Data Brief

How Global Talent Pathways Shape U.S. STEM Award Achievement

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Executive Summary

Opportunities to study, work, and conduct research in the United States shape the careers of many of the world's top scientists and innovators. To better understand how these global talent pathways contribute to U.S. leadership in STEM and emerging technologies, we analyze 550 recipients of four globally prestigious STEM awards between the years 2014 and 2024: the Nobel Prize (in Physics, Chemistry, and Physiology or Medicine), the Lasker Award, the ACM A.M. Turing Award, and MIT Technology Review's Innovators Under 35. Of these 550 awardees, 471 (86%) lived, worked, or studied in the United States at some point in their careers, and nearly half (47%) of these U.S. awardees were foreign-born. Using publicly available information, we reconstruct how foreign-born awardees first arrived in the United States. Among the 184 foreign-born U.S. awardees whose earliest recorded U.S. educational or professional activity we could identify, two-thirds came to the United States as students (most commonly doctoral students), and nearly all of the remaining third came as postdoctoral researchers or visiting scholars, illustrating the importance of American universities as a critical pathway for U.S. STEM talent.

The pathways that brought this foreign-born STEM talent to the United States are directly exposed to policy developments: about 11% of foreign-born U.S. awardees originated from countries subject to U.S. visa suspensions or entry restrictions at some point during 2026, and that share would rise to roughly a third if restrictions under consideration for countries designated as "foreign adversaries" were carried out. Furthermore, proposals under consideration to restrict or eliminate optional practical training (OPT)—a key bridge for international students pursuing long-term employment in the United States—could weaken the pathway through which most foreign-born U.S. awardees arrived. Together, these findings suggest that U.S. scientific leadership depends not only on attracting established talent, but particularly on maintaining the early-career education and research pathways that bring globally mobile scientists to the country.

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Introduction

Immigrants* make up nearly a fifth of America's STEM workforce and 43% of the country's STEM workers with a doctorate degree,[1] despite accounting for less than 15% of the total U.S. population.[2] In emerging technology fields such as AI and biotechnology, experts have identified immigration as a key source of talent for maintaining U.S. leadership and competitiveness.[3] Indeed, many of America's most recognizable names in AI, such as Google Brain cofounder Andrew Ng and ImageNet creator Fei-Fei Li, were originally born outside the United States and immigrated later.

Despite this well-documented relationship between immigration and innovation, empirical research on immigrants' representation among the highest-achieving U.S. scientists and technologists has centered largely on the Nobel Prize. Sureka and Witte (2024) found that immigrants accounted for approximately 35% of U.S.-affiliated Nobel laureates from 1901 to 2024,[4] and the National Foundation for American Policy found that immigrants have won more than a third (36%) of U.S. Nobel Prizes in chemistry, medicine, and physics.[5] While this body of work establishes that immigrants are strongly overrepresented among Nobel laureates, it fails to capture other globally prestigious markers of achievement, particularly in emergent fields such as AI. Furthermore, it measures the immigrant *share* among laureates without reconstructing *how* those individuals first came to the United States—the education and career pathways that immigration policy actually governs.

To help fill these gaps, we assembled and analyzed a new dataset of 550 individuals, each of whom received one (or more) of four major international awards in science and technology—the Nobel Prize, the Lasker Award, the Turing Award, and MIT Technology Review's Innovators Under 35—between the years 2014 and 2024. Using publicly available biographical information, we classify each awardee by country of origin and U.S. connection and, going beyond prior analyses, reconstruct their earliest U.S. educational or professional activity. This analysis provides new evidence of the ways in which global mobility pathways shape the American innovation ecosystem.

* Throughout this brief, we treat "immigrant" and "foreign-born" as equivalent terms. "Foreign-born" describes people born outside the United States, Puerto Rico, or other U.S. territories to non-citizen parents, regardless of citizenship. This group can encompass naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, temporary residents, refugees, asylees, and others. Meanwhile, we use the term "native-born" to indicate those who were born in the United States, Puerto Rico, or another U.S. territory, as well as those born in another country to at least one U.S. citizen parent.

Methodology

To assess the role of foreign-born scientists and technologists in sustaining U.S. scientific and technological leadership, we focus on four globally recognized scientific awards: the Nobel Prize (in Physics, Chemistry, and Physiology or Medicine),[6] the Lasker Award,[7] the Turing Award,[8] and MIT Technology Review's Innovators Under 35.[9] These awards were selected because they collectively capture the highest levels of achievement across the STEM research and innovation ecosystem, span multiple disciplines central to U.S. competitiveness, and offer strong indicators of established and emerging talent. For each award, we included every recipient between the years 2014 and 2024. The resulting dataset produced a total of 550 unique awardees across the four awards. Twelve of these awardees received two awards during this period, yielding 562 total award observations.

