

# OVERVIEW OF OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING AND CURRENT POLICY THREATS

## INTRODUCTION

Optional Practical Training (OPT) has been a steadily growing program for international students at U.S. colleges and universities since its creation in 1992. Each year, OPT allows hundreds of thousands of international students on F-1 visas to gain practical training in the United States during or after their studies.

The program has a significant economic impact by attracting international students, fostering foreign talent and innovation, and contributing to the U.S. workforce. At the same time, it has raised policy concerns about its effects on domestic workers and its role as a pathway to the H-1B visa.

## OPT: A TIMELINE

- 1992 – The George H. W. Bush administration created OPT in July 1992 through the Department of Justice, establishing a one-year program for qualifying F-1 visa holders.<sup>1</sup>
- 2002 – The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created under the 2002 Homeland Security Act and assumed responsibility for OPT.<sup>2</sup>
- 2008 – The George W. Bush administration, through DHS, extended the maximum period of OPT from 12 months to 29 months for F-1 students with a STEM degree.<sup>3</sup>
- 2014 – The first legal challenge to the OPT extension reached federal court in a lawsuit filed by the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech Alliance) against DHS.<sup>4</sup>
- 2016 – The Obama administration, through DHS, extended the max OPT period to 36 months for students with STEM degrees.<sup>5</sup>
- 2023 – The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear WashTech’s final appeal, leaving in place rulings affirming that DHS has the authority to authorize OPT through the Immigration and Nationality Act.<sup>6</sup>

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPT AND CURRICULAR PRACTICAL TRAINING?

**Optional Practical Training (OPT)** is temporary employment authorization for up to 12-months that is directly related to an F-1 student’s primary area of study.<sup>7</sup> OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) through DHS. OPT allows a student or graduate to work for any U.S. employer, provided the work is related to their

<sup>1</sup> “A History of the ‘Optional Practical Training’ Guestworker Program.” 2017. CIS.org. <https://cis.org/Report/History-Optional-Practical-Training-Guestworker-Program>.

<sup>2</sup> “Creation of the Department of Homeland Security.” Department of Homeland Security. 2023. <https://www.dhs.gov/creation-department-homeland-security>.

<sup>3</sup> “Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States.” Congress.gov. 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12631>.

<sup>4</sup> Congress.gov. “Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States.”

<sup>5</sup> Congress.gov. “Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States.”

<sup>6</sup> “STEM OPT WashTech Litigation.” NAFSA. October 2, 2023. <https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/browse-by-interest/stem-opt-washtech-litigation>.

<sup>7</sup> “Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS.” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. www.uscis.gov. April 22, 2020. <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students>.

field of study.<sup>8</sup> OPT is divided into two categories: pre-completion OPT, which takes place while a student is still enrolled, and post-completion OPT, which takes place after graduation.<sup>9</sup>

**Curricular Practical Training (CPT)** is employment authorization that allows F-1 students to work while enrolled in school, for up to 12-months, in a position directly related to their field of study.<sup>10</sup> CPT differs from OPT in four key ways:

1. CPT must occur before a student's degree completion date.
2. CPT is employer-specific and authorized for a set period of time.
3. A student must have a job offer before CPT can be authorized.
4. Students may hold multiple CPT authorizations at one time.<sup>11</sup>

## WHAT ARE OTHER TERMS USED WITH OPT?

**STEM OPT** refers to the 24-month extension (in addition to the original 12-month OPT) available to graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields.<sup>12</sup> Eligible degree programs are explicitly defined by USCIS, and only graduates in those fields may apply.<sup>13</sup>

**Cap-gap extension** refers to an extension granted to an F-1 student who have properly filed for an H-1B petition and change-of-status request but whose F-1 status and/or OPT authorization would otherwise expire before their H-1B petition can be approved.<sup>14</sup>

