

# INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CAREER PLANNING GUIDE

Welcome to the International Student Career Planning Guide. As an international student at Northwestern, you may have unique concerns or questions about how to successfully prepare for job searching in the United States (U.S.). This guide will provide tips and advice on how to navigate the U.S. job search process, and helpful Northwestern resources. We hope that by reviewing this guide, you will gain foundational knowledge on how to stand out as a competitive candidate for U.S. jobs and internships.

This guide is a joint collaboration between multiple Northwestern offices:

Northwestern Career Advancement  
Engineering Career Development  
Medill Career Services  
School of Communication - EPICS  
Chicago Field Studies  
Office of International Student and Scholar Services (OISS)  
Office of Professional Education (OPE)

If you need assistance with seeking employment opportunities outside of the U.S., you can meet with a career adviser from one of the aforementioned career offices to receive guidance in creating a search strategy.

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## Self-Reflection and Values

As you begin the internship or job search process, it is important to reflect on your values and on the characteristics that are important to you in a professional opportunity. Here are some reflective questions to consider:

- What are your personal strengths, skills, interests, and values? Do they align with the jobs that you are interested in?
- Geographically speaking, where do you want to work? Short term? Long term?
- What industries are you most interested in?
- What are your work authorization options?

Use the table below to identify areas of importance and inform your job search. Rank your top 3 areas and fill in the blanks.

<b>Factors to Consider</b>	<b>Must-Have (needs)</b>	<b>Could Live With (wants or compromises)</b>	<b>Deal Breakers (absolute no's)</b>
<i>Example</i>	<i>Flexible work schedule, health benefits</i>	<i>Company provides lunch and happy hour</i>	<i>Work site and location</i>
Location			
Salary & Benefits			
Company's Mission and Values			
Job Duties			
Opportunities for Advancement			
Work Environment			
Work-life Balance			

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## Job Search Planning Timeline

	Knowledge	Engagement	Strategy
Beginning of your Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get to know the <a href="#">Office of International Student and Scholar Services (OISS)</a> and the many resources they provide.</li> <li>Understand the process of applying for work authorization (CPT) for a U.S. internship and the process for applying for a Social Security Number.</li> <li>Learn about resumes, interviewing, and other aspects of the U.S. job search.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet with a career adviser to begin discussing your interests and career goals.</li> <li>Experience U.S. networking, including building a LinkedIn profile or conducting informational interviews.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research companies in areas of interest and understand recruiting timelines for your industries of interest.</li> <li>Start applying for internships or other relevant experiences during your academic program.</li> </ul>
Midway through your Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the process of applying for post-graduation work authorization (OPT)</li> <li>Explore alumni and networking resources (e.g., Northwestern Alumni Association, Northwestern Externship Program, Northwestern Mentorship Program, Our Northwestern).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend recruiting events, such as career fairs and company events, to learn about companies and to gain experience speaking with U.S. employers.</li> <li>Gain practice with mock interviews and talking about your skills and experiences.</li> <li>Continue participation in networking, including company or alumni events, informational interviews, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue applying for internships or other pre-graduation work experiences.</li> <li>Utilize resources such as GoinGlobal, MyVisaJobs, and LinkedIn to research companies that tend to hire international students.</li> </ul>
Conclusion of your Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speak with the OISS for more information about OPT processing times, and strategies for applying.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow up with previously established connections, including career fair contacts, networking contacts, or former internship supervisors to learn about potential opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apply for post-graduate work experiences in your areas of interest.</li> <li>Apply for OPT 90 days prior to the date you intend to start working in the U.S., due to the processing time.</li> </ul>

For a general understanding of undergraduate & graduate student job search timelines, review Northwestern Career Advancement's [Career Guide](#).

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## Networking and Community Building

The process of building and maintaining relationships is called *networking*. The ability to network in diverse business cultures is a critical skill for succeeding in the U.S. job search and American workplace.

Consider how you learned about Northwestern. Whether you spoke with a counselor, met with an alumnus, or attended an admissions event, you likely formed connections to learn more about the school, its culture, and the admissions process. In the same way, it is important to make connections that will support you and provide helpful information throughout your career journey.

### ***Formal and Informal Networking***

As a Northwestern student, you may be invited to attend formal networking or recruiting events hosted by the university or employers. Additional networking opportunities can be found by joining professional organizations, attending local/national conferences, or following your favorite companies or thought leaders on social media.

