

International Student Survey on OPT and Experiential Learning

Institute for Progress

October 6, 2026

Between August 14 and October 5, 2026, the Institute for Progress surveyed current and former international students in F-1 status about how proposed changes to Optional Practical Training (OPT) and experiential learning would affect their plans to stay in the United States after graduation, and how those changes would have affected their decision to enroll in a U.S. program in the first place.

The survey was distributed through certain professional science societies with student members and student groups with members on US college campuses. While student members of the science societies and campus groups are both American and noncitizen, the survey instrument did not allow completion by individuals who did not state they were or had been an international student in the US in F-1 status.

The survey received 754 responses. This writeup excludes the 20 respondents who reported never having held F-1 status, leaving 734 respondents: 535 currently working toward a degree in F-1 status, 148 currently on OPT or STEM OPT, and 51 former F-1 students, 37 of whom used OPT. Questions about future plans to stay (Questions 7–14) were asked only of the 683 respondents currently in F-1 status. Questions about the decision to enroll and willingness to pay (Questions 15–19) were asked of all 734. Results are unweighted.

Respondents are concentrated in advanced degrees: 42% are in or recently completed a PhD program, 19% a master's program, and 7% a postdoctoral fellowship, while 25% are in or recently completed a bachelor's program. 80% of respondents currently in F-1 status have majors eligible for STEM OPT. 63% attend or attended public institutions and 54% attend or attended institutions with 25,000 or more full-time students. The most common countries of citizenship are China (18%) and India (17%).

For more information on this survey, please contact Jeremy Neufeld (jeremy@ifp.org).

A. Key Results

Survey of International Students on OPT (n=734)

- **Most current F-1 students plan to use OPT.** Under current rules, 87% of those still working toward a degree say they will pursue OPT.
 - **STEM OPT–eligible respondents:** 90% of those working toward a STEM OPT-eligible degree say they intend to pursue OPT.
- **Under a \$70,000 fee for 12-month OPT and a \$30,000 fee for the STEM extension, 80% fewer students say they would likely try to stay.** If the fees could be paid by the student, school, or employer, only 15% of current F-1 respondents would likely try to stay, down from 79% under current rules. 82% of those who currently plan to stay say they would be unlikely to try under the fees, including 81% of master's students who plan to stay.
 - **STEM OPT–eligible respondents:** 15% would likely try to stay, down from 80% under current rules, an 82% decline.
 - **PhD respondents:** Under the \$70,000 fee for 12-month OPT and \$30,000 fee for the STEM extension, 13% of PhD students currently in F-1 status would likely try to stay, down from 80% under current rules, an 84% decline.
- **If schools are required to pay the fees, 40% fewer students say they would likely try to stay.** 47% of current F-1 respondents would likely try to stay, down from 79% under current rules. 49% of those who currently plan to stay would become unlikely to try. This decline is smaller than when the policy described allows payment by either the student, school, or employer, perhaps because respondents assume their school would pay under the school-only version.
 - **STEM OPT–eligible respondents:** 48% would likely try to stay, down from 80% under current rules, a 40% decline.
- **69% of respondents say they would not have enrolled in a U.S. program under a \$70,000 fee for 12-month OPT and a \$30,000 fee for the STEM extension.** 37% say they definitely would not have.
 - **STEM OPT–eligible respondents:** 70% would not have enrolled, including 38% who definitely would not have.

B. Respondent Characteristics (Questions 1–6)

Questions 1–6 were asked of all 734 respondents. The tables for Questions 5 and 6 break results down by program type from Question 1 (Postdoc = postdoctoral fellowship); respondents in associate's, professional, joint-degree, medical residency, and other programs appear only in the Total column.

Question 1. What type of program are you enrolled in or recently completed?

