

# Optional Practical Training (OPT) Tutorial

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?](#)
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## F-1 Employment Comparison Chart

	CPT	Pre Completion OPT	Post Completion OPT
What Is It	Authorization for internship/training/research, which is required for, or an integral part of, an F-1 student's major field(s) of study <b>during</b> their program.	Authorization for internship/training/research, which is related to an F-1 student's major field(s) of study <b>during</b> their program.	Authorization for internship/training/research, which is related to an F-1 student's major field(s) of study <b>after</b> their program completion.
Eligibility Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time enrollment in lawful status for one academic year.</li> <li>• Must be an integral part of the established curriculum.</li> <li>• Available only <b>before</b> a student completes their degree program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time enrollment in lawful status for one academic year.</li> <li>• Must be directly related to major field(s) of study.</li> <li>• Available only <b>before</b> a student completes their degree program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time enrollment in lawful status for one academic year prior to training.</li> <li>• Must be directly related to major field(s) of study.</li> <li>• Available only <b>after</b> a student completes their degree program.</li> </ul>
Job Offer	Required as part of the application process.	Not required for the application process.	Not required for the application process.
Duration of Training	Authorized on a per-term basis based on a specific internship/training.	12 months maximum for all OPT.	12 months maximum for all OPT.
Full Time/Part Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part-time (<i>under 20 hours/week</i>) only during the semester.</li> <li>• Full-time (over 20 hours/week) may be authorized over the summer &amp; breaks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part-time (<i>20 hours/week or less</i>) only during the semester. Deducted at 50% rate from the total of 12 months.</li> <li>• Full-time (over 20 hours/week) may be authorized over the summer &amp; official breaks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time (over 20 hours/week).</li> <li>• May work multiple part-time jobs to reach 20 hour/ week requirement.</li> </ul>
Granted By	CPT I-20 issued by OISS.	Employment Authorization Document (EAD) issued by USCIS.	Employment Authorization Document (EAD) issued by USCIS.
Application Fee	\$0	See <a href="https://www.uscis.gov/i-765">https://www.uscis.gov/i-765</a>	See <a href="https://www.uscis.gov/i-765">https://www.uscis.gov/i-765</a>
Processing Time	1-2 weeks.	3-5 months (could be longer).	3-5 months (could be longer).

## 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: OPT is not an automatic entitlement, but a benefit that you may apply for. OPT applications will go through a thorough USCIS review before adjudication.***

## 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. You must also have possession of your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) prior to starting an optional practical training opportunity.
- If you have completed more than 12 months of full-time CPT, you are ineligible for OPT.
- You can work anywhere in the U.S. directly related to your major field of study during post-completion OPT.
- All personal information updates and employment information must be updated (within 10 days) through the SEVP Portal.
- 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.
  - Exception: Students approved for Reduced Course Load in final semester
- ALL employment (including stipends, fellowships, on-campus research/employment, RA/TA-ships) 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 status for one academic year.
3. Have not used 365 days of full-time CPT (*part-time CPT does not affect eligibility for OPT*).
4. Must be physically present in the U.S.
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 up to 20 hours per week while school is in session. Exceeding 20 hours is considered “full-time,” which is not allowed during semesters 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 are not able to secure the required curricular justification necessary for CPT approval.
- 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 major field(s) of study, as listed on their I-20.
- Many 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.\*
  - **\*OISS recommends applying for OPT as early as possible since USCIS can take 3-5 months 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.**
  - **\*Please note that typically it is not possible to renew a Texas driver license until your OPT has been approved and you have the EAD card. Applying for OPT early is therefore beneficial also to avoid having a gap in your driver license validity.**



