

# F-1 Practical Training

Two types of practical training are available to students in F-1 status:

- i. Curricular Practical Training (CPT)
- ii. Optional Practical Training (OPT)

**NOTE:** Forms I-538 and I-765 can be found below in PDF format. You may fill them out from your keyboard, print, sign, and then present them with other required documents. All instructions are related *\*only\** to completing the forms for Practical Training purposes. Also, remember to record your name as it appears in your passport and on your Form I-20.

**I. CURRICULAR PRACTICAL TRAINING (CPT):** CPT allows a student to have a job that is an integral part of an established curriculum *for which academic credit is awarded*. The employment *must* be an important component of the student's academic program. Examples include alternate work/study programs, internships, and cooperative education programs. If the primary purpose of the employment is to provide the student with work experience which will enhance his/her professional career, then the student must use optional practical training. ***NO IMMIGRATION AUTHORIZATION IS REQUIRED for Curricular Practical Training, but please allow two weeks for the International Office to review your application.***

## ***RESTRICTIONS:***

1. Students are eligible for CPT if they are in F-1 status and have been studying full-time for at least one academic year. Special regulations apply for practical training that is a graduation requirement for all students in a particular program.
2. The practicum may be either a required or an optional part of the curriculum.
  - \* If the practical training is a **requirement for all students** following a given curriculum, then it does not have to confer credit.
  - \* If the practical training is a **required part of an optional course**, then the course **MUST be taken FOR CREDIT**. (Please refer to Question 2 for more information.)
3. The student must have a job offer in writing.

**NB:** There is no upper limit on amount of time available for Curricular Practical Training (CPT). **However, please note the following:**

- Students who use 12 months or more of full-time (20 or more hours per week) CPT will have **no** available time for Optional Practical Training.
- Students who use fewer than 12 months of full-time CPT still will be eligible for up to 12 months of Optional Practical Training.

## ***APPLICATION PROCESS***

1. Complete "Application for Curricular Practical Training"
2. Complete Form I-538.
3. Obtain an offer letter from your employer, specifying the starting *and* ending dates, location, salary, and the nature of the employment. **NOTE:** This letter is required and it *must* include the above information.
4. Schedule an appointment with an International Student Advisor and bring the following to the International Office:
  - a completed "Application for Curricular Practical Training" with required

attachments

- a completed Form I-538
- the offer letter from your employer
- a valid, unexpired passport (including your I-94 card), and
- your current I-20 Form

5. An International Student Advisor will review your application and notify you of the results. Please allow 2 weeks for review.

## **F-1 Practical Training (CPT) Questions and Answers**

1. **Q:** Is Curricular Practical Training a separate visa status?  
**A:** No. CPT is a benefit of F-1 status. While engaging in CPT, you still are considered to be an F-1 student under the visa sponsorship of Methodist College.
2. **Q:** An internship is not required for students in my major and there is no optional class that requires all students who take that class to do an internship, but I don't want to use any of my Optional Practical Training (OPT) time. Can I use a "special readings" course or independent study under the direction of my advisor to use CPT?  
**A:** If the internship is not required and if there is no class which requires all students taking the class to an internship, then the answer is "NO." You *must* apply for pre-completion OPT. Unfortunately, special readings and independent studies do not qualify for Curricular Practical Training
3. **Q:** How much does it cost to apply for Curricular Practical Training?  
**A:** There is no application fee for CPT.
4. **Q:** When should I apply for Curricular Practical Training?  
**A:** For CPT, apply at least two weeks before you are scheduled to begin work
5. **Q:** After I submit my application, how long will I have to wait before getting an answer?  
**A:** For Curricular Practical Training, allow approximately two weeks.
6. **Q:** Are applications ever denied?  
**A:** Applications for CPT are denied only when the eligibility or course criteria are not met.
7. **Q:** When can I begin work?  
**A:** For Curricular Practical Training, you may begin work only after you have obtained written permission from an International Student Advisor. CPT authorization cannot be back dated, and working *prior* to obtaining approval is a violation of status. If you work illegally, you must leave the U.S., re-enter as an F-1 student, and wait nine months before becoming eligible for employment benefits, such as Curricular Practical Training or Optional Practical Training.
8. **Q:** Can I begin work as a volunteer before my application is approved?  
**A:** Under no conditions can you begin before obtaining appropriate work authorization. Citizenship & Immigration Services has a very rigid interpretation of what activities constitute employment. Volunteering for a position which normally provides compensation is considered employment and is, therefore, not permitted without appropriate authorization. For more information, please see our web site entry on "Volunteer Activities".
9. **Q:** How long can I work on Curricular Practical Training? **A:** It depends. There is no upper limit on part-time CPT, but any student who works full-time CPT for 12 months or longer loses his/her Optional Practical Training benefits entirely.
10. **Q:** Do I have to work for the same employer during the entire period of my Curricular Practical Training?  
**A:** Changing employers while on CPT requires submission of a new application to an International Student Advisor. It is possible to have multiple employers simultaneously.

