

International Student Talent in the Michigan Workforce

A GROWING SOLUTION TO
THE STEM TALENT GAP

BEHIND THE DATA | SEPTEMBER 2022



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OVERVIEW

This report analyzes data that tracks international students entering the Michigan workforce. The data reveals phenomenal growth in the number of highly skilled, international students in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields hired by Michigan companies. The report was conducted with the pro bono assistance of OneMagnify, a multidisciplinary marketing and communications company with expertise in actionable analytics and data, and utilized data provided by the Pew Research Center.

Michigan companies
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international students from
2004 to 2016, representing
a 330 percent increase in the
annual number of hires.

The big news is that Michigan companies hired more than 40,000 international students, mostly highly skilled STEM workers, over the 13 years (2004-2016) for which we were able to obtain data.¹ This represented a 330

¹ The international student Optional Practical Training data was provided by the Pew Research Center who used a Freedom of Information Act request to obtain over 1 million records for the federal government for these years. It is our hope that we will be able to obtain subsequent years of data either working with Pew or through a similar FOIA request which will serve as the basis of future reports and ongoing analysis.



percent growth in the annual number of international students migrating to the Michigan workforce over this period with nearly 9,000 new international students annually filling critical talent gaps by 2016. The data suggests that thousands of Michigan companies utilized these talent pipelines. Combined with the Pew Research Center's own analysis of this data on a national basis, it suggests that the number of international students entering the Michigan workforce annually is more than double the number of high-skilled foreign workers being hired on H-1B visas.

This report helps contextualize the tremendous talent shortages that Michigan companies face, especially in STEM occupations. We explain the important roles that international students play for Michigan colleges and universities, providing critical tuition and spending to our state's economy and contributing to important research. Nationally, international students now comprise more than half of the graduate students in critical STEM fields like electric engineering, computer science, mechanical engineering, agricultural economics, mathematics, material sciences and pharmaceutical sciences. Our report chronicles the career pathway opportunities for international students and employers, and makes policy recommendations that would enable Michigan to build on these trends to help reduce the impact of talent crises that plague our economy and limit our shared prosperity.

OPT STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

BERENICE LÓPEZ

Berenice López received her MFA in Integrated Design from the College for Creative Studies (CCS) in May 2020. After graduation she participated in Global Detroit's Global Talent Accelerator, an intensive soft skills program that prepares international students and graduates for the U.S. job market. With GTA's assistance, Berenice was able to land a job as a contractor to Ford Motor Company.

Prior to moving to Michigan to study at CCS, Berenice was a project manager in the engineering center of General Motors' Mexico City operations. She wanted to change her career focus to design and decided the best place to learn about User Experience Design and human-vehicle interaction was in Detroit because of our rich automotive history. After asking several GM colleagues about where they went to school, Berenice learned about CCS and enrolled as an international student in the MFA program.

Berenice has described the GTA program as “holistic”. “We not only learned how to sell ourselves in the U.S. job market, but we also had the opportunity to learn about the immigration and work visa process, racial equity, and even how to keep a healthy mindset during this difficult situation. Also, we were able to talk to people who went through the experience of looking for a job, and we got to ask questions. Finally, we even had the opportunity to connect with some companies in southeast Michigan.” Berenice credits GTA as playing a pivotal role in helping her secure her U.S. job in pursuit of the American Dream.

Most of Berenice's colleagues in her department at Ford are immigrants. They come from Mexico, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Haiti and Eastern Europe.



"We are people who are not afraid to take risks. We are not afraid to make changes."

"That is good for the economy because we have a different approach to what we do," she says. "If we're asked to do something different from what we are used to doing, we aren't afraid to make those adjustments. We bring a different perspective not only to the work we do but what we do in general. We have a different way of thinking. It's good to have a different point of view. It makes the culture at work richer."

UNCOVERING THE POTENTIAL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The single-most pressing concern among Michigan companies of all sizes is their ability to access and grow highly skilled talent.² Michigan's most important companies and industries are locked in a global talent war for skilled workers with advanced degrees.³ Fortunately, Michigan is well positioned to leverage a global talent solution that can give its companies and economy a competitive advantage, especially around the most in-demand, high-skilled STEM talent positions.

