



Strategic Talent Retention at Michigan's Economic Crossroads

Prepared by:

Global Detroit – Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI)

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Prepared by



Primary Authors: Khadeejah Lasuc Lewis and Steve Tobocman

With contributions from the Global Detroit team, especially Lauren Boone, Kaniz Chowdhury, Shanea Condon, and Petro Kosho

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Table of Contents

4 Executive Summary

6 Core Findings

8 Overview: Michigan's Global Talent Opportunity

12 Michigan's Economic Crossroads

14 The Value of International Students

17 The Value of OPT to Michigan's Economy

30 Global Talent Retention Initiative and What's Working

33 Call to Action and Recommendations

38 Conclusion



“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**

“If we want to remain the world’s leading innovator, we have to continue to attract the best and brightest from around the world.”

— **President Barack Obama**



Executive Summary

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.

This report makes the case that international students, and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) work authorization program that enables their employment after graduation, are among Michigan’s most powerful and immediate workforce solutions and economic drivers. The OPT program allows 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.

This report demonstrates how international students:

- Fill critical talent gaps across key Michigan industries
- Provide significant economic spending which, in turn, supports thousands of jobs across Michigan
- Stabilize tuition revenues and strengthen higher education sustainability
- Contribute to research, patents, startups, and innovation

In September 2022, Global Detroit released a report using data from the Pew Research Center to document that from 2004-2016 Michigan employers hired over 40,000 international students using OPT status. The report illuminated a tremendous pipeline of high-skilled STEM talent critical to Michigan's economic future. The report called for the statewide expansion of Global Detroit's Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI). The GTRI program, launched by the University Research Corridor, Global Detroit, Michigan universities, and private industry partners in 2011, represents the nation's first and largest international student retention program outside of a university.

Michigan responded to the report's recommendation by creating the Michigan Global Talent Initiative (MGTI), in part, to expand GTRI's international student retention work statewide. MGTI has provided funding to GTRI and a half-dozen other programs designed to increase the number of skilled immigrants working across Michigan communities. MGTI programming is aimed directly at the goals established by the state's Sixty by 30 program to increase the number of college-educated or professionally-credentialed workers in Michigan. These programs engage dozens of regional chambers of commerce and economic development agencies, statewide business and industry groups, some 30 Michigan colleges and universities, and several thousand international students in Michigan.

GTRI includes many innovative approaches, such as the Global Talent Accelerator (GTA), contracts to careers and TechConnect job fairs, demonstrating that retention is scalable when employers, universities, workforce systems, the public sector, and international students are aligned. After two years of State funding, MGTI was not funded in the current state budget and the state is in danger of losing the GTRI program, long the national model for such programs.

Michigan must position itself as the national leader in global talent retention by treating international student and OPT retention as a core component of our economic infrastructure and embedding it across workforce, economic development, employer, and university systems statewide. This requires

"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**.



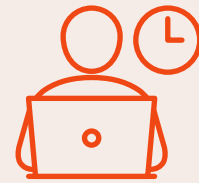
[Read the full story here](#)

sustained funding for GTRI, statewide employer education and OPT-ready hiring practices, early and coordinated university career support, clear statewide retention goals and metrics, and alignment of international student recruitment with long-term in-state employment outcomes ensuring Michigan converts global student enrollment into lasting economic growth, innovation capacity, and high-skill talent retention.

This report taps into new national OPT data, obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests made by Global Detroit and other national partners. The data has been skillfully organized by the Institute for Progress in a useful OPT Observatory website (www.optobservatory.org).

Core Findings

The new data further underscores the tremendous value that international students present to Michigan employers looking to solve STEM talent gaps.



100,000
OPT Workers in Michigan

International Students are a tremendous source of skilled labor in Michigan - Nearly 100,000 international students worked in Michigan on OPT over the decade between 2013-2022, the last decade for which we have data.



88%
Hold Graduate Degrees

The vast majority of international students working on OPT in Michigan obtained a graduate-level degree - A full 88% (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.



50,000

Engineers

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.



88.3%

STEM Workers

The international students were overwhelmingly STEM educated - Nearly all of the OPT workers (88.3%) were filled by STEM majors working in their field of study (86,341 of the 97,772 OPT users working in Michigan).



25,000

Math and Computer Science Degree Workers

International students are a significant source of mathematics and computer science talent - Over 25,000 international students majoring in mathematics and/or computer science worked in Michigan on OPT from 2013-2022. This represented 26.3% of all the international students working on OPT in Michigan during this period.



65%

of Michigan International Students Use OPT to gain work experience post-graduation

A significant majority (65%) of international students studying in Michigan use the OPT program - The numbers are even higher for computer science, engineering, and mathematics majors.



Overview: Michigan's Global Talent Opportunity

Michigan's ability to compete in the next decade will be shaped by one primary factor: whether our Michigan companies can secure the high-skilled talent required to grow, modernize, and lead in globally competitive industries. New data confirms that international students and OPT are among Michigan's most important and underutilized workforce solutions.

1.1 International students are a critical supply to Michigan’s talent needs

Michigan employers are confronting sustained vacancies in high-demand roles across automotive, mobility, defense and aerospace industries, as well as in companies in advanced manufacturing, information technology, engineering and health sciences. International students educated in Michigan represent a uniquely aligned workforce supply, especially in STEM fields that map directly to priority industry needs. Even more traditional industries find an increasing need for high-skilled STEM talent. Retailers and manufacturers, school systems, law firms and hoteliers also have IT and software needs in the modern economy.

1.2 International education is a significant export product in Michigan

International education is both a workforce strategy and an economic development engine. International students generate substantial economic activity through tuition, housing, transportation, food, and retail spending. This spending supports jobs and strengthens local economies.

Annual Economic Spending by International Students in Michigan

(Open Doors/NAFSA)



2024/25

\$1,402,643,939

1.3 International students and education power innovation

International students disproportionately power the knowledge economy through graduate STEM pathways, research labs, patent development, commercialization, and entrepreneurship. Michigan’s innovation competitiveness depends on global talent pipelines that are already embedded in our universities.

“From Michigan University to Michigan Career”



Berenice López came to Michigan from Mexico City to pursue an MFA in Integrated Design at the **College for Creative Studies**, building on her prior experience as a project manager in the automotive industry. After graduating in 2020, she engaged with **GTRI’s Global Talent**

Accelerator (GTA) program, GTRI’s intensive career readiness training program for graduating international students, to strengthen her understanding of the U.S. job market and integrate into local professional networks. That preparation helped her secure her first Michigan role as an interaction designer with an automotive employer, where she applies human-centered design to vehicle technology and user experience.

Through her work and community connections, Berenice has established deep roots in Michigan’s automotive design and tech ecosystem, illustrating how international graduates can transition from higher education into meaningful employment in key state industries. Eventually, in September 2024, Berenice was hired as an employee of **Ford Motor Company**.

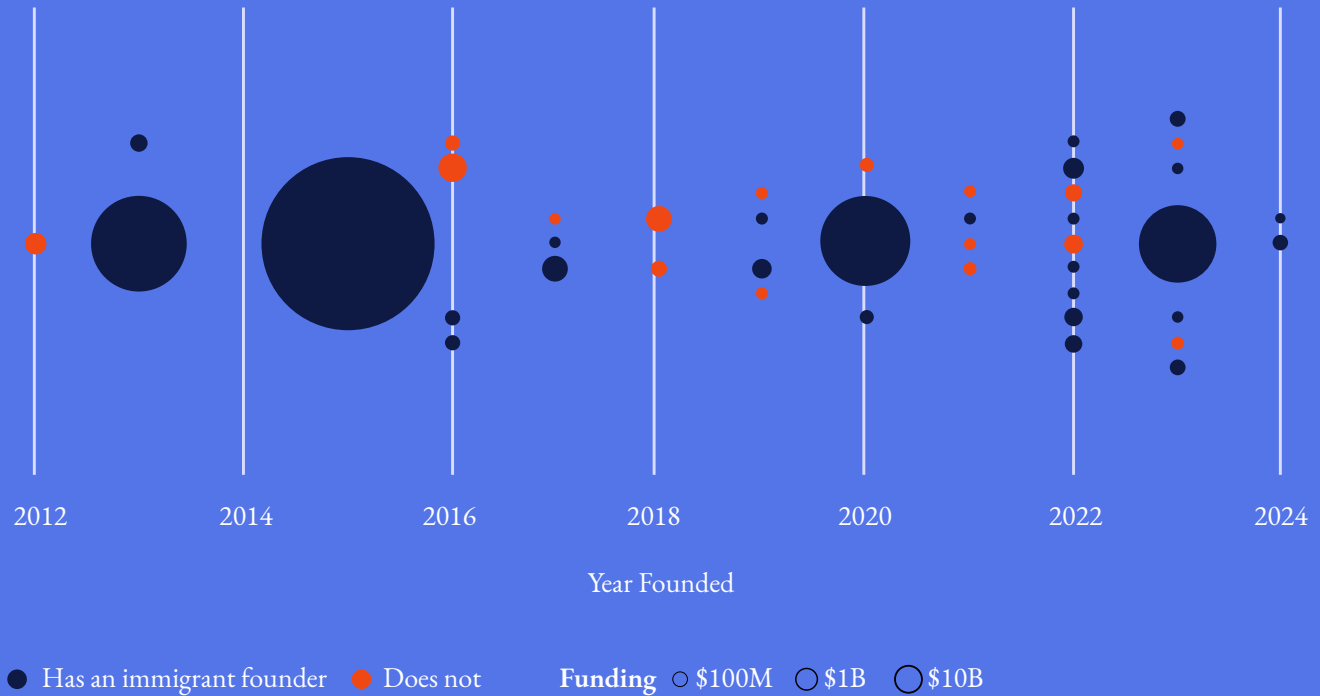
“We not only learned how to sell ourselves in the U.S. job market, we also had the opportunity to learn about the immigration and work visa process... and talk to people who went through the experience of looking for a job.”
— **Berenice López, Ford Motor Company**



