

# Innovation For All



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### Immigrant Startup Leaders Roundtable: What we Heard

*In Feb. 2023, Engine hosted immigrant leaders from across the U.S. startup ecosystem as part of our Innovation for All project. The one-hour roundtable was a free-flowing conversation where participants had a chance to highlight barriers they've faced as immigrant founders & leaders. This document highlights some of the key quotes from that conversation. Quotes have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. Participants included Alejandra Molina - [MetaBronx](#) & [BeepBoop](#); Amelie Sophie Vavrovsky - [Formally](#); Cesar Torres - [DapIt](#); Diego Sampaio - [Globalfy](#); Max Echeverría - [Eskuad](#); Nitin Pachisia - [Unshackled Ventures](#); Susana Sierra - [BH Compliance](#); Tomás Uribe - [Mavity](#).*

#### On Accessing Capital:

- Max Echeverría - “After I got the visa, it was way easier to fundraise because some of the investors wanted to have access to the team, and be able to work [physically close] to the team.”
- Tomás Uribe - “But the most important thing about access to capital is access to banking and financing options. So when I came as a student, the only way to build up credit was to self fund a credit card, that's on a personal level.”
- Tomás Uribe - “Tax law is challenging, not only for yourself, but everything that applies to C Corps, LLCs, lending money, asking for money— it's very complex.”
- Tomás Uribe - “When you as a founder want to ask for money for a traditional bank loan. Naturally, it's very hard to do—you already have to build credit over a long time. I've ended up not asking for bank loans simply because everyone told me no.”
- Tomás Uribe - “The process of speeding up and growing quicker at the beginning or the earlier stages of the company would have been faster, were we to have access to more financing and banking, banking tools and options.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “I've raised money on H1-B, and I don't think any investor ever asked me what my visa status is, but it was a bigger concern for me is, once I raise this money, how am I going to work full time on this? Am I being ethically honest with my investors about my status? And so I think it's a bigger concern for immigrant founders and investors.”
- Diego Sampaio - “During COVID, we were not able to apply for an SBA loan, because we didn't have a green card. So although we had at the time 20-something full-time employees in the US, with profitability and a good track record, I could not apply for it.”
- Tomás Uribe - “Accent definitely comes in, personal background in terms of the country that you're in, there's always going to be commentary, perhaps, because of lack of knowledge, or education or biases. It doesn't matter if you're from here, or if you're not, where you come from, how you look, how you talk, it's always gonna feed into the subconscious bias of everyone.”

#### On Visa Challenges:

- Max Echeverría - “In order to get a visa, I needed to create a board first to supervise me, because I didn't have enough money in my pockets to apply for an E-2, for example, because everything is already invested in the company. So that was kind of a problem.”
- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “I found the process really difficult...It's really hard to know, am I 'extraordinary'? Do I qualify? What does extraordinary ability even mean? How do we break that down into tangible criteria? It just makes very little sense to me that the O-1A needs to be used as an option. Given that it again, creates structural inequality more than ever, right? Because to consider yourself extraordinary, you have to have already experienced some sort of traction, you have to already experienced some sort of belief in yourself that you could even be considered extraordinary under the US government regulation”
- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “But I want to be honest, [the O-1A] is not a panacea for fixing the problem of creating more diverse founders that are international and have an international background. So I'd like to speak up about also giving options to folks who are less structurally privileged, have less access to privileged institutions, folks like asylum seekers, folks from other countries and people who are just starting out. I think they're just as deserving of starting a company here and creating opportunity in the US as people like me who went through a series of privileged institutions.”
- Susana Sierra - “[The O-1 visa] process was a really, really long process. So it's like I arrived with one kind of visa but I immediately started working on the change of status. And then when I did that change of status, I couldn't go out of the country during that time. And then when I got the change of status, then I needed to fly to another country to have the visa stamped. But if you are focusing on your business you want to move fast to do a lot of meetings, but the visa issue for me at least this last year was like a big issue.”
- Susana Sierra - “I was more worried about the visa application than my sales meeting with new potential clients.”
- Alejandra Molina - “I actually found out about all the pathways available for international students at U.S universities through a friend who worked at NYU, because my university didn't have the resources to promote the different pathways available for graduating students. So I was very lucky for that. But a lot of my friends had no idea that there was an Academic Training option after graduating. Some of them weren't even aware of the OPT STEM pathway.”
- Max Echeverría - “I worked with StartUp Chile and they created these tech visas with the government. And basically, once you get accepted, you get a tech visa so you can come easily to work for the company.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “The network and the community is truly instrumental in a lot of us moving faster, not just from an immigration standpoint, but also the shared journeys of being an immigrant.”