This report analyzes the exponential growth from 2004-2016 in the number of international students working in Michigan. International students play an important role in Michigan's higher education system, in addition to the potential they present for Michigan's economic future. With some 27,500 international students enrolled at Michigan colleges and universities, Michigan is home to the 9th largest international student population in the country. These students are estimated to account for \$828.7 million in economic activity in Michigan.⁴

2 Michigan Economic Development Corporation, found at <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/news/2022/02/high-tech-high-impact-michigans-workforce-is-hardwired-for-success/>

3 Malachi Barrett, "Michigan's high-tech industries need foreign workers to drive future growth," MLive, September 27, 2021 at <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/09/michigans-high-tech-industries-need-foreign-workers-to-drive-future-growth.html>

4 An annual state-by-state economic impact estimate is prepared by the Open Doors report published by the Institute for International Education in partnership with the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. A summary of the report data for the 2020-21 academic year can be found at <https://www.nafsa.org/>



[policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2#trends_reports](https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2#trends_reports). International student spending technically qualifies as a U.S. export product (good or services produced domestically sold to a foreign interest) and higher education actually ranks high among all U.S. export product, estimated to account for nine times the number of U.S. jobs as coal mining and to almost double the value of America's top agricultural export (soybeans). Brook Larmer, "One of America's Most Vital Exports, Education, Never Goes Abroad, but It Still Faces Threats," New York Times, January 3, 2019 found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/magazine/one-of-americas-most-vital-exports-education-never-goes-abroad-but-it-still-faces-threats.html>



STABILIZING ENROLLMENT

In Michigan, international student enrollment plays a critical role in sustaining our colleges and universities, providing much-needed revenue that both keeps public university doors open and lowers tuition increases on domestic students. International students are charged higher tuition rates—often three times the rate of in-state tuition. At least one analysis found that while international students comprised 12 percent of public university students, **they accounted for 28 percent of all tuition dollars across the nation's public colleges and universities.**⁵ Michigan's public universities

⁵ Tanza Loudanback, "International Students Are now 'Subsidizing' Public American Universities to the Tune of \$9 Billion a Year," Business Insider, September 16, 2016 found at <https://www.businessinsider.com/foreign-students-pay-up-to-three-times-as-much-for-tuition-at-us-public-colleges-2016-9>.

experienced a 9.5 percent decline in new freshman enrollment in fall 2021 on top of a 3.5 percent decline in fall 2020. In fact, four of the 15 public universities in Michigan have experienced greater than a 30 percent drop in enrollment in the last decade. Four others saw enrollment declines between 20-30 percent. The future of keeping the doors open on all 15 public colleges and universities in Michigan is jeopardized by the state's demographics of declining numbers of Michigan high school graduates.⁶

⁶ Kim Kozlowski, "CMU's Enrollment is Plummeting. Some Worry about Its Viability," Detroit News, April 3, 2022 found at <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2022/04/04/central-michigan-university-plummeting-enrollment/7096290001/>.

TABLE 1: Full-Time Graduate Students and the Percent of International Students by Field (2019)

FIELD	PERCENT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	NUMBER OF FULL-TIME INTERNATIONAL GRAD STUDENTS	NUMBER OF FULL-TIME US-BORN GRAD STUDENTS
Petroleum Engineering	82%	803	181
Electrical Engineering	74%	26,343	9,083
Computer and Information Sciences	72%	44,786	17,334
Industrial and Mfg. Engineering	71%	6,554	2,632
Statistics	70%	5,497	2,406
Economics	67%	8,023	4,049
Civil Engineering	61%	8,775	5,527
Mechanical Engineering	58%	11,215	8,130
Agricultural Economics	58%	766	564
Mathematics and Applied Math	56%	9,902	7,876
Chemical Engineering	54%	4,590	3,975
Metallurgical or Materials Engineering	53%	2,981	2,671
Materials Sciences	52%	713	660
Pharmaceutical Sciences	50%	1,790	1,827

Source

National Science Foundation Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates and Science and Engineering, Public Use Microdata files, National Foundation for American Policy. U.S. students include lawful permanent residents.

