



SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY
International Services Office

INSTRUCTIONS TO APPLY FOR OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

****KEEP THIS FORM FOR FUTURE REFERENCE AND USE!****

DESCRIPTION

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an employment benefit granted from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that enables eligible F-1 students to work anywhere in the U.S. at a job related to their major and at a level commensurate with their academic training. No job offer is required to apply.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

To be eligible for OPT, you must be an F-1 student that has been in lawful status for at least 9 consecutive months prior to your requested OPT begin date. In order for study abroad or National Student Exchange time to count as part of this 9-month requirement, you **MUST** have completed one semester of full-time fall or spring enrollment at Southeastern prior to participating in the exchange program.

REQUESTING OPT

Amount and Duration

On OPT you may work:

- Part-time or full-time during summer vacation
- Twenty hrs/wk during the academic year, even if it is your last semester and you are enrolled part-time
- Full-time after completing your studies

The total time you may participate in OPT is a maximum aggregate of 12 months per each higher degree level that you complete. The first request would be for 12 months of OPT based on your Bachelor's, the second request would be for 12 months OPT based on your Master's, and the third request would be for 12 months of OPT based on your PhD.

Please note that once USCIS has authorized OPT employment (issued you an EAD card with approved begin and end dates), there is no provision to change or cancel the authorized period of OPT, even if you are unable to work during the adjudicated period. You will lose the opportunity for OPT at that degree.

How to Choose Post-Academic Completion OPT Begin and End Dates

Starting immediately after your academic completion date, you are given a 60-day grace period during which you must exit the country, prepare to start a new academic program, or begin OPT. Therefore, you must choose an OPT begin date that falls within 60-days from your academic completion date.

Your OPT end date is exactly one year from your requested OPT begin date, should you request the full 12-month period for work authorization.

When to Apply for OPT

Please note that Commencement Day is not your actual academic completion date. If you are enrolled in courses, your completion date is the last day the University schedules final exams for the semester you are graduating. The earliest you may apply for OPT is 120 days prior to your requested begin date. However, to avoid losing time on your OPT, we recommend that you apply no later than 90 days prior to your requested begin date.

DOCUMENTS TO SUBMIT TO THE INTERNATIONAL ADMISSIONS OFFICE FOR AN OPT RECOMMENDATION:

1. **Your current I-20.** Before submitting your I-20 to the International Admissions Office, verify that it is acceptable to request OPT: the level of study and major listed in fields #4 and #5 of form I-20 must correlate with your OPT request. Also, if the completion date on your current I-20 has expired, go to the International Admissions Office and submit a request for a correct I-20. Once your I-20 has been corrected, you may apply for OPT.
2. **Completed form I-765.** First, indicate what you are applying for by marking appropriate box at the top of the form. If you are moving and know your new address and will mail your application to a Service Center that has jurisdiction over your new place of residence (other than the Texas Service Center), put that address in item #3. Do not use a P.O. box, as your EAD will not be forwarded by the post office. Instead, you may want to use the address of a friend or relative who will be stationary during this 90-day period and can forward the card to your new address when it arrives. When using someone else's address, it is necessary to write "c/o," (in care of). You must contact the International Services Office so we can inform USCIS of your new address as soon as possible. Late address changes may prevent your EAD card from reaching you accurately and promptly. Item #10 is the 11-digit number from your I-94 card that is stapled to your passport. **If you have worked on-campus and/or applied for CPT, indicate "NO" in item #11. If you have ever applied for OPT or Economic Hardship Employment, indicate "YES" in item #11.** You must provide a photocopy of any OPT or Economic Hardship EAD card(s). Item #16 should be (c) (3) (b) OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING. **Sign and date this form in the box provided.** Your phone number should be from your address listed in item #3.
3. **Copies of I-94 card, passport, and visa pages**
4. **Two passport sized photos.** They must have a white background.
5. **Filing fee.** The filing fee is \$380. You may pay by check or money order made out to "U.S. Department of Homeland Security."

