Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide you with an opportunity to gain temporary employment experience in your chosen profession for one year after you have completed your coursework. Its purpose is to “round out” or complement your academic work. Permission for this temporary employment is obtained through USCIS. The employment must be directly related to your major field of study and it must be appropriate for someone having your level of education. You may work anywhere in the United States.

Please note that this is not an entitled benefit. USCIS has the right to deny any OPT application at their discretion.

Who is eligible to apply?

- You must have been in lawful student status for an academic year (two consecutive full time semesters) prior to the start of your OPT and you must currently be in lawful status.
- You must not have had more than total of 12 months of full time CPT during your current degree level.
- You must have an anticipated program end date.
- You must be graduating with a Bachelor’s, Masters or PhD degree. Non-degree students, students attending certificate programs, and those doing post-doctoral research are not qualified for OPT.
- The employment must be directly related to your major.
- You must not have been approved for OPT as the same degree level previously.
- PLEASE NOTE: Students who have decided to depart the country and re-enter with a new I-20 in order to reinstate their status will lose any time they have accrued toward qualification for OPT. Students who travel to reinstate are subject to another full academic year (2 full time semesters) waiting period for eligibility for OPT or CPT. Keep in mind it is against regulations to delay graduation for employment purposes.
- Students transitioning from the U Asia Campus (UAC) must have completed two consecutive semesters at the University of Utah main campus and must be attending the main campus in their final semester to be eligible to apply for OPT.
How to apply for OPT:

Applying for OPT is a two-step process. Please note you must complete both steps otherwise you have not completed the process. For video instructions on how to apply for OPT, please visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26SSDxjJEpo

**Step 1: Apply for an OPT I-20**

1. Log into iStart.ic.utah.edu and submit an online request by completing the “OPT: Post or Pre Completion I-20 Request” e-form. Please note you must have already submitted a Last Semester Notification e-form in order to receive your OPT I-20.
2. An ISSS advisor will issue you a new OPT I-20 for you within 2 weeks which will include our recommendation for OPT on page 2.

**Step 2: Send your documents to USCIS**

3. Mail all the required documents (listed below) to USCIS. USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of when your I-20 was issued.
4. Keep copies of everything you mail for your own records.

**Documents you will need to send to USCIS:**

- **Form I-765** (downloadable from www.uscis.gov) Instructions on how to complete this form are in the I-765 Instructions guide.
- A copy of:
  - Your **OPT I-20** issued from ISSS with your OPT dates (Remember USCIS must receive it within 30 days of the issue date). Make sure you sign and date your OPT I-20.
  - Photo page (identification page) and expiration date page of your **valid passport**.
  - Visa page of your passport- even if expired.
  - I-94 (obtainable at https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/request.html)
  - ALL previous **I-20s** issued to you in your current education level. If you do not have these, contact ISSS. We may have copies of your old I-20s. Please give ISSS one week to look for your documents. However, it is your responsibility to keep previous immigration documents. If you are missing old I-20s and ISSS does not have them on record, simply include the I-20s that you do have. Missing I-20s do not automatically result in a denial.
  - Previous **EAD card**, include a copy of the front and back (only if you have been approved for OPT in the past)
- Two recent passport **photographs**. Print your name and I-94 card number on the back of each photo. Put the photos in an envelope and attach it to front of I-765. Ensure the photos are **U.S. passport size**, as photos from your home country may not be the correct size.
Fee of $410- In the form of check or money order, made to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. See page 4 for instructions on how to complete a check.

G-1145 (recommended) Completing this form means you will receive an email or text message when your application arrives at USCIS offices. This form needs to go on the top of your application.

Meet with an ISSS advisor to review your packet (recommended) or view the online packet review here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26SSDxjJEpo

Reminders:

- Are you sending your application within 30 days of ISSS issuing your OPT I-20?
- Did you sign your I-765 and all I-20s that you are submitting?
- Did you include all of the documents listed above?
- Did you make copies of your OPT documents for your records?
- Did you or an ISSS advisor review your packet?

Are you ready to send in your application?

Gather all documents together and send by mail. Be sure to request a tracking number so you can track when your package was delivered. You will be mailed a paper receipt notice (Form I-797) from USCIS once they receive your OPT packet. If you attached G-1145 form to the first page of your application, they will also send you an E-verification once they receive your packet.

