

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Optional Practical Training

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to an F1 student's major area of study and is commensurate with the level of education being sought. An F1 student must apply with USCIS for an Employment Authorization Document (EAD).

There are two types of OPT: Pre-completion OPT and Post-completion OPT:

Pre-completion OPT:

- During the academic year while coursework is being taken: part-time only (20 hrs/week or less)
- During the annual vacation period: full or part time
- After completion of all coursework, excluding dissertation, thesis or graduation research project: full or part time

Post-completion OPT:

- After completion of all degree requirements including dissertation, thesis or graduation research project: full-time only

Who is eligible for Post-Completion OPT?

An F1 student who

- 1) Has enrolled full time for at least one full academic year (two consecutive semesters excluding summer unless summer is required by curriculum for all students on the program);
- 2) is currently in lawful F-1 status;
- 3) has completed all academic requirements for a degree program;
- 4) has not been authorized for 12 months or more of full-time Curriculum Practical Training.

Do I need a job offer to apply for OPT?

No. You do not need to have a job offer to apply for OPT. It is strongly recommended NOT to WAIT until you get a job offer. You can not start the job before receiving the EAD card. File early. Your potential employer may be more willing to offer you the job, knowing that you have applied for OPT.

What is the maximum amount of time that can be authorized for OPT?

A maximum of 12 months full time OPT can be granted at each degree level, Bachelor's, Master's or Doctorate. Since part time pre-completion OPT is only allowed when school is in session, it is counted as 50 percent of full time OPT. For example, two months of part-time OPT is equivalent to one month of full-time OPT.

Can I save my OPT for future use?

No. OPT has to be completed within 14 months from your program completion date. If you don't use it, you will lose it.

I heard of STEM and 29 months OPT . Could you explain?

A student whose major area of study is in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) is eligible for an extension of an additional 17 months of OPT. The STEM students still have to apply for the initial twelve (12) months OPT as all other F1 students. During the first 12-month OPT, if he/she finds an employer that has signed up on E-Verify program, an online system operated jointly by the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration (SSA), he/she may apply for the additional 17 months OPT through OISS at Rutgers Newark.

How many periods of 12-month OPT is an F1 student eligible for?

An F1 student is eligible for one 12-month OPT with each degree level, Bachelor's, Master's or Doctorate. There is no OPT after completing a second degree at any of the same levels even in a completely different field of study from the first degree. For example: A student who has used up the 12 months OPT after completing a Master's degree in Biology will not be eligible for any OPT again after completing a second Master's degree in Finance.

In addition, a student who has used up 12 months OPT at a higher degree level is not eligible for OPT again for a second degree at a lower level. For example: A student returns to school to study for a Master's degree by the end of the 12 months OPT that was approved for a previous Doctorate degree will not be eligible for another 12 months OPT for the Master's degree.

Can I divide my OPT into separate periods?

You may do so at the same program level, provided you maintain F1 status. However, if you apply for 12 months on one application and are approved by USCIS, you will not be able to divide the time. In addition, even if you do not use some of the approved 12-month OPT, you will lose it.

Must I be employed on OPT?

Yes, according to F1 regulations, "during post-completion OPT, F-1 status is dependent upon employment. Students may not accrue an aggregate of more than 90 days of unemployment during any post-completion OPT carried out under the initial post-completion OPT authorization. Students granted a 17-month OPT extension may not accrue an aggregate of more than 120 days of unemployment during the total OPT period comprising any post-completion OPT carried out under the initial post-completion OPT authorization and the subsequent 17-month extension period." If you cannot find a paid professional job in your field, internship or volunteering can also satisfy this requirement.

What is the OPT application timeline?

You **MUST** submit the OPT application to USCIS within ninety (90) days before or up to sixty (60) days after the **completion** date of coursework (usually in situation of a graduate student working on dissertation/thesis) or the **completion** date of all the requirements for your degree program.

