

Supporting F-1 Students in Obtaining Meaningful Employment Post-Graduation



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Introduction

International students make up over one million of the students currently enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions (Bound et al., 2021). Prior research has focused on international student academic and mental wellbeing, but there has been little focus on how universities best support their international students in securing meaningful employment post-graduation specific to the U.S. International students, particularly undergraduate students on F-1 visas, are expected to return to their home countries once their degrees are completed, though many eventually choose to remain in the U.S. for work experience (Hegarty, 2014). There are many challenges, such as Optional Practical Training (OPT) policy issues (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017), visa status in companies that refuse to sponsor (Coffey et al., 2018; Prematillake & Lim, 2018), lack of prior work experience (Coffey et al., 2018), discrimination (Coffey et al., 2018; Alho, 2020), lack of social connections (Alho, 2020; Prematillake & Lim, 2018), and lack of employment available in a relevant field (Alho, 2020; Prematillake & Lim, 2018). The current study hopes to understand what additional resources or policy changes might be necessary for F-1 students to successfully secure employment.

Participants

	Gender	Program	Place of Study	Place of Origin
Participant A	Female	MBA Business	Texas	Vietnam
Participant B	Female	BS Engineering	Texas	India
Participant C	Female	BS Engineering	Texas	Turkey
Participant D	Male	PhD Computer Science MA Linguistics	Hawai'i	Taiwan

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative, cross-sectional interview method for collecting data as it allows for in-depth questioning and explanations to be categorized into overarching themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Four Interviews were conducted using Zoom, and each interview lasted around 30 minutes. Questions addressed a variety of topics, including supports offered from career services, supports offered from international student services, the student's experience navigating their job search, and strategies used to look for meaningful employment.

Themes

Perspectives on the Current OPT Process

- “Especially my first year, I remember [international student services] kind of gave some information about [OPT] in some meetings, but at that time I was not interested in staying in the U.S., so I didn't pay attention. I actually don't know much about the process as I should.”
- “There's so many restrictions and ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ that you do one single thing wrong, and they can actually deny [OPT]. And you don't even know why because they don't tell you what you did wrong. It's a lot of procedure, a lot of paperwork.”
- “It was pretty scary because there are so many deadlines to remember, and then I feel like if I mess one thing up, I'm gonna be deported. If the processing time is too long, it's hard for us.”

Experiences with Campus Career Resources

- “They [career services] didn't really pay attention to international students specifically.”
- “I spoke with maybe 6-7 different companies, and at first, the conversation was great, and they're like ‘Oh, yeah, we'd love to interview you - blah blah.’ But then, when it came to telling them, ‘Just so you guys know, I'm an international student,’ it was like, ‘Oh, then we can't really consider you for this position.”
- “The first thing that I would ask any company was, ‘Are you guys hiring international students?’ before I wasted my time because I have had many, many times where I wasted all this effort to not even be considered.”
- “They [international student services] didn't really help with the job search, but rather they help with how to delegate the process after getting your internship [or job], and how to get your paperwork straight and all that stuff. But I wouldn't necessarily say they helped me.”

Near Peer Supports

- “I talked to a couple of my friends from my cohort, and we basically exchange information on how we should write our elevator pitch. And then we practice saying it to each other a couple of times. We exchange our resumés and proofread together. I was also able to just have a talk with them about my concerns and trying to see if they have the same struggles as me. I think it's just for my mental health.”

Discussion

Any student searching for full-time employment post-graduation can experience challenges in the process, but for an F-1 international student, there are added stressors that are not properly addressed in the immigration policies, university resources, and research literature that is currently available. Change is necessary on all levels to create equitable resources and policies that encourage F-1 students to seek employment in the U.S.

Partnerships

One important theme drawn out of participant responses was the need for more university partnerships between career services and international student services offices. When partnerships are invested in between student affairs and academic affairs, universities can offer more holistic services to their students (Downing, 2020).

OPT Policy Changes

Every participant in this study believed that some, if not all, aspects of the current OPT process were unfair and needed to be revised. The process of obtaining OPT is lengthy, expensive, and stressful to navigate for all students, and it can make students feel hopeless and unqualified for work that they are more than qualified to do.

Networking Opportunities

Every participant in the current study also mentioned how their current or former F-1 peers heavily supported them in their job search process. Regarding alumni networks, it has been shown in the literature that having a strong alumni network can assist current students in finding a job post-graduation (Obukhova & Lan, 2013). Student networks are just as important as alumni networks to act as a support system for an F-1 student applying for jobs in the U.S. Though more formal, peer student mentorship programs implemented at various universities help students achieve both academically and socially (Hamilton et al., 2019).

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