

OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) AFTER COMPLETION OF DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Definition: OPT in F-1 status is employment related to your field of study taken immediately after completion of your studies, authorized by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) through the issuance of an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. OPT is permitted for a period of up to a maximum of twelve months based on educational level (Bachelors, Masters, etc.). For a detailed description of the OPT application procedure, please visit the ISSO website: <https://isso.columbia.edu/>.

Obtaining the employment authorization is a three-step process:

- Obtain an OPT recommendation from the ISSO on a new I-20.
- Mail your application (I-765) and all supporting documentation for an EAD to the USCIS.
- Receive the EAD in the mail. You may begin to work ONLY after you receive the EAD and no earlier than the start date on the EAD.

Eligibility: You must:

- Be physically present in the U.S. in F-1 status at the time of application. Do not leave the U.S. during the 60 day grace period following the completion date of your program if you have not yet applied for OPT.
- Have been enrolled in a University-recognized degree or certificate program in lawful student status on a full-time basis for at least one full academic year
- Have completed all requirements for the award of your University-recognized degree or certificate at the time OPT begins
- Not have used twelve months or more of full-time curricular practical training (CPT)
- Have received a grade for any course-related CPT done in a prior semester (if applicable)
- Have not previously been authorized for OPT at the same level of study

NOTE: You do not need to have secured a job in the U.S. to process OPT.

Deadline: The OPT application must be received by USCIS before the end of the 60-day grace period following the completion date of the current program of enrollment. The completion date is generally the official last date of the term in which all degree requirements have been fulfilled and not the date on which the degree is conferred. USCIS will deny any application received after the end of your 60-day grace period.

When to Apply: You have a 5 month period in which to apply for OPT--from 90 days before the completion of your program until 60 days after but you must still be in the U.S. at the time of application. You may request a start date within the 60-day grace period following completion of your program.

The employment authorization start date on your EAD will be the date you requested or the date the EAD is processed, whichever is later. Regardless of when your OPT begins, it cannot end later than a year from the end of your grace period.

Example: A student is graduating on May 16, 2019. This student may choose a start date within sixty days following the completion of her program, from May 17 to July 15. She wants her OPT to begin as late as possible, which is July 15, 2019. She sends her application to USCIS on June 1st and they process her EAD card on August 15th. The OPT authorization on her card is August 15, 2019 to July 15, 2020. OPT cannot end more than 14 months after the end date on the I-20. She may not begin employment until she has the EAD in hand and she can only work during the time period indicated on the EAD.

Please note that the US Department of Homeland Security frequently amends the regulations concerning the OPT application process. Please make sure you are following the current procedure per ISSO.