

# An Exploratory Survey of Post-Graduation Employment Location Preferences Among International Students in Missouri, USA

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## Abstract

*This study examined the post-graduation employment location preferences of international students preparing to participate in the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program in the United States. An exploratory survey asked international students in their final semesters at three midwestern public universities to indicate their employment location preferences via an online text- and map-based questionnaire. Two main questions guided the research: 1) Do international students hold employment location preferences before graduation? and 2) Where in the United States do international students applying for OPT prefer to work? Results indicated the affirmative and that preference geographies extend well beyond the state in which the students earned their degrees. In applying for OPT, participants in this study signaled their intent to remain in-country. As such, the scale of analysis shifts from traditional country-to-country migration flows of international students to the internal movements within the host country in anticipation of post-graduation employment.*

**Keywords:** Curricular Practical Training (CPT), internal migration, international students, Optional Practical Training (OPT), post-graduation employment

## Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst global economic disruption and geopolitical uncertainty, rising tuition and living costs, students from around the world are assessing their options for international study. They are having to make hard choices as they try to optimize their study experiences and time abroad (Sato et al., 2022). For many international students, education destination choices can influence long-term career trajectories and lifetime mobility aspirations (Findlay et al., 2017). Yet substantial gaps remain in our understanding of the full international student experience, including where students go after they graduate. Much of the literature on the topic has heretofore focused on

the early and middle stages of the international student experience, such as the journey between home and country of study, the new-student transition process, and other cultural and academic experiences during students' academic careers. But, as Popadiuk and Arthur (2014) have argued, "Less attention has been paid to the stage of cross-cultural transition when students are completing their international learning experiences and preparing for post-graduation plans" (p. 123).

Central to this later stage of the international student experience is post-graduation mobility, which in the case of this paper includes the motivations, plans, and preferences of international students following the completion of their degree programs. The question of what happens to international students after graduation is of increasing importance, not only for students and their careers but also for host countries and their economies. Retaining high-skilled international students is becoming a national priority for many countries. Several recent studies have considered this issue, although the scales of analysis have largely focused on international, country-to-country moves and have been limited to the decision binary of whether to "stay or go" (Mulvey, 2022; see also Geddie, 2012; Han et al., 2015; Istad et al., 2021; Iqbal et al., 2019; Lee, 2022; Netierman et al., 2022; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Less has been written about the internal, or intra-national, mobility of international students—that is, where they move and why within the host country. Traditionally, domestic students have been associated with internal or within-country moves (for example, Fiore et al., 2015), while international students have been associated with international or country-to-country migration (Prazeres, 2013; Findlay et al., 2018). This paper expands the idea of internal migration and mobility to include international students, as well.

### **Literature Review**

Hazen and Alberts (2006) report that international students studying in the United States don't necessarily arrive at school with the intention to remain in-country but instead "a wide variety of professional, societal and personal factors influence students in an ongoing decision-making process" (p. 201). Such factors include potential employment prospects back home (Agbonlahor & Ampaw, 2021); whether the social climate of the host country is amenable to staying (Musumba et al., 2011); and/or family obligations or other personal factors (Alberts & Hazen, 2005). Opportunities for post-graduation employment in the host country also play an increasingly influential role in students' mobility decisions (Farrugia, 2016; Gesing & Glass, 2019).

But intending to stay is one thing; having the legal authorization to do so is another. In general, international students are required to leave the host country at the completion of their studies. For students who do wish to remain, obtaining post-graduation employment authorization is one of the few legal options available to them (Grimm, 2019). In the United States, student post-graduation work authorization is obtained through the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. The OPT program has grown in popularity in the United States, with over 223,000 students participating just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Open Doors, 2020). Students on regular post-completion OPT can work anywhere in the US for up to 12 months after graduation regardless of degree field, while graduates with certain STEM degrees are eligible to apply for an additional 24 months of OPT work authorization, which is known as the OPT STEM Extension.

