



**GLOBAL  
DETROIT**

# Strategic Talent Retention at Michigan's Economic Crossroads

## Executive Summary

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Prepared by



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Michigan Global  
Talent Initiative



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“Acquiring the right talent is the most important key to growth. Hiring was and still is the most important thing we do”

— **Marc Benioff**,  
CEO @ Salesforce

## Michigan’s Global Talent Opportunity

Michigan’s economic future depends on its ability to secure and retain high-skilled talent, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, which are critical to the state’s priority industries. At the same time, Michigan faces structural workforce constraints driven by demographic change, population stagnation, and intensifying competition from other states and countries. Michigan is home to over 40,000 international students and scholars studying on F-1 student visas who have traveled from all corners of the world to pursue their education at the state’s world-class colleges, universities, and research institutions. These international students spend over \$1.4 billion annually, creating thousands of jobs, ensuring that our colleges and universities are filled with the best and brightest minds on the planet, advancing research and innovation, and paying top tuition rates, which help lower tuition costs for in-state Michigan students and sustain our colleges and universities in the face of smaller high

### “Why We Hire OPT Talent”



For **Brandon Byrd**, the Director of Foreign National Talent Management at **Populus Group**, global talent isn’t just a business strategy, it’s a mission. Since joining the employment solutions company in 2011, Byrd has seen firsthand how international professionals bring not only technical expertise but also resilience and drive, strengthening both the workforce and the communities they contribute to. Simply put, through its innovations in incorporating global talent into its operations, Byrd has seen Populus Group improve the talent it offers its corporate customers.

“Many of the most qualified candidates in IT require visa sponsorship, and aligning our company values with industry demand has allowed us to fill hard-to-hire STEM roles, drive business growth, and strengthen Michigan’s reputation as a destination for highly skilled professionals,” says **Brandon Byrd**, Director of Foreign National Talent Management at **Populus Group**.



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school graduating classes. Beyond the important contributions that international students make while studying at Michigan colleges and universities, they represent a critical supply of much-needed talent to Michigan’s workforce and employers. Global Detroit’s “Strategic Talent Retention at Michigan’s Economic Crossroads” analyzes newly-available data on the hiring of international students to fill critical talent gaps in the Michigan economy. It tracks nearly 100,000 international students who have worked in Michigan from 2013-2022—the last decade for which data is available— on the Optional Practical Training portion of their student visa.

# The Value of OPT

Optional Practical Training (OPT) enables international students to work for one to three years after their graduation in positions that utilize their academic degree without employers needing to file visas, engage an immigration attorney, or pay any immigration-related filing fees or costs. Every international student studying on an F-1 visa has the option of working full-time in the U.S. in their academic field after graduation, provided they can find a willing employer. The newly-released data underlying this report suggests that 65% of the international students who graduated from a Michigan college or university between 2006-2022 utilized the OPT opportunity. More than half of these students chose to work in Michigan and/or secured employment from Michigan employers. Additionally, tens of thousands of other students from other states found employment opportunities in Michigan during the 2013-2022 decade.



## No employer visa costs or attorney fees

Employers can hire international students under the OPT program without having to pay any visa costs, attorney fees or other expenses. It is completely free, and it is an opportunity that every international student on an F-1 visa can access.

## 36 months of employment eligibility for STEM majors



## Minimal extension requirements

STEM graduates qualify for an additional 24-month STEM extension, enabling up to 36 months of eligible employment provided their employer uses the federal E-Verify system and develops a professional development plan.



## No employer visa management

OPT is administered through the student and their institution and doesn't require employers to manage the process.



## 12 months of employment eligibility

Available to every international student on an F-1 student visa. Standard OPT provides up to 12 months of work authorization.

# Research Findings

The report breaks new ground in documenting the tremendous impact that international students have had on the supply of skilled labor in Michigan. 97,772 positions in Michigan were filled over the decade from 2013-2022 by international student graduates working on OPT.