INNOVATION

Beyond providing critical tuition dollars, however, international students contribute to innovation and academic advancement on college campuses, particularly at research universities. According to researchers at the New American Economy (now merged with the American Immigration Council), as well as the Vilcek Foundation, **international students and foreign-born faculty contributed to approximately 75 percent of the patents from the nation's top research universities**, like the University of Michigan.⁷

Most critically, international students have predominated the STEM fields at U.S. colleges and universities, especially among advanced degree (masters and

Ph.D.) programs. According to Congressional Research Services, almost half of all international students are studying in STEM disciplines,⁸ roughly twice the rate of domestic students. While international students account for less than five percent of all the students at U.S. colleges and universities, they account for approximately half of all the graduate students enrolled in STEM programs. Specifically, international students comprise more than 70 percent of all the graduate students in electrical engineering, computer and information sciences and industrial and manufacturing engineering—fields critical to the future of the Michigan economy.⁹

7 Steve Tobocman and Gracie Xavier, "Filling the Talent Gap: Mobilizing Michigan's International Student Potential," Global Detroit (2016), page 10 found at <https://globaldetroitmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GD-OPT-Report-8.5x11.pdf>

8 "Foreign STEM Students in the United States," Congressional Research Services, November 1, 2019 found at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11347>.

9 "International Students in Science and Engineering," National Foundation for American Policy (August 2021) found at <https://nfap.com/studies/international-students-in-science-and-engineering/>.

OPT STUDENT VISAS

International students can also be a critical source of high-skilled STEM talent for Michigan employers. All international students studying full time in the U.S. are eligible to work for one full year in their field of study through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) portion of their student visa. For those international students with degrees in STEM-related fields of study (including both undergraduate and graduate degree programs), the one-year OPT work opportunity can be extended two additional years through the OPT STEM extension program originally created under President George W. Bush in 2008 and re-established in 2016 under President Barack Obama. Employing a recently graduated international student through the OPT does not cost an employer anything, as the visa is held by the student's university. The OPT STEM extension program, which allows three years of total work experience without need for any visa sponsorship, is only available to employers that utilize the federal E-Verify system and requires that employers implement a formal training program to augment the student's academic learning through practical experience.

Over the past decade, Global Detroit has engaged thousands of international students at Michigan colleges and universities after graduation using the OPT and OPT STEM extension opportunities. These students are eager to work in the U.S. and in Michigan. Our job fairs have attracted talented STEM-degreed graduates from as far away as Florida, New York, Kansas and Arkansas who are so motivated to meet employers willing to hire under the OPT program that they have traveled from far away states to explore opportunities.

Employers using the OPT program for STEM talent have several options to engage workers hired under the program in longer-term employment relationships. Probably the most common retention strategy for



OPT workers is seeking an H-1B visa. An employer hiring a STEM graduate on OPT has as many as four opportunities to enter the annual H-1B lottery to hire that worker (April 1 of the student's final semester and each April 1 application period during the three years of OPT STEM extension employment). Employers with global operations can transfer OPT hires to offices outside the U.S. for one full year and then bring them back to their U.S. offices through L-visas allowing intracompany transfers.

The post-COVID era of remote work, however, suggests that any OPT hire can transition to a long-term employee, even if that hire needs to return to their home country at the end of their OPT employment. Remote work makes this possibility significantly more tenable. Of course, some employees will find their own legal pathway to long-term employment through marriage or other visa opportunities. If for some reason remote work and other strategies do not play out, the employer and international student hire will have to part ways at the end of the OPT employment. The employer will have benefitted from up to three years of OPT work and should have an ally abroad as a potential supplier or customer in their former employee.

