Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

Optional Practical Training

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a benefit of F-1 status which allows degree seeking students to apply for work authorization in order to gain employment experience that is directly related to their field of study. OPT applications are specific in that they have start and end dates, are authorized for either part-time or full-time work and are considered either pre-completion or post completion (of study) petitions. Applications for OPT involve the student, the academic department, the Office of Immigration and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). When an application is approved, USCIS mails the student an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) which contains the student's photograph, OPT category, and the dates of authorized employment.

Eligibility

- Be a degree seeking student in good academic standing and in valid F-1 status
- Possess a valid passport
- Have one academic year (two semesters) of full-time study completed before the requested OPT start date (Note: students may apply 90 days prior to the requested start date as long as the required academic year of study will be completed during that 90-day period)
- Must not have used 12 months or more of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

Part-time/Full-time and Pre-Completion vs. Post-Completion OPT

Pre-Completion OPT is work authorization which will begin and end before the program end date listed on the student's I-20. While school is in session, a student may apply for part-time (up to 20 hours per week) pre-completion OPT while also enrolling in the required hours to be a full-time student. Full-time pre-completion OPT may be requested for breaks such as summer when the student is not required to enroll or when a student has completed all course requirements and only lacks completion of the thesis or dissertation.

Post-Completion OPT is work authorization that will start after the program end date on the I-20. Post-completion OPT must be full-time. Students who have completed all course requirements except for the thesis or dissertation may apply for post-completion OPT although it may require the I-20 end date be shortened. The Immigration Coordinator can advise you on the impact of your choice as it affects the ability to extend your I-20 and receive the 24-month OPT extension for those in approved STEM fields.

Separate applications are required for each type of OPT, thus it is not possible to request a period of part-time pre-completion OPT immediately followed by full-time pre- or post-completion OPT in the same petition.

Time Limits

A period of twelve months of full-time Optional Practical Training is available for each higher level program in which a student enrolls. For example, a student would be eligible for 12 months at the master's level and another 12 months at the doctoral level, but would not get OPT for doing another bachelor's program even if OPT had not been previously used at the bachelor level. Students who participated in full-time CPT for twelve months or more are not eligible for OPT at the same level in which the twelve months or more of CPT was used.

The use of part-time pre-completion OPT is deducted from the 12-month limit at half the rate (i.e. a student has completed 10 months of part-time pre-completion OPT would still be eligible for 7 months of full-time post-completion OPT.

A 24-month extension beyond the first 12 months of OPT is available for students with degrees in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). See the STEM OPT Extension packet for details.

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

Employment Dates

For undergraduates, the authorization period may begin as early as the date of the graduation ceremony or as late as sixty (60) days following the graduation ceremony. For graduate students, it may begin as early as the date requested after degree requirements are completed, or as late as 60 days after the Graduate School's final acceptance of thesis or dissertation. The start date for the OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD) will be the date requested by the student or the date OPT is approved at the USCIS Service Center, whichever is later. The student will also request an end date which is no more than 12 months after the start date. Students **MUST NOT** work after their graduation date until they have the card in hand and the EAD start date is current.

Filing Deadlines

OPT petitions may be submitted **up to 90 days prior** to degree completion or no later than **60 days after** the degree completion date. USCIS must receive the petition no later than 30 days after the DSO recommendation in SEVIS.

Premium Processing

USCIS also now allows OPT and STEM OPT petitions to be premium processed. This service guarantees a response regarding your petition within 30 days. Premium Processing of an OPT/STEM OPT petition is an additional fee of $1,780.