The geography of OPT employment has been unevenly distributed across the United States. Ruiz and Budiman (2018) have demonstrated how concentrated OPT employment has been within US metro areas and how certain metros have produced more OPT workers and retained them to a greater degree than other places. Work by Beine and colleagues (2022) looked at the transition rates of international students on OPT into the U.S. labor market and found that "most foreign graduates who remain in the US transition to a first job in the same state where they got their degree" (p. 6). Both Ruiz and Budiman (2018) and Beine and colleagues (2022) analyzed national OPT data. Kaemmerer and Foulkes (2022), on the other hand, mapped the OPT employment locations of international students from the state of Missouri specifically and found that most OPT employment took place out-of-state and in larger metro areas, while in-state OPT was largely located in and around the Missouri areas where students graduated. As a result, "most of Missouri's OPT graduates were more likely to cross the country to work than to cross the state" (Kaemmerer and Foulkes, 2022, p. 407).

This paper seeks to add to the literature by first expanding the idea of internal migration to include international student post-graduation mobility within the host country. It also addresses the research gap between international students'

initial decisions to stay in the host country following graduation and the subsequent geographic decisions they make about where to move (or not move) within the host country to find post-graduation employment. Of particular interest are the implications that such internal migration decisions hold for regional, state, and local economic and workforce development policies in the United States.

Two main questions guided the research: 1) Do international students hold particular employment location preferences before graduation? and 2) Where in the United States do international students applying for OPT prefer to work? In the following sections, we describe the development and dissemination of an exploratory three-school international student survey, followed by a detailed report of the survey results. We end the paper with a discussion of the findings and concluding thoughts.

## **Methodology**

An online survey was developed to measure the post-graduation employment location preferences of international students applying to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. The intent was to capture migration preferences while students were still in school but before they started working. Survey participants included international students in their final semester at three public universities in the state of Missouri who were in the process of applying for OPT in Spring 2019. This paper refrains from using the names of the three participating universities and instead refers to them using the following descriptors: Flagship State University (FSU), Regional Comprehensive State University (RCSU), and Midsized Metropolitan State University (MMSU).

The survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey platform and consisted of fifteen questions with either multiple-choice, selectable drop-down lists, or point-and-click/touchable question types. The questions covered student biographical information, such as graduating institution, country of citizenship, degree level, and field of study. Other questions asked about previous experiences with OPT and CPT (Curricular Practical Training), as well as job search methods and a Likert scale measuring students' confidence in finding a job. The final group of three questions asked about destination preferences and incorporated one text-based question followed by two map-based questions at the national and state levels. Survey length, question type, and the platform-agnostic digital nature of the survey were meant to facilitate participation, encourage completion, and accommodate any users whose first language was not English.

Following institutional review board approval, the survey was sent via email first to participating schools in February 2019, as international students who planned to graduate in May 2019 would become eligible to apply for OPT 90 days before their program end date and up to 60 days after their program end date. A hyperlink to the survey was then distributed in coordination with each school's international office with the instruction that the hyperlink be sent only to those students who were formally applying for OPT and who had been issued an updated Form I-20 with an OPT recommendation for a May 2019 graduation. The international offices were free to distribute the hyperlink in whatever manner they chose.

## **Participants**

A total of 68 students answered at least one survey question (Table 1). Respondents were not required to answer each question. Fifty-four respondents (80%) were completing their master's degree at the time of taking the survey, ten students (15%) were completing their Ph.D., and four (6%) were completing their bachelor's degree. Eight countries were represented in the survey. Most respondents (84%) were from India and China, with 39 respondents from India alone (~57%). The most represented field of study among respondents was Computer Science (36 counts; 53%), followed by Engineering (11; 16%). Other represented fields included "Business/Management" (4), "Social Science" (4), and "Communications/Journalism" (3). In total, there were eleven different fields of study, including three respondents who identified their field as "other."

Students from FSU made up about 44% of the total with 30 respondents; RCSU's 28 respondents made up 41%; and the 10 respondents from MMSU comprised the remaining 15%. We obtained the final Spring 2019 OPT application numbers from two of the three participating schools (FSU and RCSU). Together the two schools processed 188 OPT

applicants in Spring 2019, of whom 58 participated in this survey, producing a response rate of about 31%. But, unless otherwise noted, the results presented in this paper include responses from all three schools.

