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Foreign Brains Help America Compete

STEM grads rely on OPT, an embattled visa program.

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In the global contest for technological leadership, a little-known immigration program will remain one of America's greatest advantages—but only if its opponents don't kill it first.

The Optional Practical Training program provides visa extensions for up to 12 months for eligible international students—and for up to three years for graduates of science, technology, engineering and math programs. Since 2004, more than a million STEM students have used OPT to gain work experience in the U.S. Afterward, many secure jobs here. Our research shows that more than 80% of international students receiving Ph.D.s in artificial intelligence remain in the U.S. for at least five years.

And that's good, because America's tech sector relies on foreign-born talent. Half of Silicon Valley's startups have one or more immigrant founders. In electrical engineering and computer science—fields vital to national security—international students make up more than three-quarters of the graduate population.

Without OPT, many of these graduates would simply be forced to leave. The best alternative for most would be to pursue an H-1B temporary visa, but only 85,000 H-1Bs are provided annually. In recent years, there have been more than twice as many applicants as available visas. As a result, most of the 276,500 graduates who used OPT in 2017 would have had no choice but to leave the country, diplomas in hand.

OPT has enjoyed bipartisan support for decades, but it's now facing existential challenges. A group of U.S.-born technology workers, backed by anti-immigration organizations, is suing in federal court to end the program entirely, arguing that it exceeds the limits of existing immigration statutes. The suit has already survived several procedural challenges, and a ruling on the substance could come in the next few months. Meanwhile, the Trump administration quietly announced last fall that unspecified changes to OPT are in the works; earlier statements hinted at a major rollback, promising "comprehensive reform" that would "improve protections of U.S. workers" and "reduce fraud and abuse."

Rolling back OPT wouldn't just damage the American economy—it would threaten national security. "While the U.S. is driving talent away," one prominent Chinese venture capitalist recently remarked, "it is the perfect time for us to race to bring them back to China." Ending

OPT would do more harm to American competitiveness than any foreign talent-recruitment program ever could. And, in an era of renewed great-power competition, depriving the country of tech talent would be a massive strategic blunder.

In the long run, deeper immigration reforms, including new visas for STEM graduates and workers, are needed to sustain America's technological advantage. Until those changes come about, however, OPT will continue to be a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of foreign-born STEM graduates. Now is no time to send them away. Congress should defend the program and the White House should support a legislative fix to enshrine it in law. Saving OPT should be a no-brainer.

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