Optional Practical Training (OPT)

A Guide to Working Off Campus for F-1 Visa Holders
What is OPT?

Work experience in the U.S. related to an F-1 student’s major to provide practical training during or upon completion of a degree program.
### What kind of work can I do with OPT?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible</th>
<th>Not possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Paid, unpaid or volunteer positions</td>
<td>- Work unrelated to your major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Multiple employers</td>
<td>- On-campus employment through Student Employment unless enrolled in a higher level degree program at UR for the next available term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Work for hire as contractor or consultant</td>
<td>- Work for UR after graduation UNLESS the job is a faculty, staff or other professional position recruited through Human Resource Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-employed business owner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Agency or consulting firm</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
How long is OPT?

- 12 month maximum at each higher educational level for non-STEM majors
- Cannot combine 12 month OPT periods
- 24-month extension for qualifying STEM majors
### When can I use OPT?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-completion</th>
<th>Post-completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Must be used BEFORE graduation</td>
<td>Must be used AFTER graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job offer is REQUIRED</td>
<td>Job offer is NOT REQUIRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time during semester (20 hour per week maximum including on-campus employment); Full-time during official school breaks</td>
<td>At least 20 hours per week or an average of 20 hours per week in 1-month for variable schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time will be deducted from 12 month maximum (part-time is calculated at full-time equivalent, e.g. 6 months part-time=3 months full-time)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What is required for OPT?

- Valid F-1 status and good UR standing at time of application
- Physical presence in the U.S.
- Full-time enrollment in any status that does not prohibit full-time study for at least 1 academic year by employment start date
- Not having been approved for 12 months of OPT at same degree level
- Not having used 12 months or more of full-time CPT
What is NOT required for OPT?

- A job offer for post-completion (except for 24-month STEM extension)
- Approval by the Office of International Education (USCIS approves OPT)
- Working in a particular U.S. location (work can be done anywhere in the U.S.)
What is the earliest date I can apply for OPT?

**Pre-completion**
- 90 days before completing 1st full academic year
- If you have completed 1st full academic year, 90 days before employment start date

**Post-completion**
- 90 days before graduation
- Applications received 91 or more days before graduation will be rejected and you will have to re-apply with a new application form and fee
- Must apply separately for pre- and post- completion
What is the latest date I can apply for OPT?

- **December 1** in the fall semester
- **May 1** in the spring semester

- Although immigration regulations allow students to apply for post-completion OPT up to 60 days after graduation, the Office of International Education will NOT consider applications after the stated deadlines except by prior arrangement or personal hardship.

- Application must be received at USCIS within 30 days of OPT recommendation and no later than the end of the 60 day grace period after your graduation.
How do I choose my OPT start and end dates?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-completion</th>
<th>Post-completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Known or estimated dates of employment</td>
<td>Start date anytime from 1 to 60 days after graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>End date no more than 12 months from start date if you have not used pre-completion OPT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is the timing of the OPT application and approval process?

Starting 90 days before graduation
- Submit OPT application to USCIS

2-3 weeks after mailing application
- Receive USCIS receipt notice (I-797C)

90+ calendar days from receipt date
- USCIS approves OPT application

2-4 weeks from OPT approval
- Receive approval notice and then work permit

Within 90 days of OPT start date
- Begin employment or depart the U.S.

Within 60 days after OPT end date
- Depart the U.S. OR
- Change status OR
- Begin new program
When does my OPT start?

- Must be in physical possession of EAD (Employment Authorization Document)
- Cannot work until EAD start date
- Employment must begin and end during authorized period
When does my OPT end?

- On EAD end date UNLESS you have a pending H-1B petition, a 24-month STEM extension, or you have exceeded the 90 day unemployment limit
- If you transfer to another institution
- If you start a new degree program
- If you cancel your OPT (please consult the Office of International Education 1st) - NO REFUND of USCIS fee!
- If you do not graduate and your application is pending it must be withdrawn; if your application has already been approved, you can work part-time while completing your program and full-time upon program completion
- 60 day grace period after EAD end date to change your visa, begin a new program, or depart the U.S.
24-month STEM Extension

- Apply up to 90 days before OPT end date
- 180 day automatic work authorization extension while application is pending
- Two 24-month extensions can be used after each higher degree level; Cannot be combined; Can be based on previous STEM degree obtained within 10 years of application date
- Work at least 20 hours per week in paid position for each E-Verify employer; No volunteering or self-employment allowed
What are the requirements of OPT?

- Cannot exceed 90 calendar days of unemployment (150 days for 24-month STEM extension); employment travel and periods of authorized leave do not count as unemployment

- Cannot work during gap between end of semester (pre-completion) or graduation (post-completion) and EAD start date

- 10-day reporting requirements through [SEVP Portal](#) for 12-month post-completion OPT

- Additional reporting requirements for 24-month STEM extension including self evaluations
What happens if I exceed the unemployment limit?

- Department of Homeland Security calculates unemployment time in SEVIS and will auto-terminate records exceeding unemployment limit.

- Date of record termination equals loss of F-1 status immediately – **NO GRACE PERIOD!!**

- Accrual of *unlawful presence* starts the day after unemployment limit is reached.

- Unlawful presence can lead to 3-year, 10-year or permanent bars to re-entering the U.S. and adjustment of status to permanent residency.

- Report all periods of employment and volunteering.

- Keep documentation of your work history (e.g. paystubs, employment contracts, experience letters for volunteer positions).
What is my status during post-completion OPT?

- You are **still in F-1 status** while your application is pending and after it has been approved.

- If you filed by the end of the 60 day grace period after graduation, **you can remain in the U.S.** while your application is pending but you cannot work.

- **Part-time study is permitted** during pending and approved periods of OPT but you cannot begin a degree program.
Can I travel?

Pending application *before* graduation

- Possible with or without a job if you re-enter the U.S. a few weeks before graduation
- I-20 signed for travel every 6 months, passport, F-1 visa stamp (except for Canadians)

Pending application *after* graduation

- Possible with or without a job (but risky). Travel is NOT recommended near the time your EAD is supposed to be approved.
- I-20 signed for travel every 6 months, I-797C receipt, passport, F-1 visa stamp (except for Canadians)
- Job offer letter for confirmed employment or proof of job search for unconfirmed employment (e.g. interview invitation)
Can I travel?

Approved application with EAD but no job

- Travel is NOT recommended
- I-20 signed for travel every 6 months, EAD, passport, F-1 visa stamp (except for Canadians)
- Proof of job search (e.g. interview invitation, job application submissions)
- Unemployed time abroad cannot be regained

Approved application with EAD and job

- Cannot enter the U.S. until EAD start date
- I-20 signed for travel every 6 months, passport, F-1 visa stamp (except for Canadians), EAD, and contract letter (EAD alone is not valid for re-entry)
- Not permitted during pending H-1B applications
What happens if I leave the country without applying for OPT?

- Ineligible to apply for post-completion OPT
- May not be allowed to enter U.S.
How do I apply for OPT?

- Print out this confirmation page and bring it to the OPT workshop

- Print out OPT application materials from https://international.richmond.edu/international-students/stay/employment/index.html to bring to the workshop

- Attend a mandatory OPT workshop (times and dates will be sent via email)