**Table 1**  
*Biographical information of respondents (N=68)*

	Characteristics	Count	Percent
University	Flagship State University (FSU)	30	44%
	Regional Comprehensive State Univ. (RCSU)	28	41%
	Midsized Metropolitan State Univ. (MMSU)	10	15%
Degree Level	Bachelors	4	5%
	Masters	54	79%
	Doctorate	10	15%
Country of Citizenship	India	39	57%
	China	18	26%
	Brazil	4	6%
	Iran	2	3%
	Nepal	2	3%
	Nigeria	1	1%
	Russia	1	1%
	Bangladesh	1	1%
Field of Study	Computer Science	36	53%
	Engineering	11	16%
	Business Management	4	6%
	Social Sciences	4	6%
	Communication/Journalism	3	4%
	Other	3	4%
	Physical/Life Sciences	2	3%
	Health Professions	2	3%
	Mathematics	1	1%
	Agriculture	1	1%
	Education	1	1%

*Note.* Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number and each characteristic grouping may not add up to 100%.

## Results

### The Job Search

The initial group of survey questions focused on students' job search methods. In the first question, respondents had the opportunity to rate their level of confidence in getting a job offer on a Likert Scale of 1-5, with 1 signifying *not confident* and 5 signifying *very confident*. Of the 47 responses, nearly half were *very confident* (22; 47%) that they would find employment. In fact, 33 of the respondents (about 70%) gave a confidence score of either 4 or 5. Eight respondents rated their confidence as 3 (17%), four respondents rated their confidence as 2, and only two rated themselves as 1, or fully *not confident*.

A second question asked students how they had looked for jobs (Table 2). Respondents were provided eight choices and could select all that applied. According to the results, most had used or intended to use a job posting website (56), such as Indeed or Glassdoor, and/or a company's website directly (48). The third most selected job search method was a campus job fair (25), while 22 sought friends or family connections to look for a job. At the low end of the list, only three respondents made use of or intended to use their university's international student office to find a job, and only one respondent had yet to start looking for a job at the time of the survey.

**Table 2**  
*Job search methods of respondents*

TOTAL (n = 68)			CHINA ONLY (N = 18)			INDIA ONLY (N = 39)		
Job search method (choose all that apply)	Cnt	Pct	Job Search Method (choose all that apply)	Cnt	Pct	Job Search Method (choose all that apply)	Cnt	Pct
Job posting website (indeed, glassdoor, etc.)	56	82%	Job posting website (indeed, glassdoor, etc.)	16	89%	Job posting website (indeed, glassdoor, etc.)	30	77%
Company website	48	71%	Company website	15	83%	Company website	24	62%
Campus job fair	25	37%	Campus job fair	8	44%	Campus job fair	11	28%
Friends or family connections	22	32%	Friends or family connections	7	39%	Friends or family connections	10	26%
Campus career center	18	26%	Campus career center	6	33%	I have already found a job	9	23%
I have already found a job	18	26%	I have already found a job	6	33%	Campus career center	8	21%
Academic department or professors	12	18%	Academic department or professors	5	28%	Academic department or professors	3	8%
Other	5	7%	University's international student office	0	0%	Other	3	8%
University's international student office	3	4%	I have not even started looking for a job	0	0%	University's international student office	2	5%
I have not even started looking for a job	1	1%	Other	0	0%	I have not even started looking for a job	1	3%

*Note.* Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not add up to 100%. (Cnt = Count; Pct = Percent)

The job search question was meant to capture indications of network migration effects (Massey et al., 1993). The reasoning was that if network migration played a role in graduates' location decisions, then it might reflect in how they searched for jobs. For some students, informal information networks like friends and family might play a larger role in the search process than would other search methods (Somerville & Walsworth, 2015). While 22 respondents selected "friends

or family” as one of their methods for looking for a job, that number is still less than half of the number who chose a “company’s website” or “job posting site”. Moreover, regardless of how the results were filtered—e.g. by degree type, school attended, or country of citizenship—“friends or family” still accounted for only half that of the top choice (“job posting website”). That is not to discount the prevalence and potential of friends and family in the job search process for international students on OPT; after all, at least 22 respondents consulted them. Even if friends and family figured less prominently compared to other methods, the survey itself did not ask students to rank their job search methods. Nor is it clear from the results the degree to which each of the options influenced the job search process. Therefore, whether and how much network migration vis-à-vis informal networks and word-of-mouth could play a role in employment location preferences for Missouri international students remains to be seen.

