12-month Optional Practical Training
Frequently Asked Questions

Below is a list of frequently asked questions for 12-month Optional Practical Training (OPT). F-1 students are required to attend an OPT workshop before they are eligible to apply for OPT. If you have any questions please contact the Office of International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS) at 903-886-5097 or email opt@tamuc.edu. To review the Student and Exchange Visitor Program's policy guidance go to SEVP OPT Policy Guidance.

1. **What is OPT?** Optional practical training is one type of work permission available for eligible F-1 students. It allows students to get real-world work experience related to their field of study. While an advisor at the ISSS recommends OPT in SEVIS it is the student who must apply for the work permit with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). If the OPT is approved, USCIS will issue an Employment Authorization Document (EAD card). The student must not begin working before the start date on the EAD card. F-1 visa students are eligible for 12- months of Optional Practical Training (OPT) employment in a job directly related to their field of study at each education level (associate, bachelors, masters, and doctorate). Students are only allowed 12- months of OPT one time at each education level regardless of the number of degrees received per level.

2. **Am I eligible for OPT?** To be eligible for OPT a student must have been enrolled for at least one academic year in F-1 visa status (fall semester + spring semester in any order), and currently be maintaining their F-1 visa status. Enrollment under another valid visa category *may* be allowed as long as the combined enrollment under F-1 visa and the previous visa meets the one academic year requirement. Students must also attend an OPT workshop before being eligible to apply for OPT. English Language Institute (or ESL) students are not eligible for OPT. Please contact the ISSS with any questions.

3. **When do I need to apply for 12-month OPT?** Students may apply for OPT up to 90 days prior to the end date of their final registered semester or summer session. Students may also apply up to 60 days after the end date of their final registered semester or summer session but the OPT application must be received by USCIS no later than the 60 day after the end date of the student's final registered semester or summer session.

4. **I have finished my coursework but I still need to work on my thesis/dissertation. What should I do?** If a student is close to finishing all of their coursework requirements and only has work related to their thesis/dissertation to complete, this student will need to contact an international advisor at the ISSS **immediately** to discuss their options.

5. **When can I start my employment on 12-month OPT?** Students must chose an OPT start date that is within 60 days of the end date of the student's final registered semester or summer session. The OPT start date is added to the second page of the student's OPT I-20 and will be included on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) once a student is approved. Once the application has been submitted it is very difficult to change the OPT start date. Students who have applied for OPT may contact USCIS at 1-800-375-5283 to discuss changing their OPT start date.

6. **What is the OPT start date?** The OPT start date is the date the student is eligible to begin their employment. If a student chooses an OPT start date of February 1 then this student cannot begin any employment until they are approved for their OPT, have received their EAD card, <u>*and*</u> *have reached their start date. **If a student is not approved for their OPT by the start date they have chosen then they will have to wait until they are approved by USCIS and receive their EAD card before they can begin any employment.***

7. **How long does it take U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process my OPT application?** It takes U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) an average of 2-3 months to process the OPT application. After 75 days from the receipt notice date the student may contact USCIS at -800-375-5283 to discuss their application. After 90 days from the receipt notice date the ISSS can email the USCIS service center to inquire about the application.

8. **Can I request that USCIS expedite my application?** Generally speaking the OPT application is not eligible to be expedited. For more information on USCIS' policy regarding expediting an application go to USCIS Expedite Criteria.

9. **Can I track my application with USCIS once it has been submitted?** The USCIS provides very limited tracking information for OPT applications and the website is unreliable at times. You may review your application status with your receipt notice once it is received at [https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard/CaseStatus.do.](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/Dashboard/CaseStatus.do) Please note that the USCIS website is unreliable.

10. **Can I change my OPT start date after I have submitted my application to USCIS?** Generally speaking it is very difficult to change the OPT start date once your application has been submitted to USCIS. Students will need to contact USCIS at the customer service number on their receipt notice to discuss the option to change their OPT start date. As a reminder, students are not allowed to begin any employment until their OPT application has been approved by USCIS, the student has received their EAD card (a copy is not sufficient to begin employment), and the student has reached their start date as indicated on their EAD card.

11. **What is my visa status after I graduate and before I begin my OPT employment and also during my OPT employment?** A student's visa status while they are awaiting approval of their OPT application and during their OPT period remains the F-1 visa Students do not change their status but remain an F-1 international student throughout their OPT period.

12. **What is the EAD card?** Once a student is approved for OPT they will receive an Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) from USCIS. The EAD card is the student's official employment authorization. This card will be mailed to the ISSS and the ISSS will contact the student immediately to make arrangements to mail the card to the student. The EAD card has the specific dates a students can work on the card and the student may only work during the dates on the 12-month OPT EAD card (exception if student has filed for OPT STEM Extension).

13. **How will I receive my receipt notice and EAD card?** Once your receipt notice arrives at the ISSS we will email you a scanned copy of the receipt notice. Students may pick up the receipt notice in person at the ISSS (no friends or family may pick up) or we will hold the receipt notice until we receive your EAD card. Once you are approved for OPT your EAD card will arrive at the ISSS within 30 days of approval. We will email you once your EAD card has arrived at the ISSS and you will need to either pick up your card in person or set-up mailing through the ISSS website at www.tamuc.edu/isso and select Mailing Documents. We will also send your receipt notice with your EAD card.

14. **My receipt notice name (or other information is incorrect). How do I correct the information?** If your name and any other information on your receipt notice is incorrect you will need to contact USCIS immediately at 1-800-375-5283 to request a correction.

