Optional Practical Training (OPT) Guide

For F-1 International Students

UAMS Graduate School
What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

• OPT is an employment benefit for F-1 students
  • It is available both before and after completing a degree program.
    • *Available for Ph.D. students who have completed all course work and are just working on dissertation hours.

• Employment must be in your field of study.
• A job is not required to apply for OPT.
• One year of OPT is available at each higher degree level.
• An extension of 17 months is available to students who are STEM majors.
Important Things to Remember:

1. You must be enrolled in your academic program for **one full academic year** before applying for OPT.

2. OPT application must be received by USCIS no earlier than 90 days **before program completion** and no later than 60 days **after program completion**.

3. It can take up to 3 months to receive the EAD (Employment Authorization Document) from USCIS.

4. You cannot start work until you have received your EAD card **and** your start date has arrived.

5. The dates that you submit for OPT cannot be changed after application is submitted.

6. An OPT application cannot be cancelled or withdrawn once it has been approved.

7. Students are required to continue to be in touch with the International Student Adviser while on OPT and must report any address and employment changes within 10 days of information changing.
Things to Consider When Applying for OPT:

1. Will you graduate at the end of the semester?
2. Are you going to be beginning a new program of study in the next 12 months?
3. Are you going to be traveling while your OPT application is processing?
Graduation and OPT

• Students should only apply for OPT if they are certain they will complete their program of study.
• PhD students are allowed to apply for OPT after they have completed their coursework and are working to complete and defend their dissertation.
• Verification of program completion with your program advisor is required to apply for OPT.
Beginning New Program in The Next 12 Months

• USCIS regulations state that you are not allowed to participate in OPT and begin a new program of study at the same time.

• Once you begin a new program of study your OPT will be cancelled.

• If you begin a new program of study and remain on OPT you are subject to immediate termination of F-1 status.
Traveling and OPT Processing

• Travel is **NOT RECOMMENDED** while the OPT application is processing.
• Customs and Border Patrol can possibly not allow you back in to the country and cancel your OPT application if you travel while this is processing.
• Please plan accordingly and talk to the International Student Adviser before planning travel and applying for OPT.
OPT Timeline

- OPT Application Submission: Up to 90 days before your program end date indicated on your I-20.
- OPT Processing Time: Up to 3 months after the application is submitted (can be shorter or longer depending on application time).
- OPT start date has to be within 60 days of your program end date.
- You cannot change your OPT start date once submitting your application to Texas Service Center.
- The International Student Adviser WILL NOT set your OPT start date for you.
Choosing OPT Start Date and Applying

- When it comes to applying for OPT, earlier is better!
  - Applying for OPT at least 90 days before your program end date will better ensure that you will receive your card in time to begin future employment.

- If you don’t have a job at the time of OPT application and receive one after you cannot start the job until your start date on your EAD card.

- If you apply for OPT late and set your start date for the last day of your 60 day grace period you could use OPT time.
Optimizing Process Application

Part One
1. Obtain Advisor signature on Academic Program Verification Form.
2. Complete I-765 Form
3. Complete G-1145 Form
4. Choose OPT start date
5. Obtain 2 passport size photos
6. Obtain check or money order for $380 payable to USCIS
7. Bring your passport, I-94, and all previous I-20s
8. Read, sign, and date OPT Statement of Understanding
OPT Application Process

Part Two
Contact International Student Adviser for appointment to process OPT Application Packet.

*Note: OPT I-20 will not be processed and given to the student unless all required documents and forms are signed and returned in packet.

Part Three
After meeting with International Student Adviser send your OPT Application Packet via Certified Mail to Texas Service Center. You should receive a receipt from USCIS within 10 business days.
Traveling Abroad While on OPT

- Traveling is not recommended, but if you must do so, please make sure you have the following documentation to re-enter the U.S.:
  - A valid passport
  - A valid F-1 visa stamp
  - Your OPT I-20 with a valid travel endorsement signed on page 2 by the International Student Adviser. Travel endorsement is valid for 6 months while on OPT.
  - EAD Card
  - Letter from sponsor for financial support.
  - Job offer/continuing job letter.

- Please contact the International Student Adviser before traveling outside the U.S. on OPT.
Reporting Requirements for OPT

• The following **MUST** be kept up to date while on OPT. **Failure to report within 10 business days could result in F-1 termination.**
  • Your Name
  • Your Residential Address
  • Your Phone and Email Address
  • Employer Name
  • Employer Address
  • Start Date of Employment
  • More than 10 days of unemployment (During 12-month OPT, students may not be unemployed for more than 3 months in total.)
  • Date of exiting the U.S. after OPT is complete or update of changes to status.
OPT Helpful Links

- F-1 OPT After Graduation
- F-1 STEM Extension
- F-1 Student Information