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The Smartest 5 Percent Will Play A Bigger Role Than Ever In America's Future

JONATHAN WAI, DUKE UNIVERSITY

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Vivek Wadhwa argues in his recent book — [The Immigrant Exodus](#) — that “the future of America depends on skilled immigrants.”

The book begins with his compelling personal journey as a talented immigrant from India and how he jumped at the opportunity to come to America when he was a young man.

Wadhwa is an immigrant who has reached the pinnacle of success in America. He is a regular columnist for [The Washington Post](#) and [Bloomberg Businessweek](#), holds academic appointments at Duke, Stanford, Emory, and Singularity Universities, and founded two software companies before joining academia.

In other words, he is a shining example of the thesis of his latest book.

Yet his personal story is not the only evidence he presents. Based on his body of research on talented immigrant entrepreneurs and business leaders, Wadhwa makes a compelling case that the future of America may indeed depend, at least in part, on talented immigrants:

“Today many pundits and observers question whether we are witnessing the beginning of the decline of the American empire. And I submit to you that this may indeed be the case. In alienating and locking out skilled immigrant entrepreneurs and inventors, we have not only blocked the flow of the very lifeblood that built the economic backbone of this great country, we have also deadened the nerve endings that create the next great thing. If we restore this flow, we restore our nation.”

Perhaps Wadhwa is right. But I think that by solely focusing on talented immigrants we are forgetting about a group of people who are arguably just as, if not more important, for America’s future: talented Americans. Are we doing our best to educate them? The answer, it turns out, is that we are not really doing all that much.

According to the website of the National Association for Gifted Children, the federal government allocates .02 percent of the education budget towards programs for talented Americans. Wadhwa is right to focus on talented immigrants because they make a large impact on our country’s GDP. But what about talented Americans?

Researchers Heiner Rindermann and James Thompson have demonstrated that the top 5 percent of intellectual talent of a country disproportionately impacts the GDP of that country. In other words, the most intellectually talented Americans, which include both those born in America and those who are immigrants, are incredibly important for the future of America.

Yet these talented immigrants who end up in America have developed their talent in education systems that are not American. In other words, the people Wadhwa argues are important are already among the most select individuals from their respective countries.

As I have argued in my article [Of Brainiacs And Billionaires](#) regarding the importance of investing in America’s most talented minds:

“In competitive sports there are bench warmers, average players, and stars. In education there are below average, average, and star students. If a coach decided to focus solely on developing the talent of the bench and average players, it is doubtful that fans would approve — it would reduce the competitiveness of the team. Yet we commit the educational equivalent in America — we focus on educating our below average and average students and tend to ignore our top students. If this doesn’t work in the competitive world of sports, why does it make sense in our cutthroat global economy?”

Wadwha has written a compelling book that argues forcefully for opening doors for skilled and talented immigrants. But before we focus on helping the best and brightest from other countries, shouldn’t we be focused on helping the best and brightest of our own country and opening as many doors as we can for them?

I think it is time that we did.

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