The Nobel Prizes in the scientific categories represent the world's most prestigious recognition of scientific discovery, awarded to individuals whose work has fundamentally transformed their fields. We excluded recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize and Nobel Prize in Literature, given our focus on awards directly related to science or technology. Including Nobel laureates (in Physics, Chemistry, and Physiology or Medicine) allows us to examine foreign-born awardees' contributions at the peak of scientific impact. Complementing this, the Lasker Award highlights extraordinary accomplishments in basic and clinical biomedical research. As Lasker recipients often go on to receive Nobel Prizes, this award serves as an important marker of transformational scientific work at an earlier stage in the recognition cycle.

To capture achievement in computing, AI, and information technology—sectors that underpin national security and economic growth—we included the Turing Award. Turing Award recipients have produced advances in areas such as algorithms, cryptography, and AI, fields where foreign-born scientists and engineers are especially prominent. Finally, MIT Technology Review's Innovators Under 35 (i.e., "TR35") list provides insight into the emerging generation of younger scientific talent. Unlike the other three awards that typically recognize mid- to late-career achievements, the TR35 list highlights early-career innovators who are shaping frontier technologies such as AI, robotics, and biotech. Including this award allows us to assess immigrant representation among those likely to drive the next wave of innovation in the United States and globally.

Together, these four select awards allow us to broadly analyze immigrant representation at multiple stages of the scientific pipeline: early-career innovators, field-shaping researchers, and scientists recognized for the most consequential discoveries

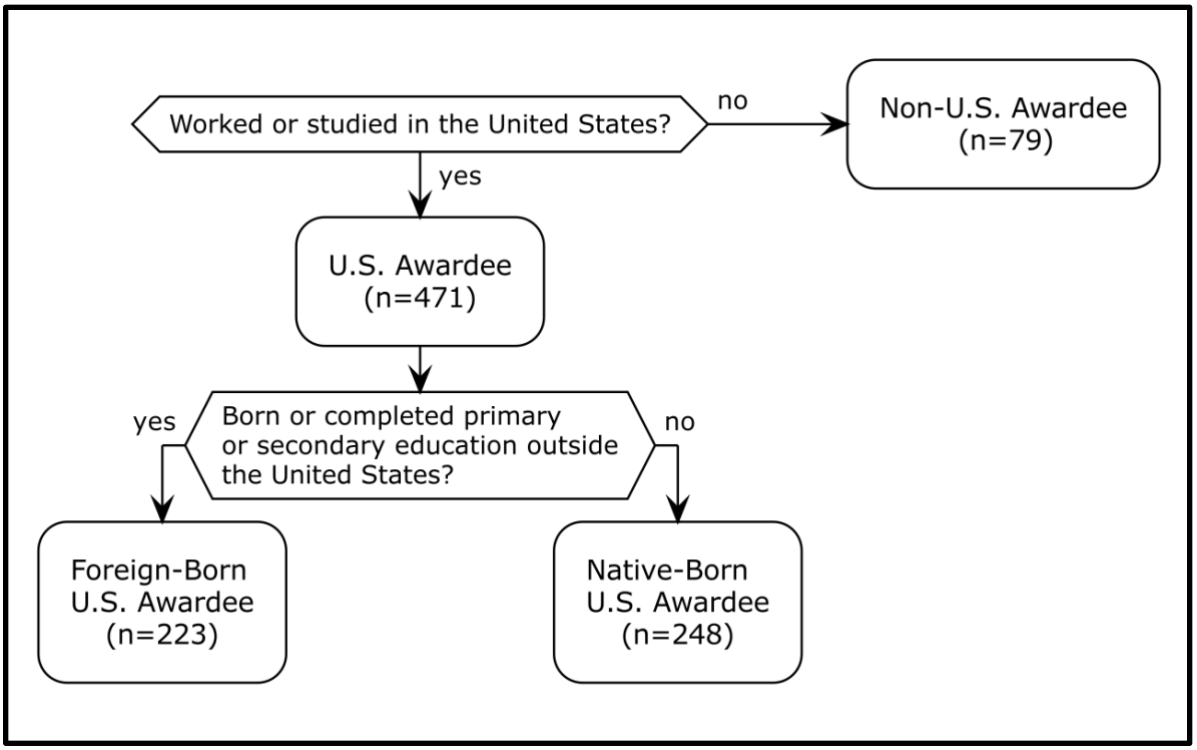
of their generation. This combined approach gives us a holistic view of immigrant contributions to U.S. science and technology over the last decade and provides a robust empirical basis for understanding how global mobility and immigration pathways influence America's innovation capacity.

