



## F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING GENERAL INFORMATION

Optional Practical Training is an employment benefit of the F-1 status. It allows F-1 students to gain practical employment experience in their field of study for a maximum of 12 months. The work authorization for OPT is the Employment Authorization Document or EAD card, issued by USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services).

**Post-completion OPT:** OPT authorized for work after the student's program completion date.

**Pre-completion OPT:** OPT authorized for work before the student's program completion date.

### To be eligible for Optional Practical Training, you must:

- have been lawfully enrolled on a full-time basis for one full academic year;
- currently be maintaining a full-time program of study and valid F-1 status; and
- work in a job directly related to your major field of study.

### IMPORTANT NOTES:

- You do **not** need a job offer *prior to applying for OPT*.
- During post-completion OPT there is a 90-day limitation on unemployment; therefore, F-1 Status dependent upon employment.

### 17-month OPT extension Eligibility:

Effective April 8, 2008, a student with a degree in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) field can apply for a 17-month extension of their 12 month OPT, for a maximum of 29 months. In order to qualify, a student must meet all of the following requirements:

- The student is already participating in approved post-completion OPT and working in a job directly related to the student's major area of study;
- The student has earned a bachelor's or master's degree listed on the STEM Designated Degree Program List (visit <http://www.ice.gov/sevis> for the STEM degree list);
- The student has accepted a job offer or is already working for a U.S. employer registered in the government's E-Verify employment verification program (visit <http://www.uscis.gov> for information about E-Verify);
- The employer agrees to report the termination or departure of an OPT employee to the DSO at the student's school (i.e. International Student Advisor at CIE);
- The student has not previously received a 17-month OPT extension after earning a STEM degree; and
- The student has maintained F-1 status.

### When to Apply:

Apply early! Standard processing time for an I-765 application is **90 days** from the date of receipt by USCIS. All students are required to file form I-765 with USCIS within **30 days of CIE International Student Advisor's recommendation date for OPT**.

**Selecting an OPT Start Date:**

You have to select your OPT start date, which must fall within 60 days from your program completion date on the I-20. If you are applying late, it is generally safer to choose a later date in your grace period to ensure receipt of your EAD card by your requested OPT start date. *Note: the OPT start date will be the date you requested or the date of USCIS approval, whichever is later.*

**When can I begin OPT?**

You can only begin employment, including volunteering, if you have met all the following requirements:

- You have received your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card
- The date of your authorized employment period has begun (see dates on your EAD card)
- You have completed the requirements for your program of study\*

**Cancelling or Changing OPT dates:**

Once your OPT application is approved by USCIS, it may not be changed or cancelled. This means that once an EAD card has been issued, situations such as unexpected delays in completing degree requirements, inability to find an appropriate job or loss of a job may result in loss of otherwise eligible time to work.

*Note: If you have concerns about cancelling your OPT request or changing your OPT start date, contact your International Student Advisor at CIE, The I-765 application fee is non-refundable.*

**Changing Employers while on OPT:**

You can change employers or have multiple employers during your 12 months of OPT as long as employment is directly related to your field of study and appropriate with your degree level. As of April 8, 2008, students must report any change in employment status and employer name and address to the school that maintains their immigration record (i.e. CIE) within 10 days. See complete reporting requirements for more details.

**Unemployment while on OPT and Volunteer Work:**

OPT employment must be a minimum 20 hours per week. Each day during your post-completion OPT period when you do not have qualifying employment counts as a day of unemployment unless you are traveling on business or your employer has authorized your leave. Volunteering in your field of study at the correct degree level at least 20 hours per week counts as qualifying OPT employment.

Important note: Students authorized for 12 months of post completion OPT cannot have more than a total of 90 days of unemployment without jeopardizing their status—ask your CIE advisor about volunteer work. Pre-completion OPT applicants are not subject to unemployment rules.

**Employment Related To Major:**

OPT is intended to allow F-1 students to gain experience in their field of study. Working in a job that is not related to your major is a violation of F-1 status. CIE suggests maintaining proof of each job you have on OPT. Keep record of the position title, duration of employment, supervisor's information and a description of the job. If it is not clear from the job description how your job is related to your field of study, obtain an official letter from your employer with an explanation of how your degree is related to the work performed. Have the letter(s) with you at the time of travel outside the U.S.

**Early Departure from the U.S. while on OPT:**

Students must inform CIE if they plan on departing the U.S. permanently while on OPT.

