



GWC-UAW LOCAL 2110

A UNION FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING ASSISTANTS AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

November 18, 2015

Dear Secretary Johnson,

International students have become an integral part of United States universities and look to Optional Practical Training (OPT) as one of the few options they have to work in the United States after graduation. Their work, before and after graduation, plays an essential role in driving US leadership in innovative technology, breakthroughs in cures to our most threatening diseases, and efforts to address major challenges like climate change and transportation problems. The Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC-UAW), representing over 3000 researching and teaching assistants at Columbia University applauds the proposed improvements to the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) extension, but also calls for broader improvements to expand and strengthen the program, to ensure that all workers received the same rights and protections.

The new rules submitted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) include measures that for the first time guarantee that OPT workers receive compensation, benefits and duties commensurate with a US worker performing the same job, a 24 month STEM extension, and an increase in the allowed time of unemployment. However, we call on DHS to further expand these rules to include:

- Language that ensures that none of the costs associated with this new rule will be passed onto international students in the form of new mandatory student fees. Too often, universities have used changes to regulations as reason to increase existing student fees, or create new mandatory fees entirely.
- Expand the OPT extension too all international students, regardless of their fields of study. All workers should have the same rights, regardless of their field of work.
- Enhance notification procedures so that all international students learn of the option of participating in OPT during their school years or after graduation.
- Increase the period of unemployment even more, so that those in OPT status have maximum time to explore alternative OPT-eligible employers or have more time to find a green card sponsor.

Sincerely,

Graduate Workers of Columbia
GWC-UAW Local 2110