## International Students in Michigan

Nearly **100,000**

International Students Worked in Michigan 2013-2022 under the Optional Practical Training Program (OPT)



**40,177**

International Students



**8**

Rank in the United States

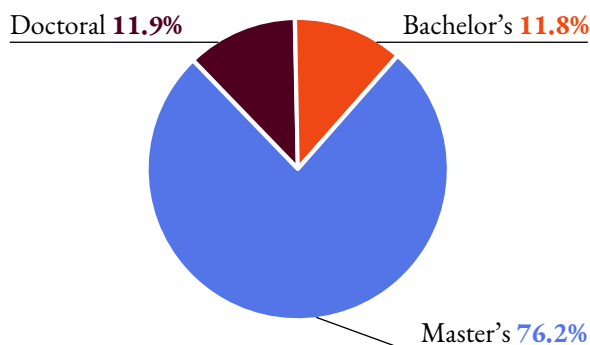


**5.4**

% increase & Capitalize International under dollar amount from Previous Year

**\$1,402,643,939**

Estimated Dollars spent by international Students



86,214 of the 97,772 international student graduates working on OPT in Michigan over this decade had obtained a master's degree or PhD.



**88.3% of the nearly 100,000 OPT Workers Possessed STEM Degrees**

The vast majority of OPT workers in Michigan (88.3%) were international students whose degrees were in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM). The 86,341 STEM OPT workers in Michigan are workers who were able to exercise the OPT “STEM extension” which allows OPT workers to extend their employment authorization from one year to three years total.



**Over 50,000 Engineers Worked in Michigan on OPT from 2013-2022**

International students are a prodigious source of engineering talent - over 50,000 engineers worked on OPT in Michigan during the decade 2013-2022. In fact, more than half of all of the OPT workers in Michigan (50,018 of the 97,772 or 51.2%) were engineering graduates working in engineering jobs. Michigan retained a higher percentage of its engineering students over the last 15 years than any other states in America, except California and Washington.



## About the Research

This report taps into new national OPT data, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests made by Global Detroit and other national partners. Prior to this data set being released and updated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in late 2024, the public had never been able to analyze the millions of individual records to understand how OPT usage impacted a state or local economy. This data set, which included a couple of million data points, has been skillfully organized by the Institute for Progress in a useful OPT Observatory website ([www.optobservatory.org](http://www.optobservatory.org)).

Global Detroit’s “**Strategic Talent Retention at Michigan’s Economic Crossroads**” research is the first localized report of its kind to utilize this new data to analyze the impact of international student employment on a state or regional economy.

## 56% Retention of Engineering OPTs

Michigan's retention of engineering graduates working on OPT was even better. Michigan retained 56% of the engineering graduates working on OPT from 2006-2022, ranking 3rd in the nation after only California (which retained 75.8%) and Washington (61.1%).

### What Is GTRI?

GTRI functions as a retention infrastructure. It reduces employer uncertainty, accelerates student workforce readiness, aligns universities and employers around outcomes, and builds durable pathways for Michigan-trained global talent to remain in Michigan.

### Core Program Components

Employer engagement and education (OPT hiring readiness) Student and alumni career preparation and coaching Global Talent Accelerator (GTA) is a flagship pathway GTRI alumni activation and peer mentoring University partnerships to coordinate outcomes and employer pipelines.

### What MGTI Funding Has Meant

The 2022 Global Detroit study of OPT trends in Michigan recommended that GTRI expand statewide. State budget appropriations in FY 2022-23 and FY 2023-24 budgets have enabled GTRI to expand the number of colleges and universities it works with to more than 30 institutions. It has supported the placement of an employer engagement specialist and a university and student outreach specialist in West Michigan. MGTI support has enabled GTRI to scale beyond Southeast Michigan into coordinated systems: expanding employer engagement, strengthening university alignment, increasing statewide programming capacity, and improving outcomes tracking for continuous improvement and investment. Unfortunately, while MGTI was originally envisioned and structured as a five-year initiative, additional state funding is uncertain. GTRI programs are limited to the geographic area defined by their funding. It will be critical for Global Detroit to secure statewide and/or West Michigan funding to assist employers in regions outside of Metro Detroit that, while experiencing significant growth in utilizing this talent pipeline, have not begun to truly prosper from the contributions that international student hiring bring. Often