For each awardee, we collected publicly available information from sources such as institutional biographies, CVs, LinkedIn pages, interviews, and academic profiles. We classified an individual as an immigrant to the United States if (a) they were born outside the United States or, where birthplace could not be determined, they completed their primary or secondary education outside the United States, and (b) they were later present in the United States as a worker or student. An individual was classified as a native-born U.S. (i.e., non-immigrant) awardee if they were born in the United States or born to parents residing in the United States. Awardees who had never lived, worked, or studied in the United States were coded as non-U.S. awardees and excluded from U.S.-specific analysis.

This definition counts awardees who were present in the United States at some point, not only those present at the time of their award, and may therefore modestly overcount the number of awardees whose recognized work was performed in the United States. We consider it a reasonable standard for two reasons. First, most foreign nationals who earn STEM PhDs in the United States remain in the country many years after graduating,[10] so researchers with substantive U.S. experience are likely to remain part of, and contributing to, the U.S. research enterprise. Second, award-time location is rarely documented in public biographical sources, whereas educational and employment histories are reliably observable; a stricter award-time criterion would be far more difficult to measure. The "U.S. awardee" classification should therefore be interpreted as indicating a substantive U.S. connection rather than certifying where the award-winning work occurred.

Of the 550 awardees in our dataset, 471 (86%) were classified as U.S. awardees, of which 47% were foreign-born. The remaining 79 awardees could not be confirmed as having ever lived, worked, or studied in the United States, and were therefore classified as non-U.S. awardees. The classification of awardees in our dataset is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Classification of Awardees



Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

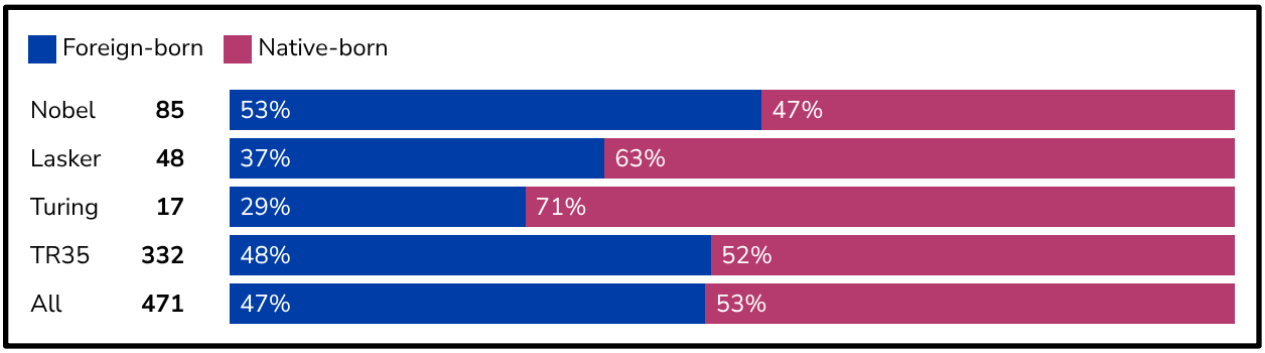
We additionally assigned each awardee to one or more domain categories (AI-related or bio-related) based on manual review of their scientific or technological contributions associated with their award. This allowed us to examine immigrant representation within fields considered strategically important for U.S. national security and competitiveness.

Findings

Among the 471 U.S. awardees, we find that 223 individuals (47%) are foreign-born U.S. immigrants, while 248 (53%) are native-born. Foreign-born awardees thus constitute nearly half of U.S. recipients across the four awards, illustrating their contribution and presence among the nation's highest-impact scientists and technologists.

Figure 2 illustrates the share of foreign-born recipients by each award. Across the four awards, foreign-born awardees account for 53% of U.S. Nobel laureates, 37% of U.S. Lasker Award recipients, 29% of U.S. Turing Award laureates, and 48% of U.S. MIT Technology Review's Innovators Under 35 (i.e., "TR35") honorees. The two awards with the lowest shares of foreign-born awardees—the Lasker Award and the Turing Award—were also the smallest subsamples we observed and thus the most subject to variability. Nevertheless, foreign-born awardees were disproportionately represented in all awards compared to the share of foreign-born residents of the United States overall (14.3%).[11]

Figure 2: Proportion of Foreign-Born Awardees by Award



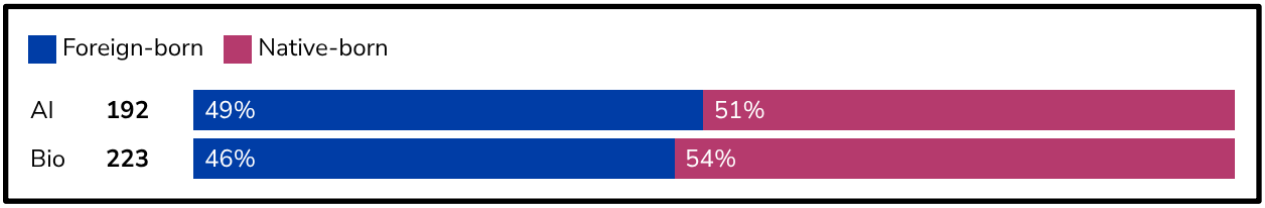
Note: n = 471 U.S. awardees. Awardees are categorized into two groups: foreign-born U.S. immigrants and native-born U.S. individuals. Individuals who received multiple awards are only counted once in the "All" row.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

