

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

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. Part-time OPT is deducted from the 12 month total at a rate of 50%. For example, if you use 6 months of part-time OPT before graduation, then this is equivalent to using 3 months of full-time OPT. You will need to file a new application and pay the fee for each period of OPT that you request.

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.

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

You may request work authorization to begin no later than 60 days after your program end date. All OPT must be completed within 14 months following completion of study.

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.

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

The USCIS office has stated that in order for you 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, as noted on the practical training endorsement on your visa document, has already begun. Contact the International Student Advisor with assistance in requesting an interim EAD card.

I lost my EAD card, how do I get a new one?

You will need to apply for a new card again. You will need to submit a copy of your original application as well as a new application fee. If you have a copy of your lost EAD card, you should submit this as well. You may continue working with the same company while your request is being processed.

Can I travel while on OPT/pending OPT?

In general, an F-1 student on 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, and must present the following:

- A valid passport with unexpired F-1 visa stamp
- Form I-20, endorsed on the bottom of page 3 by the International Student Advisor **within the preceding 6 months**
- An unexpired EAD
- Proof of employment or employment offer (letter from your employer on letterhead)

Pending OPT Travel: If your OPT application is still 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, you should have the Notice of Action receipt for your OPT application in place of the EAD. Traveling without this Notice of Action or the EAD is risky.

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:

Most common employment for CIIS students:

- **Paid employment**
Students may work part time (at least 20 hours per week when on post-completion OPT) or full time.
- **Multiple employers**
Students may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student's degree program.
- **Unpaid employment**
Students on the initial 12-month OPT may work as volunteers or unpaid interns, where this does not violate any labor laws. The work must average at least 20 hours per week. 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 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.

Not common or not available employment for CIIS students:

- **Self-employed business owner**
Students may start a business and be self-employed. In this situation, the student must work full-time (at least 40 hours/week). 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.
- **Employment through an agency**
Students must be able to provide evidence showing they worked an average of at least 20 hours per week while employed by the agency.
- **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.

Address/ employer reporting requirements while on OPT

Changes and updates of the following information must be reported to the International Student Advisor during the OPT period of authorization via email:

- Your name
- Your residential address
- Your phone and email address
- Employer name
- Employer address
- Start date of employment
- More than 10 days of unemployment (During the 12-month OPT, students may not accrue a cumulative total of more than 90 days of unemployment. Periods of up to 10 days between the end of one job and the beginning of the next job **will not be included** in the calculation for the time spent unemployed.)
- Date of exiting the U.S., particularly if you are departing and ending your OPT.

You are required to update this information within **10 working days of any changes.**

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 authorized for 12 months of OPT must not be unemployed for more than 90 days cumulative.

Unemployment while on OPT?

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, 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 this time).

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.
- If a student travels while employed either during a period of leave authorized by an employer or as part of their employment, the time spent outside the United States will not count as unemployment.

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.

Can I take class while on OPT?

Since you are expected to be actively searching for full-time employment or actually 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 an I-20 from the new 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.

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

F-1 visa holders are exempt from paying FICA Taxes, Social Security and Medicare, for a limited time. However, they are subjected to federal taxes, and state/local taxes, if applicable. 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.

Check Your Application Status online at: <https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp>, or by calling 1-800-375-5283. You will need to have your 13-character application receipt number. It is a 10 digit number preceded by the letters "WAC."

Stay in touch—We'd love to hear what you're up to!

CIIS Alumni Office—www.ciis.edu.