Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Office of International Students and Scholars
Welcome to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) tutorial for Rice F-1 international students. This tutorial is a comprehensive guide to OPT at Rice University. We hope you find it helpful. Please contact OISS should you have any questions.

The topics covered include:

- **Overview** – What is OPT?
- **Eligibility Requirements**
- **Application Process**
- **Application Timeline**
- **Required Documentation**
- **Sample OPT I-20 Authorization**
- **Mailing Instructions**
- **USCIS Processing Timeline**
- **Travel During OPT**
- **Cap Gap and STEM Extensions**
- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**
What is OPT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) gives F-1 students 12 months of “temporary employment for practical training” directly related to the student’s major area of study.” [8 CFR § 214.2(f)(10)(ii)] OPT is available to F-1 students who have been in full-time student status for at least one academic year in the U.S. A student may be eligible for a new 12-month period after completing a new degree program at a higher education level.

Important Factors to Consider:

- OPT can be applied for both pre-degree completion and post-degree completion. Most students to use OPT post-completion and CPT pre-completion. Please make an appointment with an OISS advisor if you have questions about using OPT pre-completion.
- You do not need a job offer to apply for OPT.
- OPT applies to both paid and unpaid positions.
- OPT must be authorized by USCIS before you start the position.
- If you have completed more than 12 months of full-time CPT, you are not eligible for OPT.
- You can work anywhere in the U.S. related to your major field of study during post-completion OPT.
- Since you will continue to stay in F-1 status during post-completion OPT, you must report employment and address information to OISS to maintain your legal immigration status.
Eligibility Requirements

1. Must be in valid F-1 status.
2. Must have been in full-time student status for at least one academic year.
3. Have not used 12+ months of full-time CPT (part-time CPT does not affect eligibility for OPT).
4. For Post-Completion OPT, you cannot apply more than 90 days before your program end date.*

*OISS recommends applying for OPT as early as possible since USCIS averages 90 days to process applications. Students can start applying 90 days before their program end date and must apply no later than 30 days after their program end date. Students do not need a job offer to apply for OPT.
Application Process

How to Apply

Student

- Attend one of the many CPT/OPT Workshops held by OISS each semester and review this OPT Tutorial. Current workshop schedule is available at http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork
- Make an appointment to see an OISS advisor if you have follow-up questions. Contact OISS at 713-348-6095 or email oiss@rice.edu
- Secure all the necessary required documentation (**see next slides for requirements**)

OISS

- Submit the required documents to OISS. You may apply up to 90 days before your completion date. OISS recommends submitting documents close to this date.
- Pick up your new I-20 and attend a Group OPT Pick-up Session.

Student

- Mail your application to the appropriate USCIS Lock Box.
- USCIS must receive your OPT application packet within 30 days of I-20 issuance or the application will be voided.
- Work cannot begin until you have the EAD card in hand and have reached the start date on the EAD card.
OPT Timeline

Degree completion date

Apply up to 90 days before your program completion.

Cannot accrue more than 90 days of unemployment once OPT begins.

If your degree is in a STEM field, your job is with an E-verify employer, and you are interested in the OPT STEM Extension, apply up to 120 days before your OPT end date.

OPT End date

Grace period

Grace period of 60 days to depart the US, start a new degree program, or change visa status.

 Academic Program

12 month OPT Period

60 days

OPT begin date must be within 60 days following program completion.

Important: You cannot start working until:
1. you have been approved by USCIS,
2. you have your EAD card in hand, and
3. you are in between your OPT start and end dates.

Important Factors to Consider:

1. Apply early. USCIS can take up to 90 days to process OPT.
2. Once USCIS receives your application, changing start dates can be almost impossible.
3. If you leave the USA after graduation, and have not applied for OPT, you will not be able to apply for OPT.
The OPT Handout (with required forms) can be found at [http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/](http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/) or in the OISS Office.

