



University at Buffalo
The State University of New York

Office of International Education
International Student and Scholar Services

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR F-1 STUDENTS

What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training is an F-1 student benefit granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). It allows you to work off-campus in a job related to your major area of study. It is meant to supplement your academic experience with practical experience.

Who is eligible for OPT?

To be eligible for Optional Practical Training, you must document that:

- you are currently in valid F-1 status AND
- you have legally been a full-time student for at least one full academic year (two semesters)

When can I use OPT?

Optional Practical Training may be used during any of the following situations (or combination of the following situations):

- a. during the semester (up to 20 hours per week)**
- b. during annual vacation periods (summer and winter breaks)**
- c. after completion of all course requirements for the degree, while working on the thesis or dissertation (full-time only)**
- d. after completion of study (full-time only)**

How long is OPT authorized for?

Optional Practical Training may be authorized for a total of 12 months (of full-time OPT) AND must be completed within 14 months following completion of your course of study.

- Any Optional Practical Training authorization you receive is subtracted from your total 12-month period.
For example: A student who is authorized for 3 months of full-time OPT during the summer will have only 9 months of OPT remaining.
- Any part-time OPT (20 hours per week or less) is deducted at the rate of one day of practical training for every two part-time days of OPT authorized.
For example: A student who is authorized for 4 months of part-time OPT during the semester will have 10 months of full-time OPT remaining.

PLEASE NOTE: You become eligible to apply for another 12 months of practical training if you change to a higher degree level and meet the above requirements again.

When should I apply for OPT ?

- We **RECOMMEND** that you apply for OPT **between 90-120 days prior** to your requested employment “Start Date” (***90-120 days before the day you wish to begin working***) to allow sufficient time for USCIS processing and background checks.
- The **DEADLINE** for applying for OPT is your “**course of study completion date.**” At UB, we define this date as your **degree conferral date.**

What is my "course of study completion date"? At UB, your "course of study completion date" is the degree conferral date **immediately following** the last fall or spring semester or summer session during which you fulfilled requirements for your degree. Degree conferral dates at UB are February 1st, June 1st and September 1st.

What if I will finish my thesis, project or dissertation in the summer? If you complete your thesis, project or dissertation in the summer but do not register for classes during the summer, you must submit to ISSS a letter from your advisor or Director of Graduate Studies verifying that you are still working towards your degree and detailing the nature of the work that you are completing. In such cases, the September 1st conferral date will be your course of study completion date.

What if I finish during the spring (or fall) semester but miss the deadline to apply for the next conferral date? If you actually complete your studies during the spring semester but miss the deadline to apply for the June 1st conferral date, your course of study completion date for purposes of the OPT application (i.e. your deadline for OPT) will be June 1st and not your actual conferral date. If you actually complete your studies during the fall semester but miss the deadline to apply for February 1st conferral date, your deadline for your OPT application will be February 1st, not your actual conferral date.

- **PLEASE NOTE:** Your application must be **received by the USCIS Service Center PRIOR to your course of study completion date.** If your OPT application is received by the USCIS Service Center after your course of study completion date, **you will LOSE YOUR OPT BENEFIT.** To meet this deadline, you must submit your documents to ISSS at least 2 weeks before your course of study completion date.

What if I want to apply for OPT before I've completed a full academic year as a full-time student?

You may submit your application up to 90 days prior to being enrolled for one full academic year, provided that the period of employment will not begin until the completion of the full academic year.

How do I apply for OPT?

1. Submit an OPT application and supporting documents (see below) to ISSS.
2. When your application is complete, ISSS will enter your OPT application into the SEVIS system, which will produce a new I-20 with the OPT recommendation.
3. Pick up your endorsed documents from ISSS.
4. Submit an application and supporting documents for an **Employment Authorization Document (“EAD Card”)** to the USCIS Service Center.
5. Receive your EAD card in the mail from the USCIS.

What do I bring to ISSS?

To apply for Optional Practical Training, submit the following to ISSS, 210 Talbert Hall:

- International Student Data Form (*attached*)
- Form I-765 (*attached*)
- Form I-538 (*attached*) with section A (only) completed:
 - (#3) The “Student Admission Number” is the 11-digit number on your I-94 card, **not** your 8-digit UB person number.
 - (#4) The “Date first granted F-1 status” is **the date you first entered** the U.S. as an F-1 student (or the date your Change of Status to F-1 was approved). This date should be stamped on your first I-20. It is **not** the date your F-1 visa was issued.
 - (#7) If you do not know yet where you will work, you should write: “I plan to seek employment in the field of (your major).”
For “beginning date” and “ending date” you should write the dates that you would like to work (e.g. 08/01/2007 – 07/31/2008). *Please keep in mind possible delays in USCIS processing when choosing a “beginning date.”*
- Academic Advisor's Letter (*samples attached*)
- For any semester during which you were registered for fewer than 12 credit hours (or 9 credits with an Assistantship), you must have “Certification of Full-Time Status”

ISSS will enter your OPT application into the SEVIS system and produce a SEVIS I-20 with a recommendation on page 3 for Optional Practical Training. **Processing time at ISSS is 2-5 business days.**

What do I send to the USCIS?

