US should re-evaluate definition of skilled workers in immigration policy

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New immigration research from Rice University, the University of North Carolina and the Centre for Population, Poverty and Public Policy Studies suggests the U.S. should re-evaluate its definition of skilled workers to include informal skills of migrant workers.

The study, "Identifying and Measuring the Lifelong Human Capital of 'Unskilled' Migrants in the Mexico-U.S. Migrator Circuit," draws on a binational multistage research project that involved interviews with 320 Mexican migrants and return migrants in North Carolina and Guanajuato, Mexico. The study identifies lifelong human capital –

knowledge and technical and social skills – acquired and transferred throughout these migrants' careers.

The researchers discovered that skills among these migrants not only include basic education and English, but also technical and social skills and competencies acquired informally on and off the job throughout their lives – skills that are used in construction, domestic, retail and hospitality work.

Sergio Chavez, assistant professor of sociology at Rice and one of the study's co-authors, noted that when these life skills are acquired through education or another accredited process, it is advantageous to the migrant worker. Chavez said that current U.S. immigration policy gives preference to these "skilled" immigrants who rank high on traditional human capital characteristics, such as education levels and other formal credentials, and allows them to enter the U.S.; but the policy limits the entry of "unskilled" migrants, a categorization that ignores the substantial informal skills they bring to U.S. labor markets.

"Unlike migrants whose human capital is largely acquired in formal learning environments leading to credentialed and organized knowledge, we discovered that migrants in our study with low levels of education acquire most of their skills informally through interaction and observation both on and off the job," Chavez said. "This is not to say that migrants with formal credentials do not acquire some skills informally before migration, but that for migrants with low levels of formal education, job skills are learned predominantly in informal social contexts rather than classrooms and thus are often hidden skills. It is therefore especially important that the assessment of migrant welfare gains according to models of human capital account for the acquisition of lifelong human capital."

Chavez and his co-authors said the study has broad implications for

migration policies of both the U.S. and Mexico. "These individuals with skills acquired informally often have much to contribute to the U.S. labor markets," Chavez said. "Unfortunately, current immigration policies severely limit the number of these individuals who can enter the U.S."

Chavez said that instead of focusing only on the continued expansion of immigration policy preferences for narrowly defined skilled migrants, the U.S. government needs to consider more carefully what is meant by "skilled workers" and design fairer and more effective immigration policies that match their abilities to the specific needs of U.S. industry and thereby recognize the economic contributions of all migrants within a lifelong human capital framework.

  More information: The study will be featured in more depth in a forthcoming book, "Skills of the Unskilled: Work and Social Mobility Among Mexican Migrants" (University of California Press).

Provided by Rice University