[Read the full story here](#)

Immigrant entrepreneurs founded 60% of America's top AI companies

US-based startups on Forbes Artificial Intelligence 50 List of 2025



Neufeld, J., & Milliken, L. (2025, April 16). Most of America's top AI companies were founded by immigrants. Institute for Progress. <https://ifp.org/most-of-americas-top-ai-companies-were-founded-by-immigrants/>

Innovation Insight

International students who predominate STEM fields and comprise as much as 70% of the graduate students in the U.S. in key fields such as electrical engineering and computer science are a source of talent for the workforce, but also make up a disproportionate number of American high-tech startup founders. A 2022 study from the National Foundation for American Policy estimates that

immigrants are founders or co-founders of 55% (319 of 582) of the nation's "unicorns," startups valued at \$1 billion or more backed by venture capital.¹ A full 25% (143 of the 582 unicorns) of these companies were founded by immigrants who originally came to the U.S. as international students. Similarly, the Institute for Progress indicates that 60% of top U.S.-based AI companies reviewed (25 of 42 on the Forbes AI 2025 list) were founded or co-founded by immigrants.

¹ "Immigrant Entrepreneurs and U.S. Billion-Dollar Startups," Stuart Anderson for the National Foundation for American Policy, July 2022, found at <https://nfap.com/research/new-nfap-policy-brief-immigrant-entrepreneurs-and-u-s-billion-dollar-companies/>



1.4 Michigan is a national leader in 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. In fact, through its E Pluribus national initiative, 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.

Global Detroit's 2022 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. Support has been bipartisan with appropriations made when the Michigan House

and Senate were governed by Republican majorities (FY 2022-23) and by Democratic majorities (FY 2023-24). MGTI consists of a series of global talent attraction and retention strategies that are designed to help the state meet its workforce and talent development goals embodied in Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Sixty by 30 initiative to expand the number of workers in Michigan's workforce with a post-secondary degree or professional credential from 45% to 60% by 2030. MGTI was designed by Global Detroit, the Office of Sixty by 30, the Office of Global Michigan, Detroit and Grand Rapids Chambers, MichAuto, the Small Business Association of Michigan (SBAM), and national experts in 2019 and received funding in 2023 to enable GTRI to expand statewide. MGTI has built a nationally recognized model that integrates employers, universities, workforce intermediaries, chambers, and economic development partners. This approach treats retention as a statewide economic strategy, not a standalone campus service.

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.



Michigan's Economic Crossroads

Michigan is at an economic crossroads. The state faces two intertwined constraints: a population challenge and a high-skilled talent challenge. These constraints threaten Michigan's ability to lead in electrification, advanced mobility, AI-enabled manufacturing, and next-generation defense technologies.

2.1 Michigan’s population crisis is a talent crisis

Economic growth requires people. Michigan’s labor force growth is constrained by demographic and migration trends. To compete, Michigan must expand and retain high-skill talent pipelines that can stabilize population and strengthen regional economies. According to the December 2023 Growing Michigan Together Council Report, “Michigan is 49th out of 50 in terms of population growth... We’re losing too many of our talented young people and failing to attract others. And when they leave, our communities suffer from lost tax base and wages needed to support our public amenities, schools, roads, transit, and housing, and to attract business to our state. The cycle of healthy growth is broken.”² In particular, the report notes that from 1980 to 2020, Michigan’s 20- to 34-year-old population decreased 18%.³

Immigration will play a critical role in addressing the population crisis, as all of Michigan’s net population growth over the last 45 years is due to increasing Michigan’s immigrant population, whether one goes back to 1980, 2000, or 2020.

2.2 High-skilled STEM talent will determine Michigan’s trajectory

Michigan’s priority sectors require dense STEM pipelines: electrical engineering, software development, computer science, data and AI, cybersecurity, mathematics, mechanical engineering, and advanced manufacturing engineering. These fields are not marginal to Michigan’s future: they define it. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation’s November 2023 Priority Roles Skill Profiles notes that electrical engineers and software developers are the top two positions requiring college degrees for the future of Michigan’s electric vehicle and mobility industries.⁴

2.3 International student retention is a critical part of the solution

Michigan’s opportunity is uniquely practical: international students are already here, trained in Michigan institutions, and aligned to Michigan’s key industries. The vast majority of these students want to stay and work in the U.S. after graduation, and experience suggests that they choose to work in Michigan at rates similar to in-state students and as much as three times more than out-of-state students.⁵

All international students studying on F-1 visas are allowed to work for one full year after graduation in their field of study under

² “Growing Michigan Together Council Report,” Growing Michigan Together Council, December 2023, p. 5 found at <https://growingmichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-12-14-GMTC-Final-Report-2.pdf>

³ Ibid at 14.

⁴ “MEDC Talent Action Team: Priority Role Skill Profiles,” Michigan Economic Development Corporation, November 2023, p. 2 found at <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/498d6d/globalassets/documents/talent/ev-semi-priority-role-skill-profiles.pdf>

⁵ “Filling the Talent Gap: Mobilizing Michigan’s International Student Potential,” Steve Tobocman and Gracie Xavier, Global Detroit (2016) found at <https://globaldetroitmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GD-OPT-Report-8.5x11.pdf>

“Retention is Economic Development”



Traverse City’s approach to workforce development is grounded in the understanding that talent retention is essential to long-term economic growth. Through the **Northern Explorers** program, led by **Traverse Connect**, the region intentionally connects international students studying in high-demand fields with local

employers, career pathways, and community networks, helping businesses address persistent workforce gaps while strengthening priority sectors such as healthcare, engineering, and advanced manufacturing. By positioning Michigan-trained global talent as a regional asset, the program turns international student retention into a practical strategy for business attraction, expansion, and long-term competitiveness.

As Abby Baudry, Communications and Strategic Projects Manager at **Traverse Connect**, explains, “When we retain the talent already studying here, we’re not just supporting students—we’re strengthening our workforce pipeline and investing directly in the future of our regional economy.”



[Read the full story here](#)

the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. STEM majors can extend the OPT two additional years, for three full years of employment, provided the employer uses the federal E-Verify program and helps them develop a professional development plan. OPT and the STEM OPT extension doesn’t require employers to file any visa paperwork, retain any immigration legal advice, or incur any additional costs.

Given the strong desire of international students to work in the U.S., the central question is whether Michigan can retain them at scale.



The Value of International Students

International students strengthen Michigan's economy through direct spending, tuition and enrollment stability, and innovation capacity. Their academic concentration in high-demand STEM disciplines amplifies the value of international education as a workforce strategy.

3.1 Enrollment and economic spending

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) data, education-related travel exports in 2024 were valued at \$54.84 billion and ranked 7th among U.S. service exports.⁶

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.

3.2 Tuition dollars and enrollment stability

International tuition revenues help institutions sustain program offerings and research capacity at a time of declining enrollment and rising operational costs. In many systems, international education helps reduce financial fragility and limits upward pressure on domestic tuition rates. According to the Michigan Association of State Universities, Michigan’s public universities have experienced a one-third decline in enrollment over the past decade due, in large part, to declining birth rates.⁷ But declining state budget support (in real dollar terms) have contributed to rapidly rising tuition rates, making college increasingly expensive. International students pay the highest of all tuition rates, helping to subsidize the costs for in-state students. At least one research study estimated that while international students comprised 12% of all the students at U.S. public universities, they accounted for 28% of the tuition funds.⁸

3.3 High-demand majors aligned with Michigan priorities

International students are concentrated in engineering, computing, and quantitative fields that map to Michigan’s critical workforce needs. This concentration strengthens Michigan’s ability to fill hard-to-hire technical roles and expand innovation capacity.

