



Guide to Surviving in the US Aerospace Industry as an International Student

Produced by the
International Students and Professionals in Aerospace
a Working Group of the
AIAA International Activities Group

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1 What is This Guide About and Who is it For?

This guide is about the best ways to advance your career as an international student seeking to work in the US aerospace industry. It contains information and advice designed to help you understand more about the employment landscape in the US aerospace industry and increase your chances of landing your dream aerospace job.

This guide is relevant to anyone wishing to work in the US aerospace industry who is not currently a US Person (US citizen, lawful permanent resident, i.e., a “Green Card” holder, or a protected individual as defined by 8 U.S.C. § 1324b(a)(3)), but is mostly geared towards international students carrying out their studies in the US and wishing to remain there full-time afterward. The guide is written by a group of former international students who have successfully made it to the other side and now work full-time in the US/adjacent aerospace industry. The authors are current or former officers of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) International Students & Professionals in Aerospace (ISPA), a working group under the International Activities Group (IAG), whose mission is to connect international talent pursuing a career in the US aerospace field with more job opportunities.

Note that successfully pursuing a career in the already highly competitive US aerospace industry as a non-US person can be very challenging, and will require dedication, unwavering perseverance, and a bit of luck. If your personal situation and career interests permit, you should certainly explore any other options in adjacent industries or other countries that likely have a higher probability of success. However, if you are up to the challenge, and/or can’t envision doing anything else with your future, then this guide is certainly for you, and we wish you the best of luck in this endeavor. Read on!

2 Why is it Difficult for International Students to Find Jobs in the US Aerospace Industry?

If you've ever inquired about a job opportunity at a US aerospace company, you may have had the frustrating experience of being told, “We don't hire international students,” or “Sorry, we only hire US persons.” This section will explain why exactly that is, unfortunately, a very common occurrence.

2.1 Background on US Export Control Laws

Most technology that aerospace companies work on falls under US export control regulations due to the fact that this technology is inherently dual-use – it can be used for civilian and military purposes. These regulations are aimed at protecting the national security of the US by reducing the likelihood that these technologies can leave the US (be exported) and fall into the wrong hands. Under these laws, an export is not limited to a physical sale of a product to another country but also includes the disclosure of technical information about that product to a foreign national who is inside the US. The latter type of transaction is considered a “deemed export” from the US to the foreign national's country of origin. The rules work such that any non-US person likely requires a license from the US government before they work on these technologies. If you are in the US on an F-1, J-1, H-1B, etc. visa, then you are not considered a US person, and these restrictions apply to you.

US export control regulation falls under two umbrellas. First, there is the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), which is enforced by the US Department of State and covers all technologies enumerated on the [US Munitions List \(USML\)](#). Broadly speaking, aerospace things controlled under the ITAR include: launch vehicles, spacecraft with weapons systems, spacecraft that autonomously track things, spacecraft that dock to others, spacecraft with Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), hyperspectral, or position, navigation, and timing (PNT) capabilities (e.g., GPS satellites), and military aircraft or drones. The second, lesser-known set of regulations, is the Export Administration Regulations (EAR), which is enforced by the US Department of Commerce, and covers the rest of the “less militarily sensitive” technologies that the ITAR doesn't, which are listed on the [Commerce Control List \(CCL\)](#). These include: the vast majority of commercial satellites, CubeSats, some commercial airplanes or drones, etc. ITAR trumps EAR, so if, for example, only a tiny portion of a spacecraft is described on the USML, the entire spacecraft is controlled by the ITAR, even if the rest of it is only controlled by the EAR. There is a common myth in the industry that “everything is ITAR”, but this is not true. Most products that commercial US aerospace companies work on are in fact controlled under the EAR, which is less restrictive than the ITAR.

2.2 Hiring International Talent from the Employer's Perspective

If you want to work for a US aerospace company as a non-US person, it is certainly possible, but the company likely has to get a deemed export license for you so that you can access technical

material necessary to perform your job from either the Department of State or Department of Commerce, or both, depending on which sets of regulations cover their products. These licenses are widely perceived to be too costly or too risky for a business to consider pursuing, even if that is not necessarily the case (see our International Talent Hiring Guide for more information on this). As a result, most (but not all!) companies in the US aerospace industry have made it their policy not to hire non-US persons. Generally, businesses whose technologies fall solely under EAR will have an easier time hiring non-US persons because the regulations are less restrictive.

2.3 The Interacting Effects of Immigration and Export Control Laws

The effect of these export control regulations in addition to the immigration landscape in the US presents a bit of a “catch-22” for international students: in order to get an internship at a US aerospace company, you need to be a US person, but becoming a US person on the basis of your professional activities takes multiple years after college and usually requires a US company to sponsor you for permanent residency, i.e., a Green Card. The number of US companies that are willing to sponsor Green Cards for immigrant workers is already limited, and these usually do not overlap with companies that have a “US person only” hiring policy.

What this means for you is that you will have to get informed and make smart decisions early on in order to navigate the limited pathways available to you within this regulatory environment and to find success in the US aerospace industry.

3 What Does “Making It” as an International Student Look Like?

3.1 What is the End Goal Here?

Since our goal with this guide is to help you “make it”, we first need to define what we mean by that. To us, “making it” means setting yourself up for long-term career success in the US aerospace industry. Due to the current regulatory and immigration environment, there is pretty much only one way to do this. It is what we will refer to as the “end goal” throughout the rest of the guide, and every single piece of advice or information provided is geared with this specific end goal in mind:

Obtain a Green Card as fast as possible, while gaining as much relevant experience as possible in your domain of interest.

As an international student in the US, you are in a race against the immigration clock to earn the right to stay here permanently. Therefore, it is important to view your time as a student and young professional as a sprint to achieve the end goal as fast as possible, before the immigration clock runs out. If you beat the immigration clock and successfully obtain a Green Card while having gained a bunch of relevant industry experience, things will get much easier from a career perspective as many more opportunities will be open to you. Getting a Green Card is the hard part: once you have it, the pathway to US citizenship is fairly straightforward, you are no longer tied to your employer via your work visa, and you’ll be eligible to work for 90% of the US aerospace companies out there.

Note that we view getting a Green Card with an equal level of importance as gaining relevant industry experience, because what good is it if you get your Green Card but still aren’t qualified for any jobs in your field because you don’t have the relevant experience? Additionally, if you end up changing your mind or are ultimately unsuccessful on your US journey, you will still have the relevant experience to be employable in another country (perhaps your home country) and won’t have fallen behind all of your peers.

It is important to note here that under current circumstances, long-term success in the US aerospace industry is inherently conditional on getting a Green Card, i.e. you cannot have the former without the latter. Since getting a Green Card will be a difficult years-long commitment, we do not recommend making life harder for yourself and going down this pathway towards its end goal if you are not particularly interested in or do not envision yourself staying in the US long-term after graduation.

