

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. Refer to the F-1 OPT STEM Extension Guide for more information on the STEM extension.

General Overview and Eligibility

To be eligible to apply for Optional Practical Training, you must have been lawfully enrolled on a full-time basis for one full academic year. You must also currently be maintaining a full-time program of study and valid F-1 status.

OPT allows you to work in a job that is directly related to your major field of study. You do not need to have a job offer prior to applying for OPT.

You can participate in a total of 12 months of OPT at each education level. For pre-completion OPT, part time work (at least 20 hours per week) counts towards the maximum 12 months. Post-completion OPT students must work full time.

OPT requires adjudication by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). This means that you must submit an application to USCIS and USCIS must approve this application (and send you an employment authorization document) before you can begin work.

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.

Students who participate in pre-completion OPT:

- Cannot work more than 20 hours per week while school is in session
- Can work more than 20 hours per week while school *is not* in session
- Are not subject to the unemployment provisions
- Can receive a program extension on their I-20
- 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 in a qualifying position
- Are subject to the unemployment provisions
- Cannot receive a program extension
- Are limited to a total of 90 days of unemployment
- Are eligible to apply for the OPT STEM extension (with qualifying degree)

Direct Relationship to Major Area of Study

OPT employment authorization allows you to obtain employment in a job that is directly related to your field of study for which OPT was granted. If your OPT is approved, you will be responsible for providing the Center for Global Health (CGH) with information related to your OPT employment, including a description of how your job relates to your major area of

study. MUSC, as the continuing sponsor of your F-1 status, must report this information to the federal government accordingly.

Again, you do not need to have a job in order to apply for OPT. If your OPT is approved, you will provide this explanation when you verify your OPT employment (see Reporting Employment section below).

How to Apply

The first step is for you to request a new Form I-20 requesting OPT from the Center for Global Health (CGH). You must complete the Optional Practical Training request through your Terra Dotta portal in order to request the OPT Form I-20.

Once you have the new OPT Form I-20, you must complete USCIS 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 must also pay the USCIS filing fee for this application. It is your responsibility to complete and submit this application.

See the Application Process section below for more detailed information on requesting the OPT Form I-20 and the step-by-step OPT application process.

When to Apply

There are several important deadlines and time restrictions related to the USCIS OPT application process:

- Pre-completion OPT: students may file the 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.
- Post-completion OPT: students may file with USCIS up to 90 days before the program completion date.
- The OPT application must be received by USCIS within 30 days of the date of issuance of the OPT Form I-20.
- The OPT application must be received by USCIS no later than 60 days after the program completion date.

It is very important that you adhere to these deadlines and plan ahead accordingly. If you file your application too early or too late (even by one day), USCIS may deny your application. Pay special attention to the requirement that USCIS receives your I-765 OPT application within 30 days of the date of issuance of the OPT Form I-20.

Estimated processing times for OPT applications can be found on the [USCIS website](#). In general, expect that the OPT application will take approximately three months to be approved. **You cannot begin working until USCIS has approved your application and you have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) with a current start date.**

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). 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. You will not be able to change the OPT start date after you have submitted the OPT application.

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, you have received your EAD card from USCIS, and the start date on the EAD card has been reached.

OPT Application Process

STEP ONE: Submit Optional Practical Training Request through Terra Dotta

The [Optional Practical Training request](#) is accessed through your Terra Dotta account. You will be required to complete a questionnaire, read certain documents, and provide a letter from your academic advisor stating that you are in good academic standing and the expected date of your program completion/graduation.

If your OPT request is approved, the Designated School Official (DSO) in CGH will issue an OPT Form I-20. You will be notified via email if your request is approved. The OPT Form I-20 will be sent to you via the option you selected in the OPT request.

IMPORTANT: Do not submit the I-765 application to USCIS until you have received the OPT Form I-20.

STEP TWO: Complete and submit USCIS Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization

USCIS Form I-765 can be found online at www.uscis.gov/i-765. USCIS Form I-765 is used for a variety of employment authorization applications, not just for F-1 students requesting OPT.

You must thoroughly read the USCIS Instructions for Form I-765 found on the USCIS I-765 website. It is of great importance that you read the instructions that pertain to F-1 students so that you will complete the form correctly. Instructions specific to F-1 students begin on page 7. General instructions begin on page 19.

