



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL:
Harnessing Global Talent
to Meet Minnesota's
Workforce Demands

OBJECTIVE

This toolkit provides employers with actionable strategies to engage and hire international students. In today's competitive economy, hiring international students is a strategic approach for businesses in Greater Minnesota. It not only helps address workforce shortages but also brings fresh perspectives, fosters innovation, and strengthens connections to global markets, giving businesses a competitive edge.

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Objective

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Talent on Local
Businesses

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International Students

Minnesota's employers face significant challenges due to labor shortages, skill gaps, and a declining population. To address these issues, the Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC) formed a cross-sector workforce task force, bringing together employers, universities, and community leaders in Southern Minnesota. This collaboration focuses on a key opportunity: **attracting and retaining international students locally.**



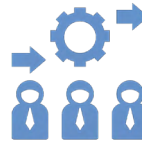
Why international students?

International students on F-1 student visas are an untapped talent pool uniquely positioned to fill high-demand roles. With advanced education, they possess expertise that aligns with industry needs. Additional reasons to hire international students include:



Effortless Hiring Process

You can hire international students without extra paperwork or cost through the CPT and OPT programs.



Filling Critical Workforce Gaps

International students often specialize in high-demand fields such as STEM, healthcare, agriculture, and IT.



Highly Skilled, Highly Motivated

Multilingual, highly skilled, and driven, international students foster innovation, helping your organization stay ahead in competitive markets.

“Hiring our international intern was a seamless process. Once on board, they quickly became a valuable asset to our team, consistently delivering high-quality work.”

– Joelle Baumann,
Special Events Manager,
Greater Mankato Growth

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MINNESOTA AT A GLANCE



14,975

International students
in Minnesota in 2024



4.6%

% increase of
international
student enrollment
in Minnesota from
previous year



The University of
Minnesota-Twin Cities, St.
Cloud State University,
and Minnesota State
University, Mankato lead
statewide enrollment.



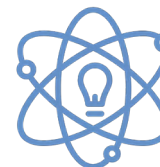
13.2%

% increase of
international student
enrollment in the
Midwest



1 in 4

Founders of \$1
billion U.S. startup
companies started
as international
students.¹



International students
represent a significant
portion of the student
body in STEM fields
at U.S. colleges and
universities, particularly
in master's and Ph.D.
programs.



81.7%

% of international
students that
would take a career
opportunity in
Southern Minnesota if
offered.



\$488,037,945

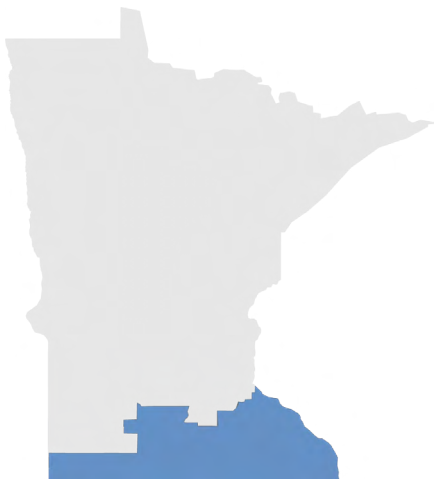
amount international
students contributed
to the Minnesota
economy in 2024.



Most foreign graduates
who transition into US
employment find their
first job in the state in
which their universities
are located.²

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2022/07/26/most-us-billion-dollar-startups-have-an-immigrant-founder/>

² <https://www.nber.org/digest/202212/contribution-international-students-us-labor-supply>



TOP HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (DOLLARS AND JOBS)

- 1 **Minnesota State University - Mankato**
\$45.9 million supporting 190 jobs
- 2 **Gustavus Adolphus College**
\$4.5 million supporting 19 jobs
- 3 **Bethany Lutheran College**
\$3.6 million supporting 17 jobs
- 4 **Winona State University**
\$3.1 million supporting 16 jobs
- 5 **Saint Mary's University of Minesota**
\$2.5 million supporting 24 jobs

* Sources used in NAFSA economic analysis: U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Commerce, and Insitute of International Education for 2023-2024 Academic Year.



