International Student & Scholar Services

Optional Practical Training Seminar

http://international.ua.edu/isss/currentstudents/student-employment/#opt
Optional Practical Training (OPT)

OPT is a 12 month temporary employment authorization that provides an opportunity for F-1 students to apply knowledge acquired from their academic program to a work experience in their major field of study.

Training is:
- **Temporary**
  - You remain on an F-1 nonimmigrant visa, however your employment may lead to a H-1B work visa
- **Optional**
  - Not part of a curriculum (unlike CPT)
  - You either use OPT or you don’t
- **Paid or Unpaid**
  - Emphasis is on training, not on paid status.
Types of Work Allowed on OPT

- Regular paid employment in a position related to your degree
- Payment by multiple short-term employers
- Work for hire (sometimes referred to as 1099 employment based on contractual work)
- Self-employed business owner
- Employment through an agency
- Volunteer work or unpaid internships
Must be related to your major field of study on the current degree level (item 5 on old I-20; Program of Study on new I-20)

Cannot be authorized to work in minor/ previous degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Old I-20</th>
<th>New I-20</th>
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Optional Practical Training (OPT) (cont.)
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(cont.)

- Job offer is not necessary for OPT employment authorization approval
- Recommended by International Student & Scholar Services
- Authorized by USCIS (US Citizenship & Immigration Services)
OPT Eligibility

- Maintaining lawful F-1 status

- Cannot begin employment until you have completed at least 1 full academic year in status (not in an English training program)

- Intend to get a job directly related to your program of study

- Have not completed more than 364 days of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT) at this degree level

- Have not been authorized for an equivalent of 12 months of OPT work authorization for the same degree level or higher
When OPT Can Occur

- **Prior to Degree Completion (Pre-completion OPT)**
  - During annual vacation (e.g. summer break)
  - While school is in session (Fall and Spring Semesters): Only part-time OPT is allowed (your on-campus and off-campus employment is limited to 20 hours per week)
  - When all course work has been completed and only thesis/dissertation or an equivalent remains

- **After Degree Completion (Post-completion OPT)**
  - Once all degree requirements are completed: Full-time OPT is Allowed
  - Post-completion OPT is the most common.
Duration of OPT

- Maximum OPT work benefit is 12 months of employment
  - Part-time and full-time OPT are subtracted at the same rate (e.g., part-time is not subtracted at a ½ rate)
  - Pre-completion OPT is subtracted from the 12 month OPT benefit
  - Pre- and Post-completion OPT combined cannot exceed 12 months

- Must complete initial Post-Completion OPT no later than 14 months after your program end date regardless of the OPT employment start date

- STEM Fields may be eligible for a 24-month extension of OPT - [http://international.ua.edu/isss/currentstudents/student-employment/#stem](http://international.ua.edu/isss/currentstudents/student-employment/#stem)
When to Apply for OPT

USCIS application processing may take 3 months so plan ahead and submit applications early.

- Applying for Pre-completion OPT (to be able to work before graduation)
  - During 1st year: As early as 90 days before completing your first academic year in status
  - After 1st year: As early as 90 days prior to the work authorization date you request.

- Applying for Post-completion OPT (to work after graduation)
  - As early as 90 days prior to your program end date.
    Your application must be received by USCIS by no later than 60 days after your program end date.
Timeline for Post-Completion OPT

- **Can apply for OPT**
  - Requested start date must be within the 60 days
  - Application must be received by USCIS before the 60th day

- **60 day grace period**

- **End of 60 Day Grace**
  - Beginning and ending dates of employment are on the EAD Card

- **Up to 90 days before**

- **12 months on OPT**
# Understanding Completion Date for Master’s Programs

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Master Student’s Anticipated Final Semester</th>
<th>Date Final Thesis Submitted to ProQuest</th>
<th>Minimum 599 Thesis Research Hours Required by Graduate School</th>
<th>Latest End-Date for I-20/DS-2019 and On-Campus Employment</th>
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<th>Doctoral Student's Anticipated Final Semester</th>
<th>Date Final Dissertation Submitted to ProQuest</th>
<th>Minimum 699 Research Hours Required by Graduate School</th>
<th>Latest End-Date for I-20/DS-2019 and On-Campus Employment</th>
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OPT Application Process

Make an appointment for OPT Processing by contacting ISSS at international@ua.edu or 205-348-5402 or book an appointment online.
To see dates and times visit ISSS calendar.

