

Optional Practical Training (OPT) for Students in F-1 Status

Definition of "Optional Practical Training (OPT)"

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide you with an opportunity to gain actual employment experience in your chosen profession for a maximum initial period of twelve (12) months. Its purpose is to "round off" or complement your academic work. It can be used during and/or after your program of study, however, most students use Curricular Practical Training (CPT) during their program in order to utilize their entire OPT after they graduate. Please note that if you have used 12 months of full-time CPT, you will not be eligible for OPT. Certain degrees will be eligible for a 17-month STEM Extension; please review the information found online at <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/405.asp> for additional information.

Eligibility Requirements

In order for you to be eligible to apply for OPT, you must have been in lawful student status for at least nine (9) months (by the time you wish to start your OPT). The work must be directly related to your major field of study and it must be appropriate for someone having your level of education. OPT done before graduation may be full-time or part-time (less than 20 hours a week), and may occur anywhere in the United States. Post-completion OPT (after graduation) must be full-time (20+ hours a week). OPT may occur anywhere in the United States.

Application Deadline

To engage in Optional Practical Training (OPT) before graduation, you will contact the International Staff in order to get the application materials. Once completed, you will need to make an appointment with the International Staff in order to prepare your application as early as 90 days before your employment begins. Your application must be received no later than 60 days after the day you complete your degree requirements). Keep in mind, that your application must be *received* at the California Service Center by this date – not postmarked by this date – in order for you to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT). With this in mind, it is still recommended that you apply at least 90 days before the day you complete your degree requirements. Your application must be submitted to the USCIS office having jurisdiction over the place you are living at that time.

KEEP IN MIND, ONCE YOU HAVE SUBMITTED YOUR OPT APPLICATION, YOU SHOULD NOT TRAVEL OUTSIDE OF THE U.S. UNTIL YOU RECEIVE YOUR EAD CARD. IF YOU DO TRAVEL BEFORE YOUR EAD CARD IS ISSUED, YOUR OPT APPLICATION WILL BE CANCELLED AS SOON AS YOU LEAVE THE U.S. FOR MORE INFORMATION, READ THE TRAVEL WHILE ON OPT HANDOUT FOUND AT www.cgu.edu/intlforms.

Importance of the Actual Date You Complete Your Program of Study

USCIS regulations refer to the date you complete all requirements for a program of study, not to the date you participate in graduation ceremonies and receive a certificate or diploma. The Service ignores your graduation date because it realizes that many students, especially graduate students in thesis or dissertation programs, may complete requirements for a degree any day during the year. This means that the last day of an academic term may not be the date you complete program requirements. Your lawful F-1 status expires 60 days after the date you complete degree requirements and you are expected to leave the country by that date unless you file a timely application for Optional Practical Training (OPT) or make other arrangements to lawfully remain in the U.S.

Application and Authorization Procedures

Recommendation by the International Staff. Please gather all items on the OPT Checklist found at www.cgu.edu/intlforms prior to making an appointment with the International Staff to finish preparing your OPT application. You must make an appointment for this process; the process will last 15-30 minutes. As part of the process, you will be reissued a new I-20 that will include your permission to apply for OPT.

Authorization by the Immigration Service. Your permission to begin OPT is not finalized until you have received an "Employment Authorization Document" (EAD) from the USCIS. You will find a link to the USCIS Homepage in the OPT Checklist found at www.cgu.edu/intlforms. From this page click on immigration forms and download the I-765 application form and instructions. Carefully follow the instructions to ensure you accurately fill the form. Make sure your signature on the bottom of the I-76 application form is small, and do not cross the lines, as they will scan this onto your EAD card (if it's not small enough, they will return the application to you). Ensure that the passport style photos you submit are recent and in the appropriate format. After meeting with the International Staff to complete and review your application (remember, you **must** make an OPT appointment), mail your application to: USCIS California Service Center, P.O. Box 10765, Laguna Niguel, CA 92607-1076, via Certified Mail from the Post Office (as our mail room doesn't send mail via Certified Mail). Within approximately a week, you will receive a receipt from USCIS - do not throw it away. It will have a file number and phone number which you can use to track the progress of your application. Please bring a copy of this receipt to our office.

