



What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

1. What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field (not your minor). OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). This authorization can take 2 to 3 months to obtain. The maximum amount of time granted to work on F1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible H1B cap-gap extension OR a 24 month STEM extension for those who qualify (see FAQ below). You may use some or all of the available 12 months of practical training during your course of study or save the full twelve months to use after you graduate.

2. What are the Eligibility Requirements for Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

To be eligible to apply for optional practical training, you must: (1) have been a full time enrolled student in the U.S. for at least one academic year by the requested start date of your OPT, and (2) be in F1 status when you apply.

3. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?

Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of Optional Practical Training after changing to a higher degree level and completing a full academic year of enrollment at the higher degree level.

4. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?

Authorization for OPT is granted by USCIS and can take 2 - 3 months to obtain. Therefore it is important that you apply 3 months before the date you wish to start working. You may apply for POST-graduation OPT up to (but not more than) 90 days before your completion date and the immigration service MUST RECEIVE your application NO LATER THAN 30 days beyond the ISSUE DATE on the I-20 (the issue date is on the lower part of the I-20) AND not more than 60 days beyond the end date of your I-20. You cannot apply MORE than 120 days before the start date you choose.



5. Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?

You do NOT need to have a job offer before applying for the first 12 months of optional practical training. If you are applying for the STEM extension, you DO need to have a job to apply.

6. Do I need to have a job while I am on optional practical training (OPT)?

Yes. The regulations require that you do have employment while on your POST-graduation OPT period. You are only allowed to have a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT or 150 days if you apply for and receive the STEM extension. While on POST-graduation OPT, you MUST update your employment information by emailing your DSO at gsavoie@sfc.edu.

7. Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?

For the first twelve months of OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed (including performance majors with regular “gigs”), interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of regular OPT employment. If you are “self-employed,” keep careful records of all the work you do—it is supposed to be at least 20 hours per week. While on the STEM extension, you must be paid, and you must have a regular employer—employee relationship with the employer (no temp agencies, no self-employment, no independent contracting).

8. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)?

No. You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS; working before practical training has been authorized by the USCIS constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

9. Do I have to do anything with International Student Programs and Services (ISPS) while I am on OPT?

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on POST-graduation OPT, you MUST report your employment and address information to St. Francis College by emailing your DSO at gsavoie@sfc.edu.



10. Can I extend my OPT after the 12 months?

There are two types of extensions available: 1) a STEM extension for those in certain fields (discussed below) and 2) an “H1B Cap Gap Extension” which extends your work authorization through to the start of your cap subject H1B visa if your OPT ends after your cap subject company has applied for a H1B for you but before the H1B starts on the following October 1st. This cap gap extension is available to all F-1 students using OPT in any field, as long as you have a pending or approved “cap subject” H1B application and the employer applied for in with a request for change of status as part of the application. The extension is automatic, you do not have to do anything at all to get the extension. “Cap Subject” refers to any H1B application that must be counted against the quota on H1B applications.

11. What is the STEM extension of OPT?

The “STEM Extension” allows F1 students on OPT who have received a degree in the fields listed below, referred to as “STEM” fields (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics), to apply for an extension of their regular 12 month OPT period. The STEM extension will allow students to have extended work authorization in case they do not get an H1B visa in their first year after graduating. Students who timely file an application for the STEM OPT extension will be able to continue employment while the extension application is pending, until a final decision on the I-765 or for 180 days, whichever comes first.

12. I think I qualify, how do I apply for the STEM extension?

More information here: www.sfc.edu/studentlife/isps

FIRST: Students graduating now with degrees in these fields will first apply for the regular 12 month period of OPT as usual.

THEN, WITHIN 3 months before the end of your first 12 months of OPT: If you meet the following criteria, you can apply through ISPS for STEM extension of your OPT.

CRITERIA FOR THE STEM EXTENSION:

- Your employer must be enrolled in the “E-Verify” program (see information links below).
- You must have graduated in and be working in one of the fields listed below referred to as “STEM” fields
- You must have maintained status while on OPT



- You and your employer MUST complete a “training plan” on form I-983 and present this completed form to ISPS:

<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/I-983.pdf>

13. What are the “STEM” fields?

Actuarial Science, Computer Science Applications, Engineering, Engineering Technologies, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Military Technologies, Physical Sciences, Science Technologies, Medical Scientist (MS, PhD)

For more info, see our website at: www.sfc.edu/studentlife/isps

14. What is “E-Verify”?

E-Verify is an Internet-based system operated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA). E-Verify is currently free to employers and is available in all 50 states. E-Verify provides an automated link to federal databases to help employers determine employment eligibility of new hires and the validity of their Social Security numbers. More information is available at: www.uscis.gov

15. Are there any other requirements while I am on the STEM extension?

In addition to filling out the OPT report form for changes in address or employment, students on the STEM extension of OPT will have to complete a report to the school every six months. You will report to us by emailing your DSO at gsavoie@sfc.edu



TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

Documents REQUIRED for re-entry	Before completing program	After completing program and before OPT approved by USCIS	After completing program and after OPT approved by USCIS
<i>Valid passport</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>Valid F-1 visa</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>I-20 with valid travel signature</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>OPT receipt (I-797)</i>		<i>Highly recommended</i>	<i>Highly recommended</i>
<i>Letter from employer</i>			✓
<i>EAD card</i>			✓

16. Now that I've turned in my application, can I travel outside the US while I wait for the card to come?

After you graduate, in order to re-enter the U.S. you must have the following:

- EAD card (or receipt notice for the OPT application)
- your valid passport
- a valid F-1 visa stamp
- I-20 signed within the last six months
- your job offer letter or proof of employment

Before you graduate, you should be able to get back into the U.S. without the EAD card as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation (at least one month). If you are within a month of the end date of your I-20, be prepared to show all the documents you would need for OPT (listed above and in number 19 below).



17. I want to leave the US for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B-2) that is valid for 10 years. Can't I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?

NO! If you intend to continue working on your OPT, NEVER enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the US and re-enter with a B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status and your OPT will be invalid!

18. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?

- You will need your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by ISPS within the last 6 months
- the EAD card from the USCIS (or the receipt notice for your OPT application)
- your valid passport
- a valid F-1 visa stamp
- your job offer letter or proof of employment

19. What if I have applied for the STEM extension but I have not yet received the card, can I travel out of the U.S.?

You are allowed to travel outside of the US while awaiting your STEM OPT card. You will enter with the I-20 showing the STEM recommendation, your job offer letter, and the receipt notice for the STEM extension along with the valid F-1 visa stamp.



20. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on:

- your expired F-1 visa stamp
- your I-94 card or print out
- a valid passport
- your EAD card (or receipt notice)
- an I-20 that has been signed by ISPS within the last 6 months
- your job offer letter or proof of employment as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa while in Canada and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, or North Korea

If you are traveling elsewhere, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. Please come in to ISPS to discuss your visa application with an advisor as the consulates often change the requirements for visa applications for students on OPT.

21. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training (OPT) is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. It is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate non-immigrant intent. Please see your international student advisor to discuss in more detail.

22. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?

- a valid passport
- the EAD card or receipt notice for your application
- an I-20 created by ISPS for your OPT application
- your job offer letter or proof of employment



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The official job offer letter should sound temporary and not permanent. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

23. Do I still need to get the travel line on my I-20 signed by ISPS during the year of OPT?

Yes, during the OPT year, if you travel outside the U.S., you need to have the travel line signed every six months. If you are not located in the New York area, mail the original I-20 to ISPS for endorsement, leaving plenty of time for mailing delays both ways.