Effective Fall 2009

F-1 Optional Practical Training

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

OPT is a benefit authorized by USCIS that extends the F-1 student status to allow you to work in the U.S. in order to gain practical training in your major field of study.

Eligibility Requirements

Students who have been in lawful, full-time student status for at least one full academic year are eligible for a total of 12 months of OPT. Any period of OPT used is subtracted from the 12-month total limit. Students authorized for 12 months of OPT become eligible to apply for another 12 months when they change to a higher education level. However, simply beginning another degree program does not automatically confer this eligibility; the new degree program must be at a higher education level (i.e., Bachelors to Masters; Masters to PhD). Students may apply for pre-completion or post-completion OPT, full or part-time. A job offer is not required to apply for OPT. However, the work must be directly related to the student's major area of study.

Optional Practical Training may be authorized in the following cases:

1. during the annual school vacations, e.g. summer vacation, (pre-completion OPT)
2. part-time (20 hours or fewer per week) while school is in session (pre-completion OPT)
3. after completion of all course requirements but before completion of thesis
4. after completion of course of study (also called "post-completion")

Application Deadlines

- for pre-completion OPT, not earlier than 90 days prior to being enrolled for one full academic year
- for post-completion OPT, within 90 days prior to and no later than 60 days after completion

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must receive the complete OPT application (see reverse page) at the Service Center before the final deadline (i.e. 60th day from the program end date). Failure to comply with this deadline will result in loss of the entire OPT benefit. All post-completion OPT must begin within 60 days after the program completion date.

USCIS-VSC processing times can take as long as 4 months, therefore, it is recommended that you apply as soon as possible to ensure that you receive the employment benefit on time. Students are not permitted to begin employment until they receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) and until the start date listed on the EAD. We strongly recommend that you do NOT use electronic filing, because this option can result in lengthy delays.

How to Apply

Make an appointment with the International Student Advisor in the Office of Admissions at least two weeks before you plan to submit your application to the USCIS. Prepare the following documents and bring them to the appointment:

- your current I-20 form and any previous I-20 forms
  (from both NSU and other schools)
- your valid passport (containing the I-94 card and F-1 visa)
- an I-765 form (Application for Employment Authorization)

You must download this from the USCIS website. www.uscis.gov (most recent edition available)
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- 2 identical passport photos, less than 30 days old
  (see http://travel.state.gov/passport/guide/composition/composition_874.html for more information)

The Office of Admissions will process a new SEVIS I-20 with OPT recommendation. You will mail the following documents to:

US Department of Homeland Security
US Citizenship and Immigration Services
Texas Service Center
PO Box 851041
Mesquite, TX 75185-1041

Checklist of documents to be mailed to USCIS:

- Check for $340 made payable to US Department of Homeland Security
- 2 photos (put your name and I-94 number in pencil on the back of each photo)
- Original I-765 form
- Copy of SEVIS I-20 form with OPT endorsement and signature (NSU Office of Admissions will provide, remember to sign it!)
- Copies of any previous I-20 forms, 1st & 3rd page for SEVIS forms, front & back for older forms
- Copy of any previous Employment Authorization Documents (EAD cards)
- Copy of F-1 Visa and I-94 card (front and back)
- Copy of identity pages in passport

NOTE: The complete application must be mailed and received at the Service Center within 30 days from the date the Office of Admissions issued the recommendation and the OPT I-20.

Travel While on Post-completion OPT

Travel while on OPT is not restricted. However, in order to reenter the US after you complete your degree and during the entire OPT period, you should be in possession of your EAD card, OPT I-20 with travel signature, a valid F-1 visa, a valid passport, and a letter from your employer verifying employment. If you are missing any one of these documents you risk being denied entry and losing your OPT. While on OPT the travel signature on the I-20 form is valid for only 6 months.

Note: The Office of Admissions recommends that once you graduate you do not travel outside of the U.S. until you have received the EAD.

Periods of Unemployment While on OPT

After completion of degree, your F-1 status while on post-completion OPT depends on your employment. You are not permitted to accumulate more than a total of 90 days of unemployment for the entire period of 12 months of OPT.

What constitutes qualified employment?

- paid employment, part-time or full-time that is for multiple employers, short-term multiple employers (performing artists), contracting work, self-employed (starting a business), employment through an agency (must be at least 20 hours/week).
- unpaid employment as volunteer, intern, that does not violate labor laws and is at least 20 hrs/week.
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Important: Accumulating more than 90 days of unemployment is a violation of your immigration status that could trigger termination of practical training. You may be required to apply for a reinstatement.