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Practice Area Column • International Students and Scholars

Navigating Policy Uncertainties of Post-Study Employment

Recent and proposed changes in U.S. immigration policy threaten the pipeline of international talent filling critical workforce gaps—with uncertain consequences for students, institutions, and industries alike.

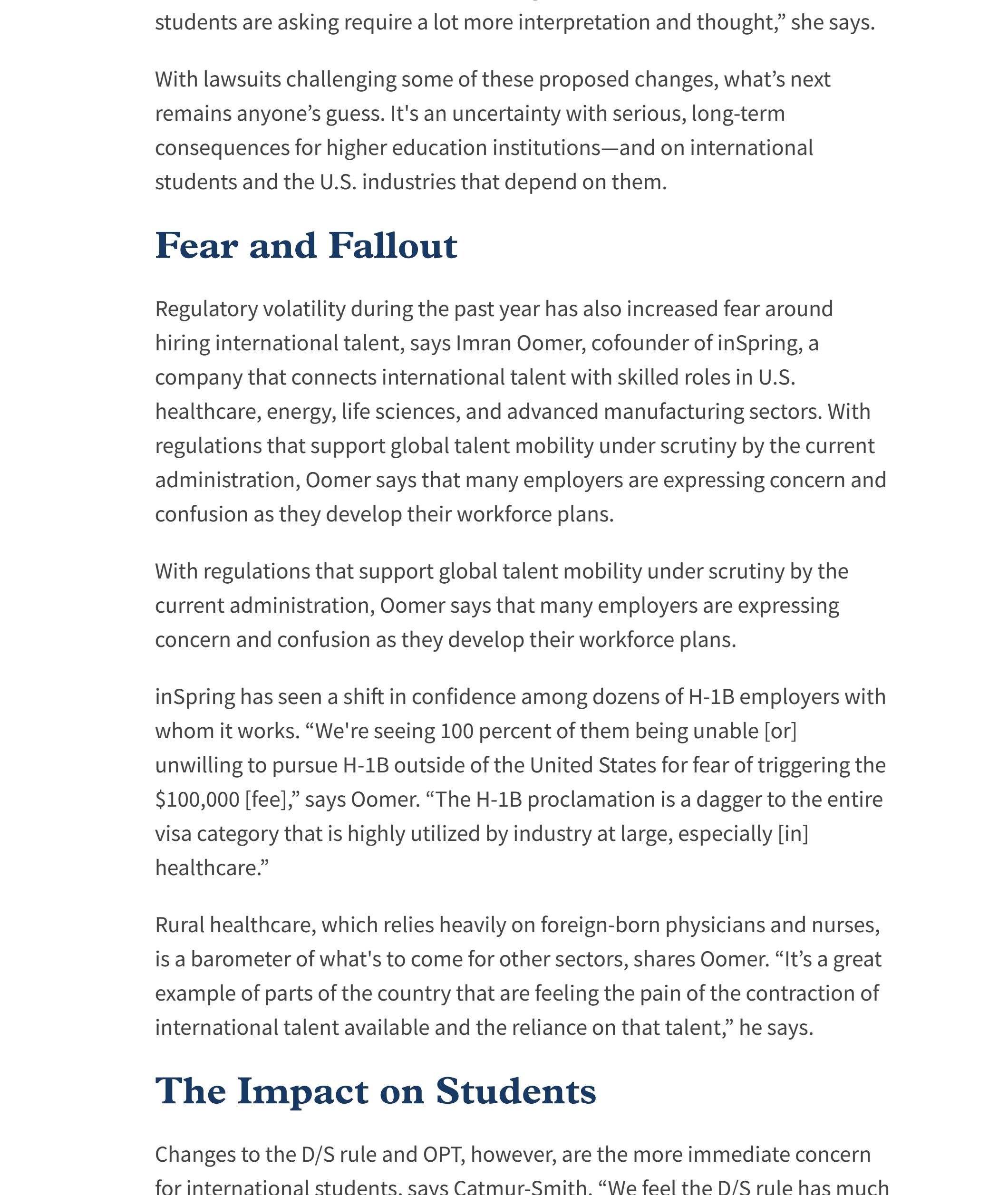


Illustration: Shutterstock

By Rita Colorito | January 22, 2026



International students have long played a vital role in filling workforce gaps in high-skill, high-demand sectors where domestic talent shortages are acute. However, recently enacted or proposed federal policy changes in the United States—including the elimination of Duration of Status (D/S) and restrictions on Optional Practical Training (OPT)—threaten this pipeline at a time when post-study work opportunities are a top motivator for international students when choosing an education destination.

International students and professionals in international student and scholar services (ISSS) are struggling with the ambiguity of these changes, says Robin Catmur-Smith, long-time NAFSA member and managing director of the recently launched [International Student Resource Center \(ISRC\)](#), a project of the Talent Mobility Fund. "We are finding that the types of questions the students are asking require a lot more interpretation and thought," she says.

With lawsuits challenging some of these proposed changes, what's next remains anyone's guess. It's an uncertainty with serious, long-term consequences for higher education institutions—and on international students and the U.S. industries that depend on them.

Fear and Fallout

Regulatory volatility during the past year has also increased fear around hiring international talent, says Imran Oomer, cofounder of inSpring, a company that connects international talent with skilled roles in U.S. healthcare, energy, life sciences, and advanced manufacturing sectors. With regulations that support global talent mobility under scrutiny by the current administration, Oomer says that many employers are expressing concern and confusion as they develop their workforce plans.

