

Optional Practical Training

F-1 Employment Authorization

The USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) defines “optional practical training” as temporary employment directly related to an F-1 student’s academic program. Optional practical training gives international students a work permit to hold a job in the U.S.. F-1 students in theological schools are authorized to receive up to a total of 12 months of practical training either before (pre-) and/or after (post-) completion of studies. There is no course credit associated with OPT. A job offer is not required at the time of application (though it is highly recommended that students obtain a job offer prior to applying for OPT). However, the student is required to be employed full-time while on OPT. OPT may be used to hold any job related to your field of study.

The application process takes approximately three months for both initial applications and renewals. PLEASE APPLY EARLY!

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training:

- The student must have been lawfully enrolled in full-time status for one academic year preceding the OPT application.
- The student must be in valid F-1 status at the time of application. Students who will be completing their degree may apply for OPT 90 days before the end of spring semester and during their 60 day departure preparation period after graduation..
- If applying for OPT based on graduation, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must receive your OPT application **before the end of the 60 day period after graduation.**
- **NOTE:** The post-completion OPT must be directly related to the student’s major area of study.

Limits on the use of OPT

Although students may engage in Optional Practical Training both before and after completion of studies, the maximum amount of time that can be granted is 12 months (including pre-completion OPT and post-completion OPT) per educational level (e.g., masters or doctorate). A student becomes eligible for another 12 months of Optional Practical Training when she/he changes to a higher educational level.

A student may be granted authorization to engage in temporary employment for optional practical training:

1. During the student’s annual vacation and at other times when school is not in session, if the student is currently enrolled, and is eligible for registration and intends to register for the next semester;
2. While school is in session, provided that practical training does not exceed 20 hours a week while school is in session; or
3. After completion of the course of study.

4. A student must complete all practical training within a 14-month period following the completion of study.

Authorization to engage in Optional Practical Training employment is automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level.

OPT before completion of course of study

A student who has coursework remaining in her/his degree program is limited to 20 hours per week of OPT while school is in session.

Students who have completed all course requirements for the degree (excluding thesis or dissertation) may apply for full time OPT. Remember that training done before a degree is completed will count against the 12-month total and reduce time available after the degree is awarded.

OPT after completion of course of study

Optional Practical Training after completion of course of study will only be granted for full-time use. Students may apply for post-completion OPT 90 days before graduation and 60 days after graduation. However, USCIS must receive your OPT application **before the end of the 60 day period after graduation.**

Bring the following to the Coordinator for International Student Support [CIIS]

- Completed Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization [Obtain from CISS or download from the SEVIS site] – mark with the code “(c) (3) (B)” at item 16. Make two copies to bring with the original <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/I-765.pdf>
- Completed Form I-538 [Obtain from CISS] Make two copies to bring with the original
- Three photocopies of all prior Forms I-20
- Three photocopies of your new I-20 showing application for OPT. This I-20 must be dated within 30 days of the OPT application.
- Three photocopies of the identification pages of your passport
- Three photocopies of your I-94 both sides and three copies of any previous EAD’s (work cards)
- Documentation from academic adviser indicating the current academic status and the expected date of completion of studies – on PSR letterhead (see [sample letter](#))
- Check or money order made payable to: “U.S. Citizen Immigration Services” [USCIS] in the amount of the fee required for Form I-765 (see <http://www.uscis.gov>) Do not write or make corrections in the upper portion of the check. Make two copies to bring with the original.
- Two recent, standard passport-style photos. Your name and SEVIS number must be printed in pencil on the back of the photos. For an example of the required photo, see <http://www.travel.state.gov/passport/pptphotos/index.html>.

Dates of OPT Authorization:

The OPT card is approved for a specific beginning and ending date. You are required to submit a preferred beginning and end date for your OPT card. These dates must be given to the CISS at the time of application.

NOTE: CISS will review the total application packet and keep one full copy for your files at PSR. The other full packet copy is for you to keep for your personal file. PSR will send the original packet of materials to the following address by Federal Express:

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship Immigrant Services (USCIS)
California Service Center
24000 Avila Road, 2nd Floor, Room 2302
Laguna Niguel, CA 92677

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of OPT?

The purpose is to allow students the opportunity to engage in off-campus employment, which is related to their major field of study but is neither required nor earning course credit for their degree program.

Do I have to have a job offer to apply for OPT?

It is not necessary to have an offer of employment to apply for OPT. **However, post-completion OPT is dependent upon employment.** While on OPT, you have to be working or be actively looking for a job. Students on post-completion OPT may not have a total of more than 90 days of unemployment during the 12 month period of OPT.

When am I eligible to use OPT?

Students may be authorized for Optional Practical Training with the noted limitations:

- a) During vacation periods (no restriction on hours per week)
- b) During the long semesters (limited to 20 hours per week, but must maintain full time enrollment)
- c) After completion of a course of study (i.e., after graduation) .Work must be full-time and must be completed within 14 months from graduation..

How can my OPT be used?

