

What You Should Know about OPT: Application Process and Reporting Requirements

prepared by International Student Services at Reed College

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a benefit available to students in F-1 visa status which allows up to 12 months of work authorization in the U.S. to gain practical experience in your field of study. Your OPT can be used before you graduate (pre-completion) or after you graduate (post-completion). OPT is available for a cumulative maximum of 12 months per educational level. An extension of 24 months is available to certain [STEM degree recipients](#).

OPT Eligibility and Other Important Things to Know:

- You must apply for this work authorization benefit through US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Application processing may take 3+ months. Applications may be submitted online or by post mail. ISS advises students to apply online, further resources are provided below.
- You must have been maintaining F-1 status for at least one academic year in order to be eligible for OPT.
- You do not need to have a job offer to apply.
- Your work must be directly related to your course of study.
- There are three categories of OPT:
 - Pre-completion OPT- Is used prior to graduation. Students must specify part-time (20 hrs or less per wk) or full-time (more than 20 hrs/wk) when applying, and may apply as early as 90 days prior to your requested work authorization start date. Any time used for pre-completion OPT is deducted from the 12 months available for post-completion.
 - Post-completion OPT - Is used after graduation. You may apply for OPT as early as 90 days prior to your program end date (graduation) and as late as 60 days following your program end date. Your selected post-completion OPT work authorization start date must be within 60 days of your program end date/graduation. 12 months available (deduct time spent in pre-graduation OPT).
 - STEM OPT Extension - An extension of 24 months is available to certain [STEM degree recipients](#). Students must be currently employed with an eligible employer and must write a training plan prior to applying. You must apply for the extension within the 90 day window prior to your OPT end date.
- There are limits on unemployment:
 - Students approved for post-completion OPT may not accrue a cumulative of more than 90 days of unemployment inclusive of weekends.
 - Students on STEM OPT are limited to 150 days of unemployment.
 - To stop the “unemployment clock”, a student must be employed full-time (defined as 20 hours or more/week). The full-time requirement can be met through multiple jobs/positions totalling 20 hours or more per week. However, [SEVP guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) considers students who are working in their OPT opportunities fewer than 20 hours a week as engaged in OPT.
- Volunteer or unpaid work qualifies as work. However, you should be sure to keep records of your hours/dates worked and ask for written documentation from your employer or volunteer coordinator to verify your employment.
- Transferring your SEVIS record to another school will end your OPT work authorization.

Pre-Completion OPT [Eligibility Category (c)(3)(A)]

- OPT before completion of the course of study (before the program end date or graduation) is "pre-completion" OPT.
- OPT is available for a cumulative maximum of 12 months per educational level, and time used for pre-completion OPT is deducted from the 12 months available for post-completion OPT. For example, if a student uses 3 months of full-time pre-completion OPT for an internship during their junior summer, they will have 9 months of OPT available to request after graduation. Part-time pre-completion OPT (<20 hrs/wk) is deducted at a 50% rate.
- A student still working towards degree completion is limited to part-time OPT (up to 20 hrs/wk) when school is in session, and may use full-time OPT (more than 20 hrs/wk) during academic breaks.
- Although you do not need a job offer to apply, most students opt not to apply until they have secured an offer. Approved pre-completion OPT will reduce the number of days available for future OPT even if the student does not actually work. Unemployment days are not counted during pre-completion OPT.
- Students may submit their application to USCIS up to 90 days prior to their requested start date for employment.
- Students in their first year of F-1 status may apply up to 90 days before they complete one academic year in F-1 status (2 semesters), but cannot start OPT employment until after the final day of that semester
- Due to USCIS delays in processing, we recommend applying as early as possible. USCIS may take 3 months to process your OPT request

Steps to Submit Your Pre-Completion OPT Application

1. [Complete the Pre-Completion OPT Quiz + Agreement.](#)
2. Carefully review and follow the [Online Filing Guide for Pre-Completion OPT](#). Prior to submitting your application you should meet with ISS to request an OPT endorsed I-20. **Your application will be denied if submitted without the updated and endorsed I-20!**
3. [Make an appointment to apply for pre-completion OPT with ISS or request the OPT I-20.](#)
Ahead of the meeting, you should prepare and gather the following:
 - A PDF copy of your online application (Form I-765)
 - Copies of the documents to be uploaded to the Evidence section
 - Anything that may be included in the "Additional Information" section
 - Consider your pre-completion OPT start and end dates, and whether you will seek full-time or part-time OPT.
4. Once OPT eligibility is confirmed, ISS will use your chosen OPT start and end dates and issue your I-20 with OPT endorsement. Once you sign and date it, a copy must be uploaded to the "Evidence" section.
5. Pay the filing fee by credit/debit card, or by bank transfer. Fee payment is the final step and will SUBMIT your application. Do not pay the fee until you review your application and upload the required evidence.

IMPORTANT: Your application will be denied if your application is not received by USCIS within 30 days of the DSO's signature on your OPT endorsed I-20.

