
OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) INSTRUCTION GUIDE

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)? Optional Practical Training (OPT) as defined by federal regulations permits F-1 students to receive temporary employment to gain work experience directly related to their major field of study for up to 12 months per educational level. There are two types of OPT options: *Pre-completion* (OPT taken during studies/before graduation) and *Post-completion* (OPT taken after graduation). Post-completion OPT falls into 3 subcategories - *Standard Post-completion* (OPT taken immediately after graduation), *STEM OPT Extension* (24 additional months to work for students with degrees in science, technology, engineering and math and are listed on the DHS STEM degree program list). As well, there is *H-1B cap-gap extension OPT* (for students whose employer has filed an H-1B petition on their behalf).

What is an H-1B Cap Gap Extension and how do I obtain one? Duration of status (D/S) and any post-completion OPT or STEM OPT work authorization are automatically extended for any F-1 student who is the beneficiary of a timely filed H-1B petition requesting change of status and an employment start date of October 1 (the first day of the following fiscal year).

What are the requirements to be eligible for Pre-completion OPT and Post-completion OPT? Students must have been enrolled as an F-1 student and in good academic standing for one academic year before applying for OPT. Students must also attend an OPT information session before they can apply for OPT at NCCU.

What are the job requirements for OPT? An offer of employment is not necessary to apply for OPT, however students may not be unemployed for more than 90 days under post-completion OPT and no more than 150 days for 24-month STEM OPT once work authorization has been approved. Work must be related to your field of study. There is no limit of unemployment for pre-completion OPT, but again, work must be related to your field of study. Students may work for any employer, many different employers, or anywhere in the U.S. as long as it relates to their degree under the pre-completion and standard post-completion option. There are additional conditions for STEM OPT. See the next section below for additional requirements on STEM OPT.

What are the consequences of exceeding unemployment? If students exceed the period of unemployment while on post-completion OPT, they have violated their status unless they have applied to continue their education by changing levels or transferring to another certified school, departed the United States, or have taken action to otherwise maintain legal status.

What are the differences between Pre-completion OPT, Post-completion OPT and STEM OPT Extension?

Pre-completion OPT - The duration lasts for 12 months (12 months total for both pre-completion and post-completion OPT combined) and occurs before completion of the degree. Students can only work part-time when classes are in session; no more than 20 hours per week. Students may work full-time or up to 40 hours per week during university breaks. Students who have completed all course work except for thesis or dissertation may work part-time or full-time. There is no limit of unemployment for pre-completion OPT. All work must be completed before completing the degree.

Post-completion OPT - The duration lasts for 12 months (12 months total for both pre-completion and post-completion OPT combined) and occurs after completion of the degree. Students have a 14-month window to use post-completion OPT. An offer of employment is not necessary to apply for post-completion OPT; *however*, students are expected to work during work authorization period and have a 90-day limit for unemployment accrued.

STEM OPT Extension – The duration lasts for 24 months, but students must already be engaged in post-completion OPT. Students may accumulate no more than 150 days of unemployment during the total 36-month OPT period. If properly and timely filed, students may work up to 180 days past the work authorization end date while STEM extension application is pending with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (UCSIS). The employer must be registered in the E-verify program and have an Employment Identification Number (EIN). There must be a bona fide employer-employee relationship between the student and the employer. It requires completion and submission of a Form I-983 Training Plan by the student and employer to the student's DSO or international student advisor. As with other OPT options, employment must be related to the major area of study. Unlike other OPT options, STEM OPT must be paid employment. Students applying for this option must have a degree CIP code in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math that is listed on the DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List. The CIP code for a student's major can be found under the major on page one of the I-20. The complete list of approved STEM fields can be found at [STEM OPT Degree List](#). The STEM extension must be based on a major field of study and not a minor and may be based on the most recent STEM degree or a STEM degree earned earlier at a university or college in the U.S. The degree earned must be from a U.S. college or university that is SEVP-certified and accredited at the time of application for the extension and received within 10 years preceding the time of application. Students are eligible for two extensions of this option during their study in the U.S., but they must be done at different education levels.

What is the Form I-983 Training Plan for STEM OPT Students? The Form I-983 is the key component of the 24-month STEM OPT Extension. It is used by the employer and student to outline the student's training plan and for self-evaluations. Specifically, it is used to identify goals for the practical training, including "specific knowledge, skills or techniques that will be imparted to the student, and explain how those goals will be achieved through the work-based learning opportunity with the employer; describe a performance evaluation process; and describe methods of oversight and supervision." Students engaging in this option must fill out this form with their employer and submit it to an OIA student advisor/DSO for review and approval before applying for the extension. See [Study in the States](#) for more information.

