



## F-1 OPT Application Checklist and Information

**REMINDER:** The OPT application must be received by USCIS **within** 30 days of the date on which the International Student Advisor (ISA) issues an OPT I-20. If filed with USCIS **after** 30 days of the OPT I-20 issuance date, your application will be denied.

**STEP 1:** Decide what dates you wish to do OPT. It generally takes 90-120 days to receive your EAD card to begin employment. Also, remember, your OPT start date cannot be more than 60 days after your SEVIS program end date at Coe College.

**STEP 2:** To prepare the OPT application for USCIS, assemble the following documents in this order **before** meeting with the ISA:

- Fill out a \$410 check or money order payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security.”  
*Do not postdate your check. The date format for your check should be as follows: month/day/year. On the memo line, write: “for OPT” and your SEVIS number.*
- Obtain 2 passport-style photos. On the back of each, lightly print your name and your I-94 number in pencil.  
*The photos must have been taken within the last 30 days (do not use the same photos used for your F-1 visa application; USCIS might notice and will return the application). The two photos should have a white background; be unmounted, printed on thin paper, glossy, and not re-touched; show a passport-style, full-face image, with both ears visible; be 2 by 2 inches, with the distance from the top of the head to just below the chin about 1 3/8 inches.*
- Print and fill out [I-765 Form](#).  
*Line 16 should read: (c) (3) (B).*
- Make photocopies of ALL current and previous I-20s.
- Photocopy the front and back of your I-94 card **OR** Photocopy your F-1 admission stamp in your passport **AND** print a copy of your I-94, which can be obtained at [CBP.gov/I94](http://CBP.gov/I94).  
*You must make sure that your I-94 record is correct and that the last port of entry is in fact where you last entered the U.S. You may call the Deferred Inspection office in Des Moines (515.284.4403 or 515.256.5514) or Omaha, Nebraska (402.341.0240).*
- Photocopy your passport identification page.
- Photocopy your F-1 visa page.
- Print and fill out [G-1145 Form](#)  
*This is optional; it signs you up for email/text message notification of your application’s arrival at USCIS.*
- Photocopy of any previously issued EADs (if applicable).

**STEP 3:** Schedule a meeting with the International Student Advisor. Before your meeting, double and triple-check your documents, making sure everything is completed and completed correctly. If you do not have all of your materials and have each box above checked, the ISA will ask you to return another time when you have everything in hand.



## After You Mail Your OPT Application to USCIS

USCIS will send you a receipt notice (I-797 Notice of Action) confirming receipt of your OPT application, assigning a “receipt date,” and assigning a case number. Carefully review the notice to make sure your name is spelled correctly. If it is not, contact the ISA immediately.

You may use the case number on your receipt notice to check the status of your application online at <https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard.do>. It is normal for your case status to say “initial review” for most of the 2-3 month processing period.

**You may not begin employment until USCIS approves the OPT application and you have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD). Authorized OPT dates will be on your EAD. Be sure to review the reporting and employment requirements you must follow after OPT approval.**

If you have completed a qualifying Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) degree, and you are currently in an approved post-completion OPT period based on a designated STEM degree, you may be eligible to apply for a 24-month STEM extension of your post-completion OPT. For a STEM degree to qualify, it must appear on the [STEM Designated Degree Program List](#). If you want to apply for a STEM extension, you must file for an extension of your EAD with USCIS before your current OPT work authorization expires. USCIS recommends that you file 90 days before the expiration of your OPT.

### **Travel During OPT: If I apply for OPT can I leave the U.S.?**

Travel on OPT can be tricky.

