F-1: Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Definition of Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a benefit of F-1 status that allows students to work off-campus in a field related to their major. Students do not need to have a specific job offer to apply for OPT and are eligible for a 12 month period of OPT at every level of education. Students majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM fields) may be eligible for an additional 24 month period of OPT (see STEM Extension Instructions).

Applying for OPT is a two-step process which begins first with a recommendation for OPT from the International Student and Scholar Advisor (ISSA), and second with approval of the application by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). In order to maintain F-1 status while on OPT, students must be employed, report their address, and report their employer’s name and address to USCIS through their ISSA.

Eligibility
To qualify for OPT students must:

- Be in valid F-1 status
- Have maintained full-time student status for at least one continuous academic year before applying
- Not have used 12 months or more of full-time curricular practical training (CPT)

OPT Limits
There is a limit of 12 months of full-time OPT per degree level. OPT may be used before completion of studies (Pre-Completion OPT), after completion of studies (Post-Completion OPT), or a combination of both.

- Pre-Completion OPT is OPT that is authorized before the completion of studies. Pre-Completion OPT may be authorized for full or part-time (less than 20 hours per week.) Pre-Completion OPT is deducted at half of the full-time rate (two months of part-time Pre-Completion OPT = one month of full time Pre-Completion OPT).

- Post-completion OPT is OPT that is authorized after the completion of studies. Post Completion OPT may only be authorized for full-time.

- STEM OPT Extension is OPT that may be authorized for an addition 24 month period after OPT to individuals majoring in STEM fields and employed by employers who use the E-Verify system. (For more information on the OPT STEM Extension, please refer to our OPT Stem Extension handout or our website at https://www.wellesley.edu/international/employment/stem-opt.

How to apply for OPT

Step 1: Plan ahead and consider the timing of your application
Keep in mind that OPT applications may be filed up to 90 days before the completion of your program and up to 60 days after the completion of your program. (Your “Program End Date” noted on your Form I-20 may not necessarily be the same as your official graduation date.) It can take up to 5 business days for your ISSA to process your OPT recommendation. Your complete OPT application must be received by USCIS within 30 days of when the OPT was recommended. USCIS can take up to 3 months to process an OPT application.
Step 2: Sign up for an OPT Workshop (REQUIRED)
OPT workshops are offered regularly in the spring. Sign up for and attend an OPT workshop about three months prior to your anticipated employment start date. For instructions on how to sign up for an OPT workshop, email slatercenter@wellesley.edu. Once you have signed up for a workshop, you will be sent the instructions and forms to prepare your OPT application before the workshop. During the workshop an ISSA will answer your questions, review your application, and collect your entire application for a final review.

Note: If you arrive at the OPT Workshop late or without your required documents you will not be able to participate in the workshop and will be asked to sign up for a future workshop.

Bring the following to the OPT Workshop:
- OPT Dates and Acknowledgement Form (https://www.wellesley.edu/international/forms_resources)
- Class Dean’s Recommendation Form (signed by your Class Dean) (https://www.wellesley.edu/international/forms_resources)
- Form I-765, completed and signed (https://www.uscis.gov/i-765)
  - The Form I-765 should be typed, saved, and printed. After printing, please sign the form. Use Adobe Acrobat to fill in the application.
  - For number 3, carefully consider the address you indicate. You should use the address where you will be in 2-4 months, when your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) will be mailed to you. You may use the Slater International Center address: c/o Karen Pabon, Wellesley College, 106 Central St, Wellesley, MA 02481.
  - Under section 16, write either (c) (3) (B) for post-completion OPT, or (c) (3) (A) for pre-completion OPT.
- Copies of your current and all previous Forms I-20 (include forms from previous U.S. schools)
- Copy of your passport ID page
- Copy of your F-1 visa (does not apply to Canadian citizens)
- Copy of your most recent Form I-94 (https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/)
- 2 passport-sized photographs (taken within the past 6 months with your name and SEVIS ID# on the back)
- A personal check or money order for $410 (made out to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”. Write your SEVIS ID # on the front of your check in the memo section)
- Copies of all previously issued EADs (Employment Authorization Document) (if applicable)
- Form G-1145 (optional)

Step 3: Meet with ISSA to review your OPT application
If the ISSA determines that you are eligible for OPT and your application is complete, you will be issued a new Form I-20 with a recommendation for OPT. You will be contacted by the ISSA via e-mail to come in to pick up and sign your new Form I-20 and review your completed OPT application. The original new Form I-20 should be used for future travel; however, you must keep all previous Form I-20s for your records.

Step 4: Mail your OPT Application to USCIS
You may mail your OPT application up to 90 days before your completion date, but not more than 60 days after your completion date. Your completed application must be received by USCIS within 30 days of the date your ISSA recommended your OPT and signed your new Form I-20.