Answer	Total
Associate's degree	16
Bachelor's degree	187
Master's degree	141
PhD	305
Postdoctoral fellowship	50
Professional degree (MBA, JD, MD)	23
Joint professional degree program (JD/MBA, MD/PhD, etc.)	5
Medical residency or graduate medical training fellowship	2
Other	5

Question 2. Is the school where you are enrolled (or recently completed your program):

Answer	Total
A public school (primarily funded by the State where located)	462
A private school	272

Question 3. How large is your institution? Please estimate the total full-time student population, including all degree levels. Your best guess is fine.

Answer	Total
Large (25,000 or more)	395
Medium (Between 5,500 and 25,000)	177
Small (5,500 or fewer)	162

Question 4. Which of the following best reflects your country of citizenship?

Answer	Total
China (Mainland)	131
India	122
East or Southeast Asia, other than China (Mainland)	108
Sub-Saharan Africa	82
Europe	71
Latin America or the Caribbean	71
South or Central Asia, other than India	67
Middle East or North Africa	32
Canada, Australia, or New Zealand	26
Other or ambiguous write-in	9
Prefer not to say	15

Note: 37 respondents wrote in an answer rather than choosing a listed region. 28 were recoded into the listed region containing the country or region they named (for example, Nigeria and Ghana to Sub-Saharan Africa, Taiwan and Japan to East or Southeast Asia, Bangladesh and Nepal to South or Central Asia, and Saudi Arabia and Israel to Middle East or North Africa). Nine were left as written because they do not map to a single listed region: Russia (4), Turkey, "AZE," "North Americans," "asian," and a dual citizen of Sri Lanka and Italy.

Question 5. Are you currently or were you previously in the United States in F-1 immigration status (including OPT or STEM OPT)?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc
Yes, currently working toward a degree in F-1 status	535	158	95	247	0
Yes, currently on OPT or STEM OPT in F-1 status	148	22	36	38	39
No longer in F-1 status but did use OPT after completing a U.S. degree in F-1 status	37	5	5	14	10
No longer in F-1 status and did not use OPT after completing a U.S. degree in F-1 status	14	2	5	6	1

Question 6. If you are currently in F-1 status (either taking classes or on OPT), have you completed, or do you expect to complete, a degree major for which STEM OPT is permitted?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc
Yes, my major is eligible for STEM OPT	555	132	118	241	41
No, my major is not eligible for STEM OPT	109	34	15	38	0
Unsure	33	17	3	10	0
I am not in F-1 status	37	4	5	16	9

Note: Former F-1 students could answer "I am not in F-1 status."

C. Plans to Stay in the United States (Questions 7–14)

Questions 7–14 were asked only of the 683 respondents currently in F-1 status, either working toward a degree or on OPT. Column labels: program type is from Question 1 (Postdoc = postdoctoral fellowship; other program types appear only in Total). STEM OPT eligible means the respondent answered yes to Question 6. Likely to stay under current rules means the respondent answered definitely or probably yes to Question 7.

Question 7. If you are an F-1 student, either on OPT or still working toward your degree: How likely are you to remain in the United States on another status after your F-1?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible
Definitely yes, I will try to remain in the United States	218	58	41	88	12	171
Probably yes, I will likely try to remain in the United States	320	76	64	139	20	265
Probably no, it's unlikely I will try to remain in the United States	120	40	20	49	5	92
Definitely no, I will not try to remain in the United States	23	6	6	8	1	15
I am not in F-1 status	2	0	0	1	1	2

Note: Two respondents currently on OPT answered "I am not in F-1 status."

Question 8. If you are an F-1 student still working toward your degree: How likely are you to remain in the United States on OPT?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I will pursue OPT	264	78	55	110	209	244
Probably yes, I will likely pursue OPT	203	50	31	110	154	162
Probably no, it's unlikely I will pursue OPT	58	27	7	22	36	17
Definitely no, I will not pursue OPT	10	3	2	5	6	0

Note: The table shows the 535 respondents currently working toward a degree in F-1 status, to whom the question was addressed. Of the 148 respondents currently on OPT, 58 answered "I am not an F-1 student working toward earning a degree" and 90 chose one of the answers above; both groups are excluded.

