



# Cornell University International Students and Scholars Office

B-50 Caldwell Hall  
Ithaca, New York 14853-2602  
Telephone: 607.255.5243  
Fax: 607.255.2778  
Email: [isso@cornell.edu](mailto:isso@cornell.edu)  
Web:  
<http://www.isso.cornell.edu>

## OPT – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **1. What is F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field. OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (U.S.C.I.S.). This authorization can take 2 to 3 months to obtain. The maximum amount of time granted to work on F-1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible H1B cap gap extension OR a 17 month extension for those who qualify (see info on page 4). You may use some or all of the available 12 months of practical training during your course of study or save the full twelve months to use after you graduate. You may apply up to 90 days before your graduation date and **the immigration service MUST RECEIVE your application NO LATER THAN 60 days beyond your graduation date or 60 days beyond the end date of your I-20 (WHICHEVER IS EARLIER)** or, if you are an advanced graduate student, **NO LATER THAN 60 days beyond the last day that you are registered as a student.** You **MUST** send your application within 30 days of getting the new I-20 from the ISSO.

### **2. What are the Eligibility Requirements for F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

To be eligible to apply for optional practical training, you must: (1) have been in full time student status for at least one academic year, and (2) be maintaining valid F-1 status at the time of the application.

### **3. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?**

Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of Optional Practical Training after changing to a **higher degree level**. This does not apply to a second master's degree.

### **4. How can I use optional practical training while I am still in my program?**

You may use OPT while you are still in your degree program as follows: (1) part-time while school is in session, (2) full-time during annual vacation periods, and/or (3) full-time after you completed all course requirements for the degree and have a thesis requirement remaining. These periods of OPT used before you graduate will be deducted from the total allowable period of 12 months. Part-time OPT will be deducted at one-half the full-time rate.

### **5. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?**

Authorization for OPT is granted by U.S.C.I.S. and can take 2 - 3 months to obtain. Therefore it is important that you apply for the authorization well in advance of the date you wish to start working. You may apply up to 90 days before your graduation date and **NO LATER THAN 60 days beyond your graduation date or end date of your I-20 (WHICHEVER IS EARLIER)** or, if you are an advanced graduate student, **NOT LATER THAN 60 days beyond the last day that you are registered as a student.** You also can **NOT** apply **MORE** than 120 days before the start date that you choose. You **MUST** send your application within 30 days of getting to new I-20 from the ISSO.

### **6. Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?**

You do **NOT** need to have a job offer before applying for optional practical training.

### **7. Do I need to have a job while I am on optional practical training?**

Yes. The new regulation requires that you do have employment while on your OPT period. You are only allowed to have a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT or 120 days if you apply for and receive the 17 month extension. While on OPT, you are required to update the ISSO with your employment information by completing the OPT report form on the web: <http://www.isso.cornell.edu/immigration/fl/optreport.php>

### **8. Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?**

For the first 12 month period of post-completion OPT, the employment does **NOT** have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed (including performance majors with regular "gigs"), interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered "employed" for the purposes of OPT employment. **For the 17-month STEM extension, employment must be traditional paid employment.**

### **9. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?**

You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from U.S.C.I.S.; working before practical training has been authorized by the U.S.C.I.S. constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

**10. Do I have to do anything with the ISSO while I am on OPT?**

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on OPT, you **MUST** report your employment and address information to the Cornell ISSO by filling out our OPT update form at:  
<http://www.isso.cornell.edu/immigration/f1/optreport.php>

**11. Can I extend my OPT after the 12 months?**

There are two types of extensions available: 1) a 17 month extension for those in certain fields (discussed below) and 2) an “H1B Cap Gap Extension” which extends your work authorization through to the start of your cap subject H1B visa if your OPT ends after your cap subject company has applied for a H1B for you but before the H1B starts on the following October 1<sup>st</sup>. This cap gap extension is available to all F-1 students using OPT in any field, as long as you have a pending or approved “cap subject” H1B application and the employer applied for in with a request for change of status as part of the application. The extension is automatic, you do not have to do anything at all to get the extension. “Cap Subject” refers to any H1B application that must be counted against the quota on H1B applications.