The 3 documents required to receive an OPT I-20 are:

1) **Degree Completion Verification for OPT** *(Part of the OISS OPT Packet)*

- For Post-Completion OPT, your Rice Faculty Advisor must verify the date you are expected to complete all degree requirements.
  - For undergraduate and non-thesis graduate students, this is the Commencement date, or “End of the Semester” date listed in the [Academic Calendar](http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/).
  - For graduate students completing a thesis, the completion date may be one of three options: 1) thesis/ dissertation defense date, 2) thesis/ dissertation submission date, or 3) commencement/ last day of final semester. Students who wish to have a completion date during the semester after oral defense will be required to register for research hours. Since the selection of a completion date can depend on a variety of factors, students are encouraged to meet one-on-one with an OISS advisor to develop an OPT timeline and strategy.

- Choose an OPT start date: must be within 60 days of the degree completion date.
  - Example: Degree completion date is May 17. Range for possible OPT start dates is May 18 – July 16.
  - The OPT end date will be one year later than the OPT start date and one day less.
    - Example: OPT Start Date: June 15, 2016  OPT End Date: June 14, 2017
Required OISS Documentation for an OPT I-20

2) OPT Statement of Understanding (Part of the OISS OPT Packet)

This Statement of Understanding will outline the requirements to be in good F-1 status while on OPT. It also provides OISS with a non-Rice email for continued communication.

3) Completed I-765 Form (use a computer to fill out this form to insure legibility – do not hand write)

(http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-765.pdf)
Next Steps After Submission of Documents to OISS

- An advisor will review your OPT documentation and either process your OPT I-20 or ask for more verification from you. This process usually takes up to 3 working days.
  - The OPT I-20: The OPT information can be found at the top of page 2 of your I-20. It will indicate: 1) full-time/part-time, 2) the requested OPT dates, 3) your primary major, and 4) a remark explaining that you will be seeking practical training in your major field(s) of study.

- You will then be directed to sign up for an OPT Pick-up Group appointment time.
For your Group OPT I-20 Pick-up time, you will want to bring the following with you:

- **G-1145** (This will allow you to receive an email confirmation that USCIS has received your application).
- Copies of your passport, visa, and I-94.
- Check made out to US Department of Homeland Security for $380.00, make sure to put your I-94 number in the Memo section.
- 2 **US Passport style photos** with your name and I-94 number on the back in pencil.
- A typed **I-765**. A USCIS computer reads the form and handwritten applications can cause issues with correct information being entered.

At the appointment, you will receive the following from the OISS advisor:

- OPT I-20
- SEVIS CPT Authorization printout (SEVIS printout of your CPT history)
- Envelope with USCIS address
Mailing Your OPT Application to USCIS

For USPS Deliveries*:
USCIS
P.O. Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

For Express mail and courier deliveries:
USCIS
Attn: AOS
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067
Include: I-765I-53

Include the following in your OPT Application (make sure to make a copy of documents for yourself):
- Optional G-1145 E-notification (will send you email/text message notice of receipt of your application and updates)
- $380 check made out to “Department of Homeland Security”
- 2 Passport-style photos
- Completed I-765
- Photocopy of current I20 (You will keep the original I-20)
- Photocopy of passport, visa (ok if your visa is expired), I-94 card or printout
- SEVIS CPT history printout
- Previous EAD(s) if any

*If the address on the I-765 is not a Texas address, please consult with an OISS advisor before mailing your OPT application as the address may be different.
USCIS Processing Timeline

- USCIS sends an I-797 Notice of Action form once your application is received. It usually takes approximately two weeks. This notice will contain a receipt number (usually starts with “SRC”) which you can use to check application status at https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsp/index.jsp.
- USCIS may send you, via mail, any questions they have regarding your application along with a due date by which to answer those additional questions.
- If approved, USCIS mails your EAD card. Processing time varies but can be as long as 90 days. Make sure to check the card to make sure all the information is correct (spelling of name, dates, etc.). If it is incorrect, please contact OISS immediately.

If you have any questions regarding your OPT application, we advise you to contact an OISS advisor before calling USCIS Customer Service.

