



Immigration Grant: 2020 Research Summary

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Immigration is one of COBRT's six policy priorities:

Companies need access to an educated and trained workforce to compete globally. We need to reform our broken visa system, fix our legal immigration, and remove the magnet that attracts illegal immigration.

Funding from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative supports Colorado Business Roundtable's ("COBRT") policy priority and the implementation of projects to further immigration reform efforts in the Colorado business community, led by COBRT's Director of Immigration and Workforce Policy ("Director of Immigration"), funded by this grant.

The original objective was to determine the landscape of immigration efforts and needs of the Colorado business community and the impact of immigration on the Colorado economy and workforce through quantitative data research and through meetings with identified key stakeholders and other directly impacted parties.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Step 1: Research data and statistics related to the impact of immigration on the Colorado economy and workforce to provide a foundation of knowledge to be built upon by qualitative and quantitative data later obtained.

Step 2: Identify key stakeholders and directly impacted parties.

- *Key Stakeholders*
 - Includes: government officials, heads of business and trade organizations, business coalitions, higher education, immigration advocates and community organizations.
 - Purpose: Gather information on the impact of immigration policies on the various stakeholders and those they represent and obtain insight on past and present immigration reform advocacy and communication efforts by individual stakeholders or coalition efforts and insight on successes and failures in those efforts.
- *Directly Impacted Parties*
 - Includes: company representatives of businesses directly impacted by immigration, immigrant entrepreneurs and immigrants who have utilized the visa system.
 - Purpose: Obtain more detailed and anecdotal information from those directly impacted to better understand how the immigration system has positively or negatively impacted their company or their life to better understand how these immigration policies take place on the ground to assist in any future advocacy and education efforts.

Step 3: Meet with key stakeholders and directly impacted parties through a combination of group and individual meetings.

- Meetings held with key stakeholders include:
 - Sixty-two individual meetings
 - Seventeen group meetings
- Meetings held with directly impacted parties include:
 - One focus group with seven company representatives
 - Eight individual meetings with company representatives
 - Six individual meetings with immigrant entrepreneurs
 - Seven individual meetings with immigrants who have utilized the visa system
- Purpose of group vs. individual meetings: Group meetings scheduled among key stakeholders or directly impacted parties provided information from multiple sources and insight through group conversations. Individual meetings provided the ability to obtain more detailed information about that directly impacted party or key stakeholder.

Step 4: Gather qualitative information during these meetings, as well as any additional applicable quantitative data identified during the meetings, to tackle questions including, but not limited to:

- Does immigration policy impact the Colorado economy and the Colorado business community in meeting their workforce needs?
- Is there a desire to hear from the business community on the impact of immigration?
- Are there existing Colorado business organizations and coalitions working immigration issues?
- Are there, or have there been, obstacles to engagement from the business community on immigration reform advocacy or communication efforts? Solutions?

FINDINGS

1. Data shows immigration policies substantially impact the Colorado economy and workforce.

Immigrants support the Colorado economy and our local communities in substantial ways.

In 2019, there were 537,334 immigrant residents in Colorado making up 9.3% of the population.ⁱ They paid \$5.8 billion in federal, state and local taxes and held \$15.6 billion in spending power.ⁱⁱ Of those immigrants, 129,565 of them are homeowners making up 9.8% of recent homebuyers, holding a housing wealth of \$56.6 billion.ⁱⁱⁱ The amount of rent paid by immigrant-led households is \$1.4 billion.^{iv}

2. There is important interconnectivity among individual immigration policies and visa programs that impact Colorado top industries, universities and local communities.

Research shows individual immigration policies, from student visas to worker visa programs, do not work in isolation, but impact both higher education and the business community. Visa programs are intertwined throughout the economy, impacting the availability of students who will graduate with professional skills and be employed by large companies as well as people in lower paying jobs in industries that support local rural communities

Higher education institutions and local communities are impacted by student visa program policies. In 2020, the 11,631 international students at Colorado colleges and universities are contributing an estimated \$428.8 million to the Colorado economy through their tuition payments and day-to-day spending.^v These international students are also graduating into economically critical fields like healthcare and STEM, whereas other immigrants are assisting in meeting the needs in rural areas

Businesses in a variety of top Colorado industries are also struggling to meet their workforce needs, and a number of companies utilize work visa programs to address shortages. These positions range from manual labor agriculture positions to high-skill STEM positions.

