

**Optional Practical Training (OPT):
A Key Driver to Study in the U.S.**

March 3, 2020

Summary

International students benefit not only our colleges and universities, but also U.S. businesses, organizations, and the wider economy. Optional Practical Training (OPT), an experiential learning opportunity and work program available to international students upon the completion of their studies, is a key channel through which highly skilled immigrants contribute to American higher education and economic growth. OPT offers temporary employment authorization to international students in the United States, allowing eligible students and recent graduates to gain valuable work experience within their field of study. According to the [Open Doors](#) report, In 2019/20 there were 223,539 international students, or 21 percent of the total international student population in the U.S., pursuing OPT.

Any reduction of OPT would harm higher education in this country: if international students are unable to apply their degrees to post-study work opportunities, fewer students will be drawn to study in the U.S. International students offer campus diversity, contribute to America's research (especially in STEM fields), and give back to their campuses and communities. According to a recent [survey](#) by World Education Services (WES) of international students and alumni, 73 percent of respondents said the ability to gain U.S. work experience was a key driver in their decision to study in the U.S.

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training (OPT), an international student:

- Has been a full-time student for one academic year, in a SEVP-certified: college; university; conservatory; or seminary.
- Is not studying English as a Second Language.
- Seeks Employment in an area related to the student's major area of study.

Complete guidance on OPT requirements is available [here](#).

Since OPT provides experiential learning that has long been a crucial component of education in this country, a reduction of OPT would compromise American higher education institutions' ability to compete for international students and benefit from their contributions. Evidence from other countries like the [UK](#) also shows that any contraction in a post-study program for international students typically leads to sharp drops in international enrollment.

Moreover, OPT has proven to be a highly successful program with direct benefits for American businesses and consumers. Several prior studies have shown that higher levels of OPT participants lead to increased innovation. In addition, foreign-born workers actually create jobs for native-born workers on aggregate, rather than displace them. As indicated by the following findings, a drop in international students and global talent due to any OPT reduction would hurt the U.S. economy:

- According to [NAFSA: Association of International Educators](#), foreign students and their families contributed nearly \$38.7 billion to the U.S. economy and supported almost 416,000 jobs during the 2019-2020 academic year, making international

education the sixth largest U.S. services export according to the [U.S. Department of Commerce](#).

- A forecasting model in a December 2018 [report](#) by the Business Roundtable, members include CEOs of companies with nearly 15 million employees and \$7.5 trillion revenues, found that scaling back OPT would result in a .25% decline in the GDP by 2025, with a total loss of 443,000 jobs, including 255,000 fewer jobs for native-born U.S. workers.
- 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. The report also finds a positive association between OPT participation on the number of patents issued in a metro area, with every 10 additional OPT participants associated with five additional patents. This positive correlation appears to be a combination of the innovation forged by OPT participants as well as the overall concentration of a highly skilled labor force in certain metro areas in the U.S.
- 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.

State & Metropolitan Area Spotlights

- **Top 10 States with the largest OPT participation:** Although international students are based at institutions through-out the U.S., states that attract large numbers of international students also tend to be ones where a large number of students avail of OPT. It should be noted, however, that even though these states are the top yielders of international students pursuing OPT, it does not mean that students are necessarily staying within these states while pursuing their OPT assignment (as described in the subsequent section). The accompanying figure shows the top ten states with the largest OPT participants. (See **Figure 1** in Appendix).
- **Top 25 institutions of OPT participants:** the following is a list of the top 25 colleges and universities across the U.S. that have the largest OPT participants. Most of the institutions are located in the top 10 states with the largest OPT participants. (See **Figure 2** in Appendix). [Source](#).
- **Workforce development:** Given the structure of the OPT program which enables international students to pursue employment anywhere in the U.S., it is also valuable to look at the metropolitan areas across the US where international students are employed through OPT, contributing to the local workforce and economy. The table below shows the top 20 core-based statistical areas (CBSAs) or major metropolitan areas where OPT participants are concentrated. The top five areas--which are in New York, California and Texas--account for almost 40 percent of all OPT participants. (See **Figure 3** in Appendix). [Source](#).

Additional Resources

Neufeld, J.L. (2019). [Optional Practical Training \(OPT\) and International Students After Graduation: Human Capital, Innovation, and the Labor Market](#). Niskanen Center Research Paper.

Ruiz, N. G. and Budiman, A. (2018). [Foreign students who stayed and worked in the U.S. under OPT after graduation by metro area, 2004-2016](#). Pew Research Center.

Appendix

Figure 1: Top 10 States by Optional Practical Training (OPT) Participants (2017-18).



Figure 2. Most Common Schools Among OPT Participants, 2003-2017.

Rank	Degree-awarding Institution	OPT Participants	State
1	University of Southern California	30,720	CA
2	Columbia University	29,438	NY
3	New York University	25,537	NY
4	City University of New York	20,730	NY
5	Carnegie Mellon University	17,109	PA
6	Arizona State University	16,797	AZ
7	University of Texas at Dallas	16,109	TX
8	University of Michigan	15,848	MI
9	University of Illinois	15,811	IL
10	Northwestern Polytechnic University	15,463	CA
11	Northeastern University	15,382	MA
12	University of Texas at Arlington	15,129	TX
13	Purdue University	14,675	IN
14	Illinois Institute of Technology	14,630	IL
15	State University of New York at Buffalo	14,228	NY
16	University of Florida	13,717	FL
17	University of Pennsylvania	13,142	PA
18	Boston University	13,102	MA
19	San Jose State University	12,464	CA
20	Indiana University	12,374	IN
21	Texas A&M University	12,300	TX
22	Ohio State University	12,050	OH
23	Harvard University	12,026	MA
24	University of California, Los Angeles	12,014	CA
25	Cornell University	11,808	NY

Figure 3. Top 20 CBSA (Metropolitan) Destinations Among OPT Participants, 2008-2017.

Rank	Core-Based Statistical Area	Share of All OPT Participants
1	New York-Newark-Jersey City	16%
2	Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim	6.5%
3	San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward	5.9%
4	San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara	5.1%
5	Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington	5%
6	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria	4.8%
7	Boston-Cambridge-Newton	4.6%
8	Chicago-Naperville-Elgin	4.1%
9	Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue	2.7%
10	Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land	2.6%
11	Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell	2.4%
12	Detroit-Warren-Dearborn	2.3%
13	Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington	2.1%
14	San Diego-Carlsbad	1.5%
15	Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach	1.5%
16	Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington	1.0%
17	Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale	1.0%
18	Austin-Round Rock	1.0%
19	Baltimore-Columbia-Towson	0.9%
20	Indiana University	0.8%