
OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

* INFORMATION SHEET *

OPT is a benefit of F-1 student immigration status and provides for an initial 12-months of off-campus work authorization anywhere in the United States for international students who have been enrolled full-time for a minimum of one academic year (considered to be 9-months or two full semesters). There are three different types of OPT:

- 1) **Pre-completion OPT** (employment before completion of studies)
- 2) **Post-completion OPT** (employment after completion of studies and graduation)
- 3) **STEM OPT extension** (extension of previous Post-completion OPT for those students who graduated in a STEM field (<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2014/stem-list.pdf>))

Pre-completion OPT notes:

- Pre-completion OPT can be used on a part-time basis during classes, or full-time basis during vacation/interim periods
- Any used time of Pre-completion OPT will be subtracted from any remaining 12-month eligibility for Post-completion OPT after completion of studies. For example, if you use 3-months of Pre-completion OPT for a summer internship, you will only have 9-months remaining for Post-completion OPT
- For internship and COOP work opportunities you should consider your eligibility for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) in order to “save” your future OPT (see <http://www.umass.edu/ipo/iss/visa/student-employment/f-visa> for CPT information)

Post-completion OPT notes: • F-1 students are eligible for a total of 12-months of OPT per educational level (BA/BS to MS/MA to Ph.D). If you previously applied for Post-completion OPT for a “lower” academic level, you are eligible to apply for additional Post-completion OPT if you have completed a “higher” academic degree (i.e. Master’s or Ph.D.)

- Any previously used time of Pre-completion OPT at the same academic level will be subtracted from any remaining 12-month eligibility for Post-completion OPT. For example, if you used 3-months of Pre-completion OPT for a summer internship, you will only have 9-months remaining for Post-completion OPT
- 12-months or more of previous FULL-TIME Curricular Practical Training (CPT) at the same academic level will eliminate any Post-completion OPT eligibility
- OPT is automatically terminated when a student transfers their SEVIS immigration record to another institution to begin a new degree program.
- You may not apply for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) once you have applied for Post-completion OPT.

APPLICATION TIME FRAME

You may file your Post-Completion OPT up to 90-days PRIOR to your completion of studies date, and up to 60-days AFTER graduation/program end date. However, waiting to apply until 60-days after your graduation/program end date is **strongly** discouraged, as it may jeopardize your ability to utilize the full 12-months of OPT eligibility because of processing delays.

“**Completion of studies**” for OPT purposes is defined as the day that you complete all requirements for your degree. For **undergraduates** this is normally the final day of exams. For **graduate students** completion of studies is slightly less defined, though is essentially implied to be once you have completed all required coursework, will not be needing to register for any additional coursework, and/or have already scheduled an imminent thesis defense/dissertation. **Important note:** “completion of studies” is not considered to be your graduation/commencement date.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE: Your OPT application needs to be received by the U.S. immigration service (USCIS) within 30-days of the IPO’s endorsement of OPT and issuance of a new I-20 form documenting your OPT dates, etc.

1. Complete the following forms and then make an appointment with Ken Reade at kjreade@ipo.umass.edu :

- **Form I-765** (<http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-765.pdf>)

Fill

out the I-765 form in .pdf format and print.

For Post-completion OPT ONLY: for question #20, write (c) (3) (B).

- **Academic Verification Form (last page of this document).**

(Or you can also drop off the Form I-765 and SIGNED Academic Verification Form in the IPO front office)

2. The following items will be required for the submission of your OPT application to USCIS (Bring them with you to IPO for verification when you submit the above forms):

- Two (2) passport-style photographs, (must not have been taken more than 30 days prior to the submission of your application and not previously used)** which can be obtained at the UCard Office/CVS/Walgreen etc. **On the back of each photo, write your full name and Date of Birth;**
Photo specifications here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/requirements/photos.html>
- Write a **personal check/money order/credit card** (<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1450.pdf>) for \$410 payable to **U.S. Department of Homeland Security;**
- Make a photocopy of the passport identification (pages with your picture and passport expiration date) and F-1 visa stamp page of your passport;
- Print out your I-94 card: www.cbp.gov/I94;
- Make a photocopy of **ALL** previously issued I-20s (copy page 1 & 2 (or p.3 for old form) of all I-20 forms, copies can be double-sided). These must include those issued by UMass and other school (for same education level);
- Photocopy of any previous OPT work documents (if applicable)

***Additional detailed information, including mailing instructions, for the submission of your OPT application to USCIS will be provided once an IPO advisor has issued your OPT I-20 and reviewed your application. Please note that it will take 2 to 3 business days to process your OPT I-20.**

FREQUENTLY ASKED OPT QUESTIONS

What visa status will I have during my OPT period?

You will continue to maintain your F-1 student immigration status while on OPT. You will need to possess a valid F-1 visa in your passport for travel* during OPT, as well as an I-20 with an IPO travel signature no older than 6-months. Your F-1 OPT immigration status while on OPT is contingent upon you maintaining full-time employment related to your field of study and appropriate to your level of education.

How long does it take for USCIS to approve my OPT application?

Estimate approximately 3-months as an average and take this into consideration when applying. For example, a student completing studies in May who wishes to commence employment immediately following graduation should apply as early as possible (90-days from completing studies). You may not begin working legally until you have the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) in your possession. You can check the status of your application online here: <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>

What if I move while my OPT is pending at USCIS?

