



Optional Practice Training (OPT) Overview

Updated: 6/11/2017

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment authorization that gives F-1 students an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to a practical work experience off campus prior to, or after graduation. To qualify you must have been lawfully enrolled on a full time basis in a SEVP approved institution for one full academic year (9 months).

OPT is available in the following cases:

Pre-Completion:

- Part-time or full-time during the student's annual vacation and other times when school is not in session if the student intends, and is eligible to register for the next semester (graduates and undergraduates);
- Part-time while school is in session (graduates and undergraduates);
- Part-time or full-time after completion of all course requirements for the degree, excluding thesis/dissertation (graduates only);

Post-Completion:

- Full-time after the completion of *all* requirements for one's degree

Length of OPT

Standard OPT (including both pre-completion OPT and standard post-completion OPT) can be authorized for a maximum aggregate period of 12 months per educational level. A student "becomes eligible for another 12 months of practical training when he or she changes to a higher educational level." Although students may engage in both pre-completion and standard post-completion OPT, the maximum amount of time that can be granted for all standard OPT combined is 12 months per educational level.

Students in certain fields of study (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) may also be eligible for an additional 24 months of OPT beyond the standard OPT authorization of 12 months. Most recent degree must be in STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), as determined by Department of Homeland Security. For a complete STEM field list see www.ice.gov/sevis/stemlist.htm. For more information about STEM OPT or to request a STEM OPT Extension, please see the CU form, "STEM OPT Information and Extension Request Form," available online at www.carrollu.edu/international.

Authorization for Optional Practical Training is granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), but requires a Designated School Official (DSO)/International Advisor to make a recommendation for OPT in SEVIS for a student prior to submission of their application to USCIS.



OPT Application Timeframe

Since it can take up to 90 days to obtain OPT authorization from USCIS, it is important that you submit your application in a timely manner. Students applying for **pre-completion OPT** may file up to 90 days before he or she has completed the full year academic year requirement, but cannot apply for OPT more than 120 days in advance of the requested start date.

If you are applying for **post-completion OPT**, the Office of International Education recommends that you submit an application for Optional Practical Training prior to your completion date. However, you can apply for OPT within the 60 days following the completion of your studies as well.

- **Submission of a post-completion application PRIOR to one's completion date**
A student may apply up to 90 days prior to his or her program end date, but is restricted by immigration regulations from filing a request for post-completion OPT *more* than 90 days prior to his or her program end date.
- **Submission of a post-completion application AFTER one's completion date**
A student should ask his or her DSO to recommend post-completion OPT within 30 days of the date the student expects the application to arrive at the USCIS Service Center. If the OPT recommendation in SEVIS is dated more than 30 days prior to the receipt date, the application may be denied.

Regardless of when you choose to apply, you should keep in mind the time that both the Office of International Education and USCIS will need to process your application and the date when you wish to begin employment. You legally cannot begin employment until you have received your EAD card and the start date on the card has been reached. For additional guidance on selecting an OPT start date, see an advisor in the Office of International Education.

How to Get Employment Authorization for OPT:

1. Review all the information in this document, complete the *OPT Request Form*, and compile other application components (outlined below). Contact OIE if you have any questions.
2. Make an appointment to see an OIE advisor and bring your completed OPT application with you. The advisor will review your application to ensure it is complete and produce an I-20 with the recommendation for OPT to accompany your application.
3. Mail your complete application to USCIS so that it arrives no later than 30 days after the advisor has made your recommendation for OPT in SEVIS.
4. If you are approved, USCIS will send an Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) to you listing the dates you are authorized for employment.



OPT application components:

- ❑ *CU OPT Request Form* with appropriate signatures
- ❑ Completed and signed form I-765 (MUST be typed), using the appropriate code at item 16
 - ❑ (c)(3)(A) for pre-completion OPT,
 - ❑ (c)(3)(B) for post-completion OPT,

Note about your address: It can take 90 days to receive OPT approval from USCIS; therefore, please use a mailing address that will be current for the next 90 days on your form I-765.