3.2 Where Do Your Specific Career Interests Lie, and How Flexible Are They?

An important question for the reader to ask themselves when thinking about the most effective way to achieve the end goal is what specific domain of the aerospace industry (aircraft, helicopters, spacecraft, launch vehicles, etc.) and discipline within that domain (structures, mechanical, thermal, electrical, flight dynamics, software, testing, aerodynamics, radio frequency, optics, etc.) they are interested in. The answer to these questions, whether it is “flight dynamics for launch vehicles or bust!” or simply “I don’t know” will affect how you go about pursuing the end goal. This is because different domains are restricted at different levels in the industry. Overall, things break down roughly as follows:

1. What regulatory regime is your domain under?

Is it primarily covered by the ITAR or the EAR? If it's ITAR, it will be much more challenging of a domain to break into. For example, the launch vehicle industry, falling entirely within ITAR, is more restrictive than the satellite industry, where only some applications are governed by ITAR, which in turn is more restrictive than the commercial or general aviation industry, which falls almost entirely under EAR. We encourage you to browse the relevant lists – the [USML](#) for ITAR and the [CCL](#) for EAR – in order to understand which set of regulations apply to your domain of interest. For the USML, aerospace technologies typically fall under Categories IV, VIII, and XV, and for the CCL look at Category 9. However, we caution that these lists are very long and have legalese caveats and exceptions to be aware of. A great introduction to how these lists work and how to extract useful information from them can be found in this [Intro to US Export Controls Guidebook](#).

2. Are there commercial/scientific applications in your domain?

You will almost certainly be ineligible to work on any military applications in your domain of interest (since these usually require US citizenship and a security clearance), so you will have to rely on pursuing commercial or scientific applications. For example, there are not too many non-military applications for hypersonics technology at the moment, so this would be a very difficult domain to break into. On the flip side, there are many commercial and scientific use cases for subsonic aircraft, helicopters, and satellites.

3. How specialized is your discipline within your domain?

Are the fundamental technical skills of your discipline exclusive to that discipline? That is, can you only gain pertinent practical experience while working in your discipline of interest, or can you gain it in another discipline or even domain? For example, the only real way to gain work experience in terminal guidance and control is to work on missiles or rockets, but one does not need to work on spacecraft to gain experience with printed circuit board design or embedded software programming.

If you are forever tied to and passionate about a very specific aerospace domain and discipline (as is the case with many of this guide's authors), we can't tell you to change your interests, but we will acknowledge that your options and therefore probability of success will likely be more limited than someone who is open to a broader range of domains and disciplines. Therefore, to maximize your chance of success, we recommend adjusting how picky you are according to how valuable you currently are on the market. When you start off as an international student with just a few engineering courses under your belt and no practical experience, you will need to cast as wide of a net as possible to secure your first stints of practical experience. As time goes on and you hone your engineering skills through classwork, internships, and/or research, you will become more valuable and more proficient in certain skills, allowing you more leverage to chase opportunities with a higher barrier to entry and to be more picky in choosing them.

4 How Do I Make It as an International Student?

Now that you know what the end goal is, and what domain/discipline you are interested in, we present general advice on 1) how to gain as much relevant experience as possible while still in school and 2) how to navigate the pathway to obtaining your Green Card.

4.1 Advice on Gaining As Much Experience As Possible While Still a Student

Given the current regulatory/industry situation, you will need to play your cards right and be strategic in your career development in order to gain as much experience as possible while still a student and succeed. We call this the **International Student Playbook**, and it has five elements:

- **Master the art of networking.** You will likely succeed almost exclusively through your network. There are certain smart and effective ways to go about it that we will explain.
- **Search for practical experience in the right places.** For the majority of companies in the aerospace industry that aren't used to hiring international talent, it doesn't matter how good you are, they won't make an exception for you. Don't waste your limited time pursuing those opportunities. Be very intentional about targeting opportunities in organizations that have a high likelihood of working out without needing a miracle, whether that be in industry, research, or student organizations.
- **Stand out.** Give employers a reason to go through the extra paperwork to hire you. The employer will have to apply for an export license for you, which they will only do if they believe that they cannot find a US-person candidate who is more qualified than you.
- **Come prepared and know the rules.** You need to know what options are available to you and what can be done to help you. You should know the export control and immigration rules better than the HR people, and you should be able to explain to them what they need to do to hire you.
- **Avoid some common pitfalls.** As an international student, there are a few things that could significantly hurt you in your pursuit of a career in the US aerospace industry. You must be aware of them, and you must avoid doing them.

Keep these elements in the back of your mind. Burn them into your memory. These should guide every decision you make and every action you take to further your career during your time as an international student and beyond. The following subsections dive into each element and give advice on how to execute on them.

4.1.1 Master the Art of Networking

We have previously mentioned that networking is extremely important; but what does good networking look like? In short, good networking consists of *constant expansion* and *constant maintenance*.

Constant expansion means that you should be constantly trying to expand your network, and taking advantage of every opportunity you have to do so. The good news here is that if you don't already have a professional network, it is entirely possible to build a network from scratch. Good places to start include professors at your university (who are often well connected to industry in their field of expertise), parents/relatives (if they have some connections that can help you, don't be afraid to use them - the cards are already stacked against you), graduate students at your university (who have had more time to be exposed to the industry), and alumni (especially if they came from your research lab or a school club that you are a part of). Join student/professional organizations at your university that have a focus on increasing your exposure to industry. Examples of these include your local AIAA chapter, your local ISPA chapter (if one doesn't exist, here's [a guide](#) on how to start one at your school), etc. This is a great way to meet other international students and network with them - they may know about opportunities that you don't.

The types of people mentioned above are all adjacent to the recruiters and engineers in industry that you will ultimately want to be in contact with in order to land a job. Therefore, it is also important to attend events where you can meet these types of people directly, such as professional conferences, on-campus industry talks and recruiting events, and industry happy hours or meetups. Regarding professional conferences, it is fine to attend as a regular attendee, but it is even better if you have a paper or poster on your research/internships to present, and you can invite the contacts that you make to view your presentation - making you stand out in their mind. The bar for acceptance of papers or posters at conferences is often low, and you don't need to have finished your research to present. Universities typically offer many different types of travel grants to support students who wish to attend conferences. Many conferences will have networking events specifically designed to connect students to industry. Additionally, conference after-parties or happy hours, which are often held in the evenings after a day of technical sessions, are a fantastic way to mingle with important people in a less formal setting, and develop a more personal rapport with them. Typical conversation topics can range from asking technical questions about challenges they are facing in their daily work, to why they chose their specific career path, to their favorite hobbies. Every time you meet someone at one of these events, make sure to get their contact information (business card or LinkedIn) - there is nothing worse than making a great connection and forgetting who it was with.

Networking with industry professionals doesn't have to be daunting or scary; you should go about it in the same way that you do with making friends, but of course with a more formal tone, a more focused purpose, and a keen interest in the company they work for. This might take some practice to get right, which makes it all the more important to seize upon as many networking opportunities as you can. Don't be discouraged if you have a few unsuccessful or awkward interactions. Learn from each experience, and you'll get it eventually.

