



Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

What is the program end date (used for assessing the timeline of OPT application and employment period)?

The program end date is the date that you have to complete requirements for your degree at CIIS, and is listed on your SEVIS I-20 form. Typically, the program end date is the last day of the semester that you will graduate or the last day of your practicum/internship contract, whichever is latest. Proof of your practicum/internship contract is required at the OPT application appointment. ****Note that the Program End Date is an estimate and may need to be updated. Nevertheless, the *actual* program end date will be used for calculating dates for your OPT.**

Do the periods of pre-completion OPT count against the available periods of post-completion OPT?

Yes. All periods of pre-completion OPT are deducted from the available periods of post-completion OPT. Full-time OPT is deducted from the 12-month cumulative limit at the full-time rate; Part-time pre-completion OPT is deducted from the 12-month cumulative limit at a 50% rate. Prior use of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT) for 12 months or more eliminates eligibility for OPT.

Can I use more than one type of OPT?

Yes, but you only have 12 months total of OPT per degree level sought. You can apply for OPT both before completing your program and after you complete your program. Eligibility requirements are on the OPT application. You will need to file a new application and pay the fee for each period of OPT that you request.

If I plan to use my OPT after I graduate, when is the latest I may request my work authorization to begin?

You may request work authorization to begin no later than 60 days after your program end date.

When can I begin working?

You must receive your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from the U.S. service center before you begin working. The first day that you may begin work is the start date indicated on your EAD, or when you have the card in hand, whichever is later. OPT applications that are submitted late may cause you to receive your EAD card *after* the start of your employment authorization.

What if I don't receive my EAD in 90 days?

To be eligible to apply for an interim EAD the following conditions must be met: More than 90 days have passed from the received date on the Notice of Action Letter you have received **AND** your requested period of practical training has already begun. You can make a status inquiry at <https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do> or through your MyUSCIS account <https://my.uscis.gov/>

My EAD card says "Not Valid for Re-entry to the U.S." What does that mean?

It means that you cannot use the EAD card on its own to travel into the U.S. Please review the travel information below about required documents for traveling while on pending or approved OPT.

Can I take classes while on OPT?

Since you are expected to be actively searching for full-time employment or working full-time, time spent going to school should only be an *incidental* part of your stay in the U.S. while on OPT. If you decide to begin a new full-time program during your OPT, you must get a new I-20 from the school and forfeit the remainder of your OPT time, depending on when the new program begins. In some cases, you may need to apply for a transfer of your SEVIS record. Contact the International Student Advisor at CIIS to discuss this option.



Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

–page 2–

Can I travel while on approved OPT/pending OPT?

In general, an F-1 student on approved post-completion OPT who travels outside the U.S. temporarily (i.e., less than 5 months) can be readmitted to resume F-1 status and employment for the remainder of the period authorized on his or her EAD card, provided the student did not accumulate more than the allowed unemployment during the OPT period. The following must be presented at your point of entry:

- A valid passport with unexpired F-1 visa stamp;
- Form I-20, with travel signature on page 2 by the International Student Advisor **within the preceding 6 months**;
- An unexpired EAD card;
- Proof of employment or employment offer (letter from your employer on letterhead)

If your OPT application is pending, you may travel and re-enter the U.S. to search for employment and thus a job offer letter is not required. In this case, however, the following is presented at the port of entry:

- A valid passport with unexpired F-1 visa stamp;
- Form I-20, with travel signature on page 2 by the International Student Advisor **within the preceding 6 months**;
- Notice of Action receipt for your OPT (received about 10-14 days after submitting your application)

It is generally not recommended to travel while the OPT application is pending.

Travel and Unemployment

- If the student whose approved period of OPT has started travels outside of the United States while unemployed, the time spent outside the United States will count as unemployment against the 90-day limit. Keep in mind, one must have a job (offer) letter to re-enter the U.S. once OPT is approved.
- If a student travels while employed during a period of leave authorized either by an employer or as part of their employment, the time spent outside the United States will not count as unemployment.

Qualifying employment for OPT

Employment must be in a job that is related to the student's degree program. The types of employment allowed during OPT include:

- **Paid employment:** Students may work part-time (at least 20 hours per week when on post-completion OPT) or full-time. On post-completion OPT students must work an average of at least 20 hours per week.
- **Multiple employers:** Students may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student's degree program.
- **Self-employed business owner:** Students may start a business and be self-employed. In this situation, the student must be able to prove that he or she has the proper business licenses and is actively engaged in a business related to the student's degree program.



Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

-page 3-

- **Unpaid employment:** Students may work as volunteers or unpaid interns, where this does not violate any U.S. labor laws. The work must average at least 20 hours per week per month. These students must be able to provide evidence from the employer that the student worked an average of at least 20 hours per week during the period of employment.
- **Work for hire:** This is also commonly referred to as 1099 contractor employment where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than an employment relationship. If requested by DHS, students must be prepared to provide evidence showing the duration of the contract periods and the name and address of the contracting company.
- **Short-term multiple employers (performing artists):** Students, such as musicians and other performing artists may work for multiple short term employers (gigs). The student should maintain a list of all gigs, the dates and duration. If requested by DHS, students must be prepared to provide evidence showing a list of all gigs.

Do I have to have a job while on OPT? (Periods of unemployment)

Although is not required to have a job offer to apply for OPT, students on approved OPT must not be unemployed for more than 90 days cumulative in the 12-month approval period. During the period of OPT authorization, it is assumed that a student will be working or actively seeking employment. If you decide to quit your job, or if you do not find a job, keep the unemployment rules in mind:

- Students on post-completion OPT may have up to 90 days of unemployment cumulative
- After your EAD expires, if you maintained your status, you are allowed a 60-day grace period to depart the U.S, change your status, or begin a new F-1 program (you are not allowed to work during the grace period).

Employer reporting and U.S. address reporting requirements while on OPT/ SEVIS Student Portal

As an F-1 student visa holder, you are required to report any change of your physical address in the U.S. and employer information within 10 days of changes. Once your OPT is approved you will receive an email to the address on file in SEVIS (your mymail.ciis.edu address) and will be notified by SEVP to open a SEVIS Portal Account. Through this account, you will update changes to your address and employer throughout the duration of your OPT. If you have not received an email from SEVP, please check your spam mailbox folders or the International Student Advisor. Refer to <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/the-sevp-portal-overview-video> and <https://sevp.ice.gov/opt/#/login>

After updating *employer information* in the SEVIS Student Portal, email the International Student Advisor to request a print out of your updated Form I-20.

Early completion of OPT and departing the U.S.

If you decided to leave the U.S. prior to the expiration of your EAD, you are required to report your date of departure from the U.S. to the International Student Advisor at CIIS by email/in writing.



Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

-page 4-

Do I have to pay into taxes at my OPT job(s)?

F-1 visa holders are *usually* exempt from paying FICA Taxes, Social Security and Medicare. However, F-1 students are subjected to federal taxes, and state/local taxes. Please make sure to discuss your F-1 non-immigrant visa status with the HR office at your place of employment as they may not be aware of this regulation. You may also refer to the tax documents posted in the Documents section of the CIIS Connect, Student Affairs, International Students page.

Can I extend my OPT dates? I read that F-1 students can get an additional 24 months of post-completion OPT.

Certain F-1 students who receive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics ([STEM](#)) [degrees may apply for a 24-month extension](#) of their post-completion optional practical training (OPT). Unfortunately, CIIS degree codes are not categorized under the STEM degrees and therefore do not qualify. The exception to this rule—ACTCM programs, which do qualify for STEM OPT.

Previously obtained STEM degrees

If you are an F-1 student participating in a 12-month period of post-completion OPT based on a non-STEM degree, you may be eligible to use a *previous* STEM degree from a U.S. institution of higher education to apply for a STEM OPT extension. You must have received both degrees from currently accredited and SEVP-certified institutions and cannot have already received a STEM OPT extension based on this previous degree. The practical training opportunity also must be directly related to the previously obtained STEM degree.

- For example: If you are currently participating in OPT based on a master's degree in counseling psychology, but you previously received a bachelor's degree in mathematics, you may be able to apply for a STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor's degree as long as it is from an accredited U.S. college or university **and** the STEM OPT extension employment opportunity is directly related to your bachelor's degree in mathematics.

Information for the application process for extension of post-completion OPT is on [USCIS.gov](https://uscis.gov)

How will I be contacted as an alumnus during post-completion OPT?

The contact email used for students/alum by international student services and other official CIIS offices **and** the U.S. government is your **CIIS mymail.ciis.edu email address** (regardless of the email address you use on your OPT application). Please continue to check this email as an alum.

Check Your Application Status online at: <https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do>

You will need to have your 13-character Notice of Action receipt number. It is a 10-digit number preceded by three letters. If you filed online you can check your MyUSCIS account at <https://my.uscis.gov/>