

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Information and FAQs

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary permission to work in the United States in order to gain additional knowledge about your field of study. OPT is work authorization available to international students who have been in valid F-1 status for at least two consecutive semesters at Gordon-Conwell and who plan to seek employment in the U.S. in their field of study. Eligible students may apply for "pre-completion OPT" (before completion of program) and/or "post-completion OPT" (after completion of program).

Eligibility

To pursue OPT you must first meet the following requirements:

- Completed one full academic year of full-time study
- Valid F-1 status
- Good academic standing
- Employment in your major field of study
- Have not regained legal status through reentry during the previous academic year

If you are eligible, you may pursue OPT in the following four ways:

- **Full-time (not part-time) after completion of study**
[Most common OPT use for GCTS students]
 - Full-time or part-time after completing all formal class requirements
 - Full-time or part-time during vacation periods
 - Part-time (fewer than 20 hours/week) during spring or fall semester, with full-time enrollment in classes
- Please note: "Full Time" is defined as 20 hours or more per week.*

Types of Employment Allowed For Pre- and Post- Completion OPT

All OPT employment, including post-completion OPT, must be in a job that is related to your degree program. For Gordon-Conwell students, this employment typically includes the following:

- *Paid employment:* Students authorized for post-completion OPT may work at least 20 hours per week for pay.
- *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.
- *Multiple employers:* Students may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to the student's degree program. During pre-completion OPT, this cannot exceed the allowed per week cumulative hours.

Procedure

OPT is recommended by Gordon-Conwell, but final approval is granted by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). Applications for OPT first require the recommendation of your International Advisor in Student Life Services at Gordon-Conwell, an updated I-20, payment of a \$410 fee (payable to "Department of Homeland Security"), a completed Form I-765, copies of all immigration related documents, two passport photos, and any other items your advisor and/or USCIS requests (see the *Optional Practical Training Application Process Form* for more information). If you already have a job, you may also include your employment offer letter. Once you gather all these required items, you must mail an application packet to USCIS's Servicing Center. USCIS will then review your application and if approved, send you an authorization card called an Employment Authorization Document Card (EAD) to the address provided on your I-765. Bring this card to your advisor so that copies can be made and included in your file. If USCIS has a question regarding your application before approval, they will send you a "Request for Evidence." Contact your advisor before taking any further action so that you may be advised on how best to respond to USCIS's request.

Application Processing Times

Processing times can take as long as three months, and OPT applications cannot be expedited. Current average processing times for applications are always listed on <http://www.uscis.gov> under the Vermont Service Center. USCIS tends to experience a high volume of application toward the summer and end of year. Due to the number of applications they receive during these times, please plan accordingly and if possible, apply early. You can apply as early as 90 days before the program completion date indicated on your I-20.

Failure to Comply with F-1 Visa Regulations

It is your responsibility to comply with all immigration regulations that apply to F-1 students before, during, and after any periods of OPT. Employment regulations pertaining to F-1 visas and OPT are very strict. Often, students who apply for OPT late may not receive their EAD until after their proposed employment start date indicated on their offer letter or I-20. Please know that working without the proper authorization, including your EAD card, is a serious violation of your F-1 visa status. Do not start working before you have received your EAD card. In some cases, you may need to make alternate arrangements with your employer to adhere to this rule. If you fail to comply with your F-1 visa regulations, you may not be eligible for benefits normally granted to F-1 students; and in most cases, you may jeopardize your stay in the U.S.

Travel During OPT

You may travel while on OPT, though keep in mind you are still in F-1 status and will need the following to re-enter the U.S.:

- Valid travel signature on your most current I-20 (within 5 months of re-entry)
- Unexpired EAD or I-797 receipt notice if your application is pending
- Letter from your employer indicating that you currently hold a job in your field of study and will be returning to the U.S. to resume employment
- Valid passport and F-1 visa

After OPT

You are entitled to a 60-day grace period beyond the last day of OPT indicated on your EAD. You may not work during your 60-day grace period.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long can I pursue OPT? F-1 students are eligible for a total of twelve months of OPT per educational level. This means at the masters degree level (MDiv, ThM) you have twelve months of OPT.

When should I apply for OPT? The earliest you can apply for OPT is 90 days before the program completion date indicated on your I-20. The latest date the USCIS will accept your application is 60 days after your completion date. In addition, OPT applications must be submitted to USCIS within 30 days of receiving an OPT I-20 from Gordon-Conwell. Once the OPT application is submitted to USCIS, it is very difficult to change or cancel the application.

What do I do after I apply for OPT? Once your packet is mailed, USCIS will send you a Form I-797 Notice of Action indicating that they have received your application and that your case will be decided on within 90 days. **DO NOT LOSE THIS FORM!** This form will probably come to you in approximately two or three weeks after you submit your application, though you may hear back before that time. It will also have a tracking number for your application, which will look something like "EAC-11-222-3333." You may check the status of your application online at www.USCIS.gov with this tracking number. Look for the case status online link and enter the EAC# in the appropriate field.