

Global Education Office (GEO)

2120 Mesa Vista Hall

MSC06 3850 1 University of New Mexico

Albuquerque, NM 87131-1056

Phone (505) 277-4032 ♦ Fax (505) 277-1867

Email iadvisor@unm.edu Web: www.geo.unm.edu/

F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR ONLINE APPLICATIONS

I. EXPLANATION

As an F-1 student, you may work off-campus in the US only if you have received special written work authorization approved by the Global Education Office (GEO) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This handout will explain one type of off-campus work authorization called Post-completion “Optional Practical Training” (OPT).

II. SUMMARY OF CONDITIONS & LIMITATIONS

- A job offer is NOT required to apply for OPT.
- The USCIS filing fee for OPT applications is **\$410**.
- A student may apply for post-completion OPT within **90 days** before the student’s academic program completion date.
- The last opportunity to apply for post-completion OPT is during the 60-day grace period following completion of study. Students should have a receipt notice before the grace period expires, showing they are in status pending the OPT approval.
- The employment must be in the student’s field of study, but it can take place anywhere in the US.
- The OPT work authorization allows for 12 months total of full-time employment.
- Students on “post-completion” OPT are expected to be engaged in employment, self-employment or volunteer work in their field of study for a minimum of 20 hours per week in order to be considered “employed.”
- The 12-month OPT authorization begins on your “start date” (appearing on your EAD card), even if you have not yet found employment.
- Periods of “unemployment” during “post-completion” OPT are limited to a total of **90 days**, and unemployment begins on the start date of your employment authorization, unless you have reported your employer through the SEVP Portal. Instructions for how to set up your SEVP Portal account will be emailed to you from SEVP when your OPT period starts. (You will not be able to create your SEVP Portal account until your OPT start date.)
- During OPT, you are still in F-1 immigration status, so you are required to report through the SEVP portal: home address, employer’s name and address, dates and changes of employer, and any changes in your immigration status. You must also obtain a travel signature on your current I-20 from GEO for international travel.
- If you leave the US for any reason after completing your degree without an OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD card) and written proof of a job in your field of study, you will **not** be able to reenter to engage in OPT.
- To reenter the US to start or resume OPT after a temporary absence from the US, you will need: proof of employment, a valid EAD card, valid I-20 with a current travel signature, a valid passport, and a valid visa (some visa exceptions exist for travel to countries bordering the US – check with an advisor).
- Changing employers while on OPT is authorized if the new employment is within your field. However, changes in employment must be reported to the SEVP Portal within 10 days of the change. Your I-20 will be updated to reflect employment changes.
- Students who start a *higher* educational level after completing one 12-month period of OPT may request another 12 months of OPT upon completion of the higher degree level.
- Students whose academic degree is in a qualifying STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) field may request a 24-month STEM OPT extension if the student meets the regulatory criteria described in the STEM OPT handout. To apply for a 24-month STEM OPT extension, students should make a STEM appointment (may be remote) with a GEO advisor and prepare their application **90 days** before their initial 12-month OPT expires.
- The OPT application may be completed online or mailed to Unites States Citizen and Immigration Service (USCIS) and it can take between 3-4 months to be approved. *There is no way to expedite it.* Once your application is received by USCIS, you will be given a case number and you can track your case status online.

- Previous authorization for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) affects OPT only if you were authorized for 12 months or more of full-time CPT.
- A student must have OPT authorization to work on-campus after the program end date on their I-20, even if they are still enrolled as a UNM student.

III. SPECIAL INFORMATION FOR POST-COMPLETION OPT

- **Application Deadline**

You should make an OPT appointment with an International Advisor at GEO approximately 95 days before you complete your program of study. Although USCIS will consider OPT applications received up to 60 days after your program end date, waiting until the 60-day grace period will result in lost work time. In general, **we recommend applying for OPT 3 months before you want your OPT to begin.** Immigration regulations refer to the date you complete all coursework requirements for a program of study, not to the date the degree is conferred or to the date you participate in graduation ceremonies, or receive a certificate or diploma. USCIS ignores your graduation date because it realizes that many students, especially graduate students in thesis or dissertation programs, may complete requirements for a degree any day during the year. Therefore, the day that you complete the last course requirement for your degree may be considered your "completion date," even if you are not graduating then. Your lawful F-1 status expires 60 days after the completion date, and you are expected to leave the country by that date, unless you have already filed an application for OPT or have made other arrangements to lawfully remain in the U.S.