## From Toy Cars in India

## to the Motor City:

## Arjun Venugopal's Journey



Arjun Venugopal's path to Michigan began in India, where a childhood fascination with toy cars sparked a lifelong interest in manufacturing. That curiosity eventually led him to Wayne State University, where he earned a master's degree in manufacturing

engineering and began preparing for the pivotal transition from student life to professional work in the U.S. After graduation, Arjun entered the OPT phase, an uncertain but critical moment for many international students. Rather than navigating it alone, he found guidance and connection through Global Detroit and the GTRI program, which helped bridge the gap between education and employment. Through those connections, Arjun secured his first professional role in the region and began onboarding into Michigan's advanced manufacturing sector. "That first job changed everything," he said. "It helped me understand how I could grow here, not just work here." Over time, Arjun's career progressed from engineering roles into leadership positions with global manufacturers. Today, he serves as Global Director of Advanced Manufacturing at Lear Corporation, where he leads complex operations and innovation across international markets. Looking back, Arjun emphasizes the importance of opportunity and support during the OPT stage: "What made the difference was having people and organizations that believed I could contribute at a higher level."



[Read the full story here](#)

employers in these regions would most benefit from employer education and assistance activities. Moreover, while GTRI has always opened its doors to students from across the state (and the country) interested in working in the communities it serves, it cannot sustain a significant presence on campus and with international students at colleges and universities beyond its funding footprint.

# OPT Hiring across Michigan



## Detroit – Warren – Livonia MSA

The Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is by far the largest source of OPT employment, comprising nearly two-thirds of the 97,772 OPT positions filled statewide over the decade of 2013-2022. Nearly 65,000 jobs in Metro Detroit were filled by international students working on OPT in the region over this period. What's even more notable is that virtually all of these jobs (91.1%) were STEM positions and more than half (55.6% or 35,902 positions) were for engineering graduates. International students majoring in mathematics and/or computer science with OPT status filled over 19,000 positions, accounting for nearly 30% of all the OPT workers in Metro Detroit over this decade. In short, engineering, mathematics and computer science comprised 85% of the OPT positions in Metro Detroit.



**65,000**

jobs were filled  
by international  
students

2013-2022 Metro Detroit

Metro Detroit's mathematics and computer science OPT workers alone roughly equal all of the OPT workers in the next biggest Michigan metro (Ann Arbor, with 20,576 OPT workers); the nearly 36,000 engineering OPT workers in Metro Detroit were nearly double any other metro area.



## Ann Arbor MSA

Ann Arbor employed the second largest number of OPT workers (20,576) of any metro area in Michigan between 2013-2022. It should be noted that the University of Michigan was one of the state's largest OPT employers. Yet, only 30% of the OPT workers in the metro graduated from UM, suggesting the region imports plenty of OPT workers for both employment at the university and in the region's strong tech, research and biotechnology sectors.



## Lansing MSA

The Michigan metro area that employed the third largest number of OPT workers from 2013-2022 was Lansing with 5,348 such workers. A significant number of these workers (43.8%) were graduates of Michigan State University—a higher proportion of OPT workers coming from the metro's flagship university than in Ann Arbor. Lansing ranks second among metros with a high percentage of OPT workers from its local flagship university. Topping that list is the Houghton metro area in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. A whopping 93.5% of the 1,465 OPT workers hired in the Houghton metro area between 2013-2022 were graduates of Michigan Tech. Similar trends were not observed with international students attending UMFlint—only 15% (116 of the 762) of OPT workers in the Flint MSA over this decade were graduates of UMFlint.



## Grand Rapids MSA

There were slightly more than 4,000 OPT workers hired in the Grand Rapids metro area over this decade, representing about 4.3% of the total number of OPT workers in Michigan. The percentage of Michigan OPT workers employed in the Grand Rapids metro consistently rose almost every year of the decade from 3.7% in 2013 to 6.1% of OPT workers in Michigan in 2022. Further action is required for Grand Rapids employers to effectively tap into this talent pipeline and build upon this momentum.

### Kalamazoo MSA

The Kalamazoo MSA had 2,182 OPT workers between 2012-2022, representing 2.2% of the state's total. Since 2019, Kalamazoo area employers consistently employed more than 300 OPT workers each year.