“Innovation Starts Here”



Dr. Rehab (Ruby) Alhajar is an internationally trained scientist and entrepreneur who has built a thriving technology venture in Michigan. The founder and CEO of **FlowShield-Nano**, Ruby leads a startup developing real-time water contamination detection solutions, bringing over 14 years of expertise in nanotechnology and water microbiology to address sustainability challenges.

Through participation in **Global Detroit’s Global Talent Retention Initiative (GTRI)** and the **Global Entrepreneur-in-Residence (Global EIR)** program, she accessed valuable resources, expanded her professional network, and accelerated her company’s growth, helping her secure Michigan employment, deepen her community ties, and contribute to local innovation ecosystems. Ruby participated in the Global EIR program through **Michigan Technological University**. Ruby also received the 2024 Global Detroit Emerging Talent Award in recognition of her impact and leadership in technology and entrepreneurship.

“The GTRI program has been essential to the growth of **FlowShield-Nano**, providing access to valuable resources and networks... These programs have not only helped with business development but have also underscored the importance of fostering inclusivity and diversity within the tech and entrepreneurial ecosystems.” — **Dr. Alhajar**

⁶ International Trade Administration website at <https://www.trade.gov/education-service-exports>

⁷ “Michigan’s Regional Universities Fight Back after Years of Enrollment Decline,” Sarah Atwood, Detroit News, November 16, 2025 found at <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2025/11/16/michigan-regional-universities-enrollment-decline/87196099007/>

⁸ “International Students Are now ‘Subsidizing’ Public American Universities to the Tune of \$9 Billion a Year,” Tanza Loudenback, 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>.

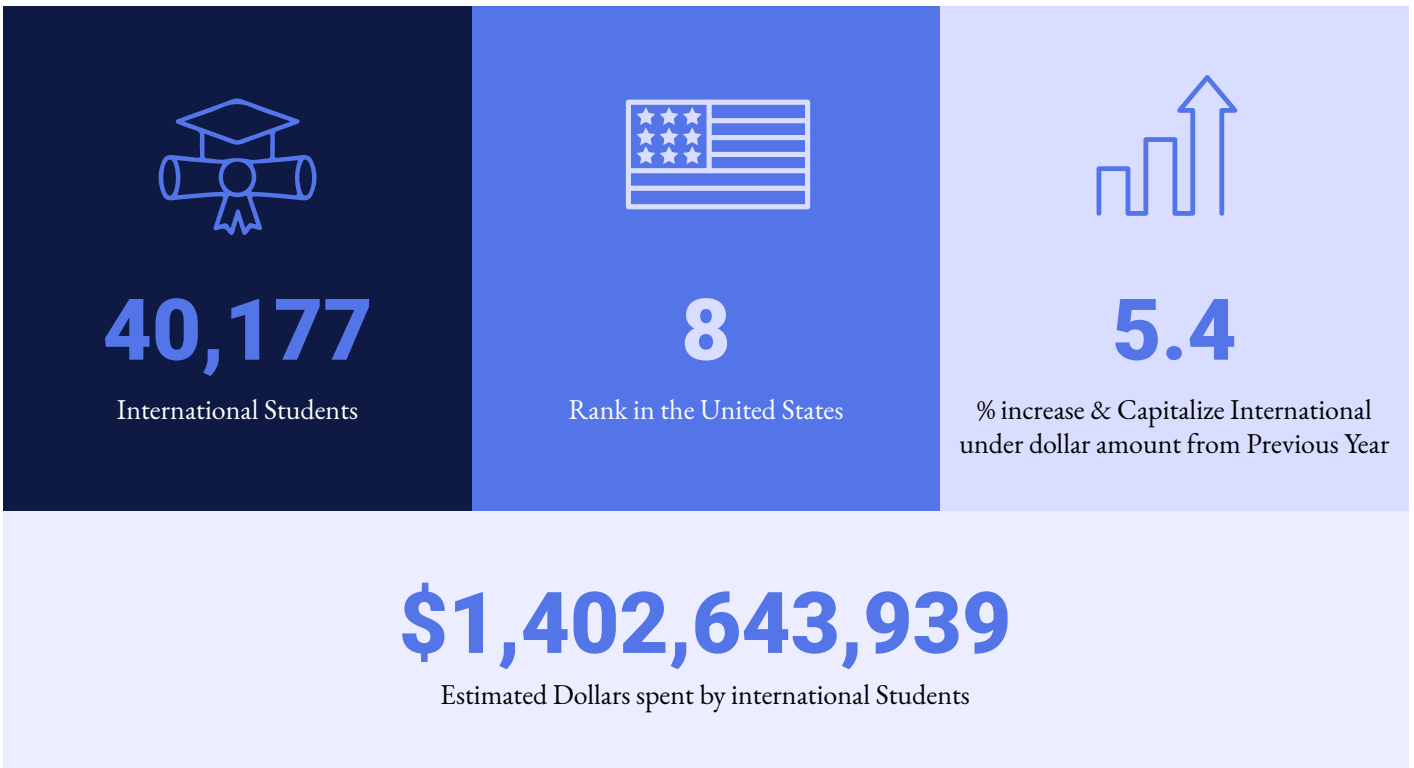


3.4 Patents, startups, and commercialization

International students contribute to research output and commercialization pipelines, supporting university patenting, technology transfer, and new venture creation. According to a 2021 study published in the MIT Science Policy Review: International faculty and scholars are powerhouse innovators, making profound economic contributions through patents and entrepreneurial activity. Immigrants who are college graduates are twice as likely to hold a patent as a comparable college graduate born in the U.S. Half of Silicon Valley startups have at least one foreign-born founder, and immigrants, who comprise only 14% of the total U.S. population, have founded more than half of startups valued at \$1 billion U.S. dollars or more.⁹

These contributions strengthen Michigan’s larger economy by accelerating innovation, expanding employer access to R&D-ready talent, and improving Michigan’s national competitiveness.

International Students in Michigan



⁹ “The Impact of International Scientists, Engineers, and Students on U.S. Research Outputs and Global Competitiveness,” Sarah M. Rovito, Divyansh Kaushik, and Surya D. Agg, MIT Science Policy Review, August 2021, p. 21, found at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3850149



The Value of OPT to Michigan's Economy

Key Features of OPT



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.

OPT Myth vs. Reality

✗ Myth 1: Hiring international students is complicated and risky.

✓ Fact: International students are already authorized to work in the U.S. for up to three years through OPT (Optional Practical Training) and STEM OPT extensions—no sponsorship required. The university is responsible for all related paperwork.

✗ Myth 2: It's too expensive to hire international student graduates.

✓ Fact: There is no additional cost for employers to hire international student graduates on OPT. No visa filing fees. No attorney fees. To employ an international student graduate beyond the OPT process, immigration sponsorship is likely needed. Global Detroit provides guidance to minimize cost and streamline the process.

✗ Myth 3: International employees won't stay long-term.

✓ Fact: The majority of international graduates are eager to build careers—and lives—in Michigan. With the right retention strategies, they become some of the most loyal and committed employees in the workforce.

✗ Myth 4: The paperwork and verification process for OPT employees is more complex than for domestic hires.

✓ Fact: The process is almost identical; employers complete the same Form I-9, and the OPT employee provides their EAD (Employee Authorization Document) and passport as proof of work authorization instead of a Social Security card or birth certificate. No additional petitions or legal filings are required from the employer for the initial OPT period.

✗ Myth 5: We don't have the expertise to navigate immigration.

✓ Fact: Global Detroit provides training, resources, and one-on-one support to help HR teams and managers feel confident hiring and retaining global talent.

OPT In Action



Santiago Chaparro-Garzon is an international student from Colombia who graduated with a Master of Arts in Transportation Design from the **College for Creative Studies (CCS)** in Detroit. He was referred to GTRI and the **Global Talent Accelerator (GTA) Program** by a friend, hoping to improve their chances of landing a job in Michigan after graduation, and participated in the Fall 2025 cohort.

Through his diligence in staying active in Global Detroit's programming, Santiago learned of and attended the first-ever **Emerging Tech Connect** in October 2025, a networking event designed to bring together Michigan's innovation community — from students and job seekers to employers and ecosystem leaders — around the state's and region's most exciting technology sectors. It was there he met **Briaca Duesette**, founder of the Detroit-based **Animation Discovery Studio** which empowers young creators from underrepresented communities to imagine boldly, think critically, and tell their own stories through the art of animation.

