

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Frequently Asked Questions

Below is a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) the Office of International and Cultural Affairs (OICA) has fielded over the years concerning OPT. We hope you find the additional explanations helpful. If you should have any questions or require further clarification, please don't hesitate to attend an [OPT Workshop](#) or contact your [International Student Advisor](#). If you would like to see a question added to this list, please e-mail ia@mst.edu. It is our pleasure to assist you.

1. What is Optional Practical Training?

As defined by [USCIS](#), Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student's major area of study. You can apply to receive up to 12 months of OPT employment after completing your academic studies (post-completion).

2. What are the different types of OPT?

As stipulated by [USCIS](#), all OPT must be directly related to your major area of study. You may participate in OPT in two different ways:

- **12-Month Post-completion OPT:** You may apply to participate in post-completion OPT up to 12 months after completing your studies. Students authorized for post-completion OPT may work part-time (at least 20 hours per week) or full-time.
- **24-Month STEM Extension:** This extension applies only to students whose degree programs are in certain [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics degree fields](#). You must apply for STEM OPT before the 12-month OPT ends. You must submit your STEM OPT application no earlier than 90 days before the expiration of your post-completion OPT. The application must be received by USCIS before your EAD expires.

3. What makes me eligible to apply for OPT? You must:

- Be an F-1 student who has been enrolled in a degree program for the previous nine months without any violation of immigration status
- Have a valid I-20, passport that is valid at least 6 months into the future, and I-94
- Complete one (1) full academic year in an academic program at Missouri S&T
- Be on track to graduate/complete with a Bachelor's, Master's or PhD
- Know your expected date of graduation/completion at the time of your application
- Have completed an OPT Workshop (either in-person or via Canvas)
- Have accrued less than 365 days of full-time CPT
- Apply within **90 days** before your graduation/completion date

4. What is the cap-gap Extension for F-1 Students with Approved H-1B Petitions?

Per [USCIS](#), if you are an F-1 student with a timely filed H-1B petition and change of status request, and your F-1 status and employment authorization will expire before the change of status to H-1B occurs (typically October 1), you may be eligible for a cap-gap extension. Visit the USCIS [Cap-Gap Extension site](#) for more information.

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5. What is the difference between my completion date and my graduation date?

The completion date for undergraduates or non-thesis graduate students is the date of graduation for that semester. The completion date for a graduate student in a thesis or dissertation program is defined as the date the student submits the library copy of their thesis or dissertation to the Office of Graduate Studies.

6. How do I begin the OPT application process?

You must begin the process by attending an OPT Workshop. The OPT Workshop schedule can be found [here](#). You may opt for online instruction via [Canvas](#). All international students are automatically enrolled in the OPT Workshop in Canvas. If you are unable to access this workshop, please e-mail ia@mst.edu and request to be added to the online Canvas OPT Workshop. There is no added cost to participate in this course.

7. What documents are required to apply for post-completion OPT?

- Copy of ID and visa pages in passport
- Copy of I-94 card or print out from <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/i94/request.html>
- Copies of any previous Employment Authorization Cards (EAD)
- Copies of all I-20's that included CPT authorization or a SEVIS print out of CPT authorizations
- Form G-1145 (optional)
- Form I-765 completed and signed by the student
- Two passport size color photos
- Check or money order made payable to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for \$410

8. How do I file my OPT application with USCIS?

After OICA has issued your new OPT I-20, you must collect your OPT application and send it to the proper USCIS address. The address is dependent on where the student is mailing from. Your International Student Advisor will provide this information to you.

9. If I apply for OPT and USCIS is processing my application, but then I change my mind and wish to cancel my application, how can I cancel my application? Can I recover the OPT time that I applied for?

If you have submitted your application to USCIS, you must contact the USCIS service center directly to have the I-765 withdrawn or send a written letter by mail or fax with the following details:

- a. Write "Re I-765 Withdrawal" on the letter
- b. Include surname, given name, date of birth and SEVIS ID number
- c. Include the I-797 receipt number or a copy of the I-797 receipt notice
- d. Specifically request that your Form I-765 application for Optional Practical Training be withdrawn
- e. Sign your letter

Each service center has different policies and procedures for withdrawing I-765 OPT EAD applications. Please refer to your I-797 receipt for contact information for your service center, and contact customer service to determine which process is best for your service center. Withdrawal of an application before it is adjudicated does not necessarily preclude the filing of a new application

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with a new fee later, provided you remain eligible for the benefit. Your \$410 application fee will not be returned if you cancel your application.

10. How do I cancel my OPT after it has begun? Can I recover my remaining OPT time?

Once USCIS has approved your OPT application, it cannot be cancelled or withdrawn. Recovering all or part of a period of OPT that has already been granted by USCIS may be difficult. To avoid loss of OPT time, you should exercise care in filing your application to ensure you will complete your programs as expected by the I-20 program end date.

