

International Student Admissions

10 South 2nd St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
(610) 372-4721, Ext. 5259
(610) 607-6257 - Fax



Optional Practical Training

I. EXPLANATION

As an F-1 student, you may only work off campus in the U.S. if you have received written work authorization approved by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). This document will explain one type of USCIS-approved off-campus work authorization called “Optional Practical Training,” or “OPT.”

II. CONDITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

1. The work you do must be directly related to your major field of study and it must be appropriate for someone with your level of education. However, you do not need to have a specific job offer at the time of application.
2. You must have been enrolled as a full-time student in legal immigration status for at least one academic year (two semesters) before your OPT begins.
3. **YOU MUST APPLY FOR POST-COMPLETION OPT BEFORE YOU COMPLETE ALL OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE.**
4. OPT must begin no later than 60 days after the completion date indicated in Item 5 on the I-20 and end no later than 14 months after the completion date. ISA will change the end date of your I-20 to the proposed completion date. This date *must* be accurate.
5. Optional Practical Training authorization is limited to a total of 12 months per each higher degree level (12 months each for Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Ph.D.). Part-time OPT authorization is deducted at one-half the full-time rate if it is taken pre-completion of studies.
6. There are restrictions on when students may utilize part or full-time Optional Practical Training. Students can take OPT:
 - a. **Part-time or Full-time:** during the annual vacation period
 - b. **Part-time:** during the course of study provided the training and other employment, on and off campus, does not exceed 20 hours per week total
 - c. **Full-time:** after completion of all requirements for a degree
7. **YOU CANNOT WORK OFF-CAMPUS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES UNTIL YOU HAVE BEEN AUTHORIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL ADMISSIONS ADVISOR AND USCIS.**

III. APPLICATION PROCESS

Your application must be approved by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) before you can begin employment. The process is estimated to take anywhere from 45 to 90 days from date of receipt by USCIS (note that 90 days for processing is the norm during busy times of the year). Approval from USCIS comes in the form of a small photo ID card called an “Employment Authorization Document” or “EAD” card. To apply, follow these steps:

Step 1: Be Informed

Read this document thoroughly and carefully.

International Student Admissions

10 South 2nd St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
(610) 372-4721, Ext. 5259
(610) 607-6257 - Fax



Step 2: Obtain Your Department's Recommendation

Have your academic advisor or other authorized department personnel complete an Optional Practical Training recommendation form. **YOU MUST BRING THIS FORM TO ISA IN ORDER TO RECEIVE THE AUTHORIZATION.**

Step 3: Attend an ISA Application Session in the ISA Office

Make an appointment to be scheduled for an OPT session 2 to 3 months prior to the anticipated completion of your program. You will need to bring your passport, I-20, and I-94. Please complete an I-765, leaving blank fields about which you have questions. This form can be found online. It is only necessary to print pages 12 & 13 of the online form at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/files/i-765.pdf>. **NOTE:** The code for OPT in item #16 is (C)(3)(i).

Step 4: Complete the USCIS Application Materials

Once you have received the new SEVIS I-20 with the OPT recommendation from the International Admissions Advisor, you will need to complete the application materials, make photocopies of all the paperwork for your files, and send the entire application to the USCIS to complete the authorization procedure. **DO NOT USE THE E-FILING PROCEDURE-** it slows the application process.

HERE IS WHAT YOU MUST SEND TO USCIS:

