OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

How to prepare your application to USCIS

International Studies Office
Issp.virginia.edu
What is OPT?

Allows for off-campus work authorization for F-1 students in their primary field of study.

- Students must be in full-time F-1 status for at least one academic year
- Some students who change visa status to F-1 and who have been continuously enrolled in a full-time degree program for at least 1 academic year may qualify for OPT prior to 1 year in F-1 status
Eligibility

Pre-Completion OPT
For most students, Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is a better option. It allows for off-campus work authorization in your field of study without using any of the 12 months of OPT time. See our website for a detailed description.

Post-Completion OPT
• You must be continuously enrolled in valid student status for one year or two full semesters (Fall and Spring).
• You apply in your final semester of study no more than 90 days before your program end date.
OPT and CPT Usage

• If you used 1 year or more of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT), during your current degree level, you do not qualify for OPT.
• Part-time CPT should not count towards OPT disqualification.
• Heavy CPT usage either part-time or full-time can cause your OPT application to be subject to additional scrutiny. Be prepared to provide evidence of all prior CPT I-20s, as well as the academic work related to your CPT.
Types of Qualifying Employment

During your 12-month OPT period, OPT employment must be a minimum of 20 hours per week in a job directly related to your degree program. It is the student’s responsibility to demonstrate relationship between coursework and employment. Here are types of employment permitted:

• Paid employment
• Multiple employers
• Work for hire (commonly referred to as 1099 employment)
• Self-employed business owner (must obtain proper business licenses)
• Employment through an agency
• Volunteers or unpaid interns (Post-Completion OPT only. Not eligible for OPT STEM Extension)
Application Process Overview

1. Review our F-1 OPT webpage and our tutorial

2. Initiate the OPT Request Process through ISSP Connect. Submit only 1 request. You can return to an incomplete application by logging onto ISSP Connect. Remember to click on the ‘submit’ button when you have completed the application.

3. You will receive an email when your OPT I-20 has been uploaded to your application. Log onto ISSP Connect and retrieve your I-20 from the Documents section of your OPT application.

4. Review our OPT Filing Instructions page. OPT I-20 and full OPT application must be in the hands of USCIS no later than 30 days after the OPT I-20’s issue date. Do not e-file your application.
   • Do not use an electronic signature on your I-765. Use a wet blue ink for all signature and dates.
   • Obtain a tracking number when mailing your application.
Step 1: Requesting your OPT I-20

1. Complete OPT Request through ISSP Connect
2. We will need your degree completion date electronically verified from your department chair, faculty advisor or association dean.
3. Remember, you can apply for OPT no earlier than 90 days before your program end date.
OPT Start Date

- Your OPT start date is the date that your 12 months of work authorization begins.
- OPT start date must be within the 60-day grace period after the program completion date.
- The requested start and end dates will be noted on page 2 of your new OPT I-20.
- The end date will be 1 year from your start date (i.e. July 2, 2021 to July 1, 2022).

IMPORTANT: Once USCIS receives your OPT application, it is not possible to change your OPT start and end dates.
Check your OPT I-20 for accuracy

1. Check your Educational Level (i.e. PhD candidate decides to graduate with a Masters)
2. Program End Date
3. Student Attestation
4. School Attestation: USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of the “Date Issued” date on Page 1, not the travel signature date.
5. OPT Start and End Dates
6. Your will receive a new travel signature at the time you request your OPT I-20
OPT Application Checklist

- 2 U.S. Passport Photos taken within the past 30 days.
- USCIS Fee of $410
  - *Fee increases to $550 on October 2, 2020*
- Form G-1145, e-notification form
- Original Form I-765. Don’t forget to sign in wet ink. No e-signatures.
- Copy of OPT I-20 issued by ISO within the past 30 days. Don’t forget to sign in wet ink. No e-signatures.
- Copy of valid passport biographical page
- Copy of latest F-1 visa stamp
- Printout of electronic I-94 record, or copy of paper Form I-94
- Copies of all previous I-20s (from UVA and previous schools, if applicable)
Passport Photo Requirement

The photos required to use for the OPT application must meet the specifications of U.S. style passport photos. To see a full description of these specifications, go to the U.S. Department of State website.

- Submit two identical color passport photos taken within the past 30 days.
- DO NOT use old photos you used for your passport or visa applications. You will get denied.
- Write your name and SEVIS number lightly in pencil on the back of both photos. Do not damage the photo surface by pressing hard while writing.

Tip:
USCIS has been strictly examining photos. ISO recommends students have their photos taken professionally. Bryan’s Photo at 2214 Ivy Road Suite 107, Charlottesville, VA 22903.
USCIS Fee

Check, Money Order, or Credit Card for $410 before October 1, 2020. Please note, fee increases to $550 after October 2, 2020.

