Optional Practical Training (OPT) Informational Packet for F-1 International Students

Definition

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an opportunity for F-1 international students to participate in professional, temporary employment that is directly related to their major area of study, but not a part of the academic curriculum. This may be done before (Pre-Completion) or after degree completion (Post-Completion).

Eligibility

To be eligible for OPT, you:

- Do NOT need a job offer to apply
- Must be in legal F-1 status
- Must have completed 1 academic year (fall and spring semester)
- Must NOT have been previously authorized for 12 months of Full-Time CPT at the same degree level
- Must NOT have been previously authorized for 12 months of OPT at the same level, or any OPT at a higher degree level

Note: Students with a Language Training I-20 are NOT eligible for OPT.

How Much OPT Do You Have?

- You have 12 months of OPT to use at each higher education level you complete (i.e. Associate's = 12 months, Bachelor's = 12 months, Master's = 12 months, PhD = 12 months)
- Any period of Pre-Completion OPT will deduct from the total 12 months (Note: Part-time (less than 20 hours per week) Pre-Completion OPT will deduct at half the rate, i.e. 2 months of part-time = 1 month deduction from the total 12 months)
- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) students who complete their Associate's degree are not eligible for the 24-month STEM extension. All other higher education levels are eligible after the completion of the initial 12 months of OPT
- Unused periods of eligibility from lower level degrees cannot be accumulated for use with later degrees at a higher level

When to Apply

Generally, you should apply as early as you are eligible to start applying! This will give you the most flexibility to renew your driver's license, get the OPT date you requested, and/or figure out other options should OPT not work out.

Pre-Completion OPT: Your application must be receipted by USCIS **no earlier than 90 days** prior to your requested start date. You may submit your application before you complete your two full-time semesters, but your start date must be after that requirement will be completed. OPT applications, regardless of Pre or Post-Completion, typically take 2-3 months to process.

Post-Completion OPT: Your application must be receipted by USCIS **no earlier than 90 days and no later than 60 days** from program completion date (i.e. I-20 end date). If your current I-20 end date is in a future semester, the end date will be shortened to reflect the anticipated completion at the time your OPT recommendation I-20 is issued.

All OPT applications must be receipted by USCIS **within 30 days** of the DSO's recommendation on the I-20 form.

Employment Specifics

- The work must be in your field of study and average at least **20 hours per week**
- Can be paid or unpaid, as long as you are gaining direct benefits and labor laws are not being violated
- Regular employment, multiple short term employers, and self-employment all qualify
- Anywhere in the United States, but not outside of the U.S.
- You must report any change/addition/loss of employer and change of address to the International Programs Office **within 10 days** during your period of OPT
- You may not exceed an accumulative of 90 days of unemployment during your OPT period

How to Apply

1. Complete the USCIS Form I-765. Download from https://www.uscis.gov/ under Forms > I-765. Do NOT "File Online" – this will result in an incomplete application.
2. Complete USCIS Form G-1145 (Optional). Download from https://www.uscis.gov/ under Forms > G-1145. This allows you to receive an email or text message when your application is received by USCIS.
3. Make an appointment with Kari Olsen in the International Programs Office (SC118) and bring the following documents:

    a. Completed original Form I-765
    b. Form G-1145 (optional)
    c. 2 passport style photos taken within the last 30 days
    d. Photocopy of your passport page showing your biographical information
    e. Photocopy of your visa most recently used when entering the U.S.
    f. I-94 printout

4. The DSO will review your documents and determine your eligibility. Bring your questions regarding forms, OPT in general, or reporting requirements after OPT to the appointment as well!

5. We recommend you mail the application in a verifiable manner (such as certified mail with proof of delivery receipt).

For US Postal Service	**For non-US Postal Service (such as FedEx, UPS, etc.**
USCIS PO Box 21281 Phoenix, AZ 85036	USCIS Attn: AOS 1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S, Suite 100 Phoenix, AZ 85034

Don't Forget to include the following in your mailing:

1. **$410.00** (U.S. Check or money order made payable to **U.S. Department of Homeland Security**)
2. **2 passport style photos taken within 30 days** of filing your application
3. **G-1145** (optional)
4. **I-765** original
5. **Electronic I-94 printout**
6. **Copy of Visa**
7. **Copy of passport biographical page**
8. **Copy of previously issued EADs**, if any
9. **Copy of all previous I-20s, including OPT I-20**

Post Filing Tips – What You Should Know

- Do NOT continue working in an on-campus position once you have completed your academic program
- If your OPT application is still pending over 90 days from the day USCIS receipted it, contact the International Programs Office
- If your OPT application is still pending past your 60-day grace period, you are legal to remain in the U.S. until you receive an answer
- Travel out of the U.S. while *waiting for OPT approval* is not advised.
- Do NOT start working before the start date on your EAD card
- Do not promise your employer you can start working on a specific date without having the EAD card and knowing your official start date
- OPT reporting is extremely important for staying legal – updated the SEVP Portal with changes to your employment status
- If you travel outside of the U.S. during your OPT period and will return to your job, obtain a travel signature on your I-20 from the International Programs Office
- If you decide to leave the country for good before your OPT period officially ends, let the International Programs Office know
- If you have filed for a change of immigration status, let the International Programs Office know
- You have a 60-day grace period after the completion of your OPT