

United States Senate

November 14, 2025

Honorable Kristi Noem
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
300 7th St. SW
Washington, D.C. 20024

Honorable Joseph B. Edlow
Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
5900 Capital Gateway Dr.
Camp Springs, MD 20746

Dear Secretary Noem and Director Edlow,

In light of your administration's continued commitment to America First immigration policy, I write to you in strong support of ongoing discussions surrounding reforms to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. Recent reports have outlined your department's plans to overhaul or end OPT.¹ This would represent a long-overdue correction to one of the most abused programs in the entire U.S. immigration system, which is also one of the few immigration programs created entirely by the executive branch, lacking congressional authorization.

As you know, the OPT program is a "work benefit" tied to the F-1 visa, the standard nonimmigrant "student visa" that allows foreign nationals to attend U.S. colleges and universities. OPT allows student visa-holders to work in the U.S. for up to 12 months after finishing their degree; STEM graduates are allowed an additional 24-month extension.²

Today, however, the program functions as a cheap-labor pipeline for big business—and a backdoor into the U.S. job market for foreign workers. OPT serves the financial interests of large corporations and academic institutions at the direct expense of young American workers and students.

This system boxes young Americans out of the workforce, discriminates against American workers in favor of foreign labor, and suppresses wages and job opportunities for U.S. graduates.³ At the same time, it distorts our higher education system, incentivizes colleges to become "visa mills" and poses a serious threat to our national security and prosperity.

Americans never asked for, or even authorized, this program. OPT was created (and then expanded) by unelected bureaucrats in the executive branch, without the input or approval of Congress, circumventing the caps and limits that govern employment-based visas. This unfortunate exercise of executive action, however, means OPT can likely be overhauled or ended by executive action.⁴

¹ Stuart Anderson, *New Immigration Rule will End or Restrict Student Practical Training*, FORBES (Nov. 11, 2025), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2025/11/11/new-immigration-rule-will-end-or-restrict-student-practical-training/>.

² Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students, U.S. CITIZENSHIP & IMMIGR. SERVS., <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students> (accessed Nov. 14, 2025, 12:20 PM).

³ George Fishman, *OPT Needs to End*, CENTER FOR IMMIGR. STUD. (June 13, 2025), <https://cis.org/Fishman/OPT-Needs-End>.

⁴ See *id.*

Foreign nationals working under OPT are exempt from federal payroll taxes. As Senator Chuck Grassley noted in 2018, that means that U.S. employers who hire them “reap a windfall...a cost savings of around 8 percent per student-employee.”⁵ In other words, American businesses are effectively receiving a tax break every time they hire a foreign worker over a U.S. citizen. A September 2024 study from the Center for Immigration Studies found that the OPT program now amounts to about \$4 billion annual in lost tax revenue.⁶

OPT workers are not subject to numerical caps, labor-market tests, or any prevailing-wage standards. Employers face no obligation to recruit or even consider American applicants first. The result is a massive, unregulated labor pool of recent foreign graduates who are cheaper to hire than their American counterparts and who can be cycled through indefinitely. At the aggregate level, the presence of a large pool of tax-friendly foreign labor puts downward pressure on entry-level salaries across entire industries.

It should be no surprise, then, that OPT participation has exploded. The number of foreign students enrolled in the program has more than doubled since 2007.⁷ Under the Biden administration, the situation only worsened: In 2023-2024, the number of OPT participants reached an all-time high.⁸ Today, by some estimates, the number of foreign students working in America via these paid “training” programs is in excess of half a million.⁹

Proponents of this policy argue that these pipelines are necessary to fill “worker shortages,” claiming that they simply cannot find Americans to work these jobs. The data tells a different story. Most foreign students who enroll in “practical training” programs pursue degrees in STEM fields,¹⁰ and are hired by employers in the tech and STEM industries.¹¹ U.S. STEM and tech students have some of the highest post-graduation unemployment rates of any major in the job market. In early 2025, physics majors had the second-highest unemployment rate of any discipline among recent U.S. college graduates.¹² (More than *double* the unemployment rate for

⁵ Grassley Examines Lax Oversight of ‘Visa Mills’ Offering Visas to Foreign Students, OFFICE OF SEN. CHUCK GRASSLEY (Mar. 26, 2018), <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-examines-lax-oversight-visa-mills-offering-visas-foreign-students>.