**II. OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT):** OPT may be used prior to or after completion of studies. OPT taken prior to completion of studies is commonly referred to as "*precompletion practical training*," while taken after completion of studies is often called "*postcompletion practical training*." This section discusses both types of OPT in detail. **IMPORTANT NOTE: INS APPROVAL IS REQUIRED FOR BOTH TYPES OF OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING.**

### **RESTRICTIONS ON OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (Pre- and Post-Completion)**

1. The employment must be **directly related to student's field of study**
2. **OPT can be used only during the following times:**
  - a. during the student's annual vacation and at other times when school is not in session if the student is currently enrolled and intends to register for the next term of the session; or
  - b. while school is in session, provided that practical training, in combination with any other authorized employment, does not exceed twenty hours a week; or
  - c. after completion of all course requirements (but before completion of a course of study), excluding a thesis or the equivalent, if the student is in a bachelor's or master's, program; or
  - d. after completion of the course of study
3. The **maximum total time** available for OPT is **12 months of full-time employment**. NOTE: effective January 1, 2003, a student becomes eligible for another 12-month period of practical training when s/he moves to a higher educational degree level.
4. **All OPT requires prior approval from the US Department of Homeland Security - Citizenship & Immigration Services (USDHS-CIS). *DO NOT BEGIN ANY EMPLOYMENT WITHOUT USDHS-CIS APPROVAL*** (USDHS-CIS approval = the starting date on Employment Authorization Document (EAD) or the date the EAD is issued, whichever date is later).
5. Students are eligible for OPT *only* after they are in F-1 status and have been studying full-time for at least one academic year.

### **PRECOMPLETION PRACTICAL TRAINING RESTRICTIONS**

1. Any time used in precompletion practical training is **subtracted from the 12-month allotment of OPT**.  
**Note:** Part-time pre-completion OPT is deducted at 1/2 the full-time rate.
2. Though not required, it is **strongly recommended that the student have a job offer** before applying for pre-completion OPT.
3. Students may not engage in full-time employment during the school year unless all course requirements have been met.
4. Students may supplement a teaching or research assistantship or other on-campus employment with OPT only if the total employment does not exceed 20 hours per week when school is in session and 40 hours per week during annual school holidays.

### **APPLICATION PROCESS**

- Complete Form I-538 and Form I-765
- Obtain a letter from your academic advisor indicating the following: your major, degree level, and expected date of completion and a recommendation for practical training.
- Obtain two photographs (see photo specifications at:  
[http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/newsrels/04\\_08\\_02Photo\\_flyer.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/newsrels/04_08_02Photo_flyer.pdf)

- Schedule an appointment with an International Student Advisor and bring the following to your appointment:
  - completed Forms I-538 and I-765 and letter from advisor
  - two (2) photographs that meet USDHS-CIS specifications
  - current I-20 form
  - valid, unexpired passport (including your I-94 card), and
  - a check or money order for \$180.00 payable to: **U.S. Department of Homeland Security** (effective 10/26/05)
- The International Student Advisor will review your application and, if all criteria are met, will issue a properly annotated page 3 of the Form I-20 to be submitted with the application. (Please allow two weeks for the International Student Advisor to review your application.)
- The following will be submitted by your International Advisor to USDHS-CIS in Mesquite, Texas: your Form I-765 and any required supporting documents, the two photographs, and a check or money order for **\$180.00** made payable to **U.S. Department of Homeland Security**.

### **POSTCOMPLETION PRACTICAL TRAINING RESTRICTIONS**

1. Available **AFTER completion of studies** (the completion of studies date for graduate students is typically the student's defense date; undergraduate and professional school students use the graduation date) May be **authorized for up to 12 months** (minus time spent in pre-completion practical training, not CPT) Can be **authorized without job offer** Student must **apply during the period 120 days prior to the completion of studies date and CANNOT apply during the 60-day grace period following the program end date**. NOTE: if the student has been enrolled in a 1-year program, then the earliest date s/he can apply is 90 days prior to the student's completion of studies date. Effective January 1, 2003, no student can apply for OPT during the 60-day grace period following completion of studies.
2. Student must complete OPT within 14 months of graduation.

