

Valparaiso University Office of International Programs (OIP) Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) (valpo.edu/international/current-students/employment/opt/)

Overview

Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide students in F-1 status with an opportunity to gain actual employment experience after degree completion 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. The OIP only recommends OPT for students, creating an "OPT Requested" I-20 which the student then uses to apply to USCIS.
- It takes approximately 3 months to receive authorization from USCIS.
- 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 master's degree if you do multiple undergraduate degrees or multiple master's degree.

Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible to apply for OPT, you must:

- be in full-time student status for **1 full semester year (Fall and Spring semesters)**. Time spent at ESL programs 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 for a semester you are authorized for Reduced Course Load);
- possess a valid, unexpired passport;
- possess an I-20 that is unexpired and reflects 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 report your employment to SEVP. See the following link:
<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevp-portal-help>

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 may shorten your total 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 requirements is NOT necessarily your 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 research, 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 (www.uscis.gov). In general, expect that the OPT application will take up to three months to be approved.

How to Apply For “OPT Requested” I-20

- Attend OPT workshop.
- Login on to [iValpo](#), find the OPT Application e-form under the Practical Training tab.
- Complete the form, attaching the necessary documents.
- Fill in your academic advisor’s name and email. The form will be routed to him/her for approval.
- Once your academic advisor approves the e-form, it will be routed to the OIP advisor. When the OIP advisor approves the OPT request, you will receive an email notification that your OPT Requested I-20 has been created & with instructions on how to access the I-20.

NOTE: You may receive an email from the OIP advisor requesting more information or documents. Please respond to that message immediately, as **no further action will be taken on your OPT request until you respond.**

Prepare the following to apply for OPT to USCIS with the “OPT Requested” I-20:

1. Completed I-765 (find latest version at uscis.gov/i-765)
 - a. For online application, you will be required to answer the I-765 questions online instead of attaching the actual form.
2. Two passport style photographs, taken within 30 days of application.
 - a. Print your name and SEVIS ID on the back of your pictures, put them in a small envelope.
3. Application fee of \$520 (paper) or \$470 (online). ([CHECK USCIS WEBSITE](#) for most current fee information!) If you are applying through paper mail, possible payment methods include...
 - a. Money order or personal check
 - i. Payable to **Department of Homeland Security**; on the memo line put your SEVIS ID and the words “I-765 application.” For a check, also write your name if it is not already there.
 - ii. **Important:** If you choose to pay with a personal check, make sure there are sufficient funds in your account and that you do not close your bank account until the Department of Homeland Security cashes your check.
 - b. Credit card
 - i. Fill out the G-1450 form (download from USCIS.gov website)
4. Copies (**not originals!**) of the following documents: the informational page of your passport, F1 Visa, I-94 printout, and EAD cards (if any).
5. If you have a job offer, prepare the formal job offer letter; it may help expedite the application process.

Important:

- If you apply to USCIS through physical/paper mail, make photocopies of each item in the application packet for your records.
- **Whether you apply online or through physical mail, the application MUST BE RECEIVED by USCIS no later than 30 days after the OPT I-20 is printed.**
- When you fill out the I-765, either online or the PDF copy, make sure that you will still be able to receive mail at the “mailing address” you list in 3 to 4 months’ time.
- Remember, your OPT I-20 is **NOT** authorization for you to work. Only your final EAD card gives you work authorization.
- 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.

If you apply online to USCIS for OPT

- Go to <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>, scroll down to “File Online”
- Create a USCIS account and submit your application online for OPT.
- Benefits of applying online:
 - The fee for \$470 accepted/rejected immediately through online payment,
 - You won’t have to deal with mailing delays,
 - The online application processing time is usually faster than for the physical application.
- **But be careful!!** Do not apply online without the OPT Requested I-20, and make sure you are filling everything out correctly.

If you mail the physical/paper OPT application into the USCIS government office:

- Mail the entire final packet by certified/tracked mail to the Service Center listed below (regardless of your mailing address as listed on your I-765, you must use one of the addresses below):

If you are using the US Postal Service (USPS):

**USCIS
Attn: I-765 C03
P.O. Box 805373
Chicago, IL 60680-5374**

If you are using an express mail service (UPS, FedEx, DHL, etc):

**USCIS
Attn: I-765 C03 (Box 805373)
131 South Dearborn - 3rd Floor
Chicago, IL 60603-5517**

While on OPT

- Students are still considered to be in F-1 status while on OPT; the 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 USCIS;
 - 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 over 20 hours per week while on OPT.
- Report any change in name, address, employment, immigration status, or any interruption of employment (including a return to studies, termination of employment, or exiting the U.S.) to the OIP or SEVP within 10 days of the change. See this link (<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevp-portal-help>) for more details on what information can be directly updated to the SEVP portal.

Unemployment Issues:

- You may not accumulate a total of more than 90 days of unemployment (these 90 days including weekends & holidays, or in other words, any calendar days that you are not employed).
- 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 USCIS 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 U.S. 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)
 - A valid F-1 visa stamp
 - Employment letter showing that you are hired or 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)
 - 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 **if you have maintained full-time (over 20hr/week) OPT employment throughout your OPT period.** 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.
- **STEM OPT 24 month Extension**

See separate handout or check our website (<http://www.valpo.edu/international/current-students/employment/opt/>) for details

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