Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT):
Frequently Asked Questions for Students in F-1 Status

Reminder:
Each student must attend an OPT workshop presented by the International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) before ISSO will process his or her request for OPT.

What is OPT?

- Period of practical training directly related to your current level and major field of study
  - Generally for opportunities located off campus
  - Occasionally for nonstudent positions at Iowa State University

Who is eligible for OPT?

- Students who are in valid F-1 status
- Students completing a Bachelor’s, Master’s, or Doctoral degree program
- Students who have completed a full academic year
  - Academic year is defined as a fall and spring semester

Who is not eligible for OPT?

- Students who are now 60 days beyond the date on which all degree requirements were completed
- Students who used 12 months of OPT at the same educational level
- Students who used 365 days of full-time Curricular Practical Training at the same educational level
- Students in the Intensive English and Orientation Program
- Non-degree students

When can I use OPT?

- Bachelor’s degree students
  - Full time after completing all degree requirements
- Students completing a master’s degree with a thesis or creative component and doctoral students
  - Full time after completing coursework
- Students completing a master’s degree without a thesis or creative component
  - Full time after completing all degree requirements

How long can I do OPT?

- 12 months for all F-1 students
- Additional 17 months if major is on the Department of Homeland Security’s STEM Designated Degree Programs list and student’s employer is enrolled in E-Verify
  - For more information, please follow these links from the ISSO main page:
    F-1 Student Immigration Information » Optional Practical Training 17-Month Extension

Can I request more than one period of OPT?

- Yes, OPT is available after each educational level, but only if you complete your new degree at a higher educational level.
When do I submit my OPT request to ISSO?
- Up to 120 days prior to the date you will complete all degree requirements
- No later than 40 days following the date when you complete all degree (allows for ISSO processing)

When will U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) accept my OPT application?
- Up to 90 days prior to the date you will complete all degree requirements
- No later than 60 days after your program completion date

How do you define program completion for immigration purposes?
- Bachelor’s degree students:
  - Completion date: Last day of the semester in which the final courses for the degree are taken
- Master’s degree students in non-thesis programs:
  - Completion date: Last day of the semester in which the final courses for the degree are taken
    - MBA students may use the last day of semester for the MBA program
- Master’s degree students with creative component or thesis and doctoral students have multiple interpretations for program completion:
  - The earliest is the last day in the semester in which the final coursework (excluding research credits) is taken
  - The latest is the last day of the semester in which you take your final oral defense
  - You may choose any day between coursework completion and the last day of the semester you take your final oral defense

What is the approximate timeline from submission this request to ISSO to receipt of EAD?
- 10 working days ISSO processing
- 5 working days Mailing time
- 90 calendar days USCIS processing
- 30 calendar days Issuance and mailing of the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- 5 working days Mailing time to you if you are no longer in Ames

Do I need to attend an OPT workshop?
- Yes, you must register for an OPT workshop by going to the Session Signups in Cystart

How do I submit an OPT request?
- It is an electronic process completed by logging in to Cystart using your ISU NetID and password
- Cystart ➔ F-1 Student Services ➔ Optional Practical Training (OPT) Request

What is the approximate timeline for ISSO to process this request?
- 10 working days after there is a ☑ mark in all boxes on the Cystart Optional Practical Training page.

How will I know if my OPT request through Cystart has been approved?
- ISSO will send an e-mail to your ISU e-mail address
- If you do not receive this e-mail within 10 working days as noted above, please send an e-mail to isso@iastate.edu to check on your request.
Do I need to meet an ISSO advisor to prepare the final OPT application for USCIS?

- No, you will meet with another staff member in ISSO.
  - Please follow the instructions provided in the e-mail sent to you by ISSO
  - If you are no longer living in Ames, you can communicate by e-mail instead of coming to ISSO

What documents must I bring to ISSO to complete my application?

- $380 personal check, made payable to U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Two identical, passport style photographs taken within the past 30 days
- Printed copy of the completed Form I-765 typed
- Printed copy of the completed Form G-1145 typed
- Copy of new I-20 with OPT recommendation on page 2, signed by ISSO advisor and student
- CPT authorization page printed from SEVIS
- Original and one copy of each of the following immigration documents:
  - I-94 card, front and back of original or print out of electronic I-94
  - Passport identity page
  - Passport page showing expiration date of passport
  - Passport page with most recent F-1 visa
  - I-20 forms with prior OPT endorsements on page 3, if any
  - Previous EAD from USCIS, if any

What more can you tell me about the required photographs?

- For more information, see the Department of State’s passport photo requirements.

What steps should I take if I choose to mail the final application myself?

- Wait for the new OPT I-20 to be sent to you by mail
  - When you receive the I-20, sign and date the I-20 in blue ink.
- Put the final application together in the order listed above, ensuring the check is on top
- Review the final application one last time to ensure the dates are correct, signatures are included, and all documents are signed within 30 days of USCIS receiving the application
- E-mail a scanned copy of your entire application to isso@iastate.edu
  - Include copies of all documents included in the final application as ISSO would need to reference these if the USCIS sends a Request for Evidence (RFE) to follow-up on your OPT application
  - Once ISSO confirms your application is complete and accurate, you may mail it.