### **APPLICATION PROCESS**

- Complete Form I-538 and Form I-765.
- Obtain a letter from your academic advisor indicating the following: your major, degree level, and expected date of completion and a recommendation for practical training.
- Obtain two photographs: see photo specifications at: [http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/newsrels/04\\_08\\_02Photo\\_flyer.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/publicaffairs/newsrels/04_08_02Photo_flyer.pdf)
- Schedule an appointment with an International Student Advisor and bring the following to your appointment:
  - completed Forms I-538 and I-765 and letter from advisor
  - two (2) photographs that meet USDHS-CIS specifications
  - current I-20 form
  - valid, unexpired passport (including your I-94 card), and
  - a check or money order for \$180.00 payable to: **U.S. Department of Homeland Security** (effective 10/26/05)
- The International Student Advisor will review your application and, if all criteria are met, will issue a properly annotated page 3 of Form I-20 to be submitted with the application. (Please allow two weeks for the International Student Advisor to review your application.)
- The following will be submitted by your International Advisor to USDHS-CIS in Mesquite, Texas: your Form I-765 and any required supporting documents, the two photographs, and a check or money order for **\$180.00** made payable to **U.S. Department of Homeland Security**.

## F-1 Practical Training (OPT) Questions and Answers

1. Q: Is Practical Training a separate visa status?  
A: No. Practical Training is a benefit of F-1 status. While engaging in practical training, you still are considered to be an F-1 student under the visa sponsorship of Methodist College.
2. Q: An internship is not required for students in my major and there is no optional class that requires all students who take that class to do an internship, but I don't want to use any of my Optional Practical Training time. Can I use a "special readings" course or independent study under the direction of my advisor to use Curricular Practical Training?  
A: If the internship is not required and if there is no class which requires all students taking the class to an internship, then the answer is "NO." You must apply for pre-completion Optional Practical Training. Unfortunately, special readings and independent studies do not qualify for Curricular Practical Training.
3. Q: How much does it cost to apply for Optional Practical Training?  
A: The application fee for OPT is currently \$180.00 (effective 10/26/05).
4. Q: When should I apply for Optional Practical Training?  
A: Immigration will not allow you to file for OPT earlier than 120 days BEFORE your 12-month period of OPT begins. You can apply for OPT as early as 120 days BEFORE your graduation date, and if you choose to do so, this means your start date will have to be the day after graduation.

You also must understand that the 12-month period of OPT can begin no later than 60 days AFTER graduation - the length of time F-1 students may remain in the U.S. after they graduate. **NOTE:** We cannot guarantee how long Immigration will take to process OPT applications.

**Example:** If graduation is May 14, you could file for OPT as early as January 15. Your work period would begin May 15th. If you want to postpone the start date as long as possible, your period of OPT could begin no later than July 14, which means you could apply as early as March 15.

It is important to note that you are NOT required to begin working on the start date of your OPT period. However, the 12-month clock starts ticking down from that first day of your OPT period, and if you don't actually work on the first day, you simply forfeit one day of authorized work. If you don't begin work until one month later, then you have lost that amount of time.

5. Q: If I graduate in May, why should I file so early?  
A: Currently, the processing time for OPT applications can take 2-3 months. This can change at any time. If you must start work immediately after graduation, then you need to give Immigration as much time as possible to process your application. **NOTE:** our office has no control over nor an ability to influence Immigration processing times.
6. Q: I don't have a job yet, I haven't sent out resumes and I have not had any interviews. When do I apply?  
A: You may wish to file for the latest possible start date. For December graduates, you may begin filing the end of September; for May graduates, the middle of March. In either case, your latest possible start date will be 61 days after graduation. While you still may not have a job, you must understand that the 12-month clock starts ticking down beginning with the first day of the OPT period. Any unworked days are lost.
7. Q: What happens after I submit my application to Immigration?  
A: After USDHS-CIS has processed your application, most Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) will be sent directly to the International Office, and you will be

contacted by us to come in and claim yours. It is possible, though rare, that an EAD may be sent to the USDHS-CIS Office in Charlotte, NC, and this will require personal pick-up.

