

International Services Office

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Guidelines

The goal of Optional Practical Training (OPT) is to provide international students with practical on-the-job experience that is directly related to the student's current field of study and degree level.

Eligibility Requirements

- You must have been maintaining your F-1 status for one full academic year and be in good academic standing.
- You must currently be in valid F-1 immigration status.

Available OPT Time Periods

- After completion of the degree program (last day of final examinations for most students)
- After completion of all course requirements for the degree if you are engaged in continuing thesis or dissertation research (full time).
- While school is in session, students can apply for *pre-completion OPT* for employment that does not exceed 20 hours per week.

Considerations When Applying for OPT

- You *do not* need a job offer in order to apply for OPT
- Time authorized for employment by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is considered time used, even if you did not work.
- Students in F-1 status are eligible to apply for up to 12 months of post-completion OPT for each progressive degree level attained (i.e., Bachelor's to Master's. Master's to PhD.,etc.)
- Pre-completion OPT counts against the amount of time available for post-completion OPT.
- If you have questions about the OPT process then please speak with an international student advisor or come to an ISO employment workshop.

Application Procedures

*OPT is recommended by the ISO but must be officially authorized by the USCIS. You will need to mail your OPT application so that it is **RECEIVED** by USCIS **BEFORE** the academic completion date of your specific program. Please keep in mind that **your specific program end date might differ from other students who are in different programs or schools at GW**. The program end date reflected on your I-20 (section 5) with the OPT recommendation on page 3 is the date by which your OPT application must be received by USCIS.*

To Request an OPT recommendation from the ISO, please submit the following documents:

1. Your **current SEVIS I-20 form** issued by GW and copies of **ALL previously issued I-20s** (all pages) from GW and prior institutions if applicable.
2. Legible photocopies of your **I-94 Card** (front & back).
3. Legible photocopies of your **Passport Biographic Identification, Expiration Date and Visa pages**.
4. A **Cover Letter** written by you, addressed to ISO (see sample letter included in this guideline).
5. Completed **USCIS form I-765** (available at the ISO or download the form from <http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/i-765.htm>).
6. A legible photocopy of the front and back of your **previous EAD card** (if applicable).
7. A **letter of certification** (on GW letterhead) addressed to the ISO from the **department chair** or from your **academic advisor**. The following information should be included:
 - a. An indication that your cover letter has been reviewed.
 - b. A brief description of your degree program and how the proposed practical training is directly related to your academic program and commensurate with the level of study listed on your I-20.
 - c. An explanation of the importance of Practical Training to round off your program.
 - d. **Expected date of program completion (generally official last day of exams for final term or dean approval of thesis / dissertation):** indication that you are making normal progress toward completion of your degree. (Consult with ISO advisor when completing program earlier than end of final term.)

8. If you are applying for Optional Practical Training before completion of studies and are in a thesis or dissertation program then please submit a letter from your academic advisor certifying that all course requirements for the degree have been met, excluding thesis or dissertation.

The USCIS can take several months to process your request, so please apply early! The ISO will notify you by e-mail if there is a problem or question about your application. Please allow 10 business days processing time after your request is complete. You will be notified via email when you can pick up your application from the ISO and submit it to the USCIS.

STEP 2: Submit OPT application to the USCIS

Collect your documents at the ISO front desk and **mail them to the USCIS with additional documents**. For details, see the “[Instructions for submitting a final OPT request to the USCIS](#)”. The instructions are included in this guideline. The instructions will be attached to your OPT recommendation from ISO. Please note that **it is your responsibility to collect your OPT documents and mail the OPT application to the USCIS**.

The ISO will NOT send your OPT application on your behalf. DEADLINE: The USCIS must receive your application not later than the date of your completion of study. They will deny your application if it is even one day late.

Receiving the USCIS Reply

- The USCIS will correspond with you at the address you listed on the I-765 form. The USCIS envelopes are NOT forwarded by the Post Office. If you are planning to move from that address, consult with an ISO advisor about what address to list on the form. Do not risk having your USCIS letters or your EAD card lost!
- If the USCIS has a question about your application, they will mail you a request for evidence indicating their question. Generally, you will have several weeks to reply. If you have questions about how to respond, please see an ISO advisor during on-call advising hours, Monday - Friday 1:30 pm - 5:00 pm.
- If the USCIS approves your application they will mail an EAD card, which includes the authorization dates, directly to you. The amount of time varies and can take as long as 60-120 days to receive the EAD card. **Please submit a legible copy of the front and back of your EAD card to the ISO front desk as soon as you receive it.**
- Once you have received the receipt notice, you can check the status of your application and see current processing dates online at <https://egov.immigration.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp>.

