OPT BASICS

1. What is OPT?
OPT (Optional Practical Training) is a temporary work authorization opportunity for international students. Most students use OPT to authorize work after completing an academic degree. However, there are three types of OPT:

- **Post-Completion OPT**: Authorized for working 12 months after graduation (most common)
- **STEM Extension OPT**: Authorized for working 24 months more for students in STEM programs. To see the list of STEM degrees, visit website https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/stem-list.pdf
- **Pre-Completion OPT**: Authorized working before graduation, only if CPT is not an option

2. Who are eligible for OPT?
In order to start your OPT application, you:

- Do NOT need a job offer at that time, however you will need to have employment within 90 days of OPT approval.
- Must be in legal F-1 status
- Must have completed two full time semesters Fall & Spring, Summer does not count.
- Must NOT have been previously authorized for 12 months of Full-Time CPT at the same degree level
- Must NOT have been previously authorized for 12 months of OPT at the same level, or any OPT at a higher degree level

*Note: Students in English language training are not eligible for OPT.*

3. When to apply for OPT?
You may apply for OPT from 90 days before your graduation date or 60 days after your graduation date. In general, it can take up to 3 months or more for USCIS to process an OPT request, hence, please plan ahead.
4. How long does OPT last?

- Standard Post-Completion OPT is available for a cumulative maximum of 12 months per educational level. That duration (12 months) is counted from the day your OPT application is approved (not from the day you start your job).
- After completing 12 month Post-Completion OPT, only STEM degree students can apply to extend their OPT.
- Part-time OPT (available for pre-completion OPT only) will deduct the length of post-completion OPT (e.g. 4 months part time = 2 months full time deduction).
- Unused periods of eligibility from lower level degrees cannot be accumulated for use with later degrees at a higher level.
- If pursuing another degree at the same level the 12 months can be divided between the two degrees.

5. How many hours per week can I work?

- Pre-completion OPT is limited to 20 hours per week while school is in session and the student still has coursework to complete. Full-time employment can be requested for pre-completion OPT done during official school breaks.
- For post-completion OPT, student may work 40+ hours per week and must be employed for at least 20 hours per week.

6. Where can I use OPT?

Students in OPT can work for any employer in the U.S. which qualifies for OPT standards.

**Paid employment:** Students may work part-time (at least 20 hours per week when on post-completion OPT) or full-time.

- **Multiple employers.** Students may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student’s degree program and for pre-completion OPT cannot exceed the allowed per week cumulative hours.
- **Short-term multiple employers (performing artists).** Students, such as musicians and other performing artists may work for multiple short term employers (gigs). The student should maintain a list of all gigs, the dates and duration. If requested by DHS, students must be prepared to provide evidence showing a list of all gigs.
- **Work for hire.** This is also commonly referred to as 1099 employment where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than employment relationship. If
requested by DHS, students must be prepared to provide evidence showing the duration of the contract periods and the name and address of the contracting company.

- **Self-employed business owner.** Students on OPT may start a business and be self-employed. In this situation, the student must work full-time. 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.

- **Employment through an agency.** Students on post-completion OPT must be able to provide evidence showing they worked an average of at least 20 hours per week while employed by the agency.

**Unpaid employment:** Students may work as volunteers or unpaid interns, where this does not violate any labor laws. The work must be at least 20 hours per week for students on post-completion OPT. These students must be able to provide evidence from the employer that the student worked at least 20 hours per week during the period of employment.
How to apply for OPT

Step 1: Complete USCIS forms
2. Complete Form G-1145 (optional) available at https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1145.pdf. If you want to receive an email and/or a text message that your Form I-765 has been accepted at a USCIS lockbox facility, form G-1145 is required to be clipped to the first page of your application.

Step 2: Copy your identification documents
3. Two passport-style photos
   - Taken within the past 30 days on white background
   - The photos must be 2 x 2 inches. The image must be 1 inch from the hair to the chin and 1 ¼ inch from eye height to the bottom of the photo. Your first and last name and I-94 number must be printed in pencil or felt pen on the back of the photos.
   - Paperclip your photo and your check together, and place into a standard envelope. Then paperclip on top of your OPT application.
4. Copy of Passport identity pages, photo page, page with passport validity dates including renewal page if original has expired, and pages showing amendments such as name changes, corrections, etc.
5. Copy of U.S. visa, if applicable
6. Copy of I-94 Form (front and back)
7. Copy of All previous I-20 forms
8. Copy of Previous Employment Authorization Card (EAD), if any

Step 3: Prepare OPT application fee
9. Write a cover letter for your OPT application package which listing all of your document. See a sample here.
10. Make a copy of the entire packet for your records.
11. Prepare a check or money order of $410 made payable to The U.S. Department of Homeland Security. On your check or money order, please write out “OPT Application Fee”. See a sample here.

**Step 4: Make an appointment with International Student Advisor**

12. Schedule a meeting with our International Student Advisor to let us review your application package and start your application process. You can email elizabeth.reyes@tamucc.edu to make an appointment.

- If you are not graduated yet, ask your department coordinator email our advisors the following: your academic standing, program start date and expected graduation date (mm/dd/yyyy format) or completion of course requirements.
- If you are double-majoring, please be sure the department includes this information for each major.
- If you graduated already, provide evidence of program completion, i.e. a copy of your diploma or transcript

13. You will get a new I-20 at the meeting with our advisors. Copy of new I-20 reflecting OPT issued by OIE (one for your personal record and the other for your OPT application package)

**Step 5: Mailing your OPT Application Package**

14. Your OPT application must be sent to USCIS no later than 30 days after the date of I-20 issuance. We recommend that you mail your application by certified mail with a return receipt or by courier service (e.g. FedEx) to have proof that your application was received. Please make a photocopy of your application before mailing it.

- For U.S. Postal Service deliveries:
  USCIS Dallas Lockbox
  USCIS, P.O. Box 660867
  Dallas, TX 75266

- For Express mail & courier deliveries:
  USCIS, Attn: AOS
  2501 S. State Hwy. 121 Business, Suite 400
  Lewisville, TX 75067
Step 6: Receiving Notice of Action & Employment Authorization

15. Within four weeks of USCIS receiving your application, they will send a “Notice of Action” letter that serves only as a confirmation receipt of your application. If you don’t receive a “Notice of Action”, please send an email to lockboxsupport@uscis.dhs.gov. Use: "no notice of action" in the subject line of your e-mail.