

OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

INFORMATION



1867

HOWARD

UNIVERSITY

WHAT IS OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)?

Optional practical training (OPT) is defined as "temporary employment for practical training directly related to the student's major area of study," and has a duration of up to 12 Months per each degree level (Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral).

A student can choose between two types of OPT:

Pre-Completion OPT or Post-Completion OPT. Howard OIS recommends using Post-completion OPT, which begins after completion of your degree program. Pre-completion OPT on the other hand, can be used while school is in session and may not exceed 20 hours/week.

STEM students may be eligible for a 24-month extension of their OPT.

OPT ELIGIBILITY

- Have not used 12 months or more of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT)***
- Have not already been approved for 12 months of OPT at the same degree level***
- Have an unexpired passport (Keep valid 6 months into the future)***
- Must have a recommendation from the DSO to be able to apply for OPT***
- You must submit the Form I-765 within 30 days of the date the DSO enters the recommendation for OPT in your SEVIS record.***

Note: You do NOT need a job offer to apply for OPT

TYPES OF OPT

12 Month Post-Completion OPT

- Authorized to be engaged after the program end date**
- May work part-time or full-time**
- Subject to the 90-day unemployment provisions**
- May apply for the STEM extension if eligible**

24 Month OPT STEM-Extension

- Must hold a STEM-qualifying degree, be in a valid period of standard post-completion OPT, and have an offer of paid employment for at least 20 hours per week from an employer enrolled in E-Verify**
- Must work full-time**
- Would be subject to the unemployment provisions (90 days), plus the unused unemployment days from initial OPT (cannot surpass 150 days)**

OPT TIMELINE



- *You can apply as early as 90 days prior to your expected program completion date and within 60 days after your program completion date (check your I-20 to confirm your actual program end date).*
- *USCIS must receive your full and complete OPT application no more than 60 days after your program end date.*
- *USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of when the OIS recommends your I-20 for OPT.*
- *If you fail to submit your application within 30 days after the day your OPT was recommended, but you are still within the 60-day grace period, please contact the ISO to renew your OPT recommendation and get an updated I-20.*
- *Important: USCIS will deny OPT applications received after the 30-day deadline and after the 60-day grace period.*

OPT START DATE

- *You may request a post-completion OPT start date up to 60 days after your program end date listed on your new I-20.*
- *You can decide whether to start OPT immediately or delay within that 60-day window.*
- *Time between program completion and OPT start counts as part of your F-1 status, so you remain in status.*
- *Many students use this gap to job search, relocate, or take a break.*
- *If you delay your start date: you cannot begin working until that date, even if OPT is approved.*
- *If you choose an earlier start date: you can begin work sooner and have more job flexibility, but unemployment days start counting right away.*



HOW TO APPLY

The OPT application process involves six steps and requires coordination between you, your academic department, the OIS, and USCIS:

- ***Step 1: Request an OPT recommendation from OIS and receive an updated I-20 showing your requested OPT start date. Students must submit Howard University OPT application to Receive OPT Recommended I-20.***
- ***Step 2: Prepare your OPT application materials;***

Copy of your passport, Copy of your visa, I-94 record, Copies of all previous I-20's Copies of any previously issued EAD cards, Two photographs that meet USCIS specifications, Application fee. Always check USCIS website Fee Calculator.

- ***Step 3: Submit your OPT application, form I-765 to USCIS within 30 days of the OPT recommended I-20 was issued. Students typically receive a receipt notice from USCIS within one to two weeks, which can be used to track your case status online.***
- ***Step 4: USCIS reviews and adjudicates your OPT application.***
- ***Step 5: If approved, USCIS will issue an approval notice, followed by your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card.***
- ***Step 6: Begin employment and promptly report your updates to OIS.***

USCIS PHOTO REQUIREMENTS

Photo requirement for form I-765 is same as passport size photo.

Photo Tips

1. *Submit one color photo*
2. *Submit a recent photo taken in last 6 months*
3. *Use a clear image of your face*
4. *Do not change your photo using computer software, phone apps or filters, or artificial intelligence*
5. *Directly face the camera without tilting your head.*
6. *Take off your eyeglasses for your photo*
7. *Use a white or off-white background without shadows, texture, or lines*

Please, visit the website below for more specification.

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/how-apply/photos.html>

WHILE OPT IS PENDING

Processing Time

Because of the high volume of OPT applications, USCIS processing can often take more than 90 days. Students are strongly encouraged to plan carefully and submit their application as early as possible to avoid delays.