**INFORMATION ON THE 17-MONTH “STEM” EXTENSION:**

**12. What is the 17 month STEM extension of OPT?**

The “STEM Extension” allows F-1 students on OPT who have received a degree in the fields listed below, referred to as “STEM” fields (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics), to apply for a one time 17-month extension of their regular 12 month OPT period. **You will NOT apply for 29 months up front.** The 17 month extension will allow students to have extended work authorization in case they do not get an H1B visa in their first year after graduating. Students who timely file an application for the 17-month OPT extension will be able to continue employment while the extension application is pending, until a final decision on the I-765 or for 180 days, whichever comes first.

**13. I think I qualify, how do I apply for the 17 month extension?**

**FIRST: Students graduating now with degrees in these fields will first apply for the regular 12 month period of OPT as usual.**

**THEN, WITHIN 3 months of the end of your first 12 months of OPT:** If you meet the following criteria, you can apply through the ISSO office for your 17 month extension of your OPT when you are within 3 months of your first 12 months of OPT.

**CRITERIA FOR THE 17 MONTH EXTENSION:**

- Your employer must be enrolled in the “E-Verify” program (see information links below).
- You must have graduated and be working in one of the fields listed below referred to as “STEM” fields
- You must have maintained status while on OPT and be within 3 months of your end date

**14. What are the “STEM” fields?**

Actuarial Science, Computer Science Applications, Engineering, Engineering Technologies, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Military Technologies, Physical Sciences, Science Technologies, Medical Scientist (MS, PhD) For more info see our website at:  
<http://www.isso.cornell.edu/immigration/f1/f1newoptreg.php>

**15. What is “E-Verify”?**

E-Verify is an Internet-based system operated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA). E-Verify is currently free to employers and is available in all 50 states. E-Verify provides an automated link to federal databases to help employers determine employment eligibility of new hires and the validity of their Social Security numbers. More information is available at: [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov).

**16. Are there any other requirements while I am on the 17-month extension?**

In addition to reporting address changes and periods of unemployment, students on the 17 month extension of OPT period will also have to report name and address of their employer, any changes in employer AND they will have to complete a report to the school every six months while on the 17 month extension. We will send out

email reminders. You will report to us using the OPT report form at:  
<http://www.isso.cornell.edu/immigration/f1/optreport.php>

## **TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING**

### **17. Now that I've turned in my application, can I travel outside the U.S. while I wait for the card to come?**

**After you graduate**, in order to re-enter the U.S. you must have the following: OPT card (or receipt notice for the OPT application), your valid passport, a **current F-1 visa stamp**, I-20 signed within the last six months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.**

**Before you graduate**, you should be able to get back in to the U.S. without the OPT card as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation (at least one month). If you have to travel, talk to an advisor at the ISSO before you leave.

### **18. I want to leave the U.S. for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B2) that is valid for 10 years. Can't I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?**

If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with a B visa, you will have an I-94 card that shows that you have been admitted under B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status. Hence, your OPT application and card will be **invalid**. If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1.

### **19. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?**

You will need your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by the ISSO within the last 6 months; the OPT card from the U.S.C.I.S. (or the receipt notice for your OPT application), your valid passport, a **current F-1 visa stamp**, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.**

### **20. What if I have applied for the 17 month extension but I have not yet received the card, can I travel out of the U.S.?**

No, the immigration service advises that while you are waiting for the approval of the 17 month extension, you should NOT try to re-enter the country until you RECEIVE the new OPT card.

### **21. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?**

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with your I-94 card, a valid passport, your EAD card (or receipt notice), an I-20 that has been signed by the ISSO within the last 6 months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment** as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa while in Canada and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, Cuba or North Korea. **If you are traveling elsewhere**, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. **Please come in to the ISSO** to discuss your visa application with an advisor as the consulates often change the requirements for visa applications for students on OPT.

### **22. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?**

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training is higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. It is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate non-immigrant intent. Please see an ISSO advisor to discuss in more detail.

### **23. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?**

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD card or receipt notice for your application, an I-20 created by the ISSO for your OPT application, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.** The official job offer letter should sound temporary and not permanent. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

### **24. Do I still need to get the travel line on my I-20 signed by the ISSO during the year of OPT?**

Yes, during the OPT year, if you travel outside the U.S., you need to have the travel line signed every six months. If you are not located in Ithaca, mail the original I-20 to the ISSO for endorsement, leaving plenty of time for mailing delays both ways.