



SMU

International Student & Scholar Services Office

**Optional Practical Training
Check-List**

**PLEASE BRING THE ORIGINAL AND 3 COPIES OF THE
FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS TO THE WORKSHOP**

- Passport (Pages that include Name, Picture & Expiration Date)
- Current Visa
(If you entered the U.S.A. on a different Visa type such as H-1, B-1, etc., please bring 3 copies)
- Most Recent I-94 Card (Front & Back)
- 3 Copies of your most recent I-20.
- Any Previous EAD Card, if applicable (Front & Back)

PLEASE BRING THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS TO THE WORKSHOP

- OPT Completion of Degree Information Form (Signed by the Student's Dean or Academic Advisor)
- (2) Color Passport photos
- *Check or Money order payable to: DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (THIS CANNOT BE ABBREVIATED. Please check the amount by going to:
<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>*

**F-1 STUDENTS CAN APPLY FOR OPT PRIOR TO YOUR PROGRAM
COMPLETION DATE OR WITHIN 60 DAYS OF GRACE PERIOD.
YOUR APPLICATION MUST REACH THE SERVICE CENTER
BEFORE THE 60TH DAY OF GRACE PERIOD**

Optional Practical Training

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

Optional Practical Training is temporary employment for practical training directly related to the student's major area of study. The maximum amount of time that a student may participate in OPT is 12 months per degree level. The application for OPT does not require proof of employment at the time of application. However, if you fail to find employment within 90 days of the start date of your EAD card, you will be considered out of compliance.

Who is eligible for OPT?

Any F-1 student who has been continuously enrolled in full-time status for one regular full academic year may apply for OPT. No practical training is available to students in English Language training programs.

Who is eligible for a 29-month OPT?

Students who have completed a degree within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) field are eligible to apply for a 17 month extension of their 12 Post Completion OPT. In order to apply for this ONE TIME EXTENSION, students must meet certain criteria. For more information, please visit your immigration advisor.

When can I participate in OPT?

A student may only participate in OPT **AFTER** the application has been processed and approved by USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) and **AFTER** the student is in possession of the EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card, indicating the authorized dates of employment.

Periods of eligibility are:

- After completion of a course of study.
 - After completion of course requirements for the degree excluding thesis or equivalent.
 - While school is in session, provided that OPT does not exceed 20 hours per week (pre-completion).
 - During the student's annual vacation or at other times when school is not in session (pre-completion)
- * Any portion of the 12 months used prior to completion of a degree level will be subtracted from the 12 months of total time of eligibility after the completion of an academic program.

What is the deadline for OPT application?

The student can apply to USCIS **BEFORE** the student's "completion date" or during the 60 days grace period. We highly recommend that you submit your application before your graduation if you want to start working upon completion your degree. However, if you are not sure whether or not you will be completing your degree, it is recommended to wait until after you finish the semester. In order for this processing to be complete, the SMU International Student and Scholar Services Office will schedule workshops for which the students must attend. It is important to note that USCIS can take 2-3 months or longer to process applications. It is highly recommended that a student mails the OPT application **90 days before** the program completion date if eligible.

How do I apply for OPT?

THE ISSS OFFICE DOES NOT RECOMMEND E-FILING OF OPT APPLICATIONS.

1. Contact the ISSS Office and make an appointment for an OPT Workshop. The OPT Workshop schedule is listed on the International Office Web site.
2. Prior to the Workshop:
 - Print the OPT Completion of Degree Information Form (available on the ISSS Office website), and have it completed and signed by your dean or academic advisor.
 - Obtain two color passport photos.
 - Make three copies of:
 - Current passport (Pages that include Name, Picture & Expiration Date)
 - Current visa
 - Most recent I-94 card (front and back)
 - Most recent I-20 or previous I20s with employment authorization (CPT).
 - Any previous EAD card, if applicable (front and back)
3. Bring to the appointment:
 - Three copies of the documents listed above
 - OPT Completion of Degree Information Form signed by the student's dean or academic advisor
 - Money Order or personal check made payable to the Department of Homeland Security. Check amount by visiting <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>. The OPT Application Form (I-765) will be distributed during the workshop.
4. Mail your application. **Do not send the application by certified or registered mail.** This will slow the application process. The application may be sent by regular or express mail as long as such mailing does not require a USCIS individual to sign for the envelope in order to complete the delivery.

How long will it take to process my OPT application?

