

F-1 Guide to Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Disclaimer: KGI has prepared this guide to provide you with general guidance. However, any advice provided to you by our office, as well as the information in this document, should not be construed as legal advice. KGI staff will provide regulatory and practice information as it stands at the time of the consult. Due to the fluid nature of governmental interpretation, individuals must understand that the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office may change its interpretation of established immigration laws/regulations and eligibility requirements for benefits at any time.

Definition of Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide you with an opportunity to gain employment experience in your chosen profession. This is initially granted for a period of 12 months, with an opportunity to apply for a 24 month extension (STEM OPT Extension) at the end of the initial period. OPT may be used before (pre-completion OPT) or after (post-completion OPT) your program ends. However, as you can participate in Curricular Practical Training (CPT) during your program, most students will utilize only post-completion OPT.

OPT jobs must be in your field and at your level. This means that the job opportunity must be **directly related to your major** and **must require applicants to have your level of education**. Pre- and post-completion OPT may be full-time or part-time and may be paid or unpaid (i.e. internship or volunteer work). You may also be self-employed during your initial OPT period; make sure that you document this carefully and that you are working a minimum of 20 hours a week. For STEM OPT, however, you must have a traditional paid, full-time (more than 20 hours a week) position, with an E-Verify listed company. OPT may occur anywhere in the United States. Please consult with your Admissions and International Student Advisor if you are unsure if a position qualifies for OPT.

Eligibility Requirements

In order to be eligible to apply for OPT, you must have been in lawful F-1 status for at least 9 months (one academic year). If you participated in a total of 12 months of full-time CPT, you will be ineligible to apply for OPT. Part-time CPT work does not affect eligibility. OPT may only be granted once per academic level. If you were authorized for OPT for a bachelor's degree, and are now pursuing a master's degree program, you will be eligible to apply for a new OPT period. The same holds true for master's students now pursuing a doctoral program.

Date You Complete Your Program of Study

Your F-1 status expires 60 days after the date you personally complete degree requirements, not the date listed on your I-20. USCIS ignores your graduation date because it realizes that many students, especially graduate students in thesis or dissertation programs, may complete requirements for a degree any day during the year. Therefore, it is important to

plan ahead and know what your actual last day of your program will be.

Application Deadline

It is highly recommended that you apply for OPT 90 days before you complete your degree requirements. OPT can begin no later than 60 days after you complete your degree requirements. This is why it's very important to apply early - if the EAD card is issued after the 60th day, USCIS is still required to put the start date as 60 days after you complete your degree requirements. This means that delaying your application could result in a loss of OPT time.

In addition, your application must be *received* (not postmarked) by USCIS no later than 60 days after you complete your degree requirements. STEM OPT applicants must have their application received no later than the last day of their current OPT. In general, applications can take anywhere from 75-90 days to be processed. You cannot expedite this process. Please see the OPT Checklist or the F-1 STEM OPT Extension Application Checklist on the [Current Students](#) page under Informational Guides and Checklists for more information on submitting these applications.

Authorization by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Office

After you apply, you will receive a receipt from USCIS - do not throw it away. It will have a file number and phone number which you can use to track the progress of your application. Please bring a copy of this receipt to our office. You may not begin work until all three of the following requirements are satisfied: (1) you have obtained an EAD card from the USCIS, (2) the date of authorized employment (as noted on your EAD card) is reached and (3) you have completed all requirements for your program of study.

Once authorization to engage in OPT is granted, it may not be rescinded or cancelled. Unexpected delays in completing degree requirements, inability to find an appropriate job, or loss of a job may result in loss of otherwise eligible time to work.

Actual Date Employment May Begin

You may not begin work until:

1. You have obtained an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card from USCIS, **and**
2. The start date on your EAD card has been reached, **and**
3. You have reported your employment details to KGI

Updating Personal & Employer Information

You must report any and all changes in your personal address, phone number, and e-mail address while on OPT within 10 days of the change. You also must immediately report any changes in your employment status, including any change in employment location or status (i.e. finished/left a job, start of new job, etc). If you are on STEM OPT, you are required to check in every 6 months with this information (whether it has changed or not). Please use the OPT Reporting Form located on our [Current Students](#) page under Forms to submit this information.

Unemployment Limits

You may accrue a maximum of 90 total days of unemployment in your 12 month period of initial OPT. Students on a STEM OPT Extension may accrue a maximum of 150 total days of unemployment, inclusive of any unemployment time accrued during the initial OPT period. For example, if you were unemployed for a total of 60 days during your initial OPT period, you have a total of 90 days of unemployment you may accrue during your 24 month STEM Extension. Please see F-1 STEM OPT Frequently Asked Questions document on the [Current Students](#) page under Informational Guides and Checklists for more information on unemployment limits while on the STEM Extension.

Travel While Applying for or Working Under OPT

Please consult our Travel Guide on the [Current Students](#) page under Travel for specific guidance depending on where you are in the OPT process.

H1-B Cap Gap

Per [USCIS](#), “An F-1 student who is the beneficiary of an H-1B petition and request for change of status that is filed on time may have his or her F-1 status and any current employment authorization extended until the first day of the new fiscal year.” This provision allows you to remain in the US and continue employment until your H1-B application is approved and takes effect on October 1st, provided that your application has been receipted prior to the end of your current OPT status. Keep in mind though that this automatic extension of work authorization will also *automatically terminate* upon the rejection, denial, or revocation of the H-1B petition. If this is the case, you will need to leave the US immediately.