



F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) Regular 12-Month Authorizations

Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows F-1 students to accept paid, off-campus employment that is directly related to their major field of study. This work permission is granted as a benefit under the F-1 program and does not change your U.S. immigration status. OPT is authorized to eligible students under the following categories:

Regular 12-Month Authorization (per degree level)

Pre-completion

- During the academic year while enrolled in coursework – part time (20 hours/week or less)
- During the annual vacation period – part or full time

Post-completion

- After completion of all degree requirements excluding the thesis – full time only
- After completion of all degree requirements – full time only

17-Month STEM Extension (one time only)

Continuation of Post-completion OPT

- Available to students with an eligible degree in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics, and currently employed under initial 12-month OPT by a qualified employer.

Note: See our separate bulletin on 17-Month STEM Extensions for details & procedures to that program.

Overview & Eligibility Requirements

Eligible students may apply for Pre- or Post-completion OPT with a recommendation from their current institution. No job offer is required to apply. Periods of full-time OPT may be granted in segments up to the full 12 months. Part-time OPT authorization is counted at 50% towards the total 12 months (i.e., 2 months of part-time OPT will count as 1 month of the total OPT). Students are eligible for an additional 12 months of OPT with each degree level. You must satisfy the following eligibility criteria to apply:

1. Currently maintaining valid F-1 status and normal progress towards degree requirements
2. Have pursued a full-time course of study for at least one academic year (usually 9 months)
3. Not been previously authorized for 12 months of OPT at the current or a higher degree level
4. Not been authorized for more than 12 months of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

Application Guidelines for General OPT

Optional Practical Training requires a two-step application process:

- 1) Request & receive an updated I-20 from the ISO using the Departmental Recommendation Form
- 2) Submit the appropriate application materials to USCIS for final authorization

Students are encouraged to speak with an International Student Advisor before starting this process, since timing is often very important. The new I-20 is generally available within 1 week of submitting all necessary forms to the ISO, but **USCIS may take up to 90 days to process the OPT application**. You must plan ahead and apply for OPT with time to receive your authorization before beginning any employment. Applications may be filed **as early as 90 days before the completion date** of all degree requirements (#5 on the I-20) or **up to 60 days after completion**. For those students requesting OPT to begin prior to completion, you may apply 90 days before your intended start date.

The start date requested for **Post-completion OPT may be delayed up to 60 days** after the completion date listed on the new I-20. Work is only authorized for the dates granted on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, which must be received from USCIS before you begin working.

When requesting an OPT recommendation, students should determine their expected completion date with their academic advisor carefully. This date will be printed on the I-20 and must reflect the expected completion of all degree requirements for the individual student, including classes, exams, final thesis, etc. This date also triggers the **end of student employment under F-1 On-Campus work permission**, which includes all Graduate Awards and lab work hired through UR Student Employment.

F-1 Reporting Requirements during OPT

Since your status does not change while pursuing Optional Practical Training, you must continue to comply with all F-1 regulations and reporting requirements. Accordingly, the University of Rochester remains your sponsoring institution and all required information must be reported through the ISO. Please use our online reporting tool for OPT students at: www.iso.rochester.edu/optreporting.htm.

Required Information: All details must be reported within **10 days** of any change.

- Change in name or personal address
- Name and address of employer(s)
- Type of Employment (see table online)
- Change in employer information
- Any interruption of employment

Documentation & Other Communications

- **EAD Card:** Provide a photocopy of your approved OPT authorization once it is issued by USCIS.
- **H-1B Petition:** Provide a copy of your Receipt Notice and Approval Notice to ISO for monitoring.
- **New Program of Study:** Notify the ISO of your intentions to begin a new degree or transfer your immigration record to another school. (Note: Your OPT work permission will become invalid once you begin coursework toward a new academic program or release your SEVIS record for transfer.)
- **Departure:** Contact the ISO if you intend to leave the U.S. and will no longer pursue your OPT.

Limits on Unemployment

Continued F-1 status and Post-completion OPT work permission are dependant on active employment. Students authorized for the standard 12-month OPT period are limited to a **cumulative total of 90 days** without employment. If you are unemployed for an aggregate of more than 90 days during your approved OPT period, your work permission will be terminated and your F-1 status is ended. No grace period currently exists for students who exceed this limit. Periods of unemployment are monitored through the required OPT reporting, so it is important to provide the ISO with timely and accurate information.

Automatic Extension for H-1B Cap Gap

Students with a pending or approved H-1B petition are eligible for an automatic extension of their F-1 status and valid OPT work permission. The purpose of this extension is to cover any lapse in status and expiring employment authorization before the H-1B Temporary Worker status can begin (usually limited to Oct 1st). H-1B petitions filed by cap-exempt employers are not intended for this benefit.

