OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (F-1)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment authorization that is related to an F-1 student’s academic program. The work done does not count towards course credit; therefore it is the student’s option to apply for OPT. The OPT program may be used during a degree program as well as after completion of course requirements. The application process takes approximately up to three months for both initial applications and renewals.

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training:

- The student must have been lawfully enrolled in full-time status for one academic year preceding the OPT application and must be in valid F-1 status at the time of application.
- If applying for OPT based on graduation, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must receive your OPT application BEFORE the official completion/graduation date. Please apply early!

Bring the following to the Center for International and Experiential Education:

- Completed Form I-765 – included in this packet
- Check or money order for $380 made payable to: Department of Homeland Security (do not write or make corrections in the upper portion of the check). If using a personal check, make sure that you maintain enough money in your account.
- 2 recent, passport-style photos on white background. The photos must be 2 x 2 inches; the images must be 1 inch from the hair to the chin and 1 1/4 inch from eye height to the bottom of the photo. Your name and I-94 number must be printed in pencil on the back of the photos. For an example photo, see http://www.travel.state.gov/passport/pptphotos/index.html
- Completed Academic Advisor Recommendation Form with specific graduation date or completion of course requirements. If you are double-majoring, please be sure to bring a letter for each major.
- Copies of the following: I-94 Form (front and back); passport name page expiration date (passport must be valid); first page of your current I-20, previous EAD (employment cards), if any

New I-20 reflecting OPT will be issued by the International advisor

Once your documents are reviewed by the International Advisor, you will need to mail your OPT application to:

USCIS Phoenix Lockbox
P.O. Box 21281
Phoenix, Arizona 85036
- **Reporting requirements when your OPT is approved**

While on OPT, the F-1 visa student is responsible by law to report within ten (10) days any changes to their U.S. personal address and email; their employer’s name, address, and telephone number; and periods of employment to the Office of International Programs.

**Dates of OPT Authorization:**

The Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card is approved for a specific beginning and ending date. You are required to submit a preferred beginning and end date for your EAD/OPT card. These dates must be given to the international advisor at the time of application. Please have these dates ready to give to the advisor. If you are unsure, you may discuss this with the advisor at the time of application.

Beginning Date: _____ / _____ / _________

End Date: _____ / _____ / _________

**Month / Day / Year**

**What is the purpose of OPT?** The purpose is to allow students the opportunity to engage in off-campus employment, which is related to their major field of study, but is neither required nor earning course credit for their degree program.

**Do I have to have a job offer to apply for OPT?** It is not necessary to have an offer of employment to apply for OPT. However, while on OPT, you have to be working or be actively looking for a job. In the future, if you want to apply for other benefits, the USCIS may require verification of employment while on OPT.

**When am I eligible to use OPT?** Students may be authorized for Optional Practical Training with the noted limitations:

- a) During vacation periods (no restriction on hours per week)
- b) During the long semesters (limited to 20 hours per week, but must maintain full-time enrollment)
- c) After completion of course requirements and admission to candidacy (for Ph.D. students), after completion of all course requirements except for thesis or report (for Master’s students). Work can be full-time or part-time.
- d) After completion of a course of study (i.e., after graduation). Work must be full-time.

**How can my OPT be used?** OPT can be divided into shorter segments. OPT can be used during your program or saved for after completion of your degree program. Part-time OPT used during your program will be counted at the rate of 50% (two months part-time OPT). NOTE: Part-time employment is 20 hours per week and less, full-time is 21 hours per week and more.

**When can I start working?** OPT is recommended by an International Advisor but is authorized by USCIS. It may take USCIS up to 90 days to process your OPT application. Since you may begin working only after receiving the EAD (Employment Authorization Document or the “employment card”) we recommend that you apply early to avoid delay in starting your employment.