Briaca saw something in Santiago: his skills, passion, and potential. Santiago was hired by Animation Discovery Studio as a co-teacher intern through his initial Optional Practical Training (OPT), supporting their mission to bring high-quality creative education directly to Detroit's youth and communities.

Upon starting the GTA program, Santiago shared: "I expect to give my skills and knowledge to the city of Detroit by bringing fresh ideas to innovate the way these communities live." Today, through his work at **Animation Discovery Studio**, he is doing exactly that.

This report taps into new national OPT data obtained through a number of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests made by Global Detroit and other national partners. The data has been skillfully organized by the Institute for Progress in a useful OPT Observatory website (www.optobservatory.org). The OPT Observatory enables users to look at OPT utilization trends based on employer state or metro region or by the location of where international students studied. It breaks down OPT numbers by university, by academic major groups (STEM versus Non-STEM, select STEM majors) and by degree level (bachelors, master's, PhD).

This report looks at the data from the perspective of Michigan's economy, employer needs and the impacts provided from Michigan colleges and universities and the international students that study here. This is the first statewide report to analyze this new OPT Observatory data set and expands on research questions from past Global Detroit international student OPT data reports in 2016 and 2022 that were written with more limited data.

4.1 OPT in Michigan Overall



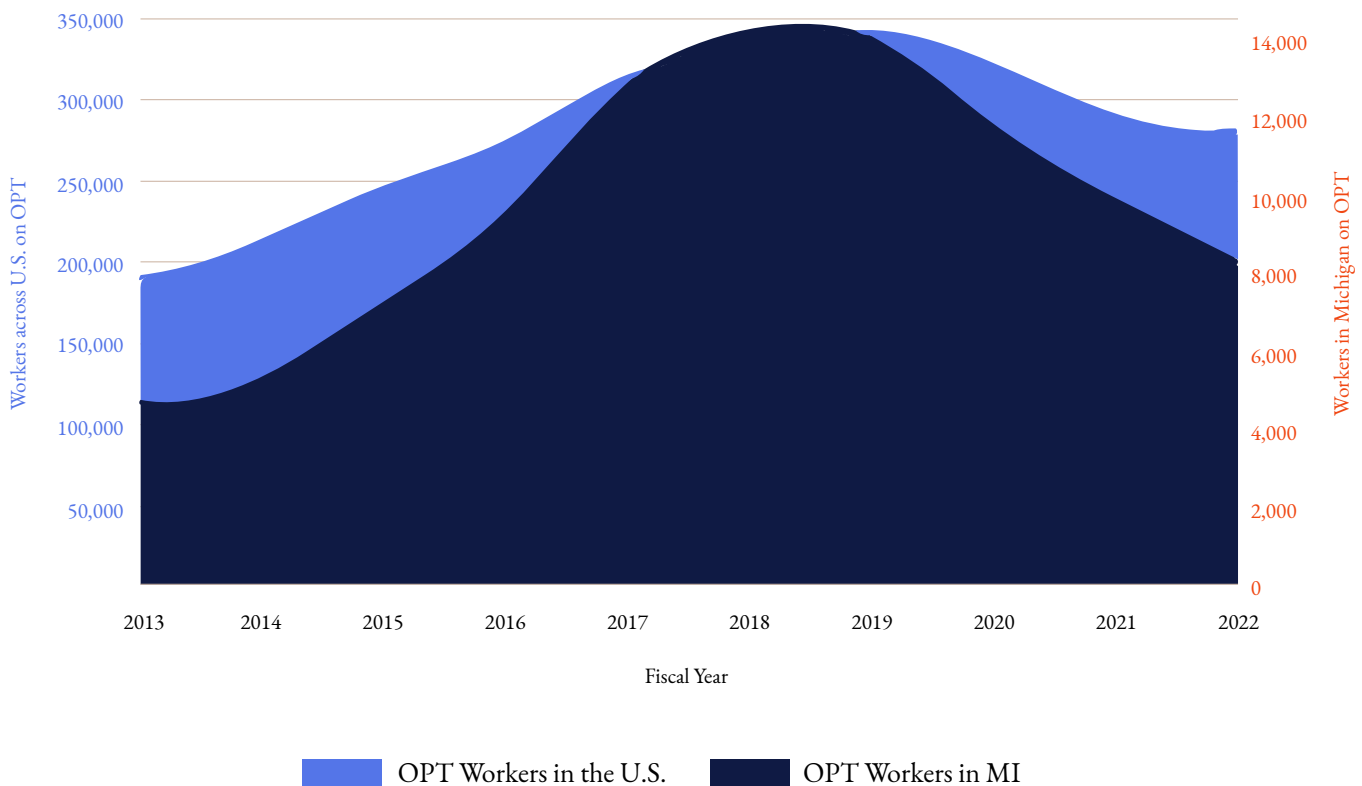
Nearly

100,000 jobs

in Michigan were filled by international students working on OPT over the decade between 2013 and 2022, the last decade for which we have such data.

International students provided a significant amount of talent to the Michigan economy over this decade and represent more than twice the amount of international student talent employed in Michigan, as chronicled in our prior report covering OPT data from 2003-2016.

Figure 1



The number of OPT workers in Michigan in a given year doubled from 4,700 to over 9,500 in three years (2013 to 2016). This growth was more rapid than the level of growth experienced nationally and likely reflected the rebound of the Michigan economy from the 2008 financial crisis; the bankruptcy of GM, Chrysler, and the City of Detroit; and the foreclosure crisis, which hit Michigan particularly hard. Annual OPT workers in Michigan grew by another 5,000 by 2018. That rapid growth is similar to the growth nationally and likely resulted from new OPT STEM extension rules, which were put into place in 2016.¹⁰

Nearly all of Michigan’s OPT workers (88.3%) were STEM majors working in their field of study. This means that 86,341 of the 97,772 Michigan OPT workers filled during the 2013-2022 period were STEM graduates. At the beginning of this decade, closer to 80% of these workers were STEM positions, but over time, the average increased to 90% of the workers. Additionally, over the decade of new data, the proportion of STEM OPT workers in Michigan filled by graduates of Michigan colleges and universities increased from around 33% to over 42%.

Figure 2

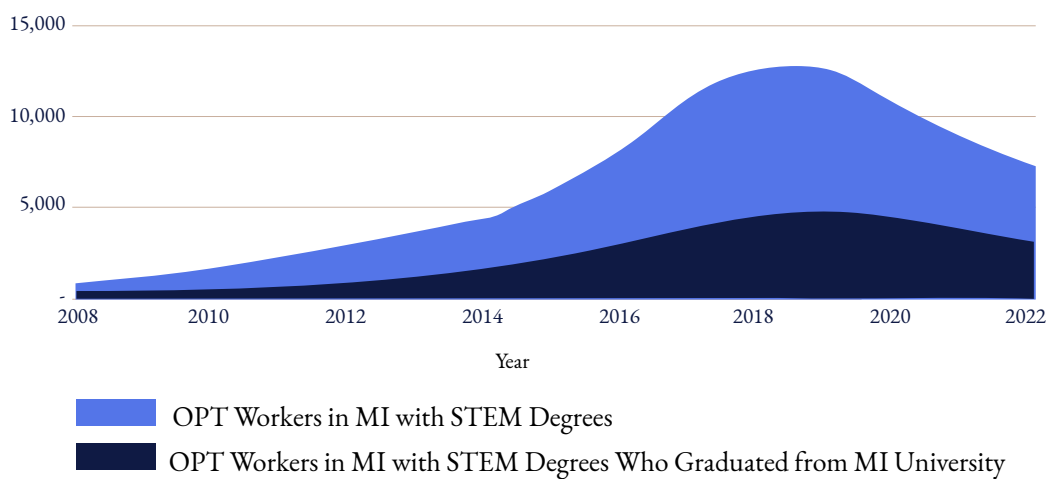
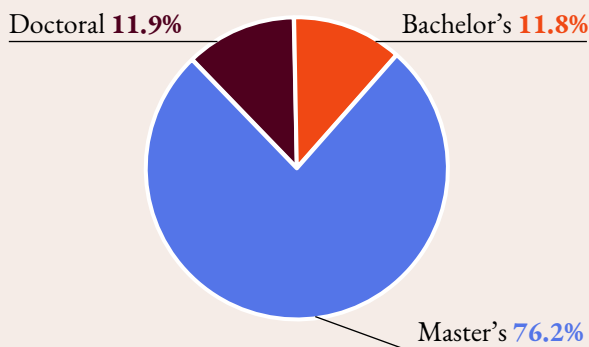