If an awardee made a significant contribution to the field of AI, as determined by our manual review, we categorized them into an "AI-related" subgroup. Similarly, if an awardee made a significant contribution to the field of biology or medicine, we categorized them as "bio-related." These two groups were identified in the interest of analyzing the impact of foreign-born awardees, particularly on emerging technologies deemed critical to national security, as opposed to science and technology more broadly.

When analyzing specific scientific domains, we identified 423 awardees in total whose work significantly advanced the fields of AI or biology; 52 of them contributed to both fields, so the AI-related and bio-related categories together comprise 475 domain classifications. Figure 3 shows the breakdown for U.S. awardees, 367 individuals who contributed to AI or biology: 192 are AI-related and 223 are bio-related, with 48 contributing to both fields. Foreign-born awardees comprise 49% of AI-related and 46% of bio-related U.S. awardees, closely mirroring their overall share of U.S. awardees (47%).

Figure 3: U.S. Awardees by Field of Contribution

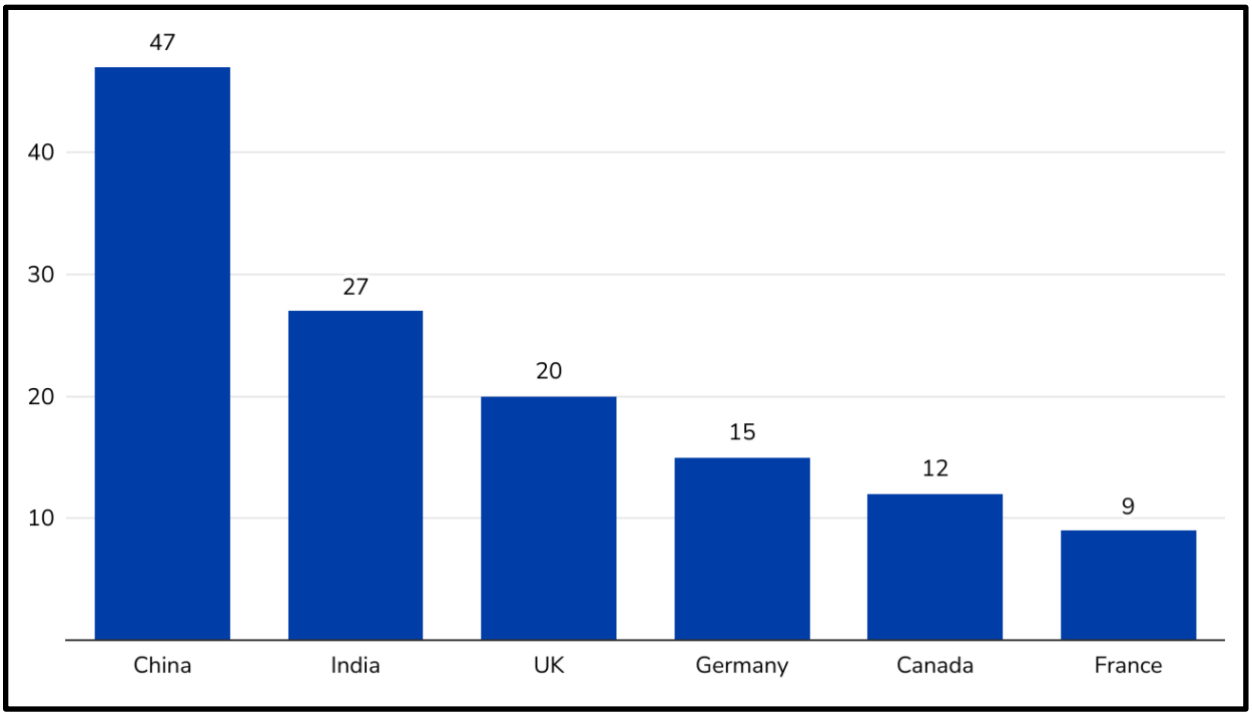


Note: n = 367 U.S. awardees who contributed to AI or biology-related fields. U.S. awardees whose work significantly advanced both AI and biology (48 individuals) are included in both the AI-related and bio-related rows, so the two rows sum to 415, more than the 367 unique awardees shown.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

In addition to identifying foreign-born awardees overall, we also examined their national origins. The 223 foreign-born U.S. awardees in our dataset originate from a range of countries across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, but a small number of countries account for a substantial share of top scientific talent flowing into the United States. Figure 4 shows the top six countries of origin among the foreign-born subsample.