- **Authorization based on the completion of a specific degree**

Your OPT is on the basis of the completion of a specific degree. Once OPT has been granted, it is no longer possible to receive a new period of OPT for completion of a program at the same or lower degree level. Students can request OPT when they have completed all coursework, even if they have not completed the final project, thesis or dissertation.

IV. Employment Eligibility Verification

When you begin to work, you and your employer must complete an "Employment Eligibility Verification" form (I-9 form), which the employer retains. The I-9 must be updated each time you receive a renewal of your work permission. You will also need a Social Security number. If you do not have a Social Security number, you may apply for one with your OPT application. If you have a Social Security card which is marked "not valid for employment," take your passport, I-94 Departure Record, I-20, employer letter, and your EAD card to the office of Social Security Administration and apply for a new Social Security card. Note that your number will remain the same if you already had one, but the notation on the card should change to indicate that employment is valid **with** authorization.

V. Social Security and Other Taxes

In general, F-1 students who have been in the US less than five years are "non-residents for tax purposes" and are exempt from Social Security (FICA) and Medicare taxes (see Internal Revenue Service Publication 519, "US Tax Guide for Aliens"). However, your earnings are subject to applicable federal, state, and local taxes. Tax returns must be filed on or before April 15 each year for the previous calendar year. If your employer is taking Social Security and Medicare taxes from your paycheck and you are a non-resident for tax purposes, contact GEO to get information to present to your employer demonstrating that this tax should not be withheld.

VI. APPLICATION PROCESS

STEP 1: Be Informed.

Read this entire handout thoroughly and carefully.

STEP 2: Receive your Department's Recommendation.

Your academic advisor or other authorized department personnel must complete the *Academic Advisor Recommendation Form for Optional Practical Training* found on page 6 of this handout. They must confirm the completion date of all degree requirements, either with thesis/dissertation or without thesis/dissertation. This form must be filled out and signed by your academic advisor before your OPT appointment with an international advisor. Electronic signatures are accepted, and the completed form should be emailed to iadvisor@unm.edu.

STEP 3: Determine your OPT start date.

Complete the *Student Participation Start Date Form for Optional Practical Training* included on page 5 of this handout. If you are unsure about your OPT start date, leave the “start date” blank and discuss this with the International Advisor at your OPT appointment. The advisor can advise you on OPT start and end dates with regards to your individual plans. In addition, read and sign the *OPT Student Responsibilities Contract* on pages 7-8 of this handout.

STEP 4: Make an Appointment with an International Advisor at GEO.

After you have the required forms (a, b, c below), schedule an OPT appointment at <https://calendly.com/unm-geo> or by calling the GEO front office at 505-277-4032. (OPT appointments take approximately two hours.)

You will need to email the following signed documents to jadvisor@unm.edu before your OPT appointment:

- a) A Student Participation Start Date Form, included on page 5 of this handout
- b) A completed Academic Advisor Recommendation Form, included on page 6 of this handout
- c) A signed OPT Student Responsibilities Contract, included on page 7-8 of this handout (read before signing)

If you do not have a completed *Academic Advisor Recommendation Form* before your appointment, you will need to reschedule it. At your appointment, the International Advisor will review these documents, discuss your OPT dates, and if everything is in order, recommend OPT in SEVIS and issue you a new I-20 with the OPT recommendation.

STEP 5: Receive the new I-20.

After attending an OPT appointment with an international advisor, you will receive the new I-20 by email within 3 to 5 business days. Check that the OPT recommendation is properly recorded on pg. 2 of the I-20 and print and sign it. You will need to include a signed copy of this I-20 with your OPT application. (If you worked on CPT during your program, you will receive a screenshot of your CPT history, which you will also need to include in your application.)

STEP 6: Complete the USCIS application online.

