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What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

1. What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field of study (not your minor or concentration). OPT is authorized by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). ***This authorization may take three (3) to five (5) months to obtain.*** The maximum amount of time granted to work on F-1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible H1-B cap-gap extension *OR* a 24-month STEM extension for those who qualify.

2. What are the eligibility requirements for OPT?

To be eligible to apply for OPT, you must:

- have been a full-time enrolled student in the U.S. for at least one academic year by the requested start date of your OPT
- be in valid F-1 status when you apply

3. What documents do I need to apply for OPT?

- [I-765](#), Application for Employment Authorization
- [G-1145](#), E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance
- Personal check or money order made out to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
 - If paying by credit card, submit [G-1450](#), Authorization for Credit Card Transactions
- [I-94](#), Arrival/Departure form
- Copy of your passport
- Copy of your current visa
- Copy of **all** previous I-20s
- Copy of signed OPT I-20
- Copy of any previous Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

4. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?

Authorization for OPT is granted by USCIS and can take three (3) to five (5) months to get approved. Therefore, it is important that you apply early to avoid delays in your work start date. You may apply for POST-completion OPT up to (but not more than) 90 days before your completion date. In addition, USCIS ***must receive*** your application ***no later than*** 30 days beyond



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the **issue date** on the I-20 (the issue date is on the lower part of the I-20) **and** no more than 60 days beyond the end date of your I-20.

5. Do I need to have a job to apply for OPT?

You do NOT need to have a job offer before applying for the first 12 months of OPT. If you are applying for the STEM extension, you DO need to have a job to apply.

6. Do I need to have a job while I am on OPT?

Yes. The regulations require that you do have employment while on your POST-completion OPT period. You are only allowed to have a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT or 150 days if you apply for and receive the 24-month STEM Extension. While on POST-completion OPT, you MUST update your employment information by emailing your DSO at ebaldwin@sfc.edu or by reporting it yourself through the SEVP Portal.

7. Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?

For the first twelve months of OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed (including performance majors with regular “gigs”), interning, or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of regular OPT employment. If you are “self-employed,” keep careful records of all the work you do—it must be at least 20 hours per week. While on the 24-month STEM Extension, you must be paid, and you must have a regular employer—employee relationship with the employer (no temp agencies, no self-employment, no independent contracting).

8. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)?

No. You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS; working before practical training has been authorized by USCIS constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

9. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study at a higher level, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?



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Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of OPT after changing to a higher degree level and completing a full academic year of enrollment at the higher degree level.

10. Do I have to use all 12 months of my OPT at once?

No. You may use it in “chunks” of time. For example, if you obtain one bachelor’s degree and plan on returning to school for another bachelor’s degree, you may choose to divide your 12 months of OPT two ways--maybe six months for the first bachelor’s degree and six months for a second bachelor’s degree. If you are interested in doing this, speak with your international student advisor.

11. Can I participate in OPT while still in school?

You can. However, if you have obtained off-campus employment (internship) while still in school, this would most likely fall under Curricular Practical Training (CPT). Speak with your international student advisor if you are interested in CPT.

12. Do I have to do anything with SFC International while I am on OPT?

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on POST-completion OPT, you MUST report your employment and address information to St. Francis College by emailing your DSO at ebaldwin@sfc.edu or reporting it through the SEVP portal.

12. Can I extend my OPT after the initial 12 months?

There are two types of extensions available:

- 24-month STEM Extension for those in certain fields (discussed below)
- “H-1B Cap-Gap Extension” which extends your work authorization through to the start of your cap subject H-1B visa if your OPT ends after your cap subject company has applied for an H-1B for you but before the H-1B starts on the following October 1st. This cap-gap extension is available to all F-1 students using OPT in any field, as long as you have a pending or approved “cap subject” H-1B application and the employer applied for you with a request for change of status as part of the application. The extension is automatic, you do not have to do anything at all to get the extension. “Cap Subject” refers to any H-1B application that must be counted against the quota on H-1B applications.



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24-MONTH STEM EXTENSION

1. What is the 24-month STEM Extension?

The “24-month STEM Extension” allows F-1 students on OPT who have received a degree in certain fields of study, referred to as “STEM” fields (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics), to apply for an extension of their initial 12-month OPT period. The 24-month STEM Extension will allow students to have extended work authorization in case they do not get an H-1B visa in their first year after graduating or want to work in their field of study for an additional two years after completing their initial 12 months of post-completion OPT. Students who timely file (only can be filed 90 days before the end of your initial post-completion OPT) an application for the 24-month STEM Extension will be able to continue employment while the extension application is pending, until a final decision on the I-765 or for 180 days, whichever comes first.

