

Post Completion - Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary 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 optional practical training is granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) – formerly known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service or INS - and can take at least 90 days and frequently up to 120 days to obtain. It is important that you apply for the authorization at the earliest possible date.

What are the Eligibility Requirements for F-1 Optional Practical Training?

To be eligible to apply for optional practical training, you must:

- OPT must relate to your major or course of study.
- You can apply for 12 months of OPT at each education level, (i.e., you may have 12 months of OPT at the bachelor's level and another 12 months of OPT at the master's level).
- Your DSO will provide you with a new Form I-20 that shows the DSO recommendation for this employment.
- You must apply for work authorization by filing an online [Form I-765, "Application for Employment Authorization,"](#) with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and paying a filing fee. USCIS will send you a Form I-766, "Employment Authorization Document," (EAD) upon approving your Form I-765.
- Wait to start work until after you receive your EAD.

When should I apply?

- Once you receive a recommendation for post-completion OPT from your Designated School Official (DSO) to pursue OPT, you must apply for an employment authorization document (EAD) with USCIS within 30 days. Additionally, you may file up to 90 days prior to your program end-date and not later than 60 days after your program end date.
- Schedule an appointment with the Center for Global Engagement to ensure your OPT request is completed correctly.

- If you will submit your USCIS I-765 OPT application online: You need to create a USCIS account. DO NOT pay for your application until you are ready to submit your form. Once you pay your USCIS fee, your application will automatically submit.

Dates of OPT Authorization:

The OPT card is approved for a specific beginning and end date. You must identify those dates on the OPT Request Form. For OPT after completion of studies or graduation, the beginning date can be no later than 60 days after the date you complete your studies. If you have questions about your OPT dates, please discuss this with **your International Student Adviser/DSO**.

This [OPT Date Calculator](#) can help students plan ahead!

How do I apply for OPT?

The DSO will recommend your SEVIS I-20 record for OPT before submitting the application to USCIS. Your first step is to schedule an appointment with our center. [Schedule your appointment with the Center for Global Engagement here](#). Appointments will be scheduled in small group format, with time for individual questions. The session will last no longer than one hour. Your online OPT applications will be reviewed for completeness and accepted for processing at the close of the session. **At the appointment, bring the following seven (7) supporting documents:**

1. **Your laptop:**
 - You need to create an online account for the [I-765 Form](#)
2. Save the most recent copy of your [I-94 form](#) in your laptop
3. Save a copy of the F-1 student visa in your laptop
4. Save a copy of your identification pages from your passport
5. Save the most recent passport color photographs per the attached instructions from USCIS ([see sample](#)) in your laptop. You can obtain your photo at Walgreen.
6. Same CPT SEVIS I-20 (3 pages) in your laptop.
7. For credit or debit card payment of \$410 - this is the I-765 application processing fee.

Center for Global Engagement will review your online application with you and submit a recommendation for OPT by updating your record in SEVIS. The SEVIS system will produce a new I-20, a copy of which we will submit with your application for optional practical training.

When OPT Employment is Permitted

You may only begin employment once you have the EAD (Employment Authorization Card) in your possession. You may only work within the dates printed on the card. Graduating students are not permitted to work on campus after graduation, unless the job qualifies under OPT, and falls within the dates of the EAD card.

Reporting Requirements after Graduation

During your OPT period you continue to hold F-1 status sponsored by Hope College. As such, you must follow certain regulations. Your F-1 record remains in the government database, SEVIS. Any changes listed below must be reported to the Center for Global Engagement so that your SEVIS record is updated.

- Your current address (where you physically reside) within ten days of a change (report the change to the Office website directly)
- Intention of transferring from your OPT to another F-1 program in the U.S.
- Change of visa status (e.g. F to H, F to J, etc.)

Travel After Graduation While Waiting for OPT Approval

After completion of studies, DO NOT leave the country without first receiving your EAD. Once you have graduated, you are required to show your EAD along with your other immigration documents in order to be permitted to reenter the United States. Printed on the EAD card will be the statement not valid for reentry. This statement means that you must have ALL documentation listed below in order to travel and return to the United States after graduation. In many cases students will also need to apply for a new F-1 visa stamp before they may return to the U.S. If you have an employer who has filed for H-1B on your behalf, no travel is recommended in F-1 status. The following is a list of required documents to re-enter the U.S. using OPT after graduation:

- a valid Form I-20, signed on page 3 by your International Student Advisor (the signature should not be more than six months old at the time of reentry to the United States)
- a valid passport
- a valid F-1 visa stamp in the passport
- valid EAD card, evidence of a job offer, evidence of resumption of employment, or if not yet employed, evidence that you are searching for employment.

Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?

No. The clock begins, however, not when you have a job, but at the date specified on your EAD.

Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)?

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.

Reporting Requirements After Graduation

F-1 students are responsible for reporting their current address, their employer's name and address and any period of unemployment while on OPT to the DSO in the Center for Global Engagement.

During your OPT period you continue to hold F-1 status sponsored by Hope College. As such, you must follow certain Homeland Security (DHS) regulations. Your F-1 record remains in the government database, SEVIS. Any changes listed below must be reported to the Center for Global Engagement so that your SEVIS record is updated.

- Your current address (where you physically reside) within ten days of a change (report the change to the Center for Global Engagement directly by sending an email to: **intladvisor@hope.edu**).
- Changes in your name or your dependent's name(s)
- Intention of transferring from your OPT to another F-1 program in the U.S.
- Change of visa status (e.g., F to H, F to J, etc.)
- No special permission is required to change employers or terminate your employment. However, you must notify Hope College Center for Global Engagement of your unemployment and/or new employer's information with a complete address and employer's name.
- OPT can only be extended beyond 12 months (for up to 17 months), if you meet the following two conditions:
 - You are currently authorized for OPT and working in a job related to your field of study
 - Your OPT is based on a US Bachelor's in a Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) degree at the time of application for the extension (STEM majors at Hope College)

Unemployment Period in OPT

The time spent without a qualifying job during post-completion OPT. Each day the student is not employed in a qualifying job is counted toward the limit on unemployment time. The limit is 90 days for students on post-completion OPT, including those with a cap-gap extension, except that

students with a STEM OPT extension are given an additional 30 days of unemployment time for a maximum of 120 days.

Grace period

The 60-day period of time given to F-1 Visa students after the completion of a program of study or an authorized period of post-completion OPT allowing the student time to prepare for departure from the United States, apply for a transfer to another SEVP-certified school, request a change of level to continue at the current school, or take steps to otherwise maintain legal status.

To schedule an appointment with a DSO for OPT, start [here](#).