- Note: The **COMPLETION** date may be different from the **graduation date**. It is the date a student **COMPLETES** all coursework or degree requirements, not the Commencement date or diploma issuing date. For example, a student who completes all coursework/program requirements on May 15th will lose eligibility to apply for OPT 61 days later on July 15th even if the student is considered graduating on October 1st due to administrative reasons).

How long does it take USCIS to process OPT applications?

It is considered normal process within 90 days for USCIS to adjudicate an OPT application from the date your application is received and entered into the USCIS' petition system. USCIS would not answer your inquiry within the 90 days. It is strongly recommended that you apply early.

What date should I request to start OPT on my application?

Any date within 60 days after your coursework/degree program completion date. The 12-month OPT must be completed within 14 months from your coursework/degree program completion date.

May I begin employment before I receive my EAD card?

No. You must not start working before receiving the EAD card from USCIS, even if the beginning date on your request has passed.

May I travel outside the U.S. while my OPT application is pending with USCIS?

It depends on situations listed below. If you must travel abroad, please make sure your F1 visa is still valid, your I-20 is signed by DSO for travel and your passport is valid at least six months into the future from the date you reenter the U. S.

If you have not completed your degree study yet and your OPT application is pending, you may travel abroad and return to resume studies while OPT application is pending. For example: you may travel during Thanksgiving break if you complete studies in December, or you may travel during spring break if you complete studies in May.

However, if you have completed your studies, it is strongly recommended that you do not plan on leaving the United States until you receive the OPT approval notice or the EAD card from USCIS. If you must travel while OPT is still pending with USCIS, you are advised to arrange to have your OPT approval notice or EAD card sent to you by express mail before you return.

(ATTENTION: If your EAD card is lost in mail, you may not be able to work even if you are permitted to reenter the U.S. unless you apply for a replacement which may take another three months.)

May I travel abroad during OPT with all required documents?

Yes. However, if you have not found a job, your time abroad will be counted as part of the 90 days limit for unemployment.

If you do have an employer, when traveling abroad, you must carry the following documents in order to be able to reenter the U.S. before your OPT ending date:

1. Current I-20 bearing OPT recommendation on Page 3 with OISS travel endorsement signed less than six (6) months earlier.
2. All previous I-20's
3. Passport valid for at least six months into the future from the date you reenter the U. S.
4. Valid F-1 visa (You must apply for a new F1 visa with a U.S. Embassy if your F1 visa is expired.)
5. EAD Card

6. A letter from your current employer (an official company letter)
7. If you have received your EAD card but your F-1 visa stamp in your passport is expired, you may travel to Canada and Mexico for less than 30 days and you carry with you the documents mentioned above.

What visa status am I in while on OPT?

You are still considered in F1 status. OPT is an extension of your F1 program.

How to maintain my F1 status while on OPT?

You must be employed and may not accrue an aggregate of more than 90 days of unemployment.

You are required to report any change of name or address, or interruption of employment to SEVIS through OISS for the duration OPT. OISS is responsible to update your SEVIS record to reflect these reported changes.

Starting a new job, report to OISS:

- Name of the employer
- Start date of employment
- Mailing address for the employer

Changing to a new job (less than 10 days between jobs), report to OISS:

- Name of the previous employer
- Ending date of the employment with the previous employer
- Name of the employer
- Start date of employment

What should I do if I change status while on OPT?

If you change immigration status (F-1 to another status) while on OPT you must inform the OISS of the change and send copies of your new status approval document to OISS so that your F-1 status can be terminated in SEVIS properly.

What ends my OPT?

1. Once the end date of your EAD arrives, your OPT ends. You must stop working immediately. You have a grace period of 60 days to prepare to leave the U.S., return to school full time for another program or file change to another status with USCIS.
2. If you begin studies as a full-time student in another degree program and receive a new I-20 for the new program, your OPT ends automatically even if it is before the ending date on your EAD card.
3. If you change to another status, such as another non-immigrant status like H-1B, your OPT ends.