

International Student/Scholar Office  
University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
College of Health & Human Services Building, Room 202  
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## F1 Optional Practical Training (OPT)

### **What is it?**

Work experience related to a student's academic field of study. No job offer is necessary to apply. See FAQ section for further explanation.

### **When can it be used?**

#### During annual vacation and when school is not in session

Student must be currently enrolled, eligible and intending to register for the next term

#### While school is in session

Maximum of 20 hours per week

#### After completion of course requirements for degree

Must be completing all required coursework in Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD program (can have thesis or equivalent still in progress). May be full-time.

#### After completion of a course of study

All practical training must be completed within a 14-month period of time following completion of study.

### **How can I apply?**

#### **Step One**

Attend one of the required OPT information sessions presented by an ISSO advisor (Marian or Denise). These are posted at <http://www.isso.uncc.edu/optworkshop.htm>

#### **Step Two**

Complete the I-765 at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis> (go to 'immigration forms' then scroll down to I-765) & have 2 passport-style photographs taken [http://travel.state.gov/passport/guide/composition/composition\\_874.html](http://travel.state.gov/passport/guide/composition/composition_874.html) (Try AAA at the Boardwalk on J.W. Clay Blvd. for best quality photos.)

#### **Step Three**

Make copies of all of the documents below.

#### **Step Four**

Once you've attended an information session and decided on your OPT start date, submit your request for a new I-20 at [www.isso.uncc.edu/optdataform.htm](http://www.isso.uncc.edu/optdataform.htm) If you need help making this decision and would like to discuss this with an advisor, please schedule an appointment before proceeding.

\*For Master or PhD students who have completed all required coursework and will continue to enroll in thesis/dissertation after beginning OPT, it is critical that you first consult with an ISSO advisor regarding the end date on your I-20 and whether the work will be considered 'pre or post-completion' OPT.

**Once you click submit, go to the ISSO at one of the pre-scheduled times below and take your documents for review with an advisor. At that time, you will also collect your new I-20:**

- **Tuesdays and Fridays between 2-5pm. Please allow 2-3 days for processing.**

### Step Five

- Mail in the following documents **no more than 30 days of I-20 issuance** to:

**USCIS Service Center  
USCIS-TSC, P.O. Box 851041, Mesquite, TX 75185-1041**

- 1. Form I-765
- 2. A photocopy of page 1 and page 3 of the new I-20 with the ISSO advisor's recommendation for Optional Practical Training on page 3. Page 1 must be signed by you.
- 3. A copy of your first I-20 with port of entry stamp & any I-20s issued to you for work authorization (CPT/OPT)
- 4. A photocopy of both sides of your I-94 Card
- 5. A copy of photo page (identification page) of your passport with current expiration date
- 6. A copy of the visa page of your passport (even if expired)
- 7. A copy of your previous OPT card or other work card (EAD) if you have had one
- 8. Two passport type photographs. Print your name and date of birth on the back of each photo, put them in an envelope and attach to front of I-765.
- 9. **Fee of \$340.** Checks may be made payable to the Department of Homeland Security. You may send a money order or a personal check drawn on a U.S. bank, **NO CASH.** Attach the check to the front of the I-765.

Staple all above documents together and send by regular US mail (or **certified mail** with a return receipt if you want to track it). After your documents have been received, you will receive a notice (Form I-797) with a receipt number. You can track your status at [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov) In general, processing can be anywhere from 1-3 months.

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**TIPS ON FILLING OUT FORM I-765**

**Check first box “permission to accept employment”; fill out lines 1 through 16; sign and date**

**#3 Return Address:** This must be an address at which you can receive mail for at least the next 3 months. It can be either a residential address or our office address:  
International Student/Scholar Office  
9201 University City Blvd.  
UNC Charlotte  
Charlotte, NC 28223

You may not request a forwarding order on this address—the immigration service’s envelopes state “Do Not Forward.” If the card is sent to an address with a forwarding order, or if you cannot receive mail at the address you use, your card will be returned to the immigration service and destroyed. Also, you may not use a P.O. box as your address.

