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Trump's latest immigration move actually puts America last

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For President Trump, almost every issue comes back to immigration. So, it's not exactly surprising that as a part of the Trump administration's plan to restart the American economy after the coronavirus shutdown, officials plan on restricting the program that allows international students to work in the United States after graduation.

Under the banner of "America First," Trump officials pursue this policy agenda with ostensibly patriotic intentions. The president and his officials seem to believe that cutting back on international competition for jobs will help college graduates who are entering the job market at a time of steep recession. This would be a very valid reason to go through with the proposed cuts — if it were actually true.

In reality, immigration is not a zero-sum game.

Under the administration's bull's-eye at the moment is the Optional Practical Training program, or OPT for short, a program which allows international students to stay and work in the U.S. for one year — two years for STEM students — after graduation. According to the Cato Institute, more than 200,000 students make use of this program each year.

So, are these internationals just taking jobs away from Americans? It's understandable why one might think that at first glance, but it's just not the case. Basic macroeconomics tells us that when skilled immigrants work in the U.S., they don't just fill one job and have no other impact on the economy. They innovate, spend money, start businesses, and more, creating economic ripple effects that outweighs any jobs they take away from citizens.

In fact, the relevant economic research on this subject explicitly undermines the Trump administration's stated justifications for eliminating or reducing OPT.

One University of Maryland study found that “contrary to claims that immigrants displace American workers, scaling back OPT would cause the unemployment rate to rise 0.15 percentage points by 2028, a further illustration that immigration increases job opportunities for native-born workers overall.”

In a separate paper, economist Madeline Zavodny found that “there is no evidence that foreign students participating in the OPT program reduce job opportunities for U.S. workers.”

Similar results came courtesy of a Niskanen Center paper, which found that “higher levels of OPT participants in a region lead to increased innovation in that region, as measured by the

number of patents, higher average earnings among the college-educated. In addition, ... [there is] no evidence of adverse effects on average earnings, unemployment, or labor force participation."

So, too, as the Cato Institute's David Bier notes, most OPT recipients work in computer science and other STEM fields where unemployment is actually not rising, thus undercutting the very stated rationale from the get-go. He surmises that "gutting [OPT] would harm U.S. workers by undermining the very companies that would employ them."

It's completely understandable that the Trump administration seeks to reinvigorate the economy after governmental restrictions brought it to a halt. But pushing away talented workers and innovators will only make things worse.