Constant maintenance means that you should be constantly maintaining the network you have already built. As your network can quickly grow to many tens of people or more after a single networking event, it is extremely important that you keep track of it in something like a spreadsheet. A sample spreadsheet that has been used by the authors of this document can be found [here](#). The main goal of such a spreadsheet is to track all the previous interactions you have

had with members of your network to help provide context for how you should interact with them in the future. As a rule of thumb, you should follow up with new contacts that you make at events within 1-2 weeks afterward so that they don't forget about you, and touch base with the rest of your network 1-2 times per year.

When you are following up via LinkedIn or email with a contact after recently meeting them, you'll want to briefly reintroduce yourself, reference the conversation you had in person, and either mention a specific reason for the follow up (i.e., interested in opportunities at their company) or just say that you want to keep in touch. When you are touching base with the rest of your network periodically, you'll want to include a brief update about yourself and your current progress through school, research, or clubs, ask them how they're doing and how things are progressing at their job, and provide either a specific reason for the follow up or similarly just mention that you are happy to touch base and find out how they're doing.

4.1.1.1 Online Networking

In the previous section, we mentioned how you could expand your network by meeting people at various events in person. However, there is also a fairly effective way to do this online - by using LinkedIn. It involves using the specific search and filtering features LinkedIn provides to your advantage. You can search for a company you are interested in, go to the "People" tab, and then search/filter the employees that you'd like to reach out to. We recommend searching for employees who are

- Mid-level engineers or team leads
- Alumni of your school
- Mutual connections with a contact who knows you well
- Have similar research or work experience as you, or
- Have a similar international student background as you

Send them a connection request with a note attached briefly introducing yourself, and asking if they are free for an informal chat to learn more about what they do. This is known as the [informational interview technique](#), and it works surprisingly well. Usually, industry professionals are eager to help students and talk about their jobs, so if you send many of these connection requests, you'll likely have a few that will be answered.

During the chat, which could either be in person or through video call, have a brief two way introduction of each other, and ask them questions about

- what their day-to-day work is like
- technical/business aspects of their company (you should have done some preliminary research on this in advance)
- advice on employment opportunities with the company and how they got their job there
- what skills/qualities they think makes a good candidate.

The conversation shouldn't be longer than 20-30 minutes and should serve as an opportunity for you to learn more about the company, build a rapport with that employee, and have them remember you and your interest in the company. As usual with making new connections, make

sure to follow up in the subsequent days and thank the employee for their time - you have now added one more person to your network!

4.1.1.2 Quality Over Quantity

In the beginning, you'll want to focus on expanding your network as quickly as possible. However, as your time in school goes by, you'll realize that having a large network is great, but having one that you know well - and one that knows you well - is even better. There will be a few key people in your network that will end up having an outsized impact on your career development. Invest in developing and maintaining a close relationship with them. At the beginning, they will likely mostly help you, but in the future you may be able to help them. For whatever situation you may find yourself in down the line - such as layoffs or job changes - having people you can count on in your network will pay dividends.

More specifically, there are two types of relationships within your network that you should try to cultivate: people who can vouch for you and people who can mentor you. The hiring world operates on referrals, so you need to have a few people that can vouch for your skills and dedication in your work. These will usually be people that have had the time to observe your work ethic and commitment in a professional/academic environment - professors, colleagues, or bosses. A lot of career development, productivity, and industry-specific knowledge is best learned through mentors, and they can have a big impact on your career. These will usually include bosses, older colleagues, or older students. Seek these people out, ask them questions, and express your interest in their advice and mentorship.

4.1.2 Search for Practical Experience in the Right Places

It is important to understand that practical experience comes in many forms - not only from internships/jobs. In fact, an impressive resume for an entry-level position for a student coming out of their bachelor's or master's will include internships, research, and student engineering clubs/competitions. Try to gain all three types of practical experience during your college years if possible. Depending on your background, university, and industry domain of interest, accessing these opportunities can vary significantly in difficulty. Obtaining internships will usually be the hardest as they will often require export licenses, whereas research and student engineering club/competition opportunities should be easier to come by because they almost always don't. This is why it is perfectly acceptable to make up for the lack of any of these three categories on your resume by substituting in more of the others.

4.1.2.1 How Much Practical Experience Is Enough?

Usually, our answer to this question would be, no amount is ever enough, you should always seek out more. However, we do feel that it is useful to provide a rough benchmark for what will and won't stand out on an entry level engineering job application. The following is a description of the practical experience that average and exceptional *American students* might have at each level of study given the opportunities available for US persons during their time in university.

For a graduating US bachelor's student:

- Average students will have completed 1-2 internships and have joined a student engineering club or done research for a couple semesters.
- Exceptional students will have completed 3 internships (one every summer), held an important/leadership role in a student engineering club that they have participated in for at least a couple years, and done research for at least a year with one conference paper published.

For a graduating US master's student:

- Average students will have the average bachelor's student's experience plus another year of research or another internship.
- Exceptional students will have the exceptional bachelor's student's experience plus another 1-2 internships, and 1-2 years of graduate-level research with another couple of conference papers published.

The experience of an exceptional graduating US PhD student will be largely the same as the graduating master's student, plus all of their thesis specific work. Average students don't usually do PhDs.

4.1.2.2 Searching for Practical Experience in Industry

Even though it is theoretically possible for a company to get you an export control license to work for them as an intern, and this has happened for a handful of international students in the past, do not underestimate employers' hesitation to do so. This is where being familiar with how "export controlled" your domain of interest is and what types of companies in that domain actually hire international students/graduates becomes very important.

First, focus your search on opportunities where you can obtain the technical skills you need for your domain of interest with as little need for obtaining an export control license as an intern as possible. For example, if you want to gain experience in orbit determination algorithms, it is easier to do this at a space situational awareness company (which as of 2024 is often not export controlled) than at a satellite operator company - even though the skills you learn in both internships will be the same.

Second, focus your search on companies that actually have a decent likelihood of being able to hire you. These tend to be

- Startups and small- to mid-size companies, because they face greater competition for talent and are more likely to go the extra mile to get an export control license; and/or
- Businesses that are headquartered internationally, because they already deal with export licensing due to their international office and so are familiar with the process; and
- Businesses that work primarily in commercial space and aviation.

ISPA has compiled a [list of companies that hire foreign nationals](#), but this is not exhaustive. New companies are coming onto the scene all the time, so it is worth doing your own research. Unless you have a compelling reason to do otherwise, we recommend keeping your internship/job search

focused on companies in this category. Invest the time to get to know them and network with their employees to get your foot in the door while you are in college. Another important hint at whether they hire foreign nationals is if any currently work there. However, just because they went through the export licensing process for that employee, this doesn't mean they will go through it for an intern like you.

Once you get an internship, we also have a couple of words of advice for maximizing the value obtained from that opportunity.