11. Will my previous Curricular Practical Training (CPT) experience affect my OPT?

No, as long as you have less than 365 days of full-time CPT.

12. I have mailed my OPT application to USCIS, and have since received a separate job offer or internship. While awaiting OPT approval, is it possible to go on Curricular Practical Training (CPT)?

No, you may not pursue CPT once you have applied for OPT. While your application is pending with USCIS, you may not engage in any type of employment on campus or off campus once you have completed your academic program. Once your application for OPT has been approved by USCIS, you may engage in any type of employment which is related to your field of study.

13. Can I change my starting and ending dates on my OPT after I have submitted my OPT application to USCIS?

No, your requested dates for employment cannot be changed once your application has been received by USCIS. By taking action in SEVIS, your International Student Advisor can change your start and end dates for OPT only if your OPT request is still in SEVIS "requested status" and USCIS has not yet received your application.

14. What is the earliest and latest possible dates I can submit my OPT application?

You may apply for OPT up to 90 days prior to your completion date. The service center must receive your application no more than 60 days after your completion date.

15. What can I expect after I mail my OPT application?

Once the USCIS service center receives your OPT application, an I-797C receipt notice will be issued and mailed to OICA (normally within two to three weeks). The I-797C will contain your LIN number which is your case number for any reference to your OPT application.

16. What is a G-1145 e-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance? Am I required to submit a G-1145 Form to request e-Notification for my OPT application?

The purpose of Form G-1145 E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance is to be used by the petitioner or applicant to receive electronic notification of the acceptance of their application. You must file your OPT application at one of the three USCIS Lockbox facilities to be eligible for this service.

17. What is the average processing time for OPT applications?

The average processing time for OPT applications by OICA is a minimum of five business days. The average processing time for OPT applications by USCIS is estimated at 90 days. However, processing time could be longer, depending on the number of applications USCIS is adjudicating.

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18. What records must I keep concerning my OPT employment? What if I am self-employed?

For each job you hold, SEVP recommends that you maintain evidence of the position held, proof of the duration of that position, the job title, contact information for your supervisor or manager, and a description of the work. If it is not clear from the job description that the work is related to your degree, SEVP highly recommends that you obtain a signed letter from your supervisor or manager or the employer's hiring official which states how your degree is related to the work performed.

If you are self-employed, the same requirements apply. You must still maintain information on the exact location, job description, job title and contact information. SEVP states "Students on OPT may start a business and be self-employed. The student should be able to prove that he or she has the proper business licenses and is actively engaged in a business related to his or her degree program." However, there are limitations on self-employment for STEM OPT students that may limit eligibility for self-employment while on STEM OPT. Please see question 33.

19. Am I allowed to leave the U.S. while my OPT application is pending?

Students whose OPT applications are still being processed by USCIS should avoid traveling outside the United States. Your OPT application could possibly be cancelled because of being "abandoned." If you choose to travel outside the U.S. before your OPT application is approved, you must have your current [I-20 authorized for travel](#). During travel, you should carry your OPT receipt and employment offer letter.

20. Must I have an EAD card before reporting to work for post-completion OPT?

Yes. Once you have completed your academic program, you are not authorized to engage in any type of paid or unpaid employment until you have received your approved EAD card. You are only authorized to work during the dates listed on the EAD card.

21. Can OPT be volunteer/unpaid work?

Volunteer/unpaid employment is authorized by USCIS for post-completion OPT. It is not authorized by USCIS for STEM OPT extension. Students must ensure that unpaid employment does not violate U.S. labor laws. U.S. Department of Labor is concerned both with the protection of jobs for United States citizens, and with the prevention of exploitation of workers. They have created laws to ensure that employment that should be paid is not done for free. While both you and the employer may be happy with an unpaid arrangement (for example, you may be eager to work even on an unpaid basis in a company in order to gain job experience), this may be considered an unfair arrangement in cases where the work is normally performed by a paid person and both the company and the employee are benefitting from the employment.

To determine whether an individual is a true volunteer engaged in "ordinary volunteerism," the Department of Labor considers a number of factors. No single factor is determinative. The factors include:

- Is the entity that will benefit/receive services from the volunteer a nonprofit organization?
- Is the activity less than a full-time occupation?
- Are the services offered freely and without pressure or coercion?
- Are the services of the kind typically associated with volunteer work?
- Have regular employees been displaced to accommodate the volunteer?

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- Does the worker receive (or expect) any benefit from the entity to which it is providing services?

22. Can STEM OPT employment be with a temporary or consulting agency?

STEM OPT extensions are not allowed for multiple employer arrangements, sole proprietorships, employment through “temp” agencies, employment through consulting firm arrangements that provide labor for hire, and other relationships that do not constitute a bona fide employer-employee relationship. STEM OPT rule states that "students cannot qualify for STEM OPT extensions unless they will be bona fide employees of the employer signing the Training Plan, and the employer that signs the Training Plan must be the same entity that employs the student and provides the practical training experience.”

