What is Optional Practical Training?

Post-Completion Optional Practical Training is the United States Immigration & Citizenship Service (USCIS) work permission for students after they have completed their coursework. F-1 visa holding students are allowed up to 12 months of full time OPT, with some extensions possible for students in limited categories.

How do I get this work permission?

First, read the all instructions and fill out the forms I-765 and CIPS I-538. Also, gather up all the required documents on the checklist, and get photos made as described below. PLEASE make use of the checklist. There is a full list of everything you must bring into the International Students Office. **Please do not submit an incomplete packet.**

Secondly, you need to sign the new I-20 that will be made as a part of your OPT application. If you are not inside of Memphis, please contact me: csnunis@memphis.edu to arrange for scans in place of other documents.

Finally, you must mail the completed packed to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services. The address for sending the packet is provided with the new I-20.

**Photos and Money**

The application requires two color photographs, that are:

- No smaller than 1½ inches square, on a white or very light color background. 2 inches max.

- No hats or scarves, unless it is required by the religious order to which you belong.

- You must show a direct face, exactly like your U.S. visa photograph.

- Make sure to write your name or I-94 number on the back. Do not staple these pictures. They must fit smoothly into the card machine.

- As of November 23, 2010 the fee is $380. You may use a personal check or money order made out to the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services, or preferably “U.S.C.I.S.”. **(Do NOT leave your check at the International Students Office!)**
**After I have compiled ALL of the items on the checklist, what next?**

The International Students office must review your materials, and then enter data into the SEVIS computer system and then produce a new I-20. After our preparation, you will send it to the USCIS.

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Remember to make sure that your application is complete!

**Where do I send my application?**

First, the International Students Office must process your paperwork. This includes the production of a new I-20. Be sure to turn in your complete application to the International Students Office. Most OPT applications are in the International Students Office for three business days before they are prepared and ready to mail.

Once prepared, either pick up your new documents. E-mail csunis@memphis.edu if you are not inside of Memphis and therefore cannot pickup your documents. Students who complete their degree at a Tennessee school send their applications to the Texas Regional Service Center.

**When should I apply?**

Apply no earlier than 120 days before the completion of your coursework, and no later than graduation. Do not wait for a job offer to apply. There is no expedited processing for OPT.

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**How Long Till I Have My Card?**

View Texas Service Center processing times here: [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov). First, click on the link for “processing times” seen on the lower left hand side of the screen. Then, choose the “Texas Service Center” from the pull-down menu, and scroll down to “I-765 for F-1 visa students” on the lower part of the page.

**Can I start work right away?**

NO. You must wait for the USCIS to respond to your request for work permission. Until you have the card, you are not legal to work.

If your employer does not have a photocopy of your card on file, then they are also violating the law. Please plan carefully. Processing times are estimates, not guarantees.

It is sometimes possible to apply for a temporary OPT card at the Memphis USCIS office. This is allowed only AFTER 90 days from your receipt letter.

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This information prepared 10/01/2012 by the University of Memphis Center for International Programs & Services. See your international students advisor or immigration specialist for updates on USCIS regulations. See your departmental advisor for school and departmental rules that may affect your graduation or completion date.
If I earn another degree, do I get 12 more months of work permission?
International students are allowed 12 months of full time Optional Practical Training per degree level. This means that a student may be eligible for 12 months of OPT after a bachelors earned inside the U.S., and then 12 more months of OPT after a U.S. masters degree, and then 12 more months after completing a PhD.

The regulations do not allow for more OPT after a second Masters.

Can I Be Un-Employed on OPT? F-1 visa holders are allowed a maximum of 90 days un-employment while on their initial 12 months of OPT. Any student who is not employed within the first 90 days of their OPT card start date will be considered in violation of their status. Volunteer jobs do count as employment, but be sure to get documentation of the volunteer work. The government can ask to see proof of employment.

What About Extensions to OPT? There are TWO types of OPT extensions available – each one has restrictive policies that may not apply to all students. Check with your International Students Office to determine if you qualify for either type of extension.

I. STEM- 17 month extension. OPT extensions are available for some F-1’s who have completed coursework in a government-selected list of approved majors. These STEM-category majors are listed here: [www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/stem-list.pdf](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/stem-list.pdf)

   Additionally, the F-1 must be employed with an E-Verify registered company.

II. Cap Gap extension. F-1’s who are currently on OPT with a pending H1B application may also qualify for a temporary extension, regardless of their major. Any major qualifies for this H1B “Cap Gap” extension. No E-Verify required for this type of extension, no special major required, but the H1B application must be in progress. Be prepared to show your H1B application receipt number.

What if I change my mind & go back to school?
OPT time cannot be returned or saved if the student cancels the card early, or returns to school full time. If an F-1 student requests a new I-20 for a new degree program during the OPT time, it will cancel the OPT. F-1 visa holders are allowed to take part time classes while on OPT, and are not required to take classes while on OPT.

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Make sure you contact our office before you travel, even if you are on OPT.

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This information prepared 05/03/2013 by the University of Memphis Center for International Programs & Services. See your international students advisor or immigration specialist for updates on USCIS regulations. See your departmental advisor for school and departmental rules that may affect your graduation or completion date.
When I’m on OPT, am I still F-1?

F-1 status continues while on OPT. This means that the International Students Office must report your status to the government while you are on OPT. We must know your residential address and the name and address of your employer while you are on OPT.

What does my employer need? Can I change employers?

Your employer needs to keep a photocopy of your OPT card to prove that you are legal for work. Also, they need a social security number to comply with tax laws. You are allowed to work for more than one employer, and you can change jobs while on OPT. Remember that your jobs must be related to your course of study, and appropriate for your degree level. You should NOT use OPT for student worker jobs or for a graduate assistantship.

What about travel while I’m on OPT?

F-1 students on OPT are allowed to travel inside the United States with no special paperwork requirements. HOWEVER: Travel outside of the U.S. is always uncertain. There have been a few cases of some OPT students being denied re-entry to the U.S. At some border points, OPT students have been asked to show proof of a job offer, in addition to the OPT card, their valid F-1 visa, and the I-20.

| Travel outside of the U.S. is at the students’ own discretion. |

What if I don’t want to take OPT right after graduation?

If not taking OPT, an F-1 has 60 days of grace period after completion of enrollment, in which to:

• Leave the U. S. OR • Change visa status OR • Sign for an I-20 for a new degree program

What happens when my OPT card finally expires?

F-1 visa students are allowed a 60 day grace period after the expiration of their OPT card. During this 60 day period, they may pack and leave the U.S. OR obtain a new I-20 for a new degree program, OR move to a new visa type. Please plan early.

How do I notify the USCIS that I have moved or changed employers?

F-1 visa students using OPT must remain in contact with their International Students Office. Your International Student Advisor will update SEVIS with your address changes and employment information, but only if you contact your International Students Office with the information. Because your U of M e-mail may expire after graduation, please be sure to provide updated e-mail address information as well.