Types of work appropriate for Pre-Completion and Post-Completion OPT

Work must be related to the student's degree program and *can* include:

- **Regular paid employment** related to a student's program of study (no less than 20 hours per week for post-completion OPT).
- **Multiple employers.** A student may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student's degree program. For Pre-Completion OPT, work cannot exceed the cumulative hours allowed per week (part-time vs. full-time).
- **Short-term multiple employers (performing artists).** A student, such as a musician or other type of performing artist, may work for multiple short-term employers (gigs). The student should maintain a list of all gigs, the dates, and duration.
- **Work for hire.** This is commonly referred to as 1099 employment where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than an employment relationship. If requested by DHS, the student must be prepared to provide evidence showing the duration of the contract period and the name and address of the contracting company.
- **Self-employed business owner.** A student on OPT may start a business and be self-employed. The student must be able to prove that he or she has the proper business licenses and is actively engaged in a business related to the student's degree program. Guidance from an immigration attorney is encouraged.
- **Employment through an agency or consulting firm.** A student on post-completion OPT must be able to provide evidence showing he or she worked an average of no less than 20 hours per week while employed by the agency.
- **Unpaid employment.** A student may work as a volunteer or unpaid intern if this practice does not violate any labor laws. The work must be no less than 20 hours per week for student's employer to verify that the student worked full-time during the period of employment.

Unemployment Limit

Students with post-completion OPT are limited to 90 days of unemployment beginning with the start date of the OPT card. Unemployment is considered to be every day (including weekends and time spent out of the country)

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

that the student does not have a qualifying work arrangement for OPT as described in the types of work appropriate for OPT section of this handout.

Processing Time for OPT Application

Once mailed to USCIS, a receipt notice will be sent to the address listed on the I-765 to confirm the arrival of materials at USCIS. A decision for the petition depends on the posted USCIS processing times, and varies depending on the case load of the USCIS Service Center. Students may check the status of their case online once the receipt notice has been received. Employment may begin only after the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) is received and the start date is reached.

Filing your OPT Petition

USCIS now allows for online filing of applications of the I-765 for OPT and OPT STEM extension. This option is useful as it allows for direct payment, immediate receipt notices, and allows for students to have faster access to notices and ability to respond to requests. You can access the Online Application Portal at this website (https:// www.uscis.gov/file-online/forms-available-to-file-online) and then scrolling down to select " I-765 Application For Employment Authorization.

You MUST receive a new I-20 with an OPT recommendation on page 2 prior to submitting the online I-765. Failure to do so will result in the denial of your OPT petition.

Reporting Responsibilities while on OPT

All students with OPT must report the following to the Office of Immigration or through the SEVP Portal:

- Any change in name (with proper passport validation)
- Residential address
- Name and address of their employer
- Any change to the name and address of the employer
- Any interruption of employment

Cancellation of Optional Practical Training

If one decides to cancel OPT, it is *sometimes* possible to do so. Once the EAD has been processed by USCIS, OPT may **not** be cancelled if the start date on the EAD Card has already passed. To cancel OPT, please contact the immigration advisor who assisted in filing your application.

Travel during Optional Practical Training

Re-entry to the U.S. requires that F-1 students present the following documents:

- I-20 endorsed for travel by Designated School Official (DSO) within one year
- Unexpired Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card
- Valid F-1 visa
- Employment verification letter from employer

On-Campus Employment Restrictions

While school is still in session, students who have not yet completed coursework and are still enrolled may work part-time (up to 20 hours per week) on campus. However, once a student has completed the degree, on campus student employment **must** cease on the last day of that semester.

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

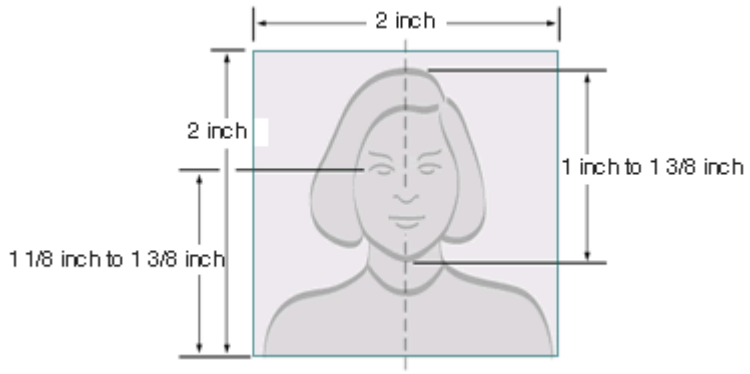
Departure from the U.S. after Optional Practical Training

An F-1 student on OPT is allowed a 60-day grace period after the authorization of employment ceases to change status, acquire an I-20 for a new academic program, transfer to another institution, or depart the United States.