Once you have received the new I-20 with the OPT recommendation, you will need to complete the USCIS online application within 30 days of the issuance date on the I-20. To apply online, you will first have to create a USCIS account using a permanent NON-UNM email address at: https://myaccount.uscis.gov/users/sign_up

These are the items that you will need to have **scanned** so you can upload them when you apply online:

- official passport photo, JPG, JPEG or PNG (there are free apps you can use to take it with your phone)
- I-94 (both sides if paper card)
- government issued photo ID, such as a passport
- copy of I-20 *after you have signed it* (you will receive this after your OPT appointment)
- (if you ever worked on CPT)* screenshot of CPT work history (you will this receive after your OPT appointment)
- (if you ever had an EAD before)* front and back of previous EAD's

This is **information** you will need to enter when your fill out the online application:

- country of citizenship/nationality
- I-94 admission record number
- last arrival date in the U.S., port of entry (can be found by clicking on “Get Travel History” on I-94 screen), & status at entry
- current passport number, expiration date, issuing country
- current immigration status (F-1 STUDENT)
- SEVIS number (listed on I-20)
- Social Security number (if you have one)

Other information for applying online:

- For the **\$410** filing fee payment, you can use debit card, credit card or direct withdrawal from your account.
- A draft of your application is saved for 30 days and then deleted if not submitted (editing resets the clock).

- Once you submit payment your application is also submitted and revisions or corrections can no longer be made.
- Photos must be JPG, JPEG or PNG.
- Documents must be PDF, JPEG, TIF/TIFF.
- The maximum size for document upload is 6MB.
- Document names can only contain letters, numbers, spaces, periods, hyphens, underscore and parentheses. No special characters.
- When filling out the online application, select **“File a form online”**
- When filling out the online application, select **“Application for Employment Authorization (I-765)”**
- When filling out the online application, select **“(c)(3)(B) Student Post-Completion OPT”** eligibility category
- If you would like your GEO advisor to assist you with the online application, you may request a follow-up application help appointment with the advisor who issued your OPT I-20.
- Once you submit an online application, you will receive a case number immediately, and you can check your case status, documents, and case history at any time by accessing your USCIS account. You will also receive a paper receipt notice in the mail within approximately 2 weeks.
- For more detailed information about the online application, see a video of *USCIS’ Online Application Webinar* at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWAqJF_AK0I&t=2294s
- It is recommended to apply online, but those who want to apply by mailing a paper application can; a GEO advisor can provide information for preparing and mailing paper applications upon request.

STEP 7: Wait for the EAD card.

Your EAD card should arrive within 3-4 months of USCIS receiving your application. Your permission to begin OPT is not finalized until you have received an EAD card from USCIS. **DO NOT START WORKING UNTIL YOU RECEIVE THE EAD CARD AND HAVE REACHED THE START DATE ON IT.**

STEP 8: Provide GEO a copy of your EAD card, create your SEVP Portal account, and report your employment.

Once you have received your EAD card, you must provide GEO with a copy by emailing it to geo@unm.edu. As soon as you receive the card and your employment “start date” has been reached, you are authorized to start working. On or after your OPT start date, you will receive an email message from SEVP with instructions for setting up your SEVP Portal account. Once you have set up your Portal account, you must report your employment information as well as any changes in your personal information directly to the SEVP Portal. You must report your employer’s name and address to the Portal as soon as your “start date” begins or you will start accumulating days of unemployment. *If you have not reported your employment information through the SEVP Portal, your 90 days of unemployment will start on this date automatically.*

REMEMBER:

- **OPT is still F-1 student status. You MUST follow all the rules to maintain legal F-1 status.**
- **Your I-20 may have a new completion date to reflect the completion of your degree requirements.**
- **The end date on the new I-20 is the date your “on-campus” and/or CPT work permission also ends.**
- **It is illegal to begin the OPT position until the EAD card is received and the start date is reached.**
- **You are authorized to work only for the dates on the EAD card.**
- **You must report change of address and/or phone number through the SEVP Portal during your entire OPT period.**
- **You must report employer name and address (including changes in employment and unemployment) through the SEVP Portal for your entire OPT period.**
- **Students on post-completion OPT have 90 days total of unemployment.**
- **OPT permission is automatically terminated if you transfer to another school or you start studying at another educational level.**
- **Students must inform GEO of a change of visa status or permanent departure from the US.**

