

## Helping Students Maximize Work Opportunities After Graduation

**T**RADITIONALLY, international student advisers guide students through their years on campus. But increasingly, international students are stopping by advisers' offices for advice about how to maximize their work options after graduation in the United States. Although advisers aren't career services professionals, their unique knowledge of regulations pertaining to international students can help them inform students of paths they can take after graduation if they want to remain in the United States.

Depending on the school and the country of origin, international students even have the possibility of eventual employment in mind even before arriving in the United States to study. Anjali Pai Hallet, associate director of international programs and services at the University of Utah, reports that university representatives in China, for example, hear parents asking: "If my child chooses this major, will it get him/her a job?" Recruiters often find that international student goals include both education and some kind of work experience. Roopa Rawjee, a former international student herself, and now foreign student adviser at California State University, Northridge, makes a similar observation: "They are very resilient and resourceful and come here with a goal to get education and practical training. They are aware of the challenges and will try nevertheless."

### Regulatory Hurdles

Tess Casler, director of the International Students and Scholars Office at Clarkson University, notes that "while status maintenance and university compliance is the primary focus of my office" she has always received "questions on 'employment advising' during optional practical training advising sessions." Furthermore, she says, "Although my 'expertise' is strictly on abiding

by OPT guidelines, I quickly realized they are also seeking information on life beyond OPT for which my knowledge is limited."

International students who seek work will face regulatory restrictions that do not confront domestic graduates. Advisers need to stay abreast of the rules, by keeping in touch with sources with expertise in this complex and changing field, such as NAFSA. Training and employment opportunities prior to graduation can also be helpful in making a graduate more attractive to a potential employer. International student advisers can also discuss with students options such as:

- on-campus employment,
- internships with an international organization,
- curricular practical training, and
- pre-completion practical training.

Each of these has specific rules and limitations, and students should never begin employment without consulting their international student adviser on what kind of authorization is needed before beginning work.

### Helping Students Gain OPT and H-1B Status

"Everybody wants OPT. It's an enriching opportunity and it's their safety net," says Rawjee, who adds that the vast majority of

international students do make the effort to get this benefit.

While a student may work under the optional practical training (OPT) option before completing the degree, "pre-completion" OPT is counted against the 12-month maximum availability, and most students choose the full-time "post-completion" OPT option: it maximizes their stay in the United States and makes it possible to get the most work experience in their field.

Since April 2008, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) rule also allows F-1 students authorized for a 12-month period of post-completion OPT to apply for a 17-month extension to their OPT, provided the student's OPT was based on a U.S. bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D. degree in a science, technology, engineering, or math field that appears on the DHS STEM Degree Program List, and the student's employer participates in DHS's E-Verify program.

International student advisers work with students to time their application (which currently costs \$340) and stay up-to-date on regulatory changes, which can be significant. For example, after obtaining post-completion OPT, an F-1 student cannot accumulate more than 90 days of unemployment (120 days total for students who receive a STEM OPT extension).

# Opportunities for Graduates

Kosiewicz points out that the OPT period provides a way for someone to demonstrate work ability, which is an important asset because most employers will not want to spend time and other resources on the H1-B process required for them to hire an international applicant unless that person has already demonstrated the ability to work effectively.

The percentage of international graduates going on to H1-B status varies considerably from institution to institution but, even where it is not rare, numbers have been declining. Lisa Kosiewicz, associate director of international student and scholar services at the University of San Francisco (USF), observes that the nationwide demand for H-1B visas has dropped significantly. This is the first time in recent years that the government has not received the necessary number of petitions to reach the cap (65,000 + 20,000 for those with a U.S. master's degree or higher) within the first week of the H-1B filing season (which begins on April 1). The H-1B cap was reached in the first five business days of the filing season in 2008, and in the first two days in 2007, according to USCIS statistics. By mid November, 2009, the cap on FY 2010 numbers still had not been reached.

