

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

What is OPT?

Optional Practical Training is an employment authorization benefit of student's F-1 status that allows students to pursue practical work experience in the field of degree study. OPT employment authorization is typically granted for 12 months. Students can apply for OPT before (pre-degree completion OPT) or after completing the degree program (post-degree completion OPT). Pre-degree completion OPT can be approved only for part-time employment. Post-degree completion OPT is approved for full-time employment, but students are permitted to choose to work only part-time. Graduates from certain degree programs may apply for an additional 17 months OPT extension, after the first twelve months of authorized OPT.

Who is Eligible?

- Students who are in active F-1 status and have been enrolled on a full-time (degree-pursuing) basis for at least two academic semesters.
- F-1 students who are in their last semester of their degree program
- F-1 students whose proposed OPT employment will be directly related to their course of study

When to Apply for OPT?

- A student can apply for an OPT up to 90 days prior to the end of his/her program-end date and up to 60 days after his/her program end date.
- *It is highly recommended that you apply not later than 30 days before your program completion date.*
- **Caution:** Consult with an International Services Office if you plan to spend your final FGCU semester outside of the US, which might make you ineligible for OPT.

OPT Application Process:

- a. First attend an OPT Information session conducted by International Services Office (ISO)
- b. Complete and assemble the following documents and schedule an appointment with ISO.

Your application packet will include the following:

1. Completed **I-765 form** (blank form attached; may also be downloaded at <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/I-765.pdf>)

The answer to Section 3 and 16 on the I-765 form is:

1. Address in Section 3 must be: **International Services Office, 10501 FGCU BLVD South, Fort Myers, FL 33965**
 2. For pre-completion OPT application: (c)(3)(A)
 3. For post-completion OPT application: (c)(3)(B)
 4. STEM student requesting OPT extension: (c)(3)(C)
2. Student's Letter of Application (see sample below)
 3. Academic Advisor's Letter of Recommendation (see sample below)

4. Photocopy of both sides of your most recent **I-94** card
 5. Photocopy of the **passport** page showing biographical data and expiration date
 6. Photocopy of your **US Visa page**
 7. Photocopies of previous I-20s showing previous **Curricular Practical Training (CPT)** authorization(s), if any.
 8. Two (2) passport **photos** (see example below). Gently print in pencil your name and SEVIS number on the back of each photo.
 9. **\$340.00** check or money order made payable to: “**U.S. Department of Homeland Security**” (please do not abbreviate).
- c. The International Services Office will prepare a new I-20 for you showing OPT authorization and dates (on page 3), review your application and documents for accuracy, before ISO will mail your application to the USCIS
- d. Within several weeks of mailing your application, the ISO will receive a Notice of receipt. This is proof that you have an application pending with USCIS. The Notice of Action/Receipt will contain your Receipt Number (“SRC number”). You can use this number to check your case status online at www.uscis.gov (in the lower right corner).

Academic Advisor’s letter

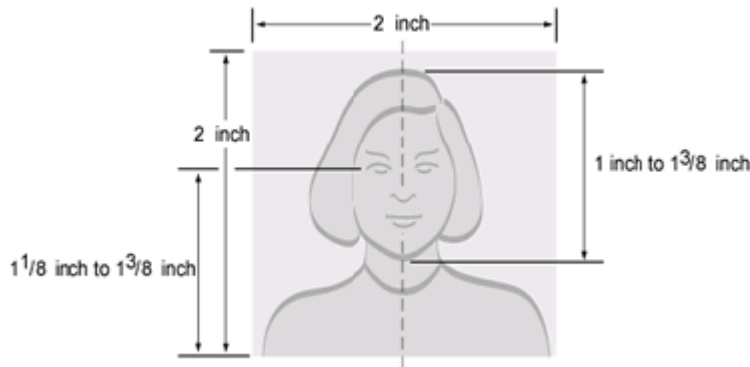
Request an Optional Practical Training recommendation letter from your academic advisor. If your advisor does not know what this is, he/she can contact our office for guidance. The letter will include: your name, major, degree completion date (which is last day of the semester, not graduation date), and verification that you will have met all requirements for graduation, and a recommendation that you be granted practical training experience.

Your application letter to the USCIS:

1. Addressed to the: **USCIS TSC, PO Box 851041, Mesquite, TX 75185-1041**
2. Today’s Date:
3. Explain that you are a student at FGCU, studying (title of your degree) to prepare for a career in (your field of study). Include the date you expect to complete your degree on (last day of semester) and would like to pursue employment for one year of Practical Training. You may want to add something about your self, your plans, your student experience...but keep this to one or two sentences.
4. Sign your letter

Color Photograph Specifications:

All photos must be of just the applicant and must be identical. All photos must meet the specifications for full frontal/passport photos and must be no more than 30 days old when an application is filed.