Figure 4: Top Countries of Origin of Foreign-Born U.S. Awardees



Note: n = 223 foreign-born U.S. awardees.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

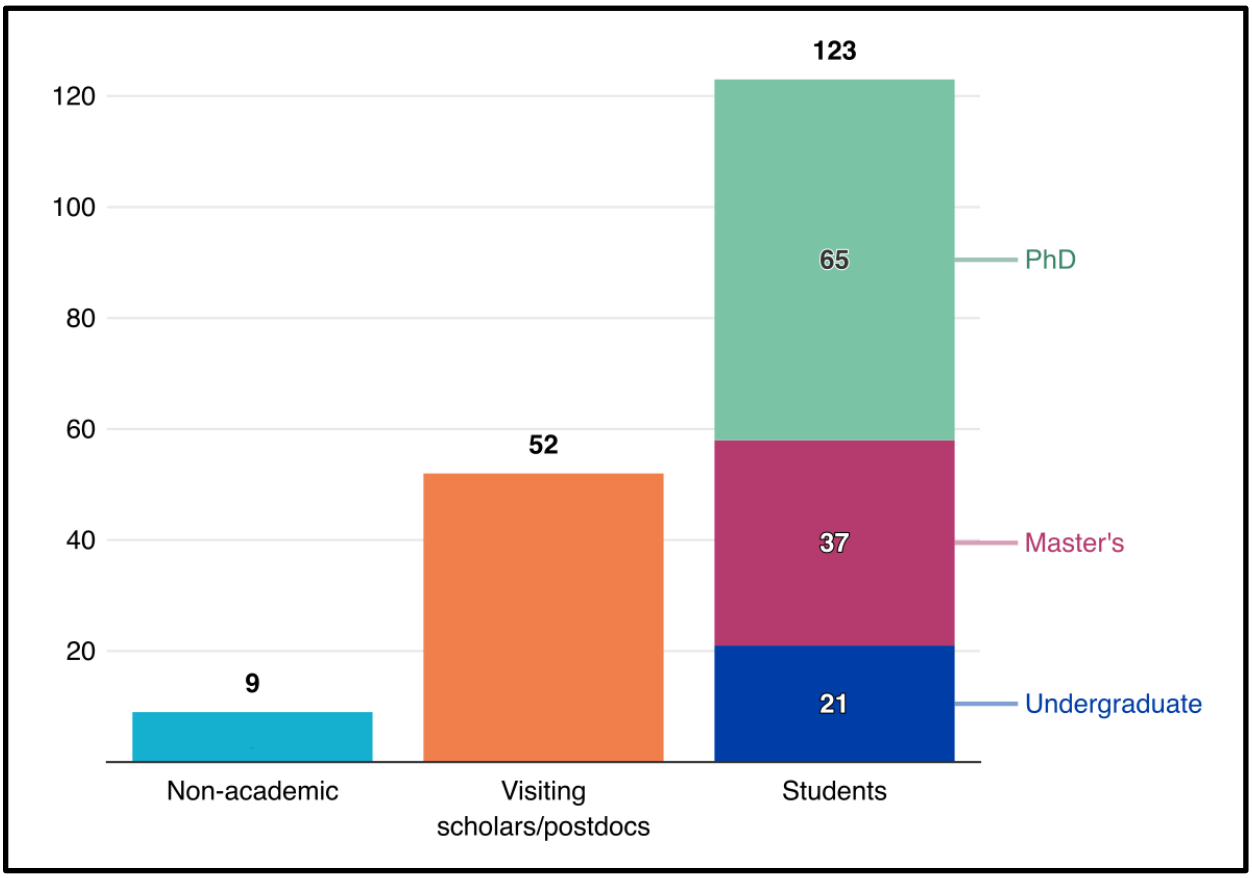
China and India together account for about one-third of foreign-born U.S. awardees; the top six countries account for 58%. China and India are the two largest countries of origin, together representing a significant portion of foreign-born awardees across all four awards. These are followed by the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany, which reflect long-standing scientific ties between the United States and Europe. Additional representation comes from countries such as Canada, France, South Korea, and Japan, illustrating that U.S.-bound top talent is geographically diverse but concentrated in a relatively small number of countries.

We also examined the earliest recorded U.S. educational or professional activity of foreign-born U.S. awardees in Figure 5. Of the 223 foreign-born U.S. awardees, we identified this information for 184 individuals (83%). Among them, 123 (67%) first arrived in the United States to pursue higher education, most commonly doctoral study.* Nearly a third (52 awardees) first came to the United States as a visiting scholar

* That is, the first record of their presence in the United States in the public sources we reviewed was related to a course of post-secondary study in the United States.

or postdoctoral researcher. The remaining 9 awardees (5%) first arrived in the United States for non-academic purposes (e.g., green card holders, temporary workers, dependents).

