



ISSO FAQ Document: Coronavirus (COVID-19)

To the UNC Charlotte international student and scholar community:

The ISSO recognizes that you all are far away from family and friends at home and rely on us to help you navigate the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and how it impacts you. For this reason, we have developed this FAQ document.

Please know that the ISSO is doing its best to develop policies and procedures to ensure your health and safety, monitor the latest immigration-related updates and keep you informed via email.

We offer you our ongoing support and send you our best wishes!

ISSO Operations

Q: With the university moving to online classes, will the ISSO close?

A: The ISSO is still open and serving international students and scholars but based on the Chancellor's expectation to follow "social distancing protocol" we are finding creative ways to do our work. See below for details.

Q: How should I get in touch with ISSO if I have questions?

A: There are multiple ways to get in touch with ISSO staff:

1. The ISSO is now offering phone advising appointments rather than walk-in advising. You can sign-up for a phone advising appointment below and an advisor will call you to discuss your concern.

Phone Advising Schedule:

- Monday - 10:00am - 12:00pm ([phone appt](#))
- Tuesday - 2:00pm - 4:00pm ([phone appt](#))
- Wednesday - No Advising
- Thursday - 2:00pm - 4:00pm ([phone appt](#))
- Friday - 10:00am - 12:00pm ([phone appt](#))



2. You can still send an email to intlssso@uncc.edu as our mailbox is monitored daily. Those messages will continue to be forwarded to an advisor for response. Please expect the standard response time of 2-3 business days.

Note, **one email is sufficient** so please refrain from re-sending the same message multiple times or to multiple individuals as this only confuses our workflow and slows down response time.

3. If you have an application to submit, you may still use ISSO Connect or other online applications as those are also being monitored daily.

We want you to know that **YOU** are still a high priority and we have access to everything we need in order to continue operations as close to normal as possible! Please read our emails with any updated information, as things can change very quickly.

We thank you in advance for your understanding while we may need some extra time to figure out our new routine.

International Students (Enrolled)

Q: With the university's transition to online classes, will my visa status be in jeopardy?

A: The Student and Exchange Visitor Program, the government office that oversees the SEVIS system, has issued guidance for F-1 students that allows for a short-term exception for limitations on online enrollment. As long as you continue completing course assignments and following instructions of your professors, your immigration status is not in jeopardy. The key is to continue making progress towards your degree. The guidance advises that our office must submit a report regarding how the university is supporting students in this move to online-only instruction in order to maintain compliance in this unusual circumstance related to COVID-19. The U.S. Department of State has made similar public health exceptions for J-1 students.

Q: I have family/friends in another part of the U.S. Can I move to stay with them while I continue my coursework online?



A: Yes; however, you will need to update your SEVIS-Local address in 'My UNC Charlotte' to update your physical address in the U.S., as required by F-1 and J-1 visa regulations.

Q: Can I go to my home country and complete the semester there via online coursework?

A: There may be a number of reasons you or your family would want you to be home in a time of pandemic response. With all of your classes moving to online delivery, you can technically complete your work from your home country. However, please keep in mind the following considerations:

- **Technology.** Can you access all the resources you need to participate in remote classes, respond timely to communication from professors, and submit required assignments from your home country?
- **Time difference.** If your classes are meeting online at your regularly scheduled time, consider the time difference and whether or not you would be able to attend.
- **Graduating in May 2020.** If you plan to complete your degree in May 2020 and wish to apply for OPT, you must be in the U.S. at the time of application. The ISSO recommends against traveling while your application is pending, but if you are considering travel, please [speak to an advisor](#).
- **Visa status.** Depending on how long you stay outside the U.S., this could interrupt your F-1 status with implications for your future eligibility for OPT and CPT. Please [consult with an advisor](#) if you think you will be outside the U.S. for more than 5 months.
- **Taking a Leave of Absence.** If you are unable to return for the Fall 2020 semester due to entry restrictions or visa delays, you will need to complete our [Leave of Absence](#) process to close out your F-1 record for the semester. Please speak with an advisor before taking any action so that we can review the process with you and also give you information on [Returning from a Leave of Absence](#) so that you can return to the U.S. for the Spring 2021 semester.
- **Return to the U.S.** There are currently indefinite [entry restrictions](#) for noncitizens travelling to the U.S. who have recently been in Iran or China, and noncitizens traveling from the United Kingdom & [Schengen area](#) of Europe. At this time, we do not know when these restrictions will be lifted or how they might change (for example, additional countries added). In addition, U.S. consulate operations are likely to be impacted in other countries with a substantial local outbreak. If you travel home, understand that there may be some uncertainty in terms of how quickly you would be able to return to the U.S.