- If your OPT application will not be filed at least five days before this, you should request an updated I-20 with OPT Endorsement from ISS.

Post-Completion OPT [Eligibility Category (c)(3)(B)]

- OPT following completion of the course of study (after graduation) is considered "post-completion" OPT. Since on-campus work eligibility ends at graduation, students planning to work for Reed after graduation must seek OPT work authorization.
- OPT is available for a cumulative maximum of 12 months per educational level. Time used for pre-completion OPT is deducted from the 12 months available for post-completion OPT.
- Students may submit their application to USCIS as early as 90 days prior to the program end date (graduation) and as late as 60 days following the program end date.
- Students must have completed one academic year in active F-1 status to be eligible for OPT.
- Due to USCIS delays in processing, we recommend applying as early as possible. USCIS may take 3 months to process your OPT request.
- Students participating in post-completion OPT are required to continue reporting address, contact, and employment information to ISS or their SEVP Portal within 10 days of a change in order to maintain F-1 status.
- Students approved for post-completion OPT may not accrue a cumulative of more than 90 days of unemployment inclusive of weekends.

Steps to Submit Your Post-Completion OPT Application

1. Connect with your Academic Advisor to confirm that you are on track to graduate this term
2. Carefully review and follow the [Online Filing Guide for Post-Completion OPT](#). Prior to submitting your application you should meet with ISS to request an OPT endorsed I-20. **Your application will be denied if submitted without the updated and endorsed I-20!**
3. Complete the [Post-Completion OPT Quiz + Agreement](#).
4. [Make an appointment to apply for post-completion OPT with ISS or request your OPT endorsed I-20](#). Ahead of the meeting, you should prepare and gather the following:
 - A PDF copy of your online application (Form I-765)
 - Copies of the documents to be uploaded to the Evidence section
 - Anything that may be included in the "Additional Information" section
 - Consider your post-completion OPT start date, which must be within 60 days of your program end date (graduation).
5. Once OPT eligibility is confirmed, ISS will use your chosen OPT start date and issue your I-20 with OPT endorsement. Once you sign and date it, a copy must be uploaded to the "Evidence" section.
6. Pay the filing fee by credit/debit card, or by bank transfer. Fee payment is the final step and will SUBMIT your application. Do not pay the fee until you review your application and upload the required evidence.

IMPORTANT: Your application will be denied if your application is not received by USCIS within 30 days of the DSO's signature on your OPT endorsed I-20.

- If your OPT application will not be filed at least five days before this, you should request an updated I-20 with OPT Endorsement from ISS.

STEM OPT Extension [Eligibility Category (c)(3)(C)]

- An extension of 24 months is available to certain [STEM degree recipients](#). Confirm that the eligible CIP code of the academic major listed on the [DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List](#) matches the CIP code listed on your I-20.
- Students must be currently employed in post-completion OPT with [an eligible employer](#) and must [write a training plan](#) prior to applying.
- Students must apply for the extension within the 90 day window prior to the OPT end date.
- Students participating in STEM OPT are required to complete [annual training plan evaluations](#), as well as final evaluations at the end of any employment segment. Students must also confirm their information and participation with ISS every 6 months, and continue reporting address, contact, and employment information changes to ISS or their SEVP Portal within 10 days of a change in order to maintain F-1 status.
- Students on STEM OPT are limited to 150 days of unemployment.
- As long as the STEM OPT extension is timely filed (properly delivered to USCIS before the expiration of the current OPT EAD card), students benefit from an automatic extension of their work authorization while the extension application is pending with USCIS for up to 180 days after the expiration of the current card ([8 CFR § 214.2\(f\)\(11\)\(i\)\(C\)](#)).

Steps to Submit Your STEM OPT Extension Application

1. Confirm your [eligibility for the STEM OPT Extension](#).
2. With your employer prepare the [I-983 Training Plan](#) and submit it to iss@reed.edu to review for completeness. Allow up to 5 business days for ISS to review your training plan. If complete, ISS will issue a STEM OPT endorsed I-20 or will follow up for additional information if necessary.
3. (Optional) [Make an appointment to discuss STEM OPT Extension questions](#) with International Student Services.
4. Submit your application for a STEM OPT Extension to USCIS. The application process is generally the same as for post-completion OPT with some additions and exceptions:
 - a. Include a Copy of your STEM-eligible degree from Reed College
 - b. Select category (c)(3)(C) for STEM OPT extension
 - c. You must provide your employer's E-Verify number in the I-765 application
 - d. DO NOT include the I-983 with your application to USCIS, this is kept on file with ISS

IMPORTANT: Your application will be denied if your application is not received by USCIS within 60 days of the DSO's signature on your I-20.

Next Steps

After you submit your OPT application, you should expect to receive a receipt notice called the Notice of Action from USCIS. The notice will include a receipt number that allows students to [track case progress of the application online](#).

Following the Notice of Action, you should receive an approval notice and then an OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD) also called the "OPT card". You may begin work AFTER receipt of the EAD and confirmed employment authorization start dates.

