

Optional Practical Training

What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows F-1 students who are maintaining their status to take part in a training experience that is directly related to the student's major area of study. The purpose is to allow F-1 students an opportunity to apply their education in a work environment during or after completing a degree program.

Who is eligible for OPT?

Any F-1 student who has been maintaining legal status for at least one academic year is eligible to apply for OPT. However, students who have been authorized for one year or more full-time Curricular Practical Training are not eligible for OPT.

What are pre-completion and post-completion OPT?

Students may apply for work permission to be used before program completion (pre-completion OPT), after graduation (post-completion OPT) or a combination of the two. Students may engage in a maximum of 12 months of OPT per educational level. (Please note that students who have completed degrees in approved science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) fields may be eligible for a 24-month extension.) Part-time, pre-completion OPT is subtracted at half the rate when calculating the amount of work permission granted.

Pre-completion: Students may apply for pre-completion OPT prior to the completion of their degree. Students may apply for either part-time work permission (20 hours a week or less) or full-time work permission (more than 20 hours per week, available during breaks as long as the student intends to enroll in the next term).

Post-completion OPT: Students may apply for post-completion OPT for work experience to be engaged in after students complete their program of study. This work permission must be full time.

When should students apply for OPT?

Pre-completion: Students may apply up to 90-days prior to the requested start date of the OPT. There is no deadline, but students must have an approved Employment Authorization Document (EAD or Form I-765) prior to beginning the employment.

Post-completion: Students may apply up to 90 days prior to the completion of their studies to no later than 60 days after completion of their studies. The requested start date cannot be more than 60 days beyond the program end date. Students must properly file the application no later than 30 days after the Associate Director for International Students recommends the OPT in SEVIS as evidenced on the new Form I-20 issued for the application.

Students applying for the 24-month STEM extension must apply prior to the expiration of their current EAD.

How does a student apply for OPT?

Please see the Associate Director for International Students for more information on specific application procedures.

What if students apply for OPT prior to obtaining a job?

Students may apply for OPT without having a job offer. However, students are limited in the amount of time they may remain in the US without employment.

What if a student has periods of unemployment?

During post-completion OPT, an F-1 student's legal status is dependent on being employed. Students may not be unemployed for more than 90 days during the original authorized period. Students must count each day of unemployment, including weekends, towards the 90-day limit.

How many hours a week does a student need to work during post-completion OPT?

A student must work at least 20 hours per week in a qualifying position to be considered employed. If a student has a variable schedule, within a month, it should average out to at least 20 hours per week.

What types of employment are allowed?

- Multiple employers
- Short-term multiple employers
- Contractual or work for hire positions
- Self-employed business owner
- Employment through an agency or consulting firm
- Paid employment
- Unpaid employment (Intern or volunteer) Must be able to evidence at least 20 hours of work per week, and must not violate labor laws.

See the Associate Director for International Students for more information on each of these types of employment.

Can students travel while on OPT?

Yes, with some precautions. Students must have the following documents with them for their return to the U.S.:

- valid passport,
- valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from the USCIS,
- valid F-1 visa,
- Form I-20 signed for travel,
- evidence of a job or job offer in terms of a verification letter or pay stubs. (If the work experience is unpaid, students would be wise to bring financial support documents as well.)
- Students must not leave the US after their program end date without an approved EAD.

If your F-1 visa has expired, it is not advisable to travel as it is difficult to renew one's visa while on OPT.

How does travel impact the period of unemployment?

Time spent outside the U.S. during an approved period of OPT counts towards the 90-day limit unless the student remains employed and on leave, or the student is traveling for the employer.

What information and through what method should students report information to the Associate Director for International Students while on OPT?

Students need to report the following information to the Associate Director for International Students through e-mail:

- Change of address of the student
- New job: Name and mailing address of new employer along with the start date of employment
- Change to a new job: Name of previous employer and the end date of employment; name and mailing address of new employer along with the start date of employment
- More the 10 days of unemployment: Indicate “Unemployed” and the ending date of the last job.
- Multiple short-term gigs: Report at the beginning of the first gig and indicate “Multiple short-term gigs”
- Work for hire: Indicate “Self-employed work for hire and indicate the start date of the contract.
- Work for hire with more than 10 days between contract or new job: Indicate “Self-employed work for hire”, that the student has no current contract, and the ending date of the last contract worked.
- Self-employed business owner: Indicate “Self-employed business owner” and the date went into business.
- Self-employed end of business: Indicate “Self-employed business owner” and the date business closed or no longer worked for the business full-time.
- Student decides to exit the U.S. and complete OPT prior to the OPT end date: Indicate “Completing OPT and exiting the U.S. along with the date of exit.

Please note that many of these updates can now be made by the student through the OPT portal.

What documents should students retain regarding their OPT authorization?

- Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- Proof that the employment relates to the students major area of study. Such proof might include a copy of the job advertisement, a job description or a letter from the supervisor indicating the position requirements and job duties.
- Evidence of the employment dates and contact information for the company and supervisor. Human Resources will often issue employment letters of verification.
- Pay stubs that show the number of hours worked each pay period.