2. I think I qualify, how do I apply for the 24-month STEM Extension?

More information here: www.sfc.edu/studentlife/iss/employment

1. Students graduating with degrees in these fields will first apply for the initial 12-month post-completion OPT as usual.

2. WITHIN 90 days before the end of your initial 12-month post-completion OPT: If you meet the following criteria, you can apply through ISPS for the 24-month STEM Extension.

Criteria for the 24-month STEM Extension:

- Your employer must be enrolled in the “E-Verify” program (see information links below).
- You must have graduated in and be working in one of the fields listed below referred to as “STEM” fields
- You must have maintained legal status while on OPT
- You and your employer MUST complete Form I-983 “training plan” and present this completed form to ISPS:

<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/I-983.pdf>

3. What are the “STEM” fields?

See the [STEM Designated Degree Program List](#).



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4. What is “E-Verify”?

E-Verify is an Internet-based system operated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA). E-Verify is currently free to employers and is available in all 50 states. E-Verify provides an automated link to federal databases to help employers determine employment eligibility of new hires and the validity of their Social Security numbers. More information is available at: www.e-verify.gov

5. Are there any other requirements while I am on the 24-month STEM Extension?

In addition to filling out the OPT report form for changes in address or employment, students on the STEM extension will have to complete a report to the school every six months. You will report to us by emailing your DSO at ebaldwin@sfc.edu

TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

Documents REQUIRED for re-entry	Before completing program	After completing program and before OPT approved by USCIS	After completing program and after OPT approved by USCIS
<i>Valid passport</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>Valid F-1 visa</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>I-20 with valid travel signature</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>OPT receipt (I-797)</i>		✓	✓
<i>Letter from employer</i>			✓
<i>EAD (OPT) card</i>			✓

1. Now that I’ve turned in my application, can I travel outside the US while I wait for the EAD to arrive?

After you graduate, in order to re-enter the U.S. you must have the following:

- EAD card (or receipt notice for the OPT application)
- your valid passport
- a valid F-1 visa stamp
- I-20 signed within the last six months



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- your job offer letter or proof of employment

Before you graduate, you should be able to get back into the U.S. without the EAD card as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation (at least one month). If you are within a month of the end date of your I-20, be prepared to show all the documents you would need for OPT (listed above and in number 3 below).

2. I want to leave the US for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card arrives. I have a tourist visa (B-2) that is valid for 10 years. Can I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?

NO! If you intend to continue working on your OPT, NEVER enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the US and re-enter with a B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status and your OPT will be invalid!

3. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?

- You will need your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by ISS within the last 6 months
- the EAD card from the USCIS (or the receipt notice for your OPT application)
- your valid passport
- a valid F-1 visa stamp
- your job offer letter or proof of employment

4. What if I have applied for the STEM extension but I have not yet received the card, can I travel out of the U.S.?

You are allowed to travel outside of the US while awaiting your STEM EAD card. You will enter with:

- the I-20 showing the STEM recommendation
- your job offer letter
- the receipt notice for the STEM extension
- the valid F-1 visa stamp

5. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?



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If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on:

- your expired F-1 visa stamp
- your I-94 card or print out
- a valid passport
- your EAD card (or receipt notice)
- an I-20 that has been signed by ISPS within the last 6 months
- your job offer letter or proof of employment as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa while in Canada and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, or North Korea

If you are traveling elsewhere, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. Please come in to ISS to discuss your visa application with an advisor as the consulates often change the requirements for visa applications for students on OPT.

6. In what ways is my application to the Embassy for a new visa affected by being on Optional Practical Training?

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for OPT is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the consular officer is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. It is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate non-immigrant intent. Please see your international student advisor to discuss in more detail.

7. What documents do I need to show at the Embassy for a new visa under OPT?

- a valid passport
- the EAD or receipt notice for your application
- an I-20 created by ISS for your OPT application
- your job offer letter or proof of employment

The official job offer letter should sound temporary and not permanent. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

Check the Embassy or Consulate where you will be applying for additional documents, if needed.



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8. Do I still need a travel signature on my I-20 signed by ISPS during OPT?

Yes, during the OPT year, if you travel outside the U.S, you need to have your OPT I-20 signed every six (6) months. If you are not located in the New York area, mail the original I-20 to ISPS for endorsement, leaving plenty of time for mailing delays both ways.

9. Do I have to work in New York City on OPT?

No! You may work anywhere in the United States of America. It's a big country with many unique places. If you are interested, apply to jobs in other states.