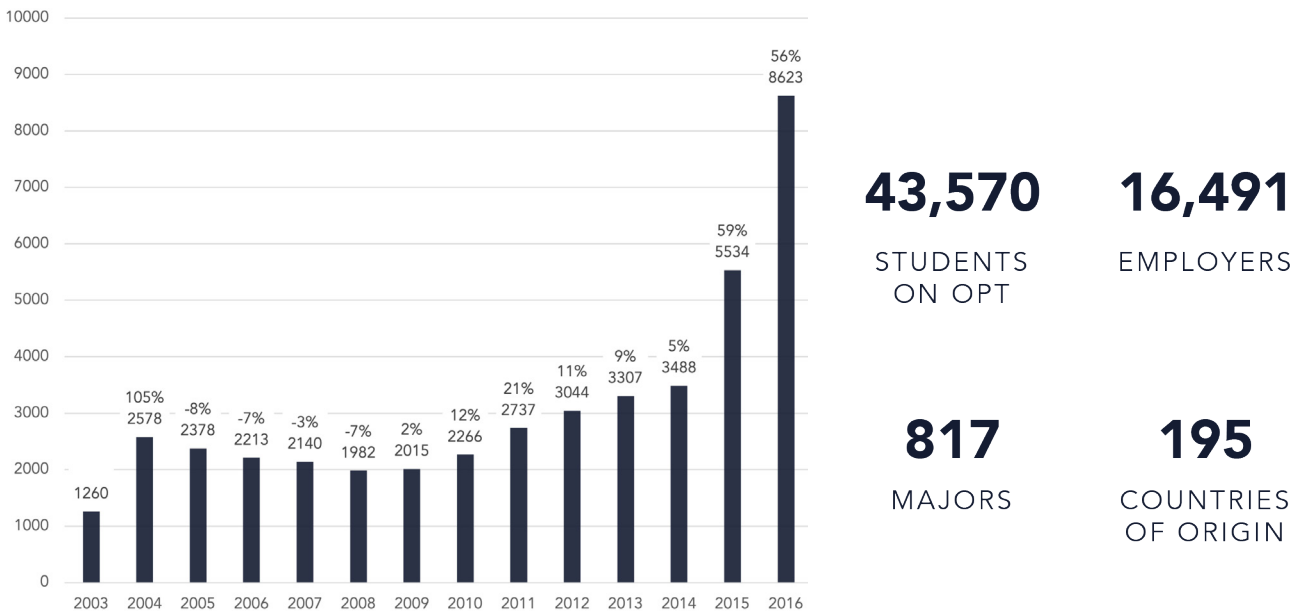
DATA FINDINGS

With the assistance of the Pew Research Center, Global Detroit has obtained 13 years of data on OPT usage across the nation. We worked with OneMagnify to analyze this data set and to assess OPT employment through Michigan employers, as well as OPT usage by international students graduating from Michigan colleges and universities for the years 2004-2016. We hope to obtain and analyze more recent data in future reports with an eye towards using annual data to track international student progress in Michigan.

RIISING OPT NUMBERS

Michigan, like the rest of the U.S., experienced meteoric growth in the hiring of international student talent from 2004-2016. In 2016, Michigan employers hired 8,623 international students on OPT—a significant source of very highly-skilled STEM talent. This represents a 335 percent growth rate from the number of hires in 2004. There is a distinct geometric growth trend in the Michigan data that begins toward the end of Michigan’s recession in 2010 and 2011, but the increases in 2015

FIGURE 1: OPTs who lived and worked in Michigan post-graduation.



SOURCE

Pew Research Center analysis of US Immigration Customs Enforcement data received August 2017 through a Freedom of Information Act request.

