

## **OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) FOR F-1 STUDENTS**

### **WHEN TO APPLY FOR OPT**

You are eligible to apply for OPT up to 90 days before your program end date in SEVIS and any time within the 60 day grace period following your program completion date.

- **Choose the earliest day that you might want to start working (you CANNOT begin to work BEFORE the start date on the EAD).** If you choose a start date farther into the future and then receive an earlier offer, you will not be able to change the date.
- **If you want the latest possible day to start your work authorization,** the latest day you may choose as your start date for the EAD is 60 days after your program completion date. Remember that some months have 31 days and USCIS counts each day!

**You may not change your OPT dates once you have filed the application with USCIS!**

### **OPT – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

#### **1. What is Optional Practical Training?**

Optional practical training (OPT) is the opportunity to apply knowledge gained in your degree program to off-campus work. The work must be related to your level and field of studies. OPT is recommended by the DSO or PDSO (Noora or Genevieve) at SRU and authorized by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

#### **2. What are the Eligibility Requirements for OPT?**

To be eligible to apply for OPT, you must: (1) have been in full time student status for at least one academic year by the requested start date of your OPT, and (2) be maintaining valid F-1 status at the time of the application.

#### **3. If I complete one-degree program, take 12 months of practical training, and then begin a second course of study, am I eligible for an additional 12 months of practical training?**

Yes, you are eligible to apply for another 12 month period of OPT after changing to a **higher degree level**. This does not apply to a second degree at the same level (i.e., a second master's degree).

#### **4. Can I get 24 months of OPT at the masters or higher level if I don't use OPT at the bachelor's level?**

No. OPT for each level cannot be combined and but must be used during/immediately after each level. Authorized OPT cannot be "saved" for use in the future.

#### **5. How can I use OPT while I am still in my program?**

You may use OPT while you are still in your degree program as follows: (1) part-time while school is in session, (2) fulltime during annual vacation periods, and/or (3) full-time after you completed all course requirements for the degree and have a thesis requirement remaining. These periods of OPT used before you graduate will be deducted from the total allowable period of 12 months. Part-time OPT will be deducted at one-half the full-time rate.

#### **6. How long does it take to get authorization for OPT and when should I apply?**

Authorization for OPT is granted by USCIS. Their standard processing time is 60-90 days. Therefore, it is important that you apply for the authorization well in advance of the date you wish to start working. You may apply up to 90 days before your completion date and **NO LATER THAN** 60 days beyond your completion date. You **MUST** send your application within 30 days of getting the new I-20 with OPT endorsement from the Global Engagement Office.

#### **7. Do I need to have a job to apply for OPT?**

You do **NOT** need to have a job offer before applying for OPT.

**8. Do I need to have a job/job offer while I am on OPT?**

Yes. F-1 regulations require that you do have employment while in your OPT period. You are allowed to have a total of 90 days of unemployment in your 12-month period of OPT or 150 days if you apply for and receive the 24-month STEM extension. While on OPT, you are required to report to the Global Engagement Office any changes in your address.

**9. Does the job I have while on OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid?**

For the first 12 month period of OPT, the employment does NOT have to be paid employment. Therefore, a student who is self-employed (including performance majors with regular “gigs”), interning or volunteering in a position directly related to the academic field would be considered “employed” for the purposes of OPT employment. For more information, see the immigration OPT policy guidance: [http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/opt\\_policy\\_guidance\\_04062009.pdf](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/opt_policy_guidance_04062009.pdf).

**10. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)?**

You may NOT begin employment before you receive your EAD from USCIS; working before your OPT has been authorized by the USCIS constitutes illegal employment and will jeopardize your legal status in the US.

**11. May I ask USCIS to expedite processing of my OPT?**

No. USCIS allows students to file the OPT application up to 90 days before the program end date. You should apply early.

**12. Do I have to do anything with the Global Engagement Office while I am on OPT?**

Yes! Immigration regulations REQUIRE that while you are on OPT, you MUST report your address information to the Global Engagement Office. You must email address changes within 10 days of the move to [noora.alie@sru.edu](mailto:noora.alie@sru.edu).