Include the following documents in your application to USCIS:
- A personal check or money order for $410 (made out to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”. Write your SEVIS ID # on the front of your check in the memo section)
- 2 passport-sized photographs (taken within the past 6 months with your name and SEVIS ID# on the back)
- Form I-765 (signed)
- Form G-1145 (optional)
- Copy of new Form I-20 (with OPT recommendation)
- Copy of all previously issued Form I-20s (organized with most recent on the top to oldest on the bottom )
- Copy of your most recent Form I-94
- Copy of F-1 visa (does not apply to Canadian citizens)
- Copy of your passport ID page
- Copy of all previously issued EADs (if applicable)
**Note:** Make a copy of your entire OPT application before mailing it to USCIS. Send your application packet to the appropriate address by priority mail (USPS) with delivery confirmation.

Send your application packet **via priority mail** to the appropriate address with delivery confirmation.

By U.S. Postal Service (USPS):  
USCIS  
P.O. Box 660867  
Dallas, TX 75266

By Express Mail or Courier Service:  
USCIS  
Attn: AOS  
2501 S. State Hwy. 121  
Business Suite 400  
Lewisville, TX 75067

**Step 5: Wait for approval**  
If you submitted Form G-1145 you may receive confirmation that your application was accepted at a USCIS Lockbox facility within 24 hours of its arrival. USCIS will send a Receipt Notice for your OPT application within 3-6 weeks.

Once you have received your Receipt Notice, you can track the status of your case using the case status search feature of the USCIS website at [https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do](https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do). You may elect to receive e-mail alerts about your case status by creating an account. Check your Receipt Notice to verify that your name is spelled correctly. **If your name is not spelled correctly, please contact the USCIS Customer Service Center at the number provided on your receipt.** Please also provide Slater International Center with a copy of this notice if you receive it directly.

**Request for Evidence**  
If you receive a notice indicating that additional documentation is required for your application, contact your ISSA immediately for assistance.

**Step 6: Receiving your EAD**  
If your OPT application is approved you should receive your EAD in approximately **90 days** from the date your application was received by USCIS. A separate Approval Notice will be sent to you before the actual EAD.

When you receive your EAD:

1. Inspect your card for accuracy and contact the USCIS Customer Service Center if there are errors.
2. Make 2 photocopies of your EAD. Send one to Slater International Center and keep the other copy in a safe place.
3. Remember that you are authorized to work only within the dates specified on the EAD.
4. If you lose your EAD you must apply for a replacement by submitting a new Form I-765, another $410 check, two photographs, and a copy of your previous application to the USCIS.

**Note:** **If you do not complete your degree by the date originally specified, contact your ISSA for assistance.**

**Maintaining F-1 Status While on OPT**

OPT is an extension of F-1 status. While you are on OPT, you must follow USCIS regulations to maintain your status.  
- You must be employed in a position and work at least 20 hours per week. If you are unemployed for more than a total of 90 days during the 12 month OPT period, you will lose your F-1 status and OPT employment authorization.
- You must report your address, contact information, and employment information to your ISSA for your SEVIS record.
Travel and Re-Entry to the United States

You must have a valid travel signature on your Form I-20 to travel and re-enter the United States in F-1 status. (while on post-completion OPT the travel signature is valid for 6 months)

- **Pre-Completion OPT**
  If you have not completed your degree requirements and you have pre-completion OPT, you may travel and re-enter the United States with a valid passport, Form I-20 (with a valid travel signature), a valid F-1 visa, and proof of financial support.

- **Post-Completion OPT**
  If you apply for post-completion OPT you must consider your future travel plans to determine what you will need to do. After you have completed your degree, your OPT application must be approved and you must have proof of a job offer or employment in order to re-enter the U.S.

Documents Required to Re-Enter the U.S. While on OPT:

- **A valid F-1 visa**
  If your F-1 visa has expired and you must travel outside of the U.S., you will need to apply for a new visa at a U.S. Consulate outside of the U.S. You may remain in the U.S. with an expired visa as long as your EAD, Form I-20, and passport are valid.

- **A valid passport** (must be valid at least six months into the future.)

- **A valid EAD** – While the EAD is marked, “Not valid for re-entry,” this simply means that the card alone is not sufficient for re-entering the U.S.

- **Form I-20** with OPT recommendation and a travel signature less than 6 months old

- **Proof of employment** – A letter from your current or prospective employer which indicates that you have a temporary job offer and that you will be employed.

**Note:** If you re-enter the U.S. in visa waiver or tourist status during your OPT authorized period, you are no longer eligible for OPT.

**Cap-Gap Extension**

F-1 students who are engaged in a period of post-completion OPT and have applied for a change of status to H-1B may benefit from an automatic provision which extends duration of status and OPT work authorization until October 1st. You may request an updated Form I-20 by emailing a copy of your H-1B petition receipt notice or approval notice to kpabon@wellesley.edu.

**Note:** Students are strongly recommended not to depart the U.S. during the period of their cap-gap extension.

**Social Security Numbers**

Social Security numbers are unique identification numbers assigned by the U.S. Federal Government. They are required for those who are employed in the United States. If you do not already have a Social Security number, you may obtain one once you have received your EAD. For more information please review the “Applying for a Social Security Number” handout (https://www.wellesley.edu/international/forms_resources).

Revised: 3/9/18