

OPT Guidance for International Students Interested in PRISM

What is OPT (Optional Practical Training)?

OPT is a temporary employment authorization available to F-1 international students. It allows students to gain work experience directly related to their **major field of study**. Eligible students can apply for **up to 12 months** of OPT per education level (e.g., bachelor's, master's, PhD).

After completing your undergraduate degree, you may apply for **Post-Completion OPT**, and work either:

- **Part-time** (minimum 20 hours/week), or
- **Full-time** (typically 40 hours/week, expected for PRISM participants)

OPT Eligibility

To qualify for OPT, you must:

- Be in valid **F-1 visa status**
- Have completed **at least one full academic year** (two semesters or three quarters) of full-time study
- Seek employment **directly related to your major**
- Not have used 12 months of full-time **CPT** (Curricular Practical Training) or previous OPT at the same degree level

Application Process

1. Submit an OPT request through your university's **International Student Office**
2. Receive a new **I-20** with the OPT recommendation
3. File **Form I-765** with **USCIS**
4. Pay the **filing fee** (~\$470 as of 2024)
5. Wait for your **EAD** (Employment Authorization Document)

Processing time: ~2 to 3 months

Important: *You cannot begin working until you have received your EAD and reached your authorized start date listed on the card.*

STEM OPT Extension (24 Months)

If your degree is in an eligible **STEM** field (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), you may qualify for a **24-month extension** of your Post-Completion OPT.

Requirements:

- Your degree must appear on the **DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List**
- Your employer must be enrolled in **E-Verify**

- Submit a new **Form I-765** along with a new I-20 endorsed for STEM OPT
- Complete and submit a formal **training plan** (Form I-983) with your employer

When to Apply for Post-Completion OPT

- **Earliest:** Up to **90 days before** your program end date
- **Latest:** No later than **60 days after** your program end date
 - >You must submit your complete OPT application to USCIS **within 30 days** of the date your designated school official issues your OPT I-20
 - >This creates a **150-day window** during which you can apply.

Employment Rules

- You may not exceed **90 days of unemployment** during the standard 12-month OPT period
- During STEM OPT, you're allowed an additional **60 days** of unemployment (150 total)
- Jobs must be directly **related to your major**
- Employment can be **paid or unpaid**, but unpaid work must comply with labor regulations (e.g., Fair Labor Standards Act)

Final Reminders

- Always follow updates from your university's International Student Office and USCIS
- Keep detailed records of all employment (start/end dates, hours, how job relates to major)
- Your SEVIS record must be updated with your employment information (via SEVP Portal or your school)

This information is based on current (2025) U.S. immigration guidelines for Optional Practical Training (OPT), but please consult your university's International Student Office and the USCIS OPT page for the most current and official information.

<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/optional-practical-training-opt-for-f-1-students>