For Optional Practical Training (OPT) before graduation, work permission on the EAD will begin on the date as reflected by your International Staff's recommendation on your I-20. For Optional Practical Training (OPT) after graduation, work permission on the EAD will begin either on the date of completion of studies, as reflected by your International Staff's recommendation on your I-20, or the date the EAD is issued, whichever occurs later. The last day your Optional Practical Training (OPT) can begin is 60 days after your last day or classes (or the last day you meet your degree requirements). Therefore, even if the EAD card is issued after this date, USCIS is still required to put the starting date as 60 days after your last day of classes (or the last day you meet your degree requirements). This is why it's very important to apply early, as it usually takes 75-90 days to get your EAD card. Inform your International Staff if you do not receive your card within 90 days. Keep in mind that you should always call or check the on-line website to make sure that your EAD card hasn't been issued. If it has, you should await your EAD card in the mail.

Photograph Specifications. The two photos must be passport style with a white background and taken no earlier than 30 days before submission to USCIS. The photos should be unmounted; printed on thin paper; glossy; and unretouched. Your head should be bare unless you are wearing a headdress as required by a religious order. The photos should not be larger than 2" x 2", with the distance from the top of your head to just below the chin about 1¼". Lightly print your name and admission number (found at the top of your I-94 card) on the back of each photo with a pencil – it *will* be light.

Making a Decision Regarding Participation in Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Only Twelve (12) Months of Optional Practical Training (OPT) is Available During Your U.S. Studies. You are allowed to have this type of employment permission for a total of twelve (12) months during your stay in the U.S. in F-1 status at each degree level. If you use all twelve (12) months during a master's degree, for example, and plan to continue study for a doctoral program, you **WILL** be eligible for a second Optional Practical Training during or after completion of that next program (as long as it is a higher degree).

Authorization May Not be Rescinded. Once authorization to engage in OPT is granted, it may not be rescinded or cancelled. This means that, after OPT is authorized by the USCIS, unexpected delays in completing degree requirements, inability to find an appropriate job, or loss of a job may result in loss of otherwise eligible time to work. Once permission to work has been given, it is gone regardless of subsequent occurrences.

Actual Date Practical Training Employment May Begin. You may not begin work until all three of the following requirements are satisfied: (1) you have obtained an EAD card from the USCIS, (2) the date of authorized employment (as noted on your EAD card) is reached and (3) you have completed all requirements for your program of study.

Change of Employer After Optional Practical Training (OPT) Has Been Authorized. You may change employers after you have begun authorized employment provided the new job is (1) directly related to your major field of study and (2) appropriate for someone having your level of education. You **must** report all changes and breaks in employment to the International Staff.

Travel Outside the U.S. Please review the Travel While On OPT Handout found at www.cgu.edu/intlforms when contemplating travel. Reentry provisions of the regulations require students in Optional Practical Training (OPT) to present (1) Form I-20, endorsed for travel by the International Staff or another Designated School Official (DSO) "within the last five months (not one year, as listed on your I-20)", (2) the "Employment Authorization Document" (EAD), and (3) a valid passport (that must be valid for at least 6 months after reentering the U.S.) with valid F-1 visa, and (4) a written job offer by an employer. Students who do not meet these requirements may not be allowed to reenter the U.S. Be sure to consult with the International Staff when contemplating travel outside the U.S. and reentry to continue Optional Practical Training (OPT). Keep in mind, if your visa is expired, and you no longer have any degree requirements to complete, you will not be eligible to apply for a new F-1 visa. Even though Optional Practical Training (OPT) is considered a part of your F-1 visa status, the U.S. Embassy or Consulate **may** not issue you an F-1 Student visa, since they feel you've already met your degree requirements.

Update Address/Phone Number/E-mail Address & Employer Information You must provide CGU with any and all changes in your address, phone number, and e-mail address. Keep in mind that 6 months after you graduate, you will no longer have the same CGU e-mail account that you did as a student. Even if you are provided an alumni e-mail account, please contact the International Staff to note the change, as this is not done automatically. You must also update CGU with any changes to employer information and any breaks in employment. Please fill out and return the OPT Employment Notification Sheet found online at www.cgu.edu/intlforms.

Further Information - 90-day Unemployment Provision, H1-B Cap Gap Provision, and 17-month STEM Extension. Additional information on employment, including detailed information on the 90-day Unemployment Provision, H1-B Cap Gap Provision, and 17-month STEM Extension for those who qualify can be found online at <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/405.asp>.