15. **I have received my EAD card but my name or other information is not correct. How do I correct the information on my EAD card?** It is very important that students fill out the Form I-765 with their correct information. If the student failed to provide the correct information on the I-765 then USCIS will usually require the student to file again for a new card and pay the $410 application fee. If USCIS was in error then the student will need to call USCIS to discuss at 1-800-375-5283. Please note that USCIS will occasionally shorten a student's name due to limited spacing on the EAD card and this will not impact their work authorization. If your OPT dates are not correct then you will need to contact USCIS at 1-800-375-5283 to discuss.

16. **What are the employment requirements during 12-month OPT?** The Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) regulations states that employment during OPT must be directly related to the academic major on the OPT I-20, students must be employed at least 20 hours a week, students may work for multiple employers, the position may be paid or unpaid, and the student may not exceed an aggregate of 90 days of unemployment during the 12-month OPT authorization period on the EAD card.

17. **What if I have been or become unemployed during my initial 12-month OPT authorization period?** Students may not accrue of aggregate of more 90 days of unemployment during the 12-month OPT work authorization period on the EAD card. The Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has advised that any student that is unemployed for a cumulative total of more than 90 days during the 12-month OPT work authorization period on the EAD will be considered out of status and may be denied future immigration benefits if USCIS determines that the student exceeded the limitations on unemployment. This rule only applies to the work authorization period on the EAD and does not include any time prior to the start date for the OPT.

18. **Does the employment have to be paid?** For regular 12-month OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed (including performance majors with regular "gigs"), interning or volunteering for at least 20 hours a week in a position directly related to the academic program on their OPT I-20 would be considered "employed" for the purposes of the 12-month OPT employment. However, the student may be required to provide written proof of the time spent in the internship or volunteer work.

19. **What are my reporting requirements during my OPT period?** F-1 students on 12-month OPT are required by the Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) to report any start of employment, change of employment, or change of address to the ISSS within 10 days of occurrence. Once a student is employed, changes employers, or move to a new address this student will need to report this information to us immediately. Students may report this information through the OPT Reporting Form at www.tamuc.edu/opt. Do not send a separate email or an employment letter to report your information. Failure to report any change of address, start of employment, or change of employment may jeopardize a student's visa status.

20. **Can I travel outside the U.S. while my OPT application is pending (not approved) by USCIS or once my OPT has been approved?** The ISSS does not recommend students travel outside the U.S. while their OPT application is pending with USCIS or during approved OPT unless absolutely necessary. For more information go to www.tamuc.edu/opt.

21. **How do I apply for 12-month OPT?** To apply for the 12-month OPT you will need to submit the documents listed on the 12-month OPT Application Checklist at www.tamuc.edu/opt to OPT@tamuc.edu. Documents will only be accepted to the OPT@tamuc.edu and do not copy any alternate ISSS email. Please allow up to ten (10) business days for the ISSS to process your application.

22. **What if an H1-B petition is filed on my behalf during my OPT?** If a student has an H-B petition filed on their behalf during OPT they will need to email a copy of their receipt notice (or email notice) to optextension@tamuc.edu. Students who have an H1-B filed for them may be eligible for the cap gap extension but it is very important that students communicate with the ISSS and send all documents to optextension@tamuc.edu. Do not copy any alternate ISSS email. For more information go to www.tamuc.edu/opt and select Cap Gap Extension.

23. **What is Cap Gap Extension?** Students meeting the following criteria may be eligible for the extension of their F-1 status and OPT Authorization through Cap Gap Extension. For more information go to USCIS Cap Gap Extension:
    - Beneficiary of a timely filed H1-B visa
    - Subject to H1-B cap count
    - H1-B is filed as a change of status
    - Employment start date is October 1
    - Student has not violated their F-1 visa status

24. **Can a student file for the OPT STEM Extension while on approved Cap Gap Extension?** Students who are on approved Cap Gap Extension may file for the OPT STEM Extension during their Cap Gap Extension period. However, such application may not be filed once a student's Cap Gap Extension is terminated (if H1-B petition is rejected, denied, revoked, or withdrawn). The ISSS recommends students eligible for the OPT STEM Extension file as soon as eligible regardless if they have an H1-B petition filed on their behalf to avoid the possibility of losing their eligibility. For more information go to USCIS Cap Gap Extension.

25. **When do I apply for the 24-month OPT STEM Extension?** Students in certain Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) majors may be eligible for an additional 24-months of OPT after the conclusion of their 12-month OPT. This benefit is called the OPT STEM Extension. To determine if your major is eligible for the OPT STEM Extension go to www.tamuc.edu/opt and select OPT STEM Extension. Students may apply for the OPT STEM Extension up to 120 days prior to the EAD card end date for their 12-month OPT. The OPT STEM Extension application must be received by USCIS by the EAD card end date for the student's 12-month OPT.

26. **What happens after the end of the 12-month OPT?** Students who have filed for the OPT STEM Extension will have their OPT authorization extended up to 180 days after the EAD card end date for their 12-month OPT while USCIS is reviewing their application. Students not eligible for the OPT STEM Extension or Cap Gap Extension (timely filed H1-B petition) will have a 60 days from the end date of their OPT (end date on the EAD card) to either depart the U.S., apply for a change of visa status (limited options), or apply for and be accepted to and have their SEVIS record transferred to a new school, or be accepted into a new program at A&M-Commerce and have the I-20 updated for the new program.