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:

- F-1 Employment Comparison Chart
- Overview – What is OPT?
- Important Factors to Consider
- Eligibility Requirements
- Pre-Completion OPT
- Post-Completion OPT
- Application Process
- Post-Completion OPT Timeline
- Required Documentation
- Next Steps After Submission of Documents
- Mailing Instructions
- USCIS Processing Timeline
- Your EAD
- Travel During OPT
- After OPT Application Approval
- Important Employment Reminders
- When OPT Ends
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
## F-1 Employment Comparison Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CPT</th>
<th>Pre-Completion OPT</th>
<th>Post-Completion OPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What Is It</strong></td>
<td>Authorization for off-campus internship/training/research, which is required for, or an integral part of, an F-1 student’s major field(s) of study <strong>during</strong> their program.</td>
<td>Authorization for internship/training/research, which is related to an F-1 student’s major field(s) of study <strong>during</strong> their program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eligibility Criteria</strong></td>
<td>• Full-time enrollment in lawful F-1 status for one academic year. • Must be an integral part of an established curriculum. • Available only <strong>before</strong> a student completes their degree program.</td>
<td>• Full-time enrollment in lawful F-1 status for one academic year. • Must be directly related to major field(s) of study. • Available only <strong>before</strong> a student completes their degree program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Offer</strong></td>
<td>• Required as part of the application process.</td>
<td>• Not required for the application process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration of Training</strong></td>
<td>Authorized on a per–semester basis based on a specific internship/training.</td>
<td>12 months maximum for all OPT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-Time/Part Time</strong></td>
<td>• Part-time (<strong>under</strong> 20 hours/week) only during the semester. • Full-time (over 20 hours/week) may be authorized over the summer &amp; breaks.</td>
<td>• Part-time (<strong>20 hours/week or less</strong>) only during the semester. Deducted at 50% rate form the total of 12 months. • Full-time (over 20 hours/week) may be authorized over the summer &amp; official breaks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application Fee</strong></td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>See <a href="https://www.uscis.gov/i-765">https://www.uscis.gov/i-765</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Processing Time</strong></td>
<td>1 week.</td>
<td>Could be 90 days or more.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

OPT gives F-1 students an opportunity to apply knowledge from their degree program to a practical experience off campus.

OPT is not a requirement for completion of your degree program, and it can be done either during or after your academic program.
Important Factors to Consider:

- OPT can be approved for both during and after degree completion. Most students choose 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 any 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. directly 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.
- A student may be eligible for OPT **once** per each new degree program at a higher education level.
- You must continue to meet full-time enrollment through your program end date.
  - ONLY exception: students who have been approved by OISS for a Reduced Course Load during their final semester.
- ALL employment (including stipends, fellowships, on-campus research/ employment, RA/TAships) must end by your program end date.
Eligibility Requirements

1. Must be in valid F-1 status.
2. Must have been enrolled full-time in lawful F-1 status for one academic year.
3. Have not used 12+ months of full-time CPT (part-time CPT does not affect eligibility for OPT).
4. Must be physically present in the US.
5. Must be maintaining lawful status at the time of application.
Pre-Completion OPT

• Pre-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is practical training authorized for employment **during** a student's program of study.

• Students may work 20 hours per week while school is in session. Exceeding 20 hours is considered “full-time,” which is not allowed during semesters as per immigration regulations. All employment, including on-campus work, may not exceed 20 hours per week.

• Full-time Pre-Completion OPT **may** be authorized in the summer and official breaks.

• Students are required to maintain their full time course enrollment requirement while on Pre-Completion OPT.

• Applies to both **paid and unpaid** positions directly related to a student’s declared major field(s) of study, as listed on their I-20.

• You may apply up to 90 days before your intended employment start date.
  – Start date must be after you have completed one academic year.

• Any periods of Pre-Completion OPT used before graduation will be deducted from the total twelve-month period available.
Why apply for Pre-Completion OPT?

- Some students will use Pre-Completion OPT if they have an opportunity to gain experience in their field of study, but there is no curricular justification for them to apply for employment authorization under the provisions of CPT.

- Students will also use Pre-Completion OPT when they wish to begin their own business related directly to their field of study during their degree program, as CPT cannot be used for entrepreneurial endeavors.
Post-Completion OPT

- Post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is practical training authorized to begin after the completion of a student’s program of study.

- Students are authorized to work full time, but you do not need a job offer to apply.

- Applies to both paid and unpaid positions directly related to a student’s declared major field(s) of study, as listed on their I-20.

- Most students choose this option to gain one year of experience in their field after graduation.

- You may apply up to 90 days before your program end date.* USCIS must receive your Post-Completion OPT application before the 60 day grace period from the end date on your I-20 has passed.
  - OISS recommends applying for OPT as early as possible since USCIS can take 90 days or more 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.
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](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 for Post-Completion OPT, or 90 days before your start date for Pre-Completion OPT. OISS recommends submitting documents prior 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.
**Post-Completion OPT Timeline**

**Degree completion date**
- Apply up to 90 days before your program completion.  
- OPT begin date must be within 60 days following program completion.