The U.S. Postal Service WILL NOT forward mail from the USCIS! It is *extremely* important that the address you put on the I-765 application form be valid for the next several months. You can consider using your friend's or relative's address. If you need to use IPO address, i.e. **IPO, 70 Butterfield Terrace, Amherst, MA 01003, please note that IPO is not responsible for postage errors that are not the fault of the IPO.**

*** Can I travel outside of the U.S. while my application is pending at USCIS?**

- **Travel during the application process and before you have found a job?** This is complicated and generally not advisable. Speak to your IPO advisor!

- **Travel after you have applied for OPT, you have a job, but before OPT has been approved?** This can also potentially be complicated depending on each individual's situation and circumstances, especially if your current F-1 visa (in your passport) has expired. Speak to your IPO advisor!
- **Travel once your OPT has been approved and you have a job?** International travel for personal and professional reasons while employed on OPT should be routine with the following: your EAD work document, valid passport, valid F-1 visa, valid I-20 form with travel signature obtained within the past 6-months, and evidence of appropriate OPT employment (such as a letter from your employer and/or pay statement/stub).

What happens if I don't finish my program before my OPT begins?

This is not entirely uncommon, especially for graduate students. An example of this is when your thesis defense date is unexpectedly rescheduled or some minor revisions in thesis research are necessary. Should this occur, you will still be able to finalize your UMass degree requirements during your OPT period. As long as you are no longer enrolled in coursework and making progress on completing your degree requirements as soon as possible and within a reasonable amount of time, your OPT will not be effected. However, your OPT dates cannot be amended or "paused." Once the OPT validity dates begin, the OPT "clock" starts to "tick."

Can I continue working on campus or maintaining my graduate assistantship once I have applied for OPT?

Very important, especially for graduate students: You will no longer have legal work authorization beyond your date of completion of studies (which will be updated on your new OPT I-20 form). If you intend to remain employed in any capacity at UMass you can only do so if your OPT has been approved and you have received the work authorization document from USCIS. Please note, even if your UMass employment is exactly the same as it was during your studies you cannot continue to be employed without OPT approval. Please consider this when selecting your OPT starting date.

After I apply for OPT, I then decide that I want to cancel the application or change the dates that I requested?

Changes to OPT dates are almost impossible, after an application is submitted to the USCIS. However, cancellation of OPT is possible if you do not plan to work. No USCIS application fees will be refunded. Speak to your IPO advisor ASAP in these instances.

My employer wants me to start working in 2-weeks. I'm afraid to tell my employer that I can't start working for 3-months, until the EAD card is issued. Can I do Curricular Practical Training (CPT) for 3-months until my OPT is approved? No. CPT is not an option once Post-completion OPT has been applied for and completion of studies has occurred.

If I do another degree after my OPT, will I be eligible for another 12-months of OPT after that degree?

Yes. But only if your new degree is at a **higher** educational level (i.e. Master's or Ph.D.). In theory, you could have three different OPT authorizations for three different degree programs while in the U.S. (Bachelor to Master's, Master's to Ph.D.). Completion of a second degree within the **same** educational level does not entitle you to additional OPT, unless you were granted less than 12 months after the first degree. For example, if you applied for/were granted only 4-months of OPT upon completion of your previous degree at the same academic level; you would still have 8-months of remaining eligibility for use after completion of your subsequent degree at the same level. But this is only if your initial OPT application was approved for less than 12-months.

Can I work as a volunteer/an unpaid intern/part-time while on OPT?

Yes, current F-1 OPT regulations do allow for such employment, but the work must be at least 20-hours per week and not violate any existing Federal labor laws. Students must be able to provide evidence from the employer that they worked at least the 20-hour minimum.

What if I am unemployed for part of my authorized OPT?

Current OPT regulations allow for a *cumulative* 90-day unemployment duration within the 12-months of OPT. If you are unemployed or between jobs for less than 90-days your OPT and F-1 immigration status is not negatively affected. However, any unused OPT time not utilized while unemployed is not credited back to you.

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) – ACADEMIC VERIFICATION FORM

This form must be completed and signed by the appropriate university official(s) before the International Programs Office (IPO) can endorse an OPT application

IMPORTANT REMINDER: Please allow a minimum of 1-week for university staff to check your records and complete this form. Please plan this application accordingly to allow staff sufficient time to process your OPT request.

Please print clearly on this form!

THIS SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED BY THE STUDENT (ALL INFORMATION IS REQUIRED)

Name: _____

UMass Spire ID#: _____ Phone #: _____

Email: _____

(Please provide an Email address which will be valid for the entire OPT and OPT extension period)

Proposed OPT start date*: _____ Proposed end date (maximum 12-months): _____

***NOTE! OPT CAN BEGIN UP TO 60-DAYS FROM COMPLETION OF STUDIES DATE, NOT YOUR GRADUATION DATE**

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS: Submit this form to your **Graduate Program Director**.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GPD: Please complete this form (check off all appropriate boxes) to verify the above-named student's status. **Please complete this form and return to the student.**

STUDENT'S GRADUATING DEGREE LEVEL: _____

Student completed (or will complete) all coursework for this degree as of _____

Student defended, or is scheduled to defend, his/her thesis/dissertation on _____

Student is expected to complete studies on _____

Student's TA/RA contract end date _____

NOTE: YOUR OPT START DATE WILL BE BASED ON YOUR COMPLETION OF STUDIES DATE ABOVE, NOT YOUR GRADUATION DATE

Comments:

GPD Signature: _____

Printed Name/Title: _____ Date: _____

Phone #: _____ Email: _____

INSTRUCTIONS FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: Please specify below if you are graduating in May, Summer, or Fall semester

I expect to graduate on: _____ .

Student's Signature _____ Date: _____