- If possible, ask your mentor/manager at the beginning of the internship for one long project, as opposed to several small projects back to back. This will lead you to do deep work, become an “expert” on your project, and allow you to have a greater impact during your short time at the company. If the work you end up doing is particularly novel or interesting, you may even be able to write a conference paper or presentation on it.
- Aim to strike a good balance between being very autonomous (onboarding yourself onto the company's tools/codebases/hardware and figuring out how to make progress towards your high level internship goals on your own) and asking for help and guidance when you are stuck on something (since your mentor can likely unblock you/solve that particular problem much faster than you can). Work overtime if you are allowed and willing to - this is your chance to impress your mentors and maximize your chances of getting re-hired at this company.

4.1.2.3 Searching for Practical Experience in Academia

Gaining practical experience in an academic context can be just as good for your resume and skills as those in an industry context. Here, it is important to do your homework to find out about all the research opportunities and engineering clubs/competitions that your university has to offer, and participate in the ones that most align with your domain of interest. What is important here will be your commitment and a focus on deep work.

When it comes to engineering clubs/competitions, there are usually many options available (none of which are export controlled), so it is a good idea to shop around and try a few during your first couple years of undergrad. Then, once you have identified the club/competition that you feel brings you a lot of value, drop the other ones and commit to that one for as long as possible. This will help you get hands-on experience and show that you know how to work in a team of people and solve practical problems. Try to get into a leadership position in this club/competition, as this will demonstrate that you understand team dynamics and project management.

When it comes to research, there are various opportunities available, with only very few being export controlled. Similar to engineering clubs, feel free to shop around different research labs during undergrad to figure out what you like, but once you find something that you do like, commit to it for as long as possible. This will maximize your chances of actually being able to publish and present results at conferences and will help you get into grad school. If you want a job in industry, it is best to do research that is as applied as possible, so that more of it is “practical” experience, instead of simply “research” experience. Doing research allows you to gain a different type of

practical experience compared to engineering clubs/competitions - it shows that you are able to conduct deep and self-guided work autonomously in a rigorous manner.

Going to grad school is an excellent way to gain practical experience without needing an export control license. In addition to qualifying you for positions requiring advanced degrees, which are common in the aerospace industry, some employers are only willing to apply for export licenses for candidates with research experience that is well-aligned with their business, which you are only likely to get by doing a Master's or PhD thesis. Furthermore, having a graduate degree improves your chances of getting self-sponsored Green Cards (see Section 4.2.1). When considering your options for grad school, avoid specializations that fall under ITAR. A good way to do this is to do some research and identify at least 2 or 3 potential employers who would be interested in your work and are able to hire you before committing to a thesis topic or focus area. If you are lucky, you could even find a research project that is sponsored by a potential employer.

4.1.2.4 Practical Experience in a Personal Context

If you want yet more practical experience, we can also recommend getting involved in personal projects or independent research. In this day and age it is often feasible to contribute to open source software, build your own drones or robots, etc. A portfolio website to showcase and properly document your personal projects is usually advised, since you would have no other record of the experience you have gained. Personal projects are a good way to supplement skill deficits you may have in a particular domain if you weren't able to find internships/research on that topic. However, while they do demonstrate the same sort of "deep and autonomous work" skills obtained from university research, it may not be looked upon with the same level of prestige as research experience by a potential employer.

4.1.3 Stand Out

In order to understand how to stand out from your peers and give companies a reason to go through the extra paperwork needed to hire you, you have to understand things from their perspective. The recruiting landscape for entry level jobs is saturated with college graduates - and all of these graduates have more or less the same general experiences (a few internship and research projects perhaps) and theoretical skills (knowledge based on what they learned in their classes). The best way you can differentiate yourself from this crowd, in rough order of importance, is to:

Possess deep knowledge / be skilled in a particular domain. If you have studied a particular domain in detail through previous research/clubs/internships and can be considered an "expert" (even at a student level) in that topic, your value to the company increases substantially. You will be able to have a much more two way conversation with engineers during the recruiting process and understand how their technology works, why they built it the way they did, how that compares to what you have worked on in the past, etc.

Possess skills/knowledge that would make you "quickly operational" at the company. If you have a good idea of how to use (or have previously used) the tools/methods to get work done

in a particular engineering role, you will be able to start producing output much more quickly than the typical college graduate, should you be hired. At the internship and entry levels, companies care a lot about “onboarding time”, and if you can become operational twice as fast as the next person, you will be more valuable.

Show that you are extremely enthusiastic and motivated. Elon Musk has been quoted saying “When hiring, look for people with the right attitude. Skills can be taught. Attitude changes require a brain transplant.” Show the recruiter that you are eager to learn, curious (ask lots of questions), excited about the company’s mission, and willing to put in extra work to make up for any skill deficiencies you may have. The best kinds of candidates are those that genuinely display all the attributes described above - it is rather easy to see if someone is faking their enthusiasm.

Know how to market your unique value. Figure out what attributes/skills make you “different from the typical engineer”. If you haven’t yet interacted with other engineers in a work setting, then compare yourself to your classmates. Are you more detail-oriented than others are, or maybe better at seeing the big picture? Perhaps you’re more persistent, or you’re better at outside-of-the-box thinking. Whatever it may be, try to identify what it is about how you carry out your work that would make you a valuable asset on a team of engineers. Then, develop a concise way to talk about it to recruiters that strikes a balance between sounding too buzzwordy and sounding too generic.

Show that you know how to work in a team with other people. This skill is very important in an engineering organization, and can only really be learned by actually working with others on engineering projects. Such experience can be in any context and does not have to be in industry. Having done this before gives you the experience to talk about these qualities to a recruiter and become a valuable addition to the team you are interested in. A good way to show that you have the right qualities to work effectively in a team is to have taken on a leadership role on a team that has exemplified itself while you were at the helm. Also, whatever your role on your team, be sure to seek out opportunities to ask for feedback on your collaboration style from your peers.

Develop general knowledge of the industry (or industries) you are interested in. This is important because it allows you to have an eye-to-eye conversation about happenings in the industry when networking with people. A good understanding of the industry landscape is something few students coming out of college have and demonstrates your enthusiasm for the industry. This is best acquired by following industry news and paying attention to industry gossip while networking.

4.1.4 Come Prepared and Know the Rules

Know the immigration and export control rules better than the HR people. Help them help you. This is very important because it could put you in control of what happens to you and may even allow you to create an opportunity where none existed before. Oftentimes HR personnel and hiring managers are not fully informed about the restrictions and possibilities under the current regulations. They may not be familiar with CPT and OPT, or with deemed export licenses, and

just assume that they are not allowed to hire foreign nationals when that is not the case. Therefore, you should know the rules yourself so that, if necessary, you can educate the HR people on how to hire you and tell them what to bring to the company's export compliance department. Make use of this document and the linked resources to educate yourself. We are also currently preparing a *Guide to Hiring International Talent in the Space Industry*, which you will be able to distribute to potential employers, so be on the lookout for its release!

Understand your CPT and OPT options. CPT (Curricular Practical Training) and OPT (Optional Practical Training) are both types of work authorizations that international students on F-1 visas in the United States can obtain.