- A \$340 check payable to "Department of Homeland Security"
- Original I-765 form completed by you with your original signature – 2/8/07 version ONLY (see bottom right corner of form). The code for OPT in item #16 is (C)(3)(i). Note that the address you use must be valid for at least 3 months from the time you send the application. The U.S. Postal Service will **not forward** the EAD card even if you leave a forwarding address. If you chose to use ISA as your mailing address, put the address as:
Reading Area Community College, Attn: International Admissions, 10 South Second St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
- Cover letter/checklist explaining that you are applying for OPT and listing the contents of the mailing
- **Photocopy (NOT original) of new SEVIS I-20 with the OPT recommendation from ISA Advisor on page 3.** You must return to ISA to collect your new I-20 with the OPT recommendation before you can proceed with this application.
- Photocopies (front & back) of all previous "old style" and SEVIS I-20 documents dating back to beginning of F-1 status
- Photocopy of I-94 (front & back)
- Photocopy of the most recent ID page(s) of your passport (these are the page(s) which contain the picture, number, and expiration date)
- Photocopy of the most recent U.S. visa stamp (in a page of your passport)
- Two "passport" photos. **NOTE:** This is a change from the previous photo requirements. More details about can be found at: www.travel.state.gov/passport/pptphotos/index.html. In pencil, print your name and write you admission number (I-94 number) on the back of each photo.
- Copy of a previously issued EAD card if available

International Student Admissions

10 South 2nd St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
(610) 372-4721, Ext. 5259
(610) 607-6257 - Fax



Step 5: Mail the Application Pack to USCIS

When you have completed the entire application, make a complete set of photocopies for your files, organize the materials as neatly as possible, write "Attention: Optional Practical Training" on the outside of the envelope, and send all of the items listed in Step 4 to the appropriate USCIS Regional Service Center having jurisdiction over the address you have used on the I-765. For those using a return address in Pennsylvania on the I-765, the Service Center address is:

**USCIS Vermont Service Center
75 Lower Welden Street
St. Albans, VT 05479-0001**

We recommend that you send the application via an express mail carrier or via U.S. registered mail "return receipt requested" so that you have proof of delivery. Your permission to begin Optional Practical Training is not finalized until you have received an "Employment Authorization Document (EAD)" from the USCIS.

Step 6: Wait for the EAD

Within one month of sending the application to the USCIS, you should get a standard receipt notice stating that the USCIS has received the application and that it will take 80 days to process (this is not an actual estimate; it is the time stated in every letter). If you do not get this letter within 6 weeks contact an advisor for more information. The "Receipt Number" in the top left corner of this receipt notice can be used to check the status of your case on the USCIS website at www.uscis.gov or by calling the phone number indicated on the receipt. Keep in mind that this information is updated infrequently.

REMEMBER: IT IS ILLEGAL TO WORK BEFORE YOU RECEIVE THE CARD. ONCE YOU RECEIVE THE CARD, YOU ARE AUTHORIZED TO WORK ONLY FOR THE DATES ON THE CARD. WORKING IMPROPERLY OR WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION IS A SERIOUS VIOLATION OF YOUR STATUS AND COULD LEAD TO DEPORTATION FROM THE U.S.

IV. OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

A. Making a Decision Regarding Participation in Optional Practical Training

- **Only one 12 month period of Optional Practical Training per degree level is available during your U.S. studies.** For instance, if you complete an Associate's degree in the U.S. and participate in 12 months of OPT following that degree program, you may receive a new 12 month period of OPT if you go on to complete a Bachelor's degree program but not if you complete a second Associate's degree.
- **The completing date in item 5 of your I-20 will be shortened to the anticipated completion date indicated by your Academic Advisor on the OPT Recommendation Form.** The new completion date on your I-20 must accurately reflect the actual completion date of your program. If you expect to be enrolled and/or continue to work on campus beyond the I-20 completion date, you must contact the International Admissions Advisor immediately to extend this date. Failure to do so may result in the loss of your F-1 status, including loss of your legal right to enroll and work on-campus as an F-1.