### How to Apply

Student

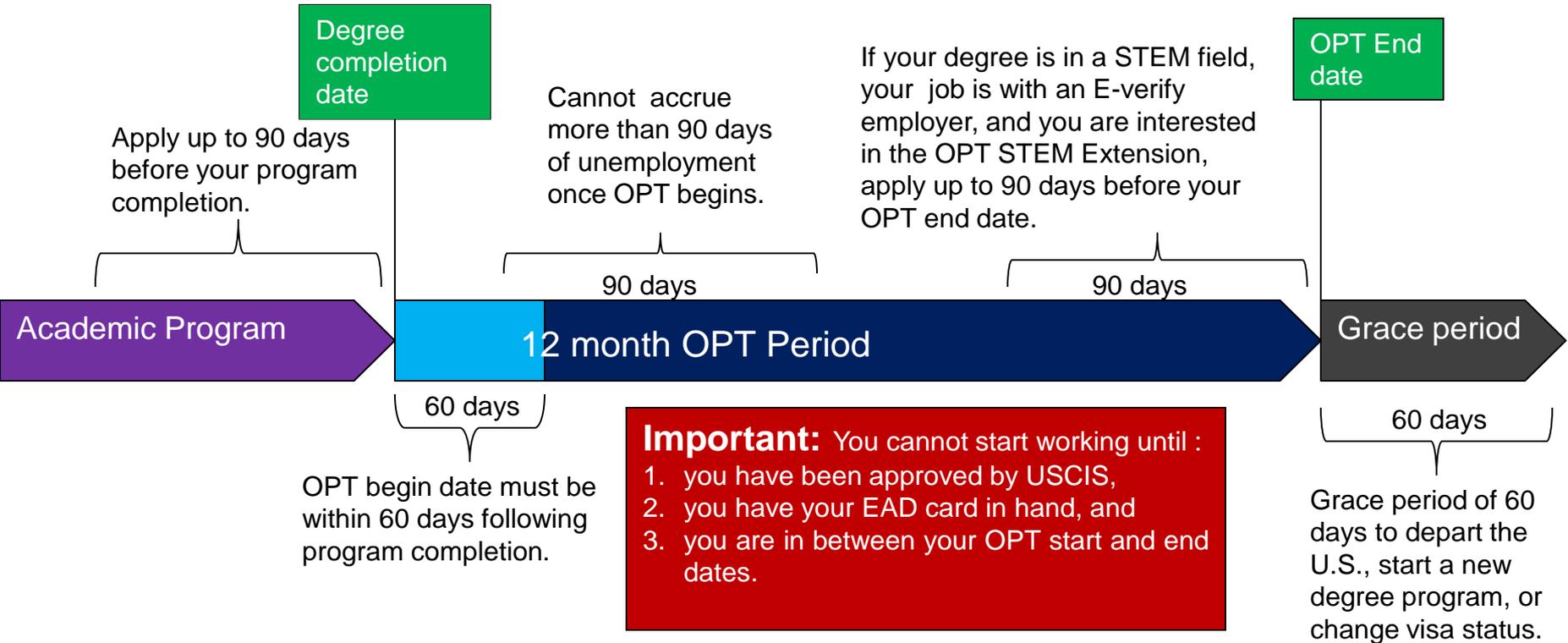
- Attend one of the many CPT/OPT Workshops held by OISS each semester and review this OPT Tutorial. *Current workshop schedule is available at <http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork>*
- *Make an appointment to see an OISS advisor if you have follow-up questions. Contact OISS at 713-348-6095 or email [oiss@rice.edu](mailto:oiss@rice.edu)*
- 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.



**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 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) **OPT Student Form** *(Part of the OISS OPT Packet)*

#### 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.

#### Complete the Statement of Understanding

- 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 3 of the OPT packet and initial each statement.
  - Please include a **non-Rice** email address on the form. This will be used for OISS communication and access to the SEVP Portal.

## OPT Handout

The OPT Handout (with required forms) can be found at <http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/> or in the OISS Office.

## **2) OPT Faculty Advisor Form** *(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.

- Degree conferral, as listed in the [Academic Calendar](#), is always the preferred option. Using the last day of final semester can sometimes be an option, but it may not leave sufficient time for compliance reporting deadlines. Missing deadlines can impact immigration status and benefits.
  - Your I-20 end date will be updated to match the completion date indicated on the form. This will impact RA/TA/other on-campus work eligibility, as the I-20 end date is the last date when students are authorized to work and/or receive a stipend.
  - On rare occasions it may be possible for graduate students to use the thesis/dissertation *defense* date or the thesis/dissertation *submission* date as the completion date, but only when requesting an OPT start date that is earlier than the degree conferral date / last day of final semester. A prior appointment with an OISS advisor and approval to use a special OPT Degree Completion Date is required in order for one of these alternative dates to be requested.

