Optional Practical Training for F-1 Students

A benefit for international students
to legally work in their field
after completing a course of study

This presentation was last updated in
October 2026

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One College. Many Paths.

What is OPT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an F-1 student employment benefit.

- You can be authorized for up to 12 months of off-campus employment per educational level (Associate, Bachelors, Masters, PhD)
- You can work anywhere in the US
- There are no restrictions on salary
- Employment eligibility is proven by an Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

Who is eligible for OPT?

- You must have been in valid F-1 student status on your current SEVIS record for one academic year (3 quarters) or longer
- You must be completing a program of study (for example, an Associate Degree or a long Certificate)
- You must not be a participant in Highline's Short Term Program
- You must be present in the US at the time of application

What kinds of jobs can I get?

- **You must work in your "field of study."**
- **All jobs must be "directly related to [your] degree program."**

…Basically, your job responsibilities have to connect to the major listed on your I-20. This is easier in some majors than in others!

How do I maintain my status while on OPT?

1. You must work at least 21 hours per week (on average) to be considered “employed.”

2. You must not be “unemployed” for more than 90 days during the authorization period.

3. You must report all job changes and changes to your personal information to the SEVP Portal within 10 days.

How do I apply?



https://myaccount.uscis.gov/

- create an account
- file I-765 (Application for Employment Authorization)
- form auto-saves and can be edited for 30 days

When can I apply?

- The earliest you can apply is 90 days before your last day of study.
- All applications must be received by the US government before the end of your 60-day grace period. (File within 30 days of receiving the I-20 from ISP.)
- Apply early! Applicants who apply during their grace period will likely get authorized for less than 12 months of work. (Authorization end date cannot be later than 12 months + 60 days after your last day of study)

When can I apply?

Final Quarter	Application Window Begins (90 days before quarter end date)	Quarter Ends	Last I-765 Appointment with ISP staff	Application Window Ends (60 days after quarter end date)
Summer 2026	5/15/2026	**8/13/2026**	10/5/2026	10/12/2026
Fall 2026	9/19/2026	**12/18/2026**	2/9/2027	2/16/2027
Winter 2027	12/26/2026	**3/26/2027**	5/18/2027	5/25/2027
Spring 2027	3/19/2027	**6/17/2027**	8/9/2027	8/16/2027

How Long Does It Take?

Gather materials and begin filing: 2-3 hours
I-765 Review Meeting: 1 hour
Finish filing online: <1 hour

Attend Biometrics appointment: <1 hour

Wait for approval: **30 - 90 days***

*some of our Spring 2026 graduates waited 145 days 😟

Try to file by the middle of your final quarter!

What do I need to prepare?

A complete OPT application packet includes:

1. OPT-endorsed I-20 (see OPT I-20 Request Form) (and any CPT-endorsed I-20s)
2. Photo page from passport
3. Electronic I-94 (if you did COS, use your approval notice)
4. Recent passport photo* (US format: white background, 2”x2”)
5. Payment of $470 (US credit/debit card or bank transfer)

You will be including these with your online I-765 form.

*See more about photos on slide 13 (“Step 2”)

Premium Processing

- Reduces processing time to 30 days (or fewer?)
- Can be filed at same time as OPT application
- Requires additional fee of…

$1,780 !!! *



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OK! I'm ready. What do I do?

See our detailed checklist at https://international.highline.edu/current-students/employment/

Step 1.

Apply to graduate! You may do this as soon as you enroll in your final quarter of classes.

https://registration.highline.edu/graduation/

Step 2.

Prepare your documents.

- valid passport
- new passport photos*
- I-94 (either from I-94 website or from COS approval)
- any previous CPT/OPT I-20s
- any previous EADs



*Photos are still required as of Sept 2026 but will eventually be removed from the form. Check the I-765 application BEFORE you bother paying money for photos.

Step 3.

Create an account at USCIS.gov.



Step 4.

Start an I-765 application and begin uploading documents. Do NOT submit yet! The form auto-saves and can be edited for 30 days.

Step 5, part 1.

Fill out ISP's OPT I-20 Request Form

The request form requires:

- SEVIS ID number
- Final quarter
- Degree/certificate you are earning
- Requested employment start date



Step 5, part 2.

Schedule your I-765 Review Meeting with an ISP Advisor.

Before your meeting, prepare all documents, make a USCIS.gov account, and start the online I-765 application… but **DO NOT SUBMIT!**



Step 6.

Attend the I-765 Review Meeting.

- Zoom: be ready to screenshare
- In-person: bring your laptop

The ISP Advisor will check your online application for accuracy and completeness. Please use this appointment to ask any questions you have about OPT.

Step 7.

Receive your OPT I-20.

- We'll shorten your program length so that your program end date matches your last date of study.
- We'll indicate your requested OPT dates.

Step 8.

Submit the completed application online!



This must be done:

- within 30 days after the OPT I-20 is issued, AND
- before the end of your 60-day grace period.

Your application WILL be denied if you file it late!

Your case will be assigned a receipt number immediately upon submitting.

USCIS has a tracker tool but it is unreliable - please ignore this.

