I. BEFORE YOU APPLY

OPT Overview & Eligibility

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?
- Temporary employment authorization for F-1 students to gain experience in jobs directly related to major area of study. Total of 12 months of OPT available per education level (e.g. Bachelor’s, Master’s, Doctorate)

Quick Overview:
- You do not need a job offer to apply for OPT
- You may not pursue a new course of study while on OPT.
- The application is approved by United States Customs & Immigration Service (USCIS), not OIA
- The approval process for USCIS takes between three and four months.
- Pre-Completion OPT (Before program end date)
  - Part time while classes are in session (20 hours or less per week, cannot be averaged)
  - Full time or part time during breaks or vacation quarters
  - Master’s/Doctoral Students ONLY: Full-time or part-time after courses finished, while working on thesis
- Post-Completion OPT (After program end date)
  - Granted on a full time basis only (over 20 hours a week)
  - All previous periods of OPT at the same level are deducted from the 12-month total. Part-time OPT is counted at a half-rate. Example: Four months part time OPT is subtracted from the total as two months.

Eligibility Requirements
1. Registered full-time for at least one academic year (three quarters) in a valid F-1 status
2. Present in the U.S. in valid F-1 status at the time of application.
   - Twelve months or more of full time CPT makes students ineligible for OPT.
   - On-campus employment does not count against the 12-month OPT eligibility.

Employment Requirements & Types of Employment

Employment Requirements (Post-Completion OPT)
- Unemployment: During the 12-month post-completion OPT period, you can have up to 90 days of unemployment. The STEM OPT extension allows 120 days of unemployment (during the 29 months).
- Documentation & Reporting: Keep documentation of type of job, days and hours worked. You must report all employers to OIA within 10 days of a new job.

Types of Paid Employment:
- Multiple employers: You may work for more than one employer, but all jobs must be related to your field.
- Short-term multiple employers (performing artists): You’re allowed to have multiple short term jobs or gigs (e.g. music performances). Keep a list of all gigs, the employer, and duration of each.
- Work for hire: Commonly referred to as 1099 or Independent Contractor Employment; keep evidence of the duration of contract periods and the name and address of the contracting company.
- Self-employed business owner: You can start a business or be self-employed while on OPT. You should be able to prove that you have the proper business licenses and that it is related to your degree program.
- Employment through an agency or consulting firm is also allowed.

Unpaid Employment:
- You may work as a volunteer or unpaid intern, where this practice does not violate any labor laws.
II. APPLICATION

Application Timeline: When should you apply?
- Your OPT start date can be between the day after your end date and 60 days after your end date
- You can apply for OPT from 90 days before your end date, until 60 days after your end date

Post-Completion OPT Timing Chart

90 Days before end date  I-20 End Date  60 Days after end-date:

My I-20 End date is _______________

OPT Start Date can be between _______________ and _______________.

USCIS will accept Post-Completion OPT applications between _______________ and _______________.

The application process involves two steps:
1. Recommendation from OIA
2. Authorization from USCIS

STEP 1: OIA Recommendation
Submit the following three documents to OIA (You do not need to see an adviser unless you have specific questions):
A. OIA Request Form
B. Verification of Completion Form
C. Form I-765, “Application for Employment Authorization”

NOTE: All forms and detailed instructions are available on the website: http://tinyurl.com/bob2w2u
Webpath: OIA Home→Current F-1 and J-1 Students → OPT→Post-Completion OPT

Application Step 1A: OIA OPT Request Form: You must indicate OPT start and end dates on this form!
When choosing an OPT start date, make sure you consider your proposed job start date, class schedule (for pre-completion OPT), your plans for future study at the same degree level, and potential H-1B plans.

Application Step 1B: Verification of Completion Form
Confirmation signed by your faculty adviser/Dean of Students or College Academic Adviser verifying that you will complete either all course requirements with the exception of the thesis OR all degree requirements by the expected graduation date.

Application Step 1C: Form I-765, “Application for Employment Authorization”
This is the official application form sent to USCIS for OPT work authorization. Fill it out online and then print it (writeable pdf format). DO NOT file electronically!