International Student Admissions

10 South 2nd St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
(610) 372-4721, Ext. 5259
(610) 607-6257 - Fax



- **You must report address or name changes within 10 days to ISA.** Report address or name changes to ISA by e-mail at jmelones@racc.edu, and this information will be reported to the Department of Homeland Security, as required in the immigration regulations.
- **You must report status changes to ISA while you are on OPT.** For instance, if you apply for and are granted a change of status from F-1 (OPT) to H1B or any other immigration status, you must notify ISA. Also, if you leave the U.S. permanently before the end date of your EAD you must notify ISA. If you plan to return to RACC as a student or continue studies elsewhere after OPT, you must also contact ISA. Report status changes to ISA by e-mail at jmelones@racc.edu.
- **Authorization may not be rescinded.** Once authorization to engage in Optional Practical Training is granted, it may not be rescinded or canceled. This means that after Optional Practical Training is authorized by the 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. Once permission to work has begun, it is impossible to have it canceled and restored at a later date.
- **Actual date practical training employment may begin:** You may not begin work until the following requirements are satisfied: 1) you have obtained an EAD card and 2) the date is reached when the EAD authorizes employment to begin.
- **Change of employer after Optional Practical Training has been authorized:** You may change employers after you have begun authorized employment provided the new job is 1) directly related to your major field of study and 2) appropriate for someone with your level of education.

B. Employment Eligibility Verification

When you begin work, you and your employer must complete a form entitled “Employment Eligibility Verification” (Form I-9), which the employer retains. The I-9 must be updated each time you receive a renewal of your work permission. This form requires you to document your identity and work authorization according to the directions on the back of the form. The most convenient of the various items acceptable as documentation include: your EAD card, I-20, valid passport, and I-94 card. Your employer, who keeps Form I-9, may make copies of the documents you submit and return the originals to you. You will also need a social security number or card. If you do not already have a social security card, or if you have a card which is marked “not valid for employment,” take your passport (if you are Canadian you may use another form of photo-bearing identification), I-94 Departure Record, Form I-20, and your EAD card to the office of the Social Security Administration, and apply for a new social security card. Note that your number will remain the same if you already have one, but the notation on the card should change to indicate that employment is valid with authorization.

C. Social Security and Other Taxes

In general, F-1 students who have been in the U.S. fewer than five years are “non-residents for tax purposes” and are exempt from Social Security (FICA) and Medicare taxes (see International Revenue Service Publication 519, “U.S. 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, which will determine if any of the withheld taxes can be refunded.

International Student Admissions

10 South 2nd St., Box 1706, Reading, PA 19603
(610) 372-4721, Ext. 5259
(610) 607-6257 - Fax



D. Special Information for Practical Training After Completion of the Degree

- **Application Deadline**

Your application for OPT must be received by the USCIS before you complete your degree. You must be sure to make an appointment to submit an application to the International Admissions Advisor no later than 10 days before you expect to complete your program of study. **You are no longer eligible to apply for Optional Practical Training after you have completed your degree program.**

Federal regulations refer to the date you complete all requirements for a program of study, not to the date the degree is conferred or to the date you participate in graduation ceremonies and receive a certificate or diploma. The 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. This means that the day you complete the last requirement for the degree will be your “completion date.” **Please contact ISA with questions.**

- **Traveling Outside the U.S. While on Optional Practical Training**

Re-entry provisions of the regulations require students who have graduated and are on authorized Optional Practical Training to present the following documents to re-enter the U.S.:

1. SEVIS I-20 Student Copy, signed on the back by the International Admissions Advisor within the last six months.
2. The Employment Authorization Document (EAD). 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 re-enter the U.S., but that you need to also have the signed I-20.
3. A valid passport
4. A valid F-1 visa stamp (unless traveling to contiguous territory for less than 30 days- see travel document).
5. A job offer letter. F regulations allow for travel and re-entry in order to “resume employment.” While a job offer letter is not required to obtain OPT, it is recommended that students who travel have a job offer letter with them when they are entering the U.S. Those who do not carry all of the documents may not be allowed to re-enter the U.S.
6. **Dependent Travel:** Since OPT is not noted on dependent I-20s, an F-2 dependent(s) must carry copies of the F-1 student’s I-20 with OPT recommendation, EAD card, and job offer letter, in addition to the F-2’s I-20 when traveling.

Travel at any time while in F-1 status carries some risk. This risk increases for individuals on OPT if the F-1 visa has expired and a new one is required in order to re-enter the U.S. If you have completed your program and you do not yet have the EAD card, you should not travel out of the country or you risk not being able to re-enter to participate in Optional Practical Training. **Be sure to consult with the International Admissions Advisor when contemplating travel outside the U.S. and re-entry to continue Optional Practical Training.**