F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is OPT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment authorization for which F-1 students may qualify. OPT employment must be related to the F-1 student’s major(s). Unlike Curricular Practical Training (CPT), the work done does not count towards course credit. OPT employment may be completed either during one’s degree program or after completion of degree requirements.

Pre-Completion OPT: Pre-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is employment authorized before the completion of a student’s program of study. It is seldom used because Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is more advantageous.

Post-Completion OPT: Post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is employment authorized to begin after a student’s successful completion of studies and program end date.

STEM Extension: Students who graduate with a qualified Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) degree, and are currently in an approved post-completion OPT period based on a designated STEM degree may apply*** for a 24-month STEM extension of their post-completion OPT.

Prerequisites and Eligibility

- You must have been enrolled in full-time status for one academic year preceding the OPT application.
- You must be in valid F-1 status at the time of application.
- If you are applying for OPT based on graduation, USCIS must receive your OPT application within 60 days after your official completion/graduation date. You may apply any time within 90 days prior to your completion/graduation date.

  It is imperative that you apply as early as possible!

- A student may be approved for up to a total of 12 months of OPT.
- *** A STEM Extension allows qualifying STEM majors to receive an additional 24-month extension (for a total of 36 months), if the employer is an E-Verified.
- Students are eligible for 12 months of OPT for every degree level that they complete.

Job Offers and Unemployment

- It is not necessary to have an offer of employment to apply for OPT. However, while on OPT, you have to be working or actively looking for a job.
  - Being unemployed for over 90 (cumulative) days while on OPT may jeopardize your F-1 status. Periods of up to 10 days between the end of one job and beginning of the next job are NOT included in the calculation for time spent unemployed.
HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO RECEIVE EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION?
The application process takes approximately 2-3 months from the time the application is mailed. (This is for both initial applications and renewals.) However, if there are any complications with the application, it may take longer. For current USCIS processing times, please check the USCIS website.
• For Spring graduates: Plan to apply between February - April
• For Fall graduates: Plan to apply between September - November

Travel While on OPT

TRAVEL WHILE OPT IS PENDING
When your OPT application is still pending, do not travel outside the US between the date you submitted your OPT application and the date you complete your studies or graduation date. If you have completed your studies and your OPT application has not been approved, it is not advisable to travel outside of the United States. USCIS may request additional information regarding your application, which may be difficult to provide from abroad. You will also be required to have your EAD card in hand if your OPT application is approved while you are travelling. Please speak to an ISSS advisor if you plan to travel outside of the U.S. while your OPT application is pending.

WHAT DO I NEED TO RE-ENTER THE UNITED STATES WHILE ON OPT?
• Valid passport
• Valid F-1 visa (please plan accordingly if you need to get your visa renewed!)
• Valid Form I-20 endorsed for travel re-entry (page 2 signed by a DSO within the past 6 months!)
• Valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD card)
• Verification of employment or job offer letter from your employer, ideally showing your employment to be in the authorized field of study
  o If you do not have a job at the time of re-entry, you may be asked to provide documentation that shows your active job search. ISSS advises that you travel with copies of emails related to your job search, interview confirmations, letters of job offers, resumes, etc.
    ▪ In some cases it is best not to travel until after your OPT is completed or until you have found employment or changed to another nonimmigrant status such as H-1B.

Reporting Requirements
During OPT, you are still in F-1 nonimmigrant status, and your SEVIS record will still be maintained through Trinity University. Please report to ISSS within ten days any change of employer, loss of job, change in your address, phone number, or email address.

Please use our OPT Update e-form for reporting any changes.

Additional Information
• Students applying for OPT may not start employment until they have received the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card and are only allowed to begin working on or after the date specified on the EAD card.
• Once OPT has been granted and an accurate EAD is issued, the dates of employment authorization may not be changed.
  o Requested dates may be changed by the adjudicator (USCIS) – abide by the dates listed on the EAD
• Students on OPT are allowed to work for more than one employer or change employers, provided that the new job is directly related to the student’s major area of study.
Paid/unpaid work as well as volunteer work can qualify as OPT employment.

It is recommended that students on OPT keep a detailed record of each employer’s contact information, job titles, duties performed, and dates of employment.

**Tracking the Application Process**

The Trinity ISSS Office will mail your application via U.S. Postal Service Priority Mail to USCIS Service Center at no additional charge to you.