What happens if your plans change after applying for OPT? Immediately schedule an appointment with an OISS advisor if your graduation or oral defense plans change after your OPT application has been submitted. A change in plans likely means that you are not eligible to work full time as planned. Depending on your situation, you might require an I-20 extension to remain in valid F-1 status.
**Travel While on OPT**

**Can I travel outside of the U.S. while my OPT is pending?**
Yes, but traveling during this time should be undertaken with caution. Please talk with an OISS Advisor for more information. If USCIS approves your OPT application, you will be expected to have your EAD in hand to re-enter the United States. Remember, USCIS can only send the EAD to your U.S. address. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT (especially while the application is still pending) can be risky.

**Can I reenter if I left the U.S. while on OPT?**
F-1 students authorized for OPT can travel outside the U.S. and re-enter provided they have all of the following documents: 1) Passport valid at least 6 months; 2) unexpired F-1 visa stamp in passport; 3) I-20 signed for travel by OISS advisor within preceding six months; 4) EAD card; 5) employment letter. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT can be risky. 

*Note: If you need a new travel signature, please keep in mind that OISS does not express mail documents. You will either need to leave enough time for regular mail or have a Rice friend pick up your new I-20 and express mail it to you.*

Please meet with an OISS advisor and refer to [http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/) for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while OPT application is pending).
After OPT Application Approval

Required Communication with OISS

- Scan OISS oiss@rice.edu a copy of the front of your EAD card
- Complete F-1 OPT status updates online (http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/) whenever you start a new job, move, or change to another visa status. OISS uses this information to accurately maintain your F-1 SEVIS record.
- Make sure OISS is aware of any status changes

CAUTION: Failure to report employment will result in automatic termination of your SEVIS record and cancellation of your OPT
**Unemployment During OPT**

Students are required to work full time (defined as over 20 hours per week) during OPT. Students are permitted only 90 total days of unemployment during the 12-month OPT. Unpaid work within a student’s major field counts as employment. If you accrue more than 90 days of unemployment, you must depart the USA immediately.

**CAUTION:** SEVIS automatically terminates records of students who accrue 90 consecutive days of unemployment.

**Social Security Numbers**

Once you have a job offer and have received your EAD card, you will be required to apply for a SSN if you don’t have one already.
After OPT

Grace Period
You have a 60-day grace period to stay in the USA after OPT ends. You cannot work during that time. The grace period does allow for: 1) travel in the USA, 2) transfer to another institution, and 3) applying to change your visa status. If you do leave the U.S. during your grace period you will not be allowed to re-enter on your F-1 visa.

OPT STEM Extension
Students in STEM fields are eligible to apply for an additional 17 months of OPT following their post-completion OPT. The STEM extension can only be applied once. Employment with an E-Verify employer is required in advance and the application must be submitted before the regular OPT has expired (applications will be accepted up to 120 days before the end of your post-completion OPT period). For additional information, refer to the “STEM OPT Handout” (http://oiss.rice.edu/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=408) and make an appointment with an OISS advisor.

Cap Gap Extension
Cap Gap provides an extension of OPT for students whose H-1B applications are pending or approved before the annual October 1 H-1B start date. This allows F-1 students to remain in the U.S.A. and continue working even after the completion of 12 months of OPT. The extension is automatic and does not require a new I-20 (one may be requested, however, if needed to prove ongoing work authorization to an employer).

For more information on possible options for working in the U.S. after OPT, please contact an OISS Advisor.
Office Location
Lovett Hall, Entrance A, 2nd Floor

Phone
713-348-6095

Email
oiss@rice.edu

Website
http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/
When should I apply for OPT?
As early as possible! You must have your EAD card (Employment Authorization Document) in hand to start working, even unpaid. USCIS can take up to 90 days to process OPT applications, so plan ahead. You do not need a job offer to apply. Applications can be submitted up to 90 days before the completion date on your new I-20 (the date filled in by your academic adviser on the Degree Completion Verification form in Step #3). The completion date is generally the end of the semester for non-thesis students. For thesis/dissertation students, this date depends on the timing of your oral defense. Please attend an OPT workshop or discuss your situation with an OISS advisor to determine what completion date would make sense for you.

