WHAT IS IT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is off-campus employment authorization that lets F-1 students get work experience in their major field of study. The amount of work you are permitted to do is a maximum of 12 months of full-time employment for each higher educational level you pursue in the U.S. You can use it during or after your studies. You can work for any employer, anywhere in the country.

Think of it as an OPT bank account! In that account are 12 months of full-time optional practical training for your current program of study. Let’s say you’d like to work full-time for three months after your sophomore (second) year in your bachelor’s degree. That’s a three-month withdrawal of full-time employment, leaving you 9 months left to spend during your bachelor’s degree. During your junior year, you decide to work part-time (less than 20 hours a week) for two semesters or nine months. Since part-time counts at half the full-time rate, you’ve made a withdrawal of four and a half months of full-time employment. This leaves you with four and a half months of full-time employment still in your account to use after you graduate.

If you decide to spend all of your OPT after you complete your degree, you must request all that you would like to use at once, that is the total amount, non-stop. You cannot use it in pieces (i.e., apply for three months and then apply for nine more months).

If you decide to go on to your Master’s degree after completing your OPT for your Bachelor’s, your bank account will be full again with another 12 months available to you!

HOW CAN IT BE USED?

- Summer vacation and semester break – either part-time or full-time employment
- While school is in session – part-time employment only
- After completion of all course requirements for a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree, excluding the thesis or equivalent – part-time or full-time employment
- After completion of ALL requirements for the course of study – full-time employment only

HOW CAN YOU QUALIFY FOR IT?

1) You must have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year.

2) You must be able to describe how the type of work you are seeking directly relates to your major. You do not have to have a job offer to apply for OPT. If you are applying for pre-completion of studies OPT, however, it is wise that you be as sure as possible of a job so that you don’t waste any of your OPT “account.”

3) You may apply for Post-Completion of Studies OPT up to three months before completing your program of study, but not later than 60 days after. If you apply within the 60-day period after
completion, you are likely not to receive your full 12 month OPT benefit due to USCIS processing
times.

4) You cannot already have used 12 months of full-time Curricular Practical Training. Using one or more
years of full-time CPT excludes you from the possibility of OPT.

HOW DO YOU APPLY?

Pick up a complete for F-1 Optional Practical Training Employment Authorization, gather and
complete the required documents, and return them to us. When you return it, we will review your
application to make sure that you qualify. If we agree that you do, we will issue two new identical
Form I-20s recommending your OPT and will contact you to come sign them. After you sign them,
you will keep one I-20 and send the other to USCIS with your complete application.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

After USCIS receives your application, it will take up to 90 days for you to receive an Employment
Authorization Document (EAD). It could take less or more time depending on USCIS's workload.

It's important to take USCIS processing time into consideration when planning the date you
want to start working! YOU CANNOT BEGIN TO WORK UNTIL YOU HAVE YOUR EAD
CARD!!

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO TRAVEL BEFORE STARTING POST-COMPLETION OF
STUDIES OPT?

Contact ISSS before making any travel plans if your OPT is still pending USCIS authorization. You
are required to have your EAD card to return to the U.S. and we recommend that you also have a
job offer.

HOW CAN YOU EXTEND YOUR OPT?

You can extend pre-completion of studies OPT by filing another application. You may not continue
to work until it has been authorized by USCIS.

Only qualified “STEM” graduates (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) may apply
for an extension of their post-completion OPT. Please contact us for more information about the
STEM extension. You will also be entitled to another 12 month period of OPT if you go on to a
higher level of study.

STUDY AND POST-COMPLETION OPT

Immigration regulations state that, “Authorization to engage in practical training employment is
automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another
educational level.” Therefore, you should not continue your U.S. study until after your OPT has
ended.