What kind of work can students do while on OPT? Students on pre-completion and post completion OPT may have regular paid employment, self-employment, volunteer work, internships, work for hire, employment through an agency, or multiple short-term employment. Work should be at least for 20 hours per week to be considered employment.

With STEM OPT, there must be a bona fide employer-employee relationship between the student and the employer, work may not be on a volunteer basis and must be at least 20 hours per week. In all cases, students should keep evidence (employment letters, contract agreements) and lists of all work, as well as, length of employment.

How long may students work on OPT? All students who have completed their degree or for graduate students who have completed their coursework and are only working on their thesis are granted a maximum of 12 months per education level. Some students with degrees in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields are allowed two extensions of 24 months at different education levels.


When can students apply for OPT? Students may apply for pre-completion OPT up to 90 days before the employment start date provided that the 1 academic year enrollment requirement has been met. Students may apply for post-completion OPT up to 90 days prior to graduation (completion of program or program end date), but no later than 60 days after the program end date on the I-20. For example, a student who will graduate May 12th, may apply as early as February 11th (90 days before graduation) with a date to begin work as early as May 13th or no later than July 12th (60 days after graduation). Students applying for STEM OPT must apply before the expiration of their current post-completion OPT, but no sooner than 90 days before that date; and no later than 60 days from the date an OIA student advisor or designated school official (DSO) recommended the STEM OPT extension in SEVIS.

When can students begin working? A student must first receive approval from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Employment Authorization Document or card (EAD) from USCIS before beginning employment. Students may begin working according to the start date on the EAD – not before.

What if a STEM OPT student changes employers?

The student must obtain a completed and signed Form I-983 Training Plan from the new employer, provide that plan to an OIA student advisor within 10 days of beginning the new training opportunity, and obtain a new recommendation from the DSO.

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS ON APPLYING FOR PRE-COMPLETION OR POST-COMPLETION OPT

- 1. Attend an OPT Information Session.** Students must have attended one OPT information session by OIA to be eligible to apply for OPT.
- 2. OPT Work Authorization Start Date:** Determine a date that you want your OPT work authorization to start. For post-completion OPT, the start date must be on or after the "Program End Date" listed on your current I-20. It cannot be more than 60 days after the Program End Date. USCIS processing times for I-765 OPT applications vary but may take up to 3 months. You should consider a start date that will allow USCIS enough time to process your application and allow you to use the full 12 months of OPT. You may also use Study in the States' planning tool to figure out your start date. Look for "Post-Completion OPT Planning Tool"  on their page, [Study in the States](#).
- 3. Collect the application documents as outlined in the checklist below.**

OPT Application Checklist:

- Complete and print Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization from the USCIS website here, www.uscis.gov. Scroll down to Form Number I-765. Number 16, Eligibility Category should be (c)(3)(A) for pre-completion OPT or (c)(3)(B) for post-completion OPT. Only list 1 option. **Note:** If you currently live on campus or you anticipate moving before your EAD arrives, it is advisable to indicate OIA's address (Office of International Affairs, 1801 Fayetteville St., 102A Lee Biology Bldg.) on the section of the I-765 form "Address in the United States". You will need to write this in by hand. There is not enough room to type it into the form. If you move before your EAD arrives by mail, the post office will not forward mail from USCIS to your new address. It would be returned to USCIS which could delay receipt of your EAD for weeks. Once the EAD arrives to our office, OIA will make a copy for our records and forward your EAD to you.
- Current Official NCCU Transcript (visit the Registrar's office or website [Transcript Orders](#) for how to request a transcript)
- Copies of new I-20 with recommendation for OPT
- Copy of your valid passport photo and biographical pages showing renewal page if original has expired or changes in name or corrections, etc.
- Copy of your F-1 visa
- Copy of (both sides) of paper form I-94 OR print-out of electronic I-94 Arrival/Departure Record, if you do not have a paper form I-94. (Visit [Retrieve I-94](#) to retrieve this information)
- Copy of USCIS approval notices if there was a change to F-1 status from another immigration status, if applicable
- Copy of any previously-issued Employment Authorization Document (EAD) cards, if applicable