Figure 5: Earliest Recorded U.S. Activity of Foreign-Born U.S. Awardees

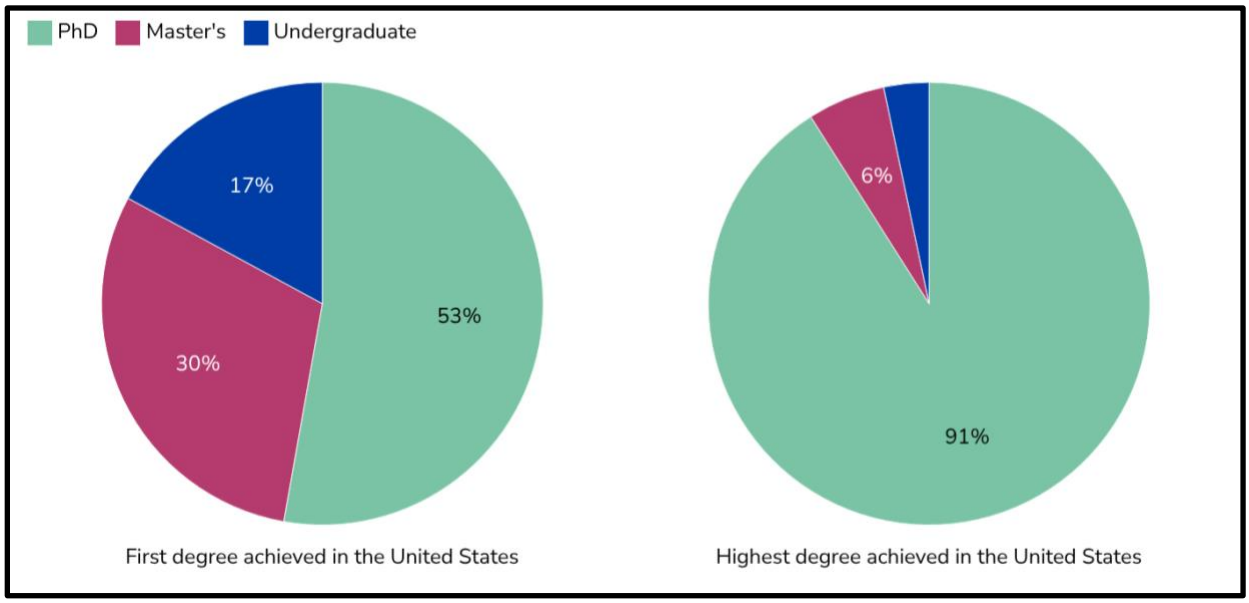


Note: n = 184 foreign-born U.S. awardees. We were unable to identify the earliest recorded U.S. activity for 39 (about 17%) of our 223 foreign-born U.S. awardees, so data is shown only for the 184 cases we were able to identify.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

Figure 6 illustrates how deeply U.S. doctoral programs are embedded in the career trajectories of foreign-born U.S. awardees. As shown in the pie chart on the left, over half (53%) of the foreign-born awardees who first arrived in the United States as students completed their first U.S. degree at the doctoral level. The pie chart on the right shows that even among those awardees who initially arrived in the United States for a non-doctoral degree, whether an undergraduate program or a Master's, most ultimately went on to earn a U.S. PhD.

Figure 6: Educational Attainment of Foreign-Born U.S. Awardees



Note: n = 123 foreign-born U.S. awardees who first arrived as students.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

Furthermore, foreign-born U.S. awardees who came to the United States as students largely earned PhDs in STEM subjects. Eighty percent of these awardees earned a PhD in a STEM field, and all but one received it from an American university. In total, nearly 82% of all foreign-born U.S. awardees—including those who did not come to the United States as students—hold STEM PhDs.

Discussion

Our data suggests that most foreign-born U.S. awardees in science and technology first came to the United States as students, most commonly for a doctoral degree. In addition, previous CSET research indicates that a large majority of foreign nationals who earn STEM PhDs in the United States remain in the country many years after graduating.[12] However, those who do leave often cite immigration-related concerns as an extremely relevant factor in their decision to leave, with 60% of non-U.S.-citizen AI PhDs working in the United States citing significant difficulties with the U.S. immigration system.[13]

While immigration-related concerns may deter some top researchers from remaining in the country, the broader environment for entering the U.S. research system has also grown less certain. Steep reductions to federal science agencies were proposed for fiscal year 2026—roughly 40% for the National Institutes of Health and about 56% for the National Science Foundation.[14] These cuts were ultimately rejected by Congress,[15] but even with funding levels preserved, agency-level disruptions such as terminated grants and fewer new awards introduced instability for the laboratories and graduate programs that host early-career researchers.[16] Against this backdrop, international enrollment has declined: the Institute of International Education's Open Doors Fall 2025 snapshot reported a 17% reduction in new international student enrollment and a 12% drop at the graduate level.[17] We do not attribute these declines to any single policy—and multiple factors are likely at work—but a sustained downturn in international graduate enrollment would lead to fewer students coming to the United States through the same pathway most foreign-born awardees in our dataset relied on.

