

1. What is F-1 Optional Practical Training?

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field. OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The maximum amount of time granted to work on F-1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible 24 month extension for those who qualify in STEM fields. You may use some or all of the available 12 months of practical training during your course of study or save the full twelve months to use after you graduate (Recommended).

2. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?

Authorization for OPT is granted by USCIS and can take 1 - 3 months to obtain. Therefore it is important that you apply for the authorization well in advance of the date you wish to start working as most take nearly three months.

You may apply up to 90 days before graduation date and **NO LATER THAN** 60 days beyond your graduation date. Do NOT wait until last minute, as mail and processing times can be slow. Plus, you may lose some time if submit towards end of 60 day mark as it may take up to 90 days to process and can't work until approved and have card.

3. When can I begin fulltime OPT and how can I choose my start date?

Undergraduate students may begin fulltime OPT upon successful completion of degree.

Graduate students may begin fulltime OPT upon successful completion of all required coursework.

- Thesis/dissertation may still be in progress while on OPT however must be completed within 12 months of OPT. No extension of the I-20 may be granted if you do not graduate within that time.

With regard to choosing your start date, you should consider processing time, interview time, and any vacation time (if desired) before OPT begins. If you'd like to begin immediately then choose a date just after program completion but if you'd like to wait a little while (find job, visit with family, etc.) then choose date within your 60-day window. Understand you can't predict the future and if you get an offer faster than anticipated, you **MUST** wait until your start date to begin work. Also, you cannot work until have EAD card in hand, even if have job offer to start sooner.

REMEMBER: Once you select OPT start date it is very difficult to change it and impossible once approved.

- Most employers would not have new employees start on a Saturday, Sunday or Holiday, so check calendar!

4. What are the Eligibility Requirements for F-1 Optional Practical Training?

To be eligible to apply for Optional Practical Training you must: (1) have been in full time student status for at least one academic year (fall and spring), and (2) be maintaining valid F-1 status at the time of the application.

5. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of optional practical training?

You are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of OPT **ONLY** after changing to a **higher degree level**.

6. How can I use optional practical training while I am still in my program?

You may use OPT while you are still in your degree program as follows: (1) part-time while school is in a session, (2) full-time during annual vacation periods, and/or (3) full-time after you completed all course requirements for a graduate degree and have a thesis requirement remaining. These periods of OPT used before you graduate will be deducted from the total allowable period of 12 months. Part-time OPT will be deducted at one-half the full-time rate. NOTE: If you use 12 months of full-time pre-completions OPT, then you lose post-completion OPT.

7. Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?

You do NOT need to have a job offer before applying for Optional Practical Training.

8. Do I need to have a job while I am on optional practical training?

Yes. Immigration regulation requires that you are employed while on your post-completion OPT period. You are required to update the ISSO of employer names and addresses, and dates of employment within 10 days of change. Also, you are only allowed a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT.

9. What defines “employment” while on OPT?

For regular post-completion OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed, interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the field of study at level of study is considered “employed” for purpose of OPT employment. There is no limit on number of employers.

10. How do I know that my application is processing?

You will receive a form I-797 (receipt notice) indicating that your application is processing. Using the receipt # you can check the status at www.uscis.gov. It may take time to update on their website. Also, you can monitor the status of your check with your bank. Additionally, you can fill out a form I-145-G and get notified via email/text.

11. What if I do not receive the EAD within the 90 day processing time?

If you have not received your EAD **after 75 days** of receipt date on your I-797 receipt notice and you have job offer then you may be eligible for expedited service. Call their customer service # on I-797 or see an advisor in ISSO.

12. Can I change employers?

You may change employers after you have begun authorized OPT employment provided that the new job is:
1) directly related to your major field of study; and 2) appropriate for someone having your level of education.

13. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?

You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS; working before practical training has been authorized by the USCIS constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

14. Will I have to pay taxes?

Employment is subject to all federal and state taxes, unless exempt under certain country tax treaties. Employment is not subject to Social Security Tax if residency in the U.S. has been for less than five (5) years.

15. Do I have to do anything with the ISSO while I am on OPT?

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on OPT, you MUST notify the ISSO when you change your address AND your employer names, addresses, and dates of employment by filling out the [Employment/Address Update Reporting Form](#). Also notify ISSO if your personal phone or email changes.

16. How can I find out about the 24-month ‘STEM’ extension?

To find out if you qualify and to learn how to apply for the 24 month extension of your OPT go to <http://isso.uncc.edu/current-students/employment/f-1-opt-stem-extension>

17. What do I do after my OPT is over?

After OPT, you have 60 days to go back to your home country unless your status has been changed or extended. You may NOT work during these 60 days nor should you travel outside U.S and re-enter during this time.

18. What if I change my status to H-1B?

Please email ISSO a copy of your I-797 Approval Notice since you are required to notify us and we are required to update SEVIS system with your new status. Also, if your OPT ends prior to the H-1B start date, you may request a new I-20 from ISSO for the ‘cap-gap’ extension. Please provide a copy of your H-1B approval or waitlist notice.

TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

19. Now that I've turned in my application, can I travel outside U.S. while I wait for OPT EAD card to come? After you graduate, you will NOT be able to re-enter U.S. without your OPT EAD card in addition to your valid passport, current F-1 visa stamp, I-20 signed within the last six months, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment. Before you graduate, you should be able to get back in to the U.S. without the EAD card as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation (at least one month). If you have to travel, talk to an advisor at the ISSO before leaving. Once graduated however, do not travel while OPT application is still pending. Wait for card!

20. I want to leave U.S. for a little while during the time my OPT application is in process, but I need to return long before the card will have arrived. I have a tourist visa (B – 2) that is valid for 10 years. Can't I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it? If you leave U.S. and re-enter with a B visa, you will have an I-94 card that shows that you have been admitted under B status, and you will have LOST your F-1 status. Hence, your OPT application and card will be **invalid**. If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1.

21. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?

You will need:

- your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by the ISSO P/DSO within the last 6 months;
- the Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) from the USCIS;
- your passport valid at least 6 months into the future;
- a current F-1 visa stamp;
- your job offer letter or proof of employment.

22. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with your I-94 card, a valid passport, your EAD card, an I-20 that has been signed by the ISSO within the last 6 months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment** as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, Cuba or North Korea. **If you are traveling elsewhere**, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. **Please come to ISSO** to discuss your visa application with an advisor as consulates often change the requirements for visa applications for students on OPT.

23. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training is higher than while you are in your active student program, as it may be seen as an avenue for gaining permanent residence in the U.S. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. If you need to apply for a new visa, please see an advisor in ISSO to make sure you have the most up to date information about what documents are required.

24. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD card or receipt notice for your application, an I-20 created by the ISSO for your OPT application, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment**. The official job offer letter should state that the job is truly temporary and will end before or by the end of your practical training time. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.