**12 month OPT Period**
- 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 90 days before your OPT end date.

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

**Important Factors to Consider:**

1. Apply early. USCIS can take 90 days or more 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.
OPT Handout

The OPT Handout (with required forms) can be found at 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](#).
     - 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
     - For Post-completion OPT: 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
     - For Pre-completion OPT: choose any start date up to 90 days in the future.
Required OISS Documentation for an OPT I-20

**OPT Handout**
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.

**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.

- Carefully read the Statement of Understanding on page 4 of the OPT packet and initial each statement.
- Please include a **non-Rice** email address.

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

For guidance on completing the I-765 form, please see:
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.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEVIS ID: N001234567 (F-1)</th>
<th>NAME: [Redacted]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE</td>
<td>FULL/PART-TIME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST-COMPLETION OPT</td>
<td>FULL TIME</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

You will then be directed to sign up for an OPT Pick-up Group appointment time.
What to Expect: Group OPT Pick-up Meeting

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 $410.00, make sure to put your I-94 number in the Memo section.
- 2 US Passport style photos taken within 30 days with your name and I-94 number written on the back in pencil.
- A typed I-765. A USCIS computer reads the form and a handwritten application may cause accuracy issues.
- Cover letter (optional)

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

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

For USPS Deliveries:

USCIS
Attn: I-765
P.O. Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

For Express mail and courier deliveries:

USCIS
Attn: I-765
2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business
Suite 400
Lewisville, TX 75067

Include the following in your OPT Application in the order listed (make sure to make a copy of documents for yourself):

- Cover letter (optional)
- 2 Passport-style photos taken within 30 days
- $410 check made out to “Department of Homeland Security”
- Optional G-1145 E-notification (will send you email/text message notice of receipt of your application and updates)
- Completed I-765
- Photocopy of current OPT I20 (You will keep the original I-20)
- SEVIS CPT history printout (provided by OISS)
- Photocopy of passport, visa (ok if your visa is expired), I-94 card or printout
- Copy of previous EAD(s) if any (front and back)

*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 Lockbox address may be different.*
[Today’s Date]

[Your Full Name]
[Your Address (use same address as the one listed on I-765)]

USCIS
Attn: I-765 for Post-completion OPT
P.O. Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

Re: Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization for [LAST NAME, First Name]
I-94 #: [write out I-94 #]

Dear USCIS Officer:

I, [Your Name], am an F-1 student applying for an EAD in order to partake in Post-completion Optional Practical Training (c)(3)(B). My requested start date for OPT is [list start date as it is indicated on your I-20]. Please find my I-765 Application for Employment Authorization enclosed with the following documentation:

- 2 passport-style photographs;
- Check/money order of $410 made out to U.S. Department of Homeland Security;
- Form G-1145, E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance;
- Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization;
- Copy of Form I-20;
- Employment history printout from SEVIS;
- Copy of passport;
- Copy of visa;
- Copy of Form I-94;
- Copy of previous EAD card (if applicable)

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

[Your Signature]

[Your Full Name]
USCIS Processing Timeline

• After approximately two weeks, USCIS will send you an I-797 Receipt Notice in the mail. This notice will contain a receipt number, which you can use to check application status at: https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/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 your EAD application has been pending more than 75 days, you may contact USCIS customer service at 1-800-375-5283 and ask that they create a service request. Please have your receipt number ready when calling.

• If approved, USCIS will mail your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card to the address provided on the I-765. Processing times vary but can be 90 days or longer. Check the card to ensure all information (spelling of name, dates, etc.) is correct. If something is incorrect, please contact OISS immediately.

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.
Your EAD

- Review your EAD Card for accuracy & submit a copy to OISS.
  - If there is an error, please contact an OISS advisor to discuss correction process.
- You **must** have your EAD card in hand in order to begin employment.
- Employment may begin **on/after** the start date listed on your card.
- Please keep your card in a safe place, as you will need it to begin working & travel.
  - Replacement cards require a new application to USCIS, which cost $410 and take up to 90 days to process.
Can I travel outside of the U.S. while my OPT is pending?

Leaving the USA while OPT is pending is Very RISKY and is not recommended. 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 denied.

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/ for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while OPT application is pending).
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 address and contact information as well as your F-1 SEVIS record.
- Make sure OISS is aware of any status changes

**CAUTION:** Failure to report employment or any changes while on OPT could result in termination of your SEVIS record and cancelation 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 days of unemployment.

**Social Security Numbers**

Once you have a job offer and have received your EAD card, you will be able to apply for a SSN if you don’t have one already.
Important Employment Reminders

• Any unauthorized employment poses a serious threat to your ability to remain in or return to the United States – even if it was one day or you did not realize it was unauthorized.

• You must always make sure that you have the necessary employment authorization before you begin work. Beginning work without prior authorization—even if you receive authorization later—is considered illegal employment.

  • For example, if you requested July 1 as a start date, you cannot begin working on July 1 if your EAD card has not arrived from USCIS. Until you have the EAD card in hand, employment is not authorized!
When OPT Ends

**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 24 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 90 days before the end of your post-completion OPT period). For additional information, refer to [http://oiss.rice.edu/stem/](http://oiss.rice.edu/stem/) 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.
Frequently Asked Questions

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 24 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 http://oiss.rice.edu/stem/ 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/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, address, and contact information.

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).