2,230
International
Students Enrolled



269
Jobs
Supported



\$61.3 Million
Financial
Contribution

Key Insights from International Students in Southern MN:

A Spring 2024 survey of international students in the region collected 155 responses, offering valuable insights:

Key Challenge: The primary barrier to entering the U.S. job market is a lack of job opportunities.
Post-Graduation Goals: 56.7% of students stated their top priority was securing a job in the United States.

Top Career Considerations:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1) Visa Sponsorship | 5) Work Hours |
| 2) Salary & Benefits | 6) Location |
| 3) Type of Position | 7) Company Reputation & History |
| 4) Career Growth & Development | 8) Hybrid/Remote Work (<1% of responses) |

Bridging the Gap

Despite international students expressing a strong desire to remain in the Southern Minnesota region, challenges persist in connecting them with local employers. Root causes of this disconnect include:

- Limited interaction between students and employers.
- Lack of awareness about employment programs like CPT and OPT.
- Misconceptions about the complexity of hiring international students.

With southern Minnesota employers facing persistent workforce shortages, retaining international students presents a significant opportunity. These students bring innovation, multilingual abilities, cultural awareness, and specialized expertise to the region. By fostering stronger connections and addressing barriers, the taskforce aims to bridge the gap between skilled international talent and regional workforce needs.

Figure 1: Number of International Students in Minnesota (2012-2023)

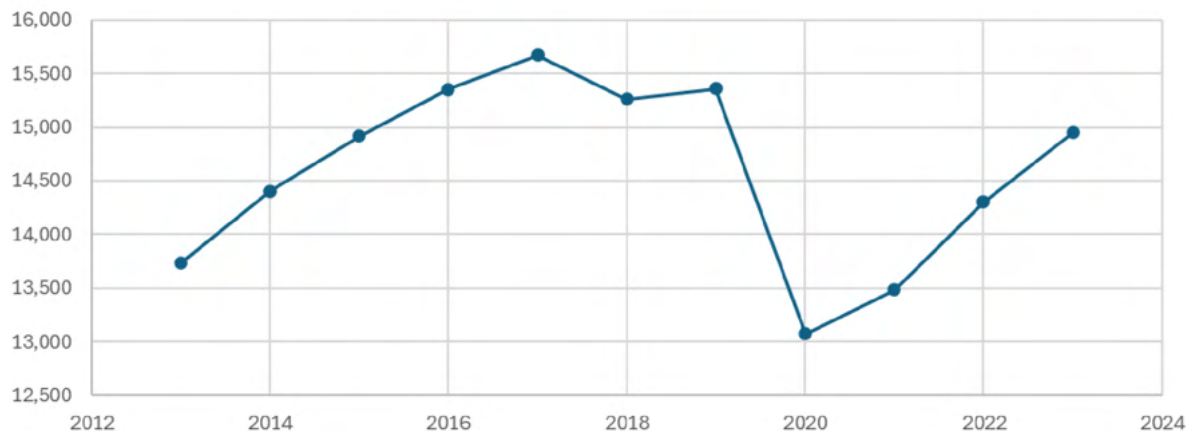


Figure 2: Percentage of retention and attraction of international students working in Minnesota (2003-2016)

