

F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) GUIDE

Optional Practical Training for F-1 students is intended to provide hands-on practical work experience in the United States that is directly related to the student's academic program of study. An F-1 student is normally eligible for a maximum of 12 months of OPT. Certain science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degree holders may be eligible for an additional 24 months of OPT time in addition to the regular 12-month OPT. Please refer to the F-1 OPT STEM Extension packet for more information on the STEM extension.

Eligibility

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training, you must:

- Have been lawfully enrolled on a full-time basis for one full academic year;
- Currently be maintaining a full-time program of study and valid F-1 status; and
- Work in a job directly related to your major field of study.

You do **not** need a job offer prior to applying for OPT; however, the regulations require that you do have employment while on your post-completion OPT period.

General OPT Guidelines

- A student can participate in a total of 12 months of OPT at each education level.
- Part-time work of at least 20 hours per week counts toward the maximum 12 months.
- A student who still has course work remaining to complete his/her degree may work up to 20 hours per week while school is in session.
- A student may work more than 20 hours per week while school is not in session.
- A student who has completed all coursework except for the thesis or dissertation may work part-time or full-time.
- A student does not need to have a job offer to be authorized for OPT.
- A student is limited to a total of 90 days of unemployment during post-completion OPT.

Pre-completion OPT vs. Post-completion OPT

OPT is available to F-1 students either while completing their program of study or upon completion of their program of study. You must choose between pre-completion and post-completion OPT. If you choose to participate in pre-completion OPT, the time will be deducted from 12-month post-completion OPT.

Students who participate in pre-completion OPT:

- Can work no more than 20 hours per week while school is in session
- Are not subject to the unemployment provisions
- Can receive a program extension on their I-20
- Are not eligible to apply for post-completion OPT
- Are not eligible to apply for the OPT STEM extension

Students who participate in post-completion OPT:

- Must work at least 20 hours per week
- May work full or part time
- Are subject to the unemployment provisions
- Cannot receive a program extension

Acceptable Types of Employment for Post-Completion OPT

All OPT employment must be directly related to the student's degree program. The following types of employment are acceptable for post-completion OPT (this does not apply to the STEM extension):

- **Paid employment.** A student may work part time (at least 20 hours per week when on post-completion OPT) or full time.
- **Multiple employers.** A student may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student's degree program.
- **Short-term multiple employers (performing artists).** A student, such as a musician or other type of performing artist, may work for multiple short term employers (gigs). The student should maintain a list of all gigs, the dates and duration.
- **Work for hire.** This is also commonly referred to as 1099 employment, where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than an employment relationship. If requested by DHS, a student must be prepared to provide evidence showing the duration of the contract periods and the name and address of the contracting company.
- **Self-employed business owner.** A student on OPT may start a business and be self-employed. The student must be able to prove that he or she has the proper business licenses and is actively engaged in a business related to the student's degree program.
- **Employment through an agency or consulting firm.** A student on post-completion OPT must be able to provide evidence showing they worked an average of at least 20 hours per week while employed by the agency.
- **Unpaid employment.** A student may work as a volunteer or unpaid intern, where this does not violate any labor laws. The work must be at least 20 hours per week for a student on post-completion OPT. A student must be able to provide evidence from the employer to verify that the student worked at least 20 hours per week during the period of employment.

How to Apply

To obtain OPT employment authorization, you will need to complete Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, and submit this form to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) along with several supporting documents. You will also be required to pay the USCIS filing fee for this application. It is your responsibility to complete and submit this form. Before submitting Form I-765, you will need to request a new I-20 with OPT recommendation from your Designated School Official (DSO) in the Center for Global Health (CGH). See the Application Process section below for more detailed information on requesting a new I-20 and the OPT application process.

When to Apply

For pre-completion OPT, students may file their OPT application with USCIS up to 90 days before being enrolled full-time for one academic year or 90 days prior to the requested employment start date for students who have already met the academic year requirement. For post-completion OPT, students may file with USCIS up to 90 days before the program completion date. The OPT application must be received by mail and accepted for processing by USCIS no later than 60 days after the program completion date.