Some of the best networking opportunities can also happen in informal spaces. Examples range from taking on leadership positions in student organizations to introducing yourself to a guest speaker after class.

### ***Understand Networking Behaviors***

Become familiar with common U.S. networking behaviors by reviewing [eDiplomat](#). Common behaviors include: making eye contact and verbally initiating conversation, speaking positively about yourself, engaging in small talk/informal conversation.

Attending a networking event — even as an observer — can be useful in understanding these behaviors. If this sounds daunting, consider starting small by practicing networking with a career adviser, joining campus clubs, and attending events on-campus.

If English is not your primary language, it is common to be anxious about making grammar or vocabulary mistakes. Practice can help you overcome these anxieties. Refer to the English Language Communication Resources page in this guide for additional resources.

### ***Conduct Informational Interviews***

One of the easiest ways to initiate a conversation and start building a relationship is to ask for an informational interview. More information about informational interviews can be found in the [NCA Career Guide's networking section](#).

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## When Networking

- **Focus on Relationship Building.** It is important to remember that you are building long-term relationships. Networking is not a one-time transaction in which you ask for a job. It is our opportunity to meet and learn about somebody and their career story.
- **Be Curious and Ask Questions.** People enjoy talking about themselves, and you can learn a lot from their responses. Here is a sample list of questions to consider asking:
  - What is your background? Tell me more about your career path.
  - What does a typical day or week look like? What are your major responsibilities?
  - What do you enjoy most about your job? What's most challenging?
  - What are some of the benefits of being international at your (company)?
  - What can I do while I'm at Northwestern to prepare myself for a career in the industry?
  - How did you navigate finding work and sponsorship in the U.S.? *(If the contact is a former international student)*
  - Is there anyone else you'd recommend that I connect with to learn more?
- **Tell your story.** Your personal pitch/narrative is an introductory statement that succinctly summarizes your background. Prepare and practice your personal pitch/narrative. The following content is typically included:

Content	Example
<b>Who you are</b>	<i>My name is Harman Argawal.</i>
<b>What you do</b>	<i>I am a senior majoring in chemical engineering at Northwestern University.</i>
<b>What makes you unique</b>	<i>This past year, I was one of three interns at XYZ Corporation in India where I designed a new piping configuration for our production facility.</i>
<b>What skills you have used</b>	<i>I used my critical thinking skills to examine the effects of possibly using this new configuration. As a result of my work, XYZ implemented this new piping system to drain their reactors more efficiently, saving time and money for the organization.</i>
<b>How you can make a positive impact</b>	<i>I would bring my problem-solving abilities and knowledge of chemical manufacturing to improve your organization's procedures.</i>

\*If you are unsure of what you want to do, you can still practice articulating your interests, skills, and goals. Meet with your Career Adviser to learn more about creating an elevator pitch.

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- **Asking a Contact (NU Alumni, Professional, or Recruiter) for an Informational Interview.** Once you have found a contact of interest, you then want to send a personalized informational interview request. Remember that your goal is to build professional relationships and network with professionals in your field of interest. Also, a personalized note is a great way to stand out from other requests.
  - **Informational Interview Inquiry Sample.** Dear Ms. Siluma, hope you're staying safe during these times! My name is Maria Hernandez and I am a first year Master's student at McCormick School of Engineering. I saw that you work as a Data Scientist at (company name). Coming from an international background, I'd love to connect with you to learn more about your background and gain any valuable insights. Thank you!
- **Follow Up.** One conversation isn't enough so plan to follow-up with those individuals. Ask for their business card or email so you can send them a thank you note and consider connecting with them on LinkedIn with a personal message. If you told them you would email them your resume, make sure you follow through. Periodically follow up with them by asking additional questions, sending updates on your progress at Northwestern, or sending interesting articles you've read that they may enjoy.
  - **Follow Up Sample.** Dear Snehal, I appreciate the time you took to meet with me today. Listening to your experiences as an international student has given me hope and I know with the right plan I will succeed. I look forward to what the future holds and I hope that I can follow up with you soon.

## **Networking Resources**

### [LinkedIn](#)

Professionally-focused social media site designed to help you cultivate relationships.

### [Northwestern Mentorship Program](#)

Online platform for connecting students to alumni for mentoring relationships. Search for alumni living in a particular city or country, who for a certain organization, or who studied the same discipline as you.

