America is Losing International Student Talent

We urge Congress to:

1. **Cosponsor the Keep STEM Talent Act of 2025[1] (S.1233/H.R.2627) to provide a direct path to a green card for international students graduating from U.S. colleges and universities to remain and contribute to the U.S. economy.**
2. **Defend the Optional Practical Training and Duration of Status policy to attract and retain the global talent needed to complement our domestic workforce and maintain U.S. preeminence in research and innovation.**

While America is fortunate to have a large and dynamic workforce, **we do not yet produce enough graduates to meet the demands of the 21st-century knowledge economy**. International students at our colleges and universities complement our domestic student pipeline in critical ways. However, the current administration's proposed rule **to replace the Duration of Status (D/S) policy with a fixed term of admission** and threats **to restrict or eliminate Optional Practical Training (OPT)** would push international talent to more welcoming countries. Proactive legislative measures to attract and retain international students such as the **Keep STEM Talent Act** are needed to ensure the United States continues to draw the world's best and brightest to our campuses, research labs, and workplaces.

The economic benefit of attracting and retaining international student talent is clear. NAFSA's latest analysis finds that international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed **$39.9 billion** and supported **309,409 jobs** to the U.S. economy during the 2025-2026 academic year. **For every four international students, one U.S. job is created/supported[2].** Consider that former international students have founded a quarter of the start-up companies valued at $1 billion or more in this country.

International students also provide domestic students with global perspectives needed to compete in an increasingly interconnected world and open the door to opportunity for their U.S. counterparts. **Research shows that for every international undergraduate at a public university, two more in-state first-year students enroll as well.**[3] This multiplier effect is especially powerful given that international students do not receive federal financial aid and pay out-of-state tuition, thus lowering the costs for American students.

A Global Race for Talent that the U.S. Cannot Afford to Lose

The United States is competing with other nations for international students and, without decisive action, risks **losing its position as the most attractive destination for international student talent**. There are troubling signs that enrollment in U.S institutions is dropping—especially at the graduate level where cutting edge research in science, medicine, and technology takes place. Declining international enrollment **cost the economy an estimated**

[1] https://www.nafsa.org/issue-brief-keep-stem-talent-act-2025
[2] Nafsa.org/econvalue
[3] https://tinyurl.com/higher-ed-export

$2.4 billion in fall 2026[4] and weakens America's reputation as the world's top producer of technological innovation. **Losing one-third of international students in U.S. STEM fields would cause long-term GDP losses of $240 to $481 billion each year**[5]. That makes the **Keep STEM Talent Act of 2025 vitally important.** It would create a path to a green card for U.S.-educated advanced STEM graduates and exempt them from annual green card caps. It also includes strong labor protections and wage requirements.

OPT: A Proven Pathway to Strengthen U.S. Workforce Competitiveness

Optional Practical Training provides international students and recent graduates with hands-on, applied learning, especially in STEM and research fields, for up to 36 months. Despite some claims to the contrary, **research**[6] **actually shows that OPT does not displace U.S. workers or decrease their wages and that it contributes to innovation and job creation.** In fact, job losses impacting U.S. workers are likely without it[7]. OPT is the only way for potential employers to build relationships with international students, who are especially vital in industries where the U.S. is experiencing a severe shortage of workers. Surveys show that OPT is a key determinant for international students in choosing where to study; 66 percent of respondents indicated they would go elsewhere if post-study work was not available[8]. Restricting OPT would push global talent to competitor nations and hamstring our economy.

Duration of Status: A Critical Tool in the Competition for Talent

The Duration of Status policy allows international students and exchange visitors to remain legally in the United States as long as they are progressing in their studies or research or are engaged in OPT or academic training. A rule proposed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would eliminate this long-standing policy and replace it with an exact date, not to exceed four years. This would force students and exchange visitors who need more time to complete a degree program or other educational endeavors to apply and pay for a formal extension of stay from DHS' U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). In November 2026, a federal court vacated the final rule and preserved the Duration of Status policy but a legislative solution, such as the Keep Innovators in America Act (H.R. 8013) is needed to ensure it is enshrined in immigration law. **Losing D/S in the future would surely drive away international student talent to more welcoming and predictable destinations.**

We have decades of evidence showing that international students and scholars create jobs, drive research, enrich U.S. classrooms, and build bridges that enhance our national security. If we do not proactively attract international talent, the talent will go elsewhere—to the detriment of the American public, our economy, and our global competitiveness.

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[4] Nafsa.org/fall2026report
[5] https://tinyurl.com/brain-freeze-paper
[6] Nafsa.org/OPT
[7] https://tinyurl.com/Rebuilding-Together-OPT
[8] https://tinyurl.com/Students-Survey-OPT