

# Optional Practical Training

January 2021

## Policy Brief



## What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a program through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services that provides international students studying in the United States opportunities to gain work experience in their area of study through temporary employment. After a minimum of one year in an approved academic program, individuals on an F-1 visa are eligible to apply for 12 months of authorized OPT during or after completion of their academic program.[1]

Students in certain Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs may be eligible to apply for a 24-month extension, culminating in 36 months total. Preserving OPT is vitally important as it offers a unique learning experience for international students and a channel for American employers to connect with highly educated and talented students.



## OPT Attracts Top Talent from Across the Globe

The opportunity to participate in work experiences directly related to one's field of study is a significant reason why many international students choose to pursue higher education in the United States. OPT encourages prospective international students, many of whom are weighing the U.S. against other countries, to choose an American institution. In addition to receiving a high-quality education, students embrace skills in the workplace that will complement their future careers. OPT provides exposure to American employers, the economy, and a diverse workforce.

**In FY 2020, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System authorized 275,237 individuals with F-1 status to participate in OPT.[2]**

**Between 2004-2016, 1.5 million international students participated in OPT. STEM students comprised 53% of the 1.5 million.[3]**

[1] United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2020). Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students. Retrieved from: <https://www.uscis.gov/opt>.  
[2] U.S. Immigrations and Customs SEVP Data Library International Student and Exchange Visitor Data. (n.d.). 2019 total number of SEVIS records with authorization to participate in CTP, OPT, or STEM OPT. Retrieved from: <https://www.ice.gov/SEVPdata>  
[3] Ruiz, N.G. and Budiman, A. (2018). Number of Foreign College Students Staying and Working in U.S. After Graduation Surges. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/05/10/number-of-foreign-college-students-staying-and-working-in-u-s-after-graduation-surges/>

## Fostering Relationships Domestically and Abroad

OPT offers international students, domestic U.S. employees, and U.S. employers opportunities to exchange innovative ideas and learn from each other's cultures. The chance to receive this "real-world" experience, while making connections with employers and other professionals in their field, also helps some OPT participants become better integrated into U.S. culture. For students who return to their country of origin after completing their graduate program, the experiences gained through OPT can serve as valuable skills in promoting diplomacy and relations between U.S. and foreign companies. Foreign-born individuals are more likely to become entrepreneurs, implementing their learned skills and values domestically and across the globe.[4]

## Connecting U.S. Employers and Surrounding Communities with Top Talent

OPT participants are bright and diligent individuals with novel skills. Some evidence points to regional economies recording higher levels of innovation and higher earnings for residents as direct benefits from expanding OPT.[5] In the ever-adapting markets, unique perspectives and collaborative thinkers are in high demand in an increasingly globalized economy. By injecting the U.S. economy and job market with top global talent, OPT enhances U.S. economic growth and sharpens the nation's competitive role in the global market.

Research projects that scaling back OPT would lead to short- and long-term economic consequences for both international and domestic workers, including decreased employment opportunities and depleted wage growth.[4] OPT encourages U.S. businesses to utilize a diverse, cutting-edge workforce that learns from and upholds the competitive nature of the nation's economy.

## Preserving and Strengthening OPT

OPT serves both international students and the U.S. employers who offer them training opportunities. To achieve the program's potential, the applicant, their institution, and an employer must follow the complex and time-sensitive OPT authorization process.

International students face hurdles that may prevent the employer and student from maximizing time together; CGS data show that 123 institutions reported that they experienced an increase in student visa and OPT process delays/denials in 2018 and 2019.[6] To ensure continued success of this program, it is paramount that OPT remain in effect and that the Department of Homeland Security continue to review applicants in a timely manner.

[4] Ruiz, N.G. and Budiman, A. (2018). Number of Foreign College Students Staying and Working in U.S. After Graduation Surges. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/05/10/number-of-foreign-college-students-staying-and-working-in-u-s-after-graduation-surges/>

[5] Neufeld, J.L. (2019). Optional Practical Training (OPT) and International Students After Graduation. Retrieved from: <https://www.niskanencenter.org/optional-practical-training-opt-and-international-students-after-graduation/>

[6] Zhou, E., Mitic, R.R., West, C.P.L., & Okahana, H. (2020). International graduate applications and enrollment: Fall 2019. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.