OPT can be used during your program or saved for after completion of your degree program. Part-time OPT used during your program will be counted at the rate of 50% (two months part-time OPT authorization equals one month full-time OPT). NOTE: Part-time employment is 20 hours per week and less, full-time is 21 hours per week and more.

When may I start working?

OPT is recommended by the CISS but it is authorized by USCIS. CISS will mail your application to USCIS, and it may take USCIS at least 2 months to process your OPT application. Since you may begin working only after receiving the EAD (Employment Authorization Document (or) the "work card"), **we recommend that you apply early to avoid delay in starting your employment.**

What will be the dates of my OPT?

You request the dates of your OPT authorization at the time of application. Discuss with the CISS your preferred dates at the time of application. For post-completion OPT, USCIS requires that the OPT be completed within fourteen months of a student's graduation date. You should take this into account when determining the OPT dates.

When you have received OPT authorization, you use the time indicated on your EAD regardless of whether or not you have actually worked. (For example, if your work dates are 07/20/08 to 07/19/09 but you didn't start working until 9/04/08, your work authorization still expires on 07/19/09.)

How much OPT am I allowed to have?

OPT authorization is allowed for 12 months for every higher degree obtained by a student. It is possible for a student who graduates with a Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. degree to have three separate periods of OPT during his/her stay in the U.S. However, it is not possible to accumulate several years of OPT and apply for a more than 12 months of OPT at a time.

What is my visa status during OPT?

While your OPT application is pending and after you receive OPT approval, your non-immigrant status remains F-1

May I travel while my OPT is pending?

If you have completed your studies and your OPT application has not been approved (if you have not received your EAD), it is **not advisable** to travel outside of the United States. USCIS may request additional information regarding your application, which may be difficult to provide from abroad. If you have an emergency and need to travel before your OPT is approved, please consult the CISS before leaving the U.S.

Important Information After Applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Step One: Mailing the Application. Applications for OPT are mailed to the USCIS California Service Center in Laguna Niguel, California

Step Two: Cashing the Application Fee. The first sign that USCIS is processing your application is the cashing of your check. If the check has not cleared your bank within six weeks, please contact the CISS to investigate the matter.

Step Three: Receiving a USCIS Receipt. USCIS will mail a Receipt Notice to the International Student at the address listed on the Form I-765. The Receipt Notice will have a receipt number, the date of the receipt notice and USCIS website to check on the status of your application: <https://egov.immigration.gov/cris/jsps/caseStat.jsp> USCIS reports that the minimum processing time for an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) is 90 days after the receipt notice date posted on the receipt. Please contact CISS if any information on the receipt is not correct.

Step Four: Processing the Application. The application for an EAD is assigned to an immigration officer who will review the paperwork and approve card production. Once a file has been approved, USCIS will scan the photos and signature card into a computer system. This computer file will later be accessed to produce the work card.

Step Five: Making the EAD. Once the card has actually been made, it will be mailed to the student at the address on the application.

Step Six: Proofing your EAD. When you receive your EAD, please look it over for any errors. If any errors are discovered, please inform the CISS and we will determine next steps.

Reporting Requirements for Students While on OPT

All students on OPT must report to the CISS or the Admissions Office at PSR the following (see [OPT tracking form](#)):

- Current address or any change in name and address
- The name and address of their employer(s)
- Any change to the name and address of the employer(s)
- Any interruption of such employment

NOTE: The OPT reporting procedures are, the time of this writing, still being developed. It is likely that a student on post-completion OPT will be required to report the above information on a USCIS website. When we receive that information, it will be posted here.

Travel and Re-Entry

For students using Optional Practical Training before completion of studies -- follow the same procedures for visits abroad and reentry required of a full-time student (valid passport, I-20 with a valid signature from the CISS or certified persons in the Admissions Office, and valid F-1 entry visa).

Students on Optional Practical Training following completion of studies: A student on OPT following completion of studies who travels outside the U.S. temporarily can be readmitted for

the remainder of the authorized training period, provided the student presents the following:

- The I-20 form with a signature from the CISS or certified persons in the Admissions Office which was signed within the preceding 6 months along with a valid EAD
- Proof of employment in the U.S.
- Students must still have a valid F-1 entry visa and passport.
- If your I-20 did not reflect your graduation date in item 5 after "complete studies not later than," please request a new I-20 from the CISS before traveling abroad on OPT. Your I-20 will be shortened to your graduation date in SEVIS soon after the end of your program.

Summary of Items Needed to Reenter the United States While on OPT after Completion of Studies:

1. Valid passport & valid F-1 entry visa
2. Valid I-20 form endorsed by CISS or certified person in the Admissions Office within the preceding 6 months
3. Valid EAD
4. Letter from your employer showing temporary employment in the authorized field of study.

NOTE: THE EAD YOU RECEIVE WHILE ON OPT IS NOT A TRAVEL DOCUMENT. Give the current immigration restrictions, we do not advise a student on OPT to travel outside the U.S.. Permission to re-enter the U.S. is not guaranteed.

- End -

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