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inSpring has seen a shift in confidence among dozens of H-1B employers with whom it works. "We're seeing 100 percent of them being unable [or] unwilling to pursue H-1B outside of the United States for fear of triggering the \$100,000 [fee]," says Oomer. "The H-1B proclamation is a dagger to the entire visa category that is highly utilized by industry at large, especially [in] healthcare."

Rural healthcare, which relies heavily on foreign-born physicians and nurses, is a barometer of what's to come for other sectors, shares Oomer. "It's a great example of parts of the country that are feeling the pain of the contraction of international talent available and the reliance on that talent," he says.

The Impact on Students

Changes to the D/S rule and OPT, however, are the more immediate concern for international students, says Catmur-Smith. "We feel the D/S rule has much more potential to be disruptive and restrictive for students."

At this time of skyrocketing costs in U.S. higher education, restrictions on OPT will also have a big impact on where students choose to study, says Catmur-Smith. "The ability to gain work experience in the academic field is absolutely critical for students. There's no way to [overstate] what it would mean to the international student population and to U.S. institutions, if that were taken away or restricted."

The [Current Students Survey](#), conducted by the Institute for Progress and NAFSA in August and September 2025, validates Catmur-Smith's concern.

Among current graduate students and postdocs who are on F-1 or J-1 visas at U.S. institutions, 49 percent said they would not have enrolled at a U.S. institution in the first place had D/S been replaced with a fixed period of admission and 54 percent said they would not have enrolled if OPT had been rescinded.

Among the master's students likely to stay in the United States and apply for another visa, 57 percent said they would be unlikely to try and stay if OPT were rescinded. For PhD students currently likely to stay, 49 percent said they would be unlikely to try to stay.

When it comes to attracting international students, the survey found that ending D/S would deter enrollment in U.S. programs: Fifty-seven percent reported that they would still enroll if D/S were replaced with a fixed period of admission compared to 67 percent who would enroll under the current rules.

Ending OPT would also deter enrollment: Forty-eight percent of respondents said they were likely to enroll if OPT were rescinded. Compare this to the 67 percent who said they would enroll under the current rules.