### [Our Northwestern](#)

Online community connecting students, alumni, faculty and staff.

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## Preparing for Campus Recruiting

Career services offices at Northwestern facilitate student and employer interactions through Campus Recruiting (CR). CR may include interviews, virtual or in-person information sessions, career fairs and other events. CR provides the opportunity to have interactions with recruiters/alumni where you can introduce yourself, gather information, and make a good impression.

**Information Sessions/Company Days:** Employers send representatives to campus to present what the company does, internship/job opportunities and their recruiting process. This is an opportunity to learn employer-specific information. Be prepared to introduce yourself, ask questions, and get a business card.

**Career Fairs** Develop your strategy for [attending career fairs/events](#). Career fairs are one part of the internship/job search; not the only strategy.

### **Recommendations for Preparing for CR**

Meet with a career adviser early to discuss strategies for success and to learn about the timeline for your U.S. industry of choice.

Learn how to use the online career management system for your school's career services office. Each system has unique opportunities for CR events, in addition to job postings.

<b>Engineering Career Development</b>	<a href="#">McCormick Connect</a>
<b>EPICS</b>	<a href="#">Handshake</a>
<b>Medill Career Services</b>	<a href="#">Handshake</a>
<b>NCA</b>	<a href="#">Handshake</a>

Practice talking about yourself, and your goals, relevant skills, and achievements in a confident, self-promoting manner.

Research relevant industries and employers. This will allow you to effectively ask and respond to questions.

Understand how recruiting practices differ for undergraduate and graduate students

### **Recommendations for Preparing for Campus Interviewing**

Practice responding to potential interview questions, including making eye contact and speaking with enthusiasm.

Research and prepare questions to ask the employer.

[Plan what you will wear](#) while feeling free to maintain your ethnic/religious identity. '[Cats Closet](#)' is a free resource if you are in need of interview attire.

Adhere to interviewing policies for the designated career office. Be on time and professional throughout the interview process.



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## Resume & Interview Best Practices

➤ **Resumes in the U.S.** As you apply for U.S. job opportunities, it is important to convert your resume to a U.S. format. The [NCA Career Guide \(PDF\)](#) provides basic information on how to structure your U.S. resume. As you review the guide, consider these additional tips to market yourself and your unique experiences:

- Include your legal and chosen name so employers know how to address you. For example: Qianhui (Michael) Chen.
- Highlight any languages you speak in addition to English. Employers value multilingual language ability in candidates.
- Exclude personal data to inhibit bias and discrimination within the hiring process. Personal data includes: date of birth, age, gender, ethnicity, social security number, visa status, political or religious affiliation, photographs
- Exclude TOEFL scores.
- If you attended an institution within another country, list your GPA given by the school while also providing a U.S. equivalent GPA so employers can better understand your academic performance.

If you would like more assistance with developing your resume, please schedule an appointment with your career adviser.

➤ **Interviewing for U.S. Companies.** While employment expectations can differ in the U.S. regionally, culturally, and within industries, the following expectations and tips can generally be applied to virtual and in-person interviews. Review the [NCA Career Guide \(PDF\)](#) for more information.

- Be punctual. Arrive 10-15 minutes early for in-person and 5 minutes early for virtual.
- Show confidence by discussing career goals, long-term plans, accomplishments, and skills.
- Expect to receive questions about your experience and skills. Be comfortable speaking directly about individual contributions you have made at work or in past projects.
- Eye contact with your interviewer conveys confidence and interest.
- It is customary to shake hands to introduce yourself. Keep in mind that if this is contrary to your religious beliefs, you can decline.
- Research the company beforehand to show interest and a clear reason why you want to work there.
- Be prepared for varying interview styles. The interviewer may decide to start with small talk or may start with direct questions. Also, they may do most of the talking or expect you to do most of the talking.
- At the end of the interview, ask the employer where they are in the interview process and when you should expect to hear back. Additionally, you can inquire about the status of an application after your interview.
- It is illegal in the U.S. for employers to ask candidates questions regarding age, race, sex, and marital status.
- In Illinois, it is illegal for employers to ask about salary history.

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## Finding “International-Friendly” Employers

One challenging aspect of the U.S. job search is determining which companies hire international students for full-time jobs after graduation. Looking through job postings on national and local job boards can prove to be frustrating and time consuming

### ***Resources for Identifying “International-Friendly” Employers***

#### [GoinGlobal](#)

A database of organizations that have applied for H-1B Visas on behalf of previous candidates, and other resources including U.S. City Guides and International Country Guides.

