

# Reference Guide for Optional Practical Training (OPT) International Engagement University of Central Arkansas

**What is OPT?** OPT is a benefit of the F-1 visa program for students who meet the requirements for the benefit. Optional Practical Training provides an opportunity for students to receive on-the-job training and experience in their degree field at companies or organizations in the United States and its territories.

## Who can apply for OPT?

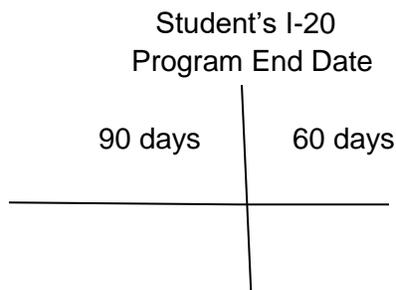
F-1 students must have been/be undertaking degree or post-baccalaureate program of study. Intensive English Program students who do not continue on for degree study are not eligible for OPT. Student may only apply for OPT one time per education level. For example, you may not apply for OPT at the end of your second bachelor's degree if you were approved for OPT at the end of your first bachelor's degree.

F-1 students must have completed at least one academic year (two semesters) of degree or post-baccalaureate work before the requested start date of the OPT(English Language Training does not count towards this requirement).

Employment must be directly related to the student's major area of study (as listed on the student's I-20). Level of responsibility and job duties should require the knowledge gained in the academic program.

## When can I participate in OPT and when do I apply?

The most common type of OPT is Post-Completion OPT. Students may apply for post-completion OPT no more than 90 days before their program end date (as listed in the I-20) and no later than 60 days after their program end date.



The recommended OPT start date (this date is agreed upon between the student and the DSO) must be no later than 60 days after the program end date. Once the DSO enters the recommended OPT dates (starting and ending) in SEVIS, the actual paper application must be sent in to U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) within 30 days.

Post-Completion OPT is for a maximum of 12 months. The DSO will enter a request for starting and ending dates in SEVIS. However, USCIS may adjust those dates to a later time if the

processing cannot be completed before the start date. USCIS will not allow the OPT end date to be more than 14 months from the program end date. In short, the actual OPT may be a few days less than 12 months. The student cannot appeal the approved OPT starting and ending dates. Post-Completion OPT must be full-time (can work for more than one employer; total hours worked must be **more than 20 hours per week**).

Pre-completion OPT is available and is usually used to assist students who are master's or PhD students who have completed their course work and have moved into their research and thesis/dissertation writing stage. It may also be used by students who are near the end of their academic programs. However pre-completion OPT requires a lot of pre-planning and may not be approved on a predictable schedule. For students who are still taking courses, Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is usually the better choice as there is no fee for applying, does not require USCIS approval and no Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card is required. Pre-completion OPT can be part-time (20 hours or less) or full-time (more than 20 hours).

OPT is still limited to a total of 12 months – pre-completion or post-completion or a combination of both.

### **Where can I work during OPT?**

For pre-completion and post-completion OPT, you may work for any company or organization anywhere in the United States or its territories. The company must have at least one physical office in the United States. Students may work from home, but there must be frequent contact with a supervisor or mentor who will provide guidance and training. Students are permitted to travel outside the U.S. on business for their company or temporarily be stationed outside the United States (not to exceed 5 months). Students may also work for an international organization such as the World Bank, United Nations, or UNESCO. There are special requirements for STEM OPT employers which can be found in the STEM OPT section of this reference guide.

### **How do I apply for OPT?**

The student is responsible for submitting the application for OPT. The other individuals/organizations involved are:

**U.S. Customs and Immigration Services** – reviews and approves or denies the application for OPT and STEM OPT employment. USCIS issues the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. USCIS is a division of the Department of Homeland Security.

**Designated School Official (DSO) at the University of Central Arkansas** – recommends students for OPT. “Recommend” means that the DSO checks to see that the student meets the eligibility requirements for OPT before the application is submitted. The DSO informs the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Student & Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) of the recommendation by entering the requested start and end dates for OPT in the student's SEVIS record. During the approved OPT period, the DSO is also responsible for entering information provided by the student, including employer information, employment start and end dates, and personal contact information. For STEM OPT, this also includes confirmation that progress reports have been submitted by the student.

**Student & Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)** – database system that contains information regarding the student during their academic program and period of OPT or STEM OPT. This database is an active database which allows the DSO to enter information such as addresses and employer information. The database has default features which the DSO cannot override, such as the start date or end date of approved OPT.

