

# Reference Guide for Optional Practical Training (OPT) Center for Global Learning & Engagement University of Central Arkansas

## Optional Practical Training (OPT) Basics

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

### Who can apply for OPT?

F-1 students who have been/are undertaking a degree or post-baccalaureate program. Students 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. Intensive English Program students who do not complete a degree are not eligible for OPT.

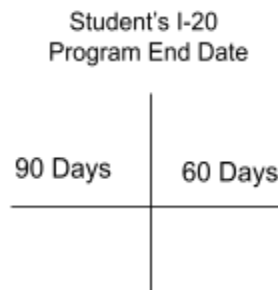
Must have completed at least one academic year (two semesters) of degree or post-baccalaureate work in F-1 student status before the requested start date of the OPT(English Language Training does not count towards this requirement).

### What type of work can I do for OPT?

Employment must be directly related to the student's **major area of study** (as listed on the student's I-20). If you have two majors, it can be in either major. It cannot be in your minor. The employment/training must require or desire that the student have a degree or that the degree will substitute for required work experience.

### 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 (start and end) in SEVIS, the application must be received by the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) within 30 days.

Post-Completion OPT is for a maximum of 12 months. The DSO will enter requested start and end dates in SEVIS. However, USCIS may adjust those dates to a later time if the processing cannot be completed before the requested start date. USCIS will not allow the OPT end date to be more than 14 months from the program end date. In short, if you apply near the end of the application period, the actual OPT may be a few days less than 12 months. The student cannot appeal the approved OPT start and end dates. Post-Completion OPT must be full-time (can work for more than one employer; total hours worked must be a **minimum of 21 hours per week**).

Pre-completion OPT is available. It 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. 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 and does not require USCIS approval. 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.

You must be physically present in the United States at the time you submit your OPT application.

### **Where can I work during 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 or the United Nations.

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

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

**U.S. Customs and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security** – reviews and approves or denies the application for OPT and STEM OPT employment.

**Designated School Official (DSO) at the University of Central Arkansas** – recommends students for OPT. That means the DSO checks to see that the student meets the eligibility

requirements and issues the I-20 which is part of the application. 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 and uploading plans and reports.

**Student & Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)** – database system that contains information regarding the student during their academic program and OPT/STEM OPT.

## **Submitting the OPT Application - See Application Checklist**

**All students will now submit their applications online if they have a credit/debit card or bank account.** If a student does not have these methods of payment, let the DSO know and we can assist with a paper application.

**Online Applications:** When you have all the documents on the Application Checklist ready, make an appointment through your Navigate account. **Save your uploaded documents on a thumb drive or send them to your UCA email. Do not save them on your phone or laptop.** You will come to the Global Learning & Engagement office and a DSO will advise you as you enter the application through myUSCIS. Be sure the document scans are clear (do NOT take pictures of documents on your phone; use a scanner that does not leave a watermark). You can take your digital photo with your phone. (see photo preparation instructions).

Currently, USCIS processing time for all OPT applications is approximately 3 months. The DSO monitors the status of all applications through the SEVIS database on a daily basis. Students can also check the status of their application online. Students should also look for USCIS notifications on their phones/email.

## **Employment for Approved OPT**

### **Unemployment during approved OPT**

There are a limited number of days allowed for unemployment during your period of OPT. This is time you are not actually in training or working/volunteering. **For post-completion OPT the limit is 90 days.** The SEVIS system starts counting unemployment from the approved start date of your OPT. When you exceed the allowed number of days, you are immediately out of status and cannot return to or start work. Once you exceed the 90 day unemployment period, your SEVIS record cannot be transferred to another university or processed for a change of education level at UCA in active status.

### **Before accepting an offer of employment and starting to work/volunteer:**

The student should get an offer of employment that meets the requirements of OPT that starts on or after the requested/approved OPT start date. **Send the offer to the DSO (Pamela Woodard George) BEFORE you start to work. The DSO will advise you if the employment meets the terms for OPT.** The employment letter **MUST BE** on the company's letterhead, signed and **MUST include all of the following information:**

- Company's name, address, 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)

**Many standard employment offer letters do not include all of this information, so please look at the offer letter before sending it to the DSO. If the offer letter you are given does not include the information above, ask for a separate letter that includes all the information.**

**Do not start training or work until OPT has been approved and the 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.

Volunteering - volunteering is eligible practical training if it is for a non-profit organization. The tasks you are performing must be related to your major and require or desire a degree. The organization should issue a letter with the same information as the employer letter listed above.

Calculating first day of employment - your first day of employment is the date you begin a training program or working (in-person or remotely) for the company or organization. It is not the date you receive an offer of employment. Until you start a company training program or begin your actual work/volunteering, the time is counted as unemployment.

### **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) or if you decide to end your OPT and return to your home country.

**You only have 90 calendar days of unemployment allowed between the approved start date and end date of your OPT.** 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.

During employment, official leave and company approved holidays do not count as unemployment. Special regulations apply if there is a strike (work stoppage) at your work location.

Notify the DSO (by email) of a new offer of employment before starting to work by sending the same information required on the initial employment letter. Also provide the date your employment ended at the previous employer.

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 period. You will be issued a new I-20 for travel (or if you live in Conway, bring your I-20 to the office for a signature). **OPT travel signatures are only valid for 6 months.**

## **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.

**I am in the middle of my post-completion OPT, but I have decided I want to return to school for another degree. How does that affect my OPT?** Your OPT will end when the DSO transfers your SEVIS record to your new school so you can enroll there. If you are going to pursue another degree at UCA, your OPT will end on the first day of classes of your new degree program. 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 old program end date, 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 **MUST** 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 will automatically be granted by USCIS and noted in your SEVIS record/I-20. A Cap Gap Extension allows you 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 are not 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 the Center for Global Learning & 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. 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 so you can directly enter 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 the Center for Global Learning & Engagement can reset 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 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 authorization?** You can work as many hours as you wish as long as the company(ies) is listed on your I-20. **Minimum number of hours is 21.**

**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?** No

**Can I travel outside the U.S. while on OPT?** Yes, as long as you have an I-20 which shows your OPT status as “pending” or “approved” and it is signed by a DSO for travel on page 2. If

you have them, you should also take your OPT work authorization card (EAD) and a letter from your employer which states you are employed but on an authorized vacation/leave. See page 5 for more information about travel.

## **STEM OPT**

If your major was in a USCIS approved STEM degree field, you may be eligible for a 24 month extension of your OPT called STEM OPT. STEM stands for “Science Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics”. The code assigned to your major (called a CIP code) must appear on the official USCIS list of approved majors. You can find the list on the USCIS website or the [studyinthestates](https://www.studyinthestates.uscis.gov/) website. You can find that code on page 1 of your I-20 next to the description of your major. In certain cases, you may apply for STEM OPT based on a previous degree with a STEM major received from a U.S. university. Check with the DSO.

You cannot apply for STEM OPT until 90 days before the end date of your post-completion OPT. USCIS must receive your application for STEM OPT before the end date of your post-completion OPT.

STEM OPT has special employment and reporting requirements. A separate STEM OPT Reference Guide is available - contact a DSO.