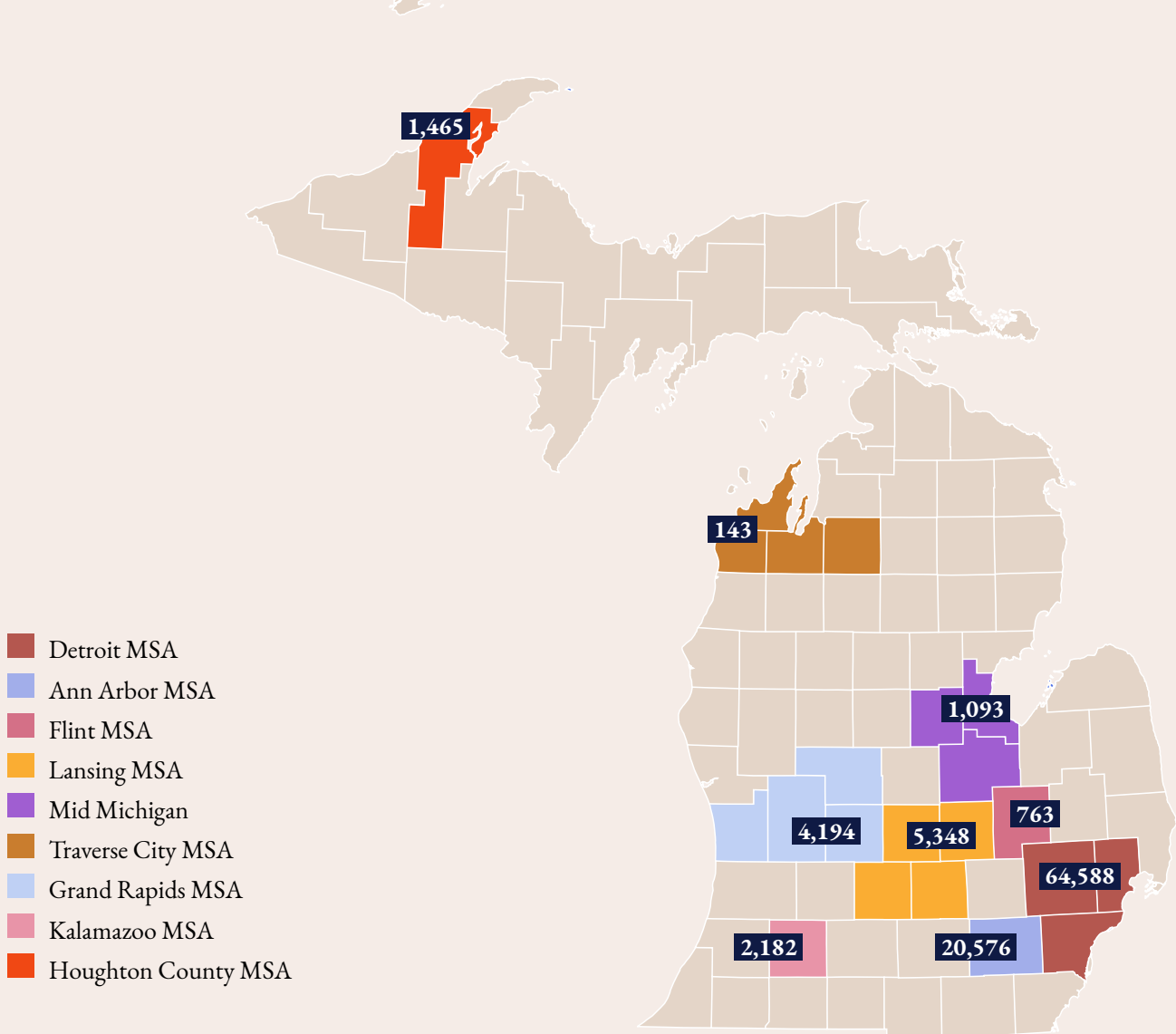
### Traverse City MSA

Only 143 OPT workers were hired in the Traverse City metro from 2013-2022. While trend lines suggest steady growth, there are a lot of opportunities to help employers in this region better connect to these talent pools.