For example, 67% of STEM jobs in computing.^{vi} In Colorado, there were 14,921 open computing jobs in January 2021 - 2.6 times the average demand rate in the state.^{vii} However, only 1,266 students graduated with a bachelor's degree in Computer Science in 2018 in the state, leaving 13,655 open computing jobs if everyone in-state is hired.^{viii}

Representative from the technology industry: "Work must be done long-term to develop a pipeline for Colorado students into STEM fields, and in the meantime supportive immigration policies to recruit international students and better access for businesses to high-skill visas will better help to fill these gaps."

On the flip side, guest worker visa programs are crucial to Colorado farmers who need on-the-farm workers. Individuals born in the U.S. are often uninterested and unwilling to fill these essential manual labor positions, and while farmers do have access to guest work visas, they are often too expensive and inefficient due to the slow and complicated process.

In addition, for dairy farmers and other agriculture industries who rely upon year-round labor do not have an agriculture work visa program to utilize.

Representative from the dairy industry: "The agriculture guest worker visas do not make sense for us because we need workers year-round. Workers born in the U.S. don't want to take these farm jobs, and yet there is no clear existing pathway for immigrants into our workforce. Getting workers on the farm helps keep those down the supply line employed too - from the truck driver transporting the goods to factory workers working with those goods."

3. There is a significant lack of knowledge among business leaders on the impact and significance of immigration policies on the Colorado economy and workforce.

Research showed the greatest obstacle to engagement on immigration reform advocacy was due to a substantial lack of knowledge, awareness or understanding among business leaders on the impact and significant role immigration policies play in the Colorado economy and addressing workforce needs.

While there are some key business stakeholders and company representatives do understand the substantial role immigration policy plays in Colorado and actively advocate on reform, more often than not, immigration was not recognized as a business or workforce issue or was seen as an unimportant issue to the business community because it's not often discussed.

The lack of recognition to the impact of immigration policy, or lack of engagement on the issue, did not come from an intentional disregard or lack of desire, but from a lack of education or awareness as to how the legal immigration system works, how immigration policies are impacting Colorado's economy and workforce, or what immigration reform even means.

4. There is a desire from the business community to become educated and more engaged.

While immigration issues may not directly impact their company or organization, there is a recognition by some in the business community that reform to immigration policies impact the overall greater good of the economy.

Business organizations, especially local chambers of commerce who have expressed their lack of knowledge on the subject or importance of the subject, have shown a great deal of interest in learning more about the impact immigration has on their members and the business community as a whole, and welcomed more education as well as guidance on how best to engage.

Representative from a local chamber of commerce: "We focus on the broader community, it is more than just membership, and we would be highly interested in learning more on immigration policies and engaging our members on any issue that has a substantial impact."

Representatives from industry and trade organizations have also expressed a desire to better understand the impact of immigration on other industries and trades in Colorado.

Representative from the agriculture industry: "Many times we come together, from different industries, and give our talking points at a press conference and walk away. It would be great to create a way where each industry has a chance to learn about the other, especially on the similarities and differences in our needs, so we can not only support one another but showcase how one change can impact other industries."

5. There is a recently launched coalition within the business community to communicate and advocate on immigration issues in a unified way.

The Colorado Business Coalition for Immigration Solutions ("CBCIS"), publicly launched in September 2020, is a statewide group of more than 45 businesses, industry and trade organizations across industries coming together with a common goal: addressing the critical and immediate need for commonsense federal immigration policies.^{ix} Members of CBCIS align with the broad tenets of the Colorado Compact.^x

The Colorado Compact was initially launched in December 2012. Spearheaded by Senator Bennet, along with former Senator Hank Brown, the compact unveiled a set of principles - signed by over 100 statewide stakeholders from the business, agriculture, civic and religious communities – to guide a national discussion on comprehensive immigration reform. The compact represented a year-long effort to convene and promote conversation on immigration that could lead to lasting reform at the federal level.

The six principles include calls for a sensible path forward for immigrants without a legal status, an improved worker-visa system, a reasonable law enforcement strategy that focuses on public safety, and a priority on keeping immigrant families together.