- Check or Money Order should be made payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security” with SEVIS number in the memo line. Money orders can be purchased as banks, post office, and some local grocery stores. Make sure a name and address are printed on the check.
  - Do not use “temporary checks” often issued by the bank when opening a new account. These checks have no name or address in the upper left hand corner.

Credit Card (not recommended by ISO)

- Submit form G-1450 for the proper amount. Credit card must have U.S. billing address. Ensure you sign G-1450 and that the financial institution will clear your transaction the first time.
Form G-1145 (e-Notification)

- Attach to top of OPT application packet
- Use Form G-1145 to request text and/or email notification(s) regarding your application.

**WARNING!**
If you receive a phone call from a person claiming to work for USCIS or any other government agency, do not provide your personal information to them. Note the person’s name, phone number, and email address and contact an ISO advisor before responding.
IMPORTANT: Download the I-765 from the USCIS website. Use the current version. It’s best to download the form just before mailing the application since USCIS updates it frequently.

How to fill out Form I-765

• Review I-765 instructions on USCIS webpage
• Page 3, #27 use code (c)(3)(B) for Post-Completion OPT
• Type within the Form. Sign in wet ink.
• Answer all questions fully and accurately.
• If a question does not apply to you, type or print “N/A” or “None”
• Print and complete all pages.
• Contact ISO with any questions or uncertainties completes the I-765
UVa OPT I-20 (all pages):

- Must be received by USCIS within 30 days of DATE ISSUED on page 1
- Original must be signed by an ISO advisor
- Original must be signed by the student at the bottom of page 1.
- The requested OPT start and end dates will appear on page 2.
- Mail the original OPT I-20. All other I-20's will be mailed as copies

Click here to review our I-765 video for detailed instruction.
Photocopy of Passport and Visa

- Photocopy the passport biographic page with photo and passport expiration date. Use a valid passport even if it is not the passport you used to enter the US most recently. (*You will provide information on the expired passport on p. 7.)

- Photocopy the F-1 visa, if applicable; visa does not need to be valid.
Photocopy of I-94

The I-94 can be:

- A paper I-94 card stapled into your passport. Include a copy of both sides, even though the back side may be blank.
- A copy of an I-797 Change of Status Approval Notice which includes a new I-94.
Photocopies of all previous OPT and CPT I-20s

• Include copies of all previous I-20s at UVA and previous institutions
• Old and new versions of the I-20 are acceptable
• Copy all pages except the instruction page
• Keep original for your records
Photocopy of Previous EAD(s), if applicable

- If an EAD was received in the past, include a copy of the front and back of card
- Can be from OPT approved at a prior institution or different educational level
- Include previous OPT I-20s and I-797 notice of approval as well, if available.

Example only. Your EAD card will have different categories, dates and information listed.
The Application Deadline

- USCIS must receive your complete OPT application no later than 30 days after the OPT I-20 issue date on page 1.
  - The issue date is located next to the advisor’s signature on page 1 of the OPT I-20. Please account for mailing time.
- Additionally, USCIS must receive your application before the end of your 60-day grace period.
- Track the status of your mailed application to be certain it was delivered on time.
Mailing your application to USCIS

ISO strongly recommends using an express carrier such as FedEx or UPS to deliver your OPT application.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the mailing address on the I-765 is in...</th>
<th>Mail your application to:</th>
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</table>
| Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Guam, or the Northern Mariana Islands. | USCIS Phoenix Lockbox  
For U.S. Postal Service (USPS):  
USCIS  
P.O. Box 21281  
Phoenix, AZ 85036  
For FedEx, UPS, and DHL deliveries:  
USCIS  
Attn: NFB AOS  
1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S  
Suite 100  
Phoenix, AZ 85034 |
| Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, U.S. Virgin Islands, or West Virginia | USCIS Dallas Lockbox  
For U.S. Postal Service (USPS):  
USCIS  
P.O. Box 660867  
Dallas, TX 75266  
For FedEx, UPS, and DHL deliveries:  
USCIS  
Attn: NFB AOS  
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business  
Suite 400  
Lewisville, TX 75067 |
Step 3: Receiving your Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

1. Tracking Your Case
2. Reporting Responsibilities
I-797 Notice of Action & USCIS Case Tracking

• You will receive an I-797 Notice of Action in the mail within 2-4 weeks after mailing your OPT application to USCIS.
• DO NOT LOSE YOUR I-797. Make a copy for your records and keep in a safe place.