How should I mail the final application if I choose to mail it myself?

- ISSO recommends using FedEx for mailing

Where should I mail my final application if I choose to mail it myself?

- Find where to send the application here.
How will I know USCIS has received my application?

- USCIS will send you an e-mail (see sample below) and/or text message
- USCIS will send ISSO the official I-797 Receipt Notice
  - This assumes the ISSO address was used as the mailing address on the I-765

Sample e-mail message from USCIS:
Your case has been accepted and routed to the USCIS Nebraska Service Center for processing. Within 7-10 days by standard mail you will receive your official Receipt Notice (Form I-797) with your Receipt Number LINxxxxxxxxx. With the official Receipt Notice (Form I-797) you may visit www.uscis.gov where you can check the status of your case using My Case Status. We suggest you wait until you have received your Form I-797 before checking My Case Status.

This confirmation provides notification of the date USCIS received your case. This notice does NOT grant any immigration status or benefit. You MAY NOT present this notice as evidence that you have been granted any immigration status or benefit. Further, this notice does NOT constitute evidence that your case remains pending with USCIS. The current status of your case must be verified with USCIS.

PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE

When will I receive the e-mail or text message from USCIS?
- Approximately 2 weeks after your application is received by USCIS

What if I don’t get the e-mail or text message from USCIS?
- First, contact your bank to ask if your check for the OPT fee has been cashed by USCIS
- Second, if necessary, contact ISSO at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu

How do I know when my 90-day processing time begins?
- The Received Date on the I-797 Receipt Notice represents the beginning of the 90 days

How do I check the status of my application?
- Go to USCIS Case Status and enter receipt number found on receipt notice

How will I know my EAD has arrived at ISSO?
- ISSO will send you an e-mail message to your ISU e-mail account

What is the average time from when the decision is made and when the EAD arrives at ISSO?
- USCIS has indicated it can take up to 30 days before your EAD is produced and mailed
- ISSO generally receives the EAD within 10 days after USCIS says it has been delivered

What if my name is incorrect—either misspelled, portion missing, or order reversed—when I review my receipt notice?
- Contact an ISSO advisor at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu

What if I want to change the dates of my OPT?
- The dates of your OPT cannot be changed once the application has been mailed to USCIS
- If your application is still pending with ISSO, contact ISSO at 515-294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu
What if my OPT request is still pending and it is more than 90 days from the receipt date?

- Contact an ISSO advisor at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu

What if I don’t complete my program as planned?

- Students completing a bachelor’s or master’s degree without a thesis must contact an ISSO advisor immediately at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu
  - Action must be taken before the completion date on your OPT I-20

- Students completing a master’s degree with a thesis or a doctoral degree
  - If choose to proceed with OPT request, no action needed
  - If choose not to proceed with OPT request, action must be taken before the completion date on your OPT I-20

What if I want to withdraw my application?

- Contact an ISSO advisor at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu
  - Request to withdraw must be made prior to the start date on the EAD
  - You will not receive a refund of the $380 application fee

Who should I contact if I don’t hear from ISSO and it has been more than 10 days since the USCIS Case Status system indicates my EAD card has been delivered?

- ISSO at 294-1120 or isso@iastate.edu

What do I need to do to pick up my EAD from ISSO?

- You may come yourself
  - Please bring a photo ID such as your passport, ISU Card, or driver’s license

- You may designate someone else to pick up your EAD
  - You must e-mail ISSO and specify a specific person to pick up your EAD. Please include the individual’s name and ISU ID number. The person picking up the EAD must have photo I.D.

- Complete a Mailing Authorization e-form request and ISSO will mail your EAD card to you

Can I take classes during OPT?

- The regulations indicate your OPT is automatically terminated when you begin study at another educational level or if you transfer to another institution.

How many days can I be unemployed while on OPT?

- During the 12 month period listed on the EAD card, the student is only allowed 90 days of unemployment
- A student must leave the US, transfer to another school, or be accepted to a new degree program at ISU before reaching the 90 days of unemployment.
What types of positions are considered employment for OPT?

- Paid or unpaid employment totaling 20 hours or more per week in a position related to the degree program, and can include the following forms of employment:
  - Multiple employers
  - Short-term multiple employers
  - Work for hire
  - Self-employed business owner
  - Employment through an agency or consulting firm

What are the reporting requirements during OPT?

- You must update your living address in Accessplus and Cystart within 10 days of moving
- You must update your employer information through Cystart as soon as possible. Your SEVIS record will auto-terminate after 90 days of unemployment.

For more information on OPT, see the ICE policy guidance here.

Disclaimer: This Frequently Asked Questions document is intended for general information and guidance. Please consult with an International Student and Scholar Advisor in the International Students and Scholars Office regarding your individual request.