Instructions for the Form I-765:
- Mark the first box, “I am applying for: permission to accept employment”
- Item 1: Print your entire name as it appears in your passport and on Form I-20. Last name in capital letters, first name lowercase. Ex: BONAPARTE Napoleon
• Item 3: This is where your EAD will be sent. You must select an **address that will be valid for the next 4-5 months**. If your address will change, use the address of a friend or relative. EAD cards will not be sent abroad. **NOTE: OIA does not permit the use of our address for completion of this form.**
  o When using a friend or relative’s address, write “c/o” followed by the individual's first and last name in the address field. The c/o stands for, ‘in care of.’ Ex: “c/o Wolfgang Mozart”
  o If the address you write is **outside of Illinois**, you may be required to mail your application to another USCIS Service Center. Check with your OIA adviser.
  o The U.S. Postal Service will **NOT forward** government mail to a new address.
  o If you live in an apartment, put “APT” in front of your apartment number
  o Include the last four digits of the zip code (Ex. 60637-2916) Check the U.S. postal service website for the complete zip code: [http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp](http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp)

• Item 10: Enter 11-digit number on I-94 card (small white card stapled in passport)

• Item 11: If you have submitted an application for OPT work authorization from USCIS (had an EAD card) in the past, check “yes.” CPT, on campus employment does not count

• Item 12: Enter the date of your last entry to the U.S. (stamped on your I-94 card).

• Item 13: Enter the port of entry you last came through (on the entry stamp on your I-94 card).

• Item 15: Enter “F-1 student.” If you have changed status since your last entry, include a copy of your Form I-797 Approval Notice as proof that you are now in F-1 status.

• Item #16: Enter code:
  o **Pre-completion OPT**: Enter code: (c)(3)(A) and **hand write** “F-1 Pre-completion Optional Practical Training” next to or above it.
  o **Post-completion OPT**: Enter code: (c)(3)(B) and **hand write** “F-1 Post-completion Optional Practical Training” next to or above it

• Barcode: Verify the I-765 has a **bar code at the bottom**. Forms without bar codes will be returned to you causing delays in the processing of your application.

  *****SIGN and date the Form I-765! *****

OIA will review your documents and create a new I-20 that shows your OPT request. You will also receive your original Form I-765 and screen shots from SEVIS showing any previous OPT or CPT time used at U Chicago. **Allow at least one week for OIA processing.** You will receive an email when your new I-20 is ready.

**STEP 2: USCIS Application Procedures**

Mail the following documents to USCIS:

1. **Form I-765** with fee and photographs stapled to it (see items #2 and #3 below).
2. **Two new passport style photos** in color. Available at the ID & Privileges Office in Regenstein. Write your name with a pencil on the back of the photos and put them in a small plastic bag or envelope and staple it to the top of Form I-765. Your photos must be recent and must not have been used in any previous application,
3. **Payment**: A check for the filing fee of $380 payable to "Department of Homeland Security." It is better to use a personal check than a money order. Staple your completed and signed check to the front of the I-765. Make sure the check has your current address. If it is incorrect, you can cross it out and handwriting your new address.
4. **Copy of I-20** (the one with the OPT recommendation on it), all pages. **DO NOT SEND ORIGINAL! The OIA signature must be less than 30 days old at the time the application is received by USCIS.**
5. **Copy of I-94** Departure Record Card, front and back. (Again, do not send the original)
6. **Screen shots** from SEVIS of OPT and CPT use (you will get this from OIA with your new I-20).
7. **Copies** (front and back) of all previous EAD(s) issued to you for OPT.
8. Copies (front and back) of all I-20s from any previous U.S. institution before the University of Chicago.
9. **Copy of the identity page(s) of your passport.** This includes the page that has your photograph and biographical information.
10. **Form G-1145, "E-Notification of Application/Acceptance,"** if you want to be notified electronically when your application is received. See [http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/g-1145.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/g-1145.pdf) for form and filing instructions.

### Timing Reminder:

| USCIS Accepts Applications: | - **POST-completion:**  
| | Earliest: 90 days before your program end date:  
| | Latest: 60 Days after program end date:  
| | - **PRE-completion**  
| | Earliest: 90 days prior to OPT start date |

### STEP 3: Mail Your Application to USCIS:

***Note: Make a copy of your entire application before mailing it; keep it with your mailing receipt.***

We recommend secure mail with delivery confirmation/tracking, such as U.S. Postal Service Certified Mail. Check with your OIA adviser if the address on your I-765 is **outside of Illinois**. Applications from **Illinois** go to a USCIS Lockbox facility in Phoenix, Arizona:

USCIS  
PO Box 21281  
Phoenix, AZ 85036

### III. AFTER YOU APPLY

#### Checking Your Application Status:

Ways to tell if your application was received:
- If you filed Form G-1145, you will receive an email or text from USCIS with confirmation that your application was received and a receipt number.
- If you paid the $380 fee with a personal check, check your bank account to see if the check has been cashed.
- Within a month of mailing your application you will receive a **Receipt Notice (I-797)** from USCIS. The Receipt Notice contains an receipt number (upper left-hand side) that you can use to check the status of your application on the USCIS Case Status Search Page: [https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard.do](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard.do)

#### EAD card

USCIS will issue an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) when your application has been approved. The card will state the specific start date and end date for your OPT.