INTERNATIONAL SERVICES OFFICE PROCESSING OF OPT RECOMMENDATION

The above documents can be submitted to the International Services Office during office hours. If you have turned in a complete application, the International Services Office can process it in approximately 5 business days. We must verify that you are completing your studies, if you are filing for post-completion OPT, before we can recommend you for OPT. We must also check to ensure that you have enrolled full-time, been in lawful status and that your USCIS file is clear. Remember, the only time you can enroll part-time is during the summer and during your last semester of study. Registering "degree only" does not qualify as an actual semester of enrollment. Also, remember to turn in copies of any recent passport renewals. If your passport will expire during the authorized OPT period, it is your responsibility to have it renewed **before** it expires. If you fail to do this, you will not regain lawful F-1 status until your passport has been renewed. If you do not meet the above criteria, an evaluation will be made to determine your OPT eligibility. You may have to submit additional documentation before the International Services Office can approve your request. The International Services Office will contact students directly in such incidences.

MAILING YOUR OPT RECOMMENDATION TO A SERVICE CENTER

You **cannot** begin your OPT until you receive an EAD card from USCIS because you cannot work before you are issued an authorized begin date from the Service Center. **Working while your application is pending or before the authorized OPT begin date on your EAD is considered unlawful employment.** Voice mail verifications or on-line case information are not authorizations of employment.

USCIS PROCESSING OF EAD CARD

After mailing your OPT application to a Service Center via registered mail and obtaining a U.S. Postal Return Receipt, you can expect to receive a “Notice of Action” form from USCIS within 2-4 weeks. A Notice of Action is your verification that the Service Center has received your OPT application and will begin processing it. The Notice of Action includes your personal receipt number, also known as your SRC#; a USCIS Customer Service telephone number to call for status updates, questions, and notification of address changes; and a website that will allow you to check the status of your application. If you do not receive a Notice of Action after 4 weeks from the date you mailed your OPT application, inform the International Services Office.

USCIS can take 90 days or more to approve your OPT application and mail your EAD card. **There is nothing the International Services Office can do to expedite the Service Center’s customary adjudication process, even if you have a pending job offer.** However, **if 91 days have passed from the date on your Notice of Action and the Service Center has approved your OPT but not yet issued your EAD, you may contact the International Services Office for assistance.** Unfortunately, a request for interim employment will not be granted by USCIS if your permanent EAD card has already been issued but has been lost in the mail by the post office. Furthermore, such requests will not be granted if an issued EAD card was returned because it was sent to an address that was unoccupied, irretrievable, or unknown because you failed to submit your change of address in a timely manner. Also, such requests will be denied if your application was mailed to a P.O. box, if there were any problems with your original OPT application, or if your OPT request was denied.

POSSIBLE CANCELLATION OF OPT REQUEST

If you wish to cancel your OPT request, contact the International Services Office no later than 3 days after receiving your Notice of Action from USCIS. After 2-3 days from the date that you receive your Notice of Action, it is likely that USCIS has begun processing your EAD card. At this point, cancellation requests to save OPT time are automatically forfeited. You will have to accept your EAD card and lose authorized OPT time for whichever major and level of study you applied.

Upon receiving your cancellation request, we will fax it to the Service Center. However, **there is no guarantee that your OPT will be cancelled.** If USCIS cancels your OPT, your authorized employment period will be saved, but USCIS will not refund the processing fee you submitted with your OPT application.

CHANGING OPT REQUEST DATES

Once a request for an OPT recommendation has been submitted to the International Services Office, **the requested dates of OPT employment cannot be changed for any reason, as they will have been already entered into SEVIS.** Therefore, it is imperative that you are **absolutely** sure of the time frame of your OPT request before you submit your application to our office. **Remember, even if you never mail your application upon receiving an OPT recommendation from the International Services Office, we still have notified USCIS of your request via SEVIS.**

FAILURE TO COMPLETE STUDIES

If you do not complete your studies or graduate as planned, you must obtain documentation from your department/professor(s) explaining why you were unable to finish. The International Admissions Office needs a copy of this letter as evidence for your file. You must keep all original documentation with your form I-20s. Unless there were factors beyond your control, USCIS looks unfavorably upon students who fail to complete their studies on time, especially if they have applied for OPT based on a projected completion date. Should this happen to you, make an appointment with the International Services Office.