**3) Completed I-765 Form** *(use a computer to fill out this form to ensure legibility – we do not recommend completing the form by hand, but if you choose to do so, please use black ink and make sure all your responses are within the lines of the answer boxes on the form)*

<https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>

## Completing the Form I-765

Before completing the Form I-765, please study the official instructions as well as tips provided by OISS:

- “Instructions for Form I-765” available at <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>. You should pay particular attention to:
  1. The information under Foreign Student Categories that applies to Optional Practical Training (p. 3-4 of the Instructions), and
  2. The General Instructions (p. 14-20)
- The OISS tips for the Form I-765 online at <http://oiss.rice.edu/OPTtips>

**IMPORTANT:** We strongly recommend that the form is typed on a computer and only printed for an original signature!

## New Requirements Included on the Form I-765

Please note that the current requirements include using Part 6. of the Form I-765 to provide all previously used SEVIS numbers and evidence of any previously authorized CPT or OPT and the academic level at which it was authorized. For more information, please see the next slide.



# Previous SEVIS Number(s) & CPT/OPT Authorization(s)

## **Previous SEVIS ID Number(s)**

If you have had a different SEVIS Number in the past, you must use Part 6. of the I-765 to report it. Please indicate Page Number 3, Part Number 2, and Item Number 27. On the lines, please indicate that you are providing a previous SEVIS Number. Include the SEVIS ID number and the dates when it was used.

## **Previous CPT Authorization(s)**

If you have been authorized for CPT in the past – including during a previous academic level, by a previous school, or under a different SEVIS ID Number – you must use Part 6. of the I-765 to report it. Since providing evidence of previous CPT authorizations seems to be a requirement for only those people applying for an EAD for F-1 Optional Practical Training, we recommend referring back to the question about your Eligibility Category by indicating Page Number 3, Part Number 2, and Item Number 27. On the lines, please list the dates of previously authorized CPTs, specify the degree level at which the CPT was authorized, and indicate that copies of the CPT I-20s are included in the application. If you no longer have those CPT I-20s available, you may want to contact your previous school to see if you could get a printout of your SEVIS Employment History and/or if they could issue a letter for you confirming any CPT that was authorized for you. For CPT authorized by Rice during your current academic level, OISS will provide your SEVIS Employment History to include in your application, but you may want to include the I-20 copies as additional supporting documents.

## **Previous OPT Authorization(s)**

If you have applied for OPT in the past, you must use Part 6. of the I-765 to report it. Since providing evidence of previous OPT authorizations seems to be a requirement for only those people applying for an EAD for F-1 Optional Practical Training, we recommend referring back to the question about your Eligibility Category by indicating Page Number 3, Part 2, Item Number 27. However, since you are required to submit a copy of the previous EAD based on Page 2, Part 2, Item 12, it may be prudent to refer to both. For example, you may use Page Number 3, Part 2, Item Number 27 under 3.a. - 3.c., and start your response under 3.d. by stating something along the lines of "This information also pertains to Page 2, Part 2, Item 12". On the lines, please specify the degree level that your previous OPT was based on, and indicate that a copy of the OPT I-20 and EAD are included in the application.

## 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 and 2) the requested OPT dates.

Department of Homeland Security  
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

I-20, Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status  
OMB NO. 1653-0038

SEVIS ID: N [REDACTED] (F-1)

NAME: [REDACTED]

### EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATIONS

TYPE	FULL/PART-TIME	STATUS	START DATE	END DATE
POST-COMPLETION OPT	FULL TIME	REQUESTED	15 DECEMBER 2016	14 DECEMBER 2017

- You will then be directed to sign up for a 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).
- Check made out to U.S. Department of Homeland Security for \$410.00 (make sure to put your I-94 number in the Memo section) **OR** [G-1450](#) authorizing a credit card payment.
- 2 [U.S. Passport style photos](#) taken within 30 days with your name and I-94 number written on the back in pencil.
- Copies of your passport, visa, and I-94.
- Documentation regarding your previous SEVIS ID Number (if any) and/or previous CPT/OPT authorization(s) (if any)
- Cover letter (optional)