**Process for applying for OPT:**

The following documents must be assembled for the OPT application.

1. Form I-765. Complete the form on-line:  
<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-765.pdf> . E-mail the completed form to [pwoodardgeorge@uca.edu](mailto:pwoodardgeorge@uca.edu) . If there is any information that you do not know, leave it blank and it will be reviewed during your OPT appointment at International Engagement. If you have previously submitted an I-765 application, you must also include a photocopy of any Employment Authorization Document (EAD “work authorization” card) – for example, if you applied for OPT previously or off-campus extreme economic hardship employment. If you were denied work authorization, you must include the USCIS denial notification letter.

OPT applicants are now required to provide the following additional information on the I-765 (page 7):

- All previous SEVIS numbers. If you have ever been issued an I-20 under another SEVIS number, either by UCA or a different college/university/language school;
  - All previous periods of Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Optional Practical Training (OPT), both full time and part time.
2. Form G-1145 – e-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance (optional but recommended)
  3. Two (2) passport size photos – color, must have been taken within 30 days of the application; 2 inches X 2 inches; do not wear white clothing or glasses; write your name and SEVIS ID# on the back of each photo
  4. Copy of biographical page of your passport and any other pages showing extension of expiration date; copy of F-1 visa; copy of most recent I-94 arrival record
  5. Check or money order for \$410 made payable to: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (do not abbreviate the name)
  6. Verification of Expected Degree Completion form signed by your academic advisor
  7. Statement of Understanding signed by student – **READ before signing!!!** and Authorization to Open First-class Mail form

**Make an OPT appointment with the DSO.** Complete items 1 through 7. Make an appointment with Pamela Woodard George using the appointment scheduler:

**uca.edu/international** Bring the documents to your OPT appointment. The DSO will help you confirm that the packet is complete, enter the recommended OPT start/end dates in SEVIS, issue a new I-20, make copies and mail the packet to the USCIS Texas Service Center for you using certified standard U.S. mail. You may choose to mail the packet or send it by express service yourself. The student will be given a photo copy of the application and the DSO will keep a photo copy.

**USCIS Approval Timeline.** OPT and STEM OPT applications take two (2) to three (3) months to be reviewed. While there is a process for expediting the application, it is highly unlikely that your case will be expedited.

## Students' Responsibilities after Submitting Application

### Before starting approved OPT:

- Get offer of employment that meets the requirements of OPT or STEM OPT that will start on or after the requested date. **Send the offer to the DSO BEFORE you start to work. The DSO will advise you if the employment meets the terms for OPT/STEM OPT.** The employment letter **MUST BE** on the company's letterhead and include all of the following information:
  - company's name, address and phone number (\*see below if using a placement agency)
  - date student will start employment
  - student's job title
  - brief description of job responsibilities
  - name, telephone number and email of supervisor
  - indicate if employment is full-time (more than 20 hours per week) or part-time (20 hours or less per week)
- **Do not work or start training until OPT has been approved and EAD card is received.**

\*if using a placement or temporary agency that does not have a representative present at your work site, please provide the name and address of both the placement agency and the company and address where you are assigned to work.

### Before and during approved OPT:

- Notify the DSO (in writing/by e-mail) of any change in your physical address, telephone number or e-mail address within 10 days of that change.

### During OPT:

- Notify the DSO (by e-mail) of any change in employment location or end of employment immediately (within 3 working days). **You only have 90 calendar days of unemployment allowed between the approved start date and end date of your OPT (see page 6 for more information).** This includes any time that you are waiting to

receive your EAD card or looking for a job AFTER the approved start date of your OPT. Official leave and holidays do not count as unemployment. Special regulations apply if there is a strike (work stoppage) at your work location.

- Notify the DSO (by e-mail) of new offer of employment before starting to work by sending the same information required on the initial employment letter
- Do not work for any other employers other than the one(s) listed on the I-20
- If traveling outside the United States, request a travel signature from a DSO at least three weeks in advance. Check with the DSO in advance of making travel arrangements to discuss special travel requirements and restrictions that apply during the OPT and STEM OPT period.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What happens if my OPT has not been approved but my 60 grace period has ended? Am I out of status at that point?** No, you are in status while the application is pending but you cannot work. \*\*For STEM extension applicants, you may continue to work for a period of 180 days while waiting for a decision on your application for the STEM extension.