Q: My I-20/DS-2019 expires in May 2020, but I won't be graduating. Can I still request an extension if the ISSO is in remote operations?



A: Yes, you MUST submit an extension request before your current I-20 or DS-2019 program end date. To request a program extension, please submit the program extension form in ISSO connect at least two weeks before the program end date on your I-20 or DS-2019.

Q: My I-20 will expire in May 2020, but I still need to defend my dissertation or thesis after my I-20 end date. Can I still request an extension?

A: Yes. To request a program extension, please see directions above. However, also remember that students are eligible for OPT once they have completed all degree requirements other than their defense, known as being all-but-defense or “ABD”. If you are currently ABD, or you will be ABD by the end of the Spring 2020 semester, you are eligible to apply for OPT prior to completing your defense, in which case there is no need for an I-20 extension.

Q: How can I get a travel signature on my I-20/DS-2019?

A: Travel signatures for currently enrolled students are valid for one year from the date of the last signature. If you are on OPT your signature is only valid for six months. If this signature will expire prior to your anticipated return, you should contact intlssso@uncc.edu to request a new travel signature. For the time being, you will not have to submit your original I-20/DS-2019 document to be signed, instead it will be reprinted and distributed to you.

Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

Q: I have received an internship offer to work off-campus during the summer – can I still apply for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) authorization while the university is under reduced operations?

A: Our Summer CPT application period will open on March 28th and we will still accept applications which are submitted to the University Career Development Center as Experiential Learning. We are working with the UCC to plan for any potential changes to the application procedure and will update our webpage accordingly if there are future changes to the application process.

Q: What if my CPT employer requires employees to self-quarantine?



A: Remote work is possible while on CPT and would not in itself require any special permission or new authorization request, as long as the work continues and there is continued supervision/oversight through various technological means. Students would simply inform the ISSO via email of the new remote work address and expected duration of quarantine period so that we can update your record. If the employer terminates the appointment for whatever reason, you should notify the ISSO immediately.

International Students (Applying for OPT)

Q: I am graduating in the next 90 days – can I still apply for post-completion OPT if the ISSO moves to remote operations?

A: Yes, you may still apply for OPT while the ISSO is in remote operations. The application process has been electronic for quite some time, so this is not new for us. The only parts that have changed are the OPT Review Session, which will be conducted via WebEx, and OPT I-20 release and collection (no more in-person pick up; UPS and FedEx delivery only). Please read our [OPT page](#) for details. If you would prefer to wait to apply for post-completion OPT, please keep in mind that you are also eligible to apply up to 60 days after you graduate (though be aware of lengthy processing time by USCIS).

Q: I have applied for OPT based on my scheduled defense date; however, I will need to reschedule my defense for a time when I can present it in-person to my committee members. Do I need to change my requested OPT start date with USCIS?

A: No, you do not need to take any action to change your requested start date with USCIS. Students are eligible for OPT once they have completed all degree requirements other than their defense, known as being all-but-defense or “ABD”. If you are currently ABD, or you will be ABD by the end of the Spring 2020 semester, you are eligible to receive OPT authorization prior to completing your defense, and you may complete your defense while you are actively engaged in employment using OPT authorization.

Q: Which mailing address should I use on my OPT application?



A: The addresses noted on our [OPT checklist](#) are still valid for those with North Carolina Mailing Addresses on their I-765. If you are using a Mailing Address outside of North Carolina on your I-765, [visit the USCIS website to verify the appropriate mailing address/facility](#). Note that the address you use will always depend on which delivery service you use to send off your application.

