OPT Application Guide

PLEASE START HERE

- *Please read this OPT Application Guide carefully and entirely <u>before</u> you apply for OPT.*
- *This form is a guide for understanding optional practical training (OPT) and how to apply for OPT through United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).*
- *There are two sections in this form: OPT Overview and OPT Application Steps. Please read both sections carefully before you apply for OPT through USCIS.*
- *This guide is informational only (you do not need to turn it in); however, you must submit the accompanying **OPT Status Form** to iss@andrews.edu AND receive an updated I-20 with OPT recommendation from a designated school official (DSO) BEFORE you send your OPT application to USCIS. If you do not have the OPT Status Form, please email iss@andrews.edu to request the form.*

OPT OVERVIEW

WHAT IS OPT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is defined as temporary employment authorization directly related to your field of study. While you are in OPT status, you are also still in F-1 visa status.

You will most likely participate in "post-completion" OPT, which is granted for up to 12 months after you have entirely completed your degree at Andrews University. This guide focuses on post-completion OPT, and "OPT" in this guide refers to post-completion OPT.

> NOTE: In some special situations, you might qualify for "pre-completion" OPT, which allows you to participate in OPT before you complete your degree. Pre-completion OPT is rare and should be considered carefully because the time you spend in pre-completion OPT is taken directly from the time you are allowed for post-completion OPT. For example, if you spend 3 months in pre-completion OPT, you can only spend 9 months in post-completion OPT.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR OPT?

You are eligible for OPT if you are in F-1 visa status and have been enrolled on a full-time basis for at least one academic year. You can participate in OPT one time per level of education (i.e., bachelor's degree level, master's degree level, and doctoral degree level).

You are NOT eligible for OPT if:

- You have had OPT already granted for the same level of education, either at Andrews University or any other institution in the United States
- Your program of study is English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Your I-20 is not in active status and/or is in reinstatement
- You applied for OPT but did not actually graduate before the OPT start date
- You are (or will soon be) outside of the United States

WHEN CAN I APPLY FOR OPT?

You can apply for OPT up to 90 days prior to your program of study completion date (i.e., the program end date listed on your I-20) and up to 60 days after this date:

Program End Date	
90 Days	**60 Days**

It is recommended that you apply for OPT within 90 days of your program end date to ensure that you have the full maximum 12 months approval for employment after you graduate. However, before you apply for OPT, make certain that you will graduate by the program end date listed on your I-20. If you do not officially graduate by the program end date, you may lose your OPT opportunity if you have already applied for OPT. Once you apply for OPT through USCIS, you cannot cancel the application, so please be certain that you will graduate!

NOTE: If you plan to spend one of your last two semesters outside of the United States, you may not be eligible for OPT.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO APPLY FOR OPT?

As of April 1, 2024: The fee to apply online is $470 and the fee to apply by mail (paper filing) is $520.

HOW DO I APPLY FOR OPT?

Please see the OPT Application Steps section (starting on page 4) for a detailed explanation of the OPT application process.

CAN I TRAVEL DURING THE OPT APPLICATION PROCESS?

Travel outside of the United States is discouraged while your OPT application is pending because of the risk of being denied reentry even if you have the necessary documentation to do so. Please consult with the International Student Services office before you make plans to leave the United States right before or during the OPT application process.

If you travel while your OPT application is pending (i.e., OPT is not yet approved), you will need the following upon reentry to the United States (please note that reentry is NOT guaranteed):

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- I-20 with OPT recommendation and recent travel signature (within the past 6 months), both issued by a designated school official (DSO) in the International Student Services office
- OPT Receipt Notice from USCIS (proof of application)

Once you are approved for OPT by USCIS, you will need the following upon reentry to the United States:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- I-20 with OPT recommendation and recent travel signature (within the past 6 months), both issued by a DSO in the International Student Services office
- Unexpired Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card
- Proof of employment (offer letter or employment confirmation letter from employer)

WHEN AND HOW IS OPT APPROVED?

Approximately 90 days after USCIS receives your application (see full application steps below starting on page 4), you will be sent an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. This is your approval.

Your authorized OPT dates will be listed on your EAD card. You cannot begin work until the start date on your EAD card, and you must stop work on the end date listed on your EAD card.

WHAT IS THE SEVP PORTAL AND HOW AM I RESPONSIBLE FOR USING IT?

At the time that you receive your EAD card, you will also receive an email from USCIS confirming your OPT has been approved. The email will provide a link for you to create a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) Portal account.