**I am in the middle of my post-completion OPT or STEM extension, but I have decided I want to return to school for another degree. How does that affect my OPT?** Your OPT/STEM extension will end when the DSO transfers your SEVIS record to your new school so you can enroll there. If you are going to pursue your second degree at UCA, your OPT will end on the first day of classes for the semester you are enrolling in. You cannot get any unused OPT time applied to a future program. To transfer your SEVIS record, you must have **admission** to the new school **before** the end of the 14 months from your program end date (36 for those with STEM extensions), have not violated any of the terms of your OPT and begin your new academic program at the next available term at your new university (but no later than 5 months). If you did not work, you may also present the admission letter **BEFORE** reaching the 90 day limit of unemployment. You must start your studies at the next available academic session. That session may not be more than 5 months from the 90<sup>th</sup> day of your unemployment.

**What if an employer has applied for an H1B visa for me?** That's perfectly fine. You should provide the DSO with copies of the I-797 or I-797C, Notice of Action so that information can be entered into SEVIS. If your OPT will end while your H1B application is still pending or approved but not started, a Cap/Gap Extension can be requested with the proper documentation. A Cap Gap Extension allows a student to keep working after the end of OPT until a decision is made on the H1B or H1B employment starts (no later than September 30). Students whose OPT ends between October 1 and March 31 may not be eligible for the Cap Gap benefit.

**I have not been able to find a job and I am close to the end of the 90 day limit on unemployment. What are my options?** **BEFORE** the 90<sup>th</sup> day, you may submit an admission

letter for a new academic program to a DSO at International Engagement. That program must start within 5 months of the date you reach your 90<sup>th</sup> day of unemployment. You will remain in status until you register for classes for the new degree program. Your OPT ends on the 90<sup>th</sup> day, so you may not continue to pursue employment under OPT. If you are already taking classes as a non-degree seeking student, you may continue to do so until you can enroll in the new degree program you have been admitted to.

**Can I take classes while I am doing OPT?** Yes, you can take classes during your OPT period, but you cannot be enrolled as a degree seeking student. The only exception is if you failed to graduate but were already approved for post-completion OPT. In that case, you should consult with the DSO immediately on how to proceed.

**Can I be self-employed or start my own business for my OPT employment?** Yes, you may be self-employed. Discuss with the DSO how your employment can be documented in your specific case.

**I received an email from USCIS about a SEVIS Portal Account. What should I do?** The SEVIS portal has been developed to make it easier for you to submit address changes and changes to employment information. However, please be reminded that information must be entered completely and correctly. Follow the instructions in the email for setting up your access to the portal. The DSO at International Engagement can re-set the portal access if you are locked out. You are not required to use the portal. Changes in address and employment can still be sent to the DSO and will be entered in your SEVIS record. You will also need to contact the DSO to print a new I-20 if the employment information has changed.

**How many hours can I work with my OPT/STEM OPT authorization?** You can work as many hours as you wish as long as it is for companies listed on your I-20.

**Can I work for more than one company or as a private contractor?** Yes, you can work for more than one company and you can work as a private contractor or consultant. Be sure you know the tax reporting process for private contractors and consultants. Be sure that you are working full-time at all times. That is, you cannot start one job part-time while looking for another job to bring you up to full time status.

**Is there any salary limit for OPT/STEM OPT?** No

## Unemployment during the OPT period

The law allows you to be unemployed during your OPT period for a limited number of days.

If you received...	You may be unemployed for...	For a total of... (during the OPT period)
Initial post-completion OPT only	Up to 90 days	90 days
24-month extension	An additional 60 days	150 days

## What is STEM OPT?

STEM OPT is a 24-month extension of the post-completion OPT. It is for F-1 students who receive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees, and who meet other specified eligibility requirements. Only degrees listed in the STEM Degree list issued by USCIS are eligible. Each UCA degree has a STEM code assigned to it.

## Eligibility for the STEM OPT Extension

To qualify for the 24-month STEM extension, you must:

- Have been granted post-completion OPT and currently be in a valid period of OPT;
- Have earned a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree from a school that is accredited by a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accrediting agency and is certified by [the Student and Exchange Visitor Program \(SEVP\)](#) when you submit your STEM OPT extension application.

**Previously obtained STEM degrees:** If you are an F-1 student participating in a 12-month period of post-completion OPT based on a non-STEM degree, you may be eligible to use a prior STEM degree earned from a U.S. institution of higher education to apply for a STEM OPT extension. You must have received both degrees from currently accredited and SEVP-certified institutions, and cannot have already received a STEM OPT extension based on this prior degree. The practical training opportunity also must be directly related to the previously obtained STEM degree.