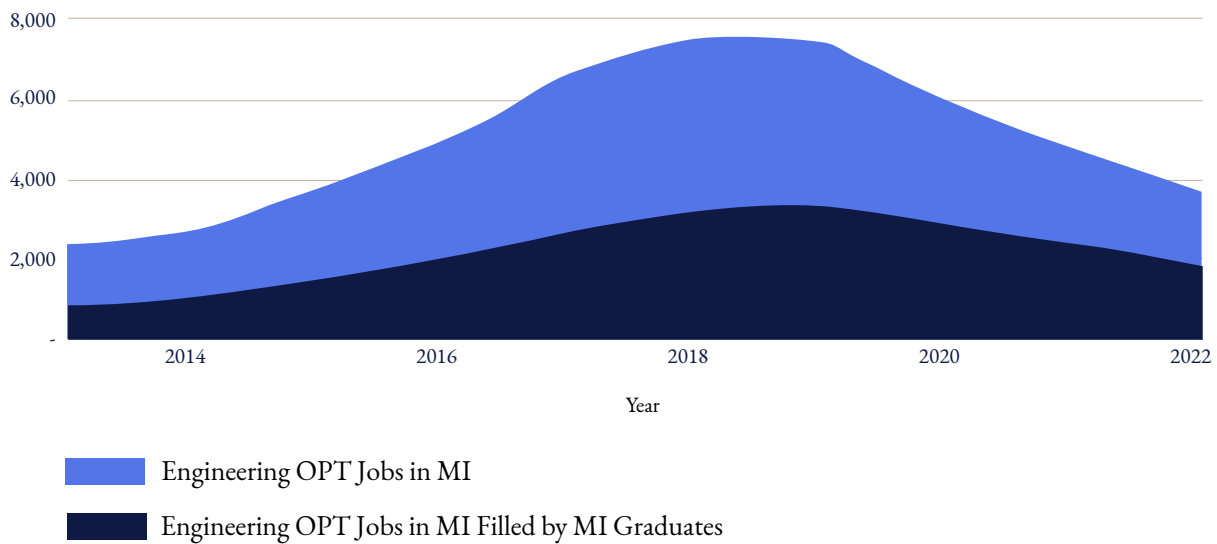
Figure 3



International students working in Michigan on OPT overwhelmingly have obtained graduate degrees. A full 88% (86,214 of the 97,772) of the international students working on OPT in Michigan from 2013-2022 had obtained a master’s degree or PhD. Only 12% were bachelor’s degree graduates.

¹⁰ OPT utilization by international students receiving degrees in STEM fields increased after the OPT STEM extension program was first announced by President Bush in 2008. Significant increases in 2016 relate to the fact that after courts struck down the OPT STEM Extension created by President Bush for violations of the Administrative Procedures Act in their original adoption, the Obama administration proposed new rules in 2015 that were finalized in March 2016 to extend the STEM Extension period from 17 months, as originally created by President Bush, to 24 months, which governs the program today. 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. workforce through the OPT program surpassed the number of new H-1B visa workers. By 2016, the number of new skilled foreign nationals entering the U.S. workforce on the OPT portion of their student visa (over 273,000 workers) more than doubled the number of new H-1B skilled workers (115,000 workers) entering the U.S. workforce.

Figure 4



International students working on OPT in Michigan are an immense source of engineering talent. Over 50,000 engineering jobs in Michigan over the decade 2013-2022 were filled by international student graduates working on OPT. 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.

- Michigan's 50,018 engineers working on OPT between 2013-2022 accounted for 7% of the 717,420 engineers working on OPT across America during this period. Overall, Michigan was home to 3.5% of all the OPT workers nationally during this decade.
- Of the international students who graduated from a Michigan college or university with an engineering degree and worked on OPT from 2006-2022, 56% stayed in Michigan to work, while 44% worked in another state. Only California and Washington retained a higher percentage of their international students in engineering working on OPT.
- Michigan did well at attracting international student engineering graduates from other states working on OPT to work in Michigan, landing 9.1% of the Ohio international student engineers working on OPT, which ranked 3rd for employing Ohio's international engineering students and behind only California and Texas. Michigan even attracted 2% of the international student engineer graduates working on OPT who graduated from California colleges and universities over this period. This ranked 7th nationally among states attracting international engineering student graduates from California.

¹¹ Note tracking Michigan's rank among states on retention uses a longer time horizon on the OPT Observatory website. Most of this Global Detroit report looks at data from the decade from 2013-2022, the most recent years for which we have this data. The retention calculations use the full data set available (2006-2022).

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. "I was always interested in manufacturing, and Detroit felt like the right place to be," Arjun shared, reflecting on why staying in Michigan mattered to him.

Through those connections, Arjun secured his first professional role in the region and began onboarding into

Michigan's advanced manufacturing sector. As he gained hands-on experience, he adapted to the U.S. workplace, built confidence, and took on increasing responsibility. That early opportunity proved foundational. "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."

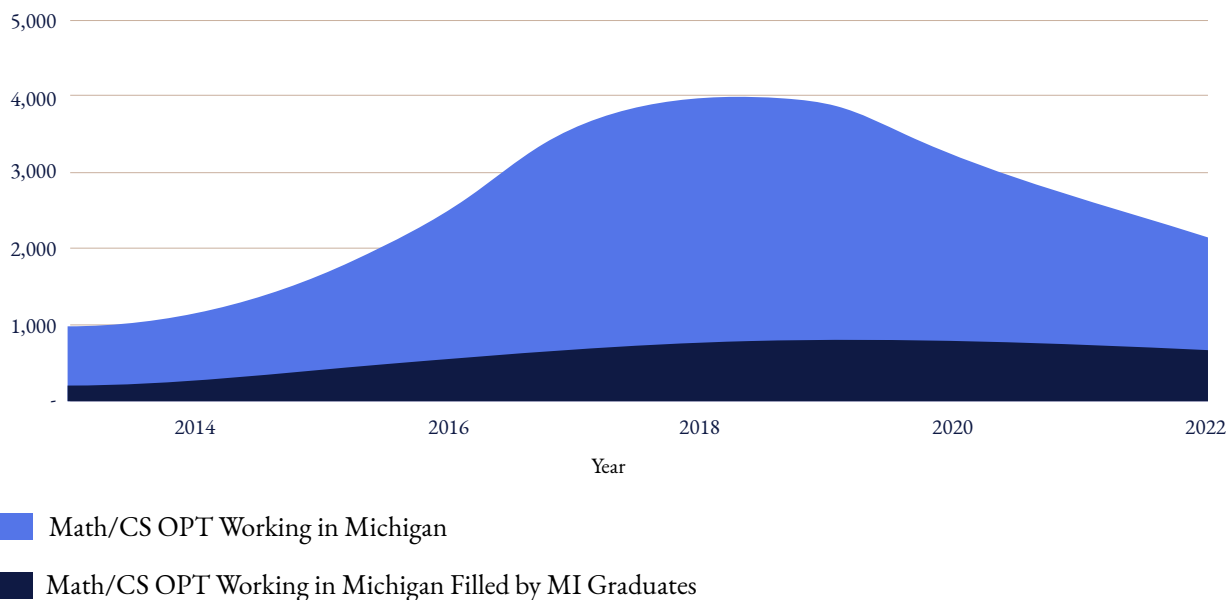
His journey, from graduation, through OPT, to long-term leadership, illustrates how Michigan-trained global talent can move from the classroom into the workforce and grow into roles that drive business success and economic impact across the state.



[Read the full story here](#)



Figure 5



This represented 26.3% of all the OPT workers in Michigan during this period. Only 22% of these positions were filled by international student graduates attending Michigan colleges and universities, while 78% were filled by students studying at institutions outside of Michigan. It is worth noting that this lower retention rate of computer science graduates seems to mirror lower retention rates for domestic students in these fields graduating from Michigan colleges and universities. Over the decade, the annual percentage of the mathematics and computer science workers on OPT that had graduated from Michigan college and universities rose from around 20% each year to almost 30%.

4.2 Michigan's Retention of International Students

Michigan colleges and universities are important actors in this ecosystem. Michigan colleges and universities currently educate over 40,000 international students, the 8th largest international student population of any state in the U.S. These international students have an immediate impact on the state's economy and our local communities, spending over \$1.4 billion annually on tuition, lodging, food, entertainment, goods and services. This sustains thousands of jobs across Michigan communities where these students live and study.

Over the decade from 2013-2022, Michigan colleges and universities graduated just more than 68,000 international students. More than half (53.9% or 36,704) utilized the OPT portion of their student visa enabling them to work in the U.S. after graduation in a position that provided practical training in their field of study. 46.1% of Michigan's international student graduates did not use the OPT program. Some of them may have enrolled in other academic degree programs, obtained other visas to work (H-1B visas for example), married a U.S. citizen and stayed in America or they returned home after graduation. Global Detroit's 15+ years working with Michigan's international students, however, suggests that the vast majority of those students would choose to stay and work in the U.S. if they could secure employment with a U.S. employer.