Mail the following to the USCIS:

- Original Form I-765
- **Application fee of \$340.** *This should be a check (from a U.S. bank) or a money order payable to the “Department of Homeland Security.”* Write the 11-digit number from your I-94 card on your check or money order. Don't forget to sign and date the check.
- **Photocopy** of your current SEVIS I-20 – page 1 and page 3 (*with OPT recommendation on page 3*)
- Photocopies of **pages 1 and 3 of all previous I-20's (PHOTOCOPIES only—do not send ORIGINAL I-20's)**

- Photocopies of your current, valid passport (biographic and photo pages) and U.S. visa stamp page in your passport
- Photocopy of the front and back of your I-94 Card
- Two (2) identical natural color photographs of yourself, taken within 30 days of this application. Please see attached specifications for the photos. **In pencil, please write your name and I-94 number lightly on the back of your photos.*
- We recommend that you have your photos taken at the:
 - UB Law Library, 211 O'Brian Hall (Tel. 645-2204) (Specify that you need photos for an OPT application)
 - International Institute, 864 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14209 (Tel. 883-1900)
 - AAA, 100 International Drive, Williamsville, NY 14221 (Tel. 633-3480).

Be sure to photocopy your entire OPT application for your personal records.

Where do I send my OPT application?

Send your application to: **U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services
Vermont Service Center
Attn. I-765
75 Lower Welden Street
St. Albans, VT 05479-0001**

PLEASE NOTE: *If your mailing address in item #3 on Form I-765 is not in New York State, please contact ISSS regarding where to send your OPT application.*

How should I mail my OPT application?

You should mail your complete application by a **reliable, overnight mail delivery service** (e.g. Airborne Express, Federal Express) to the USCIS Service Center that has jurisdiction over the address you listed in item #3 on Form I-765. Utilizing an overnight mail service will enable you to track your mailed application and its delivery. Please save your receipt.

How long is the OPT application process?

Processing time at the USCIS is estimated to be 6-12 weeks. However, processing times vary widely depending on the time of year and the workload at the Service Center to which you send your application. You can check the USCIS website for current processing times: <https://egov.immigration.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp> **You cannot begin employment until you have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from the USCIS and the “start date” becomes effective.**

After I receive my EAD card, what should I do?

- **You must give a photocopy of your EAD card to ISSS for your file.**
- **You must continue to report** any change of name and any change of address to ISSS within 10 days of your move.

If my application for OPT is pending at the USCIS Service Center, can I travel outside the U.S. and then re-enter the U.S.?

YES. While your **OPT application is pending at the USCIS, you may re-enter the U.S.** to search for employment. Remember, you must have a valid F-1 visa, valid passport and recent signature on page 3 of your SEVIS I-20. To avoid problems at the border, we recommend that you return to the U.S. before the expiration date on your I-20.

If I travel outside the U.S. after my OPT application was approved by the USCIS, can I re-enter the U.S.?

ONLY IF YOU HAVE A JOB. If your OPT has been **APPROVED**, you **DEPART** the U.S. **BEFORE** you get a job but **AFTER** the expiration date on your I-20, then your OPT is terminated and you **CANNOT** re-enter the U.S. If you have a job or a job offer, you **MAY** travel and re-enter the U.S. to work at your job.

What documents should I bring when I re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?

If you travel while you are on OPT after your completion of studies, you **must** have the following documents in order to re-enter the U.S.:

- A **current letter from your employer on employer's letterhead** verifying your OPT employment
- A valid EAD card
- Your SEVIS I-20 with the OPT recommendation on page 3
- A signature from ISSS on page 3 of your I-20 signed within the last 6 months
- Originals of all previous I-20's
- Valid F-1 visa
- Valid passport

PLEASE REMEMBER:

- **EADs are not forwarded to new addresses by the U.S. Post Office.** Therefore, you must be certain that the address you list in item #3 of Form I-765 is (and will be) your address when your application is processed.
- Employment may not begin **until the EAD is received.** Of course, you may only work during the validity dates of your EAD card.
- The EAD for Optional Practical Training will allow you to work only in a job related to your major area of study.
- Once authorized, you may accept employment anywhere in the United States.
- If you transfer to another school or begin study at another educational level, then your OPT authorization will be automatically terminated.
- While you are on OPT, you must notify ISSS of any change of address within 10 days of your move. Please e-mail your new address to intlservices@buffalo.edu.
- While you are on OPT, you must get your I-20 signed every six months.