Be sure to keep your I-797 receipt in a safe place. This receipt is proof of your pending application and allows you to remain in the United States after your program has ended.

Mailing Information

Find your mailing address on your I-765 form. For example, if your mailing address is in Utah, you must send it to one of the two Phoenix lockboxes depending on the carrier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the mailing address on your I-765 is in:</th>
<th>Mail your application to USCIS Phoenix Lockbox:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington (state), Wisconsin, Wyoming, or Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands | If you are using US Postal Service:  
USCIS  
PO Box 21281  
Phoenix, AZ 85036  
If you are using FedEx or UPS:  
USCIS, Attn: AOS  
1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S, Suite 100  
Phoenix, AZ 85034 |
If the mailing address on your I-765 is in:

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

Mail your application to USCIS Dallas Lockbox:

If you are using US Postal Service:
USCIS
PO Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

If you are using FedEx or UPS:
USCIS, Attn: AOS
2501 S. State Hwy, 121, Business Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067

Sample Check/ Money Order:

* If you have a money order please check with the issuer on where to put the information listed above as it can differ depending on the type of money order.

**Choosing your OPT Start Date**

You are allowed to pick a start date that falls between the last day of your program and the end of your 60 day grace period. The program end date is considered the last day of the semester (last day of finals).

For **graduate thesis students only**, the program end date may be the last day of the semester OR the date of your thesis defense.

There are many time constraints which affect your OPT application (see OPT timeline illustrated on the next page). When choosing the start date for your OPT, consider the following:

- Choose the earliest date you might want to start working (you cannot begin working BEFORE the start date on the EAD card). Plan ahead for any possibilities.

- **REMEMBER:** You may **NOT** change your start date once you have mailed your packet to USCIS.
OPT Timeline at a glance:

**Earliest Date to Apply**

**Program End Date**

**OPT Start Date**

**OPT End Date**

- Application Window: 90 days
- OPT employment of 12 months
- *Cannot accumulate more than 90 days total of unemployment during 12 months*
- *If eligible, you can file for a STEM extension. Must file before expiration of EAD card.

**Important things to remember:**

**Processing time:** your OPT I-20 will be processed by ISSS within 10 business days. USCIS takes an average of 3 months to process requests.

**Program completion date:** For undergraduate and non-thesis graduate students, your program end date is the last day of your last semester. For graduate thesis students, the program completion date can be the last day of your last semester or your defense date.

**OPT Start date:** You can choose any date within the 60 days after the program end date for your OPT start date. Please remember you cannot request a start date that is after the last day of your 60 day grace period.

**OPT End date:** This date will appear on your EAD card. You must end your employment on this date unless you have timely filed for a STEM extension or you have changed to any other visa that allows you to work.

*If you are remaining in the U.S. for the grace period, you cannot leave and re-enter*

Depart U.S.

**Grace period of 60 days to either leave U.S., transfer to another school, or change to another visa category**

End date OPT EAD card. Last day to work unless granted extension by USCIS.

Can choose any day within 60 day window after graduation for OPT start date.

*Cannot request start date later than 60 days after graduation date*

Your OPT I-20 e-form should be received by the ISSS office 2 weeks before you plan to submit your packet to USCIS.
**60 day grace period**: You have 60 days of grace period once you complete OPT. If you are remaining in the U.S. for the grace period, you cannot leave and re-enter on your F-1 visa. During your grace period, you can either leave U.S., transfer to another school, or change to another visa category.

**30 days from the issue date**: Your OPT application must be received by USCIS within 30 days of the OPT I-20 issue date by ISSS. Failure to send it in a timely manner will result in denial.

**90 days of unemployment**: From the start date printed on your EAD card, you are allowed up to 90 days of unemployment during your OPT period. You must work 21 hours per week or more to be considered employed for OPT purposes. If you work fewer than 21 hours per week, this will count toward your 90 days of unemployment.

**Part time/ Full time**: If you work 0-20 hours per week, it is considered as part time and is not allowed as employment for OPT purposes. If you work 21 hours or more per week, it is considered as full time.

**Address update**: Immigration regulations require that while you are on OPT, you MUST keep USCIS updated on your address. If you change your address, you must report your new address in the SEVP portal.

