F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING ("OPT")

Degree-seeking F-1 students can apply for OPT directly related to your major area of study in the following cases: (1) during annual vacation and at other times when school is not in session if you are currently enrolled and intend to register for the next term; (2) while school is in session, provided that OPT does not exceed 20 hours per week; (3) after completion of course requirements, except for a thesis, dissertation, or equivalent (note: you may engage in OPT while continuing to make normal progress towards completing a thesis/dissertation requirement (see catalog for enrollment guidelines during thesis/dissertation period); and (4) after completing your course of study.

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. There are two stages in the process. First, our office generates a new Form I-20 for you recommending OPT work authorization. Second, you gather supporting documents and meet with an F-1 advisor in our office to file an application for work authorization with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

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 either within 90 days before you graduate or 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 #16, 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
- Check for $410 made payable to “US Department of Homeland Security”
- 2 passport-style photographs (see specifications here)
- Form I-94 Arrival/Departure record printed from Customs and Border Protection website
- Copies of biographical page, visa page, and expiration page of current valid passport
ISSS must prepare a new I-20 with OPT authorization. You must come back to ISSS within one week to sign your new I-20. ISSS cannot submit your paperwork to USCIS without your signature on the new I-20. PLEASE NOTE: Your application must be filed with USCIS no more than 30 days after we issue your new I-20.

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 first page of 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 card (“EAC”) 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 80-90 days. USCIS will mail the EAC directly to ISSS. ISSS will notify you when your card arrives.

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

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

Unemployment and Maintaining Status

- 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 EAC, 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.