You MUST bring the following to the OPT Appointment:

- OPT form vital details (Page 4 of the OPT Application Packet)
- Signed responsibility agreement (Page 5 of OPT Application Packet)
- Recommendation from your Academic Adviser/Department (Page 6 of OPT Application Packet)
- Complete Form I-765 www.uscis.gov/i-765 (sample on Pages 8 - 14 of OPT Application Packet)
- Photocopies of:
  - All I-20s,
  - Main passport page,
  - Most recent visa stamp (even expired),
  - I-94 record (can be accessed at www.cbp.gov/i-94), and
  - Photocopy of old EAD Card if ever on work authorization before
- Two identical passport photos - 2 in. x 2 in. (or 5cm x 5cm)
- Check or money order for $410.00 made payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
OPT Application Packet - page 4 collects vital details. Please type responses directly into the fillable form.

Requested Employment Dates
- Must start within 60 days of your program completion date
- End date can be no later than 12 months from your requested start date (minus any pre-completion OPT time)
Page 5 of **OPT Application Packet** is a responsibility agreement.

Please read each point carefully before checking and agreeing.
Recommendation from your Academic Adviser/Department (page 6 of OPT Application Packet)

- Make sure that the graduation/completion date is entered first and major/degree field is second.
- For graduate students in thesis/dissertation research hours.
- For Pre-completion internships/work that can’t be authorized under CPT.
Photocopies and Photos

- Photocopies of:
  - all I-20s (only the 1st and 2nd pages of the new I-20 or the 1st and 3rd of the old I-20 are needed),
  - Main passport page,
  - Most recent visa (even expired),
  - I-94 record (can be accessed at www.cbp.gov/i-94), and
  - Photocopy of old EAD Card if ever on work authorization before

- Two identical passport photos (2”x2”) (write the I-94 number & your name on back in pencil)
You MUST complete Form I-765 www.uscis.gov/i-765
Example on pages 8 - 14 of OPT Application Packet
Please type responses directly into the fillable form
Print and sign the form in blue ink

I-765 Form

- You MUST complete Form I-765 [www.uscis.gov/i-765]
- Example on pages 8 - 14 of OPT Application Packet
- Please type responses directly into the fillable form
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Recommend that you use ISSS address rather than your personal address (USCIS does not forward mail). ISSS address is as follows:

If using ISSS address as the mailing address, check "No".

If you don't have an SSN, you can leave line blank. You can then request an SSN for you by checking "Yes" on lines 14, 15, and completing lines 16 a, b, and c.

Part 3. Applicant's Statement, Contact Information,Declaration, Certification, and Signature

Applicant's Statement

I, the undersigned applicant, acknowledge the following information and understand the implications of false statements.

Employment Authorization

Applicant's Signature

Date of Signature (Month, Day, Year)

Applicant's Email Address

Applicant's Phone Number

Contact Person

Sign in blue ink. Don't forget to add date.

If you use an interpreter, provide interpreter's name, otherwise, put NA in b1a, b1b and leave all fields in Part 4 blank.

Part 2. Information About You

Your Full Legal Name

Family Name (Last Name)

Given Name (First Name)

Middle Name (No Middle Initial)

Gender

Marital Status

Alien Registration Number (A#) (if any)

Social Security Number (SSN) (if any)

Have you previously filed Form I-76?

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Has the Social Security Administration (SSA) verified your identity and issued a Social Security Number (SSN)?

If you answered "Yes" to Item Number 13a, please provide the information requested in Item Number 13b.

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I-765 Filing Fee must be paid by check or money order for $410.00 made payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
Submitting OPT Application to USCIS

During OPT Processing Appointment, ISSS will help you put the OPT packet together and will give you instructions on how to mail the application, but it is your responsibility to mail the application before the deadline.

USCIS must receive your application within the 30 days of issuing the new I-20 that recommends OPT.

