

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Summary



American University · Building a Global University · International Student & Scholar Services

I. WHAT IS OPT?

- OPT is intended to provide hands-on practical work experience in the student's major field of study
- To be eligible, you must have been enrolled in a full-time degree seeking program for one academic year
- Cumulative 12 months maximum per education level. **STEM major students may be eligible for 24-month extension*
- To be eligible for more OPT time, you must enroll in a higher-level degree program
- Approval by USCIS, issued an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card with authorized dates
- Job offer not required for application

II. WAYS TO USE OPT

Pre-Completion OPT

- Part-time (≤ 20 hours/week) when school is in session, part-time or full-time during summer vacation or other times when school is not in session, as long as student intends to register for next semester
- If Pre-completion OPT is combined with on-campus employment, total hours worked while school is in session cannot exceed 20 hours (part time)
- Part-time OPT is deducted as half time (e.g. If you work part-time 4 months you use up 2 months of OPT)
- Once the Pre-completion OPT period is approved by USCIS, the time will be deducted from the total OPT time, regardless of if the authorization is used or not.

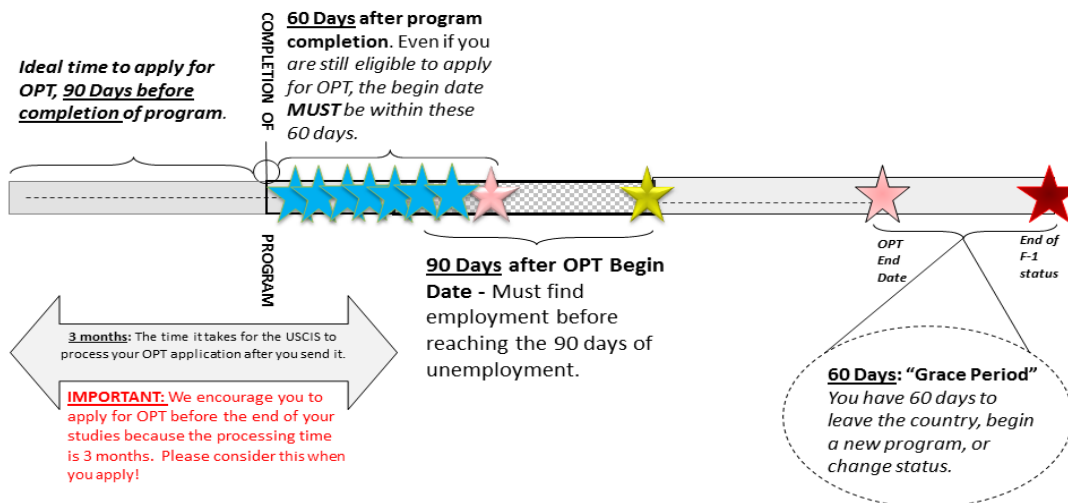
Post-Completion OPT

- Full-time (at least 20 hours/week) after completion of studies

III. OPT TIMELINE

Expect 1-3 months of processing time from the date received by USCIS

- **Pre-Completion OPT:** May apply up to 90 days prior to the requested employment start date
- **Post-Completion OPT:**
 - May apply up to 90 days before, or within 60 days after, program completion date.
 - OPT start date must be within the 60 days following program completion date
 - The program completion date can be based on:
 - Graduation date (All Students – Fall & Spring)
 - Last day of classes (Summer Graduates only)
 - Date the student will be notified of the results of comprehensive exams (Master's and PhD)
 - Date the student will complete an SRP or thesis (Master's only)
 - Date the student will defend or be notified that a dissertation will be complete (PhD only)
 - OPT application must be received by USCIS within 30 days of the new OPT I-20 issuance date.



IV. APPLY FOR OPT

- See ISSS handout on application requirements and procedures.

V. NOTIFY ISSS IF:

- You decide not to file your OPT application with USCIS for any reason.
- You do not receive a paper copy receipt notice (I-797 with case number from USCIS) within 2-4 weeks from the date your OPT application was received.
- If you receive an RFE (Request for Evidence), rejection, or denial from USCIS.
- You find an error by USCIS on your OPT EAD card.
- You change your status from F-1 (OPT) to another immigration status (e.g.: H-1B, A-1, G-4 etc.).

VI. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

- Students on OPT have legal reporting requirements to maintain status. You are expected to review and comply with all reporting requirements available in the ISSS website.
- For Pre-completion and Post-completion OPT reporting requirements, visit <https://www.american.edu/ocl/iss/opt-employment-reporting.cfm>.
- For STEM OPT Extension reporting requirements, visit <https://www.american.edu/ocl/iss/stem-opt-extension.cfm>.

VII. TRAVELING OUTSIDE THE US WHILE ON OPT

There is always a risk associated with traveling outside the US while on OPT. If you choose to travel outside the US before completion of your studies, you must get a travel signature from ISSS before departure, and your I-20, visa, and passport must be valid and unexpired.

- To travel and re-enter the United States while on OPT, you need ***a valid I-20 with a travel signature by ISSS within the past 6 months, an unexpired passport, an unexpired F-1 visa, an unexpired EAD card, and an employment letter.***
- While on OPT, you are still in F-1 student status. If your visa expires while you are outside the US, you must get an F-1 visa to re-enter.
- Unless it is an emergency or traveling on business for your employer, avoid traveling near the OPT end date. If you must travel due to an emergency, please contact ISSS for advice.

VIII. IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- You must be physically present in the U.S. to file the OPT application.
- **Avoid changing your address while your OPT application is pending.** If you know you will move in advance, we suggest you use the address of someone who can receive mail on your behalf. The US Postal Service will not forward USCIS mail.
- Your OPT will automatically end when you begin study at another educational level or transfer to another school. You will not be able to save the remaining OPT time left.
- We highly recommend that you have health insurance for the duration of time you are in the United States. You may extend your AU health insurance, but you must apply for the extension at least 1 month before the end of your current coverage. Contact your health insurance provider for more information.
- ISSS recommends that you clear your account balance before applying for post-completion OPT.

