'High-skilled' Mexican immigrants in US can help both countries

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"High-skilled" immigrants from Mexico are major contributors to the United States' so-called "knowledge economy," and fostering that relationship will benefit both countries, according to a new report from

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Elizabeth Salamanca, nonresident scholar at the institute's Center for the United States and Mexico, explains that high-skilled migrants include students, professors, researchers, technicians and CEOs, among others, who specialize in fields such as health care, mathematics, computer science, life science, physical science and engineering, all part of the knowledge economy.

"Between 1990 and 2017, the growth rate of skilled (with an undergraduate degree) and high-skilled (with a graduate degree) migration to the U.S. was more than double the growth rate of low-skilled (less than an undergraduate degree) migration," Salamanca wrote.

These high-skilled migrants help fill the gap between the needs of U.S. employers and the number of Americans in the labor force with the skills they require, particularly for jobs such as software developers and testers, health services managers, financial managers and accountants. This includes specialized areas such as cybersecurity, energy independence and biomedical research.

The impact of low birth rates and an aging workforce in the U.S. has traditionally been largely offset by Hispanic immigrants, allowing the labor force to grow at rates needed for healthy production, Salamanca wrote. These workers also tend to be younger than the native population and more willing to move to areas with better job prospects.

But the flow of immigrants has slowed, a trend that is likely to continue for the next three decades, according to the paper.

"The U.S. nowadays accounts for lower shares of high-skilled migrants and international students than it did in the past," Salamanca wrote. "In fact, skilled labor shortages resulting from a pronounced information

technologies and software development shift in innovation led U.S. multinational corporations to search abroad for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workers."

The jobs of the future will mainly be high-skilled or middle-skilled, Salamanca wrote. She argues that the U.S. must find ways to harness the "full diversity of available talent"—not only to alleviate the talent shortage but also to propel the knowledge economy forward.

High-skilled Mexican immigrants can also benefit their home country's economy through the sharing of knowledge, such as technical know-how or pricing strategies, which can help fill "deeply ingrained institutional voids" in Mexico's developing industries, Salamanca said.

"In other words, it is not all about monetary incentives or corporate interests, but also about the passion for knowledge generation and diffusion," she wrote.

Provided by Rice University