Receipt Notice (Form I-797)

Within 1-2 weeks of filing, USCIS will issue a receipt notice (Form I-797), confirming that your application has been received. This notice will include your name and case number. You can use the case number to track your application status on the USCIS website, and we also recommend creating an online USCIS account for easier case tracking.

Do not begin working until you have received your EAD card.

We do not recommend that you travel outside of the US until you receive your EAD card

Travel before Program end date

- (1) a valid Form I-20, signed on page 2 by DSO advisor (the signature must not be more than 12 months old at the time of reentry to the U.S.)***
- (2) an unexpired passport***
- (3) an unexpired F-1 visa in the passport. If your F-1 visa is expired at the time of your reentry to the U.S. you must apply for a new F-1 visa to reenter the U.S.***
- 4) Receipt Notice from the USCIS (if applicable)***

The above also applies to your F-2 dependents.

Student must re-enter the country with F-1 status. Entering with other status will automatically terminate the OPT application.

Travel after your I-20 program end date while OPT application is pending International Travel while OPT application is pending is not recommended. Student must re-enter the country with F-1 status. Entering with other status will automatically terminate the OPT application.

OPT EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS

Employment Requirements While on OPT

- *Students must work at least 20 hours per week in a position (or combination of positions) that is directly related to their field of study/major.*
- *Your unemployment clock begins on the start date listed on your EAD card.*
- *During the initial post-completion OPT period, students are allowed a maximum of 90 days of unemployment.*
- *USCIS/SEVP tracks unemployment based on the employment information reported in your SEVIS record.*
- *If you accumulate more than 90 days of unemployment or fail to report your OPT employment, your SEVIS record may be terminated.*
- *Student must report/update thier employment information through their SEVP portal.*

**Student will receive an email directly from SEVP to create their SEVP portal. SEVP portal allows student to update their personal information and their employment information.*

OPT EMPLOYMENT REQUIREMENTS

*It is the **students' responsibility** to report any changes or updates of the below information to the OIS within 10 days:*

- *Copy of OPT EAD card once received*
- *Change of current residential address*
- *Change of US telephone number and email address*
- *Hours of employment Part time vs Full time*
- *Decision to end OPT and leave the U.S.A.*
- *Change of immigration status*
- *Name of the employer*
- *Hours of employment Part time vs Full time*

TYPES OF EMPLOYMENT

- ***Paid or Unpaid Training***
 - *You may work in paid employment directly related to your major field of study.*
 - *You may also volunteer or serve as an unpaid intern, researcher, or community service worker, provided no labor laws are violated.*
 - *It is strongly recommended that you keep documentation from the organization confirming that you worked 20+ hours per week.*
- ***Multiple Employers***
- ***Short-Term Multiple Employers (Performing Artists/Musicians)***
 - *You may work for multiple short-term employers (e.g., gigs).*
 - *Maintain a detailed list of gigs, including dates and duration.*
 - *Be prepared to show this list as evidence if requested by DHS.*
- ***Independent Contractor (1099 Work)***
 - *You may work as an independent contractor providing services under a contract rather than as a traditional employee.*
 - *If requested by DHS, you must provide evidence of your contract(s), including dates and the contracting company's name and address.*
- ***Self-Employed Business Owner***
 - *You may start your own business and be self-employed.*
 - *You must show proof of proper business licenses and demonstrate that you are actively engaged in work related to your degree.*
- ***Employment Through an Agency***
 - *You may work through an employment agency.*
 - *You must be able to show evidence that you are averaging at least 20 hours per week while employed by the agency.*

STEM EXTENSION

- *24-month extension of post-completion OPT*
- *For students with **qualifying STEM degrees***

Use one of the following as your qualifying degree:

- ***Most recent degree:** The degree that was the basis for your current 12-month OPT, or*
 - ***Previously earned STEM degree, if it meets the following:***
 - *Conferred within the last 10 years at the time of recommendation.*
 - *Earned at a U.S. institution*
 - *The employment for STEM OPT must be directly related to this prior degree.*
- *Requires PAID employment offer with an E-Verify employer for at least 20 hours a week.*

STEM EXTENSION APPLICATION

- *Apply up to 90 days before current OPT ends*
- *USCIS must receive application before the end date on your EAD card.*
- *Can keep working up to 180 days while application is pending*
- *Once STEM OPT is recommended in SEVIS and you receive your STEM OPT I-20, you must submit your Form I-765 to USCIS within 60 days of the recommendation OR before your current EAD expires—whichever comes first.*

STEM EXTENSION

The STEM OPT extension is a 24-month extension of post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) available to eligible F-1 students who have earned a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM).