Step 9.

Attend the in-person biometrics appointment!



- You will receive an appointment notice in your USCIS.gov account about 2-3 weeks in advance. (It may come by mail as well.)
- Attend the appointment (or reschedule at least 12 hours in advance). It will likely be in Tukwila, WA. Bring the appointment notice, a photo ID (probably passport) and any other required documents.
- Read more here.

Step 10.

Start looking for jobs!

You can apply and interview for jobs before your OPT is approved, and even before you graduate!

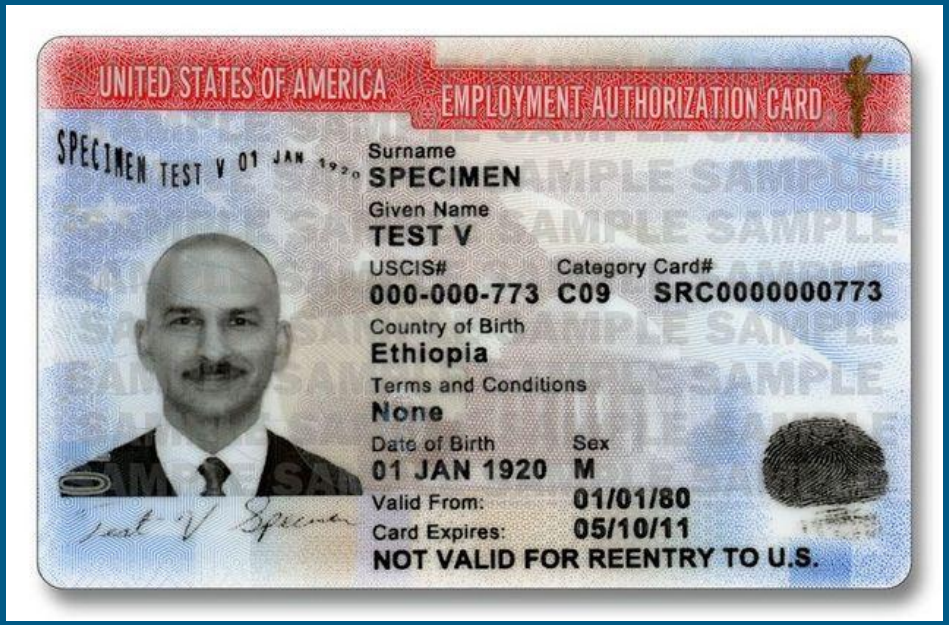
DO NOT WORK without government approval.



Step 11.

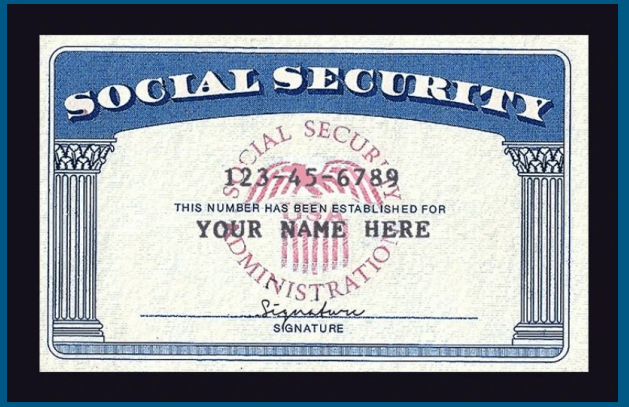
Get approved!! Receive your EAD by mail.





Step 11B.

If you don't already have a Social Security Card… get one!



1. Schedule an appointment at any SSN office in the state where you reside.

2. Bring your EAD, I-20, and other relevant documents to your appointment.



Processing may take 1-2 weeks (or longer?). You'll receive the SSN card by postal mail.



Step 12.

Begin working (on or after EAD start date).

Step 13.

Report employment.

You will receive a link to create a SEVP Portal Account on your EAD Start Date. Create your account within 14 days or the link will expire.

- Report your employer within 10 days.
- Report any changes to your contact info.
- Log in at least once every 90 days.



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highline.edu

How do I choose a start date?

- **Your OPT start date must be within your 60-day grace period.**
- **USCIS will take the same amount of time to approve your application regardless of the date that you choose.**

