UNDERSTANDING OPT

Optional Practical Training

- a benefit for F1 visa holders.
- OPT is a work authorization approved by USCIS.
- It allows you to work off-campus in your field of study.

EAD Card

- Once approved by USCIS, you receive an Employment Authorization Document.
PRE-COMPLETION OPT

What is it?

• Off-campus work authorization
• To gain some work experience in your field of study before you graduate

Important to Know:

• You need a job to apply
• Time used is deducted from your 1 year of OPT eligibility
• Only part-time (< 20 hours) is allowed during the semester
• It takes approx. 90 to 120 days to be approved
POST COMPLETION OPT

What is it?

• Off-campus work authorization
• To gain some work experience in your field of study after you graduate

Important to Know:

• You must choose your start date when you apply
• It usually takes approx. 90 - 120 days for OPT to be approved!

Applying up to 90 days before Program Completion
Start date must be during your grace period (60 days following Completion)
Graduation! (or Defense)
24-MONTH STEM OPT EXTENSION

What is it?

• Continuation of off-campus work authorization
• To continue getting work experience in your field of study after your 1 year OPT
• Only for STEM fields*

*You must earn a degree in a qualifying major (list available online)

Important to Know:

• You need a job with an e-Verify employer to apply
• You and your employer need to complete a training plan (I-983)
• Employment must be paid
• Check-ins every 6 months + annual evaluations
• Apply up to 90 days before original OPT expires
OPT ELIGIBILITY

The following MUST be true at your degree level:

✅ You have been continuously in student status for at least 1 academic year

✅ You have not already used OPT for the same (or a higher) degree level

✅ You have not used 1 year or more of full-time CPT
HOW TO APPLY

1. Complete the OPT I-20 Request Form

2. Submit the OPT I-20 Request Form and (optional) I-765

3. Your ISS Advisor will provide you with an OPT I-20 no earlier than 90 days before your program end date.

4. Mail your application so it is received by USCIS before the end of your 60 day grace period (or before the end of your OPT if you’re applying for STEM extension)

5. Wait for your EAD card to arrive (approx. 90 - 120 days)
REQUESTING YOUR OPT I-20

- The OPT I-20 Request Form is needed in order to confirm the OPT start date that you have chosen.

- If necessary, the I-20 end date will be shortened to accommodate your graduation and/or defense date.

- Your academic advisor (note: not the ISS advisor) must complete page 2.

- You must read the entire document and sign it.

- Email the complete form to iss@sc.edu

- Processing time for receipt of an OPT I-20 from ISS is 5 business days. Please plan accordingly.
APPLICATION

• ALWAYS check the USCIS website for the most recent versions of forms and a comprehensive list of required supporting documents

• Documents required include:
  • Form I-765
  • Form G-1145
  • Copies of passport biographical page, visa page, and most recent I-94
  • 2 Passport Photos taken within the last 30 days (with name and I-94 # written on the back)
  • Check or money order for the current fee, made out to U.S. Department of Homeland Security
  • Form I-983 (for STEM OPT Extensions only)
I-765 INSTRUCTIONS

For complete instructions, check the official USCIS I-765 page.

It is very important to include ALL pages in your application, even if you left some of them blank.

We recommend that you type your information (other than your signature) into the I-765. If you write your information, use a black ink pen and write very clearly to avoid any mistakes.

Next is a step-by-step guide to help you get started.
• Part 1: Don’t forget to check a reason for applying
  • 1.a. for your first OPT at this degree level
  • 1.c. for a STEM Extension