In order to re-enter the U.S. after you have applied for OPT, you must have your I-20 signed by the ISA within the last six months, a valid F-1 visa, a valid passport and your EAD card. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has also indicated the following:

- If your OPT is approved and **you are employed or have been offered employment**, you should be able to re-enter the U.S. with the documents mentioned above, PLUS a letter from your employer confirming that you are or will be employed there under Optional Practical Training.
- If your OPT application is still **pending** when you wish to re-enter the U.S., you will be allowed to re-enter to look for employment (in case your OPT is approved while you are outside the U.S., the ISA strongly recommends that **ON THE DAY YOU ARE TO LEAVE THE U.S.** you go to the [USCIS website \(link is external\)](#) where you can enter the LIN number from your Notice of Action and print a statement showing the OPT application is still pending as of that date, and have this with you when you come through the Port of Entry).
- If your OPT application has been **approved** and you leave the U.S. before finding a job (as evidenced by a job offer letter, which you should be prepared to show the

officer at the Port of Entry), your OPT will be considered canceled and you may NOT be allowed to re-enter the U.S.

### **Is OPT a different visa?**

No. A person with OPT authorization is still in F-1 status, holding an EAD for OPT. You still need the ISA signature on your I-20 if you want to re-enter the United States during your time on OPT. The ISA signature should be no more than six months old at the time you re-enter. Visa renewal on OPT can be more difficult, and you are strongly advised to have your OPT card and proof of employment in addition to regular documentation.

### **Travel during the Cap Gap Extension of OPT**

Travel during the Cap Gap Extension is not advisable.

**Note:** If you re-enter the U.S. in another status (such as B-1 visitor for business), you will no longer be eligible for OPT.

## **What Do I Need To Know Once I Receive My OPT Authorization Card (the EAD Card)?**

### **When can I start to work under OPT?**

You may only begin employment on the day that you are able to show your employer your actual EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card, assuming that the start date listed on the card has already arrived. If you receive the card but the start date is still in the future, you cannot begin working until that date arrives. Employment can only be effective as of the day you show your employer the card; you cannot begin working before this time, and email notices of OPT approval do not suffice to begin employment.

### **Does OPT employment need to be full time?**

No, but you should be working more than 20 hours/week. You may also work for more than one employer while on OPT.

### **What kind of work can I do while on OPT?**

You may work anywhere in the United States, but the key criteria is the work must be related to the degree you just obtained and for which the OPT is being authorized. OPT employment cannot be done based on prior degrees earned in the U.S. or abroad; the employment must relate to your current degree program. OPT can be granted ONLY for the most recent program. Students cannot qualify for OPT based on an earlier program.

### **Must OPT employment be in only paid positions?**

Please see the section on “What about volunteering and self-employment?” below.

### **Must I keep information about my employment?**

Homeland Security recommends you keep records of all OPT employment.

- If you are in a regular, paid position your employer should keep regular HR/payroll records that demonstrate your work.
- Those in the Arts fields should keep records of each gig performed, art sold, etc. and the duration of all employment

- If you do contract work, keep records of the duration of contract periods and the name/address of the contracting company.
- If you will be a self-employed business owner, you must be working full-time, and obtain any applicable business licenses.
- If employed through an agency, you must keep documentation to show that you worked at least 20 hours/week through the agency.
- If you are volunteering or on an unpaid internship, have your employer document that you are “working” at least 20 hours/week and that the work was related to your degree area. See the previous section about unpaid positions.

In order to prove that the work/internship/volunteer activity is related to your area of study, also keep documentation for each job/gig about the position held, the duration of the position or dates worked, job title, supervisor name/contact information, and a description of the work. Often, offer letters contain descriptions of the job duties, so keep these. If it is not clear from the job description that the work is related to your degree, you are advised to obtain a letter from your employer that briefly describes how your degree is related to the work you perform.

Keeping documentation is also a good idea because the ISA has learned that in H-1B applications, anyone on OPT is being asked for the specific starting and ending dates of their employment.

**Can I extend my OPT right now to get an additional 24 months?**

No. Only certain students are eligible to extend OPT, and this should be done 3 months before the initial period of OPT will end. To determine whether or not you might later be eligible for an extension, please ask the ISA for information about OPT STEM Extension.

