



What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is 12 months of employment authorization that gives F-1 students an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to a practical work experience off campus. Authorization for OPT is granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS).

Eligibility

- You must have been enrolled for at least one full academic year.
- You must have maintained your F-1 status.
- You must intend to work in a position directly related to your major field of study.
- You must not have previous OPT approved for the same degree level.
- If you used 12 months of full-time Curricular Practical Training, then you are not eligible for OPT.

Types of OPT

Pre-Completion

- Pre-Completion OPT may be taken during annual vacation as part (20 hrs/week or less) or full-time (more than 20 hrs/week).
- Pre-Completion OPT may only be taken as part-time while school is in session.
- Pre-Completion OPT may be taken as part-time or full-time, if you have completed course requirements and are working on your dissertation or DMin project.

Note: Pre-Completion OPT will be deducted from the 12 months of Post-Completion OPT.

Post-Completion

- Post-Completion OPT must begin after the completion date of your program (see #5 on your I-20) and end within 14 months of the completion date.

Application Deadline

Pre-Completion: Contact the Designated School Official about the timing of your application.

Post-Completion: You may submit your OPT application as early as 90 days before the completion date of your program. However, OPT must be requested prior to expiration of your 60-day grace period. If you do not apply for OPT before the end of your grace period you will not be eligible for OPT.

Note: These are deadlines for submission to USCIS, not the Designated School Official. CST does not guarantee expedited processing of applications submitted to the Designated School Official less than two weeks prior to the deadline.

Application Procedures

First, consult with the Designated School Official to verify your eligibility for OPT. Then, complete the steps in the application checklist below. Finally, make an appointment with the Designated School Official to complete the application process.

OPT Application Check List:

- Completed I-765 Form (available on the USCIS website at <http://www.uscis.gov>)
- \$410.00 personal check or money order made payable to U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Copy of your most recent I-20 pages 1 & 3
- Original immigration documents and two copies of the following documents:
 - Passport: identity, expiration and visa pages
 - I-94 card, front and back
 - Pages 1 & 3 of all previous I-20 forms
 - Previous Employment Authorization Card (EAD or OPT Card), if applicable
- Two recent passport-style photographs. Write your name and SEVIS number lightly in pencil on the back of the photos. Do not cut to size or staple.
- Job offer letter, optional.

After the Application is Submitted

USCIS will send you a receipt notice (Form I-797). The upper left corner of the I-797 will have a number starting with the letters "WAC." This is your case number, which you can use to track the progress of your application at the USCIS website <http://www.uscis.gov> by selecting the *Case Status Online* link. It may take up to 90 days for your OPT to be approved. Approximately 2 weeks after your application has been approved, you will receive a small photo identification card, called an Employment Authorization Document (EAD). This card will state the type and length of the period of employment authorized. When you receive this card, check it to make certain all the information is correct. If there are errors, please consult with Designated School Official immediately to determine whether the card needs to be returned for corrections.

Change of Address While OPT is Pending

USCIS will not forward your EAD card to your new address. CST does not recommend changing your address while your OPT application is pending. However, if you must move to a new address, it is important to file your change of address at the following locations:

USCIS: You can change your address online at www.uscis.gov.

US Post Office: You can change your address online at www.usps.com or manually by going to any post office and completing an official Change of Address form.

CST: Notify the Designated School Official by mail, email or fax.

Reporting Requirements While on OPT

You are responsible for notifying (within 10 days) the Designated School Official if you move to a new address. This must be an address where you actually reside, not a P.O. Box.

You are responsible for reporting and updating (within 10 days) the following employer information to the Designated School Official:

- Name of employer and location where you actually work
- Dates of employment (start and end date)
- Any change to the name and address of the employer
- Any periods of unemployment

3 Month Unemployment Provision

You may not accrue an aggregate (TOTAL) of more than 90 days of unemployment during post-completion OPT. If you accumulate more than 90 days of unemployment, the Department of Homeland Security can terminate your employment authorization. **Exception:** Periods of up to 10 days between the end of one job and the beginning of the next job will **not** be included in the calculation for time spent unemployed.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?

No, you may not begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS. Working before practical training has been authorized by the USCIS constitutes illegal employment and may jeopardize your legal status in the U.S. This includes working without pay and then receiving pay retroactively when the EAD is received.

Can I travel outside the US while my OPT application is pending?

Yes, if:

- You have applied for Pre-Completion OPT and will continue as a full-time student at CST or
- You have applied for Post-Completion OPT and will re-enter the U.S. before the completion date of your program.

No, if you have completed your program but have not yet received your EAD card. You may be denied re-entry into the US and CST will not be able assist you if this happens.

What about traveling abroad during OPT?

If you have completed your course of study and have received your EAD card, you may travel abroad and re-enter the U.S. in F-1 status. You will need the following documents for your re-entry: (1) a valid passport, (2) a valid F-1 visa stamp in your passport, (3) the new SEVIS I-20 recommending optional practical training, (4) your original practical training Employment Authorization Document (EAD) issued by the USCIS and (5) proof that you have a job in the

U.S. appropriate for practical training and that you are returning to the U.S. to resume or start this employment.

Note: An expired F-1 visa can pose a problem; it may be difficult to renew your F-1 visa while you are on practical training.

I heard that it's possible to get a 17 month extension of OPT. How do I apply?

Only graduates in certain STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) degree fields are eligible for this program. CST offers no programs in these fields.