International Students on OPT

Q: Will I still be able to submit employer and address updates to ISSO?

A: Absolutely, though how you report your updates depends on whether you are on regular OPT or STEM OPT:

Students on 12-month OPT should use their SEVP Portal accounts to make any needed employer or address updates. Students on STEM OPT can continue to use ISSO's [webform](#) for updates and 6, 12, 18, and 24 month validations. When selecting a shipping option/UEMS order for your updated STEM OPT I-20, use UPS and FedEx, as in-person pick up, DHL, and regular mail are currently not available.

Q: Will the SEVP Portal still update my address changes?

A: SEVIS and the SEVP Portal are online interfaces and are therefore not impacted by the Covid-19 situation. Please continue to report address and contact info changes in your SEVP Portal.

Q: My 6-month employment validation report is due soon. Are there any changes on how I should do this?

A: Actually, no, there are no changes as to how you should do this. Students on STEM OPT can continue to use ISSO's [webform](#) for 6, 12, 18, and 24 month validations.

Q: I am being required by my employer to self-quarantine. What does this mean for my OPT?

A: If your employer allows you to work remotely, there is no impact on your OPT due to self-quarantine. Similarly, if you are able to take leave (sick leave, vacation days, etc.), there is no impact on your OPT. Please do make sure to update your "employer address" in the [SEVP Portal](#) if you will be working at another location for more than 10 days. We have reached out to SEVP for



additional guidance for those that must transition to unpaid leave or inactive status concerning the impact on unemployment days and will update as more information becomes available.

Q: I am currently outside the U.S. and unable to return. How does this impact my OPT?

A: If your employer allows you to work remotely or if you continue to be employed while on a period of authorized leave from work, the time you spend outside of the U.S. will not count as 'unemployment,' so you do not have to worry about accruing days towards your 90/150-day unemployment limit (please see [7.1.8 of DHS' OPT policy guidance](#)). Since the SEVP Portal only allows U.S. addresses, please keep your "employer address" as is (assuming you haven't changed employers).

Q: I am currently participating in post-completion OPT and my EAD will expire in the next 90 days – can I still apply for the STEM extension if ISSO moves to remote operations?

A: Yes. Our STEM OPT application process is online already. You can read more about the process at: <https://isso.uncc.edu/current-students/employment/f-1-opt-stem-extension>

International Students – Academic Training (J-1 Students)

Q: I am a student in J-1 status and I have received an offer to participate in an internship off-campus this summer. Can I still apply for Academic Training?

A: Yes, you can still apply for Academic Training. Submit your request to intlssso@uncc.edu.

International Scholars

Q: If I am not able to access my lab, or am required to continue my research/writing remotely, how would this affect my status? Am I still considered actively engaged in my program?

A: Please consult with your supervisor to determine what is possible, as you may have a number of different options. One option is a temporary leave (such as vacation or sick time). If you are approved for a temporary leave (less than 30 days), your J-1 status is not in jeopardy. Alternately, you and your supervisor can work on arrangements for you to continue your program objectives remotely, which has been supported in guidance from the Department of State. In this case, please email



intlssso@uncc.edu copying your supervisor, with your plan, including the address where you will be working remotely from, and we will update your SEVIS record accordingly.

Q: I have decided to complete my program early and depart the U.S. What do I need to do?

A: Please email intlssso@uncc.edu once your plans are set.

Q: My DS-2019 is going to expire soon but because the university currently has reduced operations I am not able to complete my research – am I eligible for an extension?

A: If you need more time to complete your research you may be eligible for a program extension. You should keep in mind that the maximum program duration for a research scholar is 5 years, a short-term scholar is 6 months, and a student intern is 12 months. If you are not sure whether you are a research scholar, short-term scholar, or student intern this is indicated on your DS-2019 in section 4.

If you request an extension within the allowable maximum time for your J-1 category, please ask your department to submit a request in the ISSO Scholar Portal.