[CASE STATUS ONLINE image]

• You can track the status of your OPT application with your receipt number on your I-797.
• Visit https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus to check your case status
• Verify your name, date of birth and address on your I-797 receipt notice. If incorrect, please contact the USCIS service center listed on your I-797.
Application Problems – RFE or Rejection/Denial

Request for Evidence (RFE)
If there is a problem with your application, USCIS may send you a notice by mail. An RFE does not mean that your application has been rejected. It simply means that you need to send in additional documents before your EAD can be issued. Getting an RTI will delay the processing of your application. Contact the International Studies Office immediately so we may assist you with your application.

Rejection/Denial
In some cases, if too many items are missing from your application, USCIS will return the entire application to you. If this happens, you must make the corrections and send the application before the end date of your 60-day grace period. Contact the International Studies Office immediately so we may assist you with your application.

To avoid delays, review your application materials carefully for completeness and sign all the forms before mailing to USCIS.
The Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

- Review card to make sure the information is accurate. If not, contact an ISO advisor.
- Present your EAD to employers as proof of your legal work authorization in the United States.
- The EAD is a required document for entry to the U.S. during OPT.
Your Responsibilities During OPT

1. Reporting Requirements
2. Employment Requirements
3. Travel Documents for Re-entry
4. Applying for an F-1 Visa on OPT
The Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has its own “SEVP Portal” for students on OPT and OPT STEM. You will receive an email with instructions on how to create an account.

You are required to report any changes in address or employment through the portal within 10 days of change.

Beware of scams! SEVP will never ask you for payment to register for the SEVP Portal.
Employment Requirements

- You must work a minimum of 20 hours per week in a position related to your field of study.
- You cannot exceed more than 90 days of unemployment while on OPT. Days of unemployment prior to your EAD start date do not count towards the 90 days of unemployment. It is your responsibility to keep record of your employment history and any periods of unemployment.
# Travel Documents for Re-entry to United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Before Completing Program and Before EAD Issuance</th>
<th>After Completing Program ad Before EAD Issuance</th>
<th>After Completing Program &amp; After EAD Issuance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Passport</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valid F-1 visa stamp (if applicable)</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPT I-20 with valid travel endorsement signed within 6 months by an ISO Advisor</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of continued enrollment (e.g. Enrollment Certificate)</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of financial support</td>
<td>Strongly recommended</td>
<td>Strongly recommended</td>
<td>Strongly recommended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPT Receipt: I-797 Notice of Action</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job offer letter from employer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAD (Employment Authorization Document)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Travel Tips

• Avoid long absences from the US during the OPT period. Time spent outside of the US while unemployed by a US employer counts toward your 90 days of unemployment.
• Attempting to re-enter the U.S. close to the expiration date of your OPT can be risky.
• You must not enter the U.S. in a status other than F-1. This may result in the loss of your OPT eligibility.

Travel after Program Completion, but before OPT Card is received

• There is a higher risk associated with travel and return while your OPT is pending after the program completion date. If there are any problems with your application, you may not be able to respond to USCIS in a timely manner, which could delay processing of your EAD.
• If your OPT application is denied while outside the US, you will not be able to re-enter the US in F-1 status and will not be able to reapply.
Applying for F-1 Visa on OPT

If you are traveling abroad and your F-1 visa has expired, you must obtain a new F-1 visa before returning to the U.S. When going to your visa interview, bring the documents below.

- Valid Passport
- Valid I-20 with travel endorsement from UVA ISO Advisor within the past 6 months from the date of return to U.S.
- Unexpired EAD Card
- Job offer letter or proof of current employment directly related to your field of study
- Evidence of sufficient funds (e.g. a bank statement, a letter from sponsor or a job offer letter)
Completing OPT & Grace Period

• You have a 60-day grace period following the end of the OPT EAD
• Failure to leave the U.S., continue your F-1 status or timely file an OPT Extension or USCIS Change of Status will result in accrual of days of unlawful presence
• If you intend to apply for OPT STEM Extension, you must do so before the expiration date listed on your OPT EAD. Refer to our website for more information.
• The only additional extension of OPT available is the OPT Cap-Gap Extension for students who have an accepted cap-subject H1B application.

If you do not extend your OPT, and your EAD expires, you have the following options before the end of the 60-day grace period.
• Exit the U.S. within 60 days.
• Continue your F-1 status by transferring your I-20 to continue studies at another school, or request a change of level request to begin new studies at UVA.
• Work with immigration legal counsel regarding a Change of Status application to a new visa category. You will need to check with your legal counsel regarding your allowed period of stay or required exit date if you have a pending change of status when your grace period ends.