### Bay City, Midland and Saginaw MSAs

Combining the MSA data for Bay City, Midland and Saginaw yields slightly more than 1,000 OPT workers across this decade or about 1% of the state's total. Similar to the strong growth trends experienced in the Grand Rapids metro, the most recent years of data for the decade studied witnessed the combined totals of the three metros growing to almost 2% of the state's total. While Saginaw Valley State and Central Michigan University have significant international student populations, there is no doubt the region is attracting international students from beyond these schools providing further evidence that international students are willing to move to new areas of the state or the country for the opportunity for full-time, field-related employment.

## OPT Distribution across Michigan Metros, 2013-2022



# How Can Michigan Leverage These Findings?

The good news is that Michigan already is a national leader in international student retention strategies. Michigan is not starting from zero. Global Detroit laid the foundation to leverage this international student talent pipeline in its founding strategy document in 2010 and has been working on this issue for the past 15+ years with leading Michigan universities, regional chambers, economic development, industry, workforce development partners and Michigan employers. In 2011 Global Detroit helped launch the Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI) at the University Research Corridor. GTRI migrated back to Global Detroit's management by 2015.

Today, GTRI is recognized as the nation's first international student retention program launched outside a university and is the largest active program of its kind in America. GTRI helps connect Michigan employers with the highly-skilled talent they need to fill critical talent gaps, especially in STEM positions. GTRI helps Michigan companies understand the international student talent value proposition, the OPT hiring process, the benefits of creating welcoming workplaces and strategies for post-OPT employment. GTRI implements a Global Talent Accelerator (GTA) to prepare graduating international students eager to work after graduation to excel in the state's competitive

job market by providing them with essential U.S. workplace navigation skills, direct industry exposure, and professional networking opportunities. Additional GTRI activities include student and alumni career preparation and coaching, GTRI alumni activation and peer mentoring, and university partnerships to coordinate outcomes and employer pipelines.

Global Detroit's national leadership in international student retention strategies is evident through its E Pluribus national initiative, under which Global Detroit leads the International Student Retention National Peer Learning Cohort, consisting of 34 state and local peer international student retention programs and organizations across the nation. A 2022 Global Detroit OPT data report called for a statewide expansion of GTRI to help fill critical STEM talent gaps across the state. The State Legislature's funding of the Michigan Global Talent Initiative (MGTI) in the FY 2022-23 and FY 2023-24 budgets supported that expansion. Unfortunately, State budget constraints have meant that additional MGTI funding has not been appropriated, and new philanthropic, public sector, and corporate supporters will need to be identified to build upon the momentum created if Michigan is going to continue to capitalize on this important opportunity.



## Report Recommendations

1. Fund GTRI as statewide economic infrastructure
2. Ensure GTRI operates across all regions of Michigan
3. Inform and support employers to understand and utilize OPT to fill critical talent gaps
4. Change employer hiring and retention practices to be OPT-ready and welcoming
5. Establish a statewide international student retention goal
6. Encourage universities to support OPT employment from day one
7. Make international student retention a priority across workforce, business and economic development strategies
8. Utilize successful OPT retention outcomes to bolster international student recruitment efforts



## Conclusion


The case for international student retention is clear and powerful. By acting on these recommendations, Michigan can shift from passively educating global talent to intentionally retaining and integrating that talent into its long-term economic future. International students already represent one of the most highly skilled, innovation-ready talent pools available in the state. And the international student talent pool is available today. It doesn't require years of cultivation to grow this supply of talent.


Michigan does not lack high-skilled STEM talent; it lacks a fully coordinated system to retain and deploy it. With coordinated Michigan invests heavily in attracting international students. Without a retention strategy, the state effectively subsidizes talent for other states. Recruitment and retention must be linked as part of a single talent strategy.


Michigan does not lack high-skilled STEM talent; it lacks a fully coordinated system to retain and deploy it.

Retention is not simply an education or immigration policy issue; it is an economic competitiveness and sustainability strategy. States and regions that build durable, well-funded, and collaborative retention systems will create talent pipelines that support innovation, population stability, and industry growth for decades to come. With sustained investment and cross-sector alignment, Michigan has the opportunity to position itself as the national model for global talent strategy by building an inclusive, resilient, and future-ready economy.



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