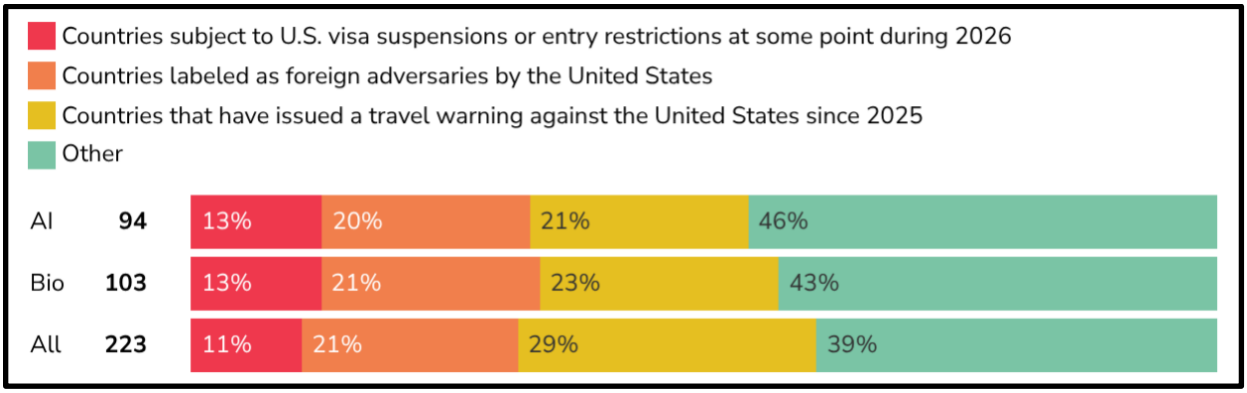
Since 2025, the United States has placed restrictions on immigration from a growing number of countries, including many of the countries from which the awardees we studied originate. From January to August 2026, the Department of State paused all issuance of immigrant visas to applicants from 75 countries; the pause was lifted by court order in late August 2026.[18] Since January 2026, nationals from 39 countries have also been partially or fully restricted from entering the United States outright.[19] Together, these restrictions may have prevented about 11% of America's foreign-born awardees from entering the country, had these policies been in effect when they first came to the United States.

An additional six countries—China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela—have been labeled as "foreign adversaries" in the Code of Federal Regulations.[20] If

similar restrictions were imposed on these countries as well, it may have impacted an additional 21% of America's foreign-born awardees.*

Finally, since 2025, multiple countries have issued travel advisories warning their citizens about strict immigration enforcement and risk of detention when visiting the United States, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and others.[21] Nationals of these countries account for a further 29% of America's foreign-born awardees. Although the United States has not indicated any intentions of restricting immigration from these countries, we include them here since these warnings may dissuade nationals of these countries from immigrating to the United States, even if they would otherwise be permitted to. These results are summarized in Figure 7, including breakdowns of the AI and bio-related subgroups.

Figure 7: Share of Foreign-Born U.S. Awardees by Restrictions on Country of Origin



Note: n = 223 foreign-born U.S. awardees. Visa suspensions and entry restrictions reflect policies in effect at some point between January and December 2026; the immigrant visa pause was lifted in August 2026. Countries subject to multiple levels of restrictions are counted once, under the most severe applicable category.

Source: CSET analysis of publicly available biographical data.

Country-based restrictions are also not the only policy lever that shapes these pathways. Because most foreign-born U.S. awardees first arrived as students or early-career researchers, policies governing student visas, optional practical training (OPT),

* Cuba, Iran, and Russia were affected by the immigrant visa pause (in effect January–August 2026), and Venezuelan nationals are also partially restricted from entry. Hence, the 21% figure here corresponds to the 21% of foreign-born awardees who originated from the remaining two countries: China and North Korea. No foreign-born awardees we studied originated from North Korea, so all 21% immigrated from China.

transitions to H-1B and other work visas, and green card backlogs also affect the student-to-employment pipeline through which nearly all of this talent flows. For example, a July 2026 rule issued by the Department of Homeland Security eliminated open-ended "duration of status" admission for student (F) visa holders. Now, most F-1 students are only eligible to stay for the length of their program of study—up to a maximum of four years—and require an extension of stay from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for any additional time, including post-completion OPT.[22] Additional proposals under consideration would further restrict or eliminate practical training for international students.* Because OPT is an important consideration for those weighing whether to pursue study or early-career research in the United States, restricting or eliminating it could disrupt the pathway through which most foreign-born awardees in our dataset arrived.