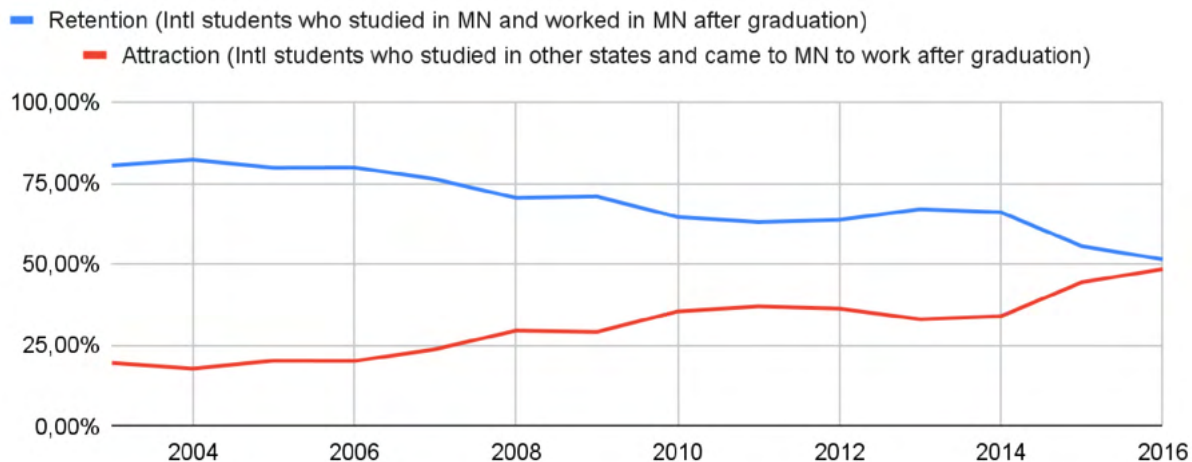


Figure1: Institute of International Education. (2023). Open Doors: International student enrollment data. Published in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

Figure 2: Pew Research Center. (n.d.). International Student Optional Practical Training data. Data obtained via Freedom of Information Act request from the Federal Government. Analyzed by Region Nine Development Commission using data provided by Global Detroit.

Retention Opportunities

As shown in Figure 2, while Minnesota has increased the number of international graduates who come from other states to work locally, the state has struggled to retain its own graduates. This disconnect is a missed opportunity to align the region's labor needs with the skilled talent it already cultivates. A student survey shown later, revealed that

81.7% of international students would choose to stay in Southern Minnesota if given the opportunity.

This underscores the importance of developing workforce strategies to retain international graduates, ensuring local businesses can tap into their skills and expertise.

THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL TALENT ON LOCAL BUSINESSES

As identified in the Minnesota: 2030 report, employers will have to tap into and retain broader talent sources to sustain their workforce and withstand economic hurdles. Existing talent pools will not be enough to meet the needs of local businesses. Thus, this report identifies global talent, specifically international students, as a key element of Minnesota's strategy to revitalize its shrinking communities, strengthen core industries, and build robust talent pipelines of skilled workers.

Statewide Contributions

International students on F-1 student visas are an untapped talent pool uniquely positioned to fill high-demand roles. With advanced education, they possess expertise that aligns with industry needs. Additional reasons to hire international students include:

**\$488
million**

Amount international students contributed to the Minnesota economy

3,430

Jobs supported by international students during the 2023-2024 academic year

75%

Percentage of foreign-born faculty and international students that have contributed to patents at the nation's top research universities.³



For every three international students, one U.S. job is created.

Among South-Central Minnesota's top industries, retaining or attracting an individual worker can increase earnings by **27% to 68%** per year.

³ Sources used in NAFSA economic analysis: U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Commerce, and Institute of International Education for 2023-2024 Academic Year.



Brent Christopherson, Director of Talent Acquisition at Taylor Corporation

Brent is the Director of Talent Acquisition at Taylor Corporation, a global print provider based in North Mankato, Minnesota. He leads a high performing team of recruiters which focuses on driving business success by bringing in talent to their organization. A year ago, Brent joined the Workforce-Taskforce led by RNDC: "My job is to make sure our company attracts, retains and develops the best talent available. And that's why this initiative is really important to me." Brent explains that, in the past, there wasn't as much of a challenge to get people to come to you, but that has definitely changed.

"The talent landscape has completely changed, and companies like Taylor need to be more aware and open minded to non-traditional sources of talent. And I view international students as definitely one of those strong non-traditional sources of talent."