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

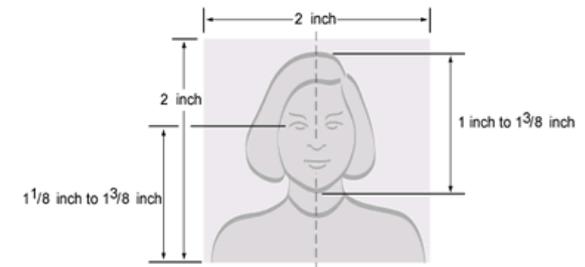
- OPT I-20
- SEVIS CPT History printout
- Envelope with USCIS address
- Envelope for photos

*If you are using a personal check, make sure it looks like the example below:*



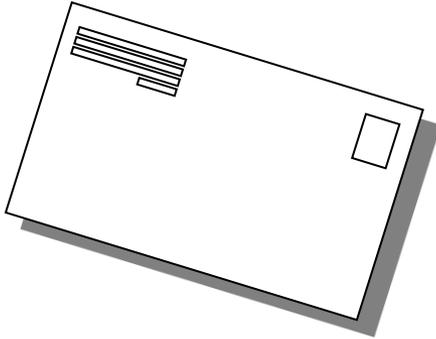
1025  
DATE MM/DD/YYYY  
PAY TO THE ORDER OF U.S. Department of Homeland Security \$ 410.00  
Four Hundred and Ten 00/100 DOLLARS  
MEMO SEVIS ID# and/or I-94 # Your signature  
⑆0000000000⑆ ⑆0000000000⑆ 1025

*Photograph requirements*





# 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**

**USCIS must  
receive your  
application  
within 30 days  
of when your  
OPT I-20 was  
issued.**

*\*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. <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765-addresses>*

**\*\*When assembling your OPT application for mailing,  
please follow the order of documents indicated on the cover letter template  
and handout distributed during the OPT I-20 pick-up appointment.\*\***



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# Optional Cover Letter

*Please download the Word document file of this cover letter, edit it with your information (see all highlighted sections), and bring it to the OPT pick-up appointment along with the rest of your documents!*

[Your Full Name]

[SEVIS ID: Nxxxxxxxxxxxxx]

[I-94: xxxxxxxxxxxxxx]

RE: FORM I-765 APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION FOR POST-COMPLETION OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (c)(3)(B), F-1 STUDENT

[Date used on I-765]

Dear USCIS Officer:

**Post-Completion OPT Requested Dates** [xx/xx/xxxx – xx/xx/xxxx]

This Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (c)(3)(B) application includes the following:

**Section 1**

- Form G-1145, E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance
- Check/money order of \$410 made out to U.S. Department of Homeland Security *OR* Form G-1450, Authorization for Credit Card Transactions (only include the option you are using for payment and remove the others)
- 2 passport-style photographs taken within the last 30 days with my name and I-94 on the back of the photo in pencil
- Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization

**Section 2**

- Copy of OPT I-20
- CPT History printout from SEVIS

**Section 3**

- Copy of passport
- Copy of visa (remove this line if you do not have an F-1 visa stamp [e.g. if you are a Canadian citizen])
- Copy of most recent Form I-94

**Section 4** (Use only if you have had a previous SEVIS number and/or previous practical training. Examples include: transferring your status at the same academic level; changing levels — e.g. Bachelor's to Master's; leave of absence)

- Statement explaining previous history. Be as detailed as possible.
- Documentation verifying statement above. Items include: EADs, I-20s with CPT, letters from previous school(s) verifying practical training authorizations.

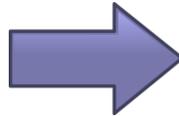
Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

[Your Signature]

[Your Full Name]

Cover letter  
template



## 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 is pending and has not been adjudicated within [normal case processing time](#), you may contact USCIS via the following webform: <https://egov.uscis.gov/e-request/displayONPTForm.do?entryPoint=init&sroPageType=onpt>
- If approved, USCIS will mail your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card to the address provided on your I-765. Check the card to ensure all information (spelling of name, dates, etc.) is correct. If something 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.

