



# IS ON THE RISE

**N**early 1.5 million international students graduated from U.S. colleges and universities, then enrolled in the federal government's Optional Practical Training (OPT) program between 2004 and 2016, according to a Pew Research report. More than half of those (53%) are employed in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. One reason for surging numbers in the program are the extensions granted by executive orders to STEM students, increasing the maximum length of employment for foreign students with STEM degrees to 29 months in 2008, then to 36 months in 2016.

29 MONTHS IN 2008

36 MONTHS IN 2016

MAXIMUM LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS WITH STEM DEGREES



53% ARE EMPLOYED IN STEM FIELDS

ALLEVIATING THE WORKLOAD— AND FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS— OF SERVING AN INCREASING NUMBER OF OPT STUDENTS.

While that's good news for international students who land temporary employment related to their major area of study, it presents challenges for their universities and designated school officials (DSOs). "Our population of OPT students has come very close to our number of enrolled international students," says Tarek Elshayeb, director of the International Student & Scholar Office at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. "Therefore, the number of students we serve overall has increased significantly."

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UNC Charlotte has 1,800 F-1 international students on campus and 1,300 OPT students at jobs across the U.S. At first glance, it may seem that serving the OPT students would be fairly simple. After all, they aren't on campus. But Elshayeb shatters this illusion: "OPT students don't walk into our office for assistance like enrolled students, however they send us tons of emails and phone calls, and they submit a lot of requests so we can help them report information in a timely fashion to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)."

The amount of work generated by OPT students at UNC Charlotte has escalated to such a degree that the International Student & Scholar Office (ISSO) is now advertising for a new advisor. "The main purpose of that new position is to work specifically with the OPT population, including STEM OPT students," says Elshayeb.



## THE CHALLENGES OF AN INCREASED **WORKLOAD**

Currently, without an employee devoted to OPT students, most of the workload at UNC Charlotte falls to the ISS Office's staff. Due to recent changes in immigration regulations and requirements that pertain to F-1 students and to lighten some of the communication, the office has put answers to simple questions on an FAQ page on its website. However, Elshayeb says many students still prefer one-on-one contact. "It extends a kind of comfort that their questions are answered, and they are doing the right thing," he says.

Part of the increased workload that ISS offices face is due to another related issue—increased reporting requirements for OPT students. "Not only are we supporting the students while they are going through this process, but now we also

have these reporting requirements," says Tami Renner, director of International Student and Scholar Services in Creighton University's Global Engagement Office. The private Jesuit university has approximately 205 F-1 international students and an additional 40 OPT students.

"We are responsible for making sure that we get their six-month reviews and annual reviews and that we have all the information on where they live, where they are employed and so on," says Renner, who works alongside one other full-time employee in the office. "It's a lot of extra work." That's particularly true for STEM OPT students, whose jobs can be extended beyond the one-year time frame of other OPT students.

# THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF OPT STUDENTS



More OPT students and more reporting requirements lead to financial implications for universities. “Time is money. You’re spending a lot of time on students who aren’t necessarily at your institution any longer, but you are still responsible for them,” says Renner. “It’s a good program, and I’m glad we have STEM OPT. But it does require more work on everyone’s part.”

To alleviate some of the financial burden, many universities have begun charging fees for OPT students. For example, UNC Charlotte charges STEM OPT students a \$225 one-time fee. (Other OPT students aren’t charged a fee because one-year jobs require less reporting and interaction with the student.) Elshayeb says that the average fee among institutions that charge students is \$100 per year.

Technology solutions also help relieve employee workload, thereby reducing expenditures. Last year, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) created a portal for OPT students to report information, including the name and address of their employer, employment progress and any changes in employment. Although Elshayeb calls the portal a “great step forward,” it doesn’t allow students to input all the required information. “We look forward to software that will enable us to capture all the information and help us report it in a timely fashion to ensure student compliance, as well as institutional compliance,” he says.

Software utilized by universities, such as Terra Dotta’s ISSS solution, also helps alleviate the workload related to OPT students, says Renner. “We have invested money into Terra Dotta, but it’s allowed us to do more with our time by being more streamlined,” she says.

# ADVICE FOR ADVOCATING FOR **MORE RESOURCES**

*Elshayeb and Renner were among a panel of presenters at the NAFSA 2019 Annual Conference & Expo in a session entitled, “The Financial Implications of Supporting OPT Students.” One question came up repeatedly from attendees during the session: What can ISS offices do to advocate for more resources? The panelists offered a few suggestions:*

- **Have conversations across campus.** Talk to leaders and administrators in the provost’s office, student life, the registrar’s office, the business office and other key constituents. Renner often tells them, “If we’re able to do our job, then you can do your job better.”
- **Stress the importance of compliance.** “One of the things that’s worked best for me here at Creighton and at other institutions is helping everyone understand what our

requirements are to the government,” says Renner. “I tell them if we’re not in compliance, then we won’t have students at all. That usually catches people’s attention.”

- **Explain how more resources will benefit other students and programming.** “If we are compliant, then we can do more to retain these students. That’s a message people listen to: Retention is definitely a catchword on campuses,” says Renner. “And more resources can help us better balance our time between OPT students and enrolled international students, making sure we are providing the programming and things they need as well.”
- **Use the news to spread your story.** “For better or worse, the news stories coming out about OPT and CPT [the Curricular Practical Training program] can help with the conversation because it raises awareness,” says Renner. She encourages her peers to start conversations with campus administrators by saying, “You may have seen this story in the news. Let me tell you how we view this and how we work with OPT students.”

Ultimately, finding additional resources is more about helping students than helping ISS staff. “We are doing our best to serve the students because we see their success as our success,” says Elshayeb. “At the end of the day, we work with our colleagues from other offices and academic departments across our campus to produce global citizens who can compete in the worldwide marketplace.”



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