### **Practical Training**

The second question group focused on students’ prior experiences with practical training, which includes not only Optional Practical Training (OPT), but also Curricular Practical Training (CPT). Unlike OPT, which is generally for work after a student graduates and for which students must apply for authorization from the federal government, CPT is for work during a student’s course of study and can be authorized “in-house” by a Designated School Official (DSO) at the student’s university. Regulations on CPT state that the work must be “relate[d] directly to the student’s major area of study and *be an integral part of the school’s established curriculum*” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2019; emphasis in original). What exactly qualifies as legitimate CPT work experience is, for better or worse, open to interpretation, and policies can vary widely from school to school. CPT has traditionally been authorized for summer internships, field practica, and cooperative or service-learning opportunities, although there have been calls to update, clarify, and expand CPT regulations to better reflect how international students gain work experience in today’s knowledge economy (Berger et al., 2021).

According to the survey, three-quarters of respondents (52) had never applied for OPT before, while 16 had. For CPT, 47 respondents (69%) had not previously participated in the program, compared to 21 (31%) who had. In the survey, respondents who had indicated previous CPT participation then received a follow-up question: If they had worked for a company or organization for CPT, would they prefer to continue working for that company or organization on OPT? Not all of the 21 respondents who had prior CPT experience chose to answer, but of the 18 who did, 14 (78%) expressed a preference to continue working for their CPT company/organization later on OPT.

### **Location Preferences: Text-based**

The final group of three survey questions centered on students’ post-graduation employment location preferences. The first, a text-based question, served as a control to the two map-based questions to see how the responses compared. Students were asked “if a good job is available” would they prefer to 1) “stay and work in the same area as my university,” 2) “stay and work somewhere in Missouri, but not in the same area as my university,” 3) “move and work in a different state,” or 4) no preference (i.e., “I don’t care where I go”). Of the 62 responses to this question, half (31; 50%) did not care where they went (i.e., choice #4). An additional 23 respondents (37%) preferred “to move and work in a different state.” Only eight respondents (13%) expressed a preference to remain and work in the same area as their university. None of the respondents indicated a preference for the third choice (“stay and work somewhere in Missouri, but not in the same area as my university”).

### **Location Preferences: Map-based (National)**

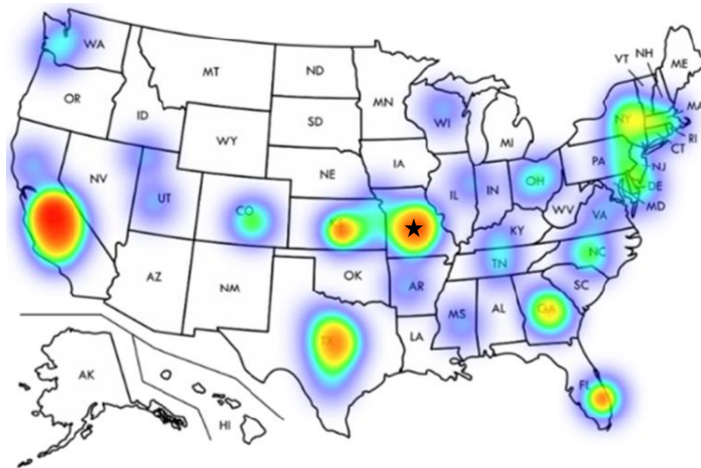
The first of the map-based questions asked respondents “If you could find a job anywhere in the US, where would you prefer to go?” Respondents could then touch or click anywhere on the map to indicate their preferred locations. Due to the small state sizes and compactness of the northeast United States, some states were combined into one “region”. For example, Vermont and New Hampshire made up one region, while another region included pieces of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware. The locked scale of the map image, as well as whether respondents used a finger or a mouse cursor and differences in screen and finger sizes, meant that precision in the Northeastern United States was challenging. Therefore,

this paper groups those selections as generally within a “Northeast” region. In all, the US map was composed of 46 “regions.”