Question 9. Think about your choices going forward. If all international graduates, in every field of study, could work in the U.S. through OPT for up to 36 months after graduation, how likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	387	115	67	156	22	305	353
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	248	51	53	108	17	202	178
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	41	11	10	18	0	34	7
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	7	3	1	3	0	4	0

Question 10. Think about your choices going forward. If a green card was "stapled to graduates' diplomas," meaning graduates of U.S. universities could receive permanent residence upon completion of their degree, with some other conditions, how likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	463	121	84	192	32	378	412
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	173	43	33	77	7	133	115
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	35	10	12	12	0	27	7
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	12	6	2	4	0	7	4

Question 11. Consider the following policy: OPT is not available unless the government collects a \$70,000 fee for the initial 12 months of OPT, and an additional \$30,000 fee for the 24-month STEM extension. OPT is only possible if either you, your school, or your employer pay the fee, but your school and your employer might decline to pay. Under this policy, how likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	25	10	4	5	1	20	24
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	80	24	16	32	1	60	74
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	269	68	56	109	19	220	227
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	309	78	55	139	18	245	213

Question 12. Now suppose the fee described above (in question 11) can only be paid by your school. You would still be able to work on OPT if your school is able to pay the fee, but you would not if your school does not pay. How likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	107	36	22	36	3	85	97
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	217	56	40	94	13	175	180
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	227	59	42	96	17	179	165
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	132	29	27	59	6	106	96

Note: More respondents said they would try to stay when only the school could pay (Question 12) than when the student, school, or employer could pay (Question 11), even though the payers in Question 11 include the school. Respondents may have read Question 11 as a fee they would most likely pay themselves.

Question 13. Suppose both of the following were true:

- OPT is unavailable to graduates of schools where more than 15% of bachelor's and master's students are international.
- CPT is unavailable.

Under those conditions, how likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	46	18	7	13	2	36	45
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	113	36	16	44	6	91	102
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	272	60	60	124	13	212	209
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	252	66	48	104	18	206	182

Question 14. Think about your choices going forward. If there was no work permission (OPT) after graduation for F-1 students at all, how likely would you be to try to remain in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would try to remain in the United States	37	13	4	14	1	26	36
Probably yes, I would likely try to remain in the United States	84	25	17	30	3	65	79
Probably no, it's unlikely I would try to remain in the United States	219	56	37	102	12	176	179
Definitely no, I would not try to remain in the United States	342	85	73	139	23	278	243
I am not in F-1 status	1	1	0	0	0	0	1

Note: One respondent currently working toward a degree answered "I am not in F-1 status."

D. Enrollment Decisions and Willingness to Pay (Questions 15–19)

Questions 15–19 were asked of all 734 respondents, including former F-1 students. Column labels are the same as in Section C. The Likely to stay under current rules column includes only the 538 respondents currently in F-1 status who answered definitely or probably yes to Question 7, since former F-1 students were not asked Question 7.

Question 15. Think back to your decision to enroll in a U.S. program. Consider if the following policy had been in place: OPT is not available unless the government collects a \$70,000 fee for the initial 12 months of OPT, and an additional \$30,000 fee for the 24-month STEM extension. OPT is only possible if either you, your school, or your employer pay the fee, but your school and your employer might decline to pay. How likely would you have been to choose a degree-granting program in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	85	28	14	34	2	64	66
Probably yes, I would have likely enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	145	39	19	73	7	102	105
Probably no, it's unlikely I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	234	58	43	104	16	177	177
Definitely no, I would not have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	270	62	65	94	25	212	190