The OPT data from 2006-2022 shows that nearly half (46.1% or 39,539 of the 85,773 OPT workers that show up in annual OPT data)¹² of the international students who graduated from Michigan colleges and universities and worked on OPT in the U.S. after graduating stayed to work in Michigan, while 53.9% worked in other states. Retention of STEM graduates was slightly higher. Note this OPT utilization rate for 2006-2022 is lower than the rate

¹² Because of the OPT STEM extension which allows three years of authorized work, the annual number of OPT workers is larger than the number of actual graduates. This is true even though many international students never participate in OPT. For example if a college graduated 10 international students in 2020 and 7 of the graduates used OPT and 6 of the 7 used STEM OPT, these 10 students would show up in the 2020 data as 7 OPTs and 2021 as 7 OPTs (because their OPT periods likely straddle two reporting periods). Moreover, the 6 STEM OPTs will show up in three or four years of data reporting. If the college graduated another class of 10 international students in 2021 who participated in OPT and STEM OPT at the same rates, one would see 13 or 14 OPTs among these students in 2021 data, despite only graduating 10 students.

for 2013-2022, implying that OPT usage by international student graduates from Michigan colleges and universities has increased over time.

To compare Michigan's retention of international students, we need to expand the years covered within the data set.¹³ Looking at retention from 2006-2022, Michigan's retention rates were 48.4% and ranked 15th among the 50 states. Its performance with international STEM graduates was slightly better over this period, retaining 49.1% of its STEM graduates working on OPT from 2006-2022, ranking 12th among all states in retaining international STEM graduates working on OPT.

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%).

"From CPT To Revolutionizing Commercial Vehicles"

Bharat Kudachi began his professional journey in India, where he worked full-time in electronics and programming. Driven to deepen his technical expertise, he made the pivotal decision to pursue a master's degree in electrical and electronics engineering at **University of Michigan–Dearborn**.

During his graduate studies, Bharat developed a strong interest in commercial vehicles (CVs) and quickly distinguished himself as both an innovator and a researcher in the field. UM-Dearborn's supportive infrastructure for international students played a critical role in his career trajectory, helping him secure his first U.S. internship at **Isuzu Technical Center of America** through the F-1 Curricular Practical Training (CPT) program.

Bharat's technical contributions proved highly valuable to Isuzu. Following graduation, the company retained him through Optional Practical Training (OPT), his OPT STEM extension, and ultimately long-term employment sponsorship, a testament to both his expertise and the company's investment in global talent.

Today, Bharat serves as a CV Test and Model-Based Development Engineer II and published researcher. From his base in Michigan, he continues to help advance commercial



▲ Bharat Kudachi with his parents at his graduation for his master's in electrical and electronics engineering at University of Michigan-Dearborn.

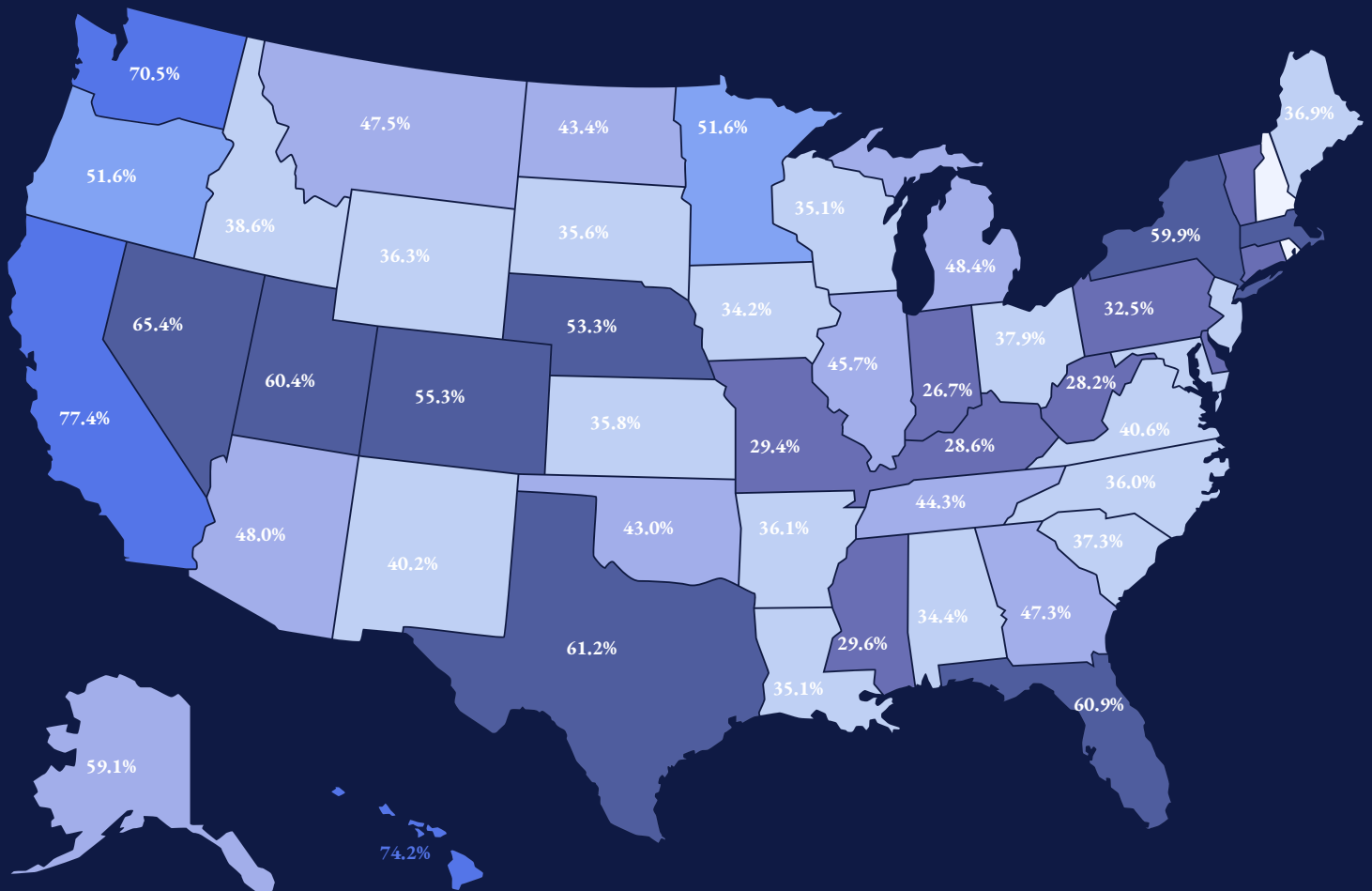
vehicle innovation through cutting-edge design, testing, and research, contributing to the strength and competitiveness of the state's automotive and mobility sector.

"During my CPT period, I worked as an intern at ISUZU Technical Center of America, Plymouth. This experience helped me understand my curriculum from an industrial perspective, which was unique for me as a student. It also helped me understand what skills are required to be a good electrical engineer. Working as an intern helped me break my limits and learn from my failures. More importantly, I got exposed to a worldwide workforce culture, and experienced different fields of technology to experiment with. All of this helped me gain professional, time management, and team-building skills."

¹³ Comparison of OPT retention rates across states is beyond our capacity. The Institute for Progress, developer of the OPT Observatory website, did compare state retention rates, but did so based on OPT data from 2006 to 2022.

Which states keep their graduates?

Share of OPT participants earning degrees in each state in FY2006-2022 who work on OPT in the same state



Source: Student and Exchange Visitor Information System data, obtained by IFP

Any evaluation of Michigan’s ability to retain international students needs to be done in the context of its ability to retain domestic students—both in-state and out-of-state students. In other words, one would expect that international students who have traveled from across the globe would end up in Michigan at rates lower than in-state students who have been raised here and whose families live here. But how do international students who stay to work in the U.S. on OPT compare to out-of-state students in terms of staying in Michigan? Our prior research suggests that the 46.1% retention rate is lower than in-state students, but significantly better than the retention of out-of-state students.¹⁴

A deeper analysis would account for the fact that retention rates differ among institutions. The University of Michigan educates the largest number of international students in Michigan by a large margin, accounting for more than one-fourth of all the international students and more than twice as many as Michigan State University, the second largest public university host. The University of Michigan, however, has historically lower rates of its graduates working in Michigan after graduation than other universities, as it educates a higher number of out-of-state students. A 46% retention rate that we see for international student graduates compares to about the average retention rate from the University of Michigan and would be significantly above the retention of out-of-state U of M students and below that of in-state students at the university.

