



## F-1 OPT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **1. What is F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

Practical training is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work in your major field (not your minor). OPT is authorized by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (U.S.C.I.S.). This authorization can take 2 to 3 months to obtain. The maximum amount of time granted to work on F-1 OPT status is 12 months per degree level plus a possible H1B cap gap extension.

### **2. What are the Eligibility Requirements for F-1 Optional Practical Training?**

To be eligible to apply for optional practical training, you must: (1) have been a full time enrolled student in the U.S. for at least one academic year by the requested start date of your OPT, and (2) be in F-1 status when you apply.

### **3. If I complete one degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?**

Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of Optional Practical Training after changing to a higher degree level. This does not apply to a second Bachelor's degree.

### **4. How can I use optional practical training while I am still in my program?**

You may use OPT while you are still in your degree program as follows: (1) part-time while school is in session, (2) fulltime during annual vacation periods. These periods of OPT used before you graduate will be deducted from the total allowable period of 12 months. Part-time OPT will be deducted at one-half the full-time rate.

### **5. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?**

Authorization for OPT is granted by U.S.C.I.S. and can take 1 - 3 months to obtain. Therefore it is important that you apply 3 months before the date you wish to start working. You may apply for POST-graduation OPT up to 90 days before your completion date and the immigration service MUST RECEIVE your application NO LATER THAN 60 days beyond your completion date or 60 days beyond the end date of your I-20 (WHICHEVER IS EARLIER). You MUST send your application within 30 days of getting the new I-20 from the International Division Office.

### **6. Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?**

You do NOT need to have a job offer before applying for the first 12 months of optional practical training.

**7. Do I need to have a job while I am on optional practical training?**

Yes. The regulations require that you do have employment while on your POST-graduation OPT period. You are only allowed to have a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12 month period of OPT.

**8. Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?**

The employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed, interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of OPT employment. If you are “self-employed,” keep careful records of all the work you do—it is supposed to be at least 20 hours per week.

**9. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?**

You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from U.S.C.I.S.; working before practical training has been authorized by the U.S.C.I.S. constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the U.S.

**10. Do I have to do anything with the Berkeley College International Division while I am on OPT?**

Yes, immigration regulations require that while you are on POST-graduation OPT, you must report your employment and address information to an International Advisor.

**11. Now that I've turned in my application, can I travel outside the U.S. while I wait for the card to come?**

After you graduate, in order to re-enter the U.S. you must have the following: OPT card, your valid passport, a current F-1 visa stamp, I-20 signed within the last six months, and your job offer letter or proof of employment.

**12. I want to leave the U.S. for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B2) that is valid for 10 years. Can't I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, then start work with the card once I get it?**

NO! If you intend to continue working on your OPT, NEVER enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with a B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status and your OPT will be invalid!

**13. What documents do I need to re-enter the U.S. while on OPT?**

You will need your I-20 that has been endorsed on the travel line by a designated school official (DSO) within the last 6 months; the OPT card from the U.S.C.I.S. (or the receipt notice for your OPT application), your valid passport, a current F-1 visa stamp, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.

**14. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the U.S. while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?**

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for less than 30 days, you could re-enter the U.S. on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with your I-94 card or print out, a valid passport, your EAD card (or receipt notice), an I-20 that has been signed by an International Advisor within the last 6 months, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment as long as:

- 1) You do not apply for a visa while in Canada and
- 2) You are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, Cuba or North Korea.

If you are traveling elsewhere, you will need to go to a U.S. embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp.

**15. In what ways is my application to the embassy for a new visa stamp affected by being on Optional Practical Training?**

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. It is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate non-immigrant intent.

**16. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under OPT?**

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD card or receipt notice for your application, an I-20 created by the International Advisor for your OPT application, AND your job offer letter or proof of employment. The official job offer letter should sound temporary and not permanent. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

**17. Do I still need to get the travel line on my I-20 signed by the International Division during the year of OPT?**

Yes, during the OPT year, if you travel outside the U.S., you need to have the travel line signed every six months.

*\* This OPT Q&A Form was taken from Cornell University International Students and Scholars Office and edited by Berkeley College International Division*