



F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

What is Optional Practical Training?

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a benefit of F-1 status whereby students can engage in temporary employment for the purpose of gaining practical experience directly related to his or her major field of study. If you have been in lawful student status for at least 9 consecutive months you may be eligible for 12 months of OPT. OPT is limited to 12 months for each degree level you complete while in valid F-1 status. You may use some or all of the 12 months of practical training during your course of study or save the full 12 months to use after you graduate.

When Can I Engage in Optional Practical Training?

OPT is available on a part-time basis (less than 20 hours per week) or on a full-time basis (over 20 hours per week). INS regulations determine eligibility for certain benefits based on your “completion date,” which refers to the date you complete all program requirements. The periods in which students can engage in OPT fall into four categories:

1. During the student’s annual vacation and at other times when school is not in session (full or part-time);
2. While school is in session (part-time only);
3. After completion of all course requirements for the degree (excluding thesis or the equivalent), if the student is in a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree program (full or part-time). *You will need to provide a letter from your academic advisor verifying completion of course requirements, and the date you are expected to complete the thesis requirement (e.g. date of final defense).*
4. After completion of the program of study (full-time only). *You must be registered for graduation in the university computer system, OR provide a letter from your academic advisor verifying the date you are expected to complete your program.* Please note that you must apply for Optional Practical Training **PRIOR** to completion of your course of study, or you will forfeit your eligibility for this benefit. This means you should bring all needed paperwork to the ISS at least 60 days before your last day of class to insure it is processed by the ISS and received by the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship & Immigration Services (formerly known as the INS) before your last day of class.

Part-time OPT will be deducted from the 12 months of available OPT at one-half the full-time rate (e.g. if a student works part-time OPT for 4 months then only 2 months of full-time OPT will be deducted).

Authorization to engage in Optional Practical Training employment is automatically terminated when an F-1 student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level. Thus, it is important if you are transferring schools that you not have a new SEVIS I-20 issued on your behalf until your OPT is nearing completion.

Am I Eligible for Optional Practical Training?

- Undergraduate and graduate students in F-1 status may apply for OPT if they have been in lawful student status for at least 9 consecutive months (excluding intensive English courses). A student may submit an application for authorization to engage in Optional Practical Training up to 90 days prior to being enrolled for one full academic year, providing that the period of employment will not begin until after the completion of the full academic year as indicated by the DSO.
- You must be in good academic standing with Lewis University to be eligible for OPT. Students who are on a leave of absence or who have been suspended from their academic programs are not eligible for OPT.

- You are not eligible for OPT if you have exceeded 12 months of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT).
- If you have already completed 12 months of OPT and have begun a new program of study, you may be eligible for OPT *in limited circumstances*.

How Do I Apply for Optional Practical Training?

You must make an appointment with the ISS Director to apply for OPT. You can apply **120 days prior to completion of your studies; however, INS must receive your application no later than 30 days before your last day of classes**. It is highly recommended that you apply at least 3 months prior to the proposed employment.

Please bring the following to your appointment:

- A money order (no checks are accepted) for \$120 payable to "U.S. Bureau of Citizenship & Immigration Services"
- Two photographs that meet INS specifications (see attached). See p. 5 of the I-765 instructions.
(Note: Print your full name and date of birth in pencil on the back of each photograph. **Do not cut photographs! Put the photographs in a clear plastic bag such as a sandwich baggie –this is so the USCIS can scan it**)
- Signature card (available at your appointment)
- The completed and signed Form I-765, all sections to be completed by the student (see attached)
- The completed and signed Form I-538, sections 1-8 to be completed by the student (see attached)
- Your current SEVIS I-20 and all previous I-20s (all pages). If you do not have a SEVIS I-20, you will need to also show proof of funding before the I-20 can be issued.
- Your passport,
 - picture page
 - identification page showing passport number
 - visa page (8 ½ by 11" copies)
- Copy of I-94 front and back
- Original. Current I-20 issued by Lewis and all previous I-20's including those issued by previous school(s)
- Your signed and completed "Academic Advisor's Recommendation for Practical Training" Form
- A copy of your most current transcript from the Registrar's Office

Suggested items:

- Previous Employment Authorization Document (EAD), if applicable
- Offer letter from your proposed OPT employer
- Evidence of approval of change of status if you entered the USA in another non-immigrant visa category. Do not submit if you subsequently left the USA, obtained an US F-1 visa stamp, and re-entered the USA in F-1 status.