***WORKING IMPROPERLY OR WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION IS A SERIOUS VIOLATION OF YOUR STATUS AND COULD LEAD TO DEPORTATION OR EXCLUSION FROM THE US.**



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STUDENT PARTICIPATION START DATE FORM FOR OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

To: F-1 Student

In the process of applying for OPT, you must decide the date that your employment authorization will begin. It is important to remember that once applied for, the authorization may not be rescinded or changed except on special discretion of USCIS. **Once authorization to engage in OPT is granted and the date of the authorization has begun, it is not possible to have it canceled at all.** This means that after OPT is authorized by USCIS, inability to find an appropriate job, loss of job, or failure to complete requirements for a degree may result in loss of otherwise eligible time to work. You need to be certain that you will want to engage in OPT BEFORE YOU APPLY. In addition, your OPT permission will be terminated if you transfer to another school or begin study at another educational level.

Please complete the form below and send it to iadvisor@unm.edu before your OPT appointment with an International Advisor.

****MUST BE COMPLETED AND SIGNED BY THE F-1 STUDENT SEEKING OPT****

I expect that if I get a position for OPT it will be in: _____
 List **all** UNM major(s) here:

You will accrue days of unemployment toward the 90-day limit, so whether or not you have a job offer should be a consideration when selecting your OPT start date.

OPT Starting date: _____ Ending date: _____

 Name of Student

 Name of International Advisor

 Signature of Student Date

 Signature of International Advisor Date

I hereby authorize GEO to receive, open and copy all mail related to OPT. I understand that GEO will forward information about all correspondence related to OPT to the most recent email address reported to GEO.

 Name of Student Date

 Signature Student

Personal Information:

Current Residential Address: _____

Permanent (non-UNM) email address: _____

Phone Number: _____



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ACADEMIC ADVISOR RECOMMENDATION FORM FOR OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

To: Academic Advisor or Authorized Department Personnel

The below-named student is applying for permission to engage in employment for Optional Practical Training (OPT) as provided in regulations of the Department of Homeland Security for F-1 students. OPT is employment in a job related to the student’s field of study and is intended to enhance and supplement the formal, classroom education. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must authorize OPT.

Before this authorization can be granted, GEO must have a statement from the student’s academic advisor confirming the date the student is expected to complete all degree requirements. (A graduate student may apply for OPT before completion of the thesis or dissertation, provided that they have completed all other requirements for the degree such as coursework, comprehensive exams, and thesis/dissertation proposals). The academic advisor should be reasonably convinced that the student will be able to complete by the date specified on the form. **The date of completion is not necessarily the end of the term or the graduation date, but the date all requirements for the degree are fulfilled (including defense and thesis/dissertation correction for graduate students).** Both dates are requested below.

Please complete the form below and return it to the student so that we may process this student’s request. Should you have any questions, please feel free to call GEO at 277-4032.

****MUST BE COMPLETED AND SIGNED BY THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR OR AUTHORIZED DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL ONLY****

To: Global Education Office (GEO), 2120 Mesa Vista Hall, MSC06 3850

This is to certify that _____ has completed or is expected to complete all requirements for the degree on
 (Student’s name)

_____ and will receive the degree of _____ in the field or major of _____.
 (Date) (Field of Study)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION NEEDED FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS:

All requirements for the degree EXCLUDING the thesis/dissertation were/will be completed by _____.
 (Date)

 (Name of Academic Advisor or Authorized Department Personnel—Please Print)

 (Signature of Academic Advisor or Authorized Department Personnel)

 (Telephone Number and/or email address)

 (Date)

OPT STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES CONTRACT

RULES F-1 STUDENTS MUST FOLLOW WHILE ON OPT TO REMAIN LEGALLY IN THE US

International students are required to abide by US immigration laws and regulations throughout their stay in the US including the time that they are on authorized in Optional Practical Training (OPT). Current Department of Homeland Security (DHS) regulations require F1 students on OPT to report any changes to their personal information or employment information through the SEVP Portal. Once reported, this information is transferred into the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Students who fail to comply with these requirements and do not report through the SEVP Portal are considered to be “out of status” by DHS.

