

OPT: Occupational Practical Training

What is OPT?

Occupational Practical Training (OPT) is a work benefit granted to international students in F-1 immigration status who are enrolled in, or completing a degree program in the U.S. This employment can be used pre-completion of studies, over the annual vacation of leave term, or post-completion of studies, after the student finishes the degree.

When should I apply?

Apply early! Allow **three months for processing** by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), plus additional time for obtaining your academic adviser's signature on the OPT Request Form, for the PDSO to process your new Form I-20 (2-3 working days), and mailing to USCIS. You cannot begin work until you receive OPT approval. This is granted in the form of your EAD card (Employment Authorization Document).

You may submit your application to USCIS as early as 90 days before your program end date and up to 60 days after your program end date. (Your program end date is the last day of your final quarter, including final exams week, according to the academic calendar. That date is May 10, 2012 for those graduating this spring.)

The PDSO strongly encourages you to apply for OPT three months prior to your program end date. Though USCIS will accept your application up to 60 days after your program end date, you cannot begin work until the application is approved. A delayed application may result in delayed work authorization and/or loss of full OPT eligibility (12 months) due to the three-month processing time by USCIS.

How do I apply?

Step 1: Complete your OPT application. *(See below for details.)*

Step 2: Have your application materials reviewed by the PDSO. *(See below for details.)*

Step 3: Pick up OPT application materials from the PDSO and mail to USCIS. *(See below for details.)*

Step 1: Completing your OPT application

Gather the following documents:

- Completed "Optional Practical Training Request Form" (attached here) signed by your *academic* adviser before you submit it to the PDSO;
- Complete I-765 Form, included with this packet, or downloadable at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=73ddd59cb7a5d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD&vgnnextchannel=db029c7755cb9010VgnVCM10000045f3d6a1RCRD>. At this site, you'll see links to the Form I-765, downloadable instructions for the form, and the Form G-1145 for email notification of the application's acceptance. In printing out the Form I-765, be sure that the bar code at the bottom of the form is visible.
- Photocopy of all past and present I-20s (pages 1 and 3);
- Photocopy of passport identification page;
- Photocopy of F-1 visa page;
- Two passport-style photos (see specifications below); do not cut the photos!
- Photocopy of the front and back of your I-94 card;
- Photocopy of previously issued EAD (if applicable);
- Fee payment of US\$380 payable by bank draft, personal check, cashier's check, certified check, or money order to "U.S. Department of Homeland Security" (spelled out like that). In the memo line, note "I-765 application fee"; attach the check to the front of the I-765.
- Completed [G-1145 Form](#) (optional but recommended -- it signs you up for email/text message notification of your application's arrival at USCIS), downloadable at the main site noted above.

Tips for completing your application:

Choosing an OPT start date:

- The "start date" is the date your work permission begins. You cannot work earlier than the start date, but you can start working later.
- Your requested start date must be within 60 days after your program completion date. For example, if you graduate or complete your exchange program June 11, your start date can be no later than August 10.
- Changing the requested OPT dates after the application has been mailed to USCIS can be very difficult. Choose your dates carefully.

Photo specifications (U.S. Dept. of State guidelines):

- The photos must have been taken within the last 30 days (do not use the same photos used for your F-1 visa application; USCIS might notice and will return the application).
- The two photos should have a white background.
- They should be unmounted, printed on thin paper, glossy, and not re-touched.
- The photos should show a passport-style, full-face image, with both ears visible.
- The photos should be 2 by 2 inches, with the distance from the top of the head to just below the chin about 1 3/8 inches.
- Lightly print your name and your I-94 number in pencil on the back of each photo.

Tips for completing I-765 Form:

Item 3 -- Your Receipt Notice and Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) will be mailed to the address you provide. In most cases, we recommend you use the PDSO's office on campus:

c/o Jan Hurndon, PDSO
Southeastern University
1000 Longfellow Blvd.

Lakeland, FL 33801

If you will be moving soon, note that government mail will not be forwarded, even if you file a change of address request with the U.S. Postal Service. Our office will need a photocopy of your EAD card. If you use the PDSO's address, we will automatically make the photocopy after receiving the EAD and will email you to pick up your card. If it is mailed to your address, you must provide us with a copy.

If you have your EAD mailed to the PDSO, and you may be leaving the Lakeland area, contact the PDSO for arrangements to get it to you.

Item 10 -- Use the number from your I-94 card (the small, white card in your passport). It is an 11-digit number.

Item 11 -- Check "yes" only if you have previously received an EAD card from USCIS. Curricular Practical Training (CPT) does not require a "yes" answer because CPT is not authorized by USCIS.

