

## Optional Practical Training: Quick Guide

**DISCLAIMER:** GCC ISO provides this guide for general information only. Information in this document does not constitute legal advice. Because immigration rules and interpretations can change, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Department of State (DOS) may modify eligibility requirements or interpretations at any time.

### Definition of Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) provides you with an opportunity to gain employment experience in your chosen profession for 12 months. OPT may be used before you graduate (pre-completion OPT) or after you graduate (post-completion OPT). Since GCC offers Curricular Practical Training authorization, most students will only use post-completion OPT.

**OPT jobs must be in your field and at your level.** This means that the job opportunity must be directly related to your major and must require applicants to have your level of education. Please consult with ISO if you are unsure if a position qualifies for OPT.

Pre-completion OPT is limited to part-time (up to 20 hours a week) during school sessions and may be full-time (21+ hours a week) during school breaks. Post-completion OPT may be full-time (21+ hours a week) or part-time (a minimum of 20 hours a week). Post-completion OPT may be paid or unpaid (i.e. internship or volunteer work). You may also be self-employed or volunteer during your post-completion OPT period. Please see the section below on “Self-Employment and Volunteering” before doing this type of work.

### Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for OPT, you must be in F-1 status for at least 9 months (one academic year). If you use a total of 12 months of *full-time* curricular practical training (CPT), you will not be able to apply for OPT. Part-time CPT work has no effect on OPT. OPT may only be granted once per higher academic level. For example, if you are completing an associate’s degree (AA/AS) but already used OPT at the associate’s level in the past, you cannot apply again. In this case, the next time you would be eligible for OPT is after a bachelor’s degree program. If you were authorized for OPT at the bachelor’s degree level, and are now graduating from an associate degree or certificate program, you will also not be eligible to apply for a new OPT period. In this case, the next time you would be eligible for OPT is after a master’s program.

### Date You Complete Your Program of Study

Your F-1 status ends 60 days after the date you **complete your degree requirements**, not the date listed on your I-20. USCIS ignores your graduation date because it realizes that many students, such as graduate students in thesis or dissertation programs, may complete requirements for a degree any day during the year. Therefore, it is important to plan ahead and know what the actual last day of your program will be.

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### **Application Deadline**

You can apply for OPT 90 days before you complete your degree requirements. OPT can begin no later than 60 days after you complete your degree requirements. If the EAD card is issued after the 60<sup>th</sup> day, USCIS must still use the 60 day deadline as your employment start date. This is why it's very important to apply early - delaying your application could result in a loss of OPT time.

Your application must be *received* (not postmarked) by USCIS no later than 60 days after you complete your degree requirements. Historically, applications can take anywhere from 75-130 days to be processed. You cannot expedite or rush this process without paying a large "premium processing" fee. Please see the Optional Practical Training Application Checklist on the [Immigration](#) page for more information on submitting these applications.

### **Authorization by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)**

After you apply, you will receive a receipt from USCIS - do not throw it away. It will have a case number and a website and telephone number which you can use to track the progress of your application. Please send a copy of this receipt to our office. You can only begin work when:

1. You have obtained an EAD card from the USCIS;
2. The start date of employment (as noted on your EAD card) is reached; and
3. You have completed all requirements for your program of study.

Once OPT approval is granted, it may not be cancelled. Unexpected delays in completing degree requirements, inability to find an appropriate job, or loss of a job may result in hitting your 90-day unemployment limit (please see section below).

### **Actual Date Employment May Begin**

You may not begin work until:

1. You have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card from USCIS **AND**
2. The start date on your EAD card has been reached

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### Updating Personal & Employer Information

You must report all changes in your personal address, phone number, and e-mail address while on OPT within 10 days of the change. You must also report any changes in your employment status, including any change in work location or job status (i.e. finished or left a job, started a new job, etc.) within 10 days. Please use the OPT Reporting Form to submit this information or report it directly in the SEVP OPT Portal. You only need to choose one reporting method but must report within 10 days of the change. “Within 10 days” means that if something happens today, you must report it no later than 10 days from today.

### Unemployment Limits

You may accrue a maximum of 90 total days of unemployment in your 12-month period of initial OPT. For example, if you were unemployed for a total of 10 days while you were looking for a job, you have a total of 80 days of unemployment left for the rest of the year. If you accrue 90 days of unemployment, you must depart the US immediately (by the 91st day). There is no additional grace period.

### Self-Employment and Volunteering

If you report self-employment, you must document all work-related activities carefully and make sure that you are working a minimum of 20 hours a week. You may need to show proof of your self-employment to USCIS in the future. We encourage you to keep your calendar up to date, use an app (like Toggl) to track your time, and use [software to keep track of billable hours](#). Even creative avenues like producing time-lapsed videos or creating a "day in the life of" video series and posting it to social media can assist with showing proof of work. Use contracts and never deal in cash – Venmo, Paypal, Zelle and other forms of electronic payments are fine as they produce a record of payment, but we recommend you do not get paid for work in direct cash.

Volunteering is also tricky. You can only report volunteer work if it meets the requirements of OPT (in your field and at your level of study). It is important to note that volunteering opportunities are typically **only** found in the public sector (i.e. non-profits, charitable organizations). There is no such thing as “volunteering” for a private or for-profit organization. These institutions generally must offer an unpaid internship for unpaid work. It is very important not to accept a position with any company that is violating US Department of Labor laws. If you have any questions about an opportunity you are thinking of pursuing, please contact us.

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### Travel During OPT Period

Please consult our Travel Guidelines document on the [Travel](#) page for specific guidance depending on where you are in the OPT process.

### H1-B Cap Gap

Students who have already earned a bachelor's degree or higher in the US may qualify for H1-B sponsorship. Per [USCIS](#), "An F-1 student who is the beneficiary of an H-1B petition and request for change of status that is filed on time may have his or her F-1 status and any current employment authorization extended until the first day of the new fiscal year."

This allows you to remain in the US and continue employment until your H1-B application is approved and takes effect on October 1<sup>st</sup>, provided that your H1-B application is received by USCIS *prior* to the end of your current OPT status. Keep in mind though that this automatic extension of work authorization will also *automatically terminate* upon the rejection, denial, or revocation of the H-1B petition. If this is the case, you will need to leave the US immediately.

You can learn more about H1-B Cap Gap on the Department of Homeland Security's [Study in the States](#) page on this topic.

### STEM Extension: Unavailable at AA or Certificate Level

The 24-month STEM extension is unavailable to associates or certificate level OPT participants. STEM requires the earning of a bachelor's degree or higher in the US. You can learn about the STEM Extension on the Department of Homeland Security's [Study in the States](#) page on this topic. However, if you *have* earned a bachelor's or master's degree in the US, and did not apply for OPT at that time, you may be eligible to apply. Please review the [STEM OPT Quick Guide](#) for more information and contact our office to confirm eligibility.