It can take 2-3 months or longer to process your OPT application.

How will I be updated on the progress of my application?

USCIS will send two "Notice of Action" forms from the Texas Service Center to the ISSS Office. The first notice will be the receipt for your application. If your application is approved, the second notice will contain your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card for OPT. When the EAD card arrives, the International Center Administrative Coordinator will contact you by SMU e-mail. It is the student's responsibility to contact the ISSS Office if there are delays in the application.

You may check on line case status at the DHS Texas Service Center:

<https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard/CaseStatus.do>

What if my card has not arrived after 90 days?

Students who have not received authorization for OPT after 90 days from their “receipt date” must contact the ISSS Advisers. The Advisers will contact Service Center in order to inquiry about your application. If you wish to inquiry about your application, you may visit the Dallas District Office. You must schedule an appointment to visit the office through info-pass: <http://infopass.uscis.gov/>. However, the Dallas District Office will not issue a temporary EAD card.

When can I begin employment?

Employment can begin only **after** you receive documented approval in the form of the EAD card. You may work **only during the valid dates indicated on the card**. Employment cannot begin before the student is in possession of the EAD card even as an unsalaried contract employee. **Employment of any kind in the United States is illegal without DHS authorization.**

Where can I work?

Employment may be obtained in any business or organization within the student’s major area of study.

Can I change my job during OPT?

There is no limit to the number of jobs a student may take during the OPT period.

Should I inform the ISSS office of my current employment?

You are required by law to inform the ISSS office where you are currently employed. If no changes in employment have occurred, you are still required to update the ISSS office of such information. Please have your supervisor complete the **Employment Verification Form** in order to report your employment.

Can I travel while waiting for my OPT to begin?

After completion of studies, we recommend that students do not travel while their OPT is pending. If you decide to travel, we recommend that you take with you a current passport, valid visa, EAD card, your OPT I-20 endorsed for travel while on OPT by an International Student Adviser, and letter of employment (or correspondence with potential employers).

Can I travel when my OPT has begun?

Again, we recommend that students do not travel while on OPT. Once the OPT has started, re-entry into the U.S. without the EAD card and letter of employment can lead to denial of re-entry into the United States and forfeiture of OPT.

By itself, the EAD card is not valid for travel purposes. International travel during OPT requires an OPT I-20 endorsed for travel while on OPT by an International Student Adviser, a current passport, a valid visa, EAD card, and letter of employment.

What is required of the student during the OPT?

- The student may only participate in employment, which is related to the student’s **major area of study**.
- Student must submit proof of employment in order to maintain status: **Employment Verification Letter**
- An OPT travel signature on the I-20 is required for international travel.
- Inform the ISSS Office of any approved change of visa status (such as F-1 to H1B)
- DHS regulations **require** the student to notify the ISSS Office for the following reasons:

- Any changes in address, phone number, or e-mail
- Name change
- Termination of employment
- Strike activity at place of employment

Do I have to pay taxes during my OPT?

Federal income taxes will be withheld from the paycheck of an F-1 student during OPT. Medicare and Social Security taxes should not be paid by F-1 OPT students if you are still a non-resident alien for tax purposes. If you are not sure what your IRS status is, please check www.irs.gov. If there is confusion concerning taxes, the employer can be directed to IRS Publication 519 at (www.irs.gov).

May I take classes during OPT?

An F-1 OPT student may not take any classes that are credit bearing. Enrollment in a full-time program requires a new I-20 which will terminate the OPT. If a decision is made to begin a full-time academic program, care should be taken to have clear communication between the student and the ISSS Office, which issues the new I-20, regarding when the OPT employment will be terminated.

What are my options when my OPT expires?

Employment must terminate on or before the last day of OPT authorization unless you are eligible for Cap-Gap extension or STEM extension.

- Departure date will be determined by your OPT start date. Further information will be provided in the workshop.
- Continue in F-1 status by pursuing further F-1 studies (such as an advanced degree) according to DHS requirements. This process should begin before the OPT expiration date.
- Apply to change status to another nonimmigrant classification according to DHS requirements. This process should begin before the OPT expiration date.

REQUIRED FORMS AND IMPORTANT INFORMATION

OPT Completion of Degree Information Form

(<http://www.smu.edu/international/forms/OPT%20degree%20completion%20info%20form.pdf>)

For USCIS Color Photograph Specifications

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>