Tips for completing Form I-765:

- 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: Question 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 for Form I-765* page 8)
- Include all 7 pages of the Form I-765 in your application
- Answer all questions thoroughly and accurately (see #3 on page 20 of *Instructions for Form I-765*)
- Refer to the Instructions for Form I-765 for details on the supporting documents you are required to submit with the I-765 application

There are currently two ways to submit the OPT I-765 application to USCIS:

1. Paper I-765 application
2. Online I-765 application

Online Application Submission

In April 2021, USCIS introduced the option for students applying for OPT to submit the I-765 application online. If you want to file online, you will click the 'File Online' button on the [USCIS I-765 website](#). You will be required to create a USCIS Account before you can proceed with the I-765 online application.

If you choose to submit the I-765 application online, we highly recommend that you complete the paper Form I-765 first and review your information to ensure that everything is correct and complete. You can then use the paper Form I-765 to help you fill out the I-765 online application. You do not need to submit the paper I-765 to USCIS if you are submitting your I-765 application online.

Paper Application Submission

If you choose to submit the I-765 paper application, refer to the [USCIS Direct Filing Addresses for Form I-765](#) to determine the specific address where you should submit the application. Click the Foreign Students section header on this page.

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). Be sure to use the correct address, depending on the service you choose to use to submit the application. We highly recommend that you use a trackable service so that you can receive confirmation that your package has been delivered to USCIS.

If you are submitting the paper application, you must ensure that your application includes a complete Form I-765 along with all required supporting documentation and payment for the application. USCIS changes the versions of its forms from time to time. USCIS can also change the filing fee amounts at any time. Therefore, we highly recommend that you check the [USCIS I-765 website](#) and the [USCIS Fee Calculator](#) *on the day that you are submitting your paper application* to be certain you are using the correct form edition and submitting the correct fee. You should print the USCIS fee calculation sheet on the date of mailing to include with your application. Make sure the printout sheet includes the date (typically in the header or footer).

USCIS I-765 Application Processing

After USCIS receives your application, you will receive a receipt notice from USCIS (Form I-797) with your case number. If you submit the I-765 application online, you should receive the case number immediately. You should also be able to access your case number and receive status updates on your application through your USCIS Account. If you submit the paper I-765 application, you should receive the paper receipt notice in the mail in a few weeks.

USCIS I-765 application processing times are highly variable and can take several months. You can view currently estimated USCIS processing times on the [USCIS Check Case Processing Times website](#).

REMEMBER:

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.

USCIS I-765 Application Approval

If your OPT application is approved, you will receive USCIS Form I-797 Notice of Action approving your OPT employment authorization along with an Employment Authorization Document (EAD card). The dates that you are approved for OPT employment authorization will appear on the EAD card.

Once you receive the EAD card, you must scan the card and upload a copy through your [Terra Dotta portal](#). From your user home page, click the Optional Practical Training (OPT) record, navigate to the Questionnaire section, and click 'Upload Copy of Employment Authorization Document.' Upload the EAD card and submit the questionnaire. Then, return to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) record main page and click the Submit button at the top of the page.

Reporting Employment

Once you have found a job, you must immediately notify CGH by submitting the [OPT Employment Verification](#). This must be completed within 10 days of the start date of your employment. You must complete the questionnaire with your employment details and upload a copy of your employment offer letter. CGH will update SEVIS with your employment details. Failure to notify CGH of your employment in a timely manner may result in you accruing unemployment days or in the termination of your F-1 status for failure to report during OPT.

When you complete the OPT Employment Verification, you will be required to provide an explanation indicating how the employment. The DSO in CGH will review this explanation and will make a determination of whether there is a direct relationship between your job and your major area of study. If a DSO believes that the documentation does not provide a sufficient explanation, you will be required to provide additional evidence to better understand the relationship.

Ongoing Reporting Responsibilities During OPT

During your valid period of OPT, you must report your employment details to CGH within 10 days of the start date or end date of any particular employment. This applies to your initial employment and any time you change jobs during OPT.

OPT reporting must be done through the [OPT Employment Verification](#) form in your Terra Dotta portal. Note that your Terra Dotta login information may have changed since you initially began the OPT process, since you are no longer an MUSC student and will not be using your MUSC NetID credentials.

In addition, you must report the following to CGH within 10 days: change of name, change of address, change of email address (or other contact information), change of status (such as a change of status to H-1B).