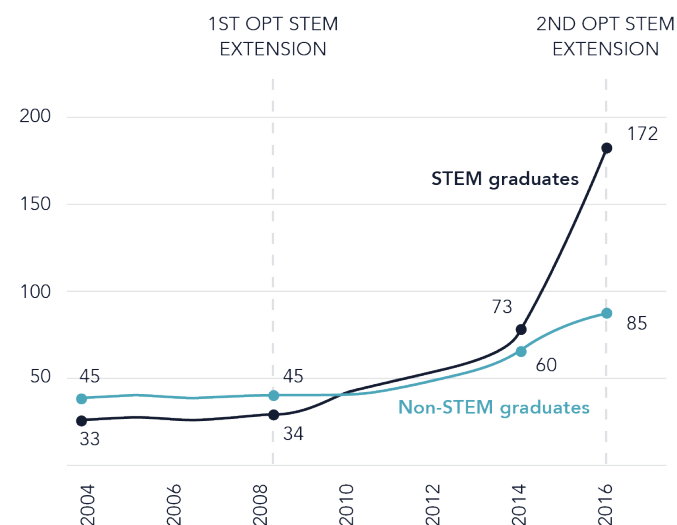


and 2016 are significant, with more than 50 percent growth each year. Using a five-year rolling average, however, documents the deep-rooted nature of the growth in OPT hiring by Michigan employers. For the five years from 2004-2008, Michigan employers average 2,258 OPT hires per year, but from 2012-2016 that number more than doubled (212 percent growth) to 4,799 hires per year over the last five years of data.

Our findings mirror those of the Pew Research Center's analysis of the national data over this period, which track a 400 percent increase in OPT hires from the 2004-2008 period to 2016, a year in which U.S. employers hired 257,000 international students through OPT.¹⁰ Pew's analysis highlights the expanded usage of OPT by international students receiving graduate degrees in STEM fields after the OPT STEM extension program was first announced by President Bush in 2008. The use of OPT to hire talented STEM graduates by U.S. employers has been so profound that in 2014, 2015 and 2016 the number of new skilled global workers entering the U.S.

10 Neil Ruiz and Abby Budiman, "Number of Foreign College Students Staying and Working in U.S. After Graduation Surges," Pew Research Center found at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/05/10/number-of-foreign-college-students-staying-and-working-in-u-s-after-graduation-surges/>.

FIGURE 2: Number of OPT approvals from 2004 to 2016 (in thousands)



NOTE

Figures are students with an associate degree or higher. STEM categories are based on fields outlined by the US Department of Homeland Security.

SOURCE

Pew Research Center analysis of US Immigration Customs Enforcement data received August 2017 through a Freedom of Information Act request.

workforce through the OPT program surpassed the number of new H-1B visa workers. In fact, by 2016 the number of new skilled foreign nationals entering the U.S. workforce on the OPT portion of their student visa (257,000) more than doubled the number of new H-1B skilled workers (115,000) entering the U.S. workforce.

Given the caps on the number of H-1B workers, it appears that OPT will continue to play a prominent role in the supply of talent. Also of note, the Pew analysis chronicles that the national growth in OPT utilization has largely been powered by STEM graduates of advanced degree programs (masters and PhDs), the most in-demand workers.¹¹

11 Ibid.

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

International students are eager to stay in Michigan to work after graduation. Our analysis suggests that **60 percent** of the 47,000 international students of Michigan colleges and universities who used the OPT over the 13 years **were employed in Michigan**, as opposed to working in other states.

This in-state retention rate is close to that of Michiganders graduating from Michigan colleges and universities and nearly three times the retention rate of out-of-state domestic students graduating from Michigan colleges and universities.¹²

Michigan is home to a little more than 700,000 foreign-born residents, or roughly seven percent of the state’s population. Foreign-born residents account for essentially all of the population growth of the state over the last 25 years. Roughly 14 percent of the state’s population is foreign born. Despite Michigan’s relatively low foreign-born numbers, the state has been home to large numbers of international students, and Michigan employers hire a large number of international students on OPT. The Open Doors report tracking international student enrollment and their economic impact annually consistently ranks Michigan around 10th in the nation in the number of international students studying at