CPT is related to your academic program and allows you to work off-campus or as an intern, co-op, or any other type of required work experience directly related to your field of study while you're still enrolled in school. Using 365 days (one full year) or more of full-time CPT at a single degree level will forfeit your ability to obtain OPT. To be safe and avoid any administrative miscalculations, immigration advisors highly recommend keeping your total full-time CPT strictly under 365 days. This typically works out to three semesters worth of full-time CPT which should be enough for most degree levels. Note that part-time CPT has no restrictions, so you can work on it for however many days you would like. Note that most universities will have some kind of concurrent enrollment requirement (i.e., a special course you have to enroll in) while you are on CPT. Be sure to consult your university's international student office for details.

OPT, on the other hand, is typically used for post-graduation employment. It allows you to work in your field of study for up to 12 months after completing your program, with the possibility of an additional 24-month extension for certain STEM degree holders. Students have additional flexibility with OPT when completing a thesis: those who have completed all coursework requirements and only have thesis hours remaining are eligible to apply for and start post-completion OPT before they graduate. The caveat is that you need to graduate within one year of your OPT start date, or else you will forfeit the ability to get an OPT-STEM extension.

While STEM graduates are eligible for up to 3 years of OPT work authorization, it is split into a 12-month initial period and a 24-month STEM extension. To qualify for the 24-month extension, your employer must be enrolled in the U.S. government's E-Verify program and must work with you to draft a formal training plan (Form I-983). If you are applying to smaller, early-stage aerospace startups, verify early on whether they are enrolled in E-Verify, or if they are willing to enroll before your first 12 months of OPT expire.

Be Proactive in Navigating the H-1B Lottery. Transitioning from F-1 OPT to an industry H-1B visa involves a random annual lottery, meaning an employer's willingness to sponsor you does not guarantee you will get the visa. To maximize your chances, ask your employer to enter you into the lottery as soon as you are hired, even during your first year of OPT. Alternatively, consider looking for 'cap-exempt' employers—such as universities, university-affiliated aerospace research centers, and qualifying non-profit research organizations. These organizations are exempt from the lottery and can sponsor your H-1B at any time of the year.

Know the Acronyms. The intersection of immigration and aerospace involves a dense alphabet soup of acronyms that can be overwhelming for students and employers alike. Ensure terms like USCIS, CBP, OPT, CPT, STEM, PERM, ITAR, EAR, and NIW are clearly defined when communicating with employers.

Seek out career development resources and training. There are key cultural differences between what American employers expect from resumes and interviews and what is expected in other countries. University career services departments offer a wide range of programs on topics such as how to make your resume more attractive to recruiters or how to make a lasting impression at interviews. It is extremely important for you to participate in these as an international student. Job searching in the United States can often seem like a game, and these career services programs are there to teach you its rules.

4.1.5 Common Pitfalls

Advertising your non-US person status. Never start a conversation with a potential employer with “do you hire international students?”. This sets the wrong tone for the conversation, namely implying that you are seeking a favor from them rather than having something to offer them. Instead, strike up a conversation related to your technical areas of interest. Do your own research on whether or not they are able to hire foreign nationals. You may even choose to see how far you can make it in the process before the issue of your nationality comes up. If you are a very good fit, some smaller employers may be willing to make an exception in their hiring practices just for you. Even if they are ultimately not able to hire you, the experience of going through the interview and hiring process with different employers is extremely valuable and should not be passed up. Moreover, employment offers, especially those with a high salary, can be used to strengthen a future immigration case.

Disregarding the rules. Although the myriad export control, immigration, and corporate rules can feel annoying, you must stay in compliance with them and take them seriously. There are severe consequences for violating these rules, such as large fines, revocation of your visa status, and potentially even jail time.

Falling behind on visa requirements. Stay on top of your visa deadlines and obligations. Opportunities are hard enough to come by as it is. The last thing you need is for one to slip away because you didn’t have the right paperwork in place on time.

Only applying for jobs through mass online applications. You can and should almost exclusively job search through your network, instead of mass applying online - as these online applications do not favor international students. This is because online applications often require you to self-select yourself out when you have to answer the nationality status/export control evaluation question in the application. Often, answering that you are not a Green Card holder (which you should always truthfully answer) will result in your application going straight into the trash. During your job search, try to avoid passing through an online application as much as

possible. Instead opt to have a real person on the other end “process” your application as the personal connection you have with them will increase your chances of being hired.

Answering Employment Authorization questions. When completing job applications, you may often see the following two questions.

1. “Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?”
2. “Do you or will you ever require an immigration case to be made on your behalf?”

As an international student, you may be inclined to answer “no” to the first question. If you are on an F-1 visa, and you have not used up your OPT, then **this is incorrect**. The F-1 visa gives you legal authorization to work on campus in the United States, and OPT gives you authorization to work off campus as well. However, because OPT is a temporary work authorization, you will eventually require a change of status (such as an H-1B visa or employer-sponsored Green Card) to remain employed long-term. Therefore, to remain 100% truthful and avoid the severe risk of being terminated later for misrepresentation, your answer to the second question should be “yes”. While this may subject your application to automatic HR filters, transparency is legally and professionally necessary. You can use your cover letter or direct networking conversations to explain the flexibility your 1-to-3 years of OPT provides to the employer while a longer-term solution is arranged. That said, once you have a job offer in hand, be transparent with your employer about the limitations of CPT and OPT, and if you are hired on OPT, work with your employer to develop an immigration plan as soon as possible.

4.2 Advice on Navigating Pathways to a Green Card

We present a few concrete pathways to obtaining that Green Card to set yourself up for long-term success in the US aerospace industry. Three concrete pathways to a Green Card are described here: self-sponsorship, industry employer sponsorship, and university employer sponsorship. They are ordered in such a way as to reflect their risk-to-reward ratio in the context of your long term career success in the US: if you are eligible, you should investigate and attempt to follow the first pathway before you try the second, and so on.

4.2.1 Green Card Pathway 1: Self-Sponsorship

The goal of this pathway is to demonstrate achievement in your field that meets specific criteria to qualify for a self-sponsored Green Card. A self-sponsored Green Card is a path to permanent residency that does not require employer sponsorship. Instead, the applicant applies for the Green Card directly, with the assistance of an immigration law firm. Compared to the other two listed below, this pathway is very convenient because it means your Green Card application will not be tied to your employer, and so you will have much more security and freedom during the Green Card process. An important consequence of this is that since you don’t need to be sponsored by an American employer, you can also exercise this pathway from outside the US if you wish, and come to the US on a Green Card if approved..

4.2.1.1 The Categories: EB-1A and EB-2 NIW

The two categories of self-sponsored Green Cards are known as the EB-1A and the EB-2 National Interest Waiver (NIW). According to the USCIS, an EB-1A is for those with “extraordinary ability in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics through sustained national or international acclaim”, whereas an EB-2 NIW is for those working in an area of national importance and are well positioned to make advances in that area. Essentially, the principle behind these pathways is that if you demonstrate that you are valuable enough in your domain of expertise, the US is willing to give you a Green Card and have you contribute to its economy.