Photo Composition Template

- Make sure the photo presents the full head from the top of the hair to the bottom of the chin
- Center the head with the frame
- The person in the photo should have a neutral expression and be facing the camera

Paper Photo Head Size Template



- Photo must be 2 inches by 2 inches
- The height of the head (top of hair to bottom of chin) should measure 1 inch to 1 3/8 inches (25 mm - 35 mm)
- Make sure the eye height is between 1 1/8 inches to 1 3/8 inches (28 mm – 35 mm) from the bottom of the photo

Well Composed Photo Composition Examples





Revised 01/2026

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE SEVP PORTAL

The SEVP Portal is a tool that allows F-1 and M-1 international students participating in post-completion practical training to report certain information to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP).

By allowing students to share this information directly with SEVP, the portal enhances data integrity, holds students accountable for meeting regulatory reporting requirements and lessens the burden for some designated school officials (DSOs).

Who Can Use the SEVP Portal?

The SEVP Portal can be used by the following groups of F-1 and M-1 international students:

- F-1 international students participating in post-completion optional practical training (OPT).
- F-1 international students participating in a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) OPT extension.
- M-1 international students participating in practical training.

These students share certain information directly with SEVP through the portal rather than relying on their DSO to make updates. However, the portal does not eliminate the need for students to actively communicate with their DSO.

How Does the SEVP Portal Work?

To gain access to the SEVP Portal, students must have a valid email address in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). Students should confirm with their DSO that their email address is up to date in SEVIS. SEVP will email this address with information about creating a portal account.

Although the portal shares information with SEVIS, it does not give students direct access to the system. Only DSOs have direct access to SEVIS.

What Information Can Students Report?

Using the SEVP Portal, F-1 and M-1 students completing practical training can update their:

- Physical home address.
- Mailing address.
- Telephone numbers.
- Employment information (with some exceptions).*

The portal also allows students to monitor their employment authorization.

**Note: F-1 students participating in STEM OPT are unable to add a new employer or to change the start date with their employer in the SEVP Portal due to the Form I-983, "Training Plan for STEM OPT Students," requirement.*

Getting Started

Create Your SEVP Portal Account

Students should complete the following steps to create an SEVP Portal account:

STEP 1: Students receive an account creation email from the SEVP Portal and click the link included in the email to open the registration page.

STEP 2: Students enter their SEVIS identification (ID) number, found in the upper left-hand corner of their Form I-20, "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status," on the initial registration page.

STEP 3: Students create and submit a password for their SEVP Portal account.

Students can only use the link from their account creation email one time. If they are unable to start the registration process using the link provided, they should ask their DSO to have the account creation email sent again.

For more information about the SEVP Portal and how to use it, visit the SEVP Portal Help section on Study in the States.

SEVP

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

OPT Student Application Form

Family Name _____ First Name _____

Jag ID # _____ Major _____

Degree Level _____ Date of completion/graduation _____

Previous CPT or OPT approved for this degree level. List dates and type (full or part-time).

_____

_____

I am applying for:_____ Pre-Completion OPT ☐ Part-time ☐ Full-time

_____ Post-completion OPT

Requested Start Date: _____ Requested End Date: _____

Signature: _____

Contact Information:

Phone _____

Permanent Email _____
(Check this email often for updates!)

Required Documents to Accompany Application (bring to OI):

You MUST receive a new I-20 with an OPT recommendation on page 2 prior to submitting the Online I-765. Failure to do so will result in the denial of your OPT petition.

- Completed Student Application Form
- Completed Form I-765 **use black ink** (see attached). On question 27, use code (c)(3)(a) for pre-completion OPT. Use code (c)(3)(b) for post-completion OPT. If you have previous SEVIS IDs, CPT Authorization, or OPT authorization at previous levels use Part 6 on page 7 to list this information
- Completed Department Recommendation Form **(completed by department)**
- Completed Post-OPT Agreement form
- Photocopies of transcript, passport info page, most recent visa, and I-94 arrival page
- Copies of all I-20s (1st and 2nd pages only) issued for the current degree program
- Two passport-style photos (see attached directions and dimensions) no older than 30 days
- Payment made via pay.gov upon submission of final OPT petition via myuscis online account