Working in talent acquisition, Brent is a direct witness of the difficulties employers are facing when it comes to hiring: "There's not enough people to fill our openings. The issue is there aren't enough people in the region to replace our aging workforce." And this is not in just one area; with 4000 employees in Minnesota alone, and 10,000 worldwide, Taylor Corporation has struggled filling all types of positions. "We hire across all functions, sales, marketing, IT, finance, accounting, HR, legal, and then we have a very big production environment. And so we're seeing a challenge in finding really good people in all those areas. It's not just one, unfortunately, it's across the board."

Taylor Corporation has ample experience hiring students in their OPTs, some of which were offered sponsorship once their program was over. With this background, Brent suggests a careful assessment of costs when hiring international students, as what may seem as a loss in terms of time and paperwork, can be overpowered by the benefits obtained from hiring a highly skilled and motivated workforce. He understands there is a cost to sponsoring international students, but highlights that the CPT and OPT programs are great opportunities to get to know employees and so, make an informed decision for sponsorship: "We don't sponsor every single student that comes across, but where we have, they're going to be the students who are going to add immediate value to the short term and long term goals of our organization."

WHY SHOULD EMPLOYERS CONSIDER HIRING INTERNATIONAL TALENT?

MINNESOTA WORKFORCE CHALLENGES	THE COST OF INACTION FOR EMPLOYERS	HOW CAN THESE CHALLENGES BE ADDRESSED?
<p>Minnesota's economic future hinges on addressing three key factors essential for the state's success:⁴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Slowing labor force and population growth Population growth will rely entirely on migration by the 2040s.⁵ ● Economic growth concentrated in a handful of southern states and coastal tech hubs ● Trailing in tech growth Minnesota lost ground in high-tech sectors as growth shifted to software and IT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Costly vacancies According to a 2020 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) study, the average cost of a vacant position can range from \$4,129 to \$5,733 per month. ● High turnover costs The cost of employee turnover can range from 50% to 213% of an employee's annual salary, depending on the role and seniority level. 	<p>The Minnesota: 2030 report highlights the following essential strategies to address these challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengthen technology infrastructure and cultivate tech-focused talent ● Retain and attract skilled workers, including international talent ● Investing in housing, childcare, connectivity, and embracing all Minnesotans by making inclusion a strength.

4 <https://www.mnchamber.com/minnesota-chamber-foundation/minnesota-2030>

5 https://mn.gov/admin/assets/Migration_Report_FINAL_tcm36-620018.pdf





Maame Quarcoo, Senior Land Use Planner for Waseca County, MN

Maame is a Senior Land Use Planner working for Waseca County, in southern Minnesota. Originally from Ghana, she graduated in her home country with a degree in planning and came to the US to continue her studies as a graduate student for Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she graduated in 2019.

Maame received an email from her internship coordinator about an internship opportunity in a neighboring county. Waseca County was looking for a first-year graduate student in the hopes they could retain the intern for at least a couple of years.

Maame felt her international experience could be hard to prove, but determined to give herself a chance, she added a binder with previous work samples to her cover letter. Soon, she heard back and she had landed the position. She started by doing shadow work. "Many people asked me why I accepted an unpaid position, but I saw this as an opportunity to learn about planning in the US and for people to get to know me." After a semester shadowing, she was able to do a paid internship in the summer, and continued with a CPT afterwards.

Maame graduated in the Fall of 2019 and she had already filed her paperwork to work for Waseca County under the OPT program. Having witnessed her resilience, resourcefulness, work ethic and, skills, her supervisor initiated conversations to retain her after that period, and the county started working on filing for an H1B work visa.

"We managed to file everything ourselves. Waseca is a small county, so they didn't have the means to hire an immigration attorney. It took a lot of reading, but we did it."

Maame attributes much of her success to the welcoming community that embraced her with open arms. Her journey from Ghana to Minnesota is a testament to the transformative power of education and the profound impact of perseverance. Maame's story is an inspiring example of how international students can thrive and contribute significantly to the U.S. workforce. "In this office I am different in a good way. My background, experience, and how I'd handle things is different, but there is always strength in diversity."

What unique skills do international students have?