Generally speaking, an EB-1A has a higher standard of admission and is almost an order of magnitude harder to obtain than an EB-2 NIW, so if you can apply for an EB-2 NIW you almost certainly should instead of applying for an EB-1A. However, there is one big factor that may be a contraindication for you applying for an EB-2 NIW: your country of birth. Unfortunately, if you were born in India or China (even if you are no longer a citizen of those countries), there is a long wait, roughly 10 years for India and roughly 4 years for China, for EB-2 NIW Green Cards due to the large number of applicants from these countries. Consult the [USCIS Visa Bulletin](#) for current wait times. To estimate your wait time, select the current or upcoming Visa Bulletin and refer to the “Dates For Filing of Employment-Based Visa Applications” table. In order for somebody with your country of birth to get an EB-1 or EB-2 Green Card today, they must have applied for it prior to the date shown in the “1st” or “2nd” rows, respectively, under the column that applies to that country. Therefore, if you were born in India or China, qualifying for an EB-1A is highly advantageous due to historically shorter wait times. However, do not entirely dismiss the EB-2 NIW! Even with long visa bulletin backlogs, getting an approved EB-2 NIW I-140 petition is an incredibly powerful tool: it locks in your ‘priority date’ early and allows you to extend an H-1B visa indefinitely beyond the standard 6-year maximum while you wait for your Green Card.

4.2.1.2 The Strategy

It is worth learning about the criteria that USCIS uses to evaluate these applications. There are separate criteria for [EB-1A](#) and [EB-2 NIW](#) (scroll down to “National Interest Waiver”). Once you have an understanding of the criteria, work on checking the boxes for them as you progress through your education. In general, these boxes are geared more towards academics than industry accomplishments, and in particular, it often comes down to one metric: how many times your published research has been cited by other researchers.

Therefore, increasing your citation count should be your ultimate goal as you navigate this pathway. The USCIS currently (as of the writing of this document in 2025) evaluates citation count by looking at your Google Scholar profile’s citation count. We have strong reason to believe that the USCIS doesn’t care about who cites your publications, or even what kinds of journals or conferences you have published/presented them at, but only looks at the citation count number itself. You do not have to be the first author of the paper for it to count as a paper that can rack up your citation count. In order to check your current citation count, create a Google Scholar account, and it will scrape all papers under your name that are found on conference websites, journals, university .edu websites, etc.

We recommend beginning your application before you graduate - this process typically takes at least 1 year for most applicants. Many immigration law firms provide free consultations for these applications. An Internet search for “EB-1A law firm” or “NIW law firm” will turn up many results. Read reviews on the various firms out there, find one that’s a good fit for your circumstances, and get a consultation as soon as possible. For reference, most law firms will only take up your case if you have above 200-400 citations for an EB-1A and above 15-30 citations for an EB-2 NIW.

Immigration attorney Sophie Alcorn provides a complimentary 15-video online class on how to become qualified for EB-1A, EB-2 NIW, or O-1A that provides additional insights, which you can find [here](#).

4.2.1.3 Costs

As of 2024, legal fees for a self-sponsored EB-1A or EB-2 NIW petition run between \$5000 and \$12000 depending on the law firm and your circumstances. On top of the legal fees, USCIS also charges fees. This may sound like a lot of money - and it is - but it can be put into context in comparison to the salary difference between an aerospace engineer in the US and an aerospace engineer in any other country.

4.2.2 Green Card Pathway 2: Industry Employer Sponsorship

The goal of this pathway is to get hired by an American company that will be willing to apply for a Green Card for you down the line. This section contains advice on which companies to target for this purpose, and how to maximize your chances of a company actually going through with your Green Card application.

4.2.2.1 The Process

In order for an American company to sponsor a Green Card for you, you will need to be working for them in the US on a nonimmigrant worker visa that legally accommodates immigrant intent, such as the statutory dual-intent H-1B and L-1 visas, or the O-1 visa. Because F-1 OPT is not a dual-intent visa, demonstrating 'immigrant intent' by filing a Green Card application (such as an I-140 petition) can make it difficult to renew your F-1 visa stamp or re-enter the U.S. if you travel abroad. However, filing an I-140 does not automatically invalidate your current, valid F-1 status or OPT work authorization as long as you remain inside the U.S. Many professionals still choose to file a self-sponsored I-140 while on F-1 OPT to lock in their 'priority date,' though it is highly recommended to consult with an immigration attorney to expertly manage the travel risks, or to switch to a dual-intent visa like an H-1B or O-1 first. We will not cover the details of these dual intent visas since there is plenty of other source material out there with this information - but we can point you towards the book *“Unshackled”* by Soundarya Balasubramani and Sameer Khedekar.

Unfortunately, the most difficult part of the process is often something that must be undertaken even before your employer can go to the USCIS and submit the Green Card application itself - obtaining a PERM (labor certification). It is a process established by the Department of Labor to

ensure that hiring foreign workers does not negatively impact the job opportunities, wages, or working conditions of U.S. workers, and it is required for those on H-1B seeking to obtain employment-based permanent residency. Basically, employers have to put out a job offering for your role and conduct a recruitment process to prove that there are no other qualified US workers – and all of this must be done to a strict standard monitored by the Department of Labor. This means that the PERM process usually can take anywhere between 8 months to 2 years, and has no guarantee of succeeding. Once you have obtained an approved PERM, your company can file the Form I-140 Immigrant Petition on your behalf. Depending on your country of birth and the Visa Bulletin, you will then file your actual Green Card application (Adjustment of Status) either concurrently with the I-140 or once your priority date becomes current. Additionally, individuals who qualify for O-1 and L-1A visas frequently transition to employment-based Green Card categories that are completely exempt from the PERM requirement (such as the EB-1A, EB-1B, or EB-1C categories). If you can qualify for an O-1 or an L-1A, be sure to explore that option with your employer as it opens up a much faster pathway to permanent residency.

The combined time, effort, and money that your employer will have to invest into switching you from your F-1 OPT to a dual intent visa, get you PERM-certified (if on H-1B), and apply for your Green Card on top of obtaining a deemed export permit for you (if required for your work), are significant, so you'll have to find an employer who is willing to stick with you throughout this endeavor.

4.2.2.2 The Strategy

In order to maximize your chances of success throughout this process, you will have to choose the right employer, display that you are indispensable to them, start having the Green Card conversation early on, and stick with them for at least a few years until you have your Green Card.