**HOW CAN I FOLLOW THE PROGRESS OF MY OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING APPLICATION?**

- The first sign that USCIS has received and is processing your application is the cashing of your cashier’s check. *Please check on the status of your cashier’s check, and if has not cleared within six weeks, contact our office immediately.*
- USCIS will mail a **Notice of Action (Form I-797)** to Trinity University International Student and Scholar Services Office (address listed on the Form I-765). You can then use the receipt number (located in the left upper corner of Notice of Action Form) to check on a pending employment authorization case with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). We will provide a scanned copy of the Notice of Action for your record keeping purposes after we receive it. Check on the status of your application:
  - **online**: https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do
  - **by phone** - call 1 (800) 375-5283, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) toll-free for automated information and live assistance

**WHEN YOU RECEIVE YOUR EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION DOCUMENT (EAD CARD)**

- After your EAD card is received by the ISSS office, you will be immediately notified via email and/or by phone.
  - You can either pick the card up in person or arrange for it to be mailed to you at your own cost.
  - We suggest that you use a traceable shipment provider such as DHL, FedEx or AirConcepts if mailing your card and provide the ISSS with a prepaid pre addressed scanned or original mailing label or waybill.

  *When your EAD card is received, please check it for any errors. It may be necessary for us to resubmit it for correction.*

**Selecting a Start Date**

- The OPT card is approved for a specific beginning and ending date.
- You are required to submit a preferred start date for your OPT card at the time of application:
  - OPT employment must be completed within fourteen months of your graduation/completion date
    - Select a start date within 60 days of your graduation date!
  - When OPT authorization is received, the time requested is used up whether you are employed or not.
    - For example, if work dates requested are 05/12/2014 - 05/12/2015, but you don’t start working until 08/12/2014, your work authorization will still expire on 05/12/2015.
  - It is helpful to consult a calendar when selecting a start date so that you do not select a start date in which your employer will not be open or a national holiday
CHECKLIST OF ITEMS TO BRING TO ISSS:

☐ Cashier’s Check or money order for $410.00 payable to the US Department of Homeland Security

☐ Two Passport-style photos on white background taken within six months of your OPT application. Your name and I-94 number must be printed lightly in pen on the back of the photos.

Photo must be 2 inches by 2 inches. The Height of the head (top of hair to bottom of chin) should measure 1 inch to 1 3/8 inches (25 mm - 35 mm). Make sure the eye height is between 1 1/8 inches to 1 3/8 inches (28 mm – 35 mm) from the bottom of the photo.

☐ Letter from the Office of the Registrar to verify expected graduation or completion of course requirements.

(If you have more than one major, please be sure to indicate in your request that you would like both majors to be listed on this letter!)

☐ Please email Eve Christoffersen (echristo@trinity.edu) directly for the graduation letter.

☐ All previous I-20’s

☐ All passport identity pages (passport and F-1 visa)

☐ Any previous Employment Authorization Documents (EAD cards) (when applicable)

ITEMS TO BE COMPLETED AT ISSS:


☐ Completed Form I-765. (A sample post-graduation OPT form is available here. You can also download the form from the following USCIS webpage: https://www.oas.org/en/protocol/pdf/forms/i-765.pdf

   ▪ Section 16 codes:
     ▪ Pre-completion OPT: (C)(3)(A)
     ▪ Post-completion OPT: (C)(3)(B)
     ▪ STEM Extension: (C)(3)(C)

   ▪ It is important that you list our office’s address as your current address:
     Trinity University
     International Student & Scholar Services
     One Trinity Place, Box 100
     San Antonio, TX 78212-7200

   ▪ STEM APPLICANTS ONLY: Please include your employer’s E-Verify Number

☐ Print out of your electronic I-94 record and travel history. To obtain your electronic I-94 record and travel history, you must use this Website: https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov

☐ Submit a preferred start date for your OPT period to the ISSS Advisor

   ▪ (Must be within 60 days of your graduation date for regular OPT!)

☐ STEM APPLICANTS ONLY: A copy of your diploma and submit form I-983 to ISSS prior to submitting application.

FROM ISSS:
(Will be completed by the ISSS advisor after student has submitted all materials and information listed above)

☐ Original signed I-20 with OPT recommendation (will be made for you upon submitting your OPT packet to ISSS - you will keep 1 original and the other original will be mailed with your OPT application)

☐ Signed OPT Reporting Requirements form (you will obtain this for your personal records)