Download the form at www.uscis.gov/i-765 and read detailed instructions at <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/i-765instr.pdf>

- ❑ Photocopies of:
 - a. Your most recent I-94 card (both sides) or electronic record
 - b. Your passport – include all biographical information, the photograph, passport expiration date, and your current F-1 visa
 - c. Your last EAD/OPT card (if applicable) and photocopy of I-20(s) with OPT notation from previous OPT authorization
- ❑ Two recent US passport-style photographs, with your name clearly printed on the back (see photo requirements in I-765 instructions)
- ❑ Personal check or Money Order made out to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for \$410.00
- ❑ Form G-1145 for e-notification acceptance of application (MUST be typed) – download at www.uscis.gov
- ❑ Photocopy of your new I-20 (with OPT endorsed on page 2)

You will mail your application to USCIS Phoenix Lockbox at one of the following addresses:

For U.S. Postal Service (USPS) deliveries:
USCIS
PO Box 21281
Phoenix, AZ 85036

■ *For Express mail and courier deliveries (use your own phone number on the form):*
USCIS
■ **Attn: AOS**
1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S
Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85034

Note: if you are having your OPT card mailed to you in a state other than Wisconsin, consult with OIE about mailing to the appropriate USCIS service center. Details available in the I-765 instructions.



The Job Requirement and Limit on Periods of Unemployment

A job offer is not a required element of the DSO's recommendation for standard OPT (it is a requirement for the STEM OPT extensions, though), or of USCIS's approval of a standard OPT EAD. However, immigration regulations state that "during post-completion OPT, F-1 status is dependent upon employment," and sets an aggregate limit on days of "unemployment" that can be accrued while on post-completion OPT.

- During standard post-completion OPT, a student may not be unemployed for an aggregate of more than 90 days.
- If a student receives a 24-month STEM OPT extension, the limit on unemployment is raised to an aggregate of no more than 150 days, applied to the entire period of standard post-completion and STEM OPT.

Types of activity that constitute employment while on OPT

SEVP's guidelines on OPT states that the following activities are considered allowable employment on both **pre-completion and standard post-completion OPT**, provided that the job is directly related to the student's program of study.

- Regular paid unemployment
- Payment by multiple short-term employers
- Work for hire (contractual based work)
- Self-employed business owner
- Employment through an agency
- Work as a volunteer or unpaid intern, where this practice does not violate any labor laws

In all cases, work must be at least 20 hours per week on average for students on post-completion OPT to avoid accruing days of unemployment. Students should keep careful record of their employment and be able to show evidence their work is related to their degree and was at least 20 hours per week on average. See an advisor in OIE for more details about work requirements while on OPT.

OPT Reporting Requirements

While you are on post-completion OPT, you are still considered in F-1 status and are required to comply with F-1 immigration regulations. The regulations require a student on standard OPT to report any change of name or address, or interruption or changes to employment to their international advisor for the duration of the authorized training. Please also be sure that the international advisor has a valid email address to reach you while on OPT.

Travel while on OPT

An F-1 student who is engaged in post-completion OPT who travels outside the United States temporarily (i.e., less than 5 months) can be readmitted to resume employment for the remainder of the period authorized on his or her EAD card. However, the student must provide an I-20 endorsed by the DSO within the last 6 months, a valid F-1 visa, an unexpired EAD and proof of a job offer. For more questions about travel while on post-completion OPT or while waiting for your EAD card, see the international advisor.



OPT Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: How many times am I eligible for OPT?

A: A student is eligible for up to 12 months of full time standard OPT per academic level (Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate). However, once a student has changed educational levels, he/she loses the privilege to engage in OPT for the lower educational level if he/she does not engage in OPT employment BEFORE changing levels.

Qualifying STEM students may also be eligible for an additional 24 months of OPT following completion of their standard post-completion OPT. A student may not be authorized for more than two lifetime STEM OPT extensions, however. A second period of STEMP OPT must be based on a degree at a higher educational level than the degree that served as the basis for the first period of STEM OPT. See an OIE advisor for additional information.