International students represent a key source of talent with unique strengths, including:

- **Multilingual-ability and cultural awareness**, fostering innovation and adaptability.
- **Problem-solving skills and independence**, demonstrated by their ability to navigate and thrive in new environments.
- **A global perspective with an innovative mindset**, fostering new approaches to complex issues.
- **STEM expertise**, many specialize in high-demand fields like technology, healthcare, and engineering.
- **A strong work ethic**, evident in their academic and professional success abroad.

“We hired an international student for a Fall internship and the process was effortless! The student intern was very professional and reliable. He wanted to be exposed to as many tasks and processes as possible, with a genuine love of learning and appreciation of the opportunity.”

– Karen Bleick,
Director of HR,
FUN.com

HIRING WITHOUT EXTRA PAPERWORK:

The benefits of the CPT and OPT program

Hiring international students is easier than employers might think. Here's what you need to know:

Is it legal to hire an international student?

Yes! Programs like CPT and OPT allow international students to work legally in the U.S. Their universities handle most of the paperwork, making it hassle-free for employers.

What is CPT and OPT?

The **Curricular Practical Training (CPT)** and **Optional Practical Training (OPT)** programs, managed by USCIS⁷, allow international students to obtain work authorization to work full- or part-time in their field of study. Employers don't need to pay extra fees or complete additional paperwork.

How CPT and OPT work:

CPT (Curricular Practical Training):

- Allows work while students are in school.
- Ideal for internships, co-op programs, and part-time positions.
- Can last up to 1 year for full-time roles or as needed for part-time positions.

OPT (Optional Practical Training):

- Post-graduation work authorization for 1-3 years, depending on the field of study.

Why Choose CPT and OPT?

No Extra Costs or Paperwork:

Students manage their own work permit requirements. Universities typically guide students through the necessary steps.

Access to Skilled Talent:

CPT and OPT provide a direct pathway to hire highly skilled, motivated individuals already familiar with Minnesota.

Long-Term Talent Pipeline:

Employers can sponsor work visas after the CPT or OPT period ends, creating a pathway to retain exceptional talent long-term. Many international students will secure permanent work authorization of their own.



⁷ United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER OPT/CPT?

Employers can opt to sponsor a student

What does it mean to “sponsor” an international worker?

Sponsorship means assisting employees in obtaining a work visa after their CPT or OPT ends. While it requires some investment, it's a great way to retain top talent long-term. Many international students eventually secure permanent work status on their own, without needing sponsorship.

Why should I sponsor a foreign worker if it involves additional costs and paperwork?

Employers should weigh the benefits of hiring a high-performing international student already living in a local community against the costs of having vacancies and high turnover in specialized roles. Sponsorship is often more cost-effective, and can result in long-term results through a stable, skilled workforce.

ADDITIONAL TERMS

F-1 International Student Visa:

A visa for foreign national students whose primary purpose is to complete an academic course of study (associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral program) in the U.S.

STEM OPT Extension:

An additional 24 month OPT extension available to F-1 students who have graduated with a degree in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) fields. No cost is required from the employer, but the employer must be e-verified.