For example: If you are currently participating in OPT based on a master's degree in business administration but you previously received a bachelor's degree in mathematics, you may be

able to apply for a STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor's degree as long as it is from an accredited U.S. college or university and the OPT employment opportunity is directly related to your bachelor's degree in mathematics.

**STEM degrees you obtain in the future:** If you enroll in a new academic program in the future and earn another qualifying STEM degree at a higher educational level, you may be eligible for one additional 24-month STEM OPT extension.

For example: If you receive a 24-month STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor's degree in engineering and you later earn a master's degree in engineering, you may apply for an additional 24-month STEM OPT extension based on your master's degree.

- Work for an employer who meets all the requirements listed in the STEM OPT Employer Responsibilities section in this reference guide (page 9).
- Submit the [Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization](#) up to 90 days **before** your current OPT employment authorization expires, and within 60 days of the date your designated school official (DSO) enters the recommendation for OPT into your Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) record.

## Applying for a STEM OPT Extension

To apply for an extension, you must properly file:

- Form I-983 Training Plan for STEM OPT Students (this is given to the DSO to review; it is not sent in with the application to USCIS). This must be submitted first and approved before the application will be processed.
- Form I-765 – must include the employer's E-Verify number. Complete the form on-line: <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-765.pdf> . E-mail the completed form to [pwoodardgeorge@uca.edu](mailto:pwoodardgeorge@uca.edu) . If there is any information that you do not know, leave it blank and it will be reviewed by Pam and returned to you.

If you have previously submitted an I-765 application, you must also include a photocopy of any Employment Authorization Document (EAD “work authorization” card) – for example, if you applied for OPT previously or off-campus extreme economic hardship employment. If you were denied work authorization, you must include the USCIS denial notification letter.

- 2 passport size (2 inch x 2 inch) color photographs taken within 30 days of the application (write name and SEVIS number on back of both photos); do not wear white clothing or glasses.
- Application fee - \$410 – check or money order payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
- Form I-20, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status, endorsed by your DSO (application must be submitted within 60 days of the DSO entering request in SEVIS)
- A copy of your STEM degree (photocopy of your diploma) and copy of your official university transcript which lists the major.
- A copy of your passport, visa, I-94 record and post-completion EAD card (front and back) or any other work authorization card

Note: If you file your extension application on time and your OPT period expires while your extension application is pending, USCIS will automatically extend your employment authorization for 180 days.

## After Receiving a STEM OPT Extension

**Reporting responsibilities – it is YOUR responsibility to know when and how to report!!**

You must report changes to your DSO within 5 business days of the change with an updated I-983 form. You must report any changes to:

- Your legal name
- Your residential or mailing address
- Your email address
- Your employer's name
- Your employer's address
- Supervisor's name and contact information

Report to your DSO every 6 months to confirm the information listed above, even if none of your information has changed. **IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO KNOW WHEN REPORTS ARE DUE.** Also report as soon as possible, any changes to your immigration status (if you receive permanent resident status or have an H1B petition filed on your behalf).

Every 6 months, students on STEM OPT must submit a report (see top half of page 5 of the I-983 training plan) and a final report just before the end of the STEM OPT period (see bottom half of page 5 for the I-983 training plan). **The reports must address the specific training objectives as outlined in the training plan.** At that time, the student must also provide their current address.

For more information, please refer to the [DHS STEM OPT Hub](#).

## STEM OPT Employer Responsibilities

Employers who want to provide a practical training opportunity to a STEM OPT student during his or her extension, must:

- Be enrolled in [E-Verify](#) and remain in good standing. The company may be directly enrolled in E-Verify or use a personnel service that provides that service. The employer must provide their E-Verify number in either case.
- Complete the Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT students. In this form, the employer must attest that:
  - Employer has enough resources and trained personnel available to appropriately train the student;
  - The student will not replace a full- or part-time, temporary or permanent U.S. worker; and

- Working for the employer will help the student attain his or her training objectives.
- Report material changes to the STEM OPT student's employment to the DSO within 5 business days.
- Implement a formal training program to supplement the student's academic learning through practical experience.
- Provide an OPT opportunity that is commensurate with those of similarly situated U.S. workers in duties, hours, and compensation.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement may visit the student's worksite(s) to verify whether the employer is meeting the STEM OPT program requirements, including whether it is maintaining the ability and resources to provide structured and guided work-based learning experiences for the STEM OPT student.

For more information, please refer to the [DHS STEM OPT Hub](#).