Items 12,13,14,15 -- Use the information from your I-94 card. In some cases you may have made recent short trips to Canada or Mexico, which are not reflected by your current I-94 card. This is standard and it will be fine to use the information from your I-94 card anyway. If you have changed to F-1 status within the U.S., include a copy of your Approval Notice.

Item 16 -- Use the applicable code: Pre-completion OPT: (c)(3)(A)
Post-completion OPT: (c)(3)(B)

Item 17 -- Leave blank unless you are a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) major applying for the 17-month OPT extension.

Certification -- Sign the form in blue ink.

Step 2: Submitting your completed OPT application to the PDSO

Please make an appointment to meet with the PDSO to go over all the parts of your application. If all materials are correct and complete, the PDSO will then issue a new I-20 with an OPT recommendation printed on the back page. You may have to return to the PDSO's office for the I-20, depending on other commitments within that office. If that is the case, you will receive an email notification to pick up the application materials and new I-20 in the PDSO's office.

Step 3: Mailing your application to USCIS

- Upon receiving your application materials and new I-20 from your PDSO, review the checklist once again to make sure your application is complete.
- Mail your application in a large envelope within 30 days of the new OPT-endorsed I-20 being issued.

- Sign your OPT-endorsed I-20 at the bottom of page 1 before photocopying it and mailing it to USCIS.
- Do not mail your original passport, I-94, or I-20.
- It is recommended you send your application by certified mail, return receipt requested.
- If your I-765 mailing address is in Florida, mail the entire application to:
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 - For U.S. Postal Service (USPS) deliveries, including certified mail:
USCIS
PO Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266
 - For express mail and courier service deliveries:
USCIS
Attn: AOS
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business
Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067
 - If your I-765 mailing address is outside the state of Florida, review the USCIS mailing instructions to find the correct Lockbox location.

USCIS will send you a receipt notice (I-797 Notice of Action) confirming receipt of your OPT application, assigning a "receipt date," and assigning a case number. Carefully review the notice to make sure your name is spelled correctly. If it is not, contact your PDSO immediately.

You may use the case number on your receipt notice to check the status of your application online.

You may not begin employment until USCIS approves the OPT application and you have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD). Authorized OPT dates will be on your EAD. Be sure to review the reporting and employment requirements you must follow after OPT approval.

FAQ's:

Should I take pre- or post-completion OPT?

* Full-time pre-completion OPT authorized during vacation periods will be deducted from the total 12 months, and will reduce the OPT time you have available to use after graduation.

* Part-time pre-completion OPT (up to 20 hours per week) can be authorized for students using OPT before graduation while school is in session (during vacation periods full-time OPT can be authorized).

(Graduate students who have completed all class requirements and only have a thesis remaining may take pre- or post-completion OPT. Please talk with SEU's PDSO about whether pre-completion or post-completion OPT is best for your situation.)

Am I eligible for OPT?

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training, you must meet all the following requirements:

[] be in F-1 status

[] have completed one academic year of full time study (2 consecutive semesters, not including

summer. For example, fall and spring semesters, or spring and fall)
[] currently be enrolled in a degree or certificate program, or within 60 days after the completion of degree or certificate program
[] have met with the International Students Coordinator to review this material

Note that you do NOT need to have a job offer to apply for OPT.

How do I apply for OPT?

Please review instructions above regarding the application requirements and process. Please also note that you must meet with the PDSO through the application process.

What are the filing deadlines?

Pre-completion OPT can be filed 120 days before the OPT start date if the student has completed 1 academic year of study. If the student has not completed 1 academic year of study, s/he can apply up to 90 days before the end of the full academic year.

Post-completion OPT can be filed 90 days prior to the completion of program date and up to 60 days after the completion of program end-date. Because the government system is not updated to allow for applications after the student's completion date, we recommend that the student apply before s/he completes her/his program.

Pre/Post-completion OPT applications MUST be received by USCIS within 30 days of OPT recommendation from the PDSO (the issuing date on the new I-20).

Applications received before or after the above filing dates may be DENIED by the adjudicating Service Center.

How long does the application approval take?

From the time the PDSO receives a complete application package, it takes no more than 2 (two) business days to process and issue the new OPT Form I-20. You then pick it up from the PDSO and mail all the application materials to USCIS as directed. USCIS should notify you by mail within 2 to 3 weeks that they have received your application. Please save this receipt as it will include your USCIS file number. With your USCIS file number, you can monitor progress on your application at the [USCIS Case Status Service website](#). You should receive your EAD card (Employment Authorization Document – a laminated card that resembles a driver's license) by mail within 4 months. Your EAD card will be mailed to you at the address you indicated on your I-765.

What documents prove that I have approval to work under OPT?

An EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card will be issued by USCIS. The card will indicate the dates when you are authorized to work. This card, along with your OPT I-20, prove that you have OPT work authorization. Please remember that the PDSO will need a copy of your EAD card.

What happens once I get my OPT card (also called an EAD card)?

Bring your EAD card to the PDSO to be copied for your file within one week of receiving it so SEVIS can be updated. Failure to do so may affect your F-1 status.

Within how many days do I have to get a job?

Students on post-completion OPT are allowed only 90 total days of unemployment during their OPT period. Employment must be for at least 20 hours per week and related to your major. Please contact the PDSO with any questions about the unemployment period and how volunteer work can count as employment.

What if I don't get a job within the allotted time?

After 90 days of unemployment the student can be considered in violation of maintaining their status unless s/he has:

- 1) Transferred to continue your education at the same or another educational institution;
- 2) Departed the US; or
- 3) Changed visa status

What reporting requirements are there?

All students on OPT must report the following information to the PDSO within 10 days of beginning, changing, or ending a new job:

- Employer's name
- Employer's address
- Start and end dates of employment

All students on OPT must also report any address changes within 10 days of the change. Email all this information to your PDSO, Jan Hurndon at jphurndon@seu.edu.

What should I do if I start or end my employment?

Immigration regulations require you to notify the PDSO (e-mail jphurndon@seu.edu) within 10 days of being hired or losing your employment. We will need to have the name, address, start and end dates of your employment.

What happens if I move?

Immigration regulations require you report your change of address within 10 days of being of moving. We will need to have your complete mailing address. Email this information to jphurndon@seu.edu.

Can I travel while on OPT?

Before you get the card for pre-completion OPT: You may travel outside the U.S. before you receive the card, if you plan to use that OPT period pre-degree completion. In order to be eligible for re-entry to the U.S., you must have a valid F-1 visa (except if you're a Canadian), a valid passport, a valid I-20 with a recent travel signature.

After you get the card for pre-completion OPT: Yes, you may travel outside the U.S. after you receive the EAD card, as long as you are still an active student at Southeastern, and plan to enroll for full-time classes in the next semester. In order to be eligible for re-entry to the U.S., you must have a valid F-1 visa (Canadians exempt), a valid passport, a valid I-20 with a recent travel signature.

Before you get the card for post-completion OPT: Travel outside the U.S. while waiting for a post-completion OPT work card can be problematic and result in cancellation of your OPT application. It is not recommended. If you must travel and the OPT case is still pending, you can re-enter the U.S. as long as you have proof of the pending OPT application, a valid passport, a valid F-1 visa (Canadians exempt), the original signed I-20 form with the OPT recommendation and a recent travel signature on it, and proof of non-immigrant intent (i.e., proof that you will return to your home country after you complete your OPT period). Forms of non-immigrant intent evidence might include admission to a college or university in your home country; a job offer in your home country, or a spouse or children living in your home country.

After you get the card for post-completion OPT: In order to be eligible for re-entry to the U.S. after the OPT application has been approved, you must have the employment card in your possession, a valid F-1 visa (Canadians exempt), a valid passport, a valid I-20 with the OPT endorsement and a recent travel signature on page 3, proof of a temporary job in your field of study, and proof of non-immigrant intent

(i.e., proof that you will return to your home country after you complete your OPT period). Forms of non-immigrant intent evident might include admission to a college or university in your home country, a job offer in your home country, or a spouse or children living in your home country. You are eligible for a new F-1 visa application as well, during the OPT approved period.

* If you enter the US in B-1/B-2 (tourist), Visa Waiver, or any other status while you are on OPT, you will lose your OPT.

Can I extend my OPT?

Only if you are a **Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics STEM** student (see related links). If you are not a STEM student, then a maximum 12 months of full-time OPT per degree is allowed.

Can I have an additional OPT?

You may have up to 12 months of full-time OPT per higher level of degree program.

Example: A student completes a Bachelor's degree and gets 12 months of OPT. S/He then completes a Master's degree and is eligible to get an additional 12 months of OPT because it is a higher degree level. The same student then completes a PhD and is eligible for another round of 12 month OPT.

What if I end my OPT early and leave the US?

Immigration regulations require you to report this information to your PDSO. E-mail jphurndon@seu.edu within 10 days of leaving the US.

Does CPT affect my OPT?

If you are authorized for a total of 12 or more months of **full-time** Curricular Practical Training, you will lose your eligibility for OPT. (Note that this does not apply to part-time CPT).

Will I need a Social Security Card/Number?