**What will be the dates of my OPT?** You request the dates of your OPT authorization at the time of application. Discuss with the International Advisor your preferred dates at the time of application. For post-completion OPT, USCIS requires that the OPT be completed within fourteen months of an international student’s graduation date. You should take this into account when determining the dates for your OPT.
When you have received OPT authorization, you use the time requested regardless of whether or not you have actually worked. (Ex.: Your work dates are 07/20/05 to 07/19/06 but you didn’t start working until 12/05. Your work authorization still expires on 07/19/06).

**How much OPT am I allowed to have?** OPT authorization is allowed for 12 months for every higher degree obtained by a student. It is possible for a student who graduates with a Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. degree to have three separate periods of OPT during his/her stay in the U.S. However, it is not possible to accumulate several years of OPT and apply for a more than 12 months of OPT at a time.

**What is my visa status during OPT?** While your OPT application is pending and after you receive OPT approval, your non-immigrant status remains F-1.

**Can I travel while my OPT is pending?** If you have completed your studies and your OPT application has not been approved (if you have not received your EAD), it is not advisable to travel outside of the United States. The USCIS may request additional information regarding your application, which may be difficult to provide from abroad. If you have an emergency and need to travel before your OPT is approved, please consult an International Advisor at the International Student Services office before leaving the U.S.

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**Important Information to Know After Applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT)**

**Step One: Mailing the Application** Applications for OPT are mailed to the USCIS Phoenix Lockbox in Phoenix, Arizona.

**Step Two: Cashing the Application Fee** The first sign that USCIS is processing your application is the cashing of the check. If the check has not cleared your bank within six weeks please contact our office to investigate the matter.

**Step Three: Receiving a USCIS Receipt** USCIS will mail a Receipt Notice to ISS (address listed on the Form I-765). The Receipt Notice will have a receipt number, the date of the receipt notice and USCIS website to check on the status of your application: [https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp) when **ISS receives the receipt, you will be notified to come and pick it up at the Multicultural and International Life front desk.** The USCIS reports that the processing time for an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) is 90 days after the receipt notice date posted on the receipt.

**Step Four: Processing of the Application** The application for an EAD is assigned to an immigration officer who will review the paperwork and approve card production. Once a file has been approved, the USCIS will scan the photos and signature card into a computer system. This computer file will later be accessed to produce the work card.

**Step Five: Make the EAD** Once the card has actually been made it will be mailed to ISS (the address on the application). **When the EAD is received, ISS will immediately send you an email that the card is here waiting for you to pick it up at the front desk.**

**Step Six: Proofing your EAD** when you receive your EAD please look it over for any errors. If any errors are discovered please inform our office so that we can determine whether or not it is necessary to send it in for correction.
Before Graduating: For students using Optional Practical Training before completion of studies, follow the same procedures for visits abroad and reentry required of a full-time student. (Valid passport, I-20 with a valid signature from an immigration advisor from ISS, and valid F-1 entry visa).

Student on Optional Practical Training following completion of studies: A student on OPT following completion of studies who travels outside the U.S. can temporarily be readmitted for the remainder of the authorized training period, provided the student presents the I-20 form with a signature from an immigration advisor from ISS which was endorsed within the preceding 6 months along with a valid EAD, as well as, proof of employment in the U.S. Students must still have a valid F-1 entry visa and passport. If your I-20 did not reflect your graduation date in item 5 after “complete studies not later than”, please request a new I-20 from an immigration advisor at ISS before traveling abroad on OPT. Your I-20 will be shortened to your graduation date in SEVIS soon after the end of your program.

Summary of Items Needed to Reenter the United States
(While on Optional Practical Training after Completion of Studies)
1. Valid passport & valid F-1 entry visa
2. Valid I-20 form endorsed by an immigration advisor from ISS within the preceding 6 months
3. Valid EAD
4. Letter from your employer showing temporary employment in the authorized field of study

Optional Practical Training & Travel Issues

1. Now that I’ve turned in my OPT application, can I travel outside the U.S. while I wait for the card to come?

Officially, if you have an Optional Practical Training application pending with USCIS, you are not supposed to leave the country. If you do, USCIS may consider this departure as an abandonment of the application. Therefore, ISS’s official recommendation is that you DO NOT travel outside of the US while your OPT application is pending.

