

Another Thing Immigrants Do for the Economy: Invent Cool Things

By [Elizabeth Dwoskin](#) on July 01, 2012

Each year the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office awards about 200,000 patents to inventors. Last year a Stanford student built a camera that lets users change what's in focus after snapping a shot; Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers invented a tiny, foldable car; and a patent was awarded for devising a metal that is as strong as steel but can be molded like plastic.

Some of these patents are just cool. Others may turn out to have enormous economic value: This year, Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) paid [\\$1.1 billion](#) to buy AOL's ([AOL](#)) patent portfolio, which comes to about \$1.2 million per patent. All of the patents above have one thing in common: They represent the work of immigrants to the U.S.

Which is why policy makers should flag a [recent study](#) that found more than three-quarters of patents from America's top ten patent-producing universities, including MIT, Stanford, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, were the result of breakthroughs by immigrants. Those universities produced 1,466 patents—a fraction of the total awarded—but many were in such cutting-edge fields as information technology and molecular biology.

The study was put out by the Partnership for a New American Economy, a group of 450 mayors and CEOs that pushes for immigration reform. (The group is chaired by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg LP owns this magazine.) Its members, including Steve Ballmer of Microsoft and Bill Marriott Jr. of Marriott International ([MAR](#)), have been [known to complain](#) about how the government's immigration policies hinder their companies' ability to bring highly skilled workers into the country.

The group has a clear bias, but the corporations and their politician allies have a point. Foreign graduate students—there are more than 400,000 on student visas—have very limited options if they want to extend their stay in the country. If an employer sponsors them, they can apply for an H1-B visa for highly skilled workers. There are only 85,000 slots, and many of those will be taken up by current employees who are seeking to renew current visas for themselves and their spouses. This year the H1-B cap for foreign graduates was met in just 68 days, compared with more than 200 days both last year and the year before.

The group wants to lift the cap on H1-B visas, but they also have another interesting idea that is gaining traction in Congress: a special “startup” visa for immigrants who create companies and a certain number of jobs in the U.S. The mayors and their corporate allies say other countries take such economic considerations into account when they give out visas, doing so far more often than the U.S.

Politicians of both parties are coming around to the idea of issuing more visas to this special category of students. President Barack Obama [recognized](#) them in his State of the Union address.

And in his immigration speech two weeks ago, Romney called for an end to all caps for foreign students who excel in math and science. Of course, that's not likely to happen before the presidential election. Until then, foreign entrepreneurs looking for a way to work in the U.S. without running afoul of immigration laws have one last option: They can sign up to live and work on a giant [cruise ship](#) off the California coast.

<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-07-01/another-thing-immigrants-do-for-the-economy-invent-cool-things>