Additionally, the address you use as your return address must be in one of the following states for you to send the application to the Texas Service Center: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas.

**#10 Alien Registration Number:** in most cases you will use your I-94 number found on the I-94 card that you received when you entered the US (small white card in your passport)

**#11 Previous employment authorization:** The answer is “no” unless you have previously applied for an OPT card at this or any other institution. It is “no” even if you have had CPT or an H1B visa.

**#16 Eligibility Categories:** For F-1 OPT, fill out as follows:  
 **You will use your OPT PRIOR to graduating: ( c ) ( 3 ) ( A )**  
 **You will use your OPT POST graduation: ( c ) ( 3 ) ( B )**

**Certification:** Remember to sign and date the I-765

## **REPORTING REQUIREMENTS WHILE YOU ARE ON "OPT"**

Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on OPT, you **MUST** notify the ISSO when:

- you change your address
- you begin a new job (send the name and address of employer and start date of employment)

Do this by sending an email to [intlssso@uncc.edu](mailto:intlssso@uncc.edu)

## **TRAVELING ABROAD WHILE ON PRACTICAL TRAINING**

In order to re-enter the U.S. while you are on Optional Practical Training, you must have:

- a valid passport
- current F-1 visa stamp
- I-20 signed within the last six months
- the EAD (OPT work card)
- your job offer letter

## **OPT – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **1. What is F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field. OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The maximum amount of time granted to work on F-1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible 17 month extension for those who qualify. You may use some or all of the available 12 months of practical training during your course of study or save the full twelve months to use after you graduate.

### **2. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?**

Authorization for OPT is granted by USCIS and can take 1 - 3 months to obtain. Therefore it is important that you apply for the authorization well in advance of the date you wish to start working.

You may apply up to 90 days before your graduation date and **NO LATER THAN** 60 days beyond your graduation date (although don't wait until the last minute, as mail and processing times can be slow).

### **3. When can I begin fulltime OPT and how can I choose my start date?**

Undergraduate students may begin fulltime OPT upon successful completion of degree.

Graduate students may begin fulltime OPT upon successful completion of all required coursework.

- Thesis/dissertation may still be in progress while on OPT however must be completed within the 12 months of OPT. No extension of the I-20 may be granted if you do not graduate within that time.

With regard to choosing your start date, you should consider processing time, interview time, and any vacation time (if desired) before OPT begins. If you'd like to begin immediately then choose a date just after program completion but if you'd like to wait a little while (visit with family, etc) then choose a date within your 60-day window. Just understand that you can't predict the future and if you get an offer faster than anticipated, you will need to wait until your start date to begin work.

**REMEMBER: Once you select your OPT start date it is very difficult to change it and it is impossible once it has been approved.**

### **4. What are the Eligibility Requirements for F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

To be eligible to apply for Optional Practical Training you must: (1) have been in full time student status for at least one academic year (fall and spring), and (2) be maintaining valid F-1 status at the time of the application.

### **5. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of**

**study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?**

Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of Optional Practical Training after changing to a **higher degree level**.

**6. How can I use optional practical training while I am still in my program?**

You may use OPT while you are still in your degree program as follows: (1) part-time while school is in session, (2) full-time during annual vacation periods, and/or (3) full-time after you completed all course requirements for a graduate degree and have a thesis requirement remaining. These periods of OPT used before you graduate will be deducted from the total allowable period of 12 months. Part-time OPT will be deducted at one-half the full-time rate.

**7. Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?**

You do NOT need to have a job offer before applying for Optional Practical Training.

**8. Do I need to have a job while I am on optional practical training?**

Yes. Immigration regulation requires that you are employed while on your post-completion OPT period. You are required to update the ISSO of employer names and addresses, and dates of employment. Also, you are only allowed a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT.