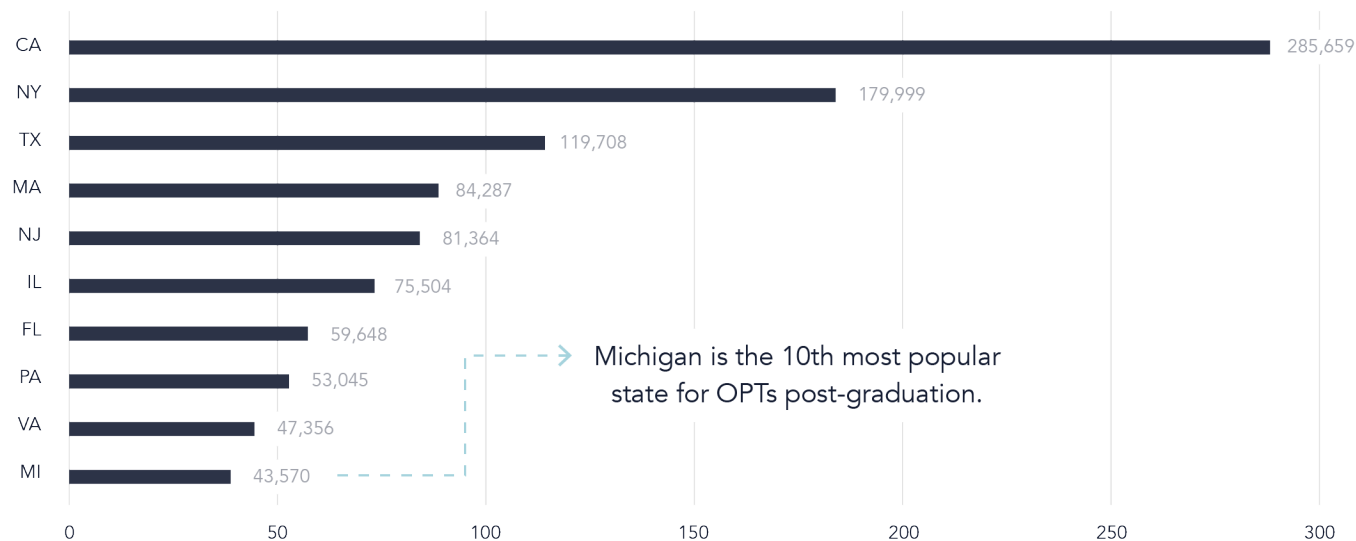
Michigan colleges and universities. **Our research puts Michigan as 10th among the states in the number of international students working under OPT.**

TABLE 2: In-State vs. Out-of-State Employment

YEAR	MICHIGAN EMPLOYMENT	EMPLOYMENT OUTSIDE MICHIGAN	PERCENT IN-STATE
2004	2,257	681	77%
2005	2,080	786	73%
2006	1,943	823	70%
2007	1,753	1,071	62%
2008	1,502	1,182	56%
2009	1,466	914	62%
2010	1,561	1,027	60%
2011	1,749	1,218	59%
2012	1,878	1,319	59%
2013	2,106	1,546	58%
2014	2,207	1,934	53%
2015	3,117	2,706	54%
2016	4,530	3,592	56%

12 Tobocman and Xavier at page 18.

FIGURE 3: Top home states of OPTs, post-graduation, 2004 to 2016



OPT STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

SUDHANVA KULKARNI

After graduating from Savitribai Phule Pune University in India, Sudhanva Kulkarni moved to Michigan to pursue a masters degree in automotive engineering technology at Lawrence Technological University. He received his degree from Lawrence Tech in May 2019 and spent his summer networking and polishing his professional skills in the Global Talent Accelerator, with hopes of obtaining a job with a U.S. automotive manufacturer or supplier. Although he is an outgoing person, he was having trouble connecting with employers and potential job opportunities. After he attended GTA's business etiquette session, he applied changes to his communication approach with recruiters and immediately saw an increase in responses. Just over a month into the program, he'd landed interviews with Toyota and GWF.

"What I learned about myself is I can stand out in the crowd and I can be more confident when talking. It is really easy to sell yourself, to market yourself and to share yourself in a direct way," he reflected soon after he completed the GTA program.

"Previously, I used to think, 'What is the formula? Is there any rocket science behind that?' But I learned it's really easy to present your ideas. The only thing that you require is courage."



Sudhanva's courage paid off. By summer's end, he had moved to the Washington, D.C. area to work as a lead business development and technical sales engineer for GWF. In this role, he works with GWF's research and development departments to help identify and develop new products; collaborates with sales teams to understand customer requirements and provide sales support; prepares and delivers technical presentations; and provides technical support.