You MUST create and begin using your SEVP Portal account to keep your OPT status active. The SEVP Portal account is where you will need to report ANY and ALL employer information as you find and begin employment and report changes in your address, telephone number, and other personal information.

> NOTE: If you do not create and maintain your SEVP Portal account, **you will lose your OPT status**, most likely 90 days after the start date on your EAD card.

For help with your SEVP Portal account, please email USCIS at SEVP@ice.dhs.gov or call (703) 603-3400 (Monday through Friday 8 AM to 6 PM U.S. Eastern Time, except U.S. holidays). You can also visit the SEVP Portal help page at https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevp-portal-help.

WHAT KINDS OF EMPLOYMENT COUNT FOR OPT?

During OPT, F-1 status is dependent upon employment. Students must NOT accrue a total of 90 days or more of unemployment during OPT. The 90 days of unemployment begins accruing on the start date of the EAD card.

Employment MUST be related to the field of study listed on the I-20 that was used to apply for OPT.

You must have your EAD card in hand and the start date of your OPT employment must be valid to begin employment.

Employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is engaged in freelance employment, interning, or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered "employed" for the purposes of OPT as long as the freelance employment, interning, or volunteering is listed in the SEVP Portal account.

Even if employment is unpaid, an F-1 student in OPT must work a **minimum of 30 hours per week** in one's field of study and obtain proof of employment such as a written letter or contract from the employer, and this information is included in the SEVP Portal account.

WHAT IF I CANNOT FIND A JOB RIGHT AWAY? CAN I STILL APPLY FOR OPT?

You can apply for OPT even if you do not have specific employment confirmed at the time of your application, but you will need find employment (paid or unpaid) within 90 days of the OPT start date on your EAD card. As soon as you find employment, you must go into the SEVP Portal and update your account with the new employment information. If you do not find employment (paid or unpaid) within 90 days of the OPT start date on your EAD card, or you do not update your SEVP Portal account within 90 days of the OPT start date, you will lose your OPT status.

WHAT IS STEM EXTENSION? AM I ELIGIBLE?

Students who receive a degree in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields MAY be eligible for an additional 24-month extension of OPT. Please contact a designated school official (DSO) in the International Student Services office to determine if the program of study listed on your I-20 qualifies you for a STEM extension.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN OPT ENDS?

Once your EAD card expires, you will have a 60-day grace period. Before the end of the grace period, you must do ONE of the following:

- Depart the United States

- Begin a new academic program (at Andrews or at another institution via transfer)
- Apply for different visa status (e.g., H-1B)

> NOTE: Only those who complete OPT receive the 60-day grace period. Those who exceed the 90-day unemployment limit during OPT will not receive the grace period.

WHAT IF I PLAN TO TRANSFER TO ANOTHER INSTITUTION DURING OR AFTER OPT?

If you are transferring to another institution, make sure to contact the International Student Services office so that your SEVIS record may be electronically transferred BEFORE the end of your authorized stay in the United States.

WHAT IF I PLAN ON CHANGING STATUS DURING OPT?

If you plan on changing your status, it is recommended that you begin the change-of-status process BEFORE your OPT expires.

WHAT IF I PLAN TO TRANSITION TO H-1B?

Some students find employers who wish to employ them longer than the OPT period. In these situations, employers will typically sponsor an H-1B employment visa. H-1B visas for private sector employers typically take effect on October 1 each year. If an employer sponsors you for an H-1B visa and your OPT expires prior to October 1, contact the International Student Services office to see if you are eligible for a "Cap-Gap" extension of your OPT work authorization and F-1 status.

OPT APPLICATION STEPS

You can apply for OPT online or by mailing your application materials to USCIS. Please see the application steps below for both methods of application.

> NOTE: Whether you submit your application online or mail your application to USCIS, the first step involves working with a designated school official (DSO) in the International Student Services office to obtain an updated I-20 with OPT recommendation. **You MUST NOT proceed with your application until you receive this updated I-20 with OPT recommendation from a DSO.** Once you receive the updated I-20, the DSO will have little to no involvement in the rest of the application process, as USCIS will view your OPT application as a process between you and USCIS.

ONLINE APPLICATION STEPS FOR OPT

ONLINE STEP 1: Complete and submit the OPT Status Form to the International Student Services office:

☐ If you do not have an OPT Status Form, request one from the International Student Services office by emailing iss@andrews.edu. It is best to have an electronic version of this form.

☐ Fill out the OPT Status Form **with your academic advisor**. You will need to complete and sign the top section ("Student Section"), and your advisor will need to complete and sign the bottom section ("Advisor Section").

