

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is it?

Many students seek post-completion OPT to work after graduation for one year in their field of study. It requires an application to USCIS, and there can be a significant wait between application and approval. It is important to coordinate with your DSO during and after the application process.

Things To Know

- OPT can be full-time or part-time and it can be paid or unpaid.
- You cannot begin to work before the date on your Employment Authorization Document (EAD).
- There are still reporting requirements to your DSO during OPT.

Eligibility

- Limit of one OPT period for every level of education (Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral).
- Participating in 12 months or more of full-time CPT makes you ineligible for OPT.
- Any pre-completion OPT will count towards the one year total for post-completion OPT.
- Employment must directly relate to your field of study.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to have a job to apply? No. You cannot begin work before your authorization period starts. However, you are allowed 90 days of unemployment during your approved OPT period.

I have done OPT before. Am I still eligible? You can apply for one OPT authorization for each degree level. You are eligible if you've never done OPT or if you've earned a higher degree since your last OPT.

What should I tell employers? Share with them that you are an international student at Bellarmine and that in most ways you would be like any other employee. Tell them that you will be able to work on your student visa for a year and what your eligible employment dates are.

What does my employer have to do? Very little! We need your supervisor's contact information. All reporting requirements are still Bellarmine's responsibility.

Do I qualify for a STEM extension? Contact your DSO to confirm if you are eligible. Homeland Security maintains a list of eligible major codes; the code on your I-20 must correspond with a code on the list.

Can I travel on OPT? You should not leave the U.S. before OPT is approved. Once you are approved, we recommend that you bring your EAD, your current I-20, and your employment offer letter with you. Your visa and passport must be unexpired. Travel signatures are only valid for 6 months while on OPT.

Do I have to pay taxes? Yes, if you are being paid for your work.

Applying for OPT

Timeline

You may apply up to 90 days before or 60 days after the program end date on your I-20. USCIS takes 90 to 120 days to process applications, so you must plan carefully. Your DSO must recommend an employment start date no later than 60 days after the program end date (however, USCIS may not approve that specific date). You are allowed to stay in the U.S. on your student visa while your application is pending. We strongly advise that you not leave the U.S. while your application is in process or while you are unemployed.

Step One: Confer with your DSO about your plans after graduation and OPT requirements.

Step Two: Fill out OPT Request form with your academic advisor and submit to DSO.

Step Three: Complete Form I-765 and gather application material.

Step Four: Review full application with DSO, who will issue a new I-20 with a recommendation for OPT.

Step Five: Within 30 days of the new I-20, submit your full application by mail.

Step Six: Once you receive your EAD from USCIS, you must notify your DSO and you may begin work.

Application Material

1. Completed Form I-765, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>
2. Copy of your passport's biographical page (must be valid for at least 6 months after application date)
3. Copy of most recent visa
4. Copy of I-94 (both sides or full electronic entry)
5. Two identical passport-style photos
6. Copy of any previous EAD
7. Copies of all prior I-20s (including latest with OPT recommendation)
8. Check or money order for \$410, payable to U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Reporting Requirements

Once you receive your EAD, you must send a copy to your DSO. We will communicate closely with you during the 90 day unemployment window; you will need to share certain information with us about your job. You must report within 10 days any changes in the following: legal name, home address, changes in employer or employer location. If you travel outside of the U.S., you should first warn your DSO. Your OPT is only valid while Bellarmine holds your SEVIS record, so if you wish to continue your studies at another school, we should not transfer your record until you are ready to be done with your OPT. There are some additional requirements for students on STEM extensions.