



DEFINING OPT

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an employment option available to F-1 students. It must be directly related to the major area of study. ISS assists students with the OPT application process; however, the final authorization is processed by USCIS. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that a completed application is submitted in a timely manner to ISS (we recommend 90 days prior to the completion date of all academic requirements). There are two types of OPT:

- **Pre-Completion OPT** is used before completion of an academic program. If a student has not yet completed all coursework, pre-completion OPT is limited at 20 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters.
- **Post-Completion OPT** is used after completion of an academic program. Post-completion is only issued for full-time employment and students must be employed and/or volunteer for a minimum of 20 hours per week. A 17-month STEM-Extension is available for eligible students.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY

Students who have a valid F-1 status and who have attended an SEVP-certified college, university, conservatory, or seminary on a full-time basis for at least one academic year may be authorized up to 12 months of OPT per program level. Students must not have used more than 12 months of full-time CPT. Students must apply no earlier than 90 days earlier than or 60 days later than their degree completion date.

OPT HOURS AND LIMITATIONS

- Employment on OPT must be directly related to the major area of study and correspond with the most recent educational level as listed on the student's I-20.
- Students may not accrue more than 90 days of unemployment during the 12 months of OPT. Working and/or volunteering for less than 20 hours per week counts as unemployment.
- Standard OPT per degree level is 12 months; the 12 months may be divided into various segments. For example, a B.A. student who completes 3 months of pre-completion is only eligible for 9 months of post-completion OPT.
- OPT time is not cumulative. For example, if student applies for 12 months of OPT on a bachelor's level but only uses 6 months before beginning a new master's level, the student loses the unused 6 months of bachelor's OPT.
- Part-time pre-completion OPT is authorized for up to 20 hours per week and is deducted from the 12-month limit at 50%.
- Post-completion OPT start date must be within 60 days following academic program completion (not necessarily date of graduation). The academic program completion date should be determined prior to applying for OPT.
- During post-completion OPT, students may enroll in classes that are "incidental" to the employment; however, obtaining a new I-20 for a new academic program cancels the current OPT once the new I20 is issued.

APPLICATION PROCESS (all application materials can be found on <http://iss.uark.edu>)

1. Complete the Student Acknowledgment Form and prepare all of the materials listed on that form.
2. Download and complete the I-765. *Note: You must use the ISS P.O. address on the I-765: c/o Int'l Students & Scholars, P.O. Box 2500, Fayetteville, AR, 72702-2500.*
3. Download the Academic Recommendation Form (there is an undergraduate and graduate version) and ask your major professor/academic advisor to complete it. *Note: They must indicate a specific **date** for your academic program completion.*
4. Obtain two passport-style photos.
5. Prepare a check or money order written out to Department of Homeland Security (do not abbreviate) for \$380.00. *Note: Write out \$380.00 as "three hundred eighty dollars and 00/100."*
6. Schedule an appointment with an ISS F-1 advisor to submit the application.

NOTE: Do not begin employment until you have received the EAD for approved OPT authorization and the start date on the EAD card has passed. The EAD is a license-sized photo card that indicates the approved dates of OPT employment authorization. You may not work prior to the start date, or after the ending date, without another form of valid work authorization.

DRIVER'S LICENSE ISSUES

Please be advised that only the Arkansas revenue office will be able to verify your status and issue a state driver's license while on OPT. You must obtain an Arkansas driver's license BEFORE you move out of state to begin working. The driver's license office in your new state will NOT be able to verify your status or issue you a driver's license.

CHANGES TO OPT

- Changes to the OPT start/end dates are not possible once your application is submitted to USCIS. Please be certain of your anticipated employment dates prior to submitting your OPT application.
- Cancellation of the OPT application must be submitted prior to issuance of the EAD and is NOT guaranteed. Applications fees will not be refunded if OPT application is cancelled or denied.
- Job change is possible. OPT is not related to a specific employer or place of employment. Submit all changes to ISS (see Reporting Requirements section below).

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS WHILE ON OPT

Students must report the following to ISS within 10 days of any change throughout the duration of OPT:

- Personal information including name, living address, and phone number
- Employer information including employer name, address, start date, termination date, supervisor name and contact information
- Changes to immigration status
- Permanent departure from the United States

TRAVEL WHILE ON OPT

Travel on OPT is risky. Before completing your academic program, travel is less risky because you are able to re-enter with a valid I20. However, after your I20 has expired, you **MUST** travel with the following documents to be allowed re-entry (remember, re-entry is not guaranteed during travel at any time):

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa
- I-20 signed for travel within the past six months. There is a special signature needed during OPT.
- EAD Note: *The EAD says "not valid for re-entry." This means it cannot be used **alone** for re-entry.*
- Letter from your employer stating that you will return to the U.S. to resume employment on your OPT.

Travel during Cap Gap is not allowed. Travel while your OPT application is pending is allowed but is very risky and not advised (especially after academic completion). In order to re-enter while your OPT application is pending, you **must** carry with you the following: a valid passport, valid visa, I-20 signed for travel within the past 6 months, and your OPT receipt notice. Note: *If your OPT is approved while you are out of the country, you will need to re-enter with the EAD and employment letter as noted above.*

CAP GAP OPT EXTENSION

F-1 status and employment authorization is automatically extended (free of charge) for students on post-completion OPT who have a pending or approved H-1B petition with an October 1 start date. **All** students with a qualifying H-1B petition are eligible for Cap Gap. Students on Cap Gap are subject to the unemployment limit associated with their OPT. If the H-1B petition is denied/withdrawn, Cap Gap employment ends 10 days after the denial/withdrawal date and grace period ends 60 days after the denial/withdrawal date. If an H-1B petition is not approved by September 30, Cap Gap expires and the student may remain in the U.S. but may not engage in employment until the H-1B petition is approved.

17-MONTH STEM EXTENSION FOR OPT (application details at <http://iss.uark.edu>)

A 17-month extension is available for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic) students currently on post-completion OPT. Below are the requirements:

- You must have **completed** a degree at bachelor's, master's, or doctoral level in a field designated by Homeland Security as a STEM program (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics). See ISS website for details.
- You must be engaged in an approved period of standard post-completion OPT, based on that STEM degree;
- You must not have had a 17-month "STEM" OPT extension previously;
- You must be employed by an employer who is enrolled in the Homeland Security "E-Verify" program.
- Your employer must agree to notify your DSO (ISS advisor) **within 48 hours** if you cease employment prior to the end date of your OPT authorization card.

The 90-day unemployment limit increases to 120 days on the STEM extension. Students must report employment to ISS 6 and 12 months after the start date of STEM OPT. These 6 and 12 month reports are strictly enforced. Failure to report to ISS on the 6 and 12 month dates will result in a loss of F-1 status.

***Student health insurance can be purchased through the Pat Walker Health Center for time spent on OPT: pdelane@uark.edu**