Please notify the ISO when an H-1B petition is submitted or approved on your behalf. To document the extended F-1 status & OPT period, you may request an updated I-20 listing the new employment dates. A temporary extension is valid once the petition is filed, pending allocation of available H-1B visas. If you are selected under the annual quota and a Receipt Notice is issued, the extension is then valid until September 30th of that year. All F-1 regulations, including OPT reporting requirements & unemployment limits, remain in effect during the extension. More information is online: www.iso.rochester.edu/optinfo.

OPT Travel Advisory

You must obtain a **valid travel endorsement every 6 months** from the ISO throughout your OPT authorization. Prior to the completion date listed on your I-20, you are able to travel normally, even if you have submitted an OPT application to USCIS. After the completion date has passed, your ability to reenter the U.S. is based on approval of the OPT. In addition to the usual travel documents (passport, I-20, & valid F-1 visa stamp), students on Post-completion OPT must also show their EAD card to prove that USCIS granted work authorization and extended eligibility for F-1 status. You may also be asked to demonstrate that you are using your OPT appropriately. This is generally satisfied by a letter or pay stub from your current employer or an offer letter from an intended employer. If your F-1 visa has expired, you will need to apply for a new visa stamp, which includes showing that you plan to return to your home country upon completion of your OPT (i.e. non-immigrant intent). Automatic Revalidation for short trips to Canada, Mexico, or the adjacent islands of 30 days or less is still available during periods of OPT.

F-2 Dependents: When returning from travel abroad, F-2 dependents must be able to show that the F-1 is still maintaining status. Prior to the student's completion date, this is proven on the dependent's I-20. During the OPT period, dependents must show that the OPT authorization was granted by USCIS. When traveling without the F-1 student, dependents should carry a photocopy of the F-1 I-20 and EAD card.

Step 1: Obtain recommendation from University of Rochester

1. **Make an appointment** to discuss your plans and application timing with an advisor in the ISO.
2. **Submit the Departmental Recommendation Form**, or formal letter from the Dean, confirming your academic advisor's recommendation and Dean's approval for employment.
3. **The ISO Advisor will issue a new SEVIS I-20** based on the expected completion date and requested employment dates listed on your OPT recommendation from the University.

Step 2: Submit application to USCIS for employment authorization

1. **Include the following documents in your application:**
 - a. Check or money order for \$340.00 (payable to Department of Homeland Security)
 - b. Two passport size photos (lightly print your name and I-94 # on the back)
 - c. Completed and signed Form I-765 (attached or at <http://www.uscis.gov>)
Use the appropriate code to complete #16 on the application form:
 - Pre-completion OPT: **(c)(3)(A)**
 - Post-completion OPT: **(c)(3)(B)**
 - d. Photocopy of new I-20, issued within 30 days before USCIS will receive the application
 - e. Photocopies of all previous I-20s (first & last pages) related to current degree program
 - f. Photocopies from passport: ID page, proof of validity, F-1 visa stamp (if available)
 - g. Photocopy of current I-94 (front and back) *or* Approval Notice for Change of Status to F-1
 - h. Photocopies of any previously issued EAD cards (if applicable)
2. **Copy** your entire application for your records, especially Form I-765.
3. **Mail your OPT application by courier or certified mail** with a return receipt to:
**USCIS Vermont Service Center
75 Lower Welden Street
St. Albans, VT 05479-9765**
4. **Track** the status of your application and current processing times through USCIS, using the Receipt Notice mailed within 2-3 weeks: <https://egov.immigration.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp>
5. **Authorization is granted by the EAD card (Employment Authorization Document):**
 - a. The EAD will be mailed only to the address listed on Form I-765; Government mail cannot be forwarded. You may use the ISO as your mailing address if you anticipate moving.
**ISO Address: 209 Morey Hall, Box 270446
Rochester, NY 14627**
 - b. **Do NOT begin working until you receive your EAD & your OPT start date is reached!**
 - c. Employment is authorized only in your field of study, indicated by the major on your I-20.
 - d. OPT work permission is not employer-specific and you may switch employers at any time.
Remember: You must then report this change to the ISO within 10 days.

Important Timing Considerations

Modifying your OPT Dates: Once your OPT application is submitted, it is very complicated, and often impossible, to make changes to your requested employment dates. You must choose the dates carefully! If you do not have a job when you apply for OPT, you can maximize your job search after graduation by using the full 60-day allowance to delay OPT, followed by the 90-day unemployment limit, as needed.

Start of OPT Reporting: You are responsible for complying with all OPT reporting requirements once the authorization start date printed on the EAD card has been reached. The 90-day limit on unemployment also begins with the OPT start date. To ensure accurate and timely reporting to SEVIS, it is important to provide date-specific information to the ISO when submitting your employment information online.

Completion of Degree Requirements: If there is a concern that you may not be able to complete your studies as scheduled, this can limit your ability to work full-time using OPT. Please contact the ISO.

Applying for 17-Month STEM Extension: If you are eligible for the STEM Extension and are working with an eligible employer, you must apply for the additional 17-month OPT period *before* your regular OPT expires. Please see our STEM Extension handout for guidelines and application instructions.