What is Optional Practical Training?

OPT is a special employment authorization granted by the Department of Homeland Security. Most students on an F-1 visa choose to use OPT to participate in employment related to their degree following completion of their academic program.

Who is eligible for OPT?

A person who has been in F-1 status for at least one full academic year (9 calendar months).

Eligible F-1 students may engage in Optional Practical Training:

1. After completion of a program of study
2. Before completion of studies if engaged in thesis or dissertation research. (This is most applicable to graduate level studies)
3. During the summer or over winter break.
4. During the regular academic year (on a part-time basis, deducted from the 12-month maximum at a proportional rate.)

Note: In this situation, Curricular Practical Training may be a better option for you. Ask your DSO for more information.

You are not eligible to apply for OPT if you leave the U.S. after graduation and before applying for OPT.

When can I apply?

You can apply as early as 90 days before graduation, and as late as 60 days after completing your degree. (This means that the application must be received by USCIS before the 60 day period ends) It is best to apply before graduation, as it can take an average of 90 days to process the application - PLAN AHEAD!

Do I need a job offer in order to apply?

No.

Can I go in person to a USCIS office to apply for OPT?

No. OPT applications must be submitted by mail, with the help of your DSO. The DSO recommends OPT permission; the USCIS must approve it. At Luther, the DSO will mail your application to USCIS.

Can I file the OPT application electronically?

No – you must follow the instructions in this packet. You MUST complete the I-765 online and print and sign it. https://www.uscis.gov/i-765
Can I request fewer than 12 months of OPT?

No. OPT applications will automatically be approved for 12 months (or will end 14 months from graduation, whichever comes first).

If I apply for OPT and then decide not to use it, can I get my OPT time back?

If the USCIS has not yet issued your EAD at the time you decide you do NOT want to use OPT, you may request to withdraw your application. Sometimes, due to timing, this is not always successful. If the EAD card has been issued, it is not possible to cancel the application, and USCIS will consider you to have used your OPT even if you did not actually work.

When can I start to work under OPT?

When you have the EAD (Employment Authorization Document – in other words, your OPT card) in hand, and at the start date noted on the card. This is why you need to plan ahead and apply early.

Can I change employers under OPT?

Yes. You may change employers, as long as the employment is related to your field of study. You must, however, keep your DSO updated on your address, and the name and address of your employer.

How long can I stay in the United States after my OPT expires?

Sixty days, unless you have obtained a new I-20 to enter a new degree program, have applied to extend your OPT (under the STEM extension), or applied to change to another immigration status.

Can I return to school after completing OPT?

Yes. You need to obtain a new I-20 for the next program of studies. Your current DSO will complete the USCIS procedure for transfer to the new school so that the DSO at your new school can issue the I-20. You will need to provide your DSO at Luther a copy of your acceptance to the new school.

If I have OPT for a year and return to school for another degree, can I have another year of OPT? Yes, as long as you are moving to a higher level of study.
Is OPT a different visa?

No. A person with OPT authorization is an F-1 student holding an EAD for OPT. The OPT acts as an extension of your I-20.

What's the difference between OPT and Curricular Practical Training (CPT)? If I used CPT, can I still use OPT?

As the name implies, CPT is meant to be an integral part of your college curriculum. At Luther, you must use the practical training for credit in your major department, hence, you must know what the job is before you apply for CPT and have permission from your academic department. You are still eligible for OPT as long as your CPT employment does not extend to 12 months of full time employment. For more questions about CPT, see your DSO.

How do I apply for OPT?

1. Read these Important Questions (above).
   Use the sample form I-765 as a guideline, and complete the Student Request for 12 Month OPT form.
   Be sure to have discussed your start date with your employer, if you have one.

   When the forms are completed, make an appointment with your DSO by calling 387-1014.

Use the OPT Application Checklist to make sure you have all the required docs when you meet with your DSO:

Photo specifications: You must submit two identical color photographs of yourself taken within 30 days of filing your application. The photos must have a white to off-white background, be printed on thin paper with a glossy finish, and be unmounted and unretouched.

The passport-style photos must be 2” by 2”. The photos must be in color with full face, frontal view on a white to off-white background. Head height should measure 1” to 1 3/8” from bottom of photo. Your head must be bare unless you are wearing a headdress as required by a religious order of which you are a member. Using pencil or felt pen, lightly print your name and Alien Receipt number on the back of the photo. (or I-94 number)

Do not make an appointment to see the DSO until you have read the OPT information packet and all the forms are completed.