**Transferring to Another School or Beginning New Academic Program:**

If you plan on transferring to another school you will need to contact your International Student Advisor to coordinate the release of your SEVIS record. You may request to also have your SEVIS record released while you are on OPT or during your 60-day grace period. Once the SEVIS record is released you cannot continue working on OPT.

**Travel Advisory while on OPT:**

While on OPT, you're still considered to be maintaining your F-1 status, so you may travel abroad and re-enter the U.S. As the travel documents depend on the timing of your re-entry to the U.S., read carefully the travel documents that are required for travel abroad based on your program completion and OPT application status. Students who do not meet these requirements *may not* be allowed to re-enter the U.S. While re-entry to the U.S. is never guaranteed (even if you have all the required documents), CIE strongly recommends against traveling towards the end of your OPT period.

**Travel Advisory while on OPT continued:**

Remember that time spent outside the U.S. during your OPT period will be considered unemployment unless you are traveling on business or your employer has authorized your leave. If you travel while employed either during a period of leave authorized by your employer or as part of your employment, CIE suggests obtaining a verification letter from the employer that specifies the purpose and the dates of your trip. Consult with CIE anytime you travel outside the U.S.

**After completing your program and after getting your EAD:**

- A valid passport (CIE recommends that your passport be valid for 6 months at the time of re-entry)
- A valid F-1 visa
- A SEVIS I-20, endorsed for travel by the International Student Advisor within the last 6 months
- An Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- An employment offer or verification letter. Include position title, dates of employment, dates of authorized leave, supervisor's name and contact information on company letterhead.

**After completing your program and before getting your EAD:**

- A valid passport (CIE recommends that your passport be valid for 6 months at the time of re-entry)
- A valid F-1 visa
- A SEVIS I-20, endorsed for travel by the International Student Advisor within the last 6 months
- OPT Receipt Notice (I-797)
- An employment offer letter: Include position title, dates of employment, dates of authorized leave, supervisor's name and contact information on company letterhead.

**Before completing your program and before getting your EAD:**

- A valid passport (CIE recommends that your passport be valid for 6 months at the time of re-entry)
- A valid F-1 visa
- A SEVIS I-20, endorsed for travel by the International Student Advisor within the last 6 months
- OPT Receipt Notice (I-797)
- An employment offer letter: Include position title, dates of employment, dates of authorized leave, supervisor's name and contact information on company letterhead.
- Proof of registration (unofficial transcript or official transcript from the Registrar's Office)

**Change of Status Application (i.e. H-1B, J-1, F-2, U.S. Permanent Resident, etc.)**

Notify CIE if you apply for a change of status to another immigration status. When your application is approved, provide CIE an electric copy of your I-797 approval notice, I-94, and or *green card*.

## REGULATIONS FOR MAINTAINING F-1 STATUS WHILE ON OPT

### Student Responsibilities

1. You may not begin OPT until you have received your EAD card, your license to work on OPT, from USCIS and until the OPT date on the EAD card. The EAD card will have your photograph and signature, and will also indicate the exact dates of your authorized employment. For current processing times, visit <https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/processTimesDisplayInit.do> (photo)
2. Email your international Student Advisor an electronic copy of your EAD card.
3. Continue to work in your field of study and at the correct degree level. You cannot have more than 90 days of unemployment during the entire 12-month OPT period.
4. Report changes of your address, employment status, employer name and address to CIE within **10 days**. (website)

### Student Reporting Requirements During OPT

Report the following information to CIE within 10 days of any change an OPT:

- Legal name

- Residential or mailing address
- Email address (permanent, non-UMW)
- Employer name and address
- Employment/Unemployment status
- Departure from the U.S. (permanent leave)

### **Types of activity that constitute employment while on OPT**

An F-1 nonimmigrant on post-completion OPT avoids “unemployment” when his or her activity constitutes “employment.” SEVP’s OPT Policy Guidance [7.2.1] states that the following activities are considered allowable employment on both pre-completion and standard post-completion OPT, provided that the job is directly related to the student’s program of study. While a student engages in such activity during a period of post-completion OPT, he or she is not considered “unemployed”:

- **Regular paid employment in a position directly related to the student’s program of study.**
  - For post-completion OPT
  - Students may work for multiple employers, as long as it is directly related to the student’s program of study.
- **Payment by multiple short-term multiple employers**
- **Work for hire (i.e. contract work)**
- **Self-employed business owner**
- **Employment through an agency**
- **Volunteers or unpaid interns**