2. What if I have to travel out of the country for an emergency?

It does happen that students do indeed leave the country during this time period. The most common arrangement is that they ask a trusted friend or relative in the U.S. to pick-up the card for them from ISS and mail it to them by courier, so that the student can re-enter the U.S. with all of the required documents. If you are considering this path, consider that there are risk involved in this scenario: Your card could get lost in the mail or USCIS could send back your application due to some minor technicality (i.e. pictures, you forgot to sign a form, etc..), and if you are not in the country, it will slow the entire process even more.

3. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. While on OPT?

You will need your I-20 that has been recently endorsed on the travel line by ISS, the Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) from the USCIS, your valid passport, and a current visa stamp. It might also be a good idea to carry your Offer of Employment letter with you as well. Please note that we cannot sign your I-20 for travel
while your OPT is pending with USCIS. Once the OPT is approved and you have received the EAD card, we will sign your I-20 for travel.

4. What if I still have some time left on my student program? Can I travel during that time, even though my I-20 shows that I’ve been recommended for OPT but it is still pending with USCIS?

Yes. You must be returning as a student to complete academic requirements. For example, a student who has applied for OPT in May, is enrolled during the summer, but who doesn’t graduate until August, may still travel as a student until their graduation date by re-entering the U.S. with a valid passport, current visa stamp, and the I-20 endorsed by ISS. We recommend that you carry with you a Letter of Good Standing which can be obtained from the Registrar’s Office.

5. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?

If you are going to Canada or Mexico or other contiguous territories (except for Cuba), and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with a valid passport, your EAD card and an I-20 that has been recently signed by ISS. Be sure NOT to turn in your I-94 card. You must keep it in your passport to re-enter the U.S. on an expired visa. If you are traveling elsewhere, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp.

6. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?

The risk of denial for a F-1 visa renewal when you are on OPT is higher than while you are in your active student program, as the fact that the focus of your stay in the U.S. now is that of working rather than going to school, it may be seen as an avenue for adjustment of status to permanent residence. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application could be denied.

7. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?

You need to take a valid passport, your I-20 recently endorsed by a student immigration advisor in ISS your EAD card, and if you already have employment, you would be well-advised to take an official Offer of Employment letter showing your salary, location of where you will be working, job duties, and beginning date. You should only take a letter if the job is truly temporary and will end before or by the end of your practical training time. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

8. Do I still need to get the ISS travel signature on my I-20 during the period of my OPT?

Yes, during your OPT, if you need to travel outside the U.S., you need to have a recent signature on your I-20. If you are not located in San Antonio mail the original I-20 to ISS for the travel endorsement well in advance of your departure date from the U.S. It is advised that you send the I-20 through express mail and enclose a self-address, pre-paid express mail envelope for ISS to return your I-20.

Mailing Address:

DePauw University
100 Memorial Student Union Building
408 S. Locust St
Greencastle, IN 46135 USA
9. I want to leave the U.S. for a little while during the time my OPT application is in process, but I need to return to the U.S. before the card arrives. I have a tourist visa that is valid for 10 years. Can’t I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa (or another visa) while I’m waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?

If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with a B visa or another type of visa, you will have an I-94 card that shows that you have been admitted under that particular visa status. This means that your F-1 status is invalid. Hence, your OPT application and card will be invalid.

10. I need to travel outside the U.S. and re-enter before the card arrives. Can’t I just re-enter using the I-20, my passport, and my valid F-1 visa?

Without the EAD card you will not be able to re-enter the U.S., as the OPT has been recommended on the third page of your I-20. This recommendation indicates to the Port of Entry officer that you should be carrying an EAD card with you. Please note: students who are still enrolled (see # 4) are allowed to re-enter the U.S. even if their card has not yet been approved.