***You cannot legally begin working until you have the physical card and the start date has been reached!***
Special Issues FAQ:

Contact OIA if:
1) You need to cancel your OPT application
2) You don’t graduate as planned
3) Need to update your mailing address
   o Contact OIA immediately. DO NOT TRY TO UPDATE THE ADDRESS YOURSELF

OPT Reporting Requirements:
All F-1 students on post-completion OPT are required to report any change in the following information within 10 days through the OPT Update Form on the OIA website: Name, address, employer name/address, any interruption of employment.

Use the OPT/AT Update Form on our website and see reporting information at: https://internationalaffairs.uchicago.edu/page/opt-reporting-requirements
Webpath: OIA Home→Current F-1 and J-1 Students → OPT→Reporting Requirements

When to Notify OIA:
• When you receive your EAD card, upload a copy through the OPT Update Form (link above)
• If you plan to study after completion of OPT (e.g. at a graduate level), you can have your SEVIS record transferred. This can be done anytime during the 60 day grace period following the OPT end date.
• If you change your status, provide evidence (e.g. approval notice, I-94 card) of the new status to OIA so that we can complete your SEVIS record appropriately.

IV. POST-COMPLETION OPT TRAVEL

While OPT is PENDING:
Before Program End Date:
You can travel normally as an F-1 student. NOTE: Contact employer if applying for H-1B.

After Program End Date:
• It is not advisable to travel outside the U.S. prior to receiving your EAD card and securing employment.
• EAD cards will NOT be sent overseas, and an EAD card is required for re-entry.
  ***Travel through Chicago airports whenever possible!***
• You can remain in the U.S. if your F-1 visa has expired. If you will travel in and out of the US while on OPT, you must have a valid F-1 visa.
• If your F-1 visa will expire before you re-enter, you must apply for a new visa at a U.S. Consulate or Embassy abroad PRIOR to your return.
• After your program end date, you will need proof of employment to show you are returning to the U.S. to resume employment appropriate for OPT.

Once OPT is APPROVED (You Have the EAD)
If you have completed your studies AND received your EAD card: You may depart and re-enter the U.S. in F-1 status. In addition to your regular travel documents (valid passport, valid F-1 visa, I-20 with OPT recommendation and travel signature less than 6 months old), you will also need:
• Valid EAD Card
• Job offer letter or letter of employment verification from your current employer
NOTE: Without your EAD AND proof of employment/job offer you assume risk in re-entering the U.S. while on OPT.

F-2 Dependents - Travel Outside the U.S.
In addition to their own Form I-20 – with updated travel signature, passport and valid F-2 visa, F-2 dependents should keep copies of the following F-1 documents for travel:
- F-1 Form I-20, F-1 Visa, F-1 Passport identification page(s), F-1 I-94 Departure record, if available, and the EAD with proof of employment/job offer

V: STEM Extension
- The Stem Extension is a one-time, 17-month extension that students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics are eligible to apply for (see eligible programs on link below).
- STEM must occur after regular post-completion OPT; application must be filed before OPT expires
- Employers must be E-Verify

More information & Application Instructions for the STEM Extension: https://internationalaffairs.uchicago.edu/page/stem-extension-opt
Webpath: OIA Home→Current F-1 and J-1 Students → OPT→STEM Extension

VI. OPT and H-1B

H-1B Cap Situation
- H-1B Cap (for ‘new’ H-1Bs): There are a limited number of new H-1B statuses available each year.
  - 65,000 H-1Bs for people with B.A.; an additional 20,000 H-1Bs for people with M.A. or above
  - Submit petition on April 1 for an October 1 start date
- The limited number does not apply to universities or non-profit research organizations. These entities can submit H-1B petitions anytime of the year for any start date without limit.
- Other work visa options include: E-3 (Australia), TN (Canada & Mexico), & H-1B1 (Chile & Singapore)

H-1B “Cap Gap” Solution
Cap Gap not applicable to non-profits, research institutes, or institutions of higher education
- If you are on OPT with a pending H-1B Change of Status petition, your OPT will be automatically extended to either the H-1B employment start date (October 1), or the H-1B petition denial date, whichever comes first.
- Students must contact OIA to receive a new I-20 that confirms Cap Gap employment authorization
- If your H-1B petition is denied, your OPT work extension will immediately be terminated. You will have 60 days (from notification of denial) to depart the U.S.

H-1B CAP GAP

June 20: OPT Ends
April 1: Employer files H-1B
CAP GAP EXTENSION
October 1: H-1B Status Begins