In general, OPT applications should be mailed to:

**USCIS Dallas Lockbox:**
USPS Deliveries:
USCIS
PO Box 805373
Chicago, IL 60680

Express Mail/Courier Deliveries (FedEX/UPS/DHL):
USCIS – I-765 C03
131 South Dearborn - 3rd Floor
Chicago, IL 60603-5517

It is recommended that applications be sent with a tracking number so that you can track the delivery of your application to USCIS. Please keep the record of your tracking number in case we need to contact USCIS about the case.
If, after applying for OPT, you learn you have to take another course...

Your OPT is based on your having completed your degree (undergrad students) or at least your coursework (grad students).

If you learn that you must take an additional course in order to graduate, then you must do the following:
• Make an appointment to talk with an ISSS advisor to discuss the consequences to your OPT application and any actions that you need to take.
If, after applying for OPT, you learn you have to take another course...

(continued)

• If USCIS has not yet processed your OPT application, it may be possible to withdraw it so that you can reapply at a later date. It is at USCIS’s discretion as to whether they will approve your request.

• If USCIS has already approved your OPT and you have passed the end-date on your I-20, then you cannot withdraw your application, and you may only work 20 hours or less per week on your OPT until you have completed your required course and all degree requirements.

• Students in eligible STEM fields cannot apply for a STEM extension unless they have earned their degree.
Canceling or Withdrawing OPT Request

- **Prior to mailing the OPT application to USCIS:**
  - Make an appointment to meet with an ISSS Advisor to requesting cancellation of OPT
  - ISSS will cancel the OPT recommendation in SEVIS and a new I-20 will be issued to you

- **After mailing the OPT application but before USCIS approves:**
  - Make an appointment to meet with an ISSS Advisor to discuss options for withdrawing the I-765 petition.
  - There is no guarantee that a request to withdraw an I-765 will be honored by USCIS.
USCIS will send a receipt notice (Form I-797) in the mail within 2 to 3 weeks to the address that you indicated on your I-765 form.

To check the status of your application:

• Access the USCIS Case Status Search Page: [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)

• Enter your “YSC, SRC, EAC, WAC, or LIN Application Receipt Number” (ex: SRC0123456789)

It will inform you if your application is in process, if they have requested further information, or if it has been approved or mailed.
Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

USCIS work authorization is issued in the form of An Employment Authorization Document (EAD).

The validity dates indicate the period an authorized F-1 student is eligible to work in the United States.
Work Authorization & Maintaining F-1 Status

In order to begin working:
• You must have the physical EAD card in your possession (not an online approval notification or scan); AND
• The date must be within the EAD work authorization period (the “Valid From” and “Card Expires” dates listed at the bottom of the EAD Card)

Employment/Training is required to maintain F-1 status while on OPT.
- Must report employer contact information to ISSS within 10 days of starting, changing, and ending employment

- Cannot accumulate more than 90 days (aggregate) of unemployment during initial OPT authorization period.

- Again, Employment/Training can be paid or unpaid.
You may have multiple employers and/or change employers as long as each job is directly related to your major area of study and you report changes in employment to ISSS.

If you lose your EAD card:

• You may continue working with your same employer as long as it is still within the authorization period.

• If you plan to change employers or travel, you must apply for a replacement EAD card with ISSS, submitting a new I-765 application and fee to USCIS along with the same documents from the original OPT application.
Responsibilities While on OPT

• Submit copy of EAD to the ISSS (if the card was mailed to you directly rather than sent to ISSS)
  E-mail a Scanned Copy to: international@ua.edu

• Obtain a job in your major field of study.

• Work only within the authorized work period.

• If traveling, obtain ISSS advisor’s travel signature no older than 6 months from the day you plan to re-enter the U.S.

• OPT is terminated if your SEVIS record is transferred to another institution to begin a new program of study or if you request a new I-20 to start a new degree program with UA.
Mandatory Reporting Requirements

• Report the following with 10 days of any update or change by emailing us at international@ua.edu:
  – All new employers (business name, address, supervisor, and supervisor’s contacts),
  – Any changes of name,
  – Any change of your home address or email address or phone number, and
  – Any interruptions of employment

• Re-verify employer and residential address information with International Services every 6 months, even if there is no change.
Renewing Driver’s License

If OPT has been approved, you should be able to renew your AL Driver’s License with the following:
- Employment Authorization Card (EAD Card)
- New, valid I-20 endorsed for OPT on Page 2
- Valid passport
- Letter from ISSS verifying your F-1 status and OPT

