

PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

June 4, 2020

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Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Alliance of 450+ University and College Presidents and Chancellors Supports Continued Existence of Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Dear President Trump:

On behalf of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (Presidents' Alliance), we write to express our unqualified support for Optional Practical Training (OPT), and STEM OPT and respectfully urge you not to issue an Executive Order or Presidential Proclamation to, or otherwise direct the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) or its component agencies to issue regulations or policy guidance that would suspend, end, or reduce the availability of these programs. Indefinitely or temporarily suspending OPT would substantially undermine our nation's economic recovery while dismantling our nation's ability to competitively attract and retain top international student and scholar talent.

The non-partisan Presidents' Alliance comprises over 450 college and university presidents and chancellors of public and private institutions. We represent all sectors of higher education. Together, our members' institutions enroll over five million students across 41 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico. The Presidents' Alliance is committed to supporting policies that create a welcoming environment for international and immigrant students that permits them to make the most of their talents and thereby contributes to U.S. social and economic global progress. We closely monitor any proposed changes in our nation's immigration policies and practices that would negatively impact our students and campuses and the communities and states we serve.¹ For a full list of our member Presidents and Chancellors, please see Appendix A.

The OPT program allows international students to continue and deepen their education by applying the skills and knowledge they learn in the classroom to a professional setting. Through OPT and STEM OPT, international students obtain employment authorization for one to three years after graduation, gain practical, hands-on training in a field directly relevant to their studies, and make significant contributions to American innovation and industry. The U.S. government has permitted international students to pursue "employment for practical training" in some form for over 70 years. In 2018-19, there were 223,085 OPT participants.²

Importantly, OPT does not threaten American jobs and actually serves as a boon to U.S. employers. According to the Niskanen Center, experiential learning

¹ For more information about the Presidents' Alliance, visit <http://www.presidentsalliance.org>.

² *International Student Enrollment Trends*, Institute of International Education, Nov. 18, 2019, <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

opportunities like OPT lead to increased innovation and higher average earnings, without costing U.S. workers their jobs or decreasing U.S. worker wages.³ A National Foundation for American Policy study focused on STEM employment found no evidence that OPT participation reduces job opportunities for U.S. workers.⁴ Critically, the report also demonstrated that unemployment rates are actually *lower* in fields with large numbers of OPT participants.⁵ Moreover, international 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.⁶ A report by the Business Roundtable found that scaling back OPT would result in an increase in unemployment, leading to a total loss of 443,000 jobs, including 255,000 fewer jobs for native-born U.S. workers by 2028.⁷ OPT students, particularly those enrolled in STEM OPT, also participate on the front lines in COVID-19-related fields, including medicine, healthcare, and vaccine research. That such individuals are an integral part of our pandemic response capabilities makes this the wrong time to suspend or reduce the availability of OPT.

The consequences of ending OPT for students, U.S. higher education, and the economy will be severe. If the United States wants to remain competitive and attractive for the world's brightest minds and many of its future entrepreneurs, doctors, and scientists, we must preserve OPT as a critical part of encouraging international students to invest their education with us. International students increasingly view this type of educational work-based experience as critical to their degree program, and practical training is an important factor in deciding where to pursue study outside their home country. Surveys from the past four years indicate that 73 percent of international students and alumni consider the ability to gain U.S. work experience "very important" when deciding to study in the United States, and 62 percent of prospective students consider the ability to work in the country after graduation as very important.⁸ Many foreign STEM students pursue OPT opportunities in medical and scientific research, sustaining the U.S. as a global leader in these areas. Moreover, competing countries such as Canada, Australia, and China all offer experiential learning and post-graduation employment programs.

We thank you for your great support for America's colleges and universities. We respectfully request that you safeguard the future of international education in America and its contributions to critical research and the U.S. economy by making clear that international students and scholars are welcomed here, their talent and contributions are valued, and that OPT and STEM OPT will be protected.

Our Alliance stands ready to assist or provide additional information for consideration of these matters. If you would like to follow up, please contact Miriam Feldblum at miriam@presidentsalliance.org.

³ Jeremy L. Neufeld, *Optional Practical Training (OPT) and International Students After Graduation*, Niskanen Center, March 2019, https://www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/old_uploads/2019/03/OPT.pdf.

⁴ Madeline Zavondy, *International Students, STEM OPT and the U.S. STEM Workforce*, National Foundation for American Policy, March 2019, <https://nfap.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/International-Students-STEM-OPT-And-The-US-STEM-Workforce.NFAP-Policy-Brief.March-2019.pdf>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ NAFSA *International Student Economic Value Tool*, NAFSA, 2018, https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2#trends_reports.

⁷ *The Economic Impact of Curbing the Optional Practical Training Program*, Business Roundtable, Dec. 2018, <https://www.businessroundtable.org/policy-perspectives/immigration/economic-impact-curbing-optional-practical-training-program>.

⁸ Bryce Loo et al., *Career Expectations, Experiences, and Outcomes of U.S.-Educated International Students: What We Learned*, WES, Oct. 21, 2017, <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/10/career-expectations-experiences-and-outcomes-of-u-s-educated-international-students-what-we-learned>; Carmen Neghina, *International students' changing perceptions of the U.S.*, studyportals, 2017, <https://studyportals.com/blog/one-year-later-international-students-changing-perceptions-of-the-u-s/>.

Sincerely,



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Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration



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APPENDIX A - List of Presidents' Alliance Members

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