Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) provides an F-1 visa holder with an opportunity to gain 12 months of employment experience in his/her major area of study. The OPT time can be used all at once (12 months) or in shorter increments during the school year (part-time), summer vacations (part-time or full-time), or after graduation (full-time). Employment while on OPT must be related to your major field of study. A job offer is not required to apply for OPT, but you must obtain authorization by the USCIS prior to beginning employment. OPT is granted for specific dates and cannot be adjusted after it is approved. Once the application is submitted, please allow 90 days for processing.

There are three types of OPT (listed below). Please review the following information to determine which OPT type fits your situation.

1. **Pre-completion OPT** is used during the F-1 visa holder's program of study (before the end date on the I-20 form), and is either part-time while studying or full or part-time during annual vacations (summer).
   To apply for Pre-completion OPT, prepare all the documents as outlined in the OPT packet, then schedule a meeting with one of the ISSS advisors.

2. **Post-completion OPT** is used after the F-1 visa holder has completed his/her program of study, however it is recommended that you apply before the end date on your I-20 form. You may apply for Post-completion OPT up until 60 days after the completion date listed on your I-20.
   To apply for Post-completion OPT, attend one of the OPT session at least 3 months before graduation. The OPT session will include a presentation on the application process, covering the details regarding OPT, time for questions, and the OPT packet, which includes the graduation verification form that must be completed by the Registrar's Office.

3. **OPT STEM Extension** is for F-1 visa holders who majored in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM), have a job in the STEM field, and the employer must be enrolled in E-Verify, an internet-based system operated by the U.S. government used to verify employment eligibility of new hires. The extension is for an additional 17 months.
   To apply for OPT STEM Extension, prepare all the documents as outlined in the OPT packet, including an official school transcript. Applications for OPT STEM Extension must be received by USCIS prior to the expiration date of the current Post-completion OPT.

Employment Rules

- You MAY NOT work before you receive the EAD card or before the start date on the EAD card.
  - You should receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) within 3-4 months from the date on the receipt notice. If it is not received in this time, contact ISSS.
- Employment must be directly related to your major field of study.
- You may not be unemployed for more than **90 days** in total while on OPT.
- Volunteering/working an unpaid internship for at least 20 hours per week in your major field of study is considered employment.

1

Reporting Requirements

While on OPT, you will continue in F-1 visa status under the sponsorship of James Madison University, and as such, you must maintain your visa status:

➔ Report **employer name** and **address**, **part-time** (less than 20 hours per week) or **full-time** employment (20-40 hours per week), and **start date** to ISSS <u>immediately</u> upon accepting employment.
  - Provide ISSS with a statement about how the employment is related to your major.

- Inform ISSS of a change in employment <u>immediately</u> and report all criteria listed above, including end date of previous employment.
- Inform ISSS of a change of name or address within 10 days.
- Maintain your medical insurance coverage.
- Keep all immigration documents safe and valid.
- STEM OPT students: verify your information every 6 months with ISSS.

Travel

Before departing the U.S., it is strongly recommended that you contact ISSS advisor about your particular travel situation, as every situation is unique. Below are general reentry guidelines to consider before departing the U.S. while on OPT.

<u>Items needed for reentry to the U.S. while on OPT</u>:
- A valid passport; valid at least 6 months into the future
- A valid visa to reenter the U.S.
- Your most recent Form I-20 with travel signature from an ISSS staff member
- Your valid EAD (Employment Authorization Document), if OPT has been approved
- Letter of employment, if OPT has been approved

➔ **ISSS strongly suggests that you do NOT travel outside of the U.S. while your OPT application is pending <u>and</u> before you secure employment.**

If you intend to leave the U.S. permanently, inform ISSS of your departure date.

The following two questions are of particular interest while traveling on OPT. The answers are from the ICE website on Travel. Again, consult the ISSS staff before traveling.

