

August 30, 2018

The Honorable Lee Francis Cissna
Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
20 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20529

Dear Director Cissna,

We are writing to express our support for the continuation of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Optional Practical Training (OPT) Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and non-STEM OPT visas. These programs are critical to providing hands-on training for the workforce of tomorrow, helping the American economy attract and retain skilled workers, and providing stability to the American workforce.

The OPT program allows eligible international students and recent graduates the ability to gain U.S. work experience before returning home. Students work with their university and an employer to get a 12-month training plan approved. Students with a degree in a STEM field can apply to work in the United States for an additional 24 months after graduation through the STEM OPT Extension program. The number of students authorized under the OPT program has grown 400 percent since 2008, representing a vital portion of our workforce.¹ This program is critical for employers to get high-skilled, educated employees right out of school without having to wait for a decision on an H-1B visa.

We write to share concerns about recent reports suggesting that the Trump administration may be considering troubling limitations to the OPT program. Our organizations collectively represent the technology industry, from enterprise software companies to consumer online services. Our member companies are helping to drive the US economy, supporting millions of high paying jobs and contributing more than a trillion dollars to the GDP. In order to continue to modernize and shape the technology landscape, our companies rely on accessing talent from across the world. Instituting strict limitations on where students can work creates barriers to innovation for our companies.

The tech sector has thrived in the United States and is committed to growing the pipeline of talent within the country. Several of our member companies participated in President Trump's "Pledge to the American Worker" event at the White House, committing to create more than 100,000 training opportunities for American workers. That commitment only represented a portion of the opportunities the industry expects to create within the United States. The industry and the economy at large, however, will still need access to the best and brightest talent globally to fill necessary high-skilled positions.

The OPT program is necessary to allow international students with needed skills to work in the U.S. and contribute to our economy. The OPT program allows the U.S. to compete globally for top talent. Between 2004 and 2016, nearly 1.5 million foreign graduates of U.S. colleges and universities obtained authorization to work in the U.S. through the OPT program. More than half of those graduates were in the STEM fields and 34 percent of all authorized OPT enrollees are STEM graduates with master's degrees.²

¹ Baron, Ethan. "H-1B visa alternative 'OPT' grew 400 percent in eight years: report." The Mercury News. May 10, 2018. Accessed August 8, 2018. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/05/10/h-1b-visa-alternative-opt-grew-400-percent-in-8-years-report/>

² Ruiz, Neil G., and Abby Budiman. "Number of Foreign College Students Staying and Working in U.S."



According to a 2017 survey, 73 percent of international students indicate that the ability to gain U.S. work experience after graduation was a very important factor in deciding to study in the U.S.³

President Trump has repeatedly said that he values high-skilled immigrants. The students using the OPT program are the best and brightest from around the world, have succeeded in American universities, and can support the American economy. This Administration should not weaken the high-skilled immigration system they support. Instead, they should bolster the programs that allow our companies to meet the technological demands of today's economy by hiring the best and brightest talent wherever they may be.

Our companies deeply value the innovation and ingenuity that the OPT students provide. Any action making it more difficult to hire these students pushes out skilled workers from the American workforce. We urge you to reconsider your position on OPT visas.

Sincerely,

Internet Association
BSA | The Software Alliance

After Graduation Surges." Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project. May 10, 2018. Accessed July 25, 2018. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/05/10/number-of-foreign-college-students-staying-and-working-in-u-s-after-graduation-surges/>.

³ <https://knowledge.wes.org/rs/317-CTM-316/images/09%20-%20Employment%20Outcomes.pdf>