Guidelines for Acceptable Photos:

- Full frontal view of your face, eyes open
- Complete head, from top of hair to bottom of chin: height of head should measure 1 inch to 1-3/8 inches (25 mm to 35 mm)
- Center head within frame (see Figure below)
- Eyes' distance from bottom of photo is 1-1/8 inches to 1-3/8 inches (28 mm and 35 mm)
- Plain white or off-white background
- No shadows on the face or background

Where to Get Photographs:

CVS Pharmacy Photo Lab

Walgreens Pharmacy Photo Lab

JC Penney Photo Lab

Any other photo lab that provides passport photo service

Employment requirements to maintain Status while on OPT

- During post-completion OPT, F-1 status is dependent upon employment.
- Employment **MUST** be related to the field of degree study.
- The employment does **NOT** have to be paid. Therefore, a student who is engaged in “free-lance” employment, internship, or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of OPT employment.
- Students may not accrue an aggregate of more than 90 days of unemployment during any post-completion OPT.
- Employment authorization will begin on the date requested or the date the employment authorization is adjudicated (approved), whichever is later.
- Students must comply with the employment reporting requirements.

Reporting and other requirements while on OPT

All students on OPT are required to report the following information to the International Services Office at Florida Gulf Coast University:

- change of name or address

- Initial and/or change of employer
- interruption of employment
- Multiple employers

Students with an approved 17-month OPT extension have additional reporting requirements. Please refer to the OPT extension application for further information.

For your Information:

- You **must** have your **Employment Authorization Document/card (EAD)** in-hand and the start date must be valid in order to begin employment.
- The EAD will be mailed to the FGCU International Services Office address that you enter on the I-765 form.
- USCIS generally will issue an EAD **approximately 60-90 days** after receipt of your application unless you are found ineligible.
- You **MUST** submit a photocopy of your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) to the International Services Office.
- If you change your status prior to the OPT expiration date, please inform the International Services Office and send a copy of your change of status approval to the office.
- Please note that while you are on OPT you are still in F-1 visa status. Please see the attached handout “**While You Are On OPT**” to learn about your responsibilities during your practical training. Also attached is some basic information to help you prepare for employment in the U.S.
- Travel outside of the US after you apply for OPT can be risky. Please contact the International Services Office if you plan to travel after you submit your OPT application. To travel out of the US and re-enter during OPT, you will need the following *original* documents:
 - Valid passport
 - Valid F-1 visa stamp
 - I-20 endorsed for OPT with the FGCU DSO travel signature less than 6 months old
 - Unexpired EAD card
 - Job offer/confirmation letter from a U.S. employer.

While you are on OPT... you are still a student and are required to report to the International Services Office at FGCU.

FAILURE TO FULFILL THE REPORTING REQUIREMENTS CAN JEOPARDIZE YOUR STAY IN THE US.

- a. Report all address changes to Florida Gulf Coast University's International Services Office within 10 calendar days of moving to your new residence. This is the address where you live. It cannot be a P.O. Box or an office address.
- b. Any change of name
- c. Any interruption or change of employment
- d. International Office must have a photocopy of your EAD card on file

REMINDERS DURING OPT:

1. **Medical insurance coverage:** maintaining full medical insurance coverage during the OPT status is encouraged, but not mandatory. Many times students on OPT do not go directly into a job where insurance coverage is provided.
2. Remember to depart the United States within the 60 day grace period that follows your last day of OPT authorization (which is on your I-20 and EAD card).
3. If you plan on changing your status we recommend that you begin this process before your OPT is expired.
4. If you are transferring to another school, make sure to contact the International Services Office so that your SEVIS records may be transferred BEFORE the end of your authorized stay.
5. If you are subject to Special Registration (NSEERS), please make sure to use official ports of departure to exit the US and allow time at airports and land crossings to complete exit interview (even if traveling to Mexico and Canada).

TRAVEL WHILE ON OPT: Before you travel, remember to:

- Make sure your passport is valid at least 6 months into the future
- Make sure your I-20 has been signed for travel within 6 months. If you need a new travel signature, bring or send your I-20 to International Office with a copy of your EAD card
- Make sure that your visa stamp is valid. If your visa is not valid for re-entry to US make preparations to renew your visa while overseas at the US embassy or consulate.
- **Caution:** Traveling while on OPT status can be tricky if a new visa stamp is needed. Consult with your International Advisor before traveling.
- Carry your EAD card and proof of employment for the EAD time period with you. Proof of employment can include a letter from your employer or recent pay stubs.
- **Please note:** If you have an expired F-1 visa stamp and you plan to make a short trip to Canada, Mexico, or adjacent (Caribbean) islands, consult with the International Advisor or visit the ICE web page on Automatic Revalidation:

<http://www.ice.gov/sevis/students/index.htm>

Ending Your OPT

Your F-1 status remains valid until 60 days after the expiration of your EAD card. During this 60-day grace period, you are no longer authorized to work, however you may legally stay in the US. If you depart the US during the 60-day grace period, you are no longer eligible to re-enter under your previous F-1 visa status.

- If you plan to leave the US after the end of your OPT, please make sure that you depart the US before the end of your 60-day grace period.
- If you plan to change your visa status, we recommend you begin this process, 1-2 months before your OPT is expired.
- If you plan to start a new degree program at another college or university, please make sure to contact International Office regarding the transfer of your SEVIS record. Transfers must be done before the end of the 60-day grace period.

Sources:

ICE Immigration Law Code on OPT: 214.2(f)(10)(ii)(A) (ii)

<http://www.ice.gov/sevis/students/opt.htm>