The Office of Immigration will review the materials for completion and produce an I-20 with the OPT recommendation. You will be sent an email requesting that you come to sign the new I-20. The petition, supporting materials - which include a copy of the signed I-20, and mailing instructions will be given to you to mail your petition to USCIS. The petition must be received by the USCIS Processing Center within 30 days of the date the I-20 was produced.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

Post-Completion OPT Agreement

Should USCIS approve my post-completion OPT petition, I understand that I am responsible for the following:

- Report to the SEVP Portal within 10 calendar days of a change in:
  - My residential address
  - Name and address of my employer
  - Change to my employment status
- Pursue work opportunities that are directly related to the program listed on my I-20
- Be aware of and not exceed the unemployment limits (90 days, counting weekends and time out of country)
- Keep my passport valid six months into the future
- Request a signature on I-20 from OI for out of country travel
- Comply with U.S. tax and Department of Labor laws

I understand that:

- I MUST receive a new I-20 with an OPT recommendation on page 2 prior to submitting the Online I-765. Failure to do so will result in the denial of the OPT petition.
- On-campus *student* employment positions are not appropriate while in post-completion OPT status and must cease the last day of the semester I graduate.
- Applying for OPT based on being ABD requires me to forfeit any graduate assistant position and failure to have my degree officially conferred prior to my STEM OPT application deadline will result in me being ineligible to apply for STEM OPT.
- Extensions to the end date on my I-20 are not possible once the end date has passed
- The issuance of a new I-20 for transfer to a new school or a new program of study will void the OPT authorization
- I have 60 days beyond the expiration of my OPT to either depart the U.S., transfer to a new school, have an I-20 issued for a new program, or apply for a change to another immigration status.
- I authorize the Office of Immigration to open mail addressed to me that is delivered to the office.
- If I submit my post-completion OPT petition to the Office of Immigration for review prior to submission to USCIS, the Office of Immigration is reviewing solely to assess the information required for it to issue an I-20 pursuant to 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f)(11)(ii). It is not reviewing my petition for accuracy.

Release: By signature hereto, I, for myself, my heirs, and my personal representatives, do hereby release and forever discharge the University, its trustees, officers, agents, and employees, including, but not limited to, the Office of Immigration, from any and all claims, demands, and actions or causes of action on account of or resulting from the University's assistance or guidance regarding my post-completion OPT petition.

Disclaimer: The Office of Immigration is able to provide you with general guidance. However, any advice provided to you by our office, as well as the information in this packet, does not constitute legal advice. We make absolutely no guarantees or assurances with respect to the final outcome of your petition. Additionally, due to the fluid nature of governmental interpretation, the USCIS may change its interpretation of the above-mentioned immigration policies, procedures, regulations, and eligibility requirements for benefits at any time. This office will do its best to provide you with the most current guidance, but please be mindful that each case is fact-specific. It is advised that you contact an experienced immigration attorney if you have questions regarding your situation.

Signature: _____

Print name: _____

Date: _____

Office of Immigration
Meisler Hall 2200 • 390 Student Center Circle
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
Phone: 251.460.6050
immigration@southalabama.edu

OPT Department Recommendation Form *(Must be filled out by department)*

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a benefit of F-1 status which allows degree seeking students to apply for work authorization in order to gain employment experience that is directly related to their field of study. OPT applications are specific in that they have start and end dates, are authorized for either part-time or full-time work and are considered either Pre-Completion or Post-Completion (of study) petitions.

Applications for OPT involve the student, the academic department, the Office of Immigration and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). When an application is approved, USCIS mails the student an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) which contains the student's photograph, OPT category, and the dates of authorized employment.

Please complete the following to assist in the completion of this request for OPT status:

Student's Name: _____

Jag ID #: _____

Degree Level: _____ Major: _____

Expected Completion Date: _____

Is student applying based on being ABD but not yet graduating: ____Yes ___No

If yes, will student be conferred their degree within the next 9 months: ____Yes ___No

Signature of Academic Advisor or Department Chair: _____

Printed Name: _____

Date: _____