F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (“OPT”)

Degree-seeking F-1 students can apply for OPT directly related to your major area of study prior to graduation (pre-completion OPT) or during their last semester to work after graduation (post-completion OPT). Students are eligible to participate in pre-completion OPT while school is in session, provided that OPT does not exceed 20 hours per week. To be eligible, you must have been enrolled as a full-time, degree-seeking student for two full semesters (fall and spring semesters or one calendar year) and have maintained lawful F-1 status during that time. To apply, students should gather the documents listed below and make an appointment with an ISSS advisor. We will request OPT in SEVIS, print a new I-20, check your documents, and send your application to USCIS.

Frequently Asked Questions

How Many Months of OPT Can I Receive?

Our office can recommend only one 12-month period of OPT per academic level. For example, we can recommend 12 months of OPT at the end of your bachelor’s degree program and then another 12 months of OPT after you complete a master’s degree. If you earn a degree in a field listed on the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (“STEM”)-Designated Degree Program and have a job offer from an employer that participates in the E-verify program, we can recommend OPT work authorization for an additional 24 months. See our page on STEM Extension for more details.

How Soon (or How Late) Can I Apply for OPT?

You can apply for OPT 90 days before you graduate (or 90 days prior to a dissertation defense date for PhD students) up to 60 days after your graduation date. Each semester, ISSS holds seminars to discuss OPT details and set the deadline for submitting paperwork to our office for review.

What Documents Do I Need in Order to Apply for OPT?

We must review the following documents before generating a new Form I-20 for you:

- USCIS Form I-765 (for question #27 Eligibility Category, enter (c)(3)(A) for pre-completion OPT, (c)(3)(B) for post-completion OPT, or (c)(3)(C) for a STEM Extension)
- Copies of all previous Forms I-20
- Valid credit card, check, or money order for $410 made payable to “US Department of Homeland Security” (*check or money order highly recommended*)
- 2 passport-style photographs (2x2 inches with white background)
- Form I-94 Arrival/Departure record printed from Customs and Border Protection website
- Copies of passport biographical page and visa page
- Academic Advisor Recommendation Form
USCIS will send a Form I-797, Notice of Action, stating that your application has been received (a “receipt notice”) to the mailing address you provide on the Form I-765. You can also submit a Form G-1145 to receive electronic notification that your application was received. The period of OPT work authorization will begin either on the date requested on your I-20, or on the date the employment authorization document (“EAD”) is issued, whichever occurs later. Students who do not apply in a timely manner may not receive a full 12 months of OPT. Average processing time with USCIS is 80-100 days.

PLEASE NOTE: You cannot begin employment until you have received your EAD.

What If I Move or Change Employers While on OPT?

UAB “owns” your I-20 while you are on OPT, and our office is required to update a database any time any of the following information changes:

- Your name or residential address
- Any interruption of employment
- Employer Information – every time your employer changes

*Students can now update their personal address and employer information through SEVP Portal.* SEVP will send students an email shortly after their OPT begins with portal login instructions. Please contact ISSS if you do not receive a login email.

How much time do I have to find a job?

- During post-completion OPT, valid F-1 status depends upon employment.
- You cannot be unemployed more than 90 days during post-completion OPT.
- If you are on a 24-month STEM OPT extension, you cannot be unemployed more than 150 days during your total 36 months of OPT.

What If I Go Back to School During My OPT Authorization Period?

Your OPT work authorization will automatically end if you begin study at another school or at another educational level. You cannot engage in full-time OPT while attending school full-time. For example, if you earn a master’s degree in April and begin working on your post-completion OPT in May, your OPT authorization will end if you begin a PhD program in August.

Can I Travel Internationally While on OPT?

F-1 students with OPT authorization should bring the following documents when travelling internationally: (1) Form I-20 endorsed for travel by ISSS within the last 12 months, (2) your EAD (Employment Authorization Document), and (3) a letter from your OPT employer printed on company letterhead. Please note: It is best to have at least 5 months remaining on your EAC when you re-enter the US. We do not recommend traveling internationally before receiving your EAC. However, after you receive your EAC, we advise you not to depart and attempt to re-enter unless you will be returning to work in the US. Always ask our office before undertaking international travel during OPT, as these guidelines are subject to change.