IMPORTANT: Check the accuracy of the information on each document you receive. If there are errors and you fail to promptly report them, you may need to pay the OPT application fee again for a replacement (corrected) EAD.

If your application is incomplete, you may receive a Request for Evidence (RFE) or denial. These notices will include instructions on completing or re-submitting your application. Follow the instructions and upload or mail the missing materials ASAP! Contact ISS if you need assistance.

Student Reporting Requirements while on OPT

All students participating in OPT must continue to report to ISS or via their SEVP Portal any change in academic program, address, or employment segments within 10 days of a change.

Failure to fulfill reporting requirements may result in immediate or future serious immigration consequences.

Students utilizing **pre-completion OPT** may report information to iss@reed.edu.

Students utilizing **post-completion OPT or STEM OPT** will be provided access to an SEVP Portal to report contact and employment information.

- Before you graduate, be sure to email iss@reed.edu your:
 1. New address in the U.S.
 2. Non-Reed email address (this will be used to access the SEVP Portal)
- If you decide to leave the U.S. and complete your F-1 program before your OPT end date, please email iss@reed.edu the date you will depart the U.S. so that your F-1 record in SEVIS may be completed with accuracy.

How to Register with the SEVP Student Portal

1-2 days after the OPT start date on your EAD, you will receive an email from SEVP with a link to create your SEVP Portal (see your junk or spam folder if it's missing). This will allow you to make certain edits and updates in your SEVIS record via the SEVP Portal. Read the [SEVP Portal Student User Guide](#), which details how to create a portal account and log your OPT activities.

While on OPT you must report any changes to the following within 10 days:

- Change of address
- Change of name
- Your employment information, including any future change of employer.

- This information will include the start/end date of employment, contact information for the employer, and a statement of how your work is directly related to your major.
- Any interruptions in employment

Students on post-completion and STEM OPT should report their information updates via the SEVP Portal. If you need an updated I-20 or help accessing your SEVP Portal, or amending an entry to reflect a start date more than 10 days in the past, please reach out to iss@reed.edu.

Failure to Report Consequences

- A U.S. government official may view a failure to report changes to OPT information within 10 days to be in violation of a student's F-1 status. This could lead to a denial of future applications for OPT, change in immigration status, or ability to renew or obtain another visa to the U.S.
- Students approved for post-completion OPT may not accrue a cumulative of more than 90 days of unemployment inclusive of weekends. Students on STEM OPT are limited to 150 days of unemployment. The number of unemployed days is counted from the beginning of the post-completion OPT start date until employment information is reported in SEVIS by ISS or via the SEVP Portal.
 - The SEVP Portal will not accept an employment start date outside of the 10 day reporting window. If the date was more than 10 days ago, you will need to email iss@reed.edu for assistance with entering the information into SEVIS.
- If locked out of your SEVP Portal account email iss@reed.edu to request to have it reset. A link to reset your account will be sent to your email address.

Travel and Re-Entry on OPT

Travel outside of the United States while awaiting approval for OPT or while on OPT can be tricky and should be approached with caution. Please consult with ISS before traveling internationally. In general:

- If you have both an EAD card and a job, you should not experience difficulty reentering the United States.
- If either of the above two conditions are missing, i.e.: you don't yet have your EAD, or you are unemployed, you are assuming risk.

When traveling internationally bring:

- EAD card ("OPT card")
- OPT-endorsed I-20 with travel signature < 6 months old at the time of return to the U.S.
- Passport (with at least 6 month's validity)
- Letter verifying employment from your employer
- Valid F-1 visa (which should be renewed if it is expired, not applicable for Canadians)
 - You do NOT need a valid F-1 visa if you travel for less than 30 days solely to Canada, Mexico, or adjacent islands in the Caribbean (except Cuba). The expired F visas are considered to be "extended" to the date of re-entry, eliminating the need to obtain a new visa at a U.S. consulate before re-entry in these cases.

What happens at the end of your post-completion OPT?

Once your employment end date comes, you have a few options:

1. **Depart the United States.** You have a 60-day grace period following your OPT end date. This time is to be used to prepare for your departure; you cannot work during this time.
2. **Transfer your F-1 SEVIS record to another school.** If you have plans to transfer to a graduate school in the U.S., [contact ISS](#) for assistance in transferring your SEVIS record to your new school. This must be completed during the 60-day grace period following your employment end date. Transferring your SEVIS record before your OPT end date will terminate your work authorization upon the transfer date.
3. **If applicable, you can apply for a [24-month STEM OPT extension](#)** (only for those who majored in an eligible STEM field at Reed). See above or [Contact ISS](#) for more information regarding the process for the STEM OPT extension, but do so at least three or four months prior to your OPT end date. You can submit an application up to 90 days before your OPT expiration.
4. **Change your immigration status.** Most commonly, this means that an employer has offered to sponsor your H-1B visa. You will work with your employer and legal counsel to apply for this work authorization.

Please don't hesitate to contact International Student Services with any questions regarding your OPT work authorization!

International Student Services
iss@reed.edu