The application must also be received by USCIS **within 30 days** of the date on which CGH issues an I-20 with OPT recommendation. If you file with USCIS after 30 days of the issuance of the OPT I-20, you will risk a denial.

Processing times for OPT applications can be found on the [USCIS website](#). In general, expect that the OPT application will take 3 months to be approved. You cannot begin working until USCIS has approved your application and you have received your Employment Authorization Document (i.e., EAD card).

Selecting a Start Date (Post-Completion OPT)

For post-completion OPT, you may choose a start date as early as the day after your program completion date (found in item 5 on your I-20). However, your chosen start date can be no later than 60 days from your program completion date.

If you have a job lined up or a job offer, and you want to be able to start working immediately following your program completion, you should choose a start date that falls soon after your program completion date. If you do not have employment lined up, and you are not confident that you will find a job soon after graduating, you may want to select a date closer to the end of the 60-day period following your program completion date.

When selecting a start date, please keep in mind that you will not be able to begin working until your I-765 has been approved by USCIS and you have received your EAD card.

Application Process

- 1) **Request an I-20 recommending OPT CGH.** Submit your request by e-mail with the following items:
 - F-1 OPT Request Form
 - Letter from academic advisor, on letterhead, stating that you are in good academic standing and the expected date of your program completion/graduation
- 2) **Complete USCIS Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization.** Form I-765 can be found online at www.uscis.gov/i-765. Refer to the USCIS *Instructions for Form I-765* (also found on the website) for help with completing this form.

Tips for filling out Form I-765:

- **Thoroughly read the USCIS Instructions for Form I-765 found on the website.** This is a large document but it is of great importance that you read the instructions and complete the form correctly.
 - Instructions specific to F-1 students begin on page 3
 - General instructions begin on page 14
 - Part 2 – US Mailing Address – Use an address where you will be able to obtain mail for the next few months. If you change your mailing address while your OPT application is pending, this could cause issues.
 - Part 2 (27) – Eligibility Category
 - Pre-completion optional practical training: (c)(3)(A)
 - Post-completion optional practical training: (c)(3)(B)
 - Part 6 Additional Information – Include evidence of previous CPT or OPT (see *Instructions* page 4)
 - Include all seven pages of the Form I-765 in your application
 - Answer all questions thoroughly and accurately (see #3 on page 15 of *Instructions for Form I-765*)
- 3) **Assemble application materials.** Please see the *Instructions for Form I-765* (www.uscis.gov/i-765) for full details on what documents you need to submit with the I-765. In general, you will need to submit the following documents:
 - Completed Form I-765 with your signature
 - Check for the USCIS I-765 application fee. Refer to the USCIS website for information on the current fee amount. Make the check payable to *US Department of Homeland Security* (do not abbreviate).
 - Supporting documentation, including (but not limited to):
 - a. Copy of I-20 form with OPT request
 - b. Copy of I-94 record
 - c. Copy of biographic page of passport
 - d. Passport-style photographs

Refer to page 20 of the *Instructions for Form I-765* for full details on required documentation and the order in which you must assemble the documents.

- 4) **Submit OPT application to the correct USCIS lockbox/service center.** Refer to *Instructions for Form I-765* (www.uscis.gov/i-765) for more information on submitting the application. You should be submitting your application

to the USCIS Dallas Lockbox. You will notice that there are two addresses provided in the instructions – one for US Postal Service, and one for express mail and commercial courier service (such as FedEx or UPS).

- 5) **Send DSO a copy of your USCIS receipt notice.** After USCIS receives your application, you will receive a USCIS receipt notice. Scan this receipt notice and e-mail a copy to huley@musc.edu.
- 6) **Send DSO a copy of your approval notice and your EAD card.** If your application is approved, you will receive Form I-797 Notice of Action approving your OPT employment authorization along with an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. Scan the receipt notice and the front and back of your EAD card and e-mail a copy to huley@musc.edu.

You cannot begin OPT employment until you receive your EAD card from USCIS.
and
You cannot begin OPT employment until the start date on your EAD card.