As previously discussed, the US aerospace companies that hire international talent are already limited, and those that have the legal expertise, resources, and willpower to sponsor employee Green Cards are even more limited. Generally, you will find three archetypes of companies when it comes to sponsoring Green Cards. There are large tech giants, such as Amazon, Meta, Google, etc., that have streamlined processes for getting their employees H-1B and Green Cards relatively quickly, but of course, there are no aerospace companies in this category. Then there are the medium-sized companies that may have their own in-house immigration HR team, or a trusted firm that they use for immigration services and may have semi-streamlined processes in place. Finally, there are startups, where each employee is critical to their success, and so display a high degree of willingness to go to extra lengths to retain their employees. You can try doing a search on h1bdata.info or h1bgrader.com and see which companies have sponsored work visas in the past for job titles you are interested in - but there are almost no aerospace companies on this list. Therefore, in line with the other job searching advice we have put together in this document, we recommend that you talk to many companies and use your network of international professionals in the US to find out which ones would be willing to sponsor Green Cards. Additionally, there are a growing number of international space companies that have a presence in the US, which you could work for abroad for at least a year (either in your home country or in a less restrictive country) before you qualify for an L-1 visa to be transferred to work in the US branch.

We recommend starting to look for the right employer while still in school, and trying to land internships with them before going full time - this can also allow you to tailor your undergraduate or graduate experience to make yourself more valuable to this employer. Conventional wisdom usually would have you try to intern at a different company every summer in order to try different things and expand your network. However, in this situation, if you get your foot in the door with an employer that seems likely to be able to sponsor your Green Card, it is in your best interest to spend as much time working with that employer as possible - seniority will be very important down the line. While employer-employee relationships can differ from company to company, your ability to get the company to do something for you (like apply for your Green Card), is often closely tied to how much value you have provided to the company. This works in a positive way - “I scratch your back, you scratch mine as a thank you” - but also in a negative way - “I will stop scratching your back if you stop scratching mine”. Try taking on new responsibilities, specializing in certain skills, or becoming a “core” employee to make yourself as indispensable to the company as possible. This will provide you with leverage when it comes to discussing Green Card sponsorship.

It is important to make your intent to stay in the US long-term clear to your employer early on - both so that you can cut your losses if you find out that your employer doesn’t actually want to sponsor a Green Card, but also so that you can begin the process early on. When you do have this conversation with your employer, try to time it around a major contribution or a promotion of yours, to increase your perceived value in their eyes, and their perceived necessity to keep you long-term.

4.2.3 Green Card Pathway 3: University Employer Sponsorship

The goal of this pathway is to stay with an American university for long enough that they will apply for a Green Card for you. If you are interested in spending time in academia, this can be a good pathway for you, even if you plan on returning to industry afterward. The main advantage of academia is that generally, there are no export control restrictions on research positions unless your research involves working with flight hardware or is embargoed research under some sponsors tied to national defense. This is mainly due to the Fundamental Research Exclusion (FRE), which is a provision in the ITAR & EAR that un-export controls research topics that are considered basic and applied research, and that could otherwise be controlled if they were done in an industry/proprietary setting. In addition, many universities have an [“openness in research” policy](#) that largely prohibits the conduct of export-controlled or embargoed research.

However, the road to a Green Card via this pathway will almost certainly be the longest of all three discussed in this document. The main careers in academia include both tenure track (assistant to full professor) and non-tenure track (e.g., research scientist, research assistant, research professor, lecturer) roles. You will need at least a PhD to qualify for any of those roles, and it often helps to also have done a postdoc.

4.2.3.1 Doing a Postdoc

A postdoctoral position is a good way to build up your publication record, which is key to securing more permanent tenure-track and non-tenure-track roles. Applications for postdoctoral roles are usually open year-round, and opportunities depend on the availability of funding and research projects at the university or organization offering the postdoc.

A postdoc position is a full-time job, so you will need a nonimmigrant work visa to be able to carry it out (F-1 OPT, J-1, H-1B, O-1, etc). In general, most postdoc assignments last between 1-3 years, with extension being rare. This timeframe is usually too short for the university to consider sponsoring you for a Green Card, so it mainly serves the purpose of boosting your chances of landing a tenure (non-tenure) track permanent role at that or another university. Please consult this [survival guide for international postdocs in the US](#) if you want to learn more.

4.2.3.2 Non-Tenure-Track Positions

For non-tenured track positions (e.g., research scientist, research assistant, lecturer), your employment entirely depends on the availability of grants and research funding at the university or research institution. Your employment may be terminated when an existing grant expires. You may bring new grants to the university by writing new proposals but this is not a requirement. The reliance of your employment on available funding makes the Green Card application process during this period by the university more uncertain.

4.2.3.3 Tenure-Track Positions

For tenure-track positions, universities usually provide an initial seed amount to help you get started. This funding is used to help you with expenses related to purchasing equipment for your lab and hiring graduate students. Your salary, on the other hand, is paid based on your teaching duties, and you will be expected to take on a teaching load that varies by institution. Your initial funding package will provide you with between 4-6 years of research funding, during which time you will be expected to bring in new grants to the university and push forward novel research. Your research output and teaching performance will be evaluated at regular milestones (the schedule for which may vary by institution), and the outcome of these evaluations will inform the university's decision as to whether or not you are awarded tenure around year 7. Applications for tenure-track positions start around late September and the process may go on until January. Since teaching is a critical part of these positions, you will be expected to start working by August. Preparing your application may take about 6 months and entails preparing your CV, research plan, and a teaching statement. Due to the longer term nature of tenure-track positions, these are much more conducive to getting a Green Card sponsorship from the university, but as with the Industry Employment based pathway, it is important to talk to the university about getting the process started sooner rather than later.

Usually, universities will be more open about whether or not they are willing to sponsor Green Cards for various positions, so it doesn't hurt to ask the university HR department directly ahead of time or speak with other foreign nationals working there. It is also worth noting that while

pursuing this Green Card pathway and publishing regularly, you will likely improve your chances of qualifying for the self-sponsored pathway.

4.2.4 Green Card Pathway 4: Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurial pathway provides a dynamic route for international students to not only remain in the U.S. but also build their own aerospace startups. If you have a viable aerospace business idea, you do not necessarily need to wait for a third-party employer to hire you. Instead, you can utilize the following stepping stones to establish your company and secure your immigration status.

The following is based on the strategic immigration frameworks championed by Silicon Valley immigration attorney Sophie Alcorn, which allow international founders to navigate systematically from student status to permanent residency by leveraging the companies they build. For a more complete treatment of the subject, you are encouraged to check out her [book](#), Ask Sophie™: The Founder's Guide to Visas & Green Cards.

4.2.4.1 CPT and Pre-Completion OPT for Founders

While still enrolled in your university program, you can legally begin laying the groundwork for your aerospace startup.

- **Curricular Practical Training (CPT):** If your university permits it, you may be able to use CPT to work on your own startup. The work must be directly tied to your academic curriculum, and you must obtain authorization from your Designated School Official (DSO). You will need an advisor familiar with your work.
- **Pre-Completion OPT:** You can also apply for pre-completion OPT to work on your business prior to graduation. However, keep in mind that any time used under pre-completion OPT will be deducted from your standard 12-month post-completion OPT allowance. Before graduation, part-time OPT is available instead of full-time, and it reduces post-completion Regular OPT at a 50% rate (eg. 2 months of pre-completion OPT reduces post-completion OPT by 1 month).

