OPT FAQs

Check back often as FAQs will be updated with new information and questions as available

Application Requirements, Processes and Deadlines:

When I am ready to apply for OPT, should I print and fill out the online forms or stop by the ISS office first? The OPT application packets are located on the ISS website, or they can be picked up from ISS. If a student has questions about OPT and if it is appropriate at that time, they should stop by ISS to ask about it. If the student is ready to apply, there is no need to talk to ISS first. Complete the application requirements and then make an appointment to submit the application to ISS. Please see the Timeline for OPT Application and Processing on the ISS OPT Information website.

How long does the application process for OPT usually take? The processing time varies depending on the time of year the application is submitted and how busy the USCIS office is at that time. Generally, it can take up to 90 days after the application is received by USCIS to be approved. Often, the time is less than that (maybe around 60 days) but a student should always apply 90 days before graduation if possible.

If I graduate in the fall, would I able to start my OPT next semester and not be in violation of my status? After graduation (date on your transcript), a student has 60 days to take action on their status, this includes submitting the OPT application to USCIS. The 60 day deadline will be in the next semester if the student graduates in December. You may not delay your OPT for any length of time after graduation. The end date of the OPT will be no later than 14 months after graduation, so delaying the application submission or start date will not allow the OPT to end any later. Note: a student may not work anywhere after the official graduation date until the EAD has been received and the start date reached.

How does OPT work if I will finish (defend) in March and officially graduate in May? OPT may begin after all required coursework is completed. For graduate students, this means that they may apply for OPT to start before their official graduation. Most students apply for OPT to begin near or after their expected defense date, but some begin OPT a semester or more before their defense. Note: the 60 day grace period begins after the official graduation date, so a May graduate would have until sometime in July to submit the OPT application, but may not work anywhere after the official graduate date until the EAD is received and the start date has been reached.

Can I do OPT for less than a year? OPT should always be requested for a full year on the application. If a student changes status or goes back to school before the OPT year is over, the OPT will be cancelled at that time. Because only one OPT can be approved for each degree
level, a shorter OPT would not allow a student to apply for the rest of the year if they change their mind.

**Do I need a job before I can apply for OPT?** No. Students may begin looking for jobs, interview, and even accept a position or sign a contract before the OPT is approved, but it is not required for application. The student may NOT be hired or begin working until the EAD is received, however. If a student has a job offer at the time of OPT application, and official offer letter should be included with the OPT application as this may help the application be approved more efficiently.

**What exactly are the STEM fields?** The US government has designated certain majors as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math). Those who graduate in one of these fields, and are employed with a qualified employer, are allowed to apply for an extension of their OPT. STEM majors are identified by their CIP code. You can find your CIP on your I-20 next to the written out name of your major. It is in the format XX.XXXX. A list of current STEM CIP codes can be found on the ISS OPT Information website.

**When can I cancel my OPT application?** If a student submits the OPT application to USCIS and then changes their mind, they may provide written notice of the intent to cancel to ISS. ISS will note the request to cancel in the SEVIS system if possible and will forward the written request to the USCIS processing center. Once an OPT is approved by USCIS, even if the EAD has not been received by the student, the OPT cannot be cancelled.

**What happens if I apply for OPT but don’t graduate?** Once an OPT application is approved, it cannot be cancelled. Undergraduate students who do not graduate must enroll in the next semester to complete their degree. They will still receive their EAD and must still be employed to meet OPT regulations (no more than 90 cumulative days of unemployment during the year) while finishing their program. However, they are limited to working no more than 20 hours per week while they are still in class(es). Graduate students who have completed their program of study but do not graduate may proceed with OPT as intended while they complete their defense, etc. Graduate students who must still complete required coursework must follow the same guidelines as undergraduates who do not graduate and must continue with required coursework.

**If my visa expires after I graduate, should I stay in the USA until my OPT application is accepted/approved?** There is no USCIS regulation that says that you cannot travel outside the US or apply for a new US visa while a student is waiting for the OPT to be approved. It is the advice of the ISS staff that you do not travel outside of the US if you do not have a valid F-1 visa to return to the US. Applying for a new visa after graduation, while in application status for OPT, is very risky. There is no documented reason for you to legally return to the US and the consular officer may deny the application. It is advised that if you need a new visa, you wait until after the OPT is approved and you have secured employment and then travel home to get a new visa. Any travel outside of the US while on OPT does require a valid US visa and proof of
employment to return to the US. Please see the notes about travel while on OPT on the Tips and Requirements while on OPT page of the OPT application. Note: emergency travel may be allowed. Consult with ISS staff if an emergency arises that will cause you to travel before your OPT is approved.

Maintaining Status While on OPT:

What is the validity period of my I-20 with OPT authorization? Is it 90 days from the OPT start date? When a student applies for OPT, the program end date on the front of the I-20 will be changed to the completion or graduation date to signify the end of the academic program for which the student is basing the OPT application. The OPT request will be entered into SEVIS and will be printed on the back of the I-20, including the requested OPT start and end date. A new I-20 will be printed and given to the student. This becomes the student’s current valid I-20 for the duration of the OPT. The I-20, along with the EAD and proof of employment, are the proof that the student is legally in the US while on OPT.

What is the validity period of my OPT? OPT is valid only for the dates listed on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD). The start date will depend on the date requested by the student and when the application was submitted to USCIS. The end date will be 365 days after the start date, or no later than 14 months after the official graduation date, whichever is earlier. A student is allowed to have no more than 90 cumulative days of unemployment during their one year of OPT. If a student chooses to wait 90 days after the EAD start date to begin working, they must maintain employment for the rest of the OPT year in order to remain in status with USCIS.

Are holidays and weekends counted as unemployment days? Yes. There is no longer any exception for weekend or federal holiday days when counting days of unemployment. It is counted as calendar days.

If I have a dual major on my I-20, can my OPT be related to either major? If both majors are listed on the I-20, the OPT employment can be related to either, or both, of the majors. The student should consider changing their primary major to the field in which they intend to work in order to have a cleaner record if possible.

Who determines if my job relates to my field of study? Currently, there is no official “approval” for each job reported by the student. If USCIS were to audit the student’s record for any reason, they could contact the student or the employer to determine if the employment is related to the major field of study. It is advised that students be sure that they can explain the relationship before they accept any position.
**Is unpaid employment allowed during OPT?** Both unpaid employment and volunteering are allowed while on OPT and will meet the requirements for employment. All jobs, paid or unpaid, or volunteer activities that you report as employment for status maintenance must be related to your major field of study. You may volunteer for community or other organizations that are not related to your major field of study for your personal interest but you may not be compensated and you may not report these as part of your employment for OPT purposes.

**If I get offered a seasonal job (for instance, a job at a summer camp) and another job after, should I apply for OPT again?** OPT can only be issued once for each degree level. A student is allowed to have more than one job during the OPT period, and more than one job at a time. All jobs must be related to the student’s major field of study. Each job should be reported to ISS using the links provided on the ISS website within ten days of any change.