

Office of Global Engagement Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an F-1 student benefit that allows you to gain **employment experience in your field of study** for up to 12 months. Its purpose is to complement or “round out” your academic work. You may apply for OPT during or after each level of study (Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Professional, Master’s, and Doctorate).

Am I Eligible for OPT?

- You must currently be in lawful F-1 status, holding an unexpired passport and I-20.
- You must have maintained lawful F-1 status for a minimum of nine months leading up to your OPT application.
- You must not have previously exhausted your 12-month OPT benefit for your current degree.
- You must not have engaged in Curricular Practical Training (CPT) for more than 11.5 months.
- Your department must verify your intended program completion date and must recommend you for OPT (form letter provided in this packet).
- You must plan ahead so you can get the OPT by when you intend to be able to start working (an immigration advisor in the Office of Global Engagement (OGE) can answer any questions you may have).

Two Types of Optional Practical Training

1. **Pre-Completion OPT** (Before completion of the degree)
 - During the school year: Students may apply for part-time optional practical training which permits them to work up to 20 hours per week. Part-time OPT is deducted from the 12 month limit at 50%. Thus, 2 months of part-time OPT would count as 1 month deduction from the available 12 months.
 - During vacation periods: OPT may be either part-time or full-time.
 - After completion of all course requirements for a degree (except thesis or dissertation): OPT may be either part-time or full-time. Students must be registered each semester on thesis or dissertation status.
2. **Post-Completion OPT** (After completion of the degree)
After completion of the degree, OPT must be authorized full-time (but you may work part-time or full-time).

Applying for OPT

All checklist items listed directly below must be done in order to complete the OPT process.

Bring the following items with you to your OPT appointment (scheduled by calling OGE at 435-797-1124):

- The completed I-765 Form.
- The completed Departmental Recommendation form which is available on our website at <http://globalengagement.usu.edu/iss/html/current-students/international-student-forms> for Post-completion OPT, when you have completed the form it will be routed for signature via DocuSign. Make a photocopy for your records.
- All I-20s ever issued to you, including those from previous schools, please **bring copies and originals**.

- Your passport, F-1 visa, and I-94 card **and copies** (I-94 is usually stapled inside your passport)
- Any employment authorization cards you may have previously received (OPT, economic hardship, etc.)
- Two passport-style photographs taken no earlier than 30 days prior to submitting your application to DHS, and made according to the instructions in this packet.
- \$410 check or money order made payable to Department of Homeland Security. In the subject or memo line, write I-765 (can be found online).
- If you would like to be notified by USCIS via email and/or text message that your Form I-765 has been accepted, simply complete an E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance ([Form G-1145](#)), and attach it to the first page of your Form I-765 application.

! To be better prepared for your OPT appointment, please also complete the application checklist below before setting an appointment.

- Verify that the majors listed on (1) your Departmental Recommendation form; (2) your USU student (BANNER) record; and (3) your most recent I-20 are the same.
- Download and complete the current I-765 form (<http://www.uscis.gov/i-765>)
When completing the I-765 form:
 - Check the box indicating that you are applying for “permission to accept employment.”
 - For Item 1, write your family name [last or surname] in ALL CAPS.
 - For Item 3 (*very important*), use the mailing address of the ISS office to receive your OPT card, which is as follows:

[Your Full Name]
Utah State University
9545 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-9545
- If you have no response for a particular item, write “N/A”.
- For Item 16,
 - Enter (c) (3) (A). For Pre-Completion OPT
 - Enter (c) (3) (B). For Post-Completion OPT
- Be sure to sign the form **IN BLUE INK and between the lines, not letting it touch the lines** and provide your telephone number and the date you signed.
- Read all information herein so you are prepared to ask any remaining questions you may have.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

What Is CPT?

Curricular Practical Training (CPT) is similar to OPT in that both of these benefits permit students to obtain paid, off-campus **employment related to one’s major**. However, CPT precedes OPT, not the reverse, and cannot exceed 11.5 months, total in order to apply for OPT.

What Are My OPT Options?

1. The most common option is “post-completion” OPT, which is full-time (more than 20 hours per week) students can apply for “post completion” OPT if one of the following is true:
 - a. It is your semester of completion, or
 - b. You have a finalized defense date, that your major professor has approved, or
 - c. You have a job offer, a finalized defense date, your major professor and department head have approved

2. Students may also participate in “pre-completion” OPT, which takes place:
 - a. Part-time (20 hours per week or fewer) while school is in session and student is enrolled full-time,
 - b. Part- or full-time after completion of all required coursework, excluding graduate credits for work on thesis, project, or dissertation, or
 - c. Part- or full-time during annual vacation semesters and periods when school is not in session.