**13. Can I extend my OPT after the 12 months?**

Yes.

**14. What options do I have to extend my OPT after 12 months?**

There are two types of extensions available:

- 1) A 24-month STEM extension for those in certain fields (see the next section on page 3) and
- 2) An “H-1B Cap Gap Extension.” The cap gap extends your work authorization through to the start of your H-1B visa if your OPT ends after your company has applied for an H-1B for you but before the H-1B starts on the following October 1st. This cap gap extension is available to all F-1 students using OPT in any field, as long as you have a pending or approved H-1B application and the employer applied for the H-1B with a request for change of status as part of the application. The extension is automatic - you do not have to do anything at all to get the extension.

**15. I will live in Pennsylvania while on OPT. Can I get a new/extended PA driver’s license/state id?**

Yes. You will need an immigration status verification letter to renew or obtain a new license/state id. Request the letter from the Global Engagement Office or email [noora.alie@sru.edu](mailto:noora.alie@sru.edu).

**16. I went to PA DMV to get a new/renewed license and they told me my information was not in SEVIS or there was an error with my information. What should I do?**

The PA DMV has to confirm information from various databases that link to SEVIS. Students on OPT should present the required documentation and make sure to show the EAD and point out the A# located on the card. This gives DMV the number they need to find your data in their system.

<b>INFORMATION ON THE 24 MONTH STEM EXTENSION</b>
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**17. What is the 24- month STEM extension of OPT?**

The 24-month STEM extension allows F-1 students on OPT who have received a degree in the “STEM” fields (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics), to apply for a one time 24-month STEM extension of their regular 12 month OPT period. **You will NOT apply for 36 months up front.** Students who timely file an application for the 24-month STEM extension will be able to continue employment while the extension application is pending, until a final decision on the I-765 or for 180 days, whichever comes first.

**18. I think I qualify for STEM, how do I apply for the 24-month STEM extension?**

**Students completing with degrees in these fields will apply for the regular 12-month period of OPT. Three months before your first 12 months of OPT expires:** If you meet the following criteria, you can apply through the Global Engagement Office for your 24-month STEM extension I-20. For instructions contact [noora.alie@sru.edu](mailto:noora.alie@sru.edu). NOTE: Your application must arrive at USCIS before your 12-month period of OPT ends or else the 24-month STEM extension benefit will be forfeited.

## CRITERIA FOR THE 24 MONTH EXTENSION:

- Your employer must be enrolled in the “E-Verify” program (see information links below).
- You must have graduated and be working in one of the fields listed below referred to as STEM fields
- You must have maintained status while on OPT and be within 3 months of your end date

### 19. What are the STEM fields?

Actuarial Science, Animal Sciences, *Biological* and Biomedical Sciences, *Business Statistics*, *Computer Science*, Engineering, *Environmental Science*, Engineering Technologies, *Forensic Science and Technology*, *Geographic Information Science and Cartography*, *Information Technology*, *Informatics*, *Mathematics and Statistics*, Military Technologies, *Physical Sciences*, Plant Sciences, Social Psychology, Management Science, Marine Sciences, Medical Scientist (MS, PhD), Natural Sciences, Nutrition Sciences. For more information, send emails to [noora.alie@sru.edu](mailto:noora.alie@sru.edu).

### 20. What is “E-Verify”?

E-Verify is an Internet-based system operated by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in partnership with the Social Security Administration (SSA). The E-Verify program is currently free to employers and is available in all 50 states. E-Verify provides an automated link to federal databases to help employers determine employment eligibility of new hires and the validity of their Social Security numbers. More information is available at: [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov). There is no comprehensive list of companies enrolled in E-verify.