Question 16. Think back again to your decision to enroll in a U.S. program. Suppose the fee described above (in question 15) can only be paid by your school. You would still be able to work on OPT if your school is able to pay the fee, but you would not if your school does not pay. How likely would you have been to choose a degree-granting program in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	96	30	22	34	2	69	72
Probably yes, I would have likely enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	216	59	31	97	11	157	165
Probably no, it's unlikely I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	249	61	44	112	22	193	179
Definitely no, I would not have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	173	37	44	62	15	136	122

Question 17. Think back to your decision to enroll in a U.S. program. Suppose OPT is not available unless the government collects a \$10,000 fee for the initial 12 months of OPT and an additional \$10,000 fee for the 24-month STEM extension. How likely would you have been to choose a degree-granting program in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	95	35	19	31	3	70	74
Probably yes, I would have likely enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	226	60	36	103	12	165	178
Probably no, it's unlikely I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	238	60	42	101	17	183	167
Definitely no, I would not have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	175	32	44	70	18	137	119

Question 18. Think back to your decision to enroll in a U.S. program. If there was no work permission (OPT) after graduation for F-1 students at all, how likely would you have been to choose a degree-granting program in the United States?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
Definitely yes, I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	71	26	14	23	2	49	54
Probably yes, I would have likely enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	149	38	24	71	6	111	106
Probably no, it's unlikely I would have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	216	56	36	98	11	156	156
Definitely no, I would not have enrolled in a degree-granting program in the United States	298	67	67	113	31	239	222

Question 19. Regardless of what you think of such fees, what is the largest one-time government fee that you (including any help from family or employer or others) would realistically pay for post-graduation (OPT) work permission in the United States that is part of your F-1 status?

Answer	Total	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	Postdoc	STEM OPT eligible	Likely to stay under current rules
I would not pay any significant fee beyond current application fees	284	64	56	112	28	222	190
Up to \$1,000	193	44	39	89	13	144	150
Up to \$5,000	134	36	23	60	9	107	109
Up to \$10,000	68	25	13	24	0	50	56
Up to \$25,000	15	5	0	5	0	11	11
Up to \$50,000	7	3	3	1	0	3	4
More than \$100,000	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Not sure	32	10	7	14	0	17	17

E. Optional Commentary from Survey Respondents (Question 20)

Question 20. Is there anything else about the importance of experiential learning and Optional Practical Training or how U.S. policy affects your education or career plans that you would like to share?

193 respondents chose to share thoughts related to the prompt. A sampling of responses includes the following.

Sampling of responses concerning OPT and experiential learning generally:

If the OPT program had any additional hurdles, I would likely be doing AI research in Tokyo or Amsterdam right now.

I strongly hope that policymakers will recognize that OPT is particularly important for PhD graduates whose careers depend on continued research and experiential training after graduation.

Charging large fees for post-graduation work authorization would place an unreasonable financial burden on international students and could discourage many talented individuals from studying in the United States.

Experiential learning opportunities are a necessary, though voluntary, part of any degree since at the end, everybody should choose a career in any direction. So if somebody wants to explore their options and gain experience, they should be able to.

Recent trends as well as common sense makes it clear that international students who have not yet invested time and money here will look towards other options where they are getting the opportunities to grow their careers. For others who do not have the luxury of a time machine to undo this decision [to study in the US] it means dealing with instability about their future while trying to finish rigorous coursework.

As a Mechanical Engineering graduate student conducting research on improving equipment reliability through AI-driven approaches, CPT and OPT would provide valuable real-world experience and practical insight into how to effectively address these challenges. Without this hands-on experience, much of the work remains theoretical rather than being applied to real-world engineering problems.

For me, I would say CPT, OPT, and STEM OPT are valuable assets. I do not know about other people, but I came to the United States to learn cutting edge technology in school and apply that in industry. To get hands-on experience, above mentioned trainings are really important. Even though one day I will go to [my home country], before going my aim is to keep my knowledge up to date, so that I can get the same level of job back home.