Students seeking pre-completion OPT should secure a job offer before applying for OPT so that employment time will not be lost. OPT employment may be anywhere in the U.S. as long as certain conditions are met, like maintaining status.

Are There Any Limits to OPT?

Students are permitted to engage in a combination of the above OPT types if they choose, not to exceed 12 months total.

When Can I Apply for OPT?

1. The *post-completion OPT* application must be received by USCIS **before the end of the 60-day grace period** following the completion date of the current program of enrollment. The completion date is generally the official last date of the term in which all degree requirements have been fulfilled (e.g., when the Library binding receipt for a thesis or dissertation has been returned to the School of Graduate Studies (SGS)) and not the date on which the degree is conferred. USCIS will deny any application received after the end of your 60-day grace period.
2. You should apply for *pre-completion OPT* **no more than 90 days** before the date you wish to begin employment.

!Graduate Students

Because of the confusion among graduate students who have applied for OPT and their misunderstanding of the amount of time needed to complete their degrees during the ending stage (after the final defense), the School of Graduate Studies and the OGE use the following guidelines when a student completes his or her program:

•**Doctoral and Plan A Master’s (Thesis) students** may apply for Post-completion OPT

1. *After the thesis or dissertation has been delivered to the SGS for review.*
2. *If you have a job offer and a defense date no more than 90 days before the date you wish to begin employment.*

(See other instructions below under Doctoral/Plan A Students.)

•**Plan B Master’s students** may apply for Post-completion OPT after a successful defense.

•**Plan C Master’s students or Professional Degree students** may apply for OPT at midterm of final semester (no more than 90 days before semester end).

!Doctoral/Plan A (Thesis) Master’s Students: The process after a defense can be long and is dependent upon committee and student schedules, especially for Doctoral/Plan A graduate students. Such students must accomplish the following steps:

- Secure corrections from your committee on a draft dissertation or thesis as soon as possible.
- Set a defense date.
- Defend.
- Make any remaining corrections that your committee requests during/after defense.
- Have your department reviewer go over your document.
- Make any corrections from the department reviewer.

- Turn in OPT request AND the corrected thesis or dissertation to the School of Graduate Studies.
- **Have the SGS sign the form. Bring the form to the OGE OPT appointment.**

What Happens after My OGE Appointment/OPT Application?

Keep in mind that the ISS recommends your approval for OPT and helps you through the process, but only the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can approve your application. Therefore, after an OGE advisor has processed your application, you are still responsible to send it to DHS and wait for approval in the form of the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card.

About two weeks after you mail your OPT application to the DHS, you will receive a Notice of Action (or **receipt**). The letter will give you a receipt number that begins with *LIN*. You may use that number to check the case status of your application at [My Case Status](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard/CaseStatus.do). (<https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard/CaseStatus.do>)

If your application is approved, DHS will send your EAD card via postal mail to the address you provided on your I-765 form. DHS is permitted to take up to 120 days to issue your card. Wait times are generally shorter, however, and most students receive their cards within two to three months. **If you have waited more than 90 days for your OPT card, please notify an ISS advisor for assistance.**

What Else Do I Need to Know?

1. **STATUS MAINTENANCE:** During the OPT application process, your department will have verified your program completion date. The OGE shortens the expiration date on your I-20 to reflect this completion date.

! If you then fail to complete your program as planned, your I-20 will expire and you will fall out of status. Therefore, if you apply for OPT and then later realize that you will not complete your program by the date indicated in your application, you MUST speak with an immigration advisor BEFORE your shortened expiration date.

2. **EMPLOYMENT RELATED TO MAJOR:** According to immigration regulations, **OPT employment must be directly related to your major field of study** and it must be appropriate for someone having your level of education.

3. **OBLIGATION TO INFORM:** During your OPT employment; you will remain as an F-1 student sponsored by USU. Therefore, you remain obligated to inform the OGE of:
 - Any change in your address (within 10 days of the change)
 - Any change in your visa status
 - Any plan to add dependents to, or remove dependents from, your SEVIS record

4. **EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION DATES:** Your OPT employment is considered temporary and is valid *only* for the dates indicated on your OPT card. **It is your sole responsibility to restrict your employment to these authorized dates. Additionally, it is your sole responsibility to postpone your employment start date until your OPT card has been delivered to you.**

! Be aware that all employment you hold will be recorded on U.S. tax records and that working before or after your authorized dates is one of the most serious immigration offenses you can commit.

5. **AFTER OPT COMPLETION:** Following the completion of OPT or extension of STEM OPT, you will have a *60-day grace period* before your lawful F-1 status expires. Within that 60-day period you must (1) be admitted to another degree program and receive an I-20, or (2) apply for a change of visa status, or (3) depart the U.S. You may *not* be employed during your grace period.