### 21. Are there any other requirements while I am on the 24-month STEM extension?

For the 24-month STEM extension the employment must be paid. You are obligated to update your address and employer information every six months while on the 24-month STEM extension (even if the information has not changed). We will send out email reminders. It is imperative that you provide us with your valid non-SRU email address. You will report this information to the Global Engagement Office by emailing [noora.alie@sru.edu](mailto:noora.alie@sru.edu).

## TRAVEL and OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING

### 22. Now that I have turned in my application, can I travel outside the US while I wait for the EAD to come?

**After you complete your program**, in order to re-enter the US you must have the following: EAD (or receipt notice for the OPT application), your valid passport, a **current/non-expired F-1 visa stamp**, I-20 with OPT endorsement signed within the last six months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment. Before you graduate**, you should be able to return to the US without the EAD as long as it is still long enough in advance of your graduation. If you have to travel, talk to Noora or Genevieve before you leave.

### 23. I want to leave the US for a short time while my OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the EAD will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B-2) that is valid for 10 years. Can I just enter the US on my tourist visa while I am waiting to get the EAD then start work with the card once I get it?

NO! If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the US and re-enter in B status - you will have lost your F-1 status and your OPT will be **invalid**!

### 24. What if I have applied for the 24-month STEM extension but I have not yet received the EAD, can I travel out of the US?

No, the immigration service advises that while you are waiting for the approval of the 24-month STEM extension, you should NOT try to leave the country until you RECEIVE the new EAD.

### 25. The visa stamp in my passport has expired, but I need to travel outside the US while on OPT. Do I need to get a new visa stamp at an embassy?

If you are going to Canada or Mexico, and staying for fewer than 30 days, you could re-enter the US on your expired F-1 visa stamp, with your I-94 card, a valid passport, your EAD (or receipt notice), an I-20 that has been signed by Noora or Genevieve within the last 6 months, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment** as long as: 1) you do not apply for a visa while in Canada/Mexico and 2) you are NOT a national of Iran, Syria, Sudan, or Cuba. **If you are traveling elsewhere**, you will need to go to a US embassy or consulate and seek a new visa stamp. **Please contact Noora** to discuss your visa application should you have questions.

### 26. In what way is my application to the consulate for a new visa stamp affected by being on OPT?

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for OPT is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. 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 consulate official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied.

However, it is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate nonimmigrant intent. Please see Noora to discuss in more detail.

**27. What documents do I need to show at the consulate for a new visa stamp under OPT?**

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD or receipt notice for your application, your OPT I-20, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.** The official job offer letter should indicate that the position is temporary and not permanent. 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 your OPT work experience there.

**28. Do I still need to get the travel line on my I-20 signed by Noora or Genevieve at SRU during the year of OPT?**

Yes, during the OPT year, if you travel outside the US, you need to have the travel line signed every 6 months. If you are not located near Slippery Rock, mail the original I-20 to the Global Engagement Office for endorsement. Please leave plenty of time for mailing delays both ways prior to intended travel.

<b>Employment Related Information</b>
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**Employment Eligibility Verification (I-9)**

When you begin work, you and your employer must complete a form entitled “Employment Eligibility Verification” (IRS Form I-9) which verifies your eligibility to work in the US. 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. For F-1 students, the most typical combination of documentation is your passport, I-94 Departure Record, I-20, and EAD.

**Social Security Number (SSN)**

For payroll purposes, you will also need to provide your SSN. If you do not already have an SSN or if you have lost your card, take your passport, I-94 Departure Record, your I-20, a letter from the Global Engagement Office and EAD to the Social Security Administration and apply for an SSN card. Note that your number will remain the same if you already had one.

**Social Security Withholding and Other Taxes**

In general, F-1 students who have been in the US fewer than five years are “non-residents for tax purposes” and are exempt from Social Security (FICA) and Medicare taxes. If you are a non-resident for tax purposes and your employer does withhold FICA, speak to your payroll office. You and your employer can refer to Internal Revenue Service Publication 519, “U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens” for additional information. 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. The results of the filing will determine if any of the withheld income taxes can be refunded to you.