



INNOVATION AND U.S. COMPETITIVENESS: ADDRESSING THE TALENT GAP

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

Background – Business-Led Initiative to Improve Science, Technology, Engineering and Math:

Fifteen national business organizations released a report in July 2005, “Tapping America’s Potential,” expressing **deep concern about the United States’ ability to sustain its scientific and technological superiority through this decade and beyond**. In the report, the organizations set the goal of **doubling the number of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) graduates by 2015** and announced an initiative to build public support for making STEM improvement a national priority. In late 2005, Business Roundtable and Compete America engaged Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. and the Winston Group to conduct **nationwide public opinion research** to help determine what the voting public and opinion leaders think about this issue and to inform the business community’s strategy.

Key Findings:

1. **Anxiety about the Future: Americans are confident about the competitive position of the U.S. today, but unlike a decade ago when they believed that the U.S. would continue to be the world’s economic leader, Americans now think that the U.S. will lose its competitive advantage in the future.**
 - Both opinion leaders and U.S. voters believe China will be the world’s strongest economic power in 20-30 years. This is a significant shift from 1997, when only 6% of the American public felt China would be atop the world economy in the future. When asked which country is the strongest economic power today: U.S. (67% opinion leaders, 44% voters); China (15% opinion leaders, 33% voters); Japan (8% opinion leaders, 14% voters). When asked which country would be the strongest economic power in 20-30 years: China (39% opinion leaders, 45% voters); U.S. (26% opinion leaders, 32% voters); India (9% opinion leaders, 4% voters).
 - 62% of U.S. voters surveyed feel public high schools *are not doing a good job* adequately preparing graduates to meet the demands they will face in college and the work world.
2. **Strong Support for Addressing the Talent Gap: Both opinion leaders and voters recognize the importance of improving U.S. science and technology capabilities, and believe it deserves a prominent place on the national agenda.**
 - 33% of opinion leaders and 18% of voters said improving U.S. science and technology capabilities to increase U.S. innovation and competitiveness is our country’s single most important objective, while 62% of both groups said that addressing this problem is equally important to other challenges such as national security, transportation, health care, energy and the legal system.
 - 86% of U.S. voters surveyed agreed that the country must increase the number of workers with a background in science and math, or America’s ability to compete in the world economy will be severely diminished.

3. Start at Home: While there is strong support for improving math and science education here at home, there is less awareness of the need to increase funding for basic research, and there are divergent views on increasing the pipeline of foreign talent as a critical element to address the talent gap in the U.S.

- 76% of opinion leaders and 51% of American voters rank a focus on education as the most important way to solve the problem; attracting foreign talent and investing in basic research rank lower.
- While 68% of opinion leaders believe we need to “get smarter” on issues like education, emphasizing science and technology, and immigration policy to retain highly educated foreign students and workers; American voters are split – 44% think that we need to “get tougher” on issues like jobs going overseas and immigration, while 39% think we need to “get smarter.”
- Similarly, 68% of opinion leaders see highly educated foreign-born workers in the U.S. as positive contributors to U.S. competitiveness. But the public again is split, with 44% of voters positive and 40% negative.

4. Convince Our Youth: Even though Americans believe we must increase the number of workers with a background in science and math or it will hurt our ability to compete, parents overwhelmingly are *not willing* to persuade their children to pursue careers in those fields.

- Only 5% of parents said they would try to persuade their child toward careers in STEM, while 65% said they would allow the child to pursue whatever career path he/she prefers and 27% said they would encourage the child to pursue a STEM career but balance it with the child’s preference.

Conclusion:

Strong leadership will be critical to addressing the growing talent gap in the United States. Americans know that the U.S. risks falling behind and understand the relationship between education and competitiveness. They support an increased emphasis on improving science, technology, engineering and math education and recognize the need to increase the number of workers with a background in these fields. However, most Americans do not intuitively link education, immigration and basic research as connected parts of the overall solution. Basic research gets a positive response when a more in-depth explanation is provided, but voters are divided on the importance of highly educated foreign workers. Leadership also will be necessary to make science and engineering more attractive to young Americans.

Methodology:

Hart and Winston conducted four focus groups: two with parents of high school and college students (one in Philadelphia, PA and one in Raleigh, NC) and one with educators (also in Raleigh). An additional session took place in Washington, DC with a diverse collection of high-level opinion leaders. The groups were followed by three surveys: 1) 250 government, business and non-profit opinion leaders (+/- 6.2 %); 2) 804 U.S. voters (with an oversample of 73 Hispanics) (+/- 3.5 %); and 3) 1,000 U.S. voters (+/- 3.1%).

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Business Roundtable (www.businessroundtable.org) is an association of chief executive officers of leading corporations with a combined workforce of more than 10 million employees in the United States and \$4 trillion in revenues. The chief executives are committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth and a dynamic global economy.

Compete America (www.competeamerica.org) is a coalition of over 200 corporations, universities, research institutions and trade associations committed to assuring that U.S. employers have the ability to hire and retain the world’s best talent.