Yes! This is required for all employment in the U.S. If you have had a campus job, then you already have your SSN. You will use this same number throughout your work life in the U.S. If you do not yet have a SSN, you will have to wait until you have your EAD card and then go to the local Social Security Administration office. (Ask the PDSO for assistance with this.)

What happens if I move after I mail my OPT application?

The U.S. Postal Service will not forward mail from USCIS if the address on the envelope does not match the name on the mailbox. Consider using the PDSO's address on the I-765 application. We will send you an email when the card arrives.

How long does it take to get approved for OPT?

Approximately three months from the date USCIS receives your application, though it can be faster depending on the time of year.

If I change my mind and decide not to work, can I cancel my OPT authorization?

The answer depends on your situation. If you were issued a new I-20 with the OPT recommendation but have not yet mailed your application to USCIS, you must notify your PDSO of your change in plans. If you have already mailed your application to USCIS, a request can be submitted to USCIS to halt processing. Your application fee will not be returned and we cannot guarantee that your request will be honored. Contact your PDSO for assistance. If you have received your EAD card and wish to cancel authorization, contact your PDSO. Cancellation in this situation is highly unlikely. OPT applications are not meant to be cancelled. Please plan carefully and apply for OPT only if you are sure that you want to

work.

I didn't submit my OPT application early enough, and I realize I might not get the OPT start date I requested. How do I know what date USCIS will authorize?

Unfortunately it is difficult to estimate. The authorization depends on when the application arrives and the workload at USCIS. If they process your application after your requested start date, they will defer the start date to their day of processing, up to 60 days after your program end date. However, there is no way to predict which date it will be.

How long does it take to get the Receipt Notice/Notice of Action (NOA)?

Approximately two-to-three weeks after USCIS receives your application. You might verify with your bank whether your check has been cashed. If so, the NOA is likely on the way.

When I receive my EAD card, should I give a copy to the PDSO?

Yes, if you requested your EAD be mailed to you directly, submit a photocopy to your PDSO. If your EAD is mailed to the PDSO first, we will make a photocopy before you pick up the EAD.

I have heard that I can apply for a "temporary" EAD card. Is this true?

In the past, students were able to apply for a temporary EAD card if their application was pending for more than 90 days. Processes have changed, and temporary EADs are no longer issued. If your application is pending for more than 90 days, contact your PDSO.

What happens if my EAD card never arrives or has incorrect information on it?

Contact your PDSO.

What if I lose my EAD card?

If you lose your card, you must apply and pay for a replacement. Complete a new I-765 Form and resubmit it to USCIS with all supporting documents, including the fee. Contact your PDSO for an updated I-20. We recommend you keep your EAD at home (not in your wallet) because of the expense and time in applying for a replacement.

How long can I stay in the U.S. after my post-completion OPT ending date expires?

You have a 60-day grace period following the end of your OPT period, unless you have extended your F-1 status for another degree program, or you are under application to change your immigration status to another classification.

If you're a graduate student...

I am a graduate student and I've completed all required coursework. I only have my thesis remaining. Can I apply for OPT authorization to begin before I graduate?

You can apply for either pre-completion OPT or post-completion OPT. There are advantages and disadvantages to consider when deciding which option works best for you. Here is an overview. We recommend you schedule an appointment with your PDSO to further discuss your options.

Pre-completion OPT is only valid while you are a student finishing your thesis or dissertation. The OPT start and end date must fall before your I-20 expires and before you graduate.

Pros:

You are not subject to the 90-day unemployment limit.

Your I-20 can be extended if you need more time to complete your thesis/dissertation.

Cons:

If you graduate, you must submit a separate *post-completion* OPT application and another application fee.

There is the risk of a gap in employment authorization if you must submit a second OPT application and the timing is not perfect.

It is challenging to take advantage of the full 12 months of OPT allotted to you because of the dual applications.

You must continue to register full-time (which may or may not be a requirement from your department depending on your funding and/or defense quarter.)

Post-completion OPT can begin either while you complete your thesis/dissertation or after you graduate. Procedurally, however, the OPT start date can only fall after the I-20 end date, so your I-20 will be shortened to the end of the quarter in which you submit the OPT application.

Pros:

You will only submit one application and fee.

You are not required to register for the purpose of maintaining F1 status (though you must consult your department about Graduate School registration requirements depending on your funding, defense quarter, and ability to apply for on-leave status).

Cons:

You are subject to the 90-day unemployment limit, an added pressure if you still need to focus on your thesis/dissertation.

The I-20 cannot be extended. If you do not complete your thesis/dissertation within the year, your F-1 status ends when the OPT expires, and you must travel and reenter with a new I-20 to continue your studies.

If you do not complete your thesis within the OPT year, you are not eligible for the 17-month STEM extension, even if you otherwise would have been eligible.