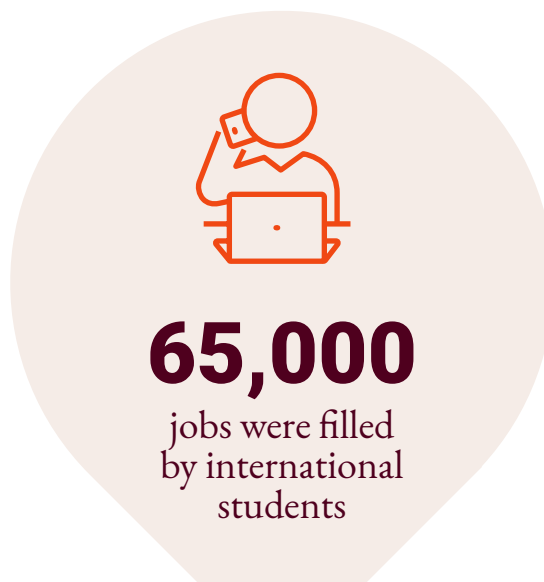
Regardless of how one judges the retention rate, building employer awareness around the OPT program and creating more job opportunities would increase retention. Working with regional chambers and economic development organizations across the state, as well as business and industry groups, Global Detroit’s GTRI staff continues to hear that employers aren’t aware of this talent pool and are confused about how to hire international students. In fact, a January 2025 report commissioned by the Michigan Global Talent Initiative surveyed over 250 corporate human resources staff and recruiters who recruit for Michigan employment and concluded that Michigan employers “are open to hiring [international students], but need support with practical aspects.” The report goes on to note that “Expanded resources for employers would help support hiring of international talent.”¹⁵

4.4 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.



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.

¹⁴ “Filling the Talent Gap: Mobilizing Michigan’s International Student Potential,” Steve Tobocman and Gracie Xavier, Global Detroit (2016) found at <https://globaldetroitmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GD-OPT-Report-8.5x11.pdf>

¹⁵ “Michigan Global Talent Initiative: Final Research Report,” Lambert by LLYC, January 2025 available on request.

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 UM-Flint—only 15% (116 of the 762) of OPT workers in the Flint MSA over this decade were graduates of UM-Flint.

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.

Bay City, Midland and Saginaw MSAs

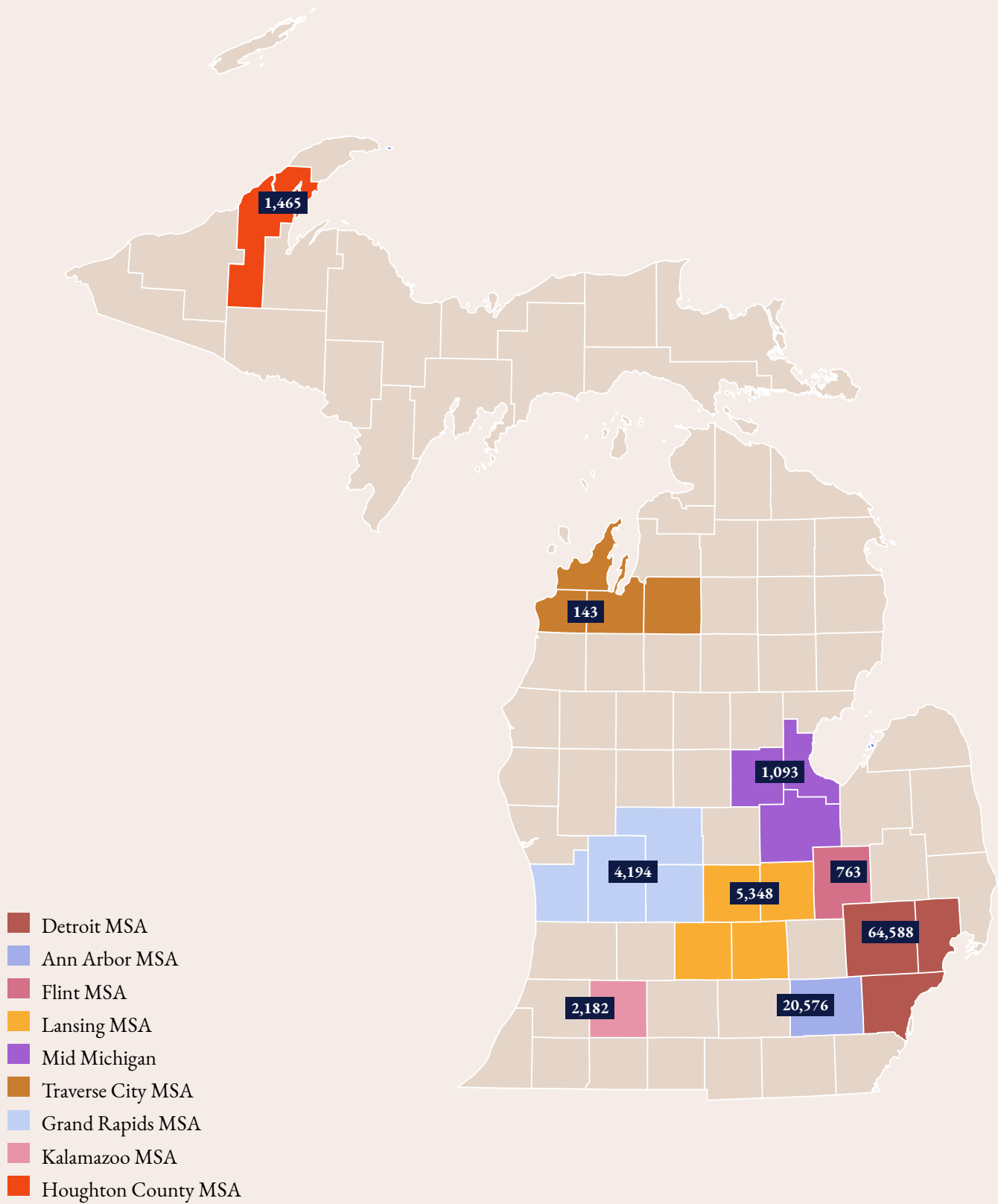
Combining the MSA data for Bay City, Midland and Saginaw yields slightly more than 1,000 OPT workers across this decade or about 1% of the state's total. Similar to the strong growth trends experienced in the Grand Rapids metro, the most recent years of data for the decade studied witnessed the combined 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.

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.



OPT Distribution across Michigan Metros, 2013-2022





Global Talent Retention Initiative and What's Working

Global Detroit, GTRI, and the Michigan Global Talent Initiative are not merely identifying the importance of international student retention; they are demonstrating how to increase it. As the nation's first and largest international student retention program outside of a university, GTRI is a statewide initiative designed to retain international students educated in Michigan and integrate them into Michigan's workforce, particularly in high-demand, high-skill industries.

5.1 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.

5.2 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

5.3 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 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.

Global Talent Retention

Initiative and What's Working



In 2025, Global Detroit partnered with **UM-Dearborn** to enroll a cohort of 20 international students from the College of Engineering and Computer Science and the College of Business in Global Detroit's Global Talent Accelerator (GTA program). Graduating international students visited

the Detroit LinkedIn office to learn about networking and personal branding. They also took part in mock interviews, discussed workplace culture in the U.S. with HR experts, attended a job fair and more.

"I've worked with international students for much of my 30-year career at **UM-Dearborn** and I can tell you that [international students] are kind, talented and bring a needed global perspective," **Emily Wang**, Assistant Director, Office of International Affairs, University of Michigan-Dearborn. "International students are also problem solvers and strategic thinkers. They've navigated a lot of difficulties to achieve their goals, and just like Detroit, they are resilient and persistent." (excerpt from UM-Dearborn News article)

GTA is offered to international students from across Michigan and includes participants from **Grand Valley State University, Kettering, Michigan State, Michigan Tech** and beyond. **Olawale Olaniyan**, an international student who received a master's degree in biostatistics from **Western Michigan University** was feeling stymied in his job search and then heard about GTA from a friend. The program changed his trajectory. "You can't do this alone. Programs like GTA don't just offer help — they remind you that you belong."

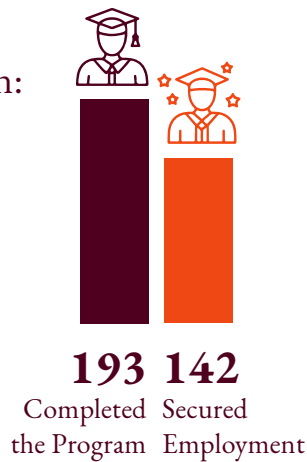


[Read the full story here](#)

The Global Talent Accelerator (GTA) is a strategic initiative designed to bridge the gap between Michigan’s employers and highly skilled international student talent. The program prepares 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.