⁶ Jon Feere, *Optional Practical Training for Foreign Students Now a \$4 Billion Annual Tax Exemption*, CENTER FOR IMMIGR. STUD. (Sep. 15, 2024), <https://cis.org/Feere/Optional-Practical-Training-Foreign-Students-Now-4-Billion-Annual-Tax-Exemption>.

⁷ Jill H. Wilson, Cong. Rsch. Serv., IF12631, *Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States* (2025).

⁸ *United States Hosts More Than 1.1 Million International Students at Higher Education Institutions, Reaching All-Time High*, INSTITUTE OF INT’L EDUC. (Nov. 18, 2024), <https://www.iie.org/news/us-hosts-more-than-1-1-million-intl-students-at-higher-education-institutions-all-time-high/>.

⁹ John Feere, *There Are 1.5 Million Foreign Students in the United States (and Over a Third Have Work Authorization)*, CENTER FOR IMMIGR. STUD. (Nov. 22, 2024), <https://cis.org/Feere/There-Are-15-Million-Foreign-Students-United-States-and-Over-Third-Have-Work-Authorization>.

¹⁰ *International Students Studying in the United States: Trends and Impacts 2025*, BOUNDLESS, <https://www.boundless.com/research/international-students-studying-in-the-united-states-trends-and-impacts/> (accessed Nov. 14, 2025, at 1:00 PM).

¹¹ *2024 Top 200 Employers for OPT and STEM-OPT Students*, U.S. IMMIGR. & CUSTOMS ENF’T, https://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/btn/2024/2024_Top200_Employers_OPT_STEM_OPT_Students.pdf (accessed Nov. 14, 2025).

¹² *The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates*, FED. RESERVE BANK OF N.Y., <https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market> (accessed Nov. 14, 2025, 1:04 PM).

majors such as philosophy, art history, and ethnic studies). Computer engineering had the third-highest unemployment rate, closely followed by computer science and “information systems” in the top 10.

At the same time, OPT and its companion programs have flooded our higher education system with foreign students, depriving qualified American candidates of positions at top universities. In 2023-2024, the total number of foreign students in the U.S. university system hit an all-time record high of over 1.1 million,¹³ coinciding with the record-breaking number of foreign nationals enrolled in OPT.

Universities have a major financial incentive to do this, as foreign students tend to pay far higher tuition fees than their native-born counterparts.¹⁴ As a result, many would argue young Americans are being boxed out of both the workforce *and* the university system in their own country. Foreign students now make up 20–30% of total enrollment for many elite or public universities, and sometimes far higher in graduate programs. Last year, for example, a full 39% of Columbia University’s total student body was foreign.¹⁵ For New York University, that number was approaching 44%¹⁶—a 244% increase since 2013.¹⁷

As it currently stands, there is no federal ceiling on how many foreign nationals a college or university can enroll, and even unaccredited “institutes” and for-profit colleges can enroll foreign students and sponsor them for CPT and later OPT. The consequence is the phenomenon of “visa mills”: Nominal “universities” that are essentially fronts for immigration fraud.

The Trump administration has done more to combat the rampant abuse of our immigration system than any other administration in my lifetime. Considering this abuse, I formally request the Department of Homeland Security conduct a thorough review of the OPT program to begin the process of either reforming or ending OPT. Thank you for your leadership on this front and for aligning our immigration programs with the principles of America First.

Sincerely,



Eric S. Schmitt
United States Senator

¹³ See United States Hosts More Than 1.1 Million International Students at Higher Education Institutions, Reaching All-Time High, *supra* note 8.

¹⁴ Rebecca Carballo, *Rubio’s visa crunch has big consequences for public universities*, POLITICO (May 29, 2025), <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/29/trump-international-students-public-universities-00373957>.

¹⁵ *Columbia University Facts 2024*, COLUM. OFFICE OF PLAN. & INSTITUTIONAL RSCH. (July 18, 2024), https://opir.columbia.edu/sites/opir.columbia.edu/files/content/Columbia%20Facts/Fact_2024.pdf.

¹⁶ Jon Feere, *Schools with the Highest Foreign Student Populations*, CENTER FOR IMMIGR. STUD. (April 25, 2024), <https://cis.org/Feere/Schools-Highest-Foreign-Student-Populations>.

¹⁷ *Annual Report*, N.Y.U. OFFICE OF GLOB. SERVS. (2024), <https://www.nyu.edu/content/dam/nyu/globalServices/documents/annualreport/OGS%20Annual%20Report%202023-2024.pdf>.