

SUBJECT: Optional Practical Training
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BACKGROUND

- Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows international students to work in the United States for one year (all students) or three years (STEM students) after graduating.
- Some legislators and federal officials have advocated suspending OPT in response to the COVID-19 crisis and its economic impacts.

KEY POINTS

- ***Skilled immigrants make critical contributions to America’s economy, and international students are an important source of immigrant talent.***
 - Studies show that high-skilled immigrants [increase](#) native-born workers’ wages, create jobs, and [boost](#) innovation and productivity.
 - Tech companies founded by former international students, such as SpaceX and Cloudflare, [employ](#) tens of thousands of Americans and directly contribute to U.S. national security and military capability.
 - According to CSET [analysis](#), 68% of America’s top 50 artificial intelligence (AI) startups were founded or co-founded by immigrants, most of whom arrived as students.
- ***OPT participants do not “crowd out” native-born Americans.***
 - In the high-tech sector, which employs most OPT holders, the available evidence suggests that relatively few Americans are out of work. In May 2020, the unemployment rate in computing occupations [was](#) 2.5%, a decrease from pre-COVID levels of 3%.
 - Economists [find](#) that “there is no evidence that foreign students participating in [OPT] reduce job opportunities for U.S. workers.” In strategic fields like AI, there is significant [evidence](#) that U.S. employers need many more skilled workers than the native-born population can supply.
 - Federal and state initiatives to train native-born workers for STEM jobs are important and should be expanded, but will take years to have a significant effect in industries where OPT is currently used. Suspending OPT in the meantime would cause U.S. employers to lose [tens of thousands](#) of skilled employees, causing immediate harm to the economy and supply chain security.
- ***Canceling OPT will directly benefit China’s technology ambitions.***
 - Chinese technology strategists [say](#) U.S. immigration restrictions give China critical opportunities “to bolster its ranks of high-end talent.”
- ***Currently, OPT is often the only way for America to retain skilled immigrants.***
 - Green cards and better-known visas, such as H-1B visas, are numerically capped at low levels (set in 1990) and are difficult to get. Because of this, many American employers [must](#) use OPT to recruit needed talent.
 - Chip maker Intel [says](#) that “without OPT, we would be able to hire just 30 percent of the highly skilled graduates we currently hire.” Suspending or eliminating OPT will cause labor shortages that undermine [plans](#) to manufacture more advanced semiconductors in the United States.
 - In a May 2020 [letter](#), 324 American companies and business organizations emphasized that restricting OPT would endanger U.S. economic recovery and native-born employment.

RECOMMENDATION

- ***On balance, suspending OPT would not benefit native-born Americans affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Rather, it would very likely destroy more jobs for native-born citizens than it creates, and undermine innovation and supply chain security.***