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Focus on North Carolina

North Carolina's Research Triangle Park Supports Innovation, Spurs Job Creation

Since the late 1950's Research Triangle Park (RTP) at the center of the Durham, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh communities has played a critical role in diversifying the economy of North Carolina. A state economy that was once based on manufacturing and agriculture has emerged as one of the nation's most active centers of innovation and research and development. In 1997, Time magazine called RTP "the region's showcase for jobs and technology" and cited the impact of these jobs on population growth in the area.¹ Subsequently, new North Carolinians, including those born abroad, have led growth in the biotechnology and financial service industries, making North Carolina a unique gateway for immigrants seeking to achieve the American dream for themselves while creating jobs and renewing the nation's economy.

Immigrants to the Raleigh-Durham region are a critical part of the local labor force in two equally significant ways: they fill many of the high-skill, high-wage jobs in education, research, and technology and they are employed in the service sector jobs that stem from population growth. Both types of workers are key to the region's success. As the Research Triangle Regional Partnership identified in two consecutive five-year Economic Development Strategy documents, the key to economic success is job creation. Each report has set a goal of creating 100,000 new jobs in the 5-year period following its publication, and the region has succeeded in achieving this benchmark.

In order to guarantee its ongoing success, RTP must continue to attract a steady supply of high tech workers, but it must also take steps towards attracting the diversified workforce that will open small businesses and build the infrastructure, housing, and amenities of a growing 21st century population. Companies hiring high-skilled immigrant workers largely rely on their ability to secure employees through the H1-B visa process, which is costly, complicated, and limited in providing workers in a timely fashion for the often shifting needs of a dynamic market.

Concentrated in construction, landscaping, food service, and hospitality, low skill jobs are often filled by Hispanic and Asian immigrants who are part of a more mobile and fluid work force. When demand is high, reports show that workers migrate to fill new positions and often leave when demand wanes.² They provide the labor to build new houses, schools, and roads, and they expand the local tax base while increasing overall business activity through their consumption power. In 2009, a report by the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at UNC-Chapel Hill stated that if recent migration trends continue, “the total economic impact of Hispanic spending in the state could increase to \$18 billion by 2009.”

Without immigrants to fill lower skilled jobs, many of the high-skilled jobs that put Research Triangle Park on the global map would not be possible. North Carolina, like many other states in the country stand to hugely benefit from immigration reform that connects workers to jobs and connects entrepreneurs to new opportunities, while building bridges to greater prosperity between and beyond the region’s communities.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985794,00.html> (last visited Feb. 22, 2011).

² <http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/immigration/pdfs/immigrationFactSheet.pdf> (last visited Feb. 22, 2011).