☐ You or your advisor can email the completed form to iss@andrews.edu, or you can print it and bring it in person to the International Student Services office in the Administration Building, Room 307. (**NOTE: Please do NOT send the OPT Status Form to USCIS.**)

☐ Once International Student Services receives your OPT Status Form, a designated school official (DSO) will update your I-20 with an OPT recommendation. You MUST wait to receive the updated I-20 with OPT

recommendation BEFORE you apply for OPT through USCIS. This updated I-20 with OPT recommendation must be included with your application.

ONLINE STEP 2: Receive an electronic version of your updated I-20 with OPT recommendation from a designated school official (DSO). Please DO NOT proceed with your OPT application until you receive this updated I-20.

> NOTE: **USCIS must receive your completed OPT application within 30 days of the date that your I-20 was updated with OPT recommendation by a DSO**. If this does not happen, USCIS will deny your OPT request.

ONLINE STEP 3: Go online and follow the instructions for the Application for Employment Authorization | USCIS (https://www.uscis.gov/i-765):

- ☐ Once you are on the **I-765, APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION** webpage, scroll down and choose **File Online**.

- ☐ You will need to create an account (if you haven't already) and then sign in.

- ☐ When you are in your USCIS account, choose **My USCIS** and then choose **File a Form Online**.

- ☐ Select **I-765, Application for Employment Authorization** and then choose **Start Form**. Follow the online directions completely, which include reading the "Before You Start Your Application" points, paying the $470 online filing fee, and gathering the documents you are instructed online to have with you when you fill out the I-765 form.

> NOTE: Designated school officials (DSOs) in the International Student Service office do not have access to **your** online application portal, so once you reach Online Step 3, you will need to bring any questions you have directly to USCIS by going to Contact Us | USCIS (https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/contact-us) or calling (800) 375-5283.

MAILING APPLICATION STEPS FOR OPT

MAILING STEP 1: Complete and submit the OPT Status Form to the International Student Services office:

- ☐ If you do not have an OPT Status Form, request one from the International Student Services office by emailing iss@andrews.edu. It is best to have an electronic version of this form.

- ☐ Fill out the OPT Status Form **with your academic advisor**. You will need to complete and sign the top section ("Student Section"), and your advisor will need to complete and sign the bottom section ("Advisor Section").

- ☐ You or your advisor can email the completed form to iss@andrews.edu, or you can print it and bring it in person to the International Student Services office in the Administration Building, Room 307. (**NOTE: Please do NOT send the OPT Status Form to USCIS.**)

- ☐ Once International Student Services receives your OPT Status Form, a designated school official (DSO) will update your I-20 with an OPT recommendation. You MUST wait to receive the updated I-20 with OPT recommendation BEFORE you apply for OPT through USCIS. This updated I-20 with OPT recommendation must be included with your application.

Please go to next page → → →

MAILING STEP 2: Gather the documents and materials you will need to apply while you are waiting for the updated I-20 with OPT recommendation from a designated school official (DSO):

- ☐ I-94 Arrival Document:
    - Download and/or print a copy by going to https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/#/home.
    - Choose "Get Most Recent I-94" and follow the directions.

- ☐ Photocopy of your passport identification page

- ☐ Photocopy of your F-1 visa page

- ☐ Photocopy of your latest I-20 (first and second page) (note: **this is NOT the I-20 with OPT recommendation a DSO will soon submit to you**; this should be the latest I-20 BEFORE the I-20 with OPT recommendation; you will submit BOTH in your OPT application)

- ☐ Two new passport photos:
    - Must be taken within the past 30 days
    - Must meet the standard specifications for passports (most pharmacies provide this service)
    - Lightly print your name and your SEVIS number in pencil on the back of each photo

- ☐ $520 paper filing fee (details on how to pay this fee are explained in Mailing Step 5 below)

MAILING STEP 3: Receive your updated I-20 with OPT recommendation from a designated school official (DSO):

- ☐ This will most likely be presented to you as a printed version, but electronic versions that you print yourself are also acceptable as long as they include the OPT recommendation and are signed by a DSO.

- ☐ Please DO NOT proceed with your OPT application until you receive this updated I-20.

NOTE: **USCIS must receive your completed OPT application within 30 days of the date that your I-20 was updated with OPT recommendation by a DSO**. If this does not happen, USCIS will deny your OPT request.