9. Two recent, identical photos of yourself, see specifications on I-765 instructions. <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765> Walgreens is a recommended location for purchasing passport photos. Lightly print your name on the back of the photos in pencil or felt pen.
10. Letter from academic advisor indicating current academic status (major, degree level, date of completion of studies and recommendation of Optional Practical Training (use department letterhead, see sample on page 5)
11. Completed Acknowledgement of Responsibilities While Engaging in Optional Practical Training form (see page 8)
12. Bank check or money order in the amount of \$410.00 payable to: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (do not abbreviate)
13. Address where application should be mailed:

For U.S. Postal Service (USPS) Deliveries:

USCIS
PO Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

For Express mail and courier deliveries:

USCIS
Attn: AOS
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business
Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067

5. **Call OIA (530-7912) to schedule an appointment to review your OPT application and make the OPT recommendation in SEVIS.**
6. **Bring all application documents to your OPT appointment where your information will be reviewed for eligibility.** OIA staff will not make copies of documents needed for your application. If eligible, the international student adviser will make the OPT recommendation in SEVIS and print your new I-20 for application to USCIS. OIA will mail the application to USCIS for you.

IMPORTANT: Contact OIA immediately if you will not graduate by the date indicated on your I-20 so that the appropriate action can be taken.

7. **After the Application Has Been Submitted:** Once your application for OPT is approved, you will be sent an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from USCIS giving you permission to work off campus. You may NOT begin working until the employment start date on your EAD has been reached.
8. **Send a copy of your EAD to the Office of International Affairs once you have received the EAD.**
9. **Remember to inform OIA with your employer information by completing an [OPT Employment and Address Report Form](#) as soon as you receive employment, otherwise you will accumulate unemployment days in SEVIS.** Once the employment start date on your EAD has been reached, SEVIS begins to count each day for which there is no employment information entered in your record. See the next section on how to maintain status while on OPT.

Maintaining Status While on OPT

Reporting Requirements While on Pre-Completion OPT

Students on pre-completion OPT should continue to report any changes of name and any changes of address to the OIA within 10 days. Changes should be made using the [F-1 Student Update Sheet](#).

Reporting Requirements While on Post-Completion OPT

Students who engage in OPT are still considered F-1 students and are required to report the following to OIA **within 10 days of the change for the duration of the authorized training:**

- any change of name
- change of mailing address and/or physical address and contact information (email, telephone number) within 10 days
- new employment or changes in employment as soon as possible (employment details should include: name of employer, start date, location of employer, and how the employment relates to their field of study).
- termination, interruption of employment (details should include the date the employment ended)
- changes in your immigration status
- return to your home country or departure from the U.S.
- move to another program level

Reports on any changes should be made by completing the [OPT Employment and Address Report Form](#) and submitting it electronically to OIA at blewis@ncu.edu. Forms can also be found on the OIA website.

Travel and Reentry Outside of the U.S.

You may travel outside of the U.S. temporarily (less than 5 months) and reenter provided you carry an unexpired EAD, I-20 signed by an OIA advisor for travel within the last 6 months, valid passport and F-1 visa and letter of employment, if you have one. Take caution if traveling out of the country before your OPT application has been approved, as USCIS may ask for a request for evidence (RFE) while you are away. You should make sure that the mailing address provided to OIA and USCIS is up-to-date to prevent any mail from USCIS from getting lost.

Students should complete a [Request for a Travel Signature](#) form to have your I-20 signed at least two weeks before travel. Please note that you will not be eligible to reenter the U.S. in F-1 status if you have exceeded the limits on unemployment.

After Post-Completion OPT

After OPT students may transfer to another degree program, change their status, or return home. This must be done before the end of your 60-day grace period.

SAMPLE POST-COMPLETION OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING
RECOMMENDATION LETTER FROM ACADEMIC ADVISOR

This letter **must** be printed on academic departmental letterhead

Month Day Year

USCIS
PO Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

Reference: Optional Practical Training
Student: (Student's Name)

Jane/John Doe has applied for F-1 "Optional Practical Training" work authorization through the Office of International Affairs. As Mr. /Ms. Doe's academic advisor, I can verify that he/she is enrolled and has been enrolled in a full course of study for one academic year before requesting Optional Practical Training and is expected to complete her/his studies in (insert type of degree/program) on (month/day/year). Mr. /Ms. Doe's field of study is (major/program). I understand that U S Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) permits F-1 students to gain work experience during 12 months of full-time temporary employment directly related to student's field of study.