1. Can I reenter if my request for Post-Completion OPT is pending?

Yes, but traveling during this time should be undertaken with caution. USCIS may send you a request for evidence while you are away, however, so you would want to make sure you have provided a correct U.S. address both to your DSO and on the application and would be able to send in requested documents. Also, if USCIS approves your OPT application, you will be expected to have your EAD in hand to re-enter the United States. Like a request for further information, USCIS can only send the EAD to your U.S. address.

2. Can I reenter if I left while on Post-Completion OPT?

If USCIS has approved your OPT you will be expected to have your EAD in hand to re-enter the United States, in addition to your Form I-20, valid passport and visa, and a letter of employment... If you exceed the limits on unemployment while outside the United States, you will not be eligible to re-enter the United States in F-1 status.

OPT Application Process

For Pre-Completion OPT and STEM Extension applicants: please email ISSS to begin the process.

For Post-Completion OPT applicants: once the Verification of Graduation letter is received from the Office of the Registrar, ISSS will contact you to schedule a meeting to complete the OPT application.

<u>Documentation needed for Pre, Post, and STEM Extension OPT application</u>:

Submit the following items when applying for OPT:

- Copies of all **SEVIS I-20's**

- Copies of the ID page in your **Passport,** plus visa and entry stamp

- The **I-94 document**, which can be retrieved from: https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/request.html

- A completed **Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization**
    - Retrieve from: https://www.uscis.gov/i-765.
    - Use blue ink and print neatly.
    - Question 3: use an address where you can receive mail for 4-5 months after your application is submitted, as USCIS mail is not forwarded.
    - Question 16:
        - o Pre-completion OPT – enter (C)(3)(**A**)
        - o Post-completion OPT – enter (C)(3)(**B**)
        - o STEM OPT – enter (C)(3)(**C**) and answer question 17

- **$380.00 application fee** in personal check or money order
    - Payable to: **US Department of Homeland Security**
    - In memo line write SEVIS ID #

- **Two passport-sized photos** (2 inches by 2 inches) taken within the past 6 months
    - Write SEVIS # lightly on the back.
    - Photos can be taken at a pharmacy, such as CVS, or Walmart.

- Copies of front and back of previous **Employment Authorization Document (EAD)** card(s), if issued

For Post-Completion OPT include the following:

- Verification of Graduation letter from the Office of the Registrar (request form in this packet)

- *When would you like your OPT to begin?* Pick a <u>start date</u> within the 60 days after the completion date on your I-20 form. See OPT Timeline in this packet.

For STEM OPT include the following:

- An official school transcript with degree and STEM field listed

738 South Mason Street- MSC 3528 • Harrisonburg, VA 22807 • (540) 568-6281 phone • (540)568-5615 fax •clientservices@jmu.edu

Letter Request

Full Name: _____
first   middle   last   (maiden)

Indicate the information to be verified in the letter (enrollment status, degree, class rank, etc.):

_____ OIP-ISSS graduation requirement verification _____

_____

Please provide the following:

Student ID #:   _____

Date of Birth: _____

Phone #:   _____

Email: _____

Number of copies: _____

Graduation date: _____

(Letters can only be faxed or mailed.)
Please send a letter to:
_____

International Student & Scholar Services
JMAC 6, Suite 23, MSC 5731
Harrisonburg, VA 22807

_____

_____

Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

*JMU can only verify enrollment for current and past semesters; **future enrollment cannot be verified.***

OPT TIMELINE

Depart U.S.

End date on 12 month EAD card

Graduation date

OPT

60 days

60 days

Application window
90 days

Apply up to 3 months before graduation

Can choose any day within 60 day window after graduation for OPT start date.

OPT employment of 12 months
- Cannot accrue more than 90 days aggregate total of unemployment during 12 months
- If eligible , can file for STEM 17-month extension. Must file before expiration of EAD card

60 day grace period to either leave U.S, transfer to another school, or change to another visa category.

Please note, if you are remaining in the US for the grace period you **cannot leave and re-enter.