OPT Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

BASICS

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)? Optional Practical Training (OPT) is the opportunity for an F-1 student to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to a practical work experience.

What types of OPT are there? Pre-completion OPT and post-completion OPT.

What are the differences between pre and post-completion OPT? Pre-Completion OPT may be part or full time. It is done prior to completion of degree requirements. It may be used during the fall or spring semester (part-time) or during the summer (full-time). Post-Completion OPT must be full-time and is done after the completion of degree requirements.

Students who have completed all coursework for their program of study, excluding thesis or equivalent, can choose between pre-completion OPT and post-completion OPT. If a student in this situation applies for pre-completion OPT, he or she can work full time and may receive a program extension.

How long can I do OPT? OPT is a work permit allowing F-1 students to work in the U.S. for up to 12 months (full-time) in a job related to their major. Part-time work counts toward the maximum 12 months at 1/2 full-time employment.

If I am a double major can I work a job in either field? Yes, only one major will show on your I-20, but you can be employed in either field.

If I apply for OPT after my master’s degree, can I work a job related to my bachelor’s degree? No (unless both degrees are in the same field). Any employment must relate to your most recent field of study.

Can I have OPT for each degree level? Yes, as long as they are consecutive, higher degrees (i.e., bachelors > masters > doctorate).
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APPLYING FOR OPT

Who can apply for OPT? F-1 students can apply for OPT if they have:
- been in full-time F-1 student status for at least one full academic year
- maintained valid F-1 status, and
- intend to work in a position directly related to their major field of study.

Do I need to have a job offer to apply for OPT? No

When should I apply for OPT? No earlier than 90 days prior to completing your degree requirements; no later than 60 days after completing your degree requirements.

How do I apply for Optional Practical Training?
- Pick up an OPT application packet at ISS
- Submit the completed application and all supporting documents to ISS
- ISS will review the application, create a new I-20 and email you when it is ready.
- The completed application must be received by the USCIS within 30 days of the date the new I-20 was issued.

Which address should I use on OPT application (Form I-765)? We suggest that you use the ISS address. We will scan and email the receipt to you and we will notify you by email or phone when we receive the EAD.

How much is OPT application fee? $380.00. This must be paid by check or money order made payable to the USCIS. ISS recommends a check as it is traceable.

How long does it take the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to process the OPT application? The average time is 90-120 days.

What dates should I request for the start and end dates of my OPT? You may request your OPT to begin as early as the day after completing your degree requirements and as late as 60 days after completing your degree requirements.

What if I have applied for OPT but I don’t complete the requirements for my degree (i.e. fail a class)? If the OPT application has not been adjudicated, you can withdraw the application. Contact ISS instructions. Your fee is not refundable.
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What if I my OPT has been approved but I don’t complete the requirements for my degree (i.e. fail a class)? Students who have applied for OPT, but for some reason fail a class or discover they still have a class to take can work part-time on OPT while re-taking the class followed by full-time OPT. The student in this situation can work full-time during breaks and holidays while finishing requirements.

Can I change the dates of my OPT after I submit my application? Maybe, if you have a written job offer that requires you to start employment earlier than you requested on your application, you can make a change of dates request to the USCIS through ISS. We cannot, however, guarantee that the USCIS will approve the request.

How will I know if the OPT application has been received? Within 30 days of receiving the application, you should receive a receipt (Form I-797).

How can I track my OPT application? Each receipt has a file number. Using the file number, you can track the Case Status at http://www.uscis.gov

What if I have moved after I have submitted my application? Inform ISS and submit an official change of address with the U.S. Post Office.

Can I work on campus if my I-20 completion date has passed? NO

Can I begin working off-campus before my OPT is approved? NO

How will I know when my application is approved? The USCIS database enters the approval into the student’s SEVIS record by changing the status of the application from Pending to Approved and entering the inclusive dates that the student is authorized for OPT. The student’s SEVIS record remains in Active status for the duration of the post-completion OPT, plus 60 days. USCIS also sends the student a Form I-766 (EAD) stating the dates the student is approved for OPT. An automatic SEVIS alert lets SE know the application has been approved.

What happens if my application is denied? Depart the U.S. 60 days after his/her program end date. If the application is pending beyond a student’s 60 day grace period and then denied, the student will have to depart the U.S. immediately. The USCIS database updates the student’s SEVIS record by changing the application status from Pending to Denied. USCIS also sends the student a Notice of Denial. An automatic SEVIS alert lets SE know that the application was denied.