Reporting Responsibilities during OPT

Once you have found a job, you must immediately notify CGH with the details of your employment by providing the following:

- F-1 OPT Employment Verification form—to be completed by your employer
- Copy of your employment offer letter on employer's letterhead

The completed form and copy of offer letter must be submitted to CGH by e-mail to huley@musc.edu. If you change jobs during OPT, you must provide a new F-1 OPT Employment Verification form along with a copy of the offer letter from the new employer. Forms and letters must be clear, scanned copies (no photos of documents taken with a smartphone).

In addition, students on OPT are required to report the following to CGH within 10 days:

- Change of name
- Change of address
- Change of e-mail or other contact information
- Change in employment (includes changes in employment address with same employer)
- Change of status (such as a change to H-1B status)

These changes should be reported by e-mail, either to fowled@musc.edu or huley@musc.edu.

Unemployment and Post-completion OPT

You may have up to 90 days of unemployment while on post-completion OPT.

Each day (including weekends) during the period of OPT authorization that you do not have qualifying employment counts as a day of unemployment. OPT authorization begins on the start date shown on your EAD card.

Documenting OPT Employment

You should keep documentation of all of your employment during your OPT for your records. Specifically, for each job, you should maintain records indicating your employer, position, start date, contact information for your supervisor, description of the work, and how the position relates to your field of study. You may be asked to provide proof of your OPT employment at a later time.

In addition, you are also responsible for keeping records of the time that you are not employed during your OPT period. Remember that you can have no more than 90 days of unemployment while on post-completion OPT.

Travel and Post-completion OPT

The regulations regarding travel and OPT are not always clear. Students in F-1 status who need to travel at any time during OPT (including when the application is pending) should be aware that they do so at their own risk. We have provided you with some information below in order to assist you in planning your travel. Please be aware that re-entry into the US is never guaranteed.

Prior to graduation while OPT application is pending

Travel abroad while your OPT application is pending with USCIS should be avoided and is generally not recommended. If your OPT application is approved while you are abroad, you will be expected to re-enter the US using your new EAD card. Furthermore, if USCIS sends you a request for additional evidence, you will not be in the US in order to provide any additional documents needed to continue processing your OPT application.

However, if there is an emergency and you must travel while your OPT application but before your program end date (i.e., your graduation date), you should be able to re-enter the US as long as you are planning on returning to the US several weeks prior to the program end date on your I-20 (found in item 5). You must also have the following documents:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- Valid I-20 with travel authorization signature that is less than one year old

After graduation while OPT application is pending

It is generally recommended to F-1 students *not* to travel while your OPT application is pending. If your OPT application is pending and your I-20 has expired, you might be denied re-entry into the US.

However, if you decide to travel, you should bring the following documents:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- Valid I-20 with travel authorization signature that is less than one year old
- I-765 receipt notice (Form I-797)
- Job offer letter from employer on official letterhead (if you have received a job offer)

After OPT has been approved but before you have found a job

If you travel outside of the US after your OPT application has been approved (and your EAD card has been issued), but you have not yet secured employment, your OPT will be considered cancelled and you will not be allowed to re-enter the US in F-1 status.

After OPT has been approved but before the job has started

If you have received your EAD card and you have a job offer but the position has not started, you may still experience difficulty in trying to re-enter the US. However, if you decide to travel under these circumstances, you should bring the following documents in order to have the best chance of re-entering the US without problems:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- Valid I-20 with travel authorization signature that is no more than 6 months old
- EAD card
- Job offer letter from employer on official letterhead, which should include your expected start date

During OPT employment

If you need to travel abroad during your period of OPT employment, you should be able to re-enter the US as long as you have the following:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- Valid I-20 with travel authorization signature that is no more than 6 months old
- EAD card
- Current letter from your employer stating that you are still employed

If your visa has expired and you need to travel abroad during OPT, you will need to apply for a new visa stamp at a US Embassy before you can re-enter the US. Please be aware that the risk of denial for an F-1 visa when you are on OPT is higher than while you are in your active student program. This is because the focus of your stay in the US now is to work rather than to attend school. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the consular officer is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application could be denied.