Global Talent Shift

But U.S. policy shifts aren't happening in a vacuum—and the cumulative effect of restrictive immigration measures across multiple countries is reshaping global student mobility. "There's this negative sentiment that 'We don't want you here. We want you to leave as soon as possible.' This is not just in the United States. The same thing is happening in the United Kingdom and Australia," says Nitin Agrawal, CEO of Interstride, a platform supporting international students from admission to career development and beyond.

As a result, international students are now enrolling at universities in France, Germany, and Russia. "All those countries are showing double digit growth," says Agrawal, who matriculated to the United States from Nepal in 2003.

The shift is already apparent: Fall 2025 data from the Institute of International Education showed that new international student enrollment in the United States had dropped by 17 percent from fall 2024. [An analysis by NAFSA and IIE International](#) found that the loss translates into more than \$1.1 billion of lost revenue and about 23,000 fewer jobs.

The rhetoric and policy changes related to immigration also impact retention, says Agrawal. International students with U.S. degrees are increasingly seeking employment opportunities outside the United States, he says.

U.S. companies, too, are shifting where they do business in order to build their high-skilled workforce, says Agrawal.

But not all industries can shift overseas. Without immediate, massive increases in the skilled workforce, 171 occupations in the United States will face skills shortages through 2032, according to a 2025 report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Of the professions that require higher education attainment, accountants, attorneys, doctors, engineers, managers, nurses, and teachers are facing the steepest workforce shortfalls.

"There needs to be better alignment between the degree fields that international students are coming into the United States for and what the labor market needs," Oomer argues.

Looking Forward

"The immigration system as it's set up today, in the status quo, is not ideal for any parties. There's tremendous friction in the process," says Oomer. "There's a real case to be made to rethink the visa categories and the visa caps, to be able to align better to the labor market needs."

For U.S. cities and regions facing generational demographic declines, the need for foreign-born workers to bolster economic growth and innovation is critical, says Oomer—as is retaining international students who simultaneously boost higher education enrollment and form the pipeline to that workforce.

"We as a country should be looking to retain all the talent that our universities educate," Oomer asserts. "The fact that we are putting policies [in place] to make it harder to retain U.S.-educated talent is astonishing and certainly the wrong move."

For now, international students largely remain committed to studying and leveraging their talents and skills. But that commitment is being tested by ongoing uncertainty and volatility. For international students, higher education institutions, local and regional economies and communities, and industries facing skills shortfalls, the costs of policy limbo are mounting. One thing is clear: All face difficult calculus in mapping their economic futures.

Navigating the Uncertainty

Until positive changes are implemented, ISSS professionals should consider this advice:

Communicate fast-changing policies.

Many recent immigration policy changes have come with little to no warning. "The advice we give both to administrators and to students is, first, stay on top of the immigration news, because there's so much happening," says Agrawal.

"We need to provide the best information we can even if there is a lot of uncertainty," says Catmur-Smith. She urges ISSS professionals to refer students to an immigration attorney or to resources like the ISRC for "questions that seem to be murky or go beyond the ability of a designated school official to respond."

Create a cheat sheet of visa options.

"Right now, when we speak to students, they're solely focused on ... the H-1B visa," says Agrawal. "They lose sight [of the fact] that even after you leave the United States, you can come back under other visas, such as the L-1, though the pathways are limited."

For highly skilled talent, including those with STEM degrees, EB-1 and EB-2 visas, or National Interest Waivers.

Tap into local economic initiatives.

Despite the federal government's actions, many local and regional entities remain committed to advancing and retaining international students. Oomer cites [Campus Philly](#) in Philadelphia and [OneROC](#) in Rochester, New York, as examples of what's possible in aligning education, workforce, and economic goals.

Emphasize empathy.

"This is a really scary time to be an international student," says Oomer. ISSS professionals need to, but also for empathetic ear not up only for navigating these regular complexities, but also for emotional ear not up only for navigating these "given in-hats" not just in the United States, but globally, there's a need to send a message to the international students and scholars who come here that they are welcome and they are supported," says Catmur-Smith.

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By MARGARET BEAL

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