Advisers use various strategies to help students gain OPT and H-1B status. The international office Web site is a valuable tool in presenting up-to-date information and promoting events such as workshops and job fairs. As a former international student herself, Gail Bumbury, international admissions and immigration services coordinator at Youngstown State University, has firsthand appreciation of the importance of understanding regulations. She says: "We include information about options for employment—CPT and OPT—in the orientation when they arrive."

The international office can also maintain a list of local attorneys or refer students to the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), which has a lawyer referral service. Advisers can invite an immigration attorney to discuss post-OPT options, rules and processes. Depending on the institution, this may be an attorney on the school staff or a local

**Optional Practical Training (OPT)** is the most commonly known work authorization sought for employment after graduation, and many international student advisers are called upon to assist students in seeking this benefit. OPT permits a student to have up to 12 months of off-campus employment that is directly related to the major field of study. OPT requires authorization from the international student office and from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Although a student does not need an offer of employment to apply for OPT, students are expected to be employed after obtaining it.

**The H-1B specialty worker category** is the most common option for foreign nationals after OPT. There is a cap on the number of H-1B petitions granted each year (the "H-1B Cap"), and the applicant must be sponsored by an employer. Some types of employers including institutions of higher education are exempt from the cap. Because the H-1B application process can take several months, graduating seniors are usually encouraged to apply for OPT before completing their studies so that they can be engaged in OPT as the employer begins the H-1B process. (As Hallett points out, having OPT buys you time before applying for an H-1B.) An H-1B petition can be approved for an initial period of up to three years and can be extended for an additional three years. To qualify for the H-1B category, the job has to be a "specialty occupation," i.e., it requires "(A) theoretical and practical application of a body of highly specialized knowledge, and (B) attainment of a bachelor's or higher degree in the specific specialty (or its equivalent) as a minimum for entry into the occupation in the United States; typical examples are computer science professionals, engineers, teachers, scientists, lawyers, as well as positions in academia.

attorney who, in many cases, will make the presentation on a pro bono basis. One such expert is Martin Lawler, an immigration lawyer who presents workshops at USF and a number of other universities several times a year. Hosted by the campus international student office, he speaks to audiences of both undergraduates and graduates, ranging in number from 25–200. "Although foreign students have concerns about finding work, those who would like to stay—and it is not all by any means—still have a keen interest in learning about H-1B visas and the process of obtaining a green card to immigrate," says Lawler. In his workshops, which also touch on OPT requirements, Lawler's number one advice to students is to plan ahead and follow the rules.

In her efforts to help students through the regulatory process, Tess Casler, director, of the International Student and Scholars Office at Clarkson University, emphasizes the importance of reducing the burden on employers. "We include a sheet in the employer packet distributed at job fairs explaining that for OPT, the onus is on the student. We also explain that the employer has no further commitment beyond the OPT period."

Bumbury, too, underscores the importance of reducing employer disincentives. "We arm the students with information so they can demystify the process for the employer." This can make a difference in employment prospects: a well-informed student will be reassuring to the employer on several levels.

While it is undeniable that the visa process can be a disincentive to some employers, advisers note that myths circulate about how strong the disincentive may be. Small businesses, for example, should not be written off. For while larger firms are likely to have more in-house staff available to prepare the petition, a smaller employer facing competition may be willing to work with an interested, capable student. And if the student understands the process, he or she can use the information gained on campus to coach the employer, thereby demonstrating initiative and determination and enhancing the chance of a job offer.

## A Collaborative Campus Effort

Employment advising after graduation has become "one of the main activities in our office," says Hallett. Working with career

services is one way that the University of Utah International Center serves international students in this capacity.

“We advise international students on writing American-style resumes; we hold events and workshops on networking and reentering the workforce after an experience abroad,” explains Hallett. “We do this in collaboration with career services, but we are encouraging academic departments to hold their own programs that include interviewing skills and networking. The University of Utah’s David Eccles School of Business has all international students come to campus two weeks prior to the start of school to practice the skills of finding a job and adjusting to U.S. culture.”