4.2.4.2 Transitioning from OPT to H-1B or O-1A

Once you graduate, post-completion OPT (and the potential 24-month STEM OPT extension) gives you up to three years of work authorization. During this time, you can grow your startup and use it as the vehicle to sponsor your subsequent nonimmigrant work visas:

- **H-1B Visa:** A startup can sponsor its founder for an H-1B visa. You no longer need to establish a valid "employer-employee" relationship with an independent Board of Directors that has the authority to hire, supervise, pay, and fire you. Now even solo founders who are 100% owners can qualify for H-1B. There is an annual lottery.
- **O-1A Visa:** The O-1A is for individuals with extraordinary ability in the sciences, education, business, or athletics. It is highly favored by venture-backed founders. Securing significant venture capital funding, participating in prestigious startup accelerators, and garnering press coverage for your aerospace innovations can serve as strong evidence to qualify for this category. It does not involve any lottery.

4.2.4.3 Self-Petitioning for a Green Card: EB-1A and EB-2 NIW

The ultimate goal of the entrepreneurial pathway is securing permanent residency without relying on a third-party employer's lengthy PERM labor certification process. Founders can self-petition for a Green Card through two primary categories:

- **EB-2 National Interest Waiver (NIW):** This category is highly viable for aerospace entrepreneurs. If you can demonstrate that your startup's technology (e.g., satellite propulsion, advanced materials, drone logistics) has "substantial merit and national importance" to the United States, and that you are well-positioned to advance this endeavor as a founder, you can bypass the PERM process and self-petition for an EB-2 NIW.
- **EB-1A Extraordinary Ability:** If your startup achieves major commercial or technological success—such as acquiring significant market share, raising substantial funding rounds, or developing groundbreaking aerospace technology—you may qualify for the EB-1A. Similar to the O-1A, this category requires demonstrating that you have risen to the very top of your field, but it offers a historically faster route to a Green Card for individuals born in countries with long visa backlogs.

By strategically using your educational work authorizations to build your company, you can create the very entity that will sponsor your temporary work visas, ultimately serving as the foundation for a self-petitioned Green Card.

5 If All Else Fails

If, after following the advice provided in this guide, you still find yourself unable to secure employment in the US aerospace industry, don't worry! As stated at the top, making it in the US industry as a foreign national is tough, but not all is lost. You may consider the following alternative employment options, depending on where you are in your career and what your priorities are.

Get work experience in an adjacent industry. There are many industries adjacent to aerospace where your aerospace discipline of interest may be applicable and your expertise in those disciplines could be valuable. Conversely, experience gained working in such industries may be considered extremely valuable in the aerospace industry, and you may consider working in one of these industries until you can secure your Green Card before returning to aerospace. The following table identifies adjacent industries in which to look for career opportunities categorized by aerospace discipline.

Relevant Adjacent Industries by Aerospace Discipline

Aerospace Discipline	Adjacent Industries
Fluid Dynamics	Energy systems (wind, gas turbines), nautical engineering, automotive
Mechanical Design	Automotive, robotics, consumer electronics
Structural Dynamics	Automotive, sporting equipment
Thermal Analysis and Design	Consumer electronics, building science, automotive
Guidance, Navigation, and Control	Self-driving cars, industrial automation, medical robotics
Avionics and Flight Software	Consumer electronics, medical devices
Systems Engineering	Any product development role in a variety of industries (electronics, automotive, software)

Take summer classes if you cannot secure an internship or research position. If you aren't able to find an internship or research position that suits your interests, then summer classes are a good way to use your summer and helps bolster your resume for your next round of job hunting.

Consider an aerospace career in another country. Many countries around the world have increased their investment in the aerospace industry in recent years, and that may include your home country. In particular, Canada and Europe also have robust aerospace industries, and Canada specifically offers expedited immigration pathways for people with higher degrees. Additionally, countries like the UAE, China, and India have all made substantial investments in their space industries, having committed to becoming major players in space, and are in need of overseas talent to achieve that goal. Note, however, that if you leave the United States, immigrating back to the US from outside of the country is generally more difficult than changing your immigration status from inside the country.

6 Resources

Below are some additional resources that you may find helpful, including all of those referred to in this guide.

- [ISPA Slack Workspace](#) First and foremost, we strongly encourage you to join the ISPA Slack Workspace if you have not already. This gives you instant access to a network of hundreds of international students and professionals in the aerospace industry across the US. This is a place for our community to share information about career opportunities, seminars, networking events, and useful resources – including future updates to this document.

Additionally, if your university has a local ISPA chapter, be sure to join their channel in the Slack Workspace so that you get announcements and updates most relevant to you. Browse the channels list and see if you find a channel for your university. At time of writing, there are relatively few chapters, and we are always looking to add more. If you would like to start a chapter at your university to help others build a network and help yourself in the process, check out our [Starting a New ISPA Student Chapter slide deck](#).

- [ISPA Knowledge Base](#) We also maintain a Knowledge Base on Google Drive that contains a wealth of additional useful resources. These include a list of aerospace companies that have been known to hire foreign nationals and presentation recordings and slides from seminars on topics related to immigration, export control, career development, among others.
- Export control lists
 - [US Munitions List \(USML\)](#) Defines articles regulated by ITAR. Found in the Code of Federal Regulations under 22 CFR Part 121.
 - [Commerce Control List \(CCL\)](#) Defines articles regulated by EAR. Found in the Code of Federal Regulations under 15 CFR Part 774.
- [Intro to US Export Controls Guidebook](#) Includes guidance on how to use the export control lists mentioned above.
- [Informational Interviews Guide](#) by the Harvard Business Review
- Self-sponsored visa categories
 - a. [EB-1A](#) Extraordinary Ability
 - b. [EB-2 NIW](#) National Interest Waiver
- [USCIS Visa Bulletin](#) Allows you to estimate your wait time for EB-1 or EB-2. Select the current or upcoming Visa Bulletin and refer to the “Dates For Filing of Employment-Based Visa Applications” table. In order for somebody with your country of birth to file their final

Green Card application (Adjustment of Status) or have it approved, their "Priority Date" (typically the date the PERM or self-sponsored I-140 was originally filed) must be earlier than the date shown in the "1st" or "2nd" preference rows, respectively, under the column that applies to that country.

- [*Unshackled: A Practical Guide for Highly-Skilled Immigrants to Thrive in the United States*](#) (2023) by Soundarya Balasubramani and Sameer Khedekar. ISBN 979-8888314715.
- Sophie Alcorn's [online course](#) on becoming qualified for EB-1A, EB-2 NIW, or O-1A status, now provided for free (formerly \$1000 to access)
- [*Ask Sophie™: The Founder's Guide to Visas & Green Cards*](#) (2023) by Sophie Alcorn. ISBN 979-8989089215.
- H-1B Databases [h1bdata.info](#) and [h1bgrader.com](#). Provide historical data on H-1Bs granted to employers and includes information such as job title and salary for each H-1B granted.
- [International Postdoc Survival Guide](#) published by the National Postdoctoral Association

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