There were 55 total responses, and the resulting map suggests a wide distribution of location preferences (Figure 1). More than twenty states were selected at least once. Though the survey respondents were all international students from Missouri universities, only 6 respondents (11%) selected Missouri as their preferred post-graduation employment location. Because the Kansas City metro area encompasses land on either side of the Missouri-Kansas border, respondents who tried to click on that area could have their selections counted as either Kansas or Missouri. Therefore, where appropriate, this paper combines Missouri and Kansas selection counts. In the survey, 3 respondents chose Kansas as their preferred location. Were those 3 included with the Missouri numbers (6), the percentage of Missouri respondents who preferred to work in Missouri would be around 16%.

### Figure 1

*Preferred National Post-Graduation Employment Locations*



*Note.* Shows the preferred national employment locations of Missouri international students applying for Optional Practical Training. N = 55. (The state of Missouri is indicated by a star.)

Filtering the survey data by the university attended revealed that respondents from all of the schools had a wide geographic distribution of location preferences. FSU had the highest number of respondents (28; 51%), selecting 17 different regions on the national map. The greatest number of FSU location selections were California (5), Missouri (3), and the Northeast (6). The 19 respondents (35%) from RCSU selected 12 different regions on the map, with California (3) and Missouri (3) tied for the most preferred locations. Finally, the 8 respondents (15%) from MMSU selected 5 different regions nationally, with the top spots being Texas (3) and California (2).

When filtered by country of citizenship, the distribution of the national map again changes. Respondents from eight different countries answered the national map question, with India (27) and China (17) together accounting for 80% of all respondents. The top locations preferred by respondents from China included California (4), Missouri/Kansas (3), and the Northeast (5). Indian respondents’ top choices included California (6), Texas (4), and Missouri/Kansas (5).

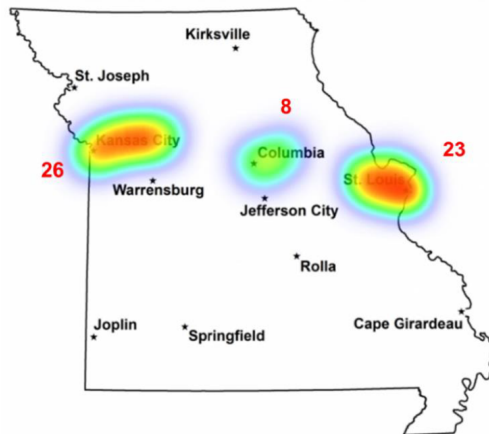
Finally, the location preferences can be further filtered by degree and education level. STEM-related degrees (e.g., Agriculture, Computer Science, Engineering, Health Professions, Mathematics, Physical/Life Sciences) accounted for nearly three-quarters of the total responses for the national map question. Of these STEM respondents, the top preferred locations included California (7), Missouri/Kansas (9), and Texas (5). Filtering by education level, 42 of the 55 respondents to the national map question were master’s students. Their location preferences were diverse in terms of the variety of states represented (21). California (8), Texas (5), and Missouri/Kansas (8) together comprised half of all locations.

### Location Preferences: Map-based (State)

The second map-based question asked students to indicate their location preferences within the state of Missouri (Figure 2). There were 57 total responses, and despite being free to select anywhere on the map respondents preferred only three locations across the entire state: Kansas City, Columbia, and St. Louis. All three locations are metropolitan areas in Missouri with populations of 100,000 or more. Twenty-six respondents (46%) chose Kansas City as their preferred location, followed by St. Louis with 23 (40%), and Columbia with 8 (14%).

**Figure 2**

*Preferred In-State Post-Graduation Employment Locations*



*Note:* Shows the preferred in-state employment locations of Missouri international students applying for Optional Practical Training.  $N = 57$ . (Numbers indicate selection totals for that location.)