In addition, the International Center staff also try to help international students investigate internship opportunities. “We participate in a campus-wide international internship committee to discuss how local companies can understand the visa process, what CPT means, and assisting them with H1B related questions,” she says.

For some international advisers, the prospect of an international student searching for a job opportunity in the United States after graduation hits close to home. “Having been an international student myself, I am quite familiar with the anxieties that international students experience when dealing with finding a job in the United States,” says Gail A. Bumbury, international admissions and immigration services coordinator, at Youngstown State University.

Bumbury also conducts tailored job-seeking workshops for international students with her campus’s career counseling office. “Our students respond well to this because each workshop first addresses immigration issues designed to better equip the international student to provide their prospective employer with information about all the possible ways they may obtain work authorization (OPT, H-1B, and permanent residency, etc.),” she explains. Campus career services personnel are also realizing the need for offices to work together.

“As campuses internationalize, there is every reason for campus professionals to work in close coordination with one another to serve the needs of international students,” says Martin Tillman, associate director of ca-

reer services at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). “Career services and international student offices should be working together closely to develop workshops tailored to the needs of the students on campus,” he says.

For their part, international advisers also emphasize the crucial importance of forging strong collaborative links with the campus career center. The international office can publicize campus job fairs and join forces with career professionals who have access to employers and who can teach international students important marketing skills. International student advisers can further promote employment-related workshops to academic advisers, who are in direct contact with the students.

Workshops tailored for international students often include the following practical topics:

**The U.S. résumé:** How long should it be? What information should not be included (even if it is the norm in the home country)? How should the résumé present relevant academic background and summarize jobs, skills, and accomplishments?

**The interview:** This step in the hiring process seems to be playing an even greater role in the current U.S. economic climate than before: it has been reported that more people are being asked to appear for several interviews before receiving a job offer. Workshops can help the international student with this step of the job-seeking process, often through mock interviews. The student needs to know how to bring up the subject of his or her own status and discuss its benefits and restrictions and how to respond, should the employer ask if the student is authorized to work in the United States. International students may need to drill on speaking clearly, establishing effective eye contact, dressing and shaking hands appropriately, discussing themselves with confidence and specificity, articulating career goals and long-term plans, anticipating possible questions, and preparing for a possible telephone interview.

**Networking and job search strategies:** Workshops and handouts can introduce students to job-search Web sites, professional organizations by field, and networking skills.

## Focusing on the Positive

Neither students nor advisers can deny that this is a difficult time to find employment in the United States. Some advisers report seeing a spike in the level of student anxiety and discouragement. But they also report that, because work experience in the United States remains a valuable asset and because jobs even in the home country may be hard to come by, students continue to seek employment in this country. Hallett says, “It’s our job to help them do that. They feel this will make them more competitive when they go home.”

“Life after graduation has always been an issue,” says Casler. “In our small population of undergraduates at Clarkson, about half go home and others look for jobs. If they are not successful, they will continue their studies.” An advanced degree will make an international student more competitive.

Koziewicz emphasizes how important it is to accentuate the positive. Because successful alumni can be an important resource for doing this, her office has organized alumni panels of recently graduated USF international students who give tips on how they heard of a job, for example, and illustrate how persistence pays off. Hallett hopes to develop a greater resource base that includes alumni. “We would like to see a powerful network created, so undergraduates can search by country and field, and look for alums.”

In trying to maximize postgraduation job opportunities for international students, campus international advisers and career counselors are, paradoxically, helping them both to conform and to market their distinctiveness: international students bring an employer cultural competence, foreign language skills, and a global perspective. If international job seekers are to succeed, they need to be informed and to plan ahead, as Lawler underscores. Here the international adviser, working with colleagues in career services, can be invaluable. **IE**

**EVE KATZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was “Imagine, Cooperative Branding” in the regional supplement on Canada and Mexico with the September/October 2009 issue.