* Additional proposals include a Department of Homeland Security rulemaking that would restrict or eliminate Optional Practical Training ("Practical Training," RIN 1653-AA97, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Spring 2025 Unified Agenda, https://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/eAgendaViewRule?pubId=202504&RIN=1653-AA97; notice of proposed rulemaking not yet published as of mid-2026) and the Fairness for High-Skilled Americans Act of 2025, H.R. 2315, 119th Cong. (2025), https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2315, which would eliminate OPT by statute. Recent reporting also suggests that the administration is considering attaching a $100,000 fee to OPT (Anna Esaki-Smith, "Trump Weighs $100,000 Fee For International Graduates To Work In U.S.," Forbes, July 31, 2026, https://www.forbes.com/sites/annaesakismith/2026/07/31/trump-weighs-100000-fee-for-international-graduates-to-work-in-the-us/.), similar to the $100,000 H-1B fee struck down in federal court in June 2026.

Limitations

There are several limitations to our methodology. First, our dataset relies on publicly available biographical information, and not all characteristics are equally observable. Educational and employment histories are generally easier to find online than birthplace, visa status, or the circumstances of a person's first arrival in the United States. As a result, the 39 foreign-born U.S. awardees whose earliest U.S. activity we could not identify may differ systematically from those we could. However, even if all 39 arrived through pathways other than study or research appointments, it would remain the case that the majority of foreign-born U.S. awardees first came to the United States to study, or to work as a visiting scholar or postdoctoral researcher.

Second, the four awards we study capture prestigious recognition, not the full universe of scientific or technological contribution. Award selection processes may interact with field, institution, geography, age, and immigration background, and these awards may overrepresent elite universities, certain disciplines, and globally visible, English-language career paths. Our findings therefore describe a population of highly recognized scientists and technologists and may not generalize to the broader STEM ecosystem.

Lastly, as noted in the Methodology, our U.S. awardee definition counts anyone who spent a substantive portion of their education or career in the United States, not only those present at the time of the award. This definition may overcount awardees whose recognized work was conducted elsewhere, and classifying a person as a U.S. awardee does not guarantee the work was conducted in the United States. However, each U.S. awardee possessed a substantive U.S. connection and the ability to make considerable contributions to U.S. science and technology—characteristics that define an important source of talent that the United States risks stifling if world-class researchers are impeded from entering the country.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that foreign-born scientists and technologists play a substantial role in sustaining America's scientific and technological leadership. Among the 471 STEM awardees who have lived, worked, or studied in the United States, nearly half are foreign-born. Most of those with identifiable early U.S. activity first arrived through American universities—as graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, or visiting scholars—and went on to produce discoveries and innovations recognized as being among the most consequential in the world. Their representation in fields critical to national security, such as AI and biotechnology, closely mirrors their overall share of U.S. awardees (about 47%). These findings underscore that the U.S. innovation ecosystem is deeply intertwined with global mobility and the ability of international researchers to study and work in the country.

The importance of these pathways also highlights the potential risks associated with restrictive or uncertain immigration policies. As shown in Figure 7, the United States placed restrictions during 2026 on countries from which 11% of its foreign-born awardees originated, and an even larger share originated from countries that have been labeled as "foreign adversaries" by the United States or that have cautioned their citizens against traveling to the United States. A decrease in immigration from these countries, whether due to U.S.-enforced restrictions or declining interest and confidence among prospective students and researchers, could reduce the pool of high-potential innovators available to U.S. universities, laboratories, and companies.

At the same time, peer nations are expanding their own high-skilled immigration pathways. Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Singapore, among other countries, have introduced talent visas, fast-track residency options, and immigration policies designed to attract top scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs from around the world.[23] In an increasingly competitive global landscape, uncertainty in U.S. immigration rules—combined with instability in federal science funding—risks undermining the country's historical advantage as the world's premier destination for scientific talent and research.

These findings carry clear policy implications. Because most foreign-born U.S. awardees first arrived in the United States as graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, or visiting scholars, policies that affect student visas, post-graduation work authorization, transitions from study to long-term employment, and routes to permanent residence bear directly on the pathways documented here. Several measures now under consideration or recently finalized—including proposals to restrict or eliminate optional practical training and a rule replacing open-ended "duration of

status" admission with fixed, renewable stays—would apply precisely to this pipeline, at the early-career stage when many future awardees first arrive. Safeguarding the ability of talented individuals from around the world to study, work, and innovate in the United States, rather than narrowing the pathways through which they have historically arrived, will be an important factor in maintaining the country's leadership in emerging technologies and scientific discovery.

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Endnotes

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