The FSU campus is in central Missouri, while both RCSU and MMSU are located farther west, near Kansas City. Of the 28 graduates of FSU, half preferred to work in St. Louis, while the rest preferred Columbia (7) and Kansas City (6). The employment location preferences of RCSU graduates balanced both sides of the state, with 12 preferring Kansas City and 8 preferring St. Louis (and only 1 respondent preferring to work in Columbia). All 8 MMSU graduates chose Kansas City as their preferred work location. Students from China preferred the central and eastern parts of the state, with 4 preferring Columbia and 10 preferring St. Louis. Only 3 Chinese respondents chose Kansas City. However, most of the 27 respondents from India preferred Kansas City (18) to St. Louis (11) and Columbia (1).

Of the 45 respondents graduating with a master's degree, 25 (56%) preferred to work in Kansas City, with St. Louis and Columbia garnering 14 and 6 preference votes, respectively. Only 8 Ph.D. students participated in the Missouri map question, but three-quarters indicated that they would prefer to work in St. Louis, with the other two locations getting 1 vote each. Three of the 4 bachelor's degree respondents preferred St. Louis (and the 4th selected Columbia).

### Practical Training: Text vs. Map Responses

#### *"I don't care where I go."*

Of the 31 respondents who indicated no preference on the text-based question, 9 had worked on CPT previously (whereas 21 total respondents had previously worked on CPT), and 8 out of 9 indicated they would prefer to continue working for the same company on OPT that they did previously on CPT. In other words, about 90% of those who didn't care where they worked but who previously worked on CPT *would* care to keep working for their previous employer, wherever that might have been located. This group was also very confident in finding a job, averaging about 4.14 on the 5-point Likert scale of job-search confidence, with 55% of respondents giving a maximum confidence score of 5. When asked



on the national map where they would prefer to go, these same “I don’t care” respondents did indicate a location—12 different locations to be exact (although, perhaps not surprisingly, 4 of them chose to skip this question). The top preferences were Missouri/Kansas (7), Texas (5), and California (5), with 4 respondents choosing to skip the question. On the Missouri map, 14 preferred Kansas City, 11 preferred St. Louis, and 4 preferred Columbia (with 1 skip).

*“...I would prefer to move and work in a different state.”*

Of the 23 respondents who preferred to move and work in a different state, 6 had previously worked on CPT, 4 of whom would have preferred to continue working for the same CPT company or organization on OPT. Interestingly, the location preferences for leavers on the national map were markedly different from the “I don’t care” group. They preferred 16 different locations, with the top ones being the Northeast (4), California (3), [Skipped] (3), and the state of Washington (2). On the Missouri map, their in-state location preferences were ranked St. Louis (11), Kansas City (5), [Skipped] (4), and Columbia (3).

*“...I would prefer to stay and work in the same area as my university.”*

Of the 8 respondents, only 3 had participated in CPT previously, 2 of whom would have preferred to keep working for the same company or organization on OPT. But while these 8 respondents indicated in the text-based question that they would prefer to stay and work in the same area as their (Missouri) university, none selected Missouri on the national map (although there was 1 vote for Kansas). Their preferences were instead spread widely across seven different states, with only California getting more than one vote (2). On the Missouri map, 6 preferred Kansas City, with St. Louis and Columbia attracting only 1 vote each. Notably, responses included students from all three schools.

### **Discussion**

Survey results were generally in line with those of Kaemmerer and Foulkes (2022) who mapped the historical employment location distribution of Missouri OPT participants. Demographically, most of the survey respondents were master’s students in STEM fields (mostly Computer Science and Engineering) and predominantly from India but also from China. Within Missouri, survey respondents favored Missouri’s metro areas. Nationally, respondents’ top five destination preferences were California, Missouri/Kansas, Texas, Georgia, and the Northeast, which likewise mirror the historical Missouri OPT data (Kaemmerer & Foulkes, 2022). When asked in the text-based question where they would prefer to work, 87% of the survey respondents indicated they either preferred to leave Missouri or did not care where they went. On the one hand, these numbers could signify that 87% of respondents are poised to leave. Most do: the historical OPT data for Missouri showed that around 80% of the OPT locations of Missouri’s international student graduates in 2017 were out-of-state (Kaemmerer & Foulkes, 2022). On the other hand, those “I don’t care where I go” respondents could be grouped with the “prefer to stay and work in the same area as my university” respondents, in which case two-thirds could be encouraged to remain in Missouri under the right circumstances. But whichever way one groups the responses, most respondents indicated a loose connection to place.