If OPT approval is pending, the DMV Office in Tuscaloosa has confirmed that it will use the dates of OPT recommendation on the 2nd page of the I-20 as confirmation of status. Please note that other DMV Offices may not have the same interpretation. You should be able to renew your AL Driver’s License in Tuscaloosa with the following:
- New, valid I-20 endorsed for OPT on Page 2
- Valid passport
- Letter from ISSS verifying your F-1 status and Pending OPT
Travel while on OPT

If OPT has been approved, you should travel with the following documents:

- Valid I-20 endorsed for OPT (PLEASE NOTE: ISSS Advisor’s travel signature is only valid 6 months while on OPT)
- Valid F-1 visa
- Valid passport (must be valid 6 mos. beyond date of return to the U.S.)
- Employment Authorization Card (EAD Card)
- Letter from your employer verifying your employment status

If OPT approval is pending, travel is not advised as there is greater risk of being denied re-entry. If you must travel while OPT is pending, you must also carry the following documents:

- Valid I-20 endorsed for OPT with an ISSS Advisor’s travel signature from last 6 months
- Valid F-1 visa
- Valid passport (must be valid 6 mos. beyond date of return to the U.S.)
- USCIS Service Center Receipt Notice of OPT application
- Job offer letter from a U.S. employer (if you have received one)
I-9, Social Security, and Taxes

- **I-9:** All employees in the U.S. must complete Employment Eligibility Verification I-9 Forms with their employers within 3 days of starting employment.

- **Social Security:** Employment in the U.S. requires a Social Security Number (SSN). If you do not have an SSN, you must apply for a SSN using your EAD Card. You can apply for an SSN in the I-765 petition.

- **Taxes:**
  - **Social Security and Medicare Taxes**
    Typically, non-resident F-1 students with authorized OPT are exempt from Social Security (F.I.C.A) and Medicare taxes as long as you continue to declare non-resident status for tax purposes.

  - **Federal, State, and Local Taxes**
    Federal, state, and local taxes will be withheld from your paycheck by employers unless you qualify for a tax treaty exemption.

(More information also available at the [IRS website](https://www.irs.gov))
Questions? Concerns? Queries? Doubts?
International Student & Scholar Services

OPT STEM Extension

http://international.ua.edu/isss/currentstudents/student-employment/#stem
STEM 24 Month OPT Extension

Some students may be eligible for a 24-month OPT extension if all filing criteria are met.

Student Requirements:
- Completed a STEM degree - [http://www.ice.gov/sevis/stemlist.htm](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/stemlist.htm) (Note: may be based on a previously obtained degree from an accredited, U.S.-based institution and earned within the past 10 years)
- Must be currently engaged in Post-completion OPT
- Must have maintained valid F-1 status during Post-completion OPT
  - Including reporting all changes of personal and employment info
  - Have not accumulated more than 90 days of unemployment/inactivity
- The 24-month extension is possible twice per lifetime. Eligible for a second STEM extension after completing a subsequent, higher STEM degree.
- Must submit a timely-filed STEM extension application
  - prior to EAD expiration – as early as 120 days before OPT expiration, but preferably at least 90 days before OPT end date
STEM 24 Month OPT Extension

Employer Requirements

- Must be currently registered and in good standing with the USCIS E-Verify program.

- Employer must provide E-Verify Company/Client Identification Number (a 5- or 6-digit number issued by DHS) to applicant as it must be entered onto the I-765 application form as well as the employer’s EIN tax id number.

- As a participant in E-Verify, employers are required to verify all newly hired employees, both U.S. citizens and non-citizens.