Travel Before and During Practical Training

- If you are requesting practical training after completion of your degree program, you may NOT re-enter the US without your EAD card. We advise students NOT to travel without your EAD card. If you have left the US and USCIS has a question or problem with your application, you will not be able to respond from outside the US.
- During your optional practical training period, it is important to **keep the ISO updated on any changes relevant to your immigration status** (e.g. change of address, name, OPT termination, change of status, etc.) You also need to have your **I-20 endorsed for travel by the ISO**, just as always. The ISO will need a copy of your **EAD card** to process the travel signature.
- When you travel, you are required to carry documentation that you have a job that is related to your field of study and commensurate with your level of study. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) may deny reentry to students on OPT who do not have employment.
- Please see an ISO advisor for information regarding travel on OPT.

OPT and Degree Program

You are not allowed to pursue a degree program while you are on post completion OPT. For more information, please attend an ISO Employment Workshop.

Students subject to Special Registration

If you are subject to Special Registration, the USCIS requires evidence of compliance with Special Registration procedures (commonly annotated on your I-94) with your OPT application documents. Failure to submit proper documentation could result in your case being rejected. For more information regarding Special Registration, refer to <http://www.ice.gov/graphics/specialregistration/index.htm>

International Services Office

Instructions for submitting final OPT request (Step 2)
to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)
(After receiving OPT recommendation from the ISO)

When your application for Optional Practical Training recommendation is processed, the ISO will return the following documents to you. You need to pick them up at the ISO front desk.

1. **Original I-765 form** (does not require ISO endorsement).
2. **I-20 form** with the recommendation for OPT endorsed on the third page. Please sign section 11 on page 1.

NOTE: Check to be sure that the dates of the recommendation are correct.

Your application to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must include the following documents:

1. **Original I-765 form**
2. Legible photocopy of your **current I-20** with OPT recommendation, (all pages)
3. Legible photocopies of **ALL previously issued I-20s** (all pages) from GW and prior institutions if applicable
4. Legible photocopy of your **I-94 card**, front and back (be sure the red USCIS stamp appears clearly on the copy)
5. Legible photocopy of your passport **identification/ signature page**
6. Legible photocopy of your passport **expiration page**
7. Legible photocopy of your **visa page**
8. An **official transcript** issued from the Registrar's Office
9. **Two passport style photos**. All photos must not be more than 30 days old when an application is filed. All photos must be in color. For detailed instructions on photo requirements please see U.S. Department of State website: http://travel.state.gov/passport/guide/guide_2081.html. Lightly print your name and your A#, if known, on the back of each photo with a pencil. The A# is a file number at USCIS. If you have previously filed applications at a Service Center, you may have this number. These two photos should be submitted to the USCIS in a small, "see-through" plastic bag.
10. **Check or money order for \$340. DO NOT send cash.** The check must be made out to "Department of Homeland Security". This fee might be updated in the future. Please contact the ISO for the current application fee or visit the USCIS website at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/> and check for I-765 application fee.
11. Evidence of Special Registration (usually annotated on I-94) if you are subject to Special Registration. For more information, please refer to <http://www.ice.gov/graphics/specialregistration/index.htm>

Make copies of your documents for your personal record. The USCIS must receive your application not later than **the date of your completion of study**. They will deny your application if it is even one day late.

Send your application by one of the following methods, so that you will be notified when the USCIS receives your documents:

- **FedEx**. You can log onto www.fedex.com to track your package and document delivery.
- **Certified mail, return receipt**. You will receive a signature card by mail when the documents arrive at the USCIS.
- **Priority mail, delivery confirmation**. You can log onto the Postal Service web site and document that the application arrived at the USCIS, then print out the delivery confirmation page as proof.

Students living in the metropolitan DC area (DC, Virginia, or Maryland) should mail the application to the USCIS at the following address:

**U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
Vermont Service Center
75 Lower Welden St.
Saint Albans, Vermont 05479**

Students living in other states should ask an ISO advisor for the USCIS address in their region of residence.

When the USCIS receives your documents, they will send a receipt notice to you at the address you listed on your I-765 form. Your EAD card will also be mailed to that same address up to four months after your application is received. It is very difficult to change your address with the USCIS, and the US Postal Service is NOT permitted to forward the EAD card to another address. If you are moving, or if delivery to the listed address is not reliable, see an ISO advisor before mailing your application. Keep the receipt notice in a safe place because it lists the document number that the USCIS will use to refer to your application in case they need to search for it.

You can **check your case status** by phone or online at www.uscis.gov by using your application receipt number, located in the top left corner on your receipt notice from the USCIS.

IMPORTANT: YOU MAY NOT ENGAGE IN ANY TYPE OF PRACTICAL TRAINING UNTIL YOU HAVE RECEIVED APPROVAL FROM THE USCIS AND HAVE RECEIVED YOUR EAD. ANY EMPLOYMENT PRIOR TO RECEIVING WRITTEN AUTHORIZATION WOULD BE CONSIDERED ILLEGAL.