In addition, time spent outside the US during an approved period of post-completion OPT counts as unemployment against the 90/120 day limits unless you are either:

- Employed during a period of leave authorized by an employer; or
- Traveling as part of your employment

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to have a job to apply for OPT?

You do not need to have a job offer before applying for the initial period of post-completion OPT. If your field of study qualifies you for the OPT STEM extension, you do have to have a job to apply for this extension.

When should I request an OPT recommendation from the DSO?

You should contact the DSO to request OPT recommendation within 30 days of the date that you expect your OPT application to arrive at the USCIS Service Center. If the OPT recommendation in SEVIS is dated more than 30 days prior to the receipt date, the application may be denied.

Will I be required to submit biometrics when applying for OPT?

Anyone applying for OPT may receive a request from USCIS to appear at a USCIS Application Support Center for the collection of biometrics (fingerprints, photograph and signature). If you receive a notice from USCIS that biometrics are required, be sure to read this document carefully, paying special attention to the appointment scheduled for you.

I checked the status of my OPT application online, and it has been approved. Can I begin working before I receive my EAD card from USCIS?

No. You may not begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS. If you begin working before you have received your official employment authorization card from USCIS, this will constitute illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

What happens if I move while my OPT application is pending?

It is *extremely* important that the address you put on the I-765 be valid for the next several months. The U.S. Postal Service will not forward mail from USCIS. Change of address may delay the arrival of the card. If you must move while your OPT application is pending, you need to file the USCIS online change of address form AR-11, which can be found at www.uscis.gov/ar-11. You also need to call the USCIS National Customer Service Center at 1-800-375-5283. Have your I-765 receipt notice handy when calling USCIS or submitting the AR-11. Please also note that you are required to notify CGH with your new address so that we can update your address in the SEVIS system.

Do I still need to get the travel line on page 3 of my I-20 signed by the DSO in the Center for Global Health during OPT?

Yes. During your year of post-completion OPT, if you travel outside the U.S., you will need to have your I-20 authorized for travel within the past 6 months (regulations require a travel authorization signature every 6 months during post-completion OPT). If you are not located in Charleston, you will need to mail your original I-20 to the Center for Global Health for endorsement. You must allow for plenty of time for mail delays both ways. CGH will send you back your signed I-20 via regular mail. If you need your I-20 to be sent back quicker, then you must provide a pre-paid express envelope and include it in the package that you mail to CGH with your original I-20.

Is OPT a different visa status?

No. An individual with OPT authorization and an EAD card is still in F-1 status.

Do I have to do anything with the MUSC Center for Global Health while I am on OPT?

Yes. Regulations require you to report any changes in your legal name, address, and employment to your DSO at the Center for Global Health while you are on OPT. These changes should be reported by e-mail, either to fowled@musc.edu or huley@musc.edu. Remember that even though you may be employed somewhere else through your OPT EAD card, MUSC is still the sponsor of your legal F-1 visa status during your time in OPT.

Do I still need to report information to the MUSC Center for Global Health if I sign up for the SEVP Portal?

Yes. The SEVP Portal is an optional tool that will allow you to update and view your personal and employer information with SEVP. However, this does not release you from your responsibility to report this information directly to the Center for Global Health. Even if you update your information in the SEVP Portal, you still must notify CGH directly with changes to your address, contact information, and employment.

Can I change jobs during OPT?

Yes. You must notify CGH if you change jobs or employers while on OPT. You must also provide CGH with a letter from your new employer stating your position, your start date, how your employment is directly related to your major area of study, and a statement that the employer agrees to notify our office within 48 hours of the end of your employment.

Can I work for more than one employer during OPT?

Yes, as long as all employment is directly related to your degree program.

Are there any restrictions on the number of hours I can work during post-completion OPT?

You must work at least 20 hours per week in a qualifying position to be considered employed. There are no limits on the maximum amount of hours you can work during post-completion OPT.