**Employment update**: You are responsible for notifying USCIS of your employment. Please review the “SEVP Portal: Post-OPT and STEM OPT” policy guide for further information.

**Travel**: Traveling on OPT can be complicated depending on when you plan to travel and if your OPT is pending or approved. More information about traveling on OPT can be found in the “OPT and Traveling” FAQ section below.

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**Frequently Asked Questions for Post-Completion OPT**

**GENERAL**

1. **How long will my OPT application take to process?**
   Applying for OPT is a two-step process. You must first obtain your OPT I-20 from International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS), which has a 10 business day processing time, and then mail your application with all the required documents to USCIS to obtain an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, which takes average of 3 months to process.

2. **When should I submit my OPT application?**
   You must apply for OPT no earlier than 90 days before your program end date and no later than 60 days after your program end date. If you send in your OPT application more than 90 days before your program ends or after your 60-day grace period is over, your OPT request will be denied.

3. **When is my program end date?**
   For undergraduate and non-thesis graduate students, the program end date is the last day of your final semester. For thesis graduate students, the program completion date can be the last day of your last semester or your
defense date. Graduate thesis students are eligible for post-completion OPT after they have defended their thesis. It is not necessary to have graduated or obtained a diploma to apply for OPT.

4. **Is there a deadline for applying to USCIS with my new I-20?**
You need to have your complete OPT application received by the appropriate USCIS Service Center within 30 days of the OPT I-20 issue date by ISSS. Applications that arrive after the 30 days will be rejected and you may lose your opportunity to do OPT.

5. **Can I get a confirmation that my application has been received by USCIS?**
If you would like an email confirmation that your application has been received by USCIS, you may fill out Form G-1145 (http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1145.pdf) and attach it to the top of your application to USCIS. The notice you receive is not a guarantee that USCIS will approve your application, but merely a confirmation that it arrived at their offices for processing.

6. **I have a job offer but my EAD card has not arrived yet. Can I begin work?**
No. You must have received your EAD card to show that you have legal work status. Any employment done before the EAD card has arrived is illegal and may harm OPT as well as your future chances of obtaining an H-1B visa, permanent residency or other types of benefits from immigration. You cannot work after your program end date on your I-20 until you receive your EAD card and your OPT start date arrives. This includes work on campus for departments.

7. **How can my past CPT participation affect my OPT?**
You are not eligible for OPT if you have participated in 12 months or more of full-time CPT. Past participation in part-time CPT or full-time CPT for less than 12 months will not affect your OPT eligibility.

8. **I am currently participating in CPT during my last semester. What’s going to happen?**
Students may participate in full time CPT in their last semester but they must maintain a physical presence on campus in Salt Lake City. Students approved for CPT may not work on CPT past their program end date. Graduate thesis students may not participate in CPT once they have defended.

9. **What is the 14 month rule for post-completion OPT?**
Federal regulations state that post-completion OPT must be completed within 14 months of your program end date. If you decide to apply for OPT AFTER the completion date of your program, USCIS may still take 90 days to process the I-765 application. The time that USCIS takes to adjudicate your request will be taking time away from when you would have been working on OPT. This means that if the processing time for your OPT goes beyond the 60 days past your program end date on the front of your I-20, this time will be deducted from your 12 months of OPT.

10. **Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?**
For post-completion OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment, although it is recommended. Interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field is considered “employment” for the purposes of OPT employment. To apply for the 24-month STEM extension, work must be paid employment with an E-Verify employer at least 21 hours per week.
11. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of OPT then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?
After completing one year of OPT, you must complete a higher academic level (Bachelors, Masters, or PhD) before you are eligible for another OPT. If you complete a second degree at the same level and you already applied for OPT at that level, you are not eligible for a second OPT at that level. (Example: A student who has completed a Master’s degree and applied for OPT after finishing that degree is not eligible to apply for OPT after completing a second Master’s degree.) If you complete a PhD degree, you may not apply for a Masters level OPT, even if you have never participated in the OPT on that level before.

12. Do I get a grace period after my OPT?
Yes, your lawful F-1 status expires 60 days after your last day of OPT. In your 60 day grace period, you may not engage in any employment or studies. You are expected to leave the country at the end of the 60 days or else be in pending status for a new degree program or a visa type. If you exit the country during your 60 day grace period, you may not re-enter on your F-1 OPT I-20. Please note that if you decide to end your OPT early, you are not eligible for a 60 day grace period.