Optional Practical Training will allow Mr. /Ms. Doe the opportunity to gain work experience in her/his field of study and enable her/him to improve employment prospects after returning home. I recommend her/him for this experience.

Sincerely,

(Sign here)

Dr. (Your name)
Title

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS ON APPLYING FOR 24-MONTH STEM OPT EXTENSION

1. Determine your eligibility for a STEM OPT extension: Eligibility for a STEM OPT extension requires a student with a STEM-qualifying bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree from an accredited, SEVIS-certified U.S. educational institution, to be in a bona-fide employer employee relationship, to be in a valid period of standard post-completion OPT, has an offer of paid employment for at least 20 hours per week from an employer enrolled in E-Verify and has an EIN number. **Check to see if your degree is listed here [DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List](#).**

2. Collect the application documents as outlined in the checklist below.

STEM OPT EXTENSION Application Checklist:

1. Completed [Form I-983](#) - completed by you and appropriate individuals from your place of employment. See Study in the States page, [I-983 Overview & Instructions](#) for instructions and tutorial on completing the form.
2. Completed [OPT Employment and Address Report Form](#)
3. Completed Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization from the USCIS website here, www.uscis.gov. Scroll down to Form Number I-765. Question #16, Eligibility Category asks for the code that reflects the type of OPT you are requesting. You should indicate (c)(3)(C) as the code. For question #17, you must indicate the degree you have received (use the CIP listed on page 1 of your I-20), the name of your employer as listed in E-Verify and their E-Verify company ID number or, if the employer is using a Designated Agent to perform the E-Verify queries, a valid #-Verify Client Company I.D. number. You will need to get this information from your employer.
4. Copy of your degree from current program

[Students Applying Based on a Prior Degree Must Also Provide]

- A copy of I-20 from prior degree showing STEM CIP code
 - Transcripts (unofficial accepted) from prior degree showing degree field, level and date of completion
5. Two recent, identical passport-size photos of yourself, see specifications on I-765 instructions. <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765> Walgreens is a recommended location for purchasing passport photos. Lightly print your name and Alien Receipt Number on the back of the photos in pencil or felt pen.
 6. Copy of (both sides) of paper form I-94 OR print-out of electronic I-94 Arrival/Departure Record, if you do not have a paper form I-94 (Visit <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov> to retrieve this information)
 7. Standard business-sized envelope holding required photos and money order/bank check. Do not seal the envelope.
 8. Copy of your current/previous EAD(s) (front and back)
 9. Completed Acknowledgement of Responsibilities While Engaging in Optional Practical Training form (see page 8)
 10. Check or money order for \$410.00 made out to the "U.S. Department of Homeland Security." Do not abbreviate.
 11. Address where application should be mailed:

For U.S. Postal Service (USPS) Deliveries:

USCIS
PO Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

For Express mail and courier deliveries:

USCIS
Attn: AOS
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business
Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067

3. Submit your application to OIA either in person or by mail. Applications must be submitted to OIA for review at least **3 weeks** before the expiration of your current post-completion OPT, but no earlier than 90 days before that date. OIA will process your I-20 with the recommendation for a STEM OPT extension and return the OPT extension application to you for mailing to USCIS within 5 business days.

4. After you receive your I-20 with the recommendation for STEM OPT Extension, mail your complete application to USCIS within 60 days, which includes:

- Form I-765
- Copy of I-20 with STEM OPT recommendation (provide only a copy; keep original I-20 with your other original I-20s)
- Copy of degree
- Two photos & check (make sure to sign it)
- I-94 print-out
- copy of your current/previous EAD(s) (front and back)

IMPORTANT: The 24-month OPT extension begins on the day after the expiration of the initial post-completion OPT employment authorization and ends 24 months thereafter, regardless of the date the actual extension is approved.

If you change employers, you must obtain a completed and signed Form I-983 Training Plan from the new employer, provide that plan to an OIA student advisor within 10 days of beginning the new training opportunity, and obtain a new recommendation from the DSO. The employment must meet all conditions for STEM OPT Extension. See Frequently Asked Questions for the conditions for STEM OPT Extension.