#### [MyVisaJobs](#)

A searchable H-1B visa database with a job board that posts international student-friendly job openings.

#### [E-Verify Search Tool](#)

E-Verify is a web-based system through which employers electronically confirm the employment eligibility of their employees. Use the E-Verify search tool to find employers who are currently enrolled in E-Verify.

#### Networking

Talk with your friends and classmates about their search and employer-related experiences. A simple conversation may be valuable in helping to uncover the potential of an employer/opportunity.

### ***U.S. Employer’s Perspective on Hiring International Students***

Why wouldn’t a U.S. employer simply fill available jobs with U.S. candidates? The answer is, there are many jobs in the U.S. that are difficult to fill because they require a particular skill set and a higher-level degree. In many cases, international students possess the desired skills and experience levels for these jobs and bring a number of other unique skills, including global perspectives, multilingual language abilities, and more. These reasons make international students a great fit for these and other jobs.

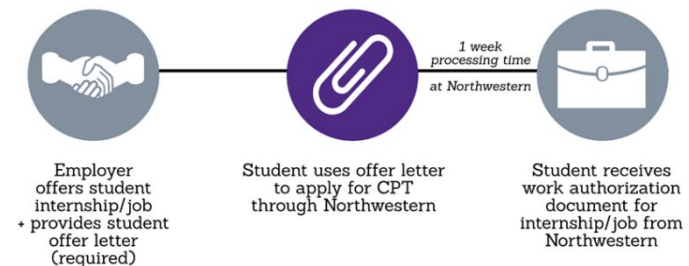
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## Work Authorization and Your Job Search

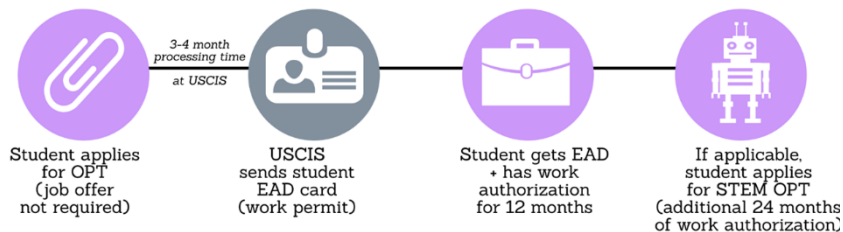
International Students are eligible to participate in a variety of work experiences, including on-campus employment, internships, research, and more, as long as you have secured the appropriate work authorization prior to beginning work. Working without authorization is a serious violation of your F-1 status and could result in termination.

- **Internships:** While enrolled at Northwestern, F-1 students may be eligible for CPT. Verify whether you are eligible by visiting: [Curricular Practical Training](#). CPT is required for all off campus work including, internships, practicums, cooperatives, jobs, gigs, volunteer work, or performances, paid or unpaid. If you are unsure if you need CPT or have CPT-related questions, please contact [OISS](#).

### CPT (Curricular Practical Training)



### OPT (Optional Practical Training)



- **Post-Graduation Jobs:** After graduation, F-1 international students are eligible for up to 12 months of full-time work in jobs related to their field of study using Optional Practical Training (OPT). F-1 international students who completed a BS, MS, or PhD degree in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math field are eligible for an additional 24 months of [STEM OPT](#), making them eligible for a potential total of 3 years of work authorization. You can verify whether your program is STEM OPT eligible if you can find the CIP code listed on your I-20 on this list: [STEM Designated Degree Program List](#).

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If you are planning to pursue an internship or a post-graduate job in the United States, make sure you understand the [procedures and policies around CPT and OPT](#). Become familiar with the requirements, application processes, and timelines for your particular academic program.

J-1 international students may be eligible for both internships and post-graduate work under a separate program called [Academic Training](#). J-1 students should confirm their eligibility with the OISS office.

## ***Responding to Work Authorization/Visa Questions on Job Applications***

You will likely encounter questions about your visa status or eligibility to work in the U.S., because employers want to ensure they are hiring individuals who are legal to do so. Additionally, there are certain types of employers (e.g. Government, Defense) that are only able to hire U.S. citizens for work.