This process is separate from the initial post-completion OPT application and is typically filed 90 days before the expiration date on your current Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card.

Unlike standard OPT, students applying for the STEM OPT extension must be employed or have a job offer at the time of application. The employment must be directly related to your STEM field of study. If your most recent degree is a STEM degree, the job must relate to that program. If you are applying based on a prior STEM degree, the employment must instead be connected to that earlier degree.

STEM EXTENSION

- *You may submit your STEM OPT application to USCIS as early as 90 days before the expiration date of your current 12-month OPT EAD card.*
- *USCIS must receive your application before the end date on your current 12-month OPT EAD card.*
- *If you file on time, you may continue working for up to 180 days after your OPT EAD expires while your STEM OPT application is pending.*
- *Once STEM OPT is recommended in SEVIS and you receive your STEM OPT I-20, you must submit your Form I-765 to USCIS within 60 days of the recommendation OR before your current EAD expires—whichever comes first.*

STEM EXTENSION ELIGIBILITY

- ***Be currently on a valid period of post-completion OPT.***
- ***Have earned a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree from a U.S. institution that:***
 - ***Is accredited by a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accrediting agency, and***
 - ***Is SEVP-certified at the time you submit your STEM OPT application.***
 - ***The degree must be on the DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List at the time your DSO recommends your STEM OPT.***
- ***Use one of the following as your qualifying degree:***
 - ***Most recent degree: The degree that was the basis for your current 12-month OPT, or***
 - ***Previously earned STEM degree, if it meets the following:***
 - ***Conferred within the last 10 years at the time of recommendation.***
 - ***Earned at a U.S. educational institution (foreign or overseas U.S. campuses do not qualify).***
 - ***Listed on the current DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List.***
 - ***The employment for STEM OPT must be directly related to this prior degree.***
- ***Have a paid, full-time position (20+ hours per week) with an E-Verify employer.***
- ***Ensure your job is directly related to your STEM field of study (it is your responsibility to show the connection).***
- ***Have an employer that meets STEM OPT employer requirements.***
- ***Submit your STEM OPT application before your post-completion OPT ends (before the EAD expiration).***
- ***Remember:***
 - ***F-1 students are allowed two lifetime STEM OPT extensions (24 months each).***
 - ***They cannot be taken consecutively.***
 - ***You may only use one STEM OPT extension per qualifying degree.***

STEM OPT QUALIFYING EMPLOYER REQUIREMENTS

To be eligible for STEM OPT, you must have a job offer or active employment of at least 20 hours per week with a qualifying employer. The employer must maintain a bona fide employer-employee relationship with you. Self-employment is not permitted on STEM OPT.

Your STEM OPT employer must:

- **Be enrolled in the USCIS E-Verify program.**
- **Have a valid Employer Identification Number (EIN).**
- **Be responsible for directly supervising your work.**
- **Be responsible for paying your salary (unpaid or volunteer work does not qualify for STEM OPT).**
- **Be willing to complete and sign Form I-983 Training Plan, including:**
 - **Wage and working condition agreements.**
 - **Supervision and mentoring plans.**
 - **Allowing site visits if required.**
 - **Fulfilling all reporting obligations.**

Additional notes:

- **You cannot use unpaid or volunteer work as the basis for a STEM OPT extension.**
- **If you are unsure whether your employer meets this requirement, consult with OIS for clarification.**

Multiple Concurrent Employers

- **You may work for more than one employer at the same time while on STEM OPT.**
- **Each employer must meet all of the above requirements.**
- **You must work at least 20 hours per week with each employer.**

STEM OPT QUALIFYING EMPLOYER REQUIREMENTS

Self-employment is not permitted on STEM OPT.