• Part 2:
  • Enter your complete name in 1. (and 2, 3, and 4 as appropriate)
  • Enter your mailing address in 5. (make sure it is easy for you to retrieve mail at that address)
  • If this address is the same as your physical address check “yes” for 6. If not, complete 7.
  • You will likely not have an A-number or USCIS Online Account Number, so you should be able to leave 8. and 9. blank.
  • Answer 10. through 13.
  • If you already have a social security number, check “no” at 14.
    If you don’t, check “yes” and complete 15. through 17.
  • Enter your country/countries of citizenship in 18.
• Enter information about your birthplace/date in 19. and 20.
• Enter your most recent I-94 number (which can be retrieved online) in 21.a.
• Enter your passport information in 21.b.,d.,and e. (21.c. will likely not be applicable to you)
• In 22. and 23. enter the date you last entered the U.S. and your port of entry (the place where you went through immigration)
• Indicate your status on your last entry in 24. (likely “F1-student” unless you changed status from within the U.S.) as well as your current status in 25.”
• Enter your SEVIS number in 26 (the number starting with an N- on your I-20)
• 27. is the eligibility category:
  • (c)(3)(a) for pre-completion OPT
  • (c)(3)(b) for post-completion OPT
  • (c)(3)(c) for STEM Extension of OPT
    • If you entered (c)(3)(c) you need to complete question 28.
• The remainder of part 2 is not applicable to individuals applying for work authorization based on OPT.
• Part 3:
  • If you are filling out your own form, you should check 1.a. and enter your contact information in 3., 4., 5.
  • Make sure to sign with a hand-drawn signature in black ink (yes, black ink) in 7.a. and date in 7.b.

• Parts 4 and 5. should be left blank if you are not using an interpreter or preparer.

• Part 6:
  • If you previously used CPT or OPT, you should enter your name in 1.a., b., c. and enter the following information as follow-up:
    • OPT: 3.a. “2”, 3.b. “2”, 3.c. “12”, 3.d.: EAD card approval dates, whether it was part- or full-time, and confirm if it was approved or denied.
  • You may also add more information in this section if you ran out of space before or need to follow up on any other questions.
IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

! Your OPT application cannot be changed after it is submitted.

! You must be inside the U.S. to apply for OPT.

! Your application MUST get to USCIS within 30 days of the I-20 creation, do NOT wait to mail your application!

! After you apply, you will receive a notice of action in the mail after about 2 to 4 weeks, with a case number. You will then be able to track your case online. Please note that your case will only be updated when an action on your case is taken. This means the status likely will not change for a couple of months after USCIS receives it. There is no need to be alarmed.
YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES WHILE ON OPT

REPORTING EMPLOYMENT
You will receive a link to set up your SEVP Portal when your OPT starts. Use it to report your address and employment within 10 days of any changes. It is required. Failing to do this will lead to auto-termination of your SEVIS record.

FIELD OF STUDY
All employment must be in your field of study. You must be able to explain the relation in the SEVP Portal.

ALLOWABLE UNEMPLOYMENT
90 days of allowable unemployment
If you use all unemployment days, you should leave the U.S. or change your visa status. SEVIS will automatically terminate your record if you don’t report employment in a timely manner or if you surpass 90 days of unemployment.
EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR POST-COMPLETION OPT

✓ At least 20 hours per week to count towards employment requirement

✓ Multiple jobs are acceptable, but all must be in your field of study

✓ Volunteer work is acceptable on post-completion OPT

✓ Contract hire and self employment are acceptable as long as paperwork is in order and you keep a time log
EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR STEM EXTENSION OPT

✓ At least 20 hours per week

✓ Multiple jobs are acceptable, but all must be related to your STEM eligible degree and all must be at least 20 hours/week

✓ STEM OPT Extension employment must be paid

✓ Your employer must be an E-Verify employer

✓ You must submit a Form I-983
INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL WITH APPROVED OPT

YOU ARE STILL IN F-1 VISA STATUS.

*Necessary Documents:*
- Valid F-1 Visa
- I-20 with travel signature <6 months old
- Employment Authorization Card
- Proof of Employment (Pay stub, letter from supervisor, offer letter, etc.)

TRAVEL WHILE OPT IS PENDING:
- Risky & not recommended, but is sometimes possible.
- You must have a job offer.
- If OPT is approved while you are outside of the U.S., you will need EAD card to reenter.
- Recommended: carry the guidance that states pending OPT students can be admitted to U.S.
AFTER YOUR OPT ENDS

You will have a 60-day grace period. During that time:

- You will have to cease employment
- You should prepare to leave the U.S.
- You may change visa status
- Or you can stay on F1 status and begin a new degree program if you are admitted and transfer your record appropriately
THANKS!

Email us at iss@sc.edu

Call us at 803 777 7461