

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING for F-1 students

What is optional practical training (OPT)?

Optional practical training provides F-1 students in legal immigration status with the opportunity to gain employment experience in their academic field of study. It allows students to use their academic training in a professional environment, providing valuable practical experience that may make students more employable when they return to their home countries.

Who is eligible?

F-1 students enrolled full-time in a degree program for at least one academic year are eligible to apply for OPT. Students enrolled in intensive English study at the English Language Center are not eligible. If you have changed your visa status to F-1 within the last year, consult with an ISSO advisor regarding your previous status; you may be able to apply your time in a different status toward the academic year requirement.

What type of employment is available?

The OPT employment must be directly related to your major field of study. The employment also must be commensurate with your educational level. For example, if you receive "post-completion" OPT you may only accept jobs which require a bachelor's degree (or a master's degree if you are a graduate student here). You may accept employment anywhere in the United States. You may change employers and work for more than one employer.

As an F-1 student, you are eligible for a maximum of 12 months of OPT for each higher degree. You may take advantage of this benefit during any of the following periods:

- ◆ Pre-Completion: During summer vacation, May-August (full-time or part-time)
- ◆ Pre-Completion: During the academic year, September-May (part-time only; 20 hours/week maximum)
- ◆ Post-Completion: After completion of your degree program (full-time)

Periods of part-time OPT authorization reduce your 12 month total at one-half the rate. For example, if you receive two months of part-time OPT one summer during your degree program, then you will have 11 months remaining after you complete your degree.

Do students need to find a job placement before they apply for optional practical training?

No, you do not need to have a job offer to apply for post-completion (after completion of your course requirements) optional practical training. However, you should not apply for pre-completion optional practical training (prior to completion of your degree requirements) unless you have a job offer.

Can students change employers while on practical training?

You may change employers after you have begun authorized employment, provided that the new job is also directly related to your major field of study and commensurate with your level of education (bachelor's or master's degree required).

When do students apply?

There is no deadline for applying for **pre-completion OPT** (OPT to be used before you complete your degree requirements), but you **must** have an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) for the OPT before beginning to work.

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If you are applying for **post-completion OPT** (OPT to be used after you complete your degree requirements), **the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must receive your application during the period from 90 days before you complete your degree until the date you complete your degree.** After you have completed all course requirements, you should not leave the United States until you have received your EAD for OPT.

How do students apply?

To apply for optional practical training, you will need to submit the following documents to an ISSO advisor for review:

- ◆ **USCIS Form I-765** (Application for Employment Authorization). See attached "Instructions for Completing Form I-765."
- ◆ **Academic Advisor's Recommendation Form.** Your academic advisor must complete this form and sign it. Discuss your OPT plans with your academic advisor. The advisor is certifying that the work you intend to do is directly related to your field of study at TU and is suitable for your level of education.
- ◆ **\$340 check** payable to the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services). A check is preferable to a money order, as your Service Center receipt number will be written on the back of your check. This will allow the Service Center to track your application, even without your receipt notice.
- ◆ **Two identical color photos.** The photographs must be made and sized according to USCIS specifications. See attached instructions, "Color Photograph Specifications."

After you submit these documents to the ISSO, we will complete the recommendation for your OPT in approximately five (5) business days. Once this is completed, we will return all your documents to you along with a SEVIS Form I-20 issued for OPT. Then you will send your complete application to the USCIS for approval and an EAD. We will give you a checklist and mailing instructions when you fill out the application.

WARNING! Once authorization to engage in optional practical training has been granted by the USCIS, it cannot be canceled for any reason (e.g., if you do not find a job). In addition, once permission to work has been granted, you can only work during the specified period of time, and you may not change this period of time.

When can students begin working?

You can begin to work once you have received your EAD from the USCIS, or the beginning date endorsed on the EAD, whichever is later. The EAD card should indicate the beginning and ending dates which we recommended, based on your request. If you discover that you have not completed all program requirements after having already obtained your EAD card, immediate action must be taken. Do not risk working illegally. Please contact an ISSO advisor for further information.

What is my relationship with the ISSO while I am holding post-completion OPT permission?

Even though you may be working full-time away from Towson, possibly even in another state, you must still keep in contact with the University. Please make sure to inform us of an e-mail address which will stay active throughout your year of OPT. You must submit any address changes to the ISSO within 10 days of your move by e-mailing isso@towson.edu. We will then forward this information to the USCIS. You must also inform the ISSO if you decide to stop working and leave the U.S., prior to completion of your OPT permission period.

Can students travel abroad while on practical training?

After you have completed all course requirements for your degree, it is not advisable to leave the United States until two conditions have been met: 1) you have received your OPT EAD card, and 2) you will be returning to the US to resume employment. You must also have your OPT I-20 endorsed for travel. If your OPT application is pending, it may be possible to travel with Form I-797. Please contact an ISSO advisor to find up the most up-to-date information.

Caution! Despite the notation on the reverse side of your I-20, a signed I-20 is not valid for travel for 12 months. Your Form I-20 should be endorsed every 6 months. The ISSO also advises that you obtain a letter from your employer verifying employment. As in all cases involving travel, be sure that you have a valid passport and F-1 visa to allow re-entry to the United States. If your F-1 visa has expired, contact an ISSO advisor to discuss your situation before you travel, as applying for a new F-1 visa may be risky.