I am not intending to stay in the US forever. I definitely need the training during and after my PhD in order to get back to my country and serve my own country. Otherwise, I might not be employed in a preferred position back home. So, OPT, CPT both are important for me to just work effectively for the future career that I want back home, it's not necessary for me to build my career in the US.

For a long time, the United States offered one of the world's most attractive environments for professional and academic development. Introducing these fees risks undermining that advantage and reversing the flow of highly skilled talent from attracting exceptional people from around the world to pushing them toward opportunities elsewhere. The U.S. is already losing many brilliant researchers, professionals, and innovators to other countries. If this trend continues, it could eventually threaten the country's leading position in scientific research and industrial innovation. The U.S. government should think carefully about the long-term consequences of policies that make the country less welcoming and competitive for highly skilled international talent.

OPT and CPT are essential programs and without them many students will likely choose to go elsewhere where they can get hands on experience after getting a degree. It really is not about the ability to make money but rather self-development.

Optional Practical Training (OPT) and experiential learning are fundamental components of the U.S. student visa framework. Given the significant financial investment required for a U.S. education, OPT is essential for international students to bridge the gap between academic study and practical application. Without the opportunity to gain relevant practical experience in their major field, the ROI of an expensive U.S. degree becomes unfeasible.

My OPT and STEM extension were pivotal in my journey to pursuing a PhD. I came to the US for my undergraduate degree on the assumption, common among international students, that US education was simply "better." If restrictive policies like this had existed from the start, it's likely I would never have chosen the US in the first place, and would have built my academic path around Singapore's or another country's system instead.

OPT or learning experience influences heavily for student's career. Inability to learn through experience will prevent students from getting a job especially in competitive field like Astronomy. Academic institutions cannot pay large fees for OPT hence they will stop hiring talented students.

A fee on the order of \$100,000 would make this pathway effectively inaccessible to many international researchers. Academic postdoctoral salaries are modest compared with salaries in many private-sector fields, and neither individual researchers nor many university research groups could realistically absorb such a cost. As a result, the policy would not simply create an additional financial burden; for many of us, it would effectively eliminate the possibility of continuing our research careers in the United States.

Many of my faculty position offers are rescinded after hearing I am on OPT, this government created this fear/terror among institutions that hiring someone on OPT is not safe.

Summer internships almost never happen for international students with policies like that. What kind of OPT fee could be ever paid by PhD international student who has GTA, GRA, or scholarship only, receiving \$2000-2500/month at best for the 4-5 years, being unable to work anywhere else during education. Any kind of potential fee like that is basically a ban for people who live below poverty line for the whole time of education.

OPT was essential to my choice of a U.S. master's program, serving as the link between the degree and actual work experience; without it, the expense would not have fit my family's budget. A five- or six-figure charge for OPT would have prompted me to rethink studying in the United States and probably steered me toward Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia, where post-study work routes are clearer and less costly. For international students, the worth of a U.S. degree depends on the chance to gain practical experience afterward.

Since I am in a PhD degree (at a fancy place) I might have more options than OPT open to me after graduation; however, without OPT I would have most definitely left the country after my undergraduate studies. It allowed me to gain experience and pursue academic research, in comparison to the conventional route of obtaining a H1B through an employer. With every policy that places more barriers on post-graduation training/work authorization, I am inclined to leave the country right after my PhD, even though I have built my whole adult life here.

Sampling of responses on CPT alone:

CPT is an essential part of learning. Losing that program will be devastating for international students who will be falling behind in work experience relative to their peers. I expect it will lead to a decrease in applicants to US schools.

An important part of my career plan was to gain hands-on professional experience in my field through CPT while completing my doctoral education. This experience would allow me to apply what I have learned academically, further develop my professional skills, and work toward professional licensure.

Being able to do an internship on CPT is one of the biggest factors and the new updates on that certainly make me regret my decision of pursuing a degree in the US. Getting experience outside class is one of the most important aspects of being well educated. To not be able to have that defeats the whole purpose of trying to get educated in a foreign country.