

Defending Optional Practical Training (OPT): Talking Points and Data

The Trump administration is considering measures to pause or end the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program for the F-1 Student Visa. The United States cannot afford to make such a consequential policy change. Our nation needs to attract the best minds to help get the U.S. economy back up and running. We need to have the next innovation and ground-breaking research happen in the U.S. Foreign students benefit not only our colleges and universities and American students, but also our businesses and the wider economy.

OPT Benefits U.S. Higher Education

- Experiential learning or on-the-job-training, is a key component of higher education today. Internships, externships, the first years following graduation – this is the time when education and employment come together to prepare for long-term career success. U.S. students are not limited in those opportunities, whereas foreign students must get permission from both their college or university and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to do so.
- Foreign students increasingly view this type of educational work-based experience as critical to their degree program, and it has become an important factor in deciding where to pursue study outside their home country.
 - In a [2017 World Education Services \(WES\) survey of international students and alumni](#), 73% of respondents indicated that the ability to gain U.S. work experience was “very important” when deciding to study in the U.S. at their institution.
 - [A 2016 survey conducted by Studyportals](#), an online resource for international students researching study destinations, showed that 62% of prospective students rated being able to work in the country after graduation as very important.
- The U.S. government has allowed international students to pursue "employment for practical training" in some form for over 70 years, [since the 1940s](#).
- Many foreign students studying in critical STEM fields pursue OPT opportunities in medical and scientific research, sustaining the U.S. as a global leader in these areas.

OPT Benefits Americans

- OPT benefits U.S. employers and other Americans. According to a March 2019 [Niskanen Center report](#), experiential learning opportunities like OPT lead to increased innovation and higher average earnings, without costing U.S. workers their jobs or decreasing U.S. worker wages.
- A March 2019 National Foundation for American Policy [study focused](#) on STEM employment found no evidence that OPT participation reduces job opportunities for U.S. workers. The report showed that unemployment rates are actually lower in fields with large numbers of OPT participants.
- A December 2018 [report](#) by the Business Roundtable illustrated significant negative effects on the U.S. economy if OPT were scaled back or curtailed. The report found

scaling back OPT would result in a 0.15% increase in unemployment by 2028, leading to a total loss of 443,000 jobs, including 255,000 fewer jobs for native-born U.S. workers.

- According to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, foreign students and their families [contributed](#) nearly \$41 billion and more than 458,000 jobs to the U.S. economy during the 2018-2019 academic year, making international education the fifth largest U.S. services export.

Data on OPT

The 2019 Open Doors report [found](#) 223,085 international students participated in OPT in the 2018-19 academic year and 203,462 participated in the 2017-18 academic year.

Table 1: OPT Participation by State, 2017-18¹

CA	44,536	IN	2,308	LA	635
NY	24,611	MN	2,265	KY	627
TX	22,870	DC	2,081	NV	600
NJ	15,396	CT	1,842	NH	499
MA	10,604	DE	1,781	RI	424
IL	9,334	CO	1,734	NM	331
MI	7,840	OR	1,617	HI	310
WA	7,585	IA	1,602	MS	245
VA	7,086	TN	1,428	ID	240
GA	7,035	WI	1,271	ND	204
FL	6,997	UT	1,130	WV	163
PA	5,265	KS	925	SD	139
OH	3,877	OK	800	ME	138
MD	3,808	AR	788	VT	134
NC	3,715	SC	721	WY	93
MO	2,630	AL	659	MT	74
AZ	2,437	NE	650	AK	52

According to the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#), a total of 288,415 OPT authorizations and 188,660 STEM OPT authorizations were approved in 2018. These include authorizations from a previous calendar year. [DHS](#) also has 2018 data on the [top 200 Employers of OPT students](#) and STEM OPT students and the [top 100 school campuses with OPT authorizations](#).

¹ Data from Jeremy Neufeld and his [2019 Niskanen Study](#). According to the author, the data in this table is derived from data received from the Department of Homeland Security. The location information was not included for approximately 14% of OPT participants, and they do not appear in the table. The true count of OPT participants in any state is probably 1.16 times the number in the table.

Other Countries Offer Experiential Learning & Post-Graduation Employment

- The United Kingdom recently restored the two-year post study work visa for foreign students, a benefit ended by the UK government back in 2012. Following the decision to end the post-study work option, foreign student enrollment in UK higher education flattened, rising just 4.1 percent over the five-year period from academic years 2012-13 to 2016-17. The UK recognized the negative consequences of its decision to curtail the program.
- Australia, Canada, and China also offer post-study work opportunities to foreign students and have seen their higher education enrollments skyrocket.
 - **Canada:** Foreign students can work following graduation for a period equal to the time they studied, up to a maximum of three years. In 2018, foreign student enrollment increased by 16%. “Skilled” work experience also helps graduates qualify for legal residence.
 - **Australia:** Foreign students can work for up to 18 months following graduation. In 2018, foreign student enrollment increased by 15%.
 - **China:** Foreign students graduating with a master’s degree or above are immediately eligible to apply for work visas within one year of graduation. The country is on track to meet its goal of hosting half a million foreign students by 2020, with 492,000 foreign students enrolled in 2018.

Additional Resources

“OPT Higher Education Institutions’ *Amicus* Brief,” Presidents’ Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (November 21, 2019). This amicus brief provides valuable information, narratives and examples of the importance of OPT to international students, campuses, local communities, and the country. https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-11-22-OPT-Amicus-Brief_FILED.pdf.

Danilo Zak, “Fact Sheet: International Students,” National Immigration Forum (April 30, 2020). <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-international-students/>.