

Optional Practical Training Information

READ ALL CAREFULLY!

What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a temporary employment authorization allowing 12 months of full-time work authorization related to a student's academic program. OPT is an option for each higher degree level completed (e.g., a student can use 12 months of OPT after completion of bachelor's degree and then be eligible for another 12 months upon completion of a master's degree). A student may request OPT during an academic program as well as after completion of the academic program. It is not necessary to have an offer of employment in order to apply for OPT.

Starting April 9, 2008, there are several new regulations governing OPT for all students. They are noted as "NEW" in the below information. Furthermore, it is now possible for students in certain STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields to apply for a 17 month OPT extension. To find out if you are eligible for this, please check our Web site.

Who is eligible for OPT?

To be eligible for OPT, a student must:

- Be in good immigration status for a full academic school year.
- Be in a degree-seeking academic program.

When can students engage in OPT?

Students may be authorized for OPT:

- While school is in session ("Pre-completion OPT" – limited to 20 hours per week).
- During vacation periods ("Pre-completion OPT" – full-time authorization).
- After completion of the course requirements for a degree, but before completion of the thesis or dissertation ("Post-completion OPT" – full-time authorization).
- After completion of an academic program leading to a degree or certificate ("Post-completion" – full-time authorization).

If you will be graduating and would like to apply for OPT, please be aware of the following:

- It is not necessary to have an offer of employment to apply for OPT.
- **You may not continue working on campus after the date your advisor gives for completing the requirements of the program. This is when you complete your studies and when you lose your benefit to work on campus without work authorization.**
- You also **may not begin** working until you receive an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card and its starting date is current.
- OPT is limited to 12 months per degree level (see exceptions to STEM graduates at our Web site). Part-time OPT performed during the academic program will be counted at the rate of 50 percent (two months part-time OPT authorization equals one month of full-time OPT). Part-time OPT authorization is 20 hours or less per week, and full-time OPT authorization is 21 hours or more.
- **NEW** If you are applying for OPT based on completion of studies, you may apply as early as 90 days before you complete your studies and no later than 60 days after the last day of classes. (**NOTE: OIE should receive your OPT application no later than one month after the date of your degree completion.**)
- The USCIS will authorize your OPT from the date you requested on the OPT Authorization Form or the USCIS approval date, whichever is later.
- It may take the USCIS Vermont Service Center a minimum of 90 to 120 days to process your OPT application.
- The USCIS will mail your card to the address shown on Form I-765. **The U.S. Postal Service will not forward mail from USCIS**, therefore the address you choose should not change for the next several months. If you are moving, agree with a responsible friend (who will not be moving) to use his/her address.
- Student departure from the U.S. **before** OPT is approved does **not** abandon the application. In order to reenter before the OPT is approved, the student will need:

- a valid passport and F-1 visa stamp
- the I-20 endorsed for OPT and signed for travel
- an I-797 receipt notice indicating USCIS receipt of the OPT application

NOTE: If your OPT is approved while you are outside the U.S., neither OIE nor USCIS will mail your card to you abroad. Also, you may have trouble with reentry without a written job offer (see information below).

- Once you have received OPT authorization, the expiration date is set, so you will have effectively used that time regardless of whether or not you have worked. (**Example:** Your work authorization dates are 05/15/1956 to 05/14/1957 but you did not start working until 08/01/1956. Your authorization will still expire on 05/14/1957.)
- **NEW limits to unemployment.** During post-completion OPT, F-1 status is dependent upon employment. Students may not accrue an aggregate of more than 90 days of unemployment during any post-completion OPT carried out under the initial post-completion OPT authorization. Please read the OPT follow-up information for more information about reporting unemployment and employment to your school.
- **NEW “Cap-Gap” extensions:** Duration of status and work authorization will be extended for any student on OPT, who is the beneficiary of a timely-filed H-1B petition requesting an employment start date of October 1 of the following fiscal year. The extension of duration of status must be requested by the student once the H-1B has been submitted. It is awarded in the form of a new I-20 with extended OPT dates. Please read the OPT follow-up information for more information.
- **NEW Student reporting requirements.** Both while your OPT application is pending with the USCIS and after your OPT application is approved, your nonimmigrant status remains F-1. **As long as you are in the U.S., and on OPT you are required to update the following to Ingrid Mercer by e-mail (iamercer@vcu.edu) within 10 days of any change:**
 - Your residential address
 - Employer name and address
 - Change of employment
 - Any loss of employment or unemployment
- **Travel outside the U.S. once OPT has been approved.** Port of entry (POE) guards will ask for proof of employment from all F-1 students returning using an OPT card. If you travel you will need to take:
 - A letter from your supervisor indicating that you are still working, a summary of what you are doing and that he or she expects you to return to continue working
 - Two of your most recent pay stubs
 - Your signed I-20 (signature cannot be older than six months regardless of text above signature line stating that signatures are good for one year)
 - A valid passport
 - A valid F-1 visa

If **have not found a job yet**, take clear documentation of your job search. Please remember that you travel at your own risk. It is very possible the OIE will not be able to help you return if you are stopped at the POE.

How do I apply for OPT?

To apply for OPT, please submit the following information to the OIE-IS no later than one month after the date of completion for your degree:

- 1) Form I-765 (see F-1 Forms for a link to this form online). On number 16, if you are applying for pre-completion OPT write (c)(3)(A). If you are applying for post-completion OPT, write (c)(3)(B).
- 2) Optional Practical Training Authorization Form completed by you and your academic adviser (see F-1 Forms for a pdf version of this form online).
- 3) Copy of passport information page, visa page and I-94 card (front and back, make sure the red entry stamp is visible).
- 4) Front and back copies of **all** previously issued I-20s and new OPT I-20 (make sure the red entry stamp is visible).
- 5) Check or money order for \$340 made payable to “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.”
- 6) Two passport-style photos. **Do not cut** or alter photos!

Updated 2008



Virginia Commonwealth University
Optional Practical Training Authorization Form

Section A. (To be completed by student.)

- 1. Employment start date (must be within 60 days of program completion date) (mm/dd/yyyy)
2. Employment end date (mm/dd/yyyy)
3. Full time (more than 20 hrs/ week) or part time (20 hrs/ week or less):

Please check each statement & sign.

I will give a legible copy of my employment authorization card to OIE as soon as I receive it.
I understand that any employment I accept while on OPT must be directly related to my field of study.

Within 10 days of any change, I will update the VCU OIE office with the following information:

- The date of any loss or end of employment
Any changes in my living address or legal name
The starting date of any changes in employer
Any changes in my employer/ employment address

Last name First Middle

Phone () NON-VCU E-mail address

Student signature Date

SEVIS #: N (above bar code)

Section B. (To be completed by academic advisor.)

- 1. Department/ program of study.
2. Student will have completed all academic requirements for the degree by: (mm/dd/yyyy)

NOTE: The student will lose on-campus work authorization this day. Please keep this in mind if student has a graduate assistantship etc...

3. Anticipated student graduation date

4. Optional comments

Academic adviser name Phone

E-mail address

Academic advisor signature Date