What is the start date on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD, Form I-766)? The start date will be the requested start date or the date of approval, whichever is later.
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WHILE ON OPT

How much do I have to work while on OPT? Students must work at least 20 hours to be considered employed.

How long can I be on OPT? Standard OPT is available for a cumulative maximum of 12 months per educational level. See STEM section for 17 month extension.

Can I apply for an additional 12 months of OPT after a second bachelor’s degree? Not if you use 12 months of OPT after your first bachelor’s degree.

Can I change jobs while on OPT? Yes, but you must report the start and end date and employer information for each job to the CIE so that the information can be updated in SEVIS. All jobs must relate to your major.

Can I have more than one job at a time while on OPT? Yes, but all jobs must relate to your major.

Can I volunteer while on OPT? Yes. If you are volunteering to avoid exceeding the maximum of 90 days of unemployment allowed on OPT, the volunteer job must also relate to your major and you must work for at least 20 hours per week. You must report your volunteer employment to ISS just as you are required to report other employment.

Do I need to report my OPT employment to anyone? Yes, report all employment and any changes to employment to ISS within 10 days. ISS will update SEVIS.

Should I keep records of my employment? Yes, including volunteer work.

Can I be unemployed on OPT? Yes, but for no more than 90 days while on OPT.

What should I do if I am unemployed for nearly 90 days? If you are reaching the limit of your unemployment, you should prepare to transfer to another institution, change educational level, depart the U.S., or change status.

Can I take classes while on post-completion OPT? Yes, if you aren’t a full-time student.

Can I get health insurance while I'm on OPT? Yes, you may purchase health insurance within 30 days of the beginning of each semester.

If I am admitted to another school while on OPT, when should I have my SEVIS form transferred from SE to the other school? The day after your last date of employment. Transferring your SEVIS record cancels OPT.

Can I stay in the U.S. during this period? Yes.
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TRAVEL

Can I travel outside the United States while my OPT application is pending? Yes, but ISS recommends that you do not leave the U.S. while your OPT application is pending (see below). Upon reentry, you need to provide the OPT application receipt issued by the USCIS to the immigration officer at the U.S. airport.

If you have not graduated, you may travel outside and re-enter the U.S. because you are still a student. In order to re-enter the U.S., you will need:
- A valid passport (valid for 6 months after you plan to re-enter the U.S.)
- A valid F-1 Visa
- I-20 signed for travel within six months
- Letter from your department stating that you have not yet graduated

Can I travel outside the United States if my post-completion OPT has not been approved and I do not have a job offer? Yes, but not recommended. If you must exit the U.S. be sure you have:
- Passport (valid for six months after you plan to re-enter the U.S)
- Valid F-1 visa stamp in your passport
- I-20 (with a travel signature no older than *six months)
- I-765 receipt notice (Form I-797)

Can I travel outside the United States after I have graduated and after my OPT is approved? USCIS had stated if your OPT has been approved, you have your EAD and you depart the U.S. before obtaining a job, your OPT is terminated and you may not reenter the U.S. Now the interpretation is that you must reenter the U.S. to "resume employment". Due to this change, it is unclear how your entry will be interpreted.

If you have an EAD card but no job offer you should not travel.

You may travel outside the U.S. if you have an EAD card and are returning to a job to resume employment. In order to re-enter the U.S., you will need:
- A valid passport
- A valid F-1 Visa
- I-20 signed for travel within six months
- An Employment Authorization Document (EAD card)
- Letter from your employer: employment dates, location, duties, salary, etc.
- Be prepared to discuss how the job experience will apply to a job in your country
I want to travel outside the U.S. but my visa has expired. Can I get a new visa to reenter the U.S. while my OPT is pending or after it is approved?

An F-1 student with an expired visa should wait for OPT approval to travel if a valid visa is required for reentry. The Department of State will not issue a visa to an applicant with a pending OPT application. There is a risk of denial by the consular officer who interviews you for a new visa. ISS recommends that you not travel outside the U.S. if you need a new visa to reenter. If you do, you will need the documents listed above.

Does time outside the U.S. count toward unemployment? Yes, days spent outside of the U.S. while unemployed count towards the 90 days of unemployment permitted.