



EDUCATION

Colleges, Business Ask Trump Not to Cut Visa Programs

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Gregory Minott came to the United States from his native Jamaica over 20 years ago on a student visa. He was able to make a career in architecture in America thanks to temporary work visas.

The 43-year-old is now a U.S. citizen and co-creator of a property development business in Boston, Massachusetts. But he worries that new proposed restrictions on student and work visas will prevent others from following a similar path to the American dream.

Minott told the Associated Press that society improves when there are lots of different kinds of people living and working together.

“To not have **peers** from other countries **collaborating** side by side with Americans is going to be a setback for the country. We learned from Americans, but Americans also learn from us,” he said.

Minott is among the business and **academic** leaders asking U.S. President Donald Trump not to expand the temporary visa restriction established in April.

They argue that barring skilled foreign workers will hurt the economy and limit **innovation** at a time when it is needed most. But others say the visa restriction did not go far enough and have been calling for stronger action.

As COVID-19 spread across the U.S., the president established a 60-day halt on visas for foreigners seeking permanent residency. But his April 22 order included a long list of exceptions. It also did not cover the hundreds of thousands of guest worker and student visas issued each year.

Republican senators, including Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Ted Cruz of Texas, argue all new guest worker visas should be suspended for at least 60 days. That, or until unemployment has returned to normal levels.

In a letter to Trump last month, they wrote, “Given the extreme lack of available jobs ... it **defies** common sense to admit additional foreign guest workers to compete for such limited employment.”

Trump administration officials have been debating how long any new order should remain in place and which industries should be excluded, like health care and food production.

But officials have made it clear they are considering suspending H-1B visas for high-skilled workers. The same goes for H-2B visas for seasonal workers and L-1 visas for employees leaving their old job for position with a company in the U.S.

Little-known OPT program

In recent weeks, businesses and academic groups have also been voicing concern about possible changes to the Optional Practical Training, or OPT program. OPT is a relatively little-known program that permits some 200,000 foreign students — mostly from China and India — to work in the country each year.

Created in the 1940s, OPT permits international students to work for up to one year during college or after they complete their studies. Over the last ten years, the program has been extended for those studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics. They can now work for up to three years.

Republican lawmakers have been some of the strongest critics of the program. But some argued that OPT is necessary for the country to remain a welcome place for international students. They wrote to the Trump administration that the students and their families add more than \$40 billion yearly into the economy. That is despite the fact that they represent just 5.5 percent of the U.S. college student population.

Companies and academic organizations also warn of a “reverse brain drain.” That is a situation in which foreign students just take their American education to help another nation’s economy.

Some critics say OPT gives companies a financial reason to employ foreigners over Americans because they do not have to pay some federal taxes.

The program also lacks **oversight** and has become a popular path for foreigners seeking legal permission to stay, said Jessica Vaughan. She is policy director at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington group that fights for strong immigration limits.

“The government does not require that there be actual training, and no one checks on the employer or terms of employment,” she said. “Some ... are career ‘students,’ going back and forth between brief ... degree programs and employment, just so they can stay here.”

Andrew Tarsy says, in Massachusetts, removing OPT would put a major part of the state’s economy at risk. He is the co-creator of the Massachusetts Business Immigration Coalition.

Earlier this month the group of nearly 50 businesses and colleges, including TripAdvisor and the University of Massachusetts, sent a letter to Trump asking him not to cut the program.

“We **attract** the brightest people in the world to study here,” Tarsy said. “It’s led to the **founding** of many, many companies and the creation of new products and services. It’s the bridge for international students.”

I'm Pete Musto.

Philip Marcelo reported on this story for the Associated Press. Pete Musto adapted it for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor. We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section.

Words in This Story

peer(s) – *n.* a person who belongs to the same age group or social group as someone else

collaborating – *v.* working with another person or group in order to achieve or do something

academic – *adj.* of or relating to schools and education

innovation – *n.* the act or process of introducing new ideas, devices, or methods

defies – *v.* goes against something

oversight – *n.* the act or job of directing work that is being done

attract – *v.* to cause someone to choose to do or be involved in something

founding – *v.* beginning or creating something that is meant to last for a long time