This study took place just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the pandemic has triggered significant changes to the nature of work. Remote work across many professions has risen in popularity and in some form or degree has become the new normal, adding a new layer of complexity to the geography of employment. Federal regulations stipulate that OPT employment must be related to a student’s major area of study and that, for the OPT STEM Extension especially, “an employer must have and maintain a bona fide employer-employee relationship with the student” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, 2022). However, the OPT regulations do not prohibit remote work. The regulations say little about the *geographic* relationship between OPT students and their employers other than requiring students to report their “physical” address (i.e., “the address where you live in the United States”), their mailing address (i.e., “the address where you get mail,” which could be different from the physical address), and their employer’s address (i.e., “the address where you work”) (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2022). The rise of remote work highlights the potential disconnect

between physical locations and employment locations. But it also offers geographic options for international students on OPT, not only in terms of where they work, but also where they choose to live in relation to their work.

It is important to note that preference is not so clear-cut. In reality, some places can be more welcoming than others (Lee & Rice, 2007), and certain barriers could impede international students' post-graduation mobility plans. The survey did not ask students *why* they preferred one place over another or where they would prefer *not* to work. Nor did it measure the *degree* to which students were attached to one place versus another. After all, a student's sense of place or feeling of community belonging can play a significant role in their location decisions (Glass, 2018).

International students who plan to work in the United States after graduation generally perceive themselves to be more employable (Niu et al., 2022). Exposing international students to work experiences earlier in their academic careers could help students build networks as well as confidence. The development of stronger local connections could, in turn, encourage and facilitate students to remain in their communities after graduation. Drawing from work by Sjoquist and Winters (2012) on domestic student populations, Harrington et al. (2016) point out that “[college] graduates often find a job in the same state where they attend college because they are more likely to develop strong social and professional contacts and networks” (p. 428). The results of this survey suggest that many of those who participated in CPT during their academic program would have preferred to continue working for their employer later on OPT. Considering that nearly 90% of respondents indicated that they had a loose connection to place, gaining work experience first with CPT might be one tool for influencing those who “don’t care where [they] go” to stay in their local communities to work on OPT—more so if the CPT employer was also local. In short, earlier and greater exposure to in-state employment (via CPT) could be a key to greater in-state post-graduation employment retention.

In addition to local communities, states, too, are interested stakeholders. Through their public institutions, states invest resources, time, and tax dollars in educating their future workforces. To have high-skilled international students then choose to work and/or move out of state upon graduation not only deprives communities of cultural richness and diversity but also productive human capital and other valuable economic contributions. States therefore have a vested interest in retaining their international student graduates to live and/or work locally, if only for a few years.

As an exploratory study of student respondents from only three midwestern schools, there is limited generalizability to the larger international student population in the United States. But despite its relatively small sample size, the survey showed value in capturing the location preferences of international students before they started OPT. Additional work is needed. More students from more schools from other regions would need to be included and subjected to greater statistical rigor. And questions remain: How might the preferences of respondents from Missouri's urban private colleges and universities compare to those of graduates from its smaller, more rural schools? And to what degree does the option for remote work influence the geography of students' preferences?

## Conclusion

This research expanded the idea of international student mobility to include post-graduation employment within the host country. An exploratory survey asked international students from Missouri about their post-graduation employment location preferences. The results indicated international students have an idea about where in the United States they would want to work on Optional Practical Training even before they graduate, and it's not necessarily local. Students' preferences extend well beyond the state in which they earned their degrees. Conceptually, international student migration can occur intra-nationally as well as internationally, and understanding the geographies of international student mobility within the host country—from school to work and among and within different cities, states, and regions—is an important if underexplored component of international students' post-graduation journeys.

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