The businesses, industry and trade organizations within CBCIS have been the most consistently vocal on immigration issues from the business community over the last 10 years and have individually advocated on their varied immigration interests and their unique reform needs at the federal level. However, CBCIS will ideally assist in providing a unified, cohesive and consistent voice from the business community to federal elected officials for the need to modernize immigration policies. CBCIS is focused on an initial educational effort for not only members, but to other businesses, industry and trade organizations across the state and expanding their membership and reach.

6. Previous organized efforts to engage business leaders on immigration reform advocacy have left those actively engaged members fatigued.

The last major push for comprehensive immigration reform by Congress was in 2013. Following 2013, there have been numerous efforts led by national organizations to engage the business community in advocating for immigration reform to congressional members, directly and indirectly.

Those who have been actively engaged in immigration reform efforts over the years have expressed fatigue with not only traditional public affairs tactics but inconsistent coalition and advocacy efforts because they have not moved the needle on immigration reform (i.e., large-scale press conference once a year and then no engagement, or sporadic placement of opinion editorials). In addition, they expressed frustration with a lack of coordination among organizations and their efforts – resulting often times in a duplication of efforts and overuse of the same surrogates.

Representative from the hospitality industry: “I will not go to one more luncheon put on by a national organization with the same people as always to give our talking points and then do nothing else for the rest of the year until the next national group calls us together for another luncheon. This is not working, and everyone is tired of hearing from the same people giving the same talking points – nothing is changing.”

7. Divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric has resulted in hesitancy to engage on the issue by individual companies who have previously advocated on immigration reform.

The recent tone and tenor in both Washington, D.C and across the country has been political and partisan. Divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric has resulted in hesitancy to engage on the issue and at times the use of the word “immigration” can halt the conversation before it has started.

Local political representative: “Immigration has become a four-letter-word with all of the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has been going on the last five years. If you want people to listen, find another way to talk about the issue without leading with ‘immigration reform.’”

8. Elected officials and other key stakeholders have expressed desire to hear more from the business community on the impact of immigration policies.

Every conversation held with key partners, stakeholders and directly impacted parties on the business community becoming more involved and spreading awareness on the impact immigration has on the lives of Coloradans, was met with excitement.

Local city official: “When we (community organizations) heard the business community was going to get more engaged on immigration issues, between a new position at COBRT and a new immigration business coalition, we were absolutely thrilled. There is such a huge impact on business and having that voice added will make all of the difference. We’ve seen inconsistent efforts by the business community working on the issue before, but it feels like that might be changing.”

In addition, there is expressed interest from congressional members and senior staff to not only better educate those congressional members and senior staff on the impact to the business community, but to also help build public support for any necessary reforms to modernize the system to better meet the needs of today’s economy and workforce needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several potential ways to overcome identified obstacles to the business community communicating on, or advocating for, immigration reform, were raised or recognized throughout this research process.

- Develop educational tools to best educate and inform those in the business community on the impact of immigration on the Colorado economy and workforce needs and what immigration reform means, as well as creating opportunities to connect with and educate the business community.
- Normalize the issue of immigration as a business issue.
- Change the narrative and develop new and unique ways to approach or discuss the issue of immigration and its impact on the business community and economy.
- Humanize the arguments for immigration reform from a business and economic impact perspective by utilizing and incorporating storytelling tactics.
- Continue coordination and collaboration efforts with existing coalitions and partners actively engaging in immigration reform advocacy, communication and educational activities that align with COBRT.
- Ensure any long-term communications or advocacy efforts by COBRT are developed and implemented in a way that provide for consistent engagement between COBRT, COBRT members, the media, congressional members and any other identified targets.

ⁱ “Immigrants and the Economy in Colorado”. New American Economy, 2019, <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/locations/colorado/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v “2020 Fact Sheet: Colorado.” Open Doors, 2020, https://opendoorsdata.org/fact_sheets/colorado/.

^{vi} “Why Computer Science?” Code.org, January 15, 2021, <https://code.org/promote>.

^{vii} “Colorado.” Code.org, January 15, 2021, <https://code.org/promote/co>.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} “Colorado Business Coalition for Immigration Solutions.” Colorado Compact on Immigration, 2020, <https://www.cocompact.org/coalition>.

^x “The Colorado Compact on Immigration.” Colorado Compact on Immigration, January 15, 2021, <https://www.cocompact.org/compact>.