8. Q: After I submit my application, how long will I have to wait before getting an answer from CIS?  
A: Allow 2-3 months.
  9. Q: What can I do to expedite the processing of my application?  
A: Nothing. Immigration adjudicates applications on a first-come/ first-served basis with no exceptions.
  10. Q: I absolutely must have my work authorization right away. What can I do?  
A: Unfortunately, nothing. Immigration does not offer same-day processing at local offices nor does CIS provide any mechanism for processing urgent requests. Students should, therefore, plan to apply for work authorization well in advance of their projected starting dates.
  11. Q: How can I find out the status of my application?  
A: After submitting your application to the USDHS-CIS Office in Texas, the International Office will receive an official receipt notice from CIS which you can access. In the lower left corner of the receipt notice is a telephone number that you can call to obtain information about your application. When calling, you must refer to the receipt number (SRC number), which is located in the upper left corner of the receipt notice. If you pay by personal check, when cashed, your SRC number also will appear on the back of your check. Additionally, you may wish to use the Immigration on-line status web site. To access this, go to: <https://egov.uscis.gov/graphics/cris/jsps/index.jsp?textFlag=N>. You must enter the Receipt Notice number, including the letters "SRC" and delete all hyphens. It will provide you with the most current information regarding the status of your case.
  12. Q: Are applications ever denied?  
A: Applications for OPT rarely are denied to eligible students.
  13. Q: When can I begin work?  
A: For Optional Practical Training, you may begin work only after you have obtained approval from USDHS-CIS. Remember: "Approval" means the starting date you requested which is printed on the USDHS-CIS-issued Employment Authorization Document (EAD) or the date on which the EAD is issued by USDHS-CIS, whichever is later.
- NOTE:** If your work authorization begins, for example, on July 1, but your employer asks that you begin on June 23, you CANNOT work before your EAD start date. If your employer asks that you postpone your start date until July 15, and your EAD start date is July 1, you can wait and start July 15, only you will lose 15 days of work authorization that you cannot recover.
14. Q: Can I begin work as a volunteer before my application is approved?  
A: Under no conditions can you begin before obtaining appropriate work authorization. Immigration has a very rigid interpretation of what activities constitute employment. Volunteering for a position which normally provides compensation is considered employment and is, therefore, not permitted without appropriate authorization. For more information, please see our web entry on "Volunteer Activities."
  15. Q: How long can I work on Optional Practical Training?  
A: Under Optional Practical Training, F-1 students can work for a maximum of 12 months. This twelve-month period does not have to be used at once. For more detailed information, please see the section entitled "Restrictions on Optional Practical Training."
  16. Q: Do I have to work for the same employer during the entire period of my Practical Training?  
A: No. Students on Optional Practical Training may change employers without obtaining permission from an International Student Advisor or from Citizenship and Immigration Services.

17. Q: If I submit my application for Optional Practical Training to **U.S. Department of Homeland Security** and then decide not to work, can I rescind my application?  
A: Unfortunately, once your application has been approved and the OPT start date reached, it is impossible to regain the period of Practical Training for which you have been authorized. Students should be very sure that they want employment authorization before submitting their applications. It may be possible to cancel your OPT if the request can be submitted before the OPT start date. Please consult with your international advisor.
18. Q: Can I leave the country while my application for OPT is being processed?  
A: Yes and no. The most risk-free answer to this question is **do not travel until you have the Employment Authorization Document** (also referred to as the EAD, I-766, or 'work permit') **in your hand**.

If you have submitted your OPT application and wish to travel outside the country while you are awaiting the approval AND you will return *before* you have completed your degree program, you may do so without any impact upon your OPT application. Of course, you will need to have a valid visa stamp and properly validated travel document in order to return, and you **must** make absolutely certain that when you reenter, your I-94 card reflects that you were admitted as an F-1 student. If you travel abroad *after* graduation but *before* the work permit is approved, then **you cannot, repeat CANNOT reenter the U.S. until you have your work permit in hand, a new I-20, AND proof that you are returning to a real job in order for the OPT to remain valid**. The risk in traveling abroad prior to approval means that if anything goes wrong with the application process or if the application is delayed for a lengthy period of time, you have no recourse other than to wait outside the country until the OPT is approved.

Immigration has a built-in mechanism for situations where it is slow in processing these OPT applications. Once 90 days have passed since your application was received, you may travel on Day 91 to the Immigration office in Charlotte and be issued an interim work permit that day. This mechanism, however, only works to your advantage IF you are inside the U.S. For the student who already has left the U.S., this '90-day rule' is NOT an option, thereby leaving the student stranded outside the country until the approval arrives. **NOTE:** if, *before* the OPT is approved, you choose to enter the country, either on an expired I-20 or in a status other than F-1 (such as WB, WT, B-1, B-2, etc.), **it is a violation of status to use the I-766 to accept employment**. It also may be viewed by Immigration as committing visa fraud. We will not be able to issue you a new I-20 and you will be unable to obtain a new F-1 visa stamp without a valid I-20.