MAILING STEP 4: Download and complete Form **I-765, Application for Employment Authorization:**

- ☐ Go to Application for Employment Authorization | USCIS (https://www.uscis.gov/i-765). Once you are on the **I-765, APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION** webpage, scroll down past the online filing instructions until you reach the Form Details options.

- ☐ Download the Form I-765 and the Instructions for Form I-765.

NOTE: On the Instruction for Form I-765 form, you should follow instructions for Foreign Student Category **"Post-completion OPT – (C) (3) (B)"** and the **General Instructions** and the **Specific Instructions**.

Please go to next page → → →

☐ Fill out Form I-765, noting the Special Instructions for Completing Form I-765 below for the highlighted questions (and follow the Specific Instructions section in the Instructions for I-765 form for all other questions):

Special Instructions for Completing Form I-765: Highlighted Questions	
Part 1	Choose 1.a. "Initial permission to accept employment".
Part 2	1.a. – 1.c. Your name should be the same as what is on your passport and I-20.
	5.a. – 5.e. Where you would like your I-797 Notice of Action and EAD card sent.
	6. If your mailing address is different than your physical address, check "No".
	7.a – 7.d. Provide your U.S. physical address if you checked "No" in 6. above.
	21.a. You can get your latest I-94 by going to https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/#/home.
	22. You can find the date of your last arrival into the U.S. in your passport next to your F-1 visa.
	23. You can find the place of your last arrival into the U.S. in your passport next to your F-1 visa.
	24. Write "F-1 student".
	25. Write "F-1 student".
	26. You can find the SEVIS number at the top left of your I-20 – it starts with N.
	27. Write (C) (3) (B).

MAILING STEP 5: Download and complete Form G-1145 (if you want e-notification of your application acceptance) by going to E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance | USCIS (https://www.uscis.gov/g-1145):

☐ Complete this form only if you would like to be electronically notified of your application acceptance.

☐ Include the completed G-1145 form in your I-765 application materials.

MAILING STEP 6: Pay the filing fee:

☐ Prepare a check or money order made payable to **US Department of Homeland Security** (do not abbreviate).

☐ For full details on the filing fee, please go to https://www.uscis.gov/i-765, scroll down past the online filing instructions until you see Form Details, and choose Filing Fee.

MAILING STEP 7: Mail your completed I-765 application with all attached documents and materials explained in the mailing steps above and repeated in the final checklist below.

☐ Review this **final checklist** of documents and materials to include with your application:

- ✓ Completed Form I-765
- ✓ I-94 document
- ✓ Photocopy of passport identification page
- ✓ Photocopy of F-1 visa page
- ✓ Photocopy of latest I-20 (before I-20 with OPT recommendation from a DSO)
- ✓ I-20 with OPT recommendation from a DSO
- ✓ Two new passport photos
- ✓ $520 paper filing fee (check or money order)
- ✓ Completed Form G-1145 (if you want e-notification of your application acceptance)

☐ It is recommended that you use express mail or courier deliveries like FedEx or DHL to mail your application and attached documents and materials to USCIS. This will be faster and you will be provided with a tracking number.

Mail to:

If you are using the **U.S. Postal Services (USPS)**:	If you are using **FedEx, UPS, or DHL**:
USCIS Attn: I-765 C03 P.O. Box 805373 Chicago, IL 60680-5374	**USCIS** Attn: I-765 C03 (Box 805373) 131 South Dearborn – 3rd Floor Chicago, IL 60603-5517

 Receipt Notice:

If you include Form G-1145 with your application, USCIS will notify you in one to four weeks of accepting your immigration forms via email and/or phone call. The message will provide a receipt number (this is not an approval of OPT) and instructions for how you can use your receipt number to monitor your case online and obtain case status information. It is normal for your case to say "initial review" for most of the three-month processing period. Approximately six weeks after your application is mailed you will receive a paper copy Receipt Notice (I-797 Notice of Action) from USCIS. Please keep this receipt carefully in your records.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

- The EAD card will be mailed to the address that you put on the I-765 form. The U.S. Postal Services (USPS) will NOT forward mail from USCIS if you change your address after you apply.

- USCIS will NOT mail your EAD card to a P.O. Box or international address.

- The International Student Services office provides information only; the office does not approve the application or have the authority to influence the process. If there is a request for information or to correct a problem, USCIS will notify you (alone) of the request and it is your responsibility to respond.

- Please note that if you choose to travel during the OPT application process, your return to the U.S. is not guaranteed, and if you are outside of the U.S., it can be difficult to respond to requests from USCIS about your application.

- You may not begin employment until USCIS approves the OPT application and you have received your EAD card.