"GTA was a bridge between graduation and the professional world for me," Sudhanva observes. "Starting from writing emails to networking, I learned the correct way of approaching potential employers. I understood that networking is not only for getting jobs but also to make great contacts so you yourself can be helpful to others and the society."

Sudhanva knew from grade one that he would study in the U.S., which he believes has "the best education system in the world," especially for studies in automotive engineering. His long-term career goal is to become a CEO of an automotive OEM—and, potentially, to come back and contribute his talent right here in Michigan.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

GLOBAL TALENT RETENTION INITIATIVE

Global Detroit has been a leader in spotlighting the opportunities that international students present to help employers fill unmet talent needs and to grow Michigan's economy. In 2013, Global Detroit helped launch, and currently leads, the Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI) as the nation's first international student retention program outside of a university. GTRI helps fill our state's high-skills talent gap by building students' job readiness skills and connecting international students and graduates with Michigan's top employers. It engages employers in helping them understand the OPT program and the legal processes for long-term retention, as well as connecting employers to international student talent.

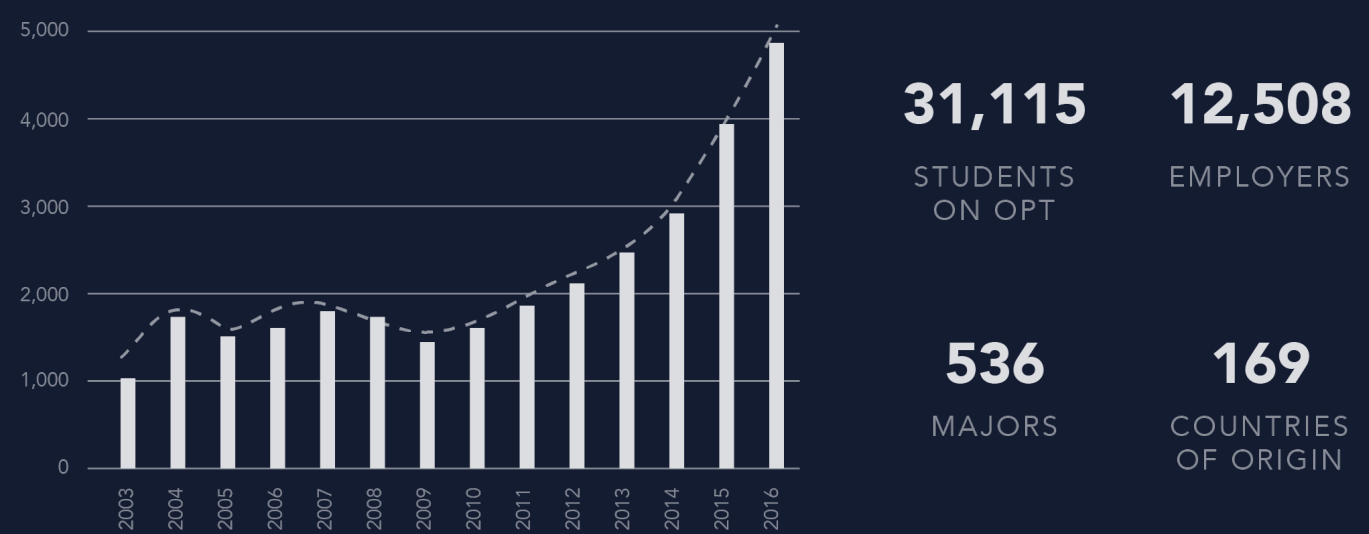
GTRI focuses on six universities who are strategic to Southeast Michigan—University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Wayne State University, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Eastern Michigan University and Oakland University. Collectively, these six institutions account for roughly 60 percent of the international students, but roughly 75 percent of the total number of international students from Michigan colleges and universities who worked in the U.S. under the OPT portion of their student visas. GTRI university students

using OPT experienced a significant growth curve similar to the curves among all Michigan colleges and universities, OPTs working in Michigan and national trends.

Collectively, GTRI schools account for roughly 60 percent of Michigan's international students, but roughly 75 percent of those using OPT.

It is impossible to pinpoint the precise impact that GTRI has had on the international students graduating from these six universities, but the over-representation of their international students in the OPT data suggests that GTRI may have contributed to boosting retention.

