

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
International Scholar & Student Services

Optional Practical Training for Students In F-1 Status

Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows foreign students to engage in temporary employment in their field of study both before and after completion of studies. The following information on Optional Practical Training concerns foreign students who are in F-1 immigration status and are either progressing towards their degree program or are graduating from their degree program.

Definition of “Optional Practical Training”

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a 12 month work permit designed to provide you with an opportunity to gain actual employment experience in your chosen profession. Its purpose is to “round off” or compliment your academic work.

Eligibility Requirement

The work must be **directly related** to your major field of study and must be appropriate for someone with your level of education. The work may be full-time or part-time, and may occur anywhere in the United States. To be eligible to apply for OPT, you (1) must have been in lawful student status for at least nine months (one academic year) and (2) must submit your application during a 150-day period based upon the date you complete all program requirements (see next section). Students enrolled in English language training are not eligible for OPT after the completion of studies.

Application Deadline

You must first submit an application to your immigration advisor preferably within the 90-days before you wish to begin your OPT. We can accept applications during your 60 days grace period, but realize that processing time may cut into your 12 months of employment. The later you wait to apply, be advised that you may not receive the full 12 months of practical training or may face delays in receiving the card. If your immigration advisor recommends that you be allowed to participate in OPT, you must then submit an application for an “Employment Authorization Document” (EAD) to the USCIS office having jurisdiction over the place you are living at that time. The USCIS must receive this application before the end of your 60 day grace period.

Application and Authorization Procedures

Your permission to begin OPT does not begin until you have received an “Employment Authorization Document” (EAD) from the USCIS and the start date has passed.

To apply for OPT, Make an appointment with one of the Immigration Advisors. They must make a recommendation for OPT in the SEVIS system. To obtain your card, you will need to submit the following materials to the Immigration Advisor:

- Form I-765 (Go to www.uscis.gov and open an E-file account and start the I-765, but **do not submit it**. We will complete it during your appointment.)
 - You will use a credit card or electronic check to pay the \$340.00 fee. Please bring one of these with you to the appointment
- Copy of Form I-20 (All your I-20s, even from previous schools, if you have them)
- Copy of I-94 (front and back)
- Copies of important passport pages (biographical page, visa page, and expiration page, if separate)
- OPT Recommendation Form from your academic advisor if you are a thesis/dissertation student (download from www.uab.edu/iss under ISSS Forms)

If you choose to mail your application instead of E-filing, then you will need to submit the following to one of the Immigration Advisors:

- Form I-765 (go to www.uscis.gov to download a copy of the form)
- Copy of Form I-20 (All your I-20s, even from previous schools, if you have them)
- Copy of I-94 (front and back)
- Check for \$340.00, made payable to “DHS or Department of Homeland Security”
- 2 photographs (Passport style – white background)

- Copies of important passport pages (biographical page, visa page, and expiration page, if separate)
- OPT Recommendation Form from your academic advisor if you are a thesis/dissertation student (download from www.uab.edu/issv under ISSS Forms)

Once USCIS receives your application, they will send you a 'Notice of Action' stating when your application will be processed. The EAD will begin either on the day requested in your Immigration Advisors recommendation on your I-20, or the date the EAD is issued, whichever occurs later. However, those students who do not apply in a timely manner may not receive the full period.

Importance of the Actual Date you Complete Your Program Of Study

Immigration regulations refer to the date you complete all requirements for a program of study, not to the date you participate in graduation ceremonies and receive a certificate/diploma. US CIS ignores your graduation date because it realizes that many students, especially graduate students in thesis or dissertation programs, may complete requirements for a degree any day during the year. The last day of an academic term may not be the date you complete program requirements. Your lawful F-1 status expires 60 days after the date you complete degree requirements and you are expected to leave the country by that date unless you file a timely application for practical training or make arrangements to lawfully remain in the U.S.

Making a Decision Regarding Participation in Optional Practical Training

Only One Twelve Month Period Per Degree Level. You are allowed only allowed one year of OPT per level in your time as an F-1 (i.e. one for Bachelor's and one for Master's). You are permitted to use your year in increments if you wish to pursue more than one degree on the same level. For example, if you intend to pursue two graduate degree programs on the Master's level, you may choose to do 6 months of OPT after each program. **Please Note:** Only two types of F-1 students have practical training rights restored after they have been used:

(1) students who spend at least one year outside the U.S. and then return in F-1 status; and (2) students who change from F-1 to another status, spend at least a year in the other status and then change back to F-1 status.

OPT allows for 12 months. OPT may be requested after the nine (9) month enrollment requirement has been met. If the student applies for OPT to begin after the completion of their program, the full 12 months is recommended. Students also have the option to request OPT during annual vacation, upon completion of course requirements excluding thesis/dissertation, or on a part-time basis during the academic year. Part-time employment will subtracted at a one-half rate from the 12-month allotment.

Unemployment During OPT

You cannot have more than 90 days of aggregate unemployment during your OPT year. These 90 days begin after the start date on the OPT card. If you are still enrolled, then you don't begin accruing these 90 days until after you graduate.

Actual Date OPT May Begin

You may not begin work until the following requirements are satisfied: (1) you have obtained your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from the USCIS; (2) the date is reached when the EAD authorizes employment to begin.

Change of Employer After Optional Practical Training Has Been Authorized

You may change employers after you have begun authorized employment provided the new job is (1) directly related to your major field of study and (2) appropriate for someone having your level of education.

Travel Outside the United States.

In order to reenter the U.S., you must present (1) a recently signed I-20; (2) a letter from your employer; (3) your OPT Card; and 4) a valid F-1 visa. Be sure to consult with staff in the ISSS office when contemplating travel outside the U.S. and reentry to continue OPT.

17-Month Extension (Only For STEM Majors)

If you are in a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) field you may be eligible for a one time 17 months extension if your employer is in the E-verify program. Please see the additional information sheet on 17-month OPT Extensions available on our website at www.uab.edu/issv.