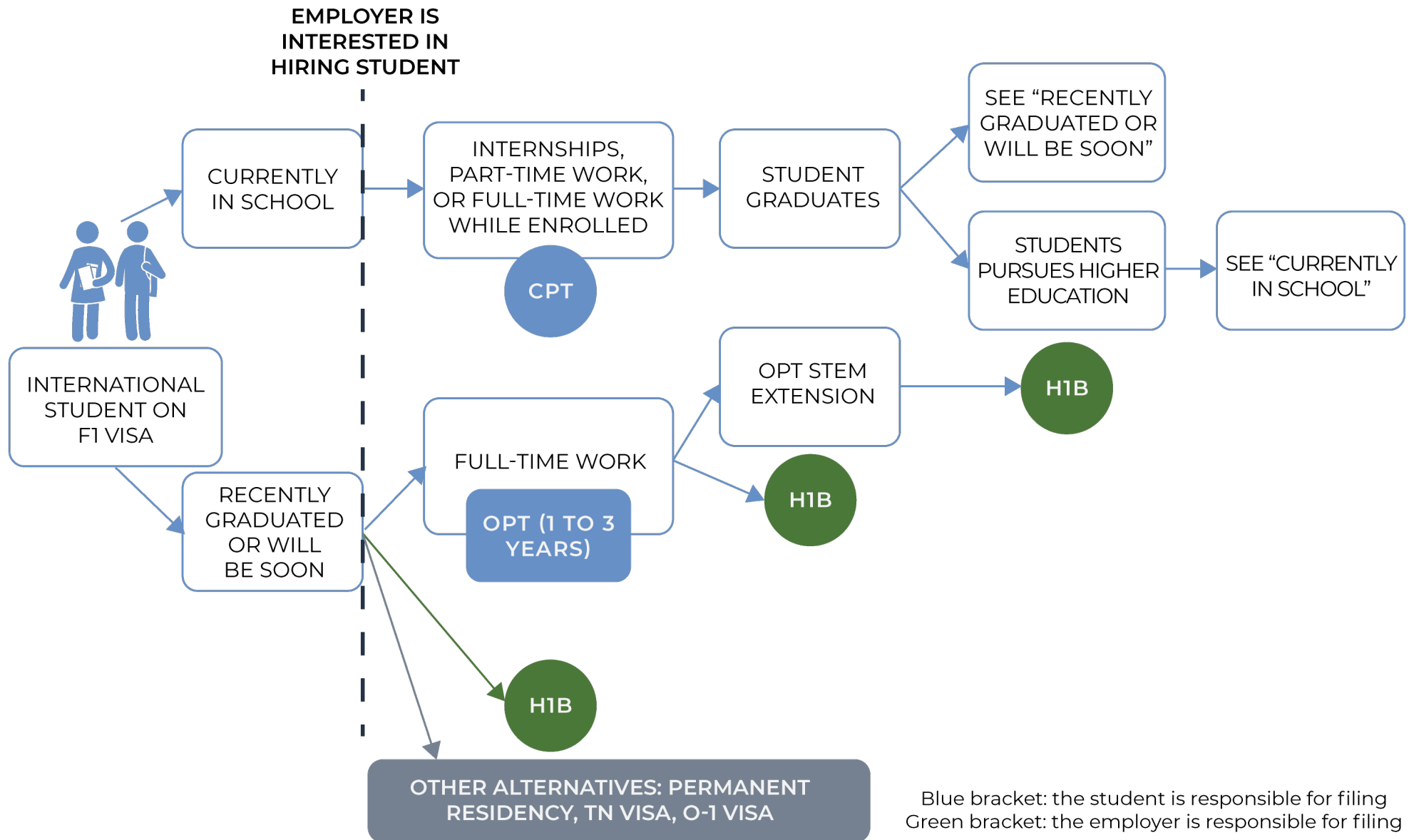
H-1B Visa:

A work visa for foreign workers in specialty occupations, often used by F-1 students after completing OPT to continue working in the U.S. The employer must file the petition and cover the fees.

Minnesota State University consistently has over 1,400 international students on campus, with over half of these students being enrolled in STEM-related degree programs. These students bring innovation and state of practice knowledge to our communities, and we are fortunate to have them in our campus family.”

*– Aaron Budge, PhD,
Interim Executive Director,
School of Applied Agriculture,
Food & Natural Resources,
MSU-Mankato*

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS HIRING WORKFLOW



REGIONAL WORKFORCE TASKFORCE ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Taskforce Members

The taskforce is comprised of representatives from key stakeholders that include:

Area colleges (Leadership, staff, and faculty)

Students and alumni
International student services International Center
Career Development Center

Local employers

Local economic developers

The regional chamber of commerce

A regional immigration law firm

About the Taskforce

Recognizing the untapped potential of international students in the workforce, RNDC created a Regional Workforce Taskforce on International Students to develop strategies for retaining global talent in South Central Minnesota. This pioneering initiative—**the first of its kind in the state**—brings together communities, educational institutions, and employers to address challenges and opportunities in retaining international graduates locally.