FIGURE 1: OPTs at GTRI Schools, 2003 to 2016



RECOMMENDATIONS

The data is clear: ***International students represent a tremendous opportunity for Michigan's economy and for its employers to fill unmet talent needs,*** especially for high-skilled STEM positions which require graduate degrees. As noted in Chart 1, international students comprise as much as 70 percent of the graduate students in the U.S. in key disciplines critical to Michigan's economic future (e.g., electrical engineering, computer science, etc.). Remote work opportunities improve the pathways for long-term retention of international students as employees.

Companies across the U.S. are expanding their talent strategies to include international student hiring using OPT

The data suggest that employers in Michigan and across the nation are expanding their talent strategies to include hiring international students under the OPT portions of their student visas. The number of talented international students entering the Michigan and national workforces expanded exponentially between 2004-2016 by any measure. To make the most of this opportunity, we recommend the following:

Michigan's global talent retention program needs deeper investment and its work should be expanded beyond Southeast Michigan. With one full-time staff person, the Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI) cannot adequately engage corporations in need of

talent, assisting international students and creating more opportunities to assist the region's talent efforts. The program currently can only assist employers in Southeast Michigan, yet employers across Michigan could benefit from GTRI's guidance in understanding the OPT and long-term retention processes and connecting with international student talent. Universities and the 10,000+ international students studying at other colleges and universities beyond the six GTRI schools could benefit from more access to GTRI's resources. Additionally, international students should be encouraged to utilize the MI STEM Forward internship program that subsidizes Michigan employers offering STEM internships and works with international students' universities to process immigration paperwork so that employers can hire international STEM student interns without worrying about visas.





Universities should invest more in soft-skills preparation for international students. In 2019, Global Detroit launched the [Global Talent Accelerator](#) (GTA) to assist international students and recent graduates looking to thrive in Southeast Michigan's job market. Through an intense six-session curriculum, international students learned skills from experts on how to sell themselves to the U.S. job market, received coaching and mentoring from professionals in their field, attended events and workshops tailored to improve their chances of employment, took virtual tours of some of metro Detroit's top companies, made connections in Southeast Michigan's corporate community and developed a network of peers. Since its launch, GTA has prepared nearly 50 international students for the U.S. workforce, placing 80 percent of its graduates with major employers, from the Big Three to small and medium-sized companies. GTA has demonstrated the value of intensive soft skills training and job search support. These can be delivered by Michigan colleges and universities, which often are best situated to make meaningful connections with the international students. International student offices are under-resourced, however, and need support to design and deliver such programs. Michigan's talent-based resources should be

directed to support these investments in students who are already here in Michigan and eager to remain.

Corporate diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging efforts need to expand their scope to address the needs and concerns of global talent. It's not enough to educate employers about the value of the international student talent pool and the mechanics of hiring under the OPT program. If foreign-born employees, including international students, H-1B workers, new refugees and others do not feel a sense of belonging at work, they will leave their jobs or be less apt to meaningfully contribute and leverage their knowledge, skills and ideas.

Companies who create a sense of belonging for their international workforce will be more competitive.

Through our employer engagement, Global Detroit's corporate partners have often shared concerns that their foreign-born employees have difficulty "fitting in" or "being part of their teams." While soft skills preparation can help address a portion of this concern, this feedback begs the question of how and whether the company is working to create a welcoming environment and workplace that values diverse perspectives, cultures and life experiences. To assist corporations in this work, it is important that diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging programs go beyond traditional issues of race and gender and are inclusive of employees from other countries and cultures.



Global Detroit is a regional economic development organization that develops and implements immigrant-inclusive policies, practices and programs to drive the revitalization of Detroit and the sustained prosperity of Southeast Michigan.

Global Detroit helped launch and spearheads the Global Talent Retention Initiative, the nation's first international student retention program outside of university.

For more information on Global Detroit visit www.globaldetroitmi.org. For more information on GTRI visit www.globaldetroitmi.org/gtri. You can contact Global Detroit and/or GTRI at info@globaldetroitmi.org.

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