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Tech industry keen on STEM visas

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The tech industry has a message for Republicans and Democrats bickering over competing immigration bills: See the bigger picture. Tech companies, desperate for more high-skilled talent, aren't particularly concerned with how Congress delivers more green cards for foreign graduates of U.S. universities with advanced degrees. They just want them.

The House voted down GOP Rep. Lamar Smith's STEM green card bill (H.R. 6429) on Thursday. California Rep. Zoe Lofgren and New York Sen. Chuck Schumer, both Democrats, have competing bills.

"While there are differences between the bills (such as whether to eliminate the diversity visa lottery program), CCIA has long believed that reform of the employment-based green card system to reduce the backlogs that currently leave valued professional workers (and their employers) in procedural uncertainty for years is critical," Ed Black, head of the Computer & Communications Industry Association, said in a statement. "And we applaud Rep. Smith, Rep. Lofgren and Sen. Schumer for their leadership in taking action."

The bills by Smith, Lofgren and Schumer all would increase the number of visas granted to foreign graduates of U.S. universities with an advanced degree in science, technology, engineering or math. But Smith offsets that by eliminating a diversity visa program, to Democrats' dismay.

The tech industry wants lawmakers to see past their differences.

"There is no debate here," Andy Halataei, director of government relations at the Information Technology Industry Council, said in a statement. "Both parties agree that our best and brightest STEM students should be allowed to innovate and create jobs here at home."

Christopher Padilla, IBM's director of government affairs, echoed that sentiment.

"We thank House Judiciary [Committee] Chairman Lamar Smith and Sen. [Chuck] Schumer for their efforts to enact common-sense legislation and are hopeful that Congress will quickly resolve the differences between these proposals," Padilla said, noting that "IBM strongly supports legislative efforts in the House and Senate that would provide a path to citizenship for up to 55,000 foreign-born graduates" with STEM degrees.

Microsoft also put out a statement urging lawmakers to find common ground and move forward.

But despite the plea from the tech industry, the partisan gridlock isn't improving.

"By doing it in less than a week from introduction to vote, and by saying, essentially, my way or the highway and cutting off any chance for compromise, I think Smith chose to have a message bill, not a bipartisan bill that actually creates a STEM visas program," said one Democratic Hill aide. "[Mitt] Romney needs a talking point other than 'self-deport,' the Arizona law, and 'I will veto the DREAM Act.'"

Democratic leaders, including House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer and South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, have spoken out against the Smith bill.

In a statement, Smith rejected the Democratic criticism.

"For the last several months, I have worked with Democrats in both the House and Senate trying to reach a deal on STEM legislation. The bill has been delayed for several weeks at the request of various Democratic members. But we cannot wait any longer," Smith said. "American companies need these workers and our economy needs this legislation to help create jobs."

Indeed, House Republican leaders have packaged the STEM green cards bill as part of their job-creation agenda.

"The Democrats have time and again said they support STEM visas," House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) said Thursday. "I'm hopeful for a bipartisan vote on this bill so we can say America's open for business, we are here for the best and the brightest in the world for them to come and work to help create jobs."

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