After Your Appointment

Make a copy of your completed application for your records, then mail the original application by certified mail (return receipt requested) to:

Northern Regional Service Center
Immigration and Naturalization Service
Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse
100 Centennial Mall North
Lincoln, NE 68501-7129

Please note that INS requires up to 90 days for processing. The actual processing time may vary considerably depending on the current workload at INS. Processing may take longer during peak times in June and December.

Travel Concerns

If you have completed your studies, it is inadvisable to travel outside the U.S. until you have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD). If you will be moving use the Lewis ISS address (One University Parkway, Box 280, Romeoville, IL 60446-2200 as your address so your EAD card does not become lost. Generally, the Post Office will not forward EAD cards.

To travel during OPT you will need your EAD, your SEVIS I-20 with the OPT endorsement, a recent travel signature (within the last six months), a valid F-1 visa, and a valid passport. You should also carry proof of your employment or a job offer.

Please consult with an ISS advisor prior to traveling outside the U.S.

A Note of Caution

While INS regulations provide you with this employment benefit, working without proper authorization is a serious violation of your status. **You must wait until you receive your EAD before beginning your employment.** Although the ISS is here to advise you on immigration policy, it is ultimately your responsibility to comply with all INS regulations that apply to your F-1 status.

Words of Advice

Be very cautious about applying for OPT during the academic year or during vacation periods. Except in rare situations, an OPT application cannot be canceled. Any unexpected delays in completing degree requirements or an inability to find employment may result in your loss of authorized OPT. Periods of authorized OPT are deducted from your 12 months of eligibility **even if you do not find work.**

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I fill out the I-538 Form?

Students should only complete each of lines 1 through 8 on Form I-538.

- #3 "Student admission number" is the 11-digit number on your I-20 in box #1 or your I-94 number.
- #4 "Date first granted F-1 status" is the date you first entered the US in F-1 status regardless which school you attended.
- #5 and #6 should match the information on your I-20, items 4 and 5; if the information on your I-20 in items 4 and 5 is not correct, you should discuss that with an ISSO adviser.
- #7 "Describe the proposed employment for practical training" : you must complete this section even if you do not yet have a job offer. The employment you are seeking must be in your field of study. The beginning date should be the date you complete your degree or within 60 days of completion. The ending date must be no more than 12 months from the beginning date. If you do not yet know the actual number of hours per week, mark "approximately 40".
- #8 : in this section list all other practical training previously authorized, including authorizations on I-20s from other schools you've attended. An assistantship or other on-campus employment is not considered practical training. If you need further clarification about this item, ask an ISSO adviser.
- Remember to sign and date the I-538. The ISSO completes Section B.

How do I fill out the I-765 Form?

- Check first box "permission to accept employment;" fill out lines 1 through 15; sign and date under "certification."

- #10 in most cases you will use your I-94 number found on the I-94 card that you received when you entered the US (small white card in your passport).
- #11 you must check yes if you have previously applied for work authorization at this or any other institution.
- #16 this section is already filled out for you: (c) (3) (i).
- Remember to sign and date the I-765.

Can I travel abroad while on Optional Practical Training?

Yes, but there are some risks involved. You must have a valid EAD and an I-20 authorized for practical training in order to re-enter the US while you are engaged in practical training (or while you are looking for a job, in F-1 practical training status). The I-20 must have been signed within the last 6 months in order to re-enter in Practical Training status. If your F-1 visa stamp in your passport has expired, please be sure to speak to an adviser at the ISS before you finalize your travel plans. It is extremely difficult for students from certain countries to obtain another F-1 visa once they are on practical training.

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for Optional Practical Training is higher if you are in OPT than while you are an active F-1 student pursuing a full course of study, as it may be seen as an intent to apply for permanent residence. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, your visa application will be denied and you may not be able to return to the United States.