Most things (like change of address) can be updated through your Terra Dotta portal. Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT User Guide](#) for step-by-step instructions. If you need to report change of status, you can [email CGH](#) directly with this information.

Keep in mind 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.

Unemployment

You may have up to 90 days of unemployment during 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.

You are responsible for keeping track of your days of unemployment during post-completion OPT. You are also responsible for reporting the end of any particular employment (within 10 days) to CGH so that we can update this information in the SEVIS system.

Exceeding the 90-day OPT unemployment limit is a violation of F-1 status. If you have not obtained qualified OPT employment by your 91st day of unemployment, you should prepare to depart from the United States immediately to avoid accruing unlawful presence.

Maintaining Records of OPT Employment

In addition to reporting your employment details to CGH, you are also responsible for keeping complete documentation of all of your employment during your OPT. You may be asked to provide proof of your OPT employment at a later time, especially if you ever apply for additional benefits (i.e., another visa status) through the US Department of Homeland Security.

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 are 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 during post-completion OPT.

You are responsible for keeping the originals of all Forms I-20 issued to you throughout your time in F-1 student status (during your academic program and OPT). You should keep these forms indefinitely as part of your US immigration records. You may need to present these at some point to prove your legal status in the US.

Travel and Post-Completion OPT

The regulations regarding international travel and OPT are not always clear. If you need to travel outside of the US at any time during OPT, you must be aware that you do so at your 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 for nonimmigrant status holders.

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 is pending 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. 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 must apply for a new visa stamp at a US embassy or consulate 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.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is OPT a different visa status?

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

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

No. 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 the OPT Form I-20?

You should submit the Optional Practical Training request in Terra Dotta approximately 4-5 weeks prior to when you plan on submitting the OPT I-765 application to USCIS. Once a complete OPT request is received, CGH can typically issue the OPT Form I-20 within 7-10 business days. Remember that USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of the issuance of the OPT Form I-20.

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.

Should I submit the I-765 paper application or online application?

The option to file the I-765 online was introduced in April 2021. There do seem to be some benefits to the online submission system, such as getting the USCIS receipt number immediately (meaning that you get immediate confirmation of the receipt of your application). Submitting the form online will also ensure that you are paying the correct filing fee and using the correct version of the Form I-765. Ultimately, the decision regarding how to submit your I-765 application (online or paper) is completely up to you. Regardless of which method you choose, you must read the I-765 instructions and review your application materials thoroughly before submitting to ensure that you are submitting a complete application.

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

No. You may not begin employment until you receive your physical EAD from USCIS. If you begin working before you have received your official employment authorization card from USCIS, this may be considered unauthorized employment that could jeopardize your legal status in the US.

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

It is *very* important that the address you use on the Form I-765 be valid for the next several months. The US 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, and you submitted the I-765 application online, you should be able to update your address through your USCIS account. If you submitted the I-765 paper application, you should be able to submit the [USCIS Form AR-11 Change of Address](#) form online. You are also required to update your address in your Terra Dotta portal so that we can then update your address in the SEVIS system.

Do I still need to get a travel endorsement signature from the DSO in the Center for Global Health on my Form I-20 during OPT?

Yes. During your year of post-completion OPT, if you travel outside the US, you must have your Form I-20 authorized for travel. Federal require a travel authorization signature on your Form I-20 every 6 months during post-completion OPT. If you are not located in Charleston, you will need to mail your Form I-20 to the Center for Global Health for the travel signature. You must allow for plenty of time for mail delays both ways. CGH will send you the signed Form 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.

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. 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. Information is reported to CGH through your [Terra Dotta portal](#). You can also contact immigration@musc.edu if you have any questions.

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. If you get a new job during OPT, you must do the following:

1. Log in to your [Terra Dotta portal](#) and update your previous OPT Employment Verification record with the last day of work at that job. This must be done within 10 days of your last day of employment.
2. Submit a new [OPT Employment Verification](#) record through your Terra Dotta portal within 10 days of the start date of your new job.

Can I work for more than one employer during OPT?

Yes, as long as all employment is directly related to your degree program, and as long as you have submitted an OPT Employment Verification through Terra Dotta for each job.

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

You can work full time or part time during post-completion OPT. If you are working part time, it must be at least 20 hours per week. There are no limits on the maximum amount of hours you can work during post-completion OPT.