Q: How does use of OPT part-time (20 hours or less per week) affect the 12 month limit of full time OPT for which I am eligible?

A: Part-time OPT is deducted from the 12 month limit at 50%. Thus, six months of part-time OPT would reduce your total available time for OPT by three months (for a total of nine remaining months). After completion of one's degree requirements, however, OPT can only be granted for full time employment (even if a student only uses it for part time work).

Q: Does use of Curricular Practical Training (CPT) affect my eligibility for Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

A: In some cases, yes. Use of full time CPT for 12 months or more eliminates the participant's eligibility for OPT. However, use of less than 12 months of full time CPT or part time CPT does NOT affect eligibility for OPT.

Q: Can I change my OPT start date once my application has been submitted to USCIS?

A: Maybe; a request may be submitted to USCIS but it is unlikely that USCIS will be able to adjust your dates of employment once they have processed your application.

Q: Can I cancel my OPT request after it has been submitted to USCIS without losing the possibility of doing OPT at a later time?

A: Maybe; it depends on whether USCIS has approved the application for OPT. After it has been approved by USCIS, a student cannot reset the OPT clock. Thus a student must use the time or lose it.

Q: I think I may complete my degree this semester, but I'm not sure. When should I apply for OPT?

A: Typically we recommend a student apply for OPT before they complete their degree requirements, however, if you are unsure, you may want to wait until the end of the semester to apply. You may submit your application for OPT up to 60 days following the completion of your degree (during your grace period).



OPT Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), Con't.

Q: Can I take some time off between completing my degree and when I start OPT?

A: Students who have completed their degree and have maintained their F-1 status are entitled to a 60 day grace period in which time they may prepare to depart the United States, begin a new program of study, change status or prepare for OPT. However, students who wish to complete a full 12 months of OPT must do so within 14 months of the date they completed their degree requirements. Consequently, students should NOT plan to start OPT more than 2 months after they have completed their degree.

Q: Can I take classes while on post-completion OPT?

A: If a student is already approved for post-completion OPT but discovers that coursework must still be completed, the student should take steps to have their program end date extended in SEVIS. The student can then work part time (20 hour/week or less) while enrolled in courses to complete the requirements. The student may resume full time employment using their post-completion OPT after completion of their studies. However, because the OPT was granted as post-completion OPT, the student is subject to the 90 day limitation on unemployment. See the international advisor for more details if you are concerned whether you will complete your studies before applying for post-completion OPT.

Other students who are on OPT may pursue additional studies on a part time basis so long as they continue to work full time. Students engaged in post-completion OPT may not also attend school full time. Additionally, per immigration regulations, "authorization to engage in OPT is automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level." If you are considering taking classes while on post-completion OPT, please first see an international advisor for guidance.



OPT Request Form

Directions: Please complete this form and attach it to the front of your application for OPT. Either drop the completed application off at OIE for review, or make an appointment to see the international advisor and bring the application with you. Remember to apply about 90 days prior to the date you wish to begin employment.

Part I: To be completed by the student.

First Name: _____ **Last Name:** _____

Current Address: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip Code:** _____

CU Email: _____ **Personal Email:** _____

Major: _____ **Level of study:** Bachelor's Master's Doctorate

Degree Program Status:

Anticipated Date of Completion (mm/dd/yr): _____

Date of completion is the date you have fulfilled all coursework and your thesis/dissertation, if applicable.

Type of OPT Requested: Pre-completion Post-completion (see instructions for definition)

Requested OPT Start Date*: _____ **Requested OPT End Date:** _____

*Start Date must be no later than 60 days from completion date.

Have you been authorized for more than 12 months of *full time* CPT for this degree? Yes No

Prior to this request, have you been authorized for any OPT for your current degree? Yes No

Location of OPT (if known at time of application)

Name of Employer/Company: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip Code:** _____

Telephone: _____ **Fax:** _____

Part II: To be filled out by the student's academic advisor

I confirm the above expected completion date is accurate.

Academic Advisor/Major Professor Name **Signature** **Date**