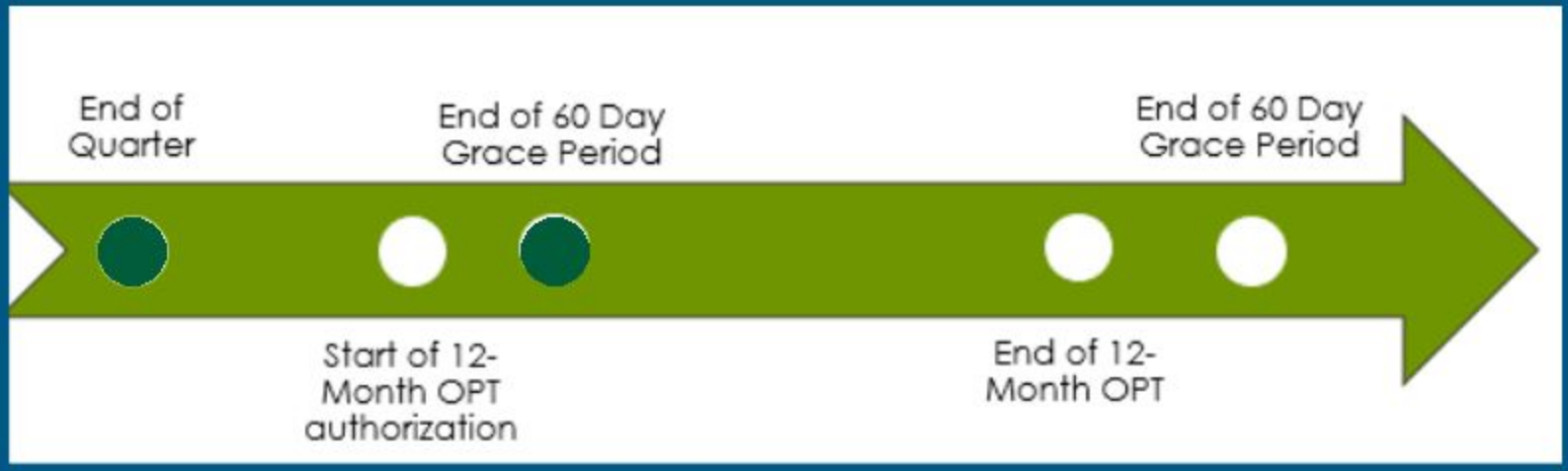
→ **Most students choose a LATE date.**

- maximum time to rest and recover after completing degree
- maximum time to find a job
- maximum length of status in US

How do I choose a start date?

Important: Applying in your grace period will often result in having <12 months of work authorization. That is because the authorization end date cannot be later than 12 months + 60 days after your last day of study.

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Here's that table again…

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Your requested start date must be **after** this date, and **on or before** this date!

How can I find a job?

Highline's Career Services website has a lot of great links!

https://studentemployment.highline.edu/find-a-job/



- **Multiple jobs ok!**
- **Volunteer work ok!**

Save the Date!



When can I start working?

You can begin work on your EAD start date if you have already received your EAD card.

Example 1: You applied to have a start date of January 1. It is January 10 and you have not received your EAD card yet. Can you work?

NO – not until you receive your EAD card.

Example 2: You applied to have a start date of January 1. It is December 15 and you just received your EAD. Can you work?

NO – not until the date printed on the card (Jan. 1).

How do I end OPT?

- You may not work after the EAD End Date. In the US, it is recommended that you give “2 weeks’ notice” to your employer.
- If you maintain status for the full OPT period, you will receive another 60-day grace period after OPT is over. During that time, you must transfer out, return to Highline for a new program, or leave the US.
- You may stop OPT early by transferring out (or transferring back to Highline) or leaving the US (with no plan to return). Speak to an ISP advisor.
- The “5-month Rule” states that there must not be a “gap in activity” (work or study) greater than 5 months.

Can I travel internationally before/during OPT?

International travel is RISKY and COMPLICATED.

- The I-765 application MUST be filed while in US. If you leave US and try to come back in grace period without filing first, you WILL be refused re-entry.
- Visa renewals may be denied because OPT is "optional" - renew visa BEFORE graduating if possible
- Government expectation is that you find a job ASAP after graduating; traveling may be seen as "goofing off"
- CBP expects you to travel with proof of OPT approval (EAD and I-20 showing "approved") and job offer letter (or letter confirming continued employment)

International Travel Requirements

Documents	Before completing program and before EAD issuance	After completing program and before EAD issuance	After completing program and after EAD issuance
Valid passport	✔	✔	✔
Valid F-1 visa stamp	✔	✔	✔
OPT I-20 with a valid travel signature	✔	✔	✔
Evidence of financial support	Strongly recommended	Strongly recommended	Strongly recommended
OPT receipt: I-797 Notice of Action		✔	
Job offer letter from employer		Strongly recommended	✔
EAD (Employment Authorization Document)			✔

Thanks to UC Berkeley for this great chart!

Travel is RISKY. Is it worth it?

Other Considerations

- **Medical Insurance Eligibility**
  - Not required but strongly encouraged
  - Must be continuous
  - **Must opt in (and pay fees) by first day of next quarter**
  - Must check eligibility before each quarter
- **Studying During OPT**
  - Optional
  - Must be part-time (below 12 units per quarter)
  - Must be at/below your OPT educational level
- **STEM OPT Extension only available for Bachelors level and higher**

Other Considerations

- **Campus View Housing**

Graduating ISP students may be eligible to remain in CV for up to one quarter after graduating, IF all of the following are true:

1) they are already living in CV during final study quarter
2) they inform CV of intent to remain in CV by week 6 of final study quarter
3) they apply for OPT during final study quarter (not grace period)

POSSIBLE Upcoming Changes

1) Fee Increase?

2) Extension of Stay application?



How can I get more information?

Please meet with Eva or Thu
to discuss your specific situation.

OPT can be a life-changing experience. Good luck!