Maintaining Status While on OPT

Reporting Requirements While on 24-Month STEM OPT Extension

Students

Regular reporting requirements - Throughout the entire period of STEM OPT Extension, you must report the following, within 10 days of the change:

- Full legal name
- Current mailing and physical/residential addresses
- When you stop working for an employer
- When you start working for a new qualifying employer
- Changes in your immigration status
- Return to your home country or leaving the U.S.
- Move to another program level

Validation report submitted for SEVIS every 6 months (3 total reports - 6, 12 and 18 months) within 10 business days that includes:

- Full legal name
- SEVIS identification number (if requested by the school)
- Current mailing and physical/residential address
- Name and address of the current employer
- Date the student began working for the current employer (Even if no there are no changes, students must still report to OIA that there are no changes.)

Students and employers are expected to comply with all attestations made in completion of the I-983, including the following:

I-983 Self-evaluations

- An initial evaluation due within 12 months of the STEM OPT extension start recorded on Form I-983
- A final evaluation due no later than 10 days after the end of the reporting period or the end of any employment

Material Changes to I-983

- When there has been a material change to the training plan described on the Form I-983 on file with OIA, you and your employer must submit a modified Form I-983 to OIA "at the earliest available opportunity."

Reports on any changes should be made by completing the [OPT Employment and Address Report Form](#) and submitting it electronically to OIA at blewis@nccu.edu. Please request this form from OIA to be emailed to you.

Employers

Employers are required to report to the DSO listed on the I-983 when a student on STEM OPT Extension is terminated by the employer or the student quits or leaves his or her employment before the end of the 24-month period. This must be reported within 5 business days.

DHS Site Visits

DHS, at its discretion, may initiate and conduct site visits of the STEM OPT employer. A 48-hour notice will be given unless fraud, complaints or non-compliance of the regulations is suspected.

Travel and Reentry Outside of the U.S.

You may travel outside of the U.S. temporarily (less than 5 months) and reenter while on STEM OPT extension provided you carry an I-20 with the recommendation for the extension and it is signed by an OIA advisor for travel within the last 6 months, valid passport and F-1 visa which allows multiple entries. This applies also if you have a pending STEM OPT extension application with USCIS.

Students should complete a [Request for a Travel Signature](#) form to have your I-20 signed at least two weeks before travel. Please note that you will not be eligible to reenter the U.S. in F-1 status if you have exceeded the limits on unemployment.

After STEM OPT Extension

After OPT students may transfer to another degree program, change their status, or return home. This must be done before the end of your 60-day grace period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES WHILE ENGAGING IN OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

Please read and sign this page in acknowledgement that you have read the *Optional Practical Training (OPT) Instruction Guide* and understand your responsibilities below while engaging in OPT. Please print this page and bring it to your OPT appointment.

As a student engaged in OPT, you are still considered an F-1 student and have the following responsibilities:

- To not exceed the limit for unemployment, which is 90 days for standard OPT and 150 days for 24-month STEM Extension OPT (applied to the whole 36 months)
- To report the following to the Office of International Affairs for the duration of your time in OPT:
 - any change of your name
 - change of address (physical and mailing addresses) within 10 days of moving and contact information (email, telephone number)
 - new employment or change in employment (employment details should include: name of employer, start date, location/address of employer, and how your employment relates to your field of study)
 - termination, interruption of employment (details should include the end date of your employment)
 - changes in your immigration status
 - return to your home country or departure from the U.S.
 - move to another program level

6-month Reporting Requirement for Students on the 24-month STEM OPT Extension:

- In addition to the requirements above, you must also report your mailing and physical address, name of your OPT employer and employer's address to OIA **every 6 months** from the date your 24-month extension begins until your F-1 status ends, you change educational levels at NCCU, transfer to another school, or the 24-month extension ends, whichever is first.

As a student engaged in the 24-month STEM OPT Extension, you are expected to comply with all attestations made in completion of the I-983, including the following:

- I-983 Self-evaluations
 - An initial evaluation due within 12 months of the STEM OPT extension start recorded on Form I-983
 - A final evaluation due no later than 10 days after the end of the reporting period or the end of any employment
- Material Changes to I-983
 - When there has been a material change to the training plan described on the Form I-983 on file with OIA, you and your employer must submit a modified Form I-983 to OIA "at the earliest available opportunity."

Reports on any changes should be made by completing the [OPT Employment and Address Report Form](#) and submitting it electronically to OIA at blewis@ncsu.edu. Please request this form from OIA to be emailed to you.

I have read and understand the above requirements for F-1 students engaged in OPT and that these requirements are federal regulations. By signing below, I indicate my agreement and understanding of all the above.

Printed Name

Signature

Date