## HOW IS OPT DIFFERENT FROM AN F-1 STUDENT VISA?

OPT can only be authorized for students who are already hold a student visa. These visas usually fall into two categories: F-1 (academic students) and M-1 (vocational students). Student visas are issued by the U.S. Department of State, but once a student enters the United States, DHS assumes responsibility for adjudication and immigration enforcement.<sup>15</sup> Colleges and universities also play a role. If certified by the DHS Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), institutions are responsible for recommending students for OPT.<sup>16</sup>

## HOW POPULAR IS OPT WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

Federal immigration data show that OPT has nearly doubled since 2007.<sup>17</sup> In that year, 154,242 nonimmigrants were authorized for OPT; by 2024, the number had grown to 418,781.<sup>18</sup> In 2025, an estimated 21.5 percent of international students in the United States are participating in OPT.<sup>19</sup> The program is most popular with students from Asian countries, with India, China and South Korea ranking as the top three.<sup>20</sup>

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8 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

9 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

10 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

11 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

12 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

13 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

14 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

15 "International Student Visas." EducationUSA. March 4, 2015. <https://educationusa.state.gov/foreign-institutions-and-governments/understanding-us-higher-education/international-student>.

16 USCIS. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for F-1 Students | USCIS."

17 Congress.gov. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States."

18 Congress.gov. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States."

19 "International Students in US Higher Education - Defending Education." Defending Education. July 21, 2025. <https://defendinged.org/investigations/foreign-student-enrollment-in-higher-ed/>.

20 Congress.gov. "Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Foreign Students in the United States."

## ECONOMIC IMPACT OF OPT AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

According to a 2025 EducationUSA report, international students contributed \$44 billion dollars to the United States economy during the 2023-2024 academic year. Encouraging international students to study in the United States and contribute to the U.S. economy has typically been a bipartisan effort.

However, concerns tend to grow when the conversation shifts from studying to working in the United States. OPT has faced many challenges over the course of its lifetime, most notably in the challenge brought against DHS by the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech), a labor union representing domestic technology workers.<sup>21</sup>

## LEGAL CHALLENGES TO OPT

WashTech Alliance first sued DHS in 2014 asserting that the agency “lacked statutory authority to permit F-1 nonimmigrants to remain and work in the United States after graduation on the grounds that F-1 status is statutorily limited to pursuing a course of study at an academic institution.”<sup>22</sup> WashTech’s lawsuit and subsequent appeals in 2016, 2017, and 2021 were ultimately unsuccessful. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit upheld OPT as a valid exercise of DHS’s authority under the Immigration and Nationality Act.<sup>23</sup>

Although OPT has been upheld for the past three decades, some Trump officials have promised to terminate or overhaul OPT during the current administration.<sup>24</sup>

## OUTLOOK OF OPT UNDER THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

To date, no changes have been made to OPT under the second Trump administration. However, some OPT supporters are concerned with the program’s outlook following comments made by Joseph B. Edlow, director of USCIS, during his May 2025 nomination hearing. Edlow promised to end post-completion OPT for international students, citing what he described as a “real problem in terms of misapplication of the law” over the past four years.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

For more than three decades, OPT has provided unmatched practical training opportunities in the U.S. for international students and has served as an important incentive for students considering study here. Although the program has faced legal and political challenges, DHS’s authority to administer the program has been upheld in court so far. Whether the second Trump administration will move to alter OPT in the coming years remains uncertain.

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<sup>21</sup> NAFSA. “STEM OPT WashTech Litigation

<sup>22</sup> NAFSA. “STEM OPT WashTech Litigation

<sup>23</sup> NAFSA. “STEM OPT WashTech Litigation

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, Stuart. “Snubbing Trump, Immigration Nominee Would End Student Practical Training.” Forbes. May 22, 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2025/05/22/snubbing-trump-immigration-nominee-will-end-student-practical-training/>.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson. “Snubbing Trump, Immigration Nominee Would End Student Practical Training.”