13. What if I change my mind and I want to cancel my application for OPT? Or what happens if I wasn’t able to graduate?
The answer to this question varies on many factors. Please make an appointment as soon as possible with an ISSS advisor to discuss your options.

14. What if I have lost or thrown away my old I-20s?
International Student & Scholar Services may have copies of your old I-20s in your file. You can request that ISSS make you copies of your old I-20s by completing the “Request for Document Copies” e-form, but keep in mind that it could take up to a week to process your request. It is always your responsibility to keep your I-20s. Your file may or may not contain copies of the documents you are looking for. It is best if you maintain a well-kept file of your documents in a safe place. Keep in mind you only need to submit I-20s at your current degree level for your OPT application. If you are missing I-20s, please submit what you currently have.

15. Since I need to move and don’t know my new address, can I put a foreign address on I-765 form?
No, USCIS requires you indicate an address in the United States. The address you use may be a friend’s address or a P. O. Box. Contact ISSS if you have further questions about your mailing address.

16. Why should I keep a copy of my application?
Always keep copies of all official documents that you send through the mail. We also strongly recommend that you make copies of any checks or money orders that you mail in to USCIS as proof of payment in the case your application is lost in the mail. In case USCIS makes an error on your EAD card, one way to prove the error was theirs (and not yours) is to keep copies of the documents you submitted.

17. How can I check on the status of my application?
When USCIS sends you your I-797 receipt notice in the mail, you will receive a receipt number. You can use this number to access information about your application at the USCIS Case Status page: https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do

18. What happens to my dependents, who are on F-2 visas, during the application and OPT process?
If you are granted the OPT work authorization and you are still in legal F-1 immigration status, then your dependents are still in legal F-2 immigration visa status. You will receive new I-20s for yourself and all dependents.
if you are eligible for the OPT work authorization. If you do not follow F-1 regulations while on OPT and fall out of status, your F-2 dependents automatically fall out of status with you.

**OPT AND TRAVELING**

19. **Can I travel home (or anywhere outside of the U.S.) after I graduate?**

The answer to this question depends on if you have applied for OPT and where you are in that process:

**Did not apply for OPT:** If you have not applied for OPT, you may leave the U.S. during your grace period but you will not be allowed to return on your F-1 student visa and you also will lose the opportunity to apply for OPT. If you wish to return to the U.S. on your student visa and participate in OPT, you must send in your OPT application and wait for OPT approval before traveling.

**Your OPT is pending:** If you have a pending OPT application and it is after your program end date, it is very strongly recommended that you do NOT travel until your OPT request has been approved. Please understand that entry into the U.S. is granted at the discretion of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer, and you travel at your own risk. If you wish to travel while your OPT is pending, please speak with an ISSS advisor about the risks involved.

**Your OPT has been approved:** After you have received your EAD card, your travel documents should include your signed OPT I-20, valid F-1 visa, a passport valid for at least six months, EAD card, and a letter from your employer (if applicable). The letter should state that they have employed you or plan on employing you, and you are coming back to the U.S. to work for them. Note: When you receive your EAD card it will say, “Not valid for travel”. This means besides your EAD card, you will need your I-20, valid passport, and visa in order to travel.

These same rules apply for both the initial OPT and the 24 month STEM extension. Please understand that entry into the U.S. is granted at the discretion of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer, and you travel at your own risk.

**Dependent travel:** Since OPT is not noted on dependent I-20s, an F2 dependent must carry copies of the F-1 student’s I-20 with OPT recommendation, EAD card, and proof of employment, in addition to their own F-2 I-20 when traveling.

20. **What documents should I travel with?**

You should always travel with valid passport, valid F-1 visa, most recent I-20 with a travel signature, EAD card, and if applicable, your job offer letter.

21. **I want to leave the U.S. for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B2) that is valid for 10 years. Can’t I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I’m waiting to get the EAD card, and then start work with the card once I get it?**

**NO!!** If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with any other status than F-1, you will immediately forfeit your F-1 status. This means your OPT will be invalid.
22. Can I renew my F-1 visa while on OPT?
   It is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to
demonstrate non-immigrant intent. The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional
Practical Training is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa
requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the
embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application could be denied.

23. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?
   You need to take a valid passport, your EAD card, your OPT I-20 issued by ISSS, and your job offer letter or proof of
   employment (if applicable). You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job
   market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there. You may be able to find additional information
   about required documents at your embassy's website.

24. Do I still need a travel signature to travel if I am on OPT?
   Yes. During OPT, if you travel outside the U.S., your I-20 must be signed for travel. The current travel signature on
   page 2 of your I-20 is valid for 6 months. If you return after this date, you may be denied re-entry. If you are not
   located in the Salt Lake area, mail the original I-20 to ISSS for endorsement, leaving plenty of time for possible
   mailing delays both ways. Alternatively, you may request an “I-20 Reprint” via e-form by going to iStart.ic.utah.edu
   and choosing the option to have your I-20 mailed to you. You will be responsible for shipping costs.

OPT AND EMPLOYMENT

25. How do I report my employment?
   You are required to report your employment to SEVP within 10 days of beginning a new job. You will report your
   employment directly through the SEVP Portal. To learn more, read our SEVP Portal policy guide.

26. How do I get access to the SEVP Portal?
   You will receive an email from SEVP to your UMail account on the date that your OPT employment begins. This
   email will instruct you on how to register your portal account. You must register your account within 14 days of
   receiving the email. If you do not receive an email, check your junk or spam folders. For more information about
   how to access your account if you are locked out, read the SEVP Portal policy guide.

27. What type of employment can I accept? Does it have to be paid?
   Your job must be related to your major. Your employment may or may not be paid while on post-completion OPT.

28. Do I need to have job offer to apply for OPT?
   You don’t need a job offer to apply for OPT.

29. Do I need to have a job while I am on OPT?
   Yes, you do need to be employed while on post-completion OPT. You are only allowed to have a total of 90 days of
   unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT. This total number of unemployment days applies through the
   entire period of OPT. If you have already used 30 days of unemployment on OPT and you lost your job 6 months
   into the OPT, you still have 60 days of unemployment to find a job. Remember to report all employment changes
to the SEVP portal.
30. **What if I can’t find a full-time job?**

USCIS considers full-time work to be 21 hours or more per week. If you are working less than this, it is considered as unemployment time. ISSS strongly recommends students that are nearing the 90 days of unemployment apply for an internship (paid or unpaid) or volunteer work of at least 21 hours per week. Interning or volunteering in a position directly related to your academic field can be considered “employment” for the purpose of OPT employment. Keep in mind, however, that you must be working in a paid position for an E-Verified employer in order to apply for STEM OPT (if you are otherwise eligible). Please see the [Volunteering policy guide](#) for further information on volunteering while on OPT.

**OPT AND ATTENDING SCHOOL**

31. **I’m finished with my OPT and I want to return to school. What do I need to know?**

If you wish to return to school after you finish OPT, you must obtain a new I-20 from the International Admissions Office within 60 days of your OPT end date. You must begin classes within the next available semester or within 5 months, whichever is sooner. If you are changing schools, you must request the school that issued your OPT I-20 transfer your SEVIS record to your new school within 60 days of your OPT end date.

Students are allowed to take classes while on OPT, but these classes must be avocational in nature (for example, a cooking or exercise class) and may not be part of a new degree and will not count towards maintaining your F-1 status. If you are admitted into a new degree program, you will get a new I-20 and your OPT will be cancelled.

32. **Can I take extra classes while on OPT?**

Students are allowed to take classes while on OPT, but these classes must be avocational in nature (for example, a cooking or exercise class) and cannot be part of a new degree program. If you are admitted into a new degree program, you will get a new I-20 and your OPT will be cancelled.

33. **Can I transfer to a new school while on OPT?**

Students can transfer their SEVIS record to a new school while on OPT. But once you transfer your record to a new school, your OPT automatically terminates and you are not able to engage in employment until authorized to do so from a new school. Please speak with ISSS advisor if you have any concerns or questions.

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Disclaimer: International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS) provides support and information related to U.S. immigration laws and regulations related to F and J status at the University of Utah. ISSS staff are not attorneys and any information provided by ISSS should not be construed as legal advice. Individuals are welcome to consult a qualified immigration attorney for specific legal advice, particularly in complicated cases. For a list of local Utah attorneys please visit our website [here](#).

*Last Updated 10/31/2018 ALT*