19. Q: If I want to travel outside of the U.S. after my OPT has been approved, what do I have to do?  
A: **Many things!** After you receive your Employment Authorization Document (EAD), if you intend to travel abroad, contact our office immediately. As an F-1 student, you will need a valid passport and an updated I-20 verifying your status and approval for OPT. If you need to obtain a new visa stamp, you also will need a new I-20. Before we can issue a new I-20, we must make a copy of your current I-20, your I-94 card (front and back), your passport identity and expiration date pages, your current/most recent visa stamp, and new financial proof of funding documentation. **If you need a new visa stamp, remember that the burden is upon you to convince a U.S. consular officer that you intend to return to your home country after completion of your optional practical training. If the officer believes that it is your intention to remain in the U.S. beyond the ending date of your OPT, s/he may deny your visa and you will be unable to return to the U.S. Neither the MC International Office nor your employer can intervene should this occur.**

**MOST IMPORTANTLY:** you CANNOT travel abroad and reenter the U.S. after

graduation and during the OPT period **unless you actually are returning to a job**. As of December 15, 2004, SEVP has issued an interpretation of 8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f)(13)(ii) making it clear that after your OPT is approved and the EAD issued, you only can reenter the U.S. to **resume employment**. SEVP further clarified that the student need not have already commenced the actual job before leaving, as long as s/he has a **firm job offer** to which to return.

The problem with traveling after graduation *before* you have your work permit is that you have no idea *when* the OPT application will be approved. If you are out of the country when this happens, it will be possible for us to send the EAD to you and work with you to obtain the necessary documents to issue you a new I-20. **BUT, none of this will be of any good if you don't yet have a job!** Prior to the 2003-04 academic year, students could return to continue their job search while on OPT. This no longer is possible.

### **No job, no reentry, and no OPT.**

1. Q. If I travel abroad during OPT, how long is my I-20 valid?  
A. The signature on your I-20 cannot be more than 6 months old as of the day you plan to reenter the U.S. This means you must have your I-20 revalidated or endorsed for reentry on page 3. How do you obtain this signature? First, do *not* wait until the last minute to request this revalidation. You should mail your I-20 to our office at 5400 Ramsey St. Fayetteville, NC 28311. You must include a copy - front and back - of your I-94 card. The I-20(s) will be signed, dated and returned to you by mail to the address you enclose with the I-20(s). If you want the documents express mailed, then you must enclose with your request a pre-addressed and pre-paid express mail envelope. We will not be able to accept individual credit card information in order to send your visa documents by express mail.
2. Q. Do I have to report my living address to the Methodist College International Office during the period of OPT?  
A. Absolutely! In order to maintain valid F-1 status, this is required. A student must inform the MC International Office in writing of any legal changes to his/her name or any change of address within 10 days of the change. Except in cases where the U.S. Post Office cannot deliver mail to the location where a student resides, the address provided by the student must be the actual physical location where the student is living rather than a mailing address (e.g., P.O. Box).

Our office always has warned students that traveling on OPT without a job was a risky thing to do. OPT is authorization to work full-time, just as F-1 students are expected to be enrolled in their academic programs full-time. The later into the OPT period that students traveled without having a job begged the question, "what *are* you doing in the U.S.?" It now is clear. You cannot travel during OPT and reenter unless you are coming back to an actual job.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

If you know you need to travel soon after graduation, apply for OPT early enough to have a good chance of having your work permit by graduation. If filed by the first of March, there is a good possibility of this happening! If you do leave the country following graduation, please know you cannot get back unless you have a job offer letter in your hand. We also cannot guarantee that you won't have trouble reentering on just an I-765 Receipt Notice. To be in the strongest possible position, we recommend that when you leave the U.S. after graduation, you have:

### **For Departure**

1. your EAD in hand,
2. your new I-20 from MC in hand, and
3. your job offer letter in hand.

### **For Return**

4. a valid passport,
5. a valid F-1 visa stamp,
6. a valid I-20 (you left the U.S. with it),
7. a valid EAD (you left the U.S. with it), and
8. your job offer letter (you left the U.S. with it).

Any student who has both the EAD for post-completion OPT *and* a job or job offer letter should not experience difficulty reentering the United States with these items and the usual valid immigration documents to support their reentry.