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Originally Published: May 10, 2011 6:43 PM Modified: May 11, 2011 11:11 AM

Speakers: Michigan immigrants serve as a wellspring for entrepreneurship

By [Sherri Welch](#)

Metro Detroit and Michigan are well-positioned to capitalize on the high amount of education and entrepreneurship in its immigrant populations, provided the state can get past stereotypes and biases.

That's according to speakers at a nonprofit conference today in Lansing.

"We have the second-largest foreign-born population in the (Great Lakes) region," behind Chicago, said former state Rep. Steve Tobocman.

Tobocman is leading the Global Detroit work for the **New Economy Initiative**. Global Detroit is looking at how the region can capitalize on its immigrant population to help reinvent its economy. Tobocman spoke during the Michigan Nonprofit SuperConference in Lansing today and Wednesday.

His work stems from the Global Detroit study he spearheaded. The findings were released a year ago.

Based on 10 years of data, immigrants are three times as likely to start a business in Michigan, and 1.89 times as likely to start one in the U.S., Tobocman said.

"That's something that holds up at every level of education."

In addition, immigrants are three times as likely to major in science, math and technology — fields the areas experts predict will be important in the emerging economy, he said.

Forty-four percent of the state's master's degrees and 62 percent of its doctorates are awarded to foreign-born students, Tobocman said.

Other findings from the study :

- 40 percent to 45 percent of all patents filed from Michigan are from immigrants.
- 25 percent of all public, venture-backed firms in the U.S were started by immigrants
- 32.8 percent of all technology firms in Michigan were started by an immigrant, and Michigan ranks third in high-tech firms behind California and New Jersey.

- Incarceration rates for immigrants are one-fifth that of native-born Americans.
- Cities relatively close to borders, like San Diego, Phoenix, El Paso and Austin, are among some of the safest cities in the country.

"There was no formal program at Michigan colleges and universities to retain these people when we started this work," Tobocman said.

"This is one innovative opportunity for us to build on a strength we already have. We haven't done enough to figure out how to connect that talent to our communities."

The New Economy Initiative, **Skillman Foundation** and **Detroit Regional Chamber** are funding the Global Detroit Initiative.

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