- Employer must agree to report termination or departure of OPT employee to UA International Student & Scholar Services.
STEM OPT Application Process

If you are not working in the Tuscaloosa-area, submit scanned copies of documents below via email to international@ua.edu with “Attn: STEM Extension Application” as the email subject line

You MUST submit the following for STEM OPT processing:

- **STEM OPT Application Packet**
  (page 3 collects vital details - please type responses directly into the fillable form)

- **Requested Employment Dates**
  - Will continue 24 months from current OPT end-date
Responsibility Agreement

You MUST submit (continued):

- Page 4 of STEM OPT Application Packet is a responsibility agreement.
- Please read each point carefully before checking and agreeing.
- Please check both the top and bottom portions.
You MUST bring a complete Form I-765 [www.uscis.gov/i-765](http://www.uscis.gov/i-765)

Example on pages 6 – 12 on [STEM OPT Application Packet](http://www.uscis.gov/i-765)

Please type responses directly into the fillable form

Print and sign the form in blue ink
I-983 Form

You MUST submit (continued):

- You and your Employer must complete an I-983 Training Plan—
  https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/students-and-the-form-i-983;

- A sample form can be found on Pages 13 – 17 of the STEM OPT Application Packet
STEM OPT Application Process – Additional Documentation

You MUST submit Scans/Photocopies of:

- All I-20s (only the 1st and 2nd pages of the new I-20 or the 1st and 3rd of the old I-20 are needed),
- Main passport page,
- Most recent visa stamp (even expired),
- I-94 record (electronic card can be accessed at www.cbp.gov/i-94),
- Front and Back of current EAD Card for OPT, and
- Diploma & transcripts indicating completion of degree (including for previous STEM degree if STEM extension is based on previous degree).
Completing STEM Application for shipping to USCIS

After ISSS processes your new I-20 recommending a STEM OPT extension, we will ship you the complete packet.

You will attach the following materials to the packet and ship to USCIS directly:

- $410 check to the “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
- Two 2 x 2 passport style photos taken within the past 30 days with your name and I-94 number written in pencil on the back;
Submitting Application to USCIS

Mail the completed application to the correct USCIS Center.

In general, OPT applications should be mailed to:

**USCIS Dallas Lockbox:**
USPS Deliveries:
USCIS
PO Box 805373
Chicago, IL 60680

Express Mail/Courier Deliveries (FedEx/UPS/DHL):
USCIS – I-765 C03
131 South Dearborn - 3rd Floor
Chicago, IL 60603-5517

There is an automatic extension of status and work authorization up to 180 days while a timely filed STEM extension OPT application is pending – meaning that you don’t need an EAD card to continue working, just the I-797 receipt notice is sufficient to prove timely filing.
Once your STEM OPT is approved, please submit a copy of new EAD card to international@ua.edu

Cannot accrue a total of 150 days of unemployment over the 36 month OPT period (includes first 12 months and 24 month STEM period)

Reporting Requirements:
- Report the following within 10 days of the change:
  - legal name, residential or mailing address, email address, employer name, employer address
- Must report above info to CIS every 6 months even if there is no change
- 12-Month and 24-Month Evaluations: Must also complete and submit a self-evaluation using the I-983, signed by the employer and submitted to International Student & Scholar Services at months 12 and 24 of the STEM Employment Period.

Can still benefit from the cap-gap provision at the end of the STEM period.
International Student & Scholar Services

Cap Gap Extension

http://international.ua.edu/issss/currentstudents/student-employment/#cap-gap
Cap-Gap Relief Provision

See: http://international.ua.edu/isss/currentstudents/student-employment/#cap-gap

Students from any degree field can benefit from this provision intended to eliminate the Cap-Gap (i.e. the gap between the end of your OPT and the beginning of a cap-subject H-1B that starts on Oct. 1.)

Duration of status and work authorization is extended for F-1 students on OPT whose employer has:

- Has been timely filed by a registered cap subject employer for a registered and selected beneficiary (within the acceptance period – after April 1, but before either the OPT period or 60-day grace period expires)
- Requests an employment start date of October 1
- Requests a change-of-status (rather than consular processing)

Extension of status and work authorization are automatically terminated upon rejection, denial, or revocation of H-1B petition.
Requesting a Cap Gap Relief I-20

Email scanned copies of the documents below to international@ua.edu with the subject: “Cap-Gap Extension”:

- Name
- SEVIS number
- CWID number
- Employment start and end date as indicated on your current EAD Card

- Proof of your H-1B Case:
  - Proof of filing, or
  - Proof of wait-listing, or
  - Scanned copy of I-797 H-1B approval and/or receipt notice

- Indicate whether you would like to pick up your document or have it mailed to you. If we will ship this to you, please see our Document Shipping Options page for instructions on completing the shipping request.