

F-1

Tompkins Cortland Community College
Global Initiative Office, Room 230

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

WHAT IS IT?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is off-campus employment authorization that lets F-1 students get work experience in their major field of study. The amount of work you are permitted is a maximum of 12 months of full-time employment for each higher educational level you pursue in the U.S. You can work for any employer, anywhere in the country.

Think of it as an OPT bank account! In that account are 12 months of full-time optional practical training for your current program of study. Let's say you'd like to work full-time for three months after your sophomore year (second) year in your bachelor's degree. That's a three-month withdrawal of full-time employment, leaving you 9 months left to spend during your associate's degree. During your second year, you decide to work part-time (less than 20 hours a week) for two semesters or nine months. Since part-time employment counts at half the full-time rate, you've made a withdrawal of four and a half months of full-time employment. This leaves you with four and a half months of full-time employment still in your account to use after you graduate.

If you decide to spend all of your OPT after you complete your degree, you must request all of it at once, that is the full year. You cannot use it in pieces.

If you decide to go on for your Bachelor's degree after completing your OPT for your Associate's, your bank account will be full again with another 12 months available to you!

HOW CAN IT BE USED?

- **Summer vacation and semester break-** *either part-time or full-time employment*
- **While school is in session-** *part-time employment only*
- **After completion of all course requirements for bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree, excluding the thesis or equivalent-** *part-or full-time employment*
- **After completion of ALL requirements for the course of study-** *full-time employment only*

HOW CAN YOU QUALIFY FOR IT?

1. You must have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year.
2. You must be able to describe how the type of work you are seeking directly relates to your major. You do not have a job offer to apply for OPT. If you are applying for before completion of studies OPT, however, is it wise that you be as sure as possible of a job so that you don't waste any of your OPT "account."

(Over →)

3. If you are seeking Post-Completion of Studies OPT, your department must certify the date that you are expected to complete your program of study. You may apply for Post-Completion of Studies OPT up to three months before your completing of your program of study, but no later than 60 days after. If you apply within the 60 day period after completion, you are likely not to receive your full 12 month OPT benefit due to USCIS processing times.
4. You cannot already have used 12 months of full-time *Curricular* Practical Training.

HOW DO YOU APPLY?

Pick up an Application for F-1 Optional Practical Training Employment Recommendation, fill it out and return it to us. When you return it, we will review your application to make sure it is complete and that you qualify. If everything is in order, we will issue you a new Form I-20 recommending your OPT and contact you to come pick up your application. When you pick up your application, we will provide you with instructions on how to submit your application to USCIS and track its progress.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

After your application is filed at USCIS, plan that it will take about three months for your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) to be returned to us from USCIS. It could take less or more depending on their workload and any security clearances. If it takes longer than 90 days, you may request “Expeditious Handling” of your application.

It’s important to take USCIS processing time into consideration when planning the date you want to start working! YOU CANNOT BEGIN TO WORK UNTIL YOU HAVE YOUR EAD CARD!!

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO TRAVEL BEFORE STARTING POST-COMPLETION OF STUDIES OPT?

Contact your international student advisor before making any travel plans if your OPT is still pending USCIS authorization. DHS regulations require that you have your EAD card and a job or job offer to return to the U.S.

HOW CAN YOU EXTEND YOUR OPT?

You can extend Pre-completion of studies by filing another application. You may not continue to work until it has been authorized by USCIS.

Only qualified “STEM” graduates (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) may qualify for an extension of their Post-completion OPT. You will, however, be entitled to another 12-month period of OPT if you go on to a higher level of study.

STUDY AND POST-COMPLETION OPT

DHS regulations state that, “Authorization to engage in optional practical training employment is automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level .” Therefore, you should not continue your U.S. studies until after your OPT has ended.