**9. What defines “employment” while on OPT?**

For regular post-completion OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed, interning or volunteering at least 20 hrs/week in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of OPT employment.

**10. How do I know that my application is processing?**

You will receive a form I-797 (receipt notice) indicating that your application is processing. Using the receipt # you can check the status at [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov). Also, you can monitor the status of your check with your bank.

**11. What if I do not receive the EAD within the 90 day processing time?**

If you have not received your EAD within 90 days of the receipt date on your I-797 receipt notice and you have a job offer then you may be eligible for expedited service. Please see an advisor in the ISSO for assistance.

**12. Can I change employers?**

You may change employers after you have begun authorized employment provided that the new job is: 1) directly related to your major field of study; and 2) appropriate for someone having your level of education.

**13. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?**

You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS; working before practical training has been authorized by the USCIS constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

**14. Will I have to pay taxes?**

Employment is subject to all federal and state taxes, unless exempt under certain country tax treaties. Employment is not subject to Social Security Tax if residency in the U.S. has been for less than five (5) years.

**15. Do I have to do anything with the ISSO while I am on OPT?**

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on OPT, you **MUST** notify the ISSO when you change your address **AND** your employer names, addresses, and dates of employment by sending an email to [intlssso@uncc.edu](mailto:intlssso@uncc.edu).

**16. How can I find out about the 17-month ‘STEM’ extension?**

To find out if you qualify and to learn how to apply for the 17 month extension of your OPT go to <http://www.issso.uncc.edu/STEM%20information%20&%20instructions.pdf>.

### **17. What do I do after my OPT is over?**

After your OPT is over, you have 60 days to go back to your home country unless your status has been changed or extended. You may not work during these 60 days nor should you travel outside the U.S and re-enter during this time.

### **18. What if I change my status to H-1B?**

Please fax or email the ISSO a copy of your I-797 Approval Notice since you are required to notify us and we are required to update the SEVIS system with your new status. Also, if your OPT ends prior to the H-1B start date, you may request a new I-20 from the ISSO for the ‘cap-gap’ extension. Please provide a copy of your H-1B approval or waitlist notice.

## **TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING**

### **19. Now that I’ve turned in my application, can I travel outside the U.S. while I wait for the card to come?**

**After you graduate, you will NOT be able to re-enter the U.S. without your OPT card in addition to your valid passport, current F-1 visa stamp, I-20 signed within the last six months, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.**

**Before you graduate, you should be able to get back in to the U.S. without the OPT card as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation (at least one month). If you have to travel, talk to an advisor at the ISSO before you leave.**

### **20. I want to leave the U.S. for a little while during the time my OPT application is in process, but I need to return long before the card will have arrived. I have a tourist visa (B – 2) that is valid for 10 years. Can’t I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I’m waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?**

If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with a B visa, you will have an I-94 card that shows that you have been admitted under B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status. Hence, your OPT application and card will be **invalid**. If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1.

### **21. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?**

You will need your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by the ISSO within the last 6 months; the Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) from the USCIS, your valid passport, a **current F-1 visa stamp, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.**

### **22. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?**

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with your I-94 card, a valid passport, your EAD card, an I-20 that has been signed by the ISSO within the last 6 months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment** as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, Cuba or North Korea. **If you are traveling elsewhere, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. Please come in to the ISSO** to discuss your visa application with an advisor as the consulates often change the requirements for visa applications for students on OPT.

### **23. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?**

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training is higher than while you are in your active student program, as it may be seen as an avenue for gaining permanent residence in the U.S. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. If you need to apply for a new visa, please see an advisor in the ISSO to make sure you have the most up to date information about what documents are required.

### **24. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?**

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD card or receipt notice for your application, an I-20 created by the ISSO for your OPT application, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.** The official job offer letter should state that the job is truly temporary and will end before or by the end of your practical training time. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.