23. What are my reporting requirements while on OPT?

Regulations of your F-1 visa will still require that you report the following to your International Student Advisor:

- Change in local address in Joe’S within ten days of the change (review/confirm every 6 months)
- Change in mailing address (review/confirm every 6 months)
- Change in SEVIS address (home country address)
- Name changes
- If unemployed for more than 10 days, report the date unemployment began
- Any change to your visa status
- Any change in your employment (different employer, different job assignment, new location, quit your job/termination)
- Students on post-completion and STEM OPT must submit a validation report to OICA every six months. This report is due within 10 days of the six-month deadline.

24. Am I allowed to take distance classes while on OPT?

Yes. If you are working full-time in post-completion OPT or STEM OPT you may attend school part-time. You may enroll in on-campus courses at the school of your choice or in classes offered online or by distance.

25. Am I allowed to change employers while on OPT?

Yes. You may change employers while on OPT provided the new employment meets the requirements of OPT. It is your responsibility to notify your International Student Advisor of any changes in employment, unemployment or personal information within 10 days of the change.

26. How long may I remain in the U.S. after my OPT expires? What if I want to permanently leave the U.S. prior to the end date of my OPT?

You should report to your International Student Advisor that you are leaving the United States. Your F-1 status will end when you leave the country. You must provide your departure date from the United States to your International Student Advisor by completing the [F-1 Exit Plan Form](#). You may not use your OPT card as a visa document to attempt to re-enter the U.S. A valid I-20 signed for travel by your International Student Advisor is the only document that can be used to re-end the U.S.

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27. What if I lose my job while on OPT?

You are not permitted to accrue more than ninety (90) days of unemployment during the initial 12-month OPT period. If your accrued unemployment on 12-month OPT exceeds 90 days you are considered out of valid F-1 status. While on STEM OPT extension, your total aggregate unemployment cannot exceed 150 days. If your accrued unemployment while on STEM OPT exceeds 150 days, you are considered out of valid F-1 status. If you have become unemployed and are approaching the end of this 90-day or 150-day window, then your options are:

- Apply for a new academic degree program
- Change immigration status to a visa type which allows you to remain in the U.S.
- Leave the U.S.

28. Can I extend my OPT?

You may extend your post-completion OPT for 24 months if you are in a STEM field. You must be employed with an E-Verify company and be in a paid position of 20 hours or more per week. The employment must also be directly related to your approved program field, and your employer must complete the I-983 Training Plan form. If you successfully file the application for your 24-month OPT extension prior to the expiration of your current 12-month OPT period listed on your EAD, you may continue employment *even if your previous EAD card is expired* until your OPT extension is processed or until 180 days has passed, whichever is sooner.

29. Am I authorized to work while my STEM OPT extension is pending?

Students must apply for the 24-month OPT extension prior to the expiration of the first 12 months of “regular” OPT. The application must be received by USCIS prior to the expiration date of the first OPT period listed on your EAD in order to be properly (timely) filed. USCIS will not accept I-765 applications for STEM extensions any earlier than 90 days before the current EAD expiration date. Please note: you cannot apply during your 60 day grace period after your graduation/completion date. If you successfully file the application for your 24-month OPT extension prior to the expiration of your current 12-month OPT period EAD, you may continue employment even if your previous EAD card is expired until your OPT extension is processed or until 180 days has passed, whichever is sooner.

30. If I travel outside the U.S. as part of my employment (employer approved), will my OPT authorization be revoked?

If you travel outside the U.S. while on OPT, you must have your current [I-20 authorized for travel](#). During travel, you should carry proof of employment from your employer. If you travel after the OPT is approved and do not have a job offer, you should be aware that you risk being denied reentry into the U.S.

31. How many years of OPT am I allowed with each degree program?

Current regulations allow students 12 months of post-completion OPT for each higher degree earned. STEM students may be authorized two 24-month non-consecutive periods of STEM OPT.

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32. What if I notice an error on my EAD card?

If you notice an error on your EAD card please contact the USCIS National Customer Service Center at 1-800-375-5283. Additional information about EAD card issues may be found on the USCIS website at www.uscis.gov.

33. Is it permissible to use OPT to engage in self-employment or to open a business?

Students on a STEM extension can start a business and be self-employed. In this situation, the student must register his or her business with E-Verify and work full time. The student must be able to prove that he or she has the proper business licenses and is actively engaged in a business related to his or her degree program. HOWEVER, under the new STEM regulations, students may not fill out their own Form I-983, Sections 3 to 6, nor act as their own employer for the purposes of the form. *This might result in the student NOT being eligible for a STEM extension if self-employed.*