

Purpose

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide students with an opportunity to gain practical experience in the field of their studies. The OPT application requires approval from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) prior to the beginning date of the practical training, or before the program end-date listed on your I-20. Remember, the program end-date is the last day of the final quarter for which you will be registered.

How to Apply

1. Attend a mandatory OPT workshop – see our website for the [schedule](#). At the end of the session, you will receive a workshop certificate.
2. Complete the Adviser's Recommendation Form. (This will require information and a signature from your Academic Adviser).
3. Come to Walk-In Appointment Hours to submit your application directly to your International Adviser. Please bring your completed OPT application, including the following:
 - a. OPT Workshop Certificate;
 - b. Application for Employment Authorization;
 - c. Completed [Form I-765](#);
 - d. Photocopies of the following:
 - i. Your first I-20 from Northwestern (or an I-20 that was stamped by a border official more than one year ago);
 - ii. Any I-20's listing Curricular Practical Training (p. 3);
 - iii. Front and back of current I-94 card;
 - iv. Passport biographic page;
 - v. U.S. visa stamp; and
 - vi. Any previously issued Employment Authorization Documents or other USCIS approved employment authorizations.
 - e. Check or money order in the amount of \$340 made payable to the Department of Homeland Security; and
 - f. Two passport photos with your name and I-94 number written on the back.
4. Your adviser will review your documents and then submit your request for OPT to SEVIS. Generally, this process will take 3-4 days if all is submitted during the appointment.
5. Once completed, return to the International Office to retrieve two new I-20's. Sign both of them! On page three of these I-20's are the requested dates of employment. Keep one I-20 and submit the other with your completed OPT application (see above list).
6. Prior to mailing, make a photocopy of your entire application.
7. Mail the packet to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. We recommend using US Postal Service Certified Mail with return receipt. Do not use UPS or FedEx because you are sending your application to a P.O. Box.

USCIS Service Center
P.O. Box 87765
Lincoln, NE 68501-7765

Note on non-Illinois addresses: If the address on line 3 of the form I-765 is not in Illinois, check the table on pages 8-9 of the instructions for the form I-765 to confirm the proper mailing address.

FAQ's

What are the eligibility requirements to apply for OPT?

- Student must have been in lawful full-time status for full academic year;
- Training must be related to the student's major area of studies;
- A total of twelve months of training is available (regardless of the number of degrees awarded); and
- Student must attend an [Employment Workshop](#)

When should I apply?

Your application must be received by the USCIS before your program end-date. However, an application may be received by the USCIS up to 120 days prior to the end-date listed on your I-20. Plan ahead as an application may take anywhere from 90-120 days to process.

How much time am I eligible for?

A total of twelve months of training is available per education level. However, any pre-completion OPT will be deducted from this period when applying for post-completion OPT. Part-time OPT will be deducted at half the full-time rate. Likewise, if you have used 12-months of full-time CPT (Curricular Practical Training), you will no longer be eligible for OPT.

Do I have to have a job to apply for OPT?

No specific job offer is required to apply for OPT.

Can I begin working while my application is pending?

No. You can begin working only after you receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) and only then on the start-date. You may not begin working even if you receive the card prior to the start date.

Do I have to pay taxes?

F-1 international students are exempt from paying Social Security and Medicare taxes during the first 5 years in the U.S. (See *IRS Publication 519 U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens*). After 5 years in the United States you will become a "resident" for tax purposes and are subject to paying all taxes.

Can I travel after I've applied for OPT? What about when I'm on OPT?

If you plan to travel after you have sent your application to USCIS, but before the end-date listed on your I-20, please carry the following:

- I-20 with a travel signature within the past year;
- Valid passport (six months into the future); and
- Valid F-1 visa stamp.

If you plan to travel after applying for OPT and after the program end-date listed on your I-20, you must have the above listed items and the following additional items:

- EAD card; and
- An employment offer letter.

What about traveling after my visa stamp has expired?

If you do not have a valid F1 visa and you leave the U.S., you will need to obtain one prior to your return, unless you travel to Canada, Mexico, or the contiguous territories for less than 30 days. For more information please see the Travel Information page on the International Office website.

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Completed Application Checklist

Student's Name: _____ EMPLID:

Incomplete applications will not be accepted or processed.

- OPT workshop certificate.
- Completed Advisor's Recommendation Form.
- Completed form I-765.
- Photocopy of the first I-20 issued to you by Northwestern University – if you have misplaced your first I-20, please turn in an I-20 that was stamped at the port of entry more than one year ago.
- Photocopies of all I-20s issued for previously approved periods of full or part time Curricular Practical Training or letter addressed to the USCIS.
- Photocopy of the front and back of your I-94 card.
- Photocopy of your passport biographic page.
- Photocopy of your U.S. visa stamp.
- Check or money order for \$340 payable to Department of Homeland Security.
- Two passport style photos. Print your name and I-94 number on the back of each in pencil.
- If applicable*, photocopy (front and back) of previously issued Employment Authorization Documents or other USCIS Service Center approved employment authorization.