What do the photos for my OPT application need to look like?
Standard U.S. passport photos: Square 2” x 2” (5cm x 5 cm), front view, full face, white or off-white background. For full specifications, see http://travel.state.gov/passport/pptphotoreq/pptphotoreq_5333.html. Many FedEx, CVS, and Walgreens branches near Rice offer reasonably priced passport photo services.

What happens after my OPT application is mailed to USCIS?
1. USCIS sends a Notice of Action form once your application is received, usually in about two weeks. This notice will contain a receipt number to check application status at https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp.
2. USCIS mails your EAD card. Processing time varies but can be up to three months.

What happens if my plans change after applying for OPT?
Immediately schedule an appointment with an OISS advisor if your graduation or oral defense plans change after your OPT application has been submitted. A change in plans likely means that you are not eligible to work full time as planned. Depending on your situation, you might require an I-20 extension to remain in valid F-1 status.

What if I don’t find a job right away . . . how much unemployment time can I have?
Students are required to work full time (defined as over 20 hours per week) during OPT. Students are permitted 90 total days of unemployment during the 12-month OPT. Unpaid work within a student’s major field counts as employment. If you accrue more than 90 days of unemployment, you must depart the USA immediately.
What if I want to travel outside of the U.S. during my OPT period – what do I need to keep in mind?
F-1 students authorized for OPT can travel outside the U.S. and re-enter provided they have all of the following documents: 1) Passport valid at least 6 months; 2) unexpired F-1 visa stamp in passport; 3) I-20 signed for travel by OISS advisor within preceding six months; 4) EAD card; 5) employment letter. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT can be risky. Please meet with an OISS advisor and refer to http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/faq_f2.htm#_Toc81222042 for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while OPT application is pending).

What is “Cap Gap”?
Cap Gap provides an extension of OPT for students whose H-1B applications are pending or approved before the annual October 1 H-1B start date. This allows F-1 students to remain in the U.S. and continue working even after the completion of 12 months of OPT. The extension is automatic and does not require a new I-20 (one may be requested, however, if needed to prove ongoing work authorization to an employer).

What is a STEM Extension?
Students in STEM fields are eligible to apply for an additional 17 months of OPT. However, employment with an e-Verify employer is required in advance and application must be made before the regular OPT has expired. For additional information, refer to the “STEM OPT Handout” (http://oiss.rice.edu/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=408) and make an appointment with an OISS advisor.

Is there any required follow-up with OISS when I am on OPT?
In your final appointment before mailing your OPT application, your OISS advisor will remind you of the requirement to:
1. Bring or send OISS a copy of your EAD card.
2. Complete F-1 OPT status updates online (http://oiss.rice.edu/gateway.aspx?id=204) whenever you start a new job, move, or change to another visa status. OISS uses this information to accurately maintain your F-1 SEVIS record.

How do I get a social security number when on OPT?
Once you have a job offer and have received your EAD card, you will be eligible to apply for a SSN if you don’t have one already.
As a thesis/dissertation graduate student, what date should I use as my date of completion?
You may use one of the following:
  • Thesis/ dissertation defense date
  • Thesis/ dissertation submission date
  • Commencement/ last day of final semester
Since the selection of a completion date for thesis/dissertation graduate students can depend on a variety of factors, it is recommended that students meet with an OISS advisor to discuss their options and strategy.

What status am I on while on OPT?
You are on F-1 status. OPT is not a status in itself.

When can I start working?
You can start working once you have your EAD card in hand and you are within the dates listed on your EAD card.

Once I receive my OPT I-20, how long do I have for USCIS to receive my application before it is voided?
30 days

My EAD states ‘not valid for re-entry’ on it. Does that mean I cannot travel outside of the U.S. while on OPT?
No. It means that your EAD card alone will not allow you admission into the U.S.A. You will need to bring the other required documentation (see OPT Tutorial PowerPoint travel slide).