The taskforce meets regularly to explore and implement strategies for attracting and retaining international students. Its notable accomplishments include:

- **Publishing** the region's first comprehensive report on international student employment and retention.
- **Hosting** statewide and local workshops on hiring global talent.
- **Fostering** partnerships between a regional immigration law firm and a local university.
- **Obtaining** grant funding for employer training on hiring international students.
- **Organizing** reverse career fairs to enhance student-employer connections.



ENGAGING A GLOBAL WORKFORCE:

A guide to hiring international students

Recruiting and Hiring	
Opportunity	Action Item
1. Engage international students early	<p>Engage international students early using OPT (Optional Practical Training) and CPT (Curricular Practical Training).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Hire students through internships, part-time work, or project-based work while they are studying using CPT or OPT.
2. Optimize you job listings	<p>Use visa-friendly language to attract global talent:</p> <p>Some online application forms may discourage international students from applying, especially when they are immediately asked if they require sponsorship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Use terms such as “OPT-friendly,” or “Sponsorship options for eligible candidates” if your organization supports visa sponsorship. <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid disqualifying questions (e.g., “Do you require sponsorship?”) upfront. For CPT and OPT candidates, sponsorship is not needed initially. <input type="checkbox"/> Be transparent about your willingness to hire international students.
3. Connect with local universities and colleges	<p>Build relationships with local universities and career offices:</p> <p>These offices can guide employers and facilitate connections with students actively seeking job or internship opportunities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Connect with internship coordinators and international student offices at local universities. <input type="checkbox"/> Attend career fairs and host workshops or networking events targeting international students. <input type="checkbox"/> Advertise your job openings in platforms used by local universities, such as Handshake.

Retaining

Opportunity	Action Item
4. Learn about visa options and use existing resources	<p>Seek existing information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Access easy-to-read materials from local universities and employer webinars. <input type="checkbox"/> Attend workshops, workforce summits, and employer-focused events on hiring international students.
5. Plan for long-term employment	<p>Evaluate the opportunity cost of hiring international students and sponsoring employment visas with broader costs of turnover and vacancies:</p> <p>By utilizing OPT, CPT, and other visa programs, international students can contribute to your organization for several years. International students typically have lower turnover rates, which can significantly reduce the costs associated with recruiting, turnover, and hiring. This stands in contrast to the average turnover rate for U.S. employees, which is around five years⁴.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Assess vacancy costs: A Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) study estimates monthly losses of \$4,129 to \$5,733 per vacant position, depending on industry and role. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and use resources and grants for legal and human resource consultations.
6. Build a supportive work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Offer mentorship and resources to help international students or recent graduates transition smoothly into the workforce. <input type="checkbox"/> Frame differences as assets by recognizing and celebrating the unique perspectives, skills, and experiences international students bring to your workplace. <input type="checkbox"/> Promote a welcoming culture by supporting intercultural celebrations and community events, strengthening both your workplace and community's resilience.

ABOUT REGION NINE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Our mission: “Promote the development of the region through intergovernmental cooperation, community and human development, long-range planning, and technical assistance.”

Region Nine Development Commission (RNDC) is a regional development organization serving nine counties in south-central Minnesota, including Blue Earth, Brown, Faribault, Le Sueur, Martin, Nicollet, Sibley, Waseca, and Watonwan. Established in 1972, RNDC is governed by 40 regional leaders, including elected officials from the nine counties, cities, townships, school districts, the Minnesota Valley Council of Governments, and public interest groups focused on health, human welfare, minority populations, and youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Taylor Corporation
Greater Mankato Growth
Minnesota State University, Mankato
Gustavus Adolphus College
Kivu Immigration Law



Notes



REGION NINE



**DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION**

Scan the QR code
to visit the Global
Talent Hiring
webpage for more
information and
resources.