Since its launch in 2019, the GTA program has demonstrated significant success in talent retention:

- 193 international students have completed the program.
- 142 participants (73.6%) have secured U.S. employment opportunities.



Recommendation for Employers

Leveraging the GTA program provides a direct pipeline to pre-vetted, work-authorized, and culturally prepared talent. Employers are encouraged to:

- Participate in program events, virtual tours, and networking sessions to build early relationships with top-tier candidates.
- Hire GTA graduates. GTA graduates represent a unique talent pool that has already received targeted professional development, reducing onboarding risk and ramp-up time.
- Collaborate with Global Detroit to seamlessly integrate global talent into your hiring pipeline and long-term workforce strategy.

The GTA program is a proven model for retaining global talent, directly addressing Michigan’s skilled workforce needs and turning international graduates into committed, long-term contributors to the state’s economy.





Call to Action and Recommendation

6.1 Fund GTRI as Statewide Economic Infrastructure

Michigan Global Talent initiatives must be funded and positioned as permanent statewide economic development, talent and workforce development infrastructure, not time-limited programs.

International student retention directly supports Michigan's:

- High-skill talent pipeline
- Innovation and research commercialization
- Population stabilization and growth
- Competitiveness in mobility, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, AI, and clean energy

Action Steps

- In the near term, GTRI needs financial support from local foundations and corporate philanthropy while longer-term and more sustainable funding can be established.
- Establish dedicated public funding streams for GTRI within state and local economic development and workforce budgets.
- Position international student retention work alongside talent attraction, workforce development, business attraction, site development as a core state and local economic strategy.
- Support sustained staffing, employer engagement, data tracking, and regional delivery models.

Michigan has a clear opportunity to become the national leader in global talent retention. However, this will only occur if international student retention and OPT employment are treated not as peripheral programming, but as essential elements of the core economic infrastructure and fully integrated into workforce development and talent attraction, innovation capacity, and long-term competitiveness strategies, policies, practices and programs.

The following recommendations are designed for adoption by state and local leaders, economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, industry groups, workforce development and talent attraction systems, employers, and universities.





6.2 Ensure GTRI Operates Across All Regions of Michigan

Talent needs are universal. Talent loss is not confined to one city or campus. A statewide strategy requires geographic reach that connects universities, employers, and regional economic development partners across Michigan.

Action Steps

- Expand MGTI capacity to serve urban, suburban, and rural regions. Resources should extend to regions in the state that have been less active at hiring international students. It is clear that many international students are willing to consider smaller and more rural regions if they can find employers willing to hire them on OPT. At the same time, resources should ensure efforts are sustained and expanded in regions that have the largest high-skilled STEM talent needs and gaps.
- Partner with regional chambers, economic development organizations, workforce development boards and local talent attraction and retention efforts.
- Ensure employers outside Southeast Michigan have direct access to international talent pipelines.
- A truly statewide model ensures Michigan retains talent where jobs exist and are needed, in addition to the regions where universities, research, technology and innovation hubs are concentrated.

6.3 Inform and Support Employers to Understand and Utilize OPT

In 2025, the Michigan Global Talent Initiative commissioned an extensive study by Lambert that engaged over 400 international students and graduates and over 200 Michigan-based HR professionals and talent recruiters via surveys, focus groups and interviews. The study found that 9 in 10 employers were open to hiring international students but that large numbers remained confused or misinformed about the mechanics of hiring on OPT or the nature of this talent.

Many Michigan employers lose global talent not by choice, but due to misinformation, risk aversion, or lack of process knowledge around OPT hiring.

Employers must move from passive interest to intentional, informed participation in global talent hiring.

Action Steps

- Provide employer education on OPT and STEM OPT work authorization, as well as post-OPT visa pathways.
- Develop standardized OPT-ready hiring toolkits and HR guidance.
- Promote peer learning models where experienced employers mentor new adopters.
- Engage in communications, narrative and messaging campaigns to promote international students and employers to help normalize hiring of international students as part of Michigan talent strategies for employers, workforce development and talent attractions programs and economic development.





6.4 Change Employer Hiring Practices to Become OPT-Ready and Welcoming

Becoming “OPT-Ready” should be framed as a competitive talent strategy, not a diversity or compliance burden. Beyond just understanding the mechanics of hiring international students on OPT and clearing up misconceptions about international students, employers need to integrate international student hiring into their recruitment, talent acquisition and hiring strategies.

To fully enjoy the contributions that international student graduates bring to a Michigan employer, it is important that the workplace is welcoming and inclusive so that an international student employee can fully contribute their technical skills, knowledge and insights. It’s important that we create welcoming workplaces.

- Encourage employers to include OPT candidates in early career, internship, and rotational programs.
- Ensure that employers include OPT employment in all stages of talent acquisition and hiring and clearly communicate that openness to prospective international student applicants.
- Provide employer education on how to retain International talent once in place.

6.6 Encourage Universities to Support OPT Employment from Day One

Retention does not begin at graduation; it begins when students first arrive on campus. Universities must integrate career outcomes and OPT pathways into the entire student lifecycle, and a clear target for campus career centers, not just international student offices. In fact, strong post-graduation employment records can and should be utilized in marketing and recruitment efforts to attract more international scholars.

Action Steps

- Introduce OPT education during student onboarding and orientation, and connect students with organizations like Global Detroit immediately.
- Integrate career readiness and employer engagement into academic departments, not just career centers and international student centers.
- Align international student services, career services, and employer relations offices around a shared international student retention strategy.
- Expand access to internships, co-ops, and employer connections early in international students’ academic journeys.
- Work with ethnic chambers, ethnic professional societies and other groups to build relationships between Michigan’s international students and the international, ethnic and immigrant communities across Michigan.

Early intervention and exposure significantly increase the likelihood that students secure Michigan-based employment.

6.5 Establish a Statewide International Student Retention Goal

What gets measured gets managed. Michigan should adopt a clear, public statewide goal for retaining international students in OPT employment. This goal could be expressed either as increasing the retention of international students graduating from Michigan colleges and universities and/or the total number of OPT employment across the state and/or within specific metro regions.

A statewide retention target:

- Aligns universities, employers, and policymakers;
- Creates accountability; and
- Elevates retention as a measurable economic outcome.



6.7 Make Retention a Priority Across Workforce, Business, and Economic Development Strategies

International student retention must be embedded into mainstream talent, workforce and economic development systems.

Action Steps

- Talent attraction and retention, workforce and economic development offices and organizations should integrate international student retention into their state and regional strategies.
- Integrate international students into industry sector partnerships and industry talent initiatives.
- Encourage chambers, business leaders and industry associations to include OPT education and employer outreach in their programming.

This ensures global talent is recognized as part of Michigan’s domestic workforce solution, not a separate category.

6.8 Tie OPT Retention Outcomes to International Student Recruitment

Michigan invests 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.

- Track the percentage of recruited international students who remain in Michigan for OPT employment.
- Incorporate retention outcomes into state and institutional performance metrics.
- Encourage universities to align enrollment growth strategies with employer engagement and career placement capacity. Highlighting our state’s leadership efforts to include post-graduation employment through OPT gives the state a competitive advantage in recruiting international students.
- Work with the MEDC and others who are marketing the state to other countries to tie international student recruitment to Michigan’s foreign direct investment and trade strategies.

Retention converts educational enrollment into long-term economic benefit for Michigan.



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

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 systems, informed employers, and aligned policy, Michigan can ensure that more of this talent stays, works, and builds here.

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.



About Global Detroit

Global Detroit is a regional community and economic development organization. With a focus on immigrants and global talent, we develop and implement inclusive strategies to drive the growth, revitalization and broadly shared prosperity of Detroit and Southeast Michigan.

For more information please visit www.globaldetroitmi.org

About the Global Talent Retention Initiative

The Global Talent Retention Initiative was launched in 2011 as the nation's first and now largest international student retention initiative outside of a university. GTRI connects Michigan companies with international graduates who bring advanced skills, innovation, and global perspectives to fill critical gaps in high-demand industries.


To learn more about GTRI please visit www.globaldetroitmi.org/gtri

About the Michigan Global Talent Initiative"


The Michigan Global Talent Coalition is a collection of 25 statewide and local chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, industry associations and key supporters who believe that the intentional inclusion of immigrant talent in Michigan's economic development and workforce development plans, policies, and programs will expand the state's economic growth, shared prosperity and competitiveness. The Coalition has advocated for the Michigan Global Talent Initiative, a five-year investment to ensure comprehensive immigrant inclusion in the State's Sixty by 30 workforce development goals.

To learn more about MGTC, please visit www.michiganglobaltalent.org.



 info@globaldetroitmi.org

 globaldetroitmi.org

 2050 15th Street, Suite 312
Detroit, MI 48216, USA