

Western Carolina University / International Programs and Services

Overview of OPT

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is for F-1 students who wish to gain off-campus work experience directly related to their field of study. Eligibility for Optional Practical Training includes:

- 1) Student must have been in lawful F-1 status as a fulltime student for one full academic year. However, a student may submit the OPT application up to 90 days prior to being enrolled for one full academic year provided that the employment will not begin until the completion of the full academic year.
- 2) Time spent in a study abroad program may not exceed (5) months (outside the U.S.).
- 3) Student must apply prior to completion of study.
- 4) The training must be directly related to the student's field of study and commensurate with the student's educational level.
- 5) The training may occur during or after the program of study – part-time during the student's studies or fulltime during the vacation and holidays. OPT after course completion must be fulltime.
- 6) No job offer is required.
- 7) The training is limited to maximum of (12) months within the 14-month period following the completion of study after each level of education.

TIME RESTRICTIONS

Part-time employment is deducted at half the full-time rate. For example, a student may work full-time during summer break, part-time during the fall semester, and use the remaining time to work full-time after completion of his/her program. Students cannot re-apply or extend OPT once the twelve months have been used. Students who plan to continue in a new degree program can save OPT until graduation from the new program. Earning more than one degree does not increase the twelve months allowed for OPT.

Students may apply for OPT under the following categories:

1. Full-time during spring, summer, and winter breaks
2. Part-time (20 hours per week maximum) during the spring and fall semesters
3. Full-time after completion of all degree requirements

4. Full-time after completion of course requirements for a degree (i.e. Master's and Ph.D. students who have only thesis, dissertation, or independent study left)

Note that Ph.D. students may not apply for OPT after completing Master's requirements, unless they withdraw from their Ph.D. program.

OPT After Completion of Program

Graduating students may apply for OPT as early as 120 days before completion of all degree requirements, and up to 60 days after. It is not advisable to travel outside of the United States while an application is pending with the U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS), as USCIS views this as "abandoning an application." When traveling on OPT, always bring the I-20, the EAD card, and a letter of employment (not required, but strongly recommended). Students will also need a valid F-1 visa in order to return to the United States. Traveling on OPT after completion of a program may be risky if one needs a new visa, since the objective now is to work rather than to be a student. In some countries, it may be difficult to convince an officer at the U.S. consulate or embassy to issue a new F-1 visa for OPT.

When approved, USCIS will issue an employment authorization card that will be mailed directly to the address as indicated on Form I-765. To avoid potential delays, remember to enter the correct mailing address and to apply well in advance. If a student plans to move after completion of program, the IPS mailing address may be used on Form I-765.

APPLYING PROCESS

**U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services
Texas Service Center
P.O. Box 851041
Mesquite, TX 75185-1041**

Students are responsible for mailing the OPT application, which will include:

- Original Form I-765 (Employment Application)
- Money Order – U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services - \$340 (as of 07/31/07)
- New I-20 with OPT request (copy made for application / student keeps original)
- Copy of I-94 (Front & Back)
- Copy of Passport Bio-page

- (2) Passport Style Color Photos (specified in USCIS application as 2" x 2")
 - (write Full Name and I-94 # in pencil/felt pen on the back of the photos)

- **Letter from Advisor indicating your completion of Program** (not part of final application) but students may not start work until they have received an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) from USCIS. The application process takes between 3-4 months to process, perhaps longer.
- It is recommended that the applicant use Certified Mail when sending application to USCIS Service Center.
- F-1 Students in **STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields and granted initial post-completion OPT are eligible to apply for a one-time extension for 17 additional months, a maximum of 29 months. (see SEVIS coordinator for more information)