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Immigrants: dreamers, doers

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Friday, August 17, 2012

Immigrants: Dreamers, doers

AS I SEE IT

By Marcus Goncalves

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The American dream is alive and well, at least to immigrants who are magnetized by it. It is they who challenge the rest of us to foster a culture of inclusion, access, opportunity, and empowerment. Moreover, they are the ones with the starkest sense of how America differs from every other country in the world. Their very belief in that difference virtually guarantees the American dream come true.

As James Jasper noted in his book "Restless Nation," immigrants "picked this country because of its promise. They dreamed the dream."

This has always been one of the underlying premises of this dream, which has simultaneously been a catalyst for renewal and transformation of our society over the centuries. When it comes to the topic of immigration, however, the public debate seems to undermine the positive contributions of immigration to our economy. True, border control and illegal immigration need to be dealt with, not only to protect the American people, but for the immigrants themselves.

Although it is cliché to note, the United States has always been a nation of immigrants. The fact is, according to Herman and Smith in their acclaimed book "Immigrant, Inc.," no other country in the history of mankind has accepted over 70 million immigrants. About 50 percent of Americans have close immigrant lineage or share immigrant ancestry.

Whether immigration is a good thing or a scourge, we like to think of our country as an immigrant-friendly place, with borders that are among the most open in



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the world, which is not the case. But according to the Migration Integration Policy Index, which rates the EU nations, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, and the U.S. in efforts to integrate immigrants, the U.S. ranks ninth. Sweden, Portugal, and Canada are the three leading countries, respectively. Nonetheless, for John Gartner, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University, immigrant traits are built into an American's DNA.

As an immigrant, I have the privilege to appreciate the argument from both sides of the spectrum. According to a new Gallup poll, American attitudes toward immigration are hardening. Half of all Americans say immigration should be "decreased" — up 11 points from 39 percent last year.

Although the U.S. is a nation of immigrants, it has rarely understood the vital role immigrants have played in building our country and its economy. The U.S. experienced a great inflow of talented scientists, entrepreneurs, artists, and musicians during the Great Depression which helped bolster its position at the frontiers of science, technology, entrepreneurship, and the arts during the long and prosperous post-war era.

Too often, we tend to view immigration from the alleged costs it bears to society and the American people, especially in times of economic recession, without realizing their significant economic contributions, in particular the entrepreneurs, which tend to be the vast majority.

According to a recent report by the International Migration Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, immigrants are more often than not entrepreneurs and always have been. Who but a restless dreamer and entrepreneur would be willing to leave everything to start a new life in a strange country? Answer: optimistic risk-takers who believe in the American dream.

A college-educated immigrant, according to Herman and Smith, is twice as likely to obtain a U.S. patent as a nonimmigrant. Nearly all of these patents, including my very own (U.S. Patent #2002/0111972) now owned by Symantec, were in science, technology, engineering and math, the so-called STEM fields that are a crucial driver of U.S. job growth.

Crises in the economy always bring about change seasons where talent flows are often reset causing nations to rise or decline. If growing anti-immigrant sentiment persists it can have a negative effect for American technology, entrepreneurship, and the economy in general. As argued by Richard Florida, professor and researcher at Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, "the future belongs to those countries and regions that can attract the best and brightest across the entire world." The most prosperous states in the U.S. are the ones with large number of immigrants.

America is at a dangerous moment, facing global competition as it has never seen before. To maintain its competitive advantage the U.S. must concentrate on its core strengths which include innovation, entrepreneurship, and immigration, which, in my view, are inextricably linked.

I'm afraid that, with the economic downturn, xenophobia is rising and political clouds of nativism and protectionism are swirling across the country. Immigrants play a compelling and powerful role in our economy, reminding us that new people, ideas, and entrepreneurial spirit is at the core of the American dream story. In the words of J.F. Kennedy, "every aspect of the American economy has profited from the contributions of immigrants."

Marcus Goncalves, Ph.D., is assistant professor of management, chair of the International Business Program, and director of academic programs, graduate and professional studies at Nichols College in Dudley.



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