If you decide to take the risk, you will need a valid passport, the SEVIS I-20 endorsed by the ISS within the last 6 months, the EAD card, and if you are employed under OPT, and an official letter of offer of employment showing salary, location, job duties, and beginning date as well. You should only take a letter if the job is truly temporary and will end before or by the end of your practical training time. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

Please note: Officially, if you have an Optional Practical Training application pending with the INS, you are not supposed to leave the country or the INS may consider this departure as an abandonment of the application. Therefore, the ISS's official recommendation is that you DO NOT travel outside of the US while your OPT application is pending.

Can I wait to apply for OPT until after I graduate?

No. The Immigration regulations changed in January 2003. F-1 students must now apply for OPT before the end of their last semester and prior to the last day of classes. If you do not apply on time, you will lose your eligibility for OPT.

Do I need to have a job to apply for optional practical training?

You do not need to have a job offer before applying for optional practical training. However, if you are applying for optional practical training during your course of study or vacation periods, you will want to either have a job offer or a firm job prospect because periods of optional practical training can not be rescinded once the period requested has been authorized.

How will I know if the practical training application has been approved?

You will receive from the INS a small photo identification card, called an Employment Authorization Document. This card will state the type and length of the period of employment authorized. When you receive this card, check to make certain all the information is correct.

Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?

You may not begin employment before you receive your EAD from INS; working before the INS has authorized practical training constitutes illegal employment that will jeopardize your legal status in the USA.

Will I have to pay U.S. taxes for income earned while on practical training?

In general, F-1 students who have been in the U.S. for five or less calendar years are exempt from social security (FICA) and Medicare taxes. You should be sure to bring this to the attention of your employer, as many employers are not familiar with this provision of the tax law. You will be subject to all other taxes that may apply: federal, state and local. You should check to see if your country is one of the few that has a tax treaty with the U.S. allowing students to exclude a limited amount of earned income from federal taxation.

How is the process for OPT changed under the new SEVIS system?

In making a recommendation for Optional Practical Training under SEVIS (The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System), the DSO (Designated School Official/ISS) will update your student record in SEVIS as having been recommended for optional practical training. The DSO will indicate in SEVIS whether the employment is to be full-time or part-time, and note in SEVIS the start and end date of employment. The DSO will then print the employment page of the student's SEVIS Form I-20, and sign and date the form to indicate that Optional Practical Training has been recommended. The student must file with the INS service center for an Employment Authorization Document, on Form I-

765, with fee and the SEVIS Form I-20 employment page indicating that Optional Practical Training has been recommended.

Because you can have only one valid SEVIS I-20 at a time, it is important if you intend to change educational levels, or attend school, while working under your OPT, that you instruct your DSO not to issue you a new SEVIS I-20 for the level change or the school transfer while you are still working on OPT. Under the new Immigration regulations, your authorization to engage in OPT will be terminated automatically when you transfer your I-20 to another school or begin study at another educational level for which a SEVIS I-20 has been issued.

OPT Photograph Requirements

- Two matching **color** photographs with a white background taken no earlier than 30 days before submission to the INS.
- The photos should show a three-quarter front profile of the right side of your face, with your right ear visible (45 degree angle from the camera showing the right ear).
- The image should be approximately 1 –1/4 inches (or 30mm) from the top of the head to just below the chin.
- They should be unmounted, printed on thin heat resistant paper, glossy, and un-retouched.
- Your head should be bare unless you are wearing a headdress as required by a religious order to which you belong.

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Optional Practical Training Questionnaire

Complete all questions honestly.

Is your I-20 current? Yes No

Does your I-20 reflect your current field of study? Yes No

Does your I-20 reflect your current educational level? Yes No

Do you have a valid, unexpired passport? Yes No

Passport expiration date: _____

Is this your first time applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT)? Yes No

Were you ever granted Optional Practical Training based on attendance at a previous U.S. institution? Yes No Dates: from _____ to _____

Have you had less than 12 months of Curricular Practical Training? Yes No

Dates of all Curricular Practical Training granted either at Lewis or another University in the United States? From _____ to _____

Have you been a full time student for 9 (nine) consecutive months (defined as 12 credit hours for undergraduates and 8 hours for graduate students) EVERY Semester you attended school in the United States as an F-1 student? Yes No

Anticipated date of graduation from Lewis University: _____

Please return this form with all items requested on the F-1 OPT Check List to:

International Student Services

Lewis University

Box 280

Student Services Division/Student Union Building

Romeoville, IL 60446