CORRECTION OF A USCIS ERROR ON THE EAD CARD

If the USCIS has made an error on your Notice of Action or EAD card, it may be possible to have it corrected. Please contact the International Services Office immediately upon noticing such errors, and we will fax USCIS a request to correct your card. Please mail the International Services Office a copy of your card with a letter explaining why it is incorrect. Be aware that this may delay your work authorization for a small period of time.

Corrections only apply to errors made by USCIS (for example: your name is spelled differently on your EAD than on the I-765 you submitted to the Service Center). Change desired for OPT authorization dates are not allowed; be sure of your decision when requesting these dates.

ONCE YOU ARE ON OPT

Enrolling in Classes

While you are on OPT, you may not take classes at any institutions because based on your OPT application, your intent was to work in the U.S. **If you try to enroll in courses while on OPT, your EAD card will be cancelled because you will be registered in SEVIS as enrolled.**

Traveling Outside the U.S.

While on OPT, you retain F-1 status. Therefore, traveling outside the U.S. while on OPT is very similar to traveling as a student. When traveling outside the U.S., you must take the following items with you to be eligible for re-entry:

- ✓ **Your valid passport.**
- ✓ **A valid visa stamp in your passport. (If the visa stamp in your passport has expired, you must go to a U.S. embassy outside of the U.S. to apply for a new one.)**
- ✓ **Your original form I-20 with your OPT recommendation.**
- ✓ **Any other original form I-20s.**
- ✓ **Signature for re-entry located on page 3 of your OPT I-20.** When the International Admissions Office recommends your OPT, we will sign for your first 6 months of travel. After 6 months have passed, you must obtain another signature on your I-20 from the International Admissions Office. You can mail your I-20 to us for additional signatures. Please be sure to include a letter explaining your request and include a clear return address.
- ✓ **Your current employment authorization document (EAD card) and any previously issued.**
- ✓ **A job offer letter, employment letter, or letters of possible interviews scheduled.**
- ✓ **An affidavit of financial support that reflects how you will pay for living expenses while looking for employment in the U.S.**

Leaving the U.S. for extended amounts of time during your authorized OPT period may cause problems with your re-entry, especially if you do not have a letter of employment or job offer to present to Immigration. You may be heavily questioned by Immigration upon re-entry about your previous whereabouts and your reasons for wanting to return to the U.S. **DO NOT LEAVE THE U.S. WITHOUT AN EAD CARD AFTER COMPLETING YOUR STUDIES WHILE YOUR OPT APPLICATION IS PENDING AT THE SERVICE CENTER.** Without possession of an EAD, you will not be able to re-enter the U.S.

Mandatory Reporting to the International Admissions Office

You will continue to be in F-1 status while on OPT, if your recommendation was completed by Southeastern. **This means that SEVIS reporting requirements still apply to you.** It is mandatory that you immediately report any of the following changes to the International Services Office:

1. Decisions to prematurely terminate your OPT by leaving the U.S.
2. Beginning a new academic program
3. Changing visa category status, such as to H-1B
4. Official name or address changes. **You must report new information to the International Services Office within 10 days of the actual change. Failure to do so is considered a serious violation of your F-1 status by USCIS.**

Grace Period

Because you maintain your F-1 status while on OPT, a **60-day grace** period follows the end of your EAD card. During this time, you are not allowed to work. You must exit the U.S., start a new academic program, or submit an application to change your visa status to a category that would allow you to remain in the U.S. (i.e., to H-1B, B-2 etc.) within 60 days from your completion date. If you continue as an F-1 and transfer to a new institution, your new school must gain possession of your SEVIS record within this 60-day grace period.