What if I Want to Travel Outside the United States after Applying for the OPT Card?

When traveling outside the United States, you must carry your OPT (EAD) card, a valid passport, current visa, and valid I-20 signed *for travel* no more than six months prior to your departure. You must also be employed and returning to a job in the U.S. A letter from your employer on company letterhead is required as proof of your employment.

According to immigration regulations, you must be employed or be actively seeking employment during your authorized OPT period. If you *must* travel outside the U.S. after you have submitted your OPT application to DHS but before you have received your EAD card, please consult the ISS for the most recent travel advice. Please also consult the OGE if you wish to travel and have received your EAD card, but have not obtained employment. Travel outside the U.S. under these circumstances is very risky and your reentry into the U.S. is not guaranteed. Therefore, you are *strongly* advised to avoid such travel whenever possible.

(end FAQs)

Additional Information about Tax Withholdings and Social Security

- On-campus Employment: Earnings of international employees working in the U.S. are subject to certain tax withholdings. Withholdings vary depending on the employee's visa type and country. Non-resident alien employees may not claim "exempt" status on the W-4 form. All international students and scholars employed by Utah State University must complete the appropriate tax forms in the Payroll Office at the onset of employment. Appointments can be made to complete these forms by contacting Paula Quay in Old Main, Room 026 (phone: 435-797-1058).
- Off-campus Employment: Tax treaty arrangements and tax withholdings for off-campus employment must be discussed with your employer. Your employer may determine the level of withholdings to which you will be subjected.

Where to Send Your Application Materials after Your OGE Appointment

Once an immigration advisor has processed your application and issued you a new I-20 with your OPT recommendation on the back, you should first photocopy all of the documents you will be sending to DHS (including your check or money order and the front and back of your passport photographs). Take care to keep your documents in the same order in which the OGE compiled them. *After making photocopies for your records, **send your original documents to:***

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
US Citizenship and Immigration Services
USCIS Phoenix Lockbox
P.O. BOX 21281
Phoenix, AZ 85036

You should obtain a manila envelope at the Post Office (in the Student Center), and put the above address in the middle (lengthwise). ***In the upper left-hand corner you'll put.***

[Your Name]
Utah State University
9545 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-9545

Expedited Delivery Address

Though DHS has indicated it is questionable whether any substantial time is gained from sending something as expedited mail (overnight or 2-day delivery), if you choose to mail your application this way you will want to use this address:

USCIS
Attn: AOS
1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S
Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85034

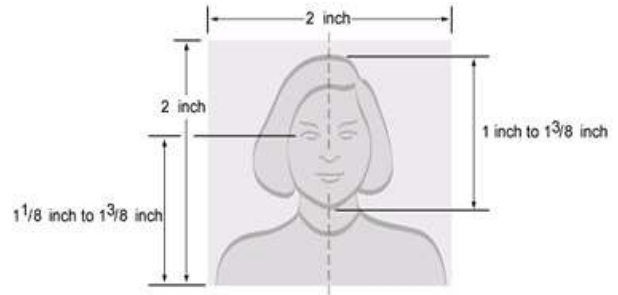
IMPORTANT to KNOW: *Your application must be received by DHS within 30 days of the date on which your new I-20 was printed.* Failure to meet this deadline could result in significant delays. Ask your immigration advisor about Certified Mail if you wish to track it for even the three days it may take to arrive at its initial destination. It used to be recommended that you send your application via Certified Mail and request a return receipt. However, DHS may actually be more delayed by having to sign and treat your package as special. The choice is up to you. The combined cost for both certified and expedited services will average around \$7.00.

Photo Composition Checklist

You may have your picture taken at a number of different places in Logan. Check the Yellow Pages phone book under *Passport* or *Photography* for locations. Please take these instructions with you to ensure that your picture is taken properly.

7 Steps to Successful Photos

- ✓ Frame subject with full face, front view, eyes open
- ✓ Make sure photo presents full head from top of hair to bottom of chin, height of head should measure 1 inch to 1 3/8 inches (25 mm to 35 mm)
- ✓ Center head within frame as in the figure to the right
- ✓ Make sure eye height is between 1 1/8 inches to 1 3/8 inches (28 mm and 35 mm) from bottom of photo
- ✓ Photograph subject against a plain white or off white background
- ✓ Position subject and lighting so that there are no distracting shadows on the face or background
- ✓ Encourage subject to have a natural expression



Sample Money Order

You may obtain a money order, with cash, from the Post Office, bank, grocery store, or other outlet. Payment may also be made by personal check. DHS charges are as follows:

- Optional practical training \$410
- Off-campus work (hardship) \$380
- J-2 work authorization \$380
- Reinstatement \$290
- Change of status \$370