### **On Green Cards:**

- Diego Sampaio - “The E-2 visa doesn't allow us to move from the visa to a green card. Even though we have 70 employees and we're growing over 50 percent year over year, that still doesn't provide the opportunity to escalate to a green card.”
- Diego Sampaio - “In my case, basically, to be able to apply for a green card, I will have to go to the EB-2. And then again, it becomes another challenge because a lot of what I did in the last 8 years in the US cannot be used to apply for a green card.”

### On the Need for Other Pathways:

- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “We should be thinking about what industries you do want to provide visas for – leaning into things like the NIW that already exists, which is the national interest waiver. How do we create better pathways for people to contribute to the US national interest? Instead of suffering from this brain drain-like scenario?”
- Tomás Uribe - “It's very hard when you have a standard general application for an O-1, H-1B, et cetera, it's very hard to accommodate our own individual skills to that and build a solid case.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “I think the biggest opportunity is then using pathways that already exist and making procedural changes.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “I think there's some real opportunity in pathways that exist, but making them more applicable does not require congressional approval, that is very much in the hands of existing machinery.”

### Other:

- Nitin Pachisia - “There's just a ton of misinformation [about the immigration system] and that misinformation curbs entrepreneurship.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “From the time you think of starting a company, the first time you talk to your immigration counsel or your university support system, you're just told you can't do this. You can't do this because you're on a visa.”
- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “I went to undergrad at Brown and then Stanford for graduate school, and [immigration] was an omnipresent thing that people are just thinking about. And you should see Stanford's international graduate orientation and how people's faces drop when they hear, they can't actually start companies.”
- Nitin Pachisia - “There're so many success stories of immigrant founders being successful... The one part, which is not a policy part, is the information part, how do we collectively make better information available—that pathways are available. If you look at our our immigration system, there's a pathway for a lot of different things”
- Nitin Pachisia - “You need to have the right people guiding you and around you, and the right structure.”
- Tomás Uribe - “I think there's a lot to do from the universities, because it's a direct channel to navigate the immigrant and entrepreneurship systems... And I think the challenge with International Student Services offices across US schools, is that they are simply not equipped enough to really support [immigrants looking to stay in the U.S.]”
- Alejandra Molina - “A big, big thing that I think would be a great idea is to also collaborate with universities...to share information about visa pathways for student startup founders.”
- Susana Sierra - “The first advice that I give to all the people that want to come here is find a network.”
- Alejandra Molina - “I think communities are very useful...I was very happy to have found a community of international students that went through similar things.”
- Max Echeverría - “Information is one of the things that we can help others to get easier. And in my personal case, I didn't study in the US, I built my first company when I was studying at a university in Chile. But I got involved with Georgia Tech because one of my companies was an accelerator that worked with them. So I believe part of the informational piece could go through accelerator programs, not only universities, and also chambers of economic development.”

- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “I think it actually does start for a lot of people with international student advocacy, which relatively unanimously gets bipartisan support in a way that other immigration issues do not. So building a better pipeline from university to visa pathways is really important to keeping that talent and those jobs in the US.”
- Amélie-Sophie Vavrovsky - “I think one aspect of policy to really hone in on is how do we help the students that we trained here that we educated here, that have already brought a lot of value economically and also socially to the country—how do we help those folks thrive?”