

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

A GUIDE TO WORKING OFF CAMPUS
FOR F-1 VISA HOLDERS



International
Education

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

***see COVID-19 slides for modifications during the pandemic**

What kind of work can I do with OPT?

Possible

- Paid, unpaid or volunteer positions
- Multiple employers
- Work for hire as contractor or consultant
- Self-employed business owner
- Agency or consulting firm

Not possible

- Work unrelated to your major
- On-campus employment through Student Employment unless enrolled in a higher level degree program at UR for the next available term
- Work for UR after graduation UNLESS the job is a faculty, staff or other professional position recruited through Human Resource Services

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?

Pre-completion

- Must be used BEFORE graduation
- Job offer is REQUIRED
- Part-time during semester (20 hour per week maximum including on-campus employment); Full-time during official school breaks
- 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)

Post-completion

- Must be used AFTER graduation
- Job offer is NOT REQUIRED
- At least 20 hours per week or an average of 20 hours per week in 1-month for variable schedules*

*see COVID-19 slides for modifications during the pandemic

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

***see COVID-19 slides for modifications during the pandemic**

What is not required for OPT?

- A job offer for post-completion (except for 24-month STEM extension)
- Approval by International Education (USCIS approves OPT)
- Working in a particular U.S. location (work can be done anywhere in the U.S.)*

*see COVID-19 slides for modifications during the pandemic

Applying during COVID-19

The regulations state that to be eligible to apply for OPT, you must have valid F-1 status, which is only possible if you are physically in the U.S. Although we normally advise that you apply only from within the U.S., this may not be possible given the current pandemic.

Although U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has not announced any exceptions to this requirement, they might show flexibility in approving your application during COVID-19 conditions.

Given these unusual circumstances, IE is willing to recommend OPT regardless of your current location, with the caveat that OPT approval is ultimately up to USCIS.

Modifications during COVID-19

Students are still eligible for OPT if they are studying remotely and their SEVIS record is in Active status

Students currently participating in OPT, including STEM OPT, may work remotely if their employer has an office outside of the U.S. or the employer can assess student engagement using electronic means.

Students are permitted to work fewer than 20 hours per week because of the economic impact of COVID-19.

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, **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?

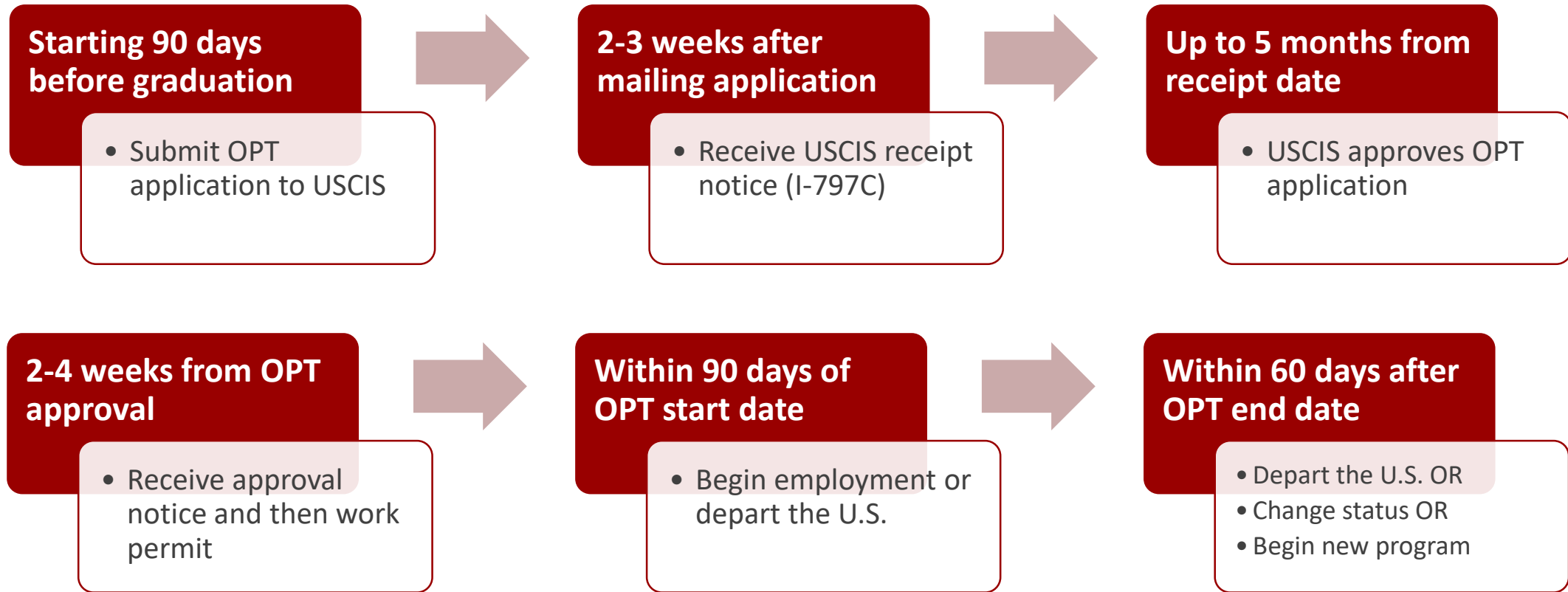
Pre-completion

- Known or estimated dates of employment

Post-completion

- Start date anytime from 1 to 60 days after graduation
- End date no more than 12 months from start date if you have not used pre-completion OPT

What is the timing of the OPT application and approval process?



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 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 – application MUST be submitted within 60 days of STEM OPT recommendation 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 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!!**
- Violation of F-1 status by not departing the U.S. or applying to change or continue your status once unemployment limit is reached
- Status violations can result in future issues when applying for a U.S. visa, re-entering the U.S. or applying to change your status
- Report all periods of employment and volunteering
- Keep documentation of your work history (e.g. paystubs, employment contracts, experience letters for volunteer positions)

If I am in the U.S., 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

If I am in the U.S., can I travel abroad?

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 citizens of Canada & Bermuda)

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 citizens of Canada & Bermuda)
- Job offer letter for confirmed employment or proof of job search for unconfirmed employment (e.g. interview invitation)

If I am in the U.S., can I travel abroad?

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 citizens of Canada & Bermuda)
- 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 citizens of Canada & Bermuda), 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 U.S. after graduation 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 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)