



Career & Student Employment Services
Division of Student Affairs

Employing International Students

Prospective employers are often unaware that international students attending colleges and universities in the United States can work in their fields of study during academic sessions, vacation periods and after completion of study, without lengthy application procedures or fees. Approximately 1000 international students are hosted on the WMU campus each year. These students come from 103 countries and speak more than 50 different languages. Many of these students are pursuing degrees in technical and business subjects which can help meet the flux of needs in American business, manufacturing and service industries. Western Michigan University offers the following general guidelines for international students enrolled at WMU who are eager to gain experience in their fields of study.

The following information is intended to provide basic clarification on hiring international students. This document is not intended as legal counsel.

INTERNSHIPS/CO-OPS

Q: How do I hire enrolled international students?

A: International students are eligible for degree-related work off campus (Curricular Practical Training). Employers can hire non-U.S. citizens for internships/co-ops just as they would hire a U.S citizen student. It is the student's responsibility to have the employment approved as a "related experience" through the WMU Office of International Student & Scholar Services and the academic department. For example, a computer science student may do an internship with a consulting firm or manufacturing facility as long as the work relates to computer science. Students will have documentation to present to employers to verify their eligibility to be hired.

Q: If I do hire a WMU international student, what are my obligations?

A: As an employer, you may be asked to verify that the experience is related to the student's academic training. A job letter/offer addressed to the student and describing the responsibilities of the position is standard. The student will submit it to the academic advisor for approval as an internship site. Employers are not required to provide any special documentation.

Q: What restrictions do international students have regarding pay and availability?

A: International students may receive pay for internship experience as long as it is related to the major field of study and is equal to that of other employees in the same role. They must have social security numbers, which are typically obtained with the assistance of the WMU Office of International Student & Scholar Services. It is the responsibility of the students to verify the amount of time they are eligible for any full-time positions. Authorization for them to work for you will be documented and should be presented to you when they begin work.

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Q: Are international students eligible to work after they graduate from WMU?

A: Most international students are eligible to work for one year immediately following graduation in the field of study for which the degree was granted (Optional Practical Training). Students themselves apply to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for work authorization and will possess a wallet-sized "Employment Authorization Document" bearing their photograph.

Q: How long can an international student work in the United States?

A: After the first year of Optional Practical Training, it is up to the employer and the international employee to decide to continue the working relationship. In this case, the employer agrees to sponsor the employee. The employer would apply to the Department of Homeland Security to secure an H-1B visa for Temporary Worker status for the employee. H-1B status is available in two 3-year increments, and can be renewed beyond six years if the beneficiary has started the application process for Permanent Residency.

Q: Are the legal aspects of retaining a good employee as complicated as it seems?

A: It is recommended that the application process begin as soon as you determine the future value of an international employee's work, three or four months after hiring. Time is a factor, as there are limits to the number of visas granted each year. However, with the assistance of an attorney, the process can be expedited. Some companies have an attorney on site. Otherwise, the graduates/employees can secure their own attorneys to work with them in making these arrangements. Some of the legal fees could be the responsibility of the employee. Some companies who do not retain attorneys on staff consider negotiating within the graduate's salary a way to help cover legal fees.

Q: Why should I hire international students?

A: Temporary work visas are bound to the sponsoring employer and visa holders are not likely to leave for positions with other firms during the period of the visa. International students possess language skills, eagerness to learn, exceptional work ethics, and experiences with acculturation. They bring diversity, expertise, and global thinking to enrich U.S. workplaces and organizations. They become international business persons and advocates, and ideal future contacts. They make excellent candidates for transfer to home country locations, having acquired an insightful understanding of American work patterns, goals and ethics.

Q: Whom do I contact if I have questions?

A: Contact the Office of International Student & Scholar Services, 4255 Ellsworth Hall, (269) 387-5866 with questions about work eligibility of any international student attending WMU. Contact our office as you normally do to pursue on-campus interviewing, resume referrals, career fairs, or other ways of identifying talent you are currently seeking.

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