



Senators Urge Ending International Student Visa Program

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Four U.S. senators called for the suspension of postgraduate Optional Practical Training (OPT) in a recent letter to the White House. The move comes after Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said in a radio interview that foreign students' use of OPT was an area of concern to the administration.

Experts told VOA if the government halts the OPT program, the consequences could include loss of income for the US economy and a significant drop in international student enrollment in US universities, an industry that moves more than \$40 billion annually.

Sens. Tom Cotton, R-Ark; Ted Cruz, R-Texas; Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa; and Josh Hawley, R-Miss, wrote a letter to the White House on May 7, saying "There is certainly no reason to allow foreign students to stay for three additional years just to take jobs that would otherwise go to unemployed Americans as our economy recovers."

David Bier, immigration policy analyst at CATO Institute, disputes this assessment. "The cause of the unemployment is the pandemic, and when the pandemic subsides, unemployment will subside for both immigrants and natives," he said.

News outlets have reported that the Trump administration is considering restricting or banning international students from working after graduating from U.S. colleges and universities. The plan, government officials said, would benefit unemployed Americans.

Bier disagrees. "In fact, immigration restrictions will be harmful in the recovery because any job that is forcibly kept open - longer than it would otherwise be kept open - reduces the amount of production by that company, delaying the recovery," he said.

Under OPT, international students can work in the U.S. for 12 months after graduating. If the student is in science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) fields, the program can be extended two years.

Students may apply for a pre-study completion OPT, allowing them to work part time (20 hours or less per week) while school is in session, and full time when school is not in session. If a student decides to stay in the U.S. after graduation, the time she or he has already worked under that program is deducted from post-graduation OPT period.

Cotton, Cruz, Grassley and Hawley said in the letter that Americans "share the hope that our economic recovery will be swift, with Americans returning to work in massive numbers as soon as it is safe to do

so. Unfortunately, it will likely take some time for most businesses to begin generating enough revenue to return to pre-pandemic levels."

Still, they urge the suspension of all new guest worker visas for 60 days, along with the suspension of other guest worker visas for at least a year.

The letter also cited record unemployment numbers in the U.S. In April, unemployment was 14.7%, or 22 million people out of work.

Bier said the objective during a recovery is to fill jobs as quickly as possible so companies get their operations back online as fast as possible.

"Anytime you're delaying that process, you are ultimately harming every company that depends on the company for inputs. You're harming consumers who are trying to go out and buy things that they would need, which, you know, interrupts the virtuous cycle of supply and demand in the economy. ... That's one reason why OPT is a good idea," he said.

Bier, who recently published *The Facts About Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students*, explained that managerial positions in tech companies are overwhelmingly filled by native born workers and U.S. workers. Computer programming positions tend to be more immigrant-heavy positions.

Foreign students and U.S. economy

According to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, more than 1 million international students at U.S. colleges and universities contributed nearly \$41 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 458,290 jobs during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Sarah Spreitzer, government relations director at the American Council on Education, said they are already expecting a 25% drop in international student enrollment.

"I think that the number may change based on what our institutions start seeing for the fall in regards to applications and deposits. ... But that 25% is based on the initial feedback that we're getting from institutions of higher education," Spreitzer said.

Spreitzer said OPT is one of the reasons people choose to study in the United States.

She also said international students under OPT have a significant impact in the local and regional economies.

"You know like buying groceries, going to restaurants, renting apartments, buying cars, and all the things that they do while they're here in the U.S.," she said.

NAFSA reported in 2019 that for every seven international students, three U.S. jobs are created or supported by spending in the following sectors: higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications and health insurance.