It is important to know how to respond to these types of questions on applications so you are being honest about your eligibility for work, while also demonstrating that you are eligible for work under appropriate work authorization.

## ***Common Job Application Questions***

### ➤ ***“Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?”***

International students are eligible for work authorization for both internships and post-graduation full-time roles. If you have done your research about work authorization types and know that you are eligible for either CPT or OPT, you can typically answer “Yes” to this question.

If you are not sure about your eligibility or the process for receiving work authorization for the type of position you are applying to, you should do additional research before responding “Yes” to this question.

### ➤ ***“Will you now or in the future require sponsorship for an employment visa?”***

Overall, the response to this question can depend on your program, work authorization options, and long-term career goals. Speak with your career adviser for assistance in handling this question based on your career preferences and goals.

For an internship, international students typically use CPT work authorization to work as an intern, which is not the same as seeking sponsorship. If you are just hoping to get an internship with the company and are not necessarily expecting them to sponsor you for an H-1B visa in the future, often the response to this question can be “No.”

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## ***Responding to Work Authorization Questions While Interviewing or Networking***

When interviewing or networking with employers, you should focus on your skills and competencies as they relate to the position. Do not approach an employer by immediately asking about sponsorship or “whether they hire international students.”

At some point during the interview process prior to the job offer stage, you and your prospective employer must have a conversation about work authorization and your eligibility to work. In advance of that conversation, do your research and understand which work authorization options you are eligible for. See the Work Authorization Elevator Pitch sample below.

Understand the requirements for employers, so that you can help the employer understand what they need to do. Typically, the requirements for CPT and OPT on the employer side are minimal, and [Northwestern’s OISS office](#) handles most of the paperwork. The employer will just need to provide an official offer letter. There is no additional cost to hire a student under CPT or OPT.

## ***Creating Your Work Authorization Elevator Pitch***

Some employers are not familiar with work authorization for international students and may assume that it is quite complicated. You want to be prepared to advocate for yourself and clearly communicate the process to employers.

Below is a sample “elevator pitch” you can use in situations where an employer asks about your ability to legally work in the U.S., and the work authorization process. While this sample is focused on finding an internship, it can be adapted for full-time work under OPT.

*“As an international student, I am able to complete an internship using Curricular Practical Training, or CPT. This work authorization is something that my school will process and manage. As my employer, you would not need to complete any paperwork or pay anything for this service. If hired, the only thing that I would need from you is an offer letter confirming my position. Using CPT, I will be able to obtain a Social Security Number and work just like any other employee. If you or your HR department has any questions about how this process works, I can refer you to Northwestern’s Office of International Student and Scholar Services.”*

## ***Work Authorization Resources***

Work authorization is managed through the Northwestern Office of International Student and Scholar Services (OISS). A comprehensive list of work authorization types and eligibility information is on the [OISS website](#).

For specific questions regarding eligibility for work authorization or how to apply for CPT, OPT, or Academic Training, [contact the OISS](#) or see your OISS advisor.

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## Understanding U.S. Job Offers & Negotiating

### ***Offer Letters***

U.S. employers may extend a job offer verbally or through email. When receiving a job offer verbally or through email, request a formal offer letter before accepting the position. This will ensure that the information provided in the letter is consistent with the terms of employment discussed between you and the employer. You will also need this formal letter when you apply for CPT and OPT.

Below is common information you will find within a written offer letter:

- Company name
- Position title
- Start date
- Job duties
- Starting salary
- Benefits information (e.g. health, vacation, retirement)
- Employment eligibility and immigration status requirements

Job offer letters may also include information about bonus and commission structures, relocation assistance, tuition benefits, stock options and other details when applicable.

### ***Negotiating Job Offers***

Before accepting a job offer, take time to understand the terminology used within the offer letter. If you have questions about the language used or details about the offer, ask the employer directly or [speak with an immigration attorney](#).

Once an offer is extended, the employer will often identify a preferred timeline for your decision. Timelines range from a day to more than three months; the most common is one to two weeks. If you feel pressured to make a decision, contact your career adviser.

Evaluate the job offer to ensure it meets your professional needs. Refer to the Self-Reflection and Values section of this guide for more assistance with this. You can negotiate with the employer to see what needs can be accommodated, including decision deadline, salary, location and start date. Review the [negotiating a job offer](#) section of the NCA Career Guide or speak with your career advisor for more help.