Because failure to comply with these requirements will mean loss of legal status in the US, it is essential that you understand these reporting responsibilities. This form lists the specific information you must report through the SEVP Portal while on OPT in order to maintain legal student status. To report this information, SEVP will send you an email message on or shortly after your OPT start date with instructions to create your SEVP Portal account. Please follow the instructions in that message to create your account and report your employment. It is YOUR responsibility to ensure that your SEVP Portal account is accurate and up-to-date for the duration of your OPT year. Any new information must be reported within 10 days of the change.

INFORMATION THAT ALL STUDENTS ON OPT MUST REPORT TO THE SEVP PORTAL TO MAINTAIN LEGAL STATUS:

1. Current, physical US address. This must be the place where you currently live and it must be updated within 10 days of making any change. A current email and phone number are also required.
Current, Mailing US address. This must be the address you use to receive mail.
2. Current US employer and address. *IF YOU DO NOT REPORT AN EMPLOYER IN YOUR SEVP PORTAL ACCOUNT, YOU WILL BE LISTED AS “UNEMPLOYED” AND WILL BE ACCRUING UNEMPLOYMENT DAYS.* If you accrue more than **90 days** of unemployment your SEVIS record may automatically terminate.
3. Employment Start Date and End Date/s. You must report employment within 10 days of your employment start date. (You can enter start dates in the past.) If you are currently employed, do not enter an “end date”.
4. Any changes or interruptions in employment, such as periods of “unemployment.” (Vacations while employed do not count as “unemployment.”)
5. Any change of non-immigrant status or permanent departure from the US.

When employment start and/or end dates are reported, an updated I-20 reflecting the change will be automatically emailed to you from GEO within 2-3 weeks of reporting the change.

OPT STEM EXTENSIONS:

If you have completed a STEM degree and you wish to apply for an OPT STEM extension, please send an email to iadvisor@unm.edu **4 months** prior to the end of your current OPT authorization so that we can provide you with further instructions on how to apply for a 24-month OPT STEM extension of your OPT.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS REQUIRED FOR REENTRY WHILE ON AUTHORIZED OPT:

1. SEVIS Form I-20, endorsed for travel by an International Advisor at UNM within the last six months.
2. Employment Authorization Document (EAD card). Note that the EAD card says “not valid for travel” on the face of the card. This means that you cannot use the EAD alone to reenter the US, but must also have the signed I-20 and an employer letter.
3. Valid passport.

4. Valid F-1 visa page (if you are traveling to Canada or Mexico for less than 30 days and not applying for a visa while there, you may be able to travel with an expired visa - ask an advisor for details).
5. Documentation or letter from your OPT employer on official letterhead, confirming that you are working for them on OPT in a field related to your studies. Note that this MUST be the same employer that you have reported through your SEVP Portal account. This employer should be listed on pg. 2 of your I-20.

Below is a list of documents F-2 dependents must have to reenter the US if they are traveling without the student:

1. SEVIS Form I-20, endorsed for travel by the International Advisor at UNM within the last six months.
2. Copy of the F-1 student (spouse/parent) SEVIS Form I-20 showing authorized OPT.
3. Copy of the F-1 student's Employment Authorization Document (EAD card).
4. Valid passport.
5. Valid F-2 visa page (if you are traveling to Canada or Mexico for less than 30 days and not applying for a visa while there, you may be able to travel with an expired visa -ask an advisor for details).
6. Documentation or letter from the F-1 student's OPT employer, showing that the F-1 student is working on OPT. Note that this MUST be the same employer that the F-1 student reported through the SEVP portal. This employer should be listed on page 2 of your I-20.

Remember: If you do not have all of these documents you should not travel internationally or you risk not being able to reenter the U.S. to participate in OPT. Traveling outside the US is not recommended if your F-1 visa has expired and a new one is required to reenter the US. Consult with an International Advisor when contemplating travel outside the US and reentering to continue OPT.

I have read and understand my responsibilities as outlined above.

NAME (Print)

SIGNATURE

DATE