**Can I take classes if I have OPT?**

Perhaps. If you have graduated and have OPT, regulations allow you to take classes informally and part-time, as long as you maintain your OPT employment. However, if you begin a new course of study (i.e. a new degree program), this will automatically cancel your OPT authorization.

**Can I change employers if I am authorized for the 12-month OPT?**

Yes. As long as the employment is related to your field of study, you can work for any employer or even multiple employers at once.

**How long can I stay in the United States after my OPT expires?**

Sixty days, unless you have obtained a new I-20 to enter a new degree program, applied to extend your OPT to 24-month OPT STEM Extension, or applied to change to another immigration status.

**Can I return to school after completing OPT?**

Yes. You need to obtain an I-20 for the next program of studies, and complete Coe’s procedure for Transfer (if you go to a different school NOTE: Please see the ISA if you seek to Transfer). Please note that if you transfer to a new school you are only allowed to remain in the U.S. for up to 5 months between the time your OPT ends and the new program of

studies is to begin; if the time period is greater than 5 months, you will be required to leave the U.S. and can only re-enter within 30 days of the start of your new program of study.

**If I have OPT for a year and return to school for another degree, can I have another year of OPT?**

You will be eligible for another year of OPT if your new degree will be at a HIGHER level of study. For instance, if you obtained a Bachelor's degree, did 12 months of OPT, then enter a Master's or PhD program, you will be eligible for another 12 months of OPT following that Master's or PhD program.

## **Unemployment and OPT**

**What If I Cannot Find a Job?**

Students on OPT cannot accrue more than 90 cumulative days of unemployment during the 12-month period of OPT. If you accumulate 90 days of unemployment, your legal F-1 status ends immediately as of the 91<sup>st</sup> day. Before the 91<sup>st</sup> day, you will need to make arrangements to leave the U.S., start a new degree program, or change to a different status. If you are still in the U.S. after 90 days of unemployment, you have no legal status.

**Do they count business days or calendar days?**

Calendar. In other words, Saturdays and Sundays count when you are unemployed, not just Monday-Friday.

**What if I am out of the U.S.? Does this count as unemployment?**

If your time away is authorized by your employer, such as on vacation/sick leave or traveling on company business, it is still counted as being employed.

**What about volunteering or self-employment?**

Yes, volunteering or self-employment does count as "employed" if you meet certain criteria.

The following guidelines must be met for Volunteering:

- While the OPT regulations state that volunteer work or unpaid internships can count as "employment," most of these situations are not going to qualify. You need to be careful that the volunteer position is *truly* volunteer; in other words, people are never paid for doing that work. Examples would be a social work major volunteering on a crisis hotline, or a computer science major volunteering to set up a website for a nonprofit food bank, or an accounting major who volunteers during tax season – i.e. if anyone else did the same work, they would not be paid. You cannot "volunteer" in a position that would normally be paid, such as "volunteering" to work in a lab because they don't have funds to pay you. Doing so would violate both immigration and labor laws. It is the same issue with "unpaid internships." Very few true internships exist outside of the student context, i.e. after graduation (journalism might be an example where newspapers or magazines often have formal internships for non-students). The ISA recommends you ensure the position is a true internship and keep documentation to prove it. For example, can you document the history of the internship, that it has been advertised as such, that it has existed for a certain period of time, and what the application process is? Or is it being created just to help an F-1 on OPT avoid accruing days of unemployment? Finally, such work must meet

all other OPT criteria, i.e. must be related to your area of study, be at least 20 hours/week, and can be started only after OPT has been approved. Please note the ISA will not make a determination about whether a volunteer position or an unpaid internship “qualifies” as employment for OPT. Based on our description, this is a determination you and your employer will have to make.

For, Self-Employment:

- See the prior section on “Must I keep information about my employment?” This will indicate what kinds of documents you should keep regarding your self-employment if you work on a contractual basis, have started a business, are in the Arts areas, or work through an agency.