# Your Employment Authorization Document (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 costs \$410 and takes more than 90 days to process.



# Travel While on OPT

## ***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 a U.S. address. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT (especially while the application is still pending) can be denied.

## ***Can I re-enter 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
  - Showing “OPT Approved” on pg. 2,
  - Employment info has been updated via the SEVP Portal and is accurate on the I-20, and
  - Signed for travel by OISS advisor. Signature cannot be more than 6 months old from date of re-entry to the US.
- 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, send OISS a prepaid shipping label, 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).**

## After The EAD Arrives

### Required Communication with OISS

- Scan OISS [oiss@rice.edu](mailto:oiss@rice.edu) a copy of the front of your EAD card
- Update OISS if you wish to change your email
- Make sure OISS is aware of any changes in status or permanent departure from the U.S. prior to completing your OPT

### Required Communication through the SEVP Portal

- OISS SEVP Portal Information Webpage: <http://oiss.rice.edu/sevportal/>
- You will have access to the SEVP Portal on the first day of your approved OPT period. The SEVP Portal will reach out to you to set up an account to the email you provided during your OPT Application. You will not be able to report OPT information until the OPT start date on your EAD card.
  - If you never received the email (please check your SPAM/JUNK folders), you may send a request for an initial SEVP Portal email by contacting [SEVP@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVP@ice.dhs.gov). If you did receive the email but the link expired or you locked your account, please contact [OISS@rice.edu](mailto:OISS@rice.edu) to reset your account.
- Update the SEVP Portal with any changes in employment (adding employers, changing employers, or periods of unemployment) AND personal updates (changes in mailing address, physical address, telephone number).

**CAUTION:** Failure to report employment or any changes while on OPT could result in termination of your immigration status and cancelation of your OPT.



## After OPT Application Approval

### Unemployment During OPT

Students are required to work full-time (defined as 21+ 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

If you do not have a Social Security Number, you will be able to request for a Social Security Card when applying for OPT on your Form I-765. You may also choose to apply for the SSN separately after receiving your EAD card. Contact OISS if you have questions.

## 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!

## **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 within the U.S., or 2) transfer to another F-1 institution. 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 be applied for twice. 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/> and make an appointment (phone or in-person) 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.*



# RICE

## Contact Information

### Office Location

Lovett Hall, Entrance A,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

### Phone

713-348-6095

### Email

[oiss@rice.edu](mailto: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 an average of 3-5 months 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](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 usually arrives within 3-5 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 21+ 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](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). The Cap Gap extension expires on September 30<sup>th</sup> even if the H-1B has not yet been approved, and cannot be extended. The 60-day grace period is granted at the end of the Cap Gap extension per F-1 status regulations, which gives legal right to remain in the U.S. but no work authorization. Students are encouraged to consult their employer / immigration attorney filing the H-1B petition regarding legality and any possible work eligibility past the Cap Gap and/or grace period end date.

## **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. See slide titled “After The EAD Arrives” for more information on reporting to the OISS and the SEVP Portal.

## **When can I register with the SEVP Portal?**

After your OPT application has been approved by USCIS, you will receive an automated email with a registration link on the EAD start date. You will not be able to report OPT information until the OPT start date on your EAD card.

- If you never received the email (please check your SPAM/JUNK folders), you may send a request for an initial SEVP Portal email by contacting [SEVP@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:SEVP@ice.dhs.gov). If you did receive the email but the link expired or you locked your account, please contact [OISS@rice.edu](mailto:OISS@rice.edu) to reset your account.

**How do I get a social security number when on OPT?**

If you do not have a Social Security Number, you will be able to request for a Social Security Card when applying for OPT on your Form I-765. You may also choose to apply for the SSN separately after receiving your EAD card. Contact OISS if you have questions.

**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
- Degree conferral / 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 to do I have for USCIS to receive my application before it is voided?**

USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of the issuance the I-20 (the date next to the OISS advisor's signature).

**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).

**My Driver License has expired, when can I renew it?**

Driver license regulations depend on the specific U.S. state, but at least in Texas you are not able to renew your driver license until you have received your EAD card. It is recommended to apply early, to avoid having a gap in your driver license validity.