Your STEM OPT employer must:

- *Be enrolled in the USCIS E-Verify program.*
- *Have a valid Employer Identification Number (EIN).*
- *Be responsible for directly supervising your work.*
- *Be responsible for paying your salary (unpaid or volunteer work does not qualify for STEM OPT).*
- *Be willing to complete and sign Form I-983 Training Plan, including:*
 - *Wage and working condition agreements.*
 - *Supervision and mentoring plans.*
 - *Allowing site visits if required.*
 - *Fulfilling all reporting obligations.*

Additional notes:

- *You cannot use unpaid or volunteer work as the basis for a STEM OPT extension.*
- *If you are unsure whether your employer meets this requirement, consult with OIS for clarification.*

Multiple Concurrent Employers

- *You may work for more than one employer at the same time while on STEM OPT.*
- *Each employer must meet all of the above requirements.*
- *You must work at least 20 hours per week with each employer.*

STEM OPT PROCESS

To apply for the STEM OPT extension, students must:

- ***Report Post-Completion OPT Employment***
 - *Update employment through the SEVP Portal, or*
 - *Submit the OPT Employment Reporting Form to Howard University OIS.*
- ***Submit the Howard University STEM OPT Application.***
- ***Complete and Submit Form I-983 (Training Plan for STEM OPT Students):***
 - *Student and employer must complete, sign, and submit Form I-983.*
 - *The plan must outline the student's learning objectives and demonstrate the employer's commitment to supporting these goals.*
 - *Both student and employer must follow all terms and conditions outlined in:*
 - *24-month STEM OPT extension regulations.*
 - *Form I-983 instructions.*
 - *The completed Form I-983 itself.*
 - *These obligations begin on the employment start date listed on Form I-983.*
- ***Obtain a STEM OPT Recommended I-20 from OIS.***
- ***File Form I-765 (Application for Employment Authorization) with USCIS.***

UNDERSTANDING FORM I-983

Before Applying:

- *Student must complete, sign, and submit Form I-983 to their DSO.*
- *Employer and student must work together to complete the form.*
- *Students are responsible for ensuring the form is completed and kept in their record.*

Completing the Form:

- *Section 1: Student fills out personal, SEVIS, and school information.*
- *Sections 2–6: Completed with the employer (training plan, supervision, etc.).*
- *Must include details on degree, CIP code, degree level, date awarded, and whether it's based on a prior STEM degree.*

School Information Needed:

- *Name of SEVP-certified school recommending STEM OPT.*
- *School where STEM degree was earned (if different).*
- *Correct SEVIS school code (with suffix).*
- *DSO's full name, phone, and email.*

Employer Information:

- *Employer must complete training plan (Form I-983) including wage, supervision, and reporting.*

Evaluations:

- *Two self-evaluations required:*
 - *12-month evaluation (within 12 months of start date).*
 - *Final evaluation (at the end of STEM OPT or within 10 days if employment ends early).*
- *Each evaluation must:*
 - *Assess performance and progress.*
 - *Review knowledge/skills gained.*
 - *Summarize accomplishments and contributions.*
 - *Address any changes to goals or objectives.*
- *Both evaluations must be signed by the employer and submitted to the DSO.*

STEM OPT REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

◆ **Validation Reporting (6, 12, 18, 24 Months)**

STEM OPT students must submit validation reports at 6, 12, 18, and 24 months.

- **6-Month Report:** Email DSO with company name, address, and position title.
- **12-Month Report:** Email DSO with company name, address, position title, plus 12-month self-evaluation (top half of page 5, Form I-983).
- **18-Month Report:** Email DSO with company name, address, and position title.
- **24-Month (Final) Report:** Email DSO with company name, address, position title, plus final self-evaluation (bottom half of page 5, Form I-983).
 - Must also be submitted if you change status, depart the U.S., or change employers.

Notes:

- Reports may be submitted up to 30 days before due date.
- Submit validation materials to DSO at least 10 business days before deadline.

◆ **Unemployment Reporting**

- If unemployed, report within 10 days of last work day.
- Submit final self-evaluation (bottom half of page 5, Form I-983) for previous employer.

◆ **Material Changes to Employment**

Report within 10 days by submitting an updated Form I-983 if there are significant changes, such as:

- Salary/compensation changes.
- Weekly work hours.
- Changes to employer training commitments or learning objectives.
- New employer address, supervisor, or other details on Form I-983.

◆ **Changing Employers**

If you switch employers (or employer's EIN changes), report within 10 days by submitting through the STEM Update Employment E-Form:

1. *For previous employment: Final self-evaluation (bottom half of page 5, Form I-983) with end date.*
2. *For new employment: New Form I-983 (pages 1-4) with new employer's details and start date.*

QUESTIONS?

