

Valparaiso University Office of International Programs (OIP) Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide student in F-1 status with an opportunity to gain actual employment experience in the student's field of study, as listed on the I-20. OPT is different from CPT in the following ways:

- A job offer is not needed before applying for OPT
- US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), not OIP, authorizes the training
- It takes 3-4 months to receive authorization
- Student may work for one or more employers, change jobs, or look for work (up to 90 days) during OPT
- OPT is limited to 12 months per degree level (exception for some STEM majors); it does NOT mean 12 months after each undergraduate degree or each masters degree, if you do multiple undergraduate degrees or multiple masters degree. (See an international student advisor at OIP for details)

Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible to apply for OPT, you must:

- Be in full-time student status for one full semester year (Fall and Spring semester). Time spent at INTERLINK does not count towards the one academic year requirement;
- Be in F-1 visa status when applying;
- Be registered full time every semester (except for summer vacation or be authorized to be part-time by OIP for your final semester);
- Possess a valid, unexpired passport;
- Possess an I-20 that is unexpired and reflect current information such as major and educational level. Please note that if your I-20 is not current, you will need to provide document to reflect the changes so we can update your I-20 before processing the work authorization. This will delay the processing time of your OPT application;
- Be willing to make periodic reports to OIP regarding your employment.

Students enrolled in English language training programs (INTERLINK) are not eligible for OPT after completion of their English studies.

When to Apply

- You may apply for OPT up to 90 days before your expected program completion date
- You may apply for OPT no later than 60 days after the completion of the program requirements.
- Filing later will NOT give you additional OPT time. Students are eligible for 12 months of OPT, and those 12 months must be taken within the 14 months following the completion of degree requirements.
- The date you complete your program requirement is NOT the graduation date or the date you receive a certificate of diploma. In most cases, it is the last day of

the term in which you finish all degree requirements, BUT for students who participate in internship or engage in thesis or dissertation programs, their program completion date may be any day during the year. In this case, the last day of an academic term may not be the date you complete program requirements.

- Processing time for OPT applications can be found on the USCIS website. USDHS can take up to 3-4 months to process your work authorization. Please apply 3 months before your desired employment start date. The OPT start date must be within your 60 day grace period.

How to Apply

- Attend OPT workshop, pick up an OPT application packet
- Have your academic advisor complete the attached Academic Advisor Recommendation Form and return it to you
- Student should complete the attached I-765 Form. Use the Office of International Programs address as your U.S. address (#3 on the form). We will forward any mail from USDHS to you. The office address is:
Office of International Programs (OIP)
Valparaiso University
1509 Chapel Drive, Harre Union 209
Valparaiso, IN 46383
- Prepare two passport photographs; put your name and I-94 number on the back of your pictures.
- Call OIP at 464-5333 and make an appointment with an international student advisor. Allow one hour for this appointment.

Bring with you:

1. Completed forms from the packet
2. Photographs
3. A certified check or money order (No personal checks are accepted) for the application fee (\$340), payable to Department of Homeland Security; on the memo line put your name, I-94 number, and "I-765 application."
4. Your passport, I-94 card, all I-20s, and all EAD cards.
5. If you have a job offer, bring the formal job offer letter with you, it will help expedite the application process.

An international student advisor will review all the forms, answer any remaining questions you may have, make copies, and enter data into the SEVIS system recommending the training. A new I-20 will be issued to you with the recommended dates for OPT. This is **NOT** authorization for you to work.

Once OPT is granted, it may not be changed or stopped. Be very sure of the dates you want. An unexpected delay in completing degree requirements, the inability to find an appropriate job or the loss of a job will not change the dates that you are allowed to work. Once permission to work begins it continues until the expiration date and cannot be changed.

While on OPT

Students are still considered to be in F-1 status while on OPT, OIP will continue to assist you if you have concerns or questions

You may begin working:

- Only upon receiving the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from USDHS;
- Only during the dates listed on the card (with the exception of the CAP-GAP PREVENTION, which will be discussed separately); and
- Only upon completion of all degree requirement.
- Students must work in their major field of study, as noted on their I-20
- Students may work for one or more employers, change jobs, or look for work (up to 90 days) during OPT
- There are no maximum limits on the number of hours per week students can work while on OPT, but students must work for at least 20 hours per week while on OPT.
- You must continue to verify your information in SEVIS every 6 months,
- Report any change in name, address, employment, immigration status, any interruption of employment (including a return to studies) to OIP within 10 days of your change. OIP needs to update this information in SEVIS.

Unemployment Issues:

- You may not accumulate a total of more than 90 days of unemployment (120 days for students with STEM extension)
- Unemployment of 10 days or less when changing jobs does NOT need to be reported to OIP, and does NOT count towards the 90 day total days of unemployment
- This 10 day exception also applies to the first 10 days from the start date on the EAD
- Days spent outside the U.S. while unemployed count towards the 90 days of unemployment permitted.
- Students who are unemployed for more than 90 days will be considered out of status.
- Failure to report interruptions of employment or accruing more than 90 days of unemployment may result in USDHS not approving future benefits or request.

Traveling Issues:

While employed, if you are traveling outside the U.S. for a vacation or for business, those dates outside the US. do not count as days of unemployment.

Traveling outside the U.S. after your OPT has been approved AND after the completion date on your I-20, you must take with you:

- Your most current I-20 endorsed for travel by OIP (each travel signature is valid for only 6 months during the period of OPT)
- Your valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- A valid passport (at least 6 months into the future from the date of re-entry to the

- U.S.)
- A valid F-1 visa stamp
 - Job offer letter or employment letter showing that you are hired or currently working in your major field of study and will be returning to the U.S. to resume employment

Traveling outside of the U.S. while waiting for your OPT to be approved and **before you complete your degree**, take these items with you:

- A valid passport (at least 6 months into the future from the date of re-entry to the U.S.)
- A valid F-1 visa stamp
- Your most current I-20 with travel signature (valid for 6 months during OPT)
- I-797 receipt notice for pending OPT

Traveling outside the U.S. while waiting for your OPT to be approved **AND AFTER** your degree completion:

OIP does not recommend students to travel outside the U.S. in this case as it is risky and you may not be allowed to reenter to the U.S.

Also, please note that it is very difficult to apply for an F-1 visa while on OPT.

Please see an advisor to discuss your travel options.

After OPT

- You have a 60-day grace period after the last day listed on your EAD. You may not work during your grace period but you may stay in the U.S. legally to prepare for your departure, to begin a new program of study or to submit an application for a change of status.

CAP-GAP Prevention:

- 1) If an H-1 B application is pending or approved for your H-1B cap-subject employer, you may continue your employment until your employment start date (October 1 of the following fiscal year) or until your application is denied. The CAP-GAP work authorization continuation only applies in cases where the H-1 B petition is filed BEFORE the EAD expires. In this case, the permission to allow student to continue to work is automatic and no new EAD will be issued. The student should contact OIP to issue a new I-20 to prove your work authorization during this period.
- 2) If the EAD expires before the H-1B petition is filed, but the student is still within the 60- day grace period, that student may stay in the U.S. until a decision on the H-1B petition is reached; however, that student may not work.

OPT STEM Extension

(See separate handout or check our web site for details)

Please keep this handout with your immigration documents for future references.