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## Additional Considerations

### ➤ **H-1B and Other Employment Visas**

If you are working for an employer under post-graduate OPT, including STEM-OPT, that employer has the option to pursue an H-1B visa, or other visa options, such as an L-1 Intracompany Transfer visa or an O-1 Extraordinary Ability visa, to allow you to continue work in the U.S. after OPT. More information about various employment visas can be found in [NAFSA's Visa Classification chart](#).

You should have a conversation with your employer about their willingness to pursue an H-1B visa or other visa options at least 6 months before your OPT period ends, or earlier if you feel comfortable and have established a good working relationship.

Your employer should work with their HR Department or [outside immigration attorney](#) for more information about how to pursue an H-1B or other post-OPT visas.

### ➤ **On-Campus Employment as an International Student**

A Social Security Number (SSN) is required for any paid work in the U.S. On-campus part-time employment can be a great way to obtain your SSN. Securing a paid job on campus will help you compete for future work in the U.S. because some employers will only consider international students who already have a SSN.

International students can work on-campus for up to 20 hours per week without any additional authorization needed. Please note, F-1 and J-1 international students are not eligible for work-study positions.

Part-time, on-campus - opportunities can be found through the Northwestern Work Study website. This website contains work study and non-work study positions. Check this site quarterly for new jobs that might interest you.

Below are a few examples of common on-campus employers and jobs:

- Athletics Learning Strategist/Study Skills Coordinator
- Alumni Relations and Development Phonathon Caller
- Research Assistant positions with Northwestern faculty.  
(Contact faculty whose research interests you; McCormick's students may also use Undergraduate Research Opportunities page)
- Northwestern Information Technology Student Employment Opportunities

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## English Language Communication Resources

While some employers may be concerned about an international student's ability to effectively communicate in verbal and written English, know that there are many different accents and ways to speak English and having Global English competency is an added value to any team.

Should you want to pursue additional resources for speaking and writing in English, Northwestern offers many on-campus resources:

	Undergraduate	The Graduate School	Other Graduate Programs
<a href="#">Speech Language &amp; Learning (Professional Speaking)</a>	X	X	X
<a href="#">ELP Foundations</a>		X	
<a href="#">English Development through Guided Exploration (EDGE)</a>		X	
<a href="#">English Language Programs</a>	X	X	X
<a href="#">Integrated Academic Skills Program</a>		X	
<a href="#">Toastmasters</a>	X	X	X

There may be additional opportunities in your local neighborhood. Meet with your career adviser or [OISS](#) to explore the options.

### ***Tips for Improving your English***

- Spend time with English-speaking classmates, join an English-speaking club, or participate in customary U.S. activities.
- Read books, watch the news, movies, and popular shows. Doing so can introduce you to common conversational topics.
- Ask for feedback on your language skills from others who speak English for help with mispronounced words or misused idioms.
- Become a tutor. Explaining concepts in English to someone else will prompt you to ensure your pronunciation is correct, and to find alternative ways to explain things in English.
- Download the [Duolingo app](#) and continue practicing.



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## Resources

### **Career Offices**

[Chicago Field Studies](#)

[Kellogg Career Management Center \(CMC\)](#)

[McCormick School of Engineering - Engineering Career Development](#)

[Medill Career Services](#)

[Northwestern Career Advancement](#)

[Northwestern Athletics - NU for Life](#)

[Pritzker School of Law - Career Strategy Center \(CSC\)](#)

[School of Communication - Office of External Programs, Internships, & Career Services \(EPICS\)](#)

[School of Professional Studies](#)

### **U.S. Culture & English Language Development Resources**

[Speech Language and Learning \(Professional Speaking\)](#)

[eDiplomat](#)

[ELP Foundations](#)

[English Development through Guided Exploration \(EDGE\)](#)

[English Language Programs](#)

[Integrated Academic Skills Program](#)

[Toastmasters](#)

### **Northwestern Networking Resources**

[Our Northwestern](#)

[Northwestern Mentorship Program](#)

### **Work Authorization & Immigration Resources**

[Northwestern Office of International Student and Scholar Services \(OISS\)](#)

[Department of Homeland Security – Study in the States](#)

[GoinGlobal \(Accessible from the \[NCA Student Resources page\]\(#\)\)](#)

[MyVisaJobs](#)

[NAFSA - Visa Classifications Chart](#)

[U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services \(USCIS\)](#)