WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY WNE

12-month OPT Application Packet

Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment directly related to a student's major field of study, and it may be used before or after completion of an academic program. OPT may be used for 12 months for *each* degree level. OPT may be used before or after the completion of a program but it is advisable to use only after graduation. Students on post-completion OPT are limited to 90 days of unemployment. Students with certain STEM majors may be eligible for an additional 24-month extension of post-completion OPT.

On the basis of recommendation for OPT for the student from Western New England University, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will provide final approval and issue an (Employment Authorization Document) EAD. The applicant must have an EAD card before they can begin OPT employment.

Eligibility:

- Students must have completed at least one full academic year of full-time study
- Maintain valid F-1 status
- Employment must be directly relevant to the major / field of study
- Have not used 12 months or more of full-time CPT (Curricular Practical Training)
- Have not regained legal status through reentry during the previous academic year

NOTE: Students will lose their OPT eligibility if they depart the U.S. during their grace period and USCIS has not received their OPT application prior to departure. Students will be unable to return until OPT is approved. The OPT applications must be made while the student is present in the USA.

OPT Categories:

1. Pre-completion (rare) : Pre-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows eligible F-1 students to work in their field of study before completing their academic program.
   - During Fall and/or Spring Semesters
     - Students who have not completed all required coursework may be authorized for pre-completion OPT on a part-time basis only.
     - Employment is limited to a maximum of 20 hours per week. This includes the combined total of all on-campus employment, any authorized off-campus employment, and pre-completion OPT.
   - Vacation Period
     - Authorization may be part-time or full-time
2. Post-Completion (most common)
   - After completion of the degree program

Application Process:

- **Pre-completion OPT applications:**
  - Students may apply up to 90 days before completing one full academic year of enrollment, provided the requested OPT employment start date is not earlier than the date they complete the full academic year.
  - Students must receive a new Form I-20 with the DSO's OPT recommendation

before submitting their application to USCIS.

- Students may not begin employment until they receive the required USCIS authorization (Employment Authorization Document) and reach the authorized employment start date.

- **Post-completion applications:**
  - **OPT Online Workshop and Quiz:** All students applying for Post-Completion OPT must complete the OPT Online Workshop and Quiz in Kodiak. You must receive a score of 90% or higher before your I-20 with an OPT recommendation will be created. You can take the quiz multiple times
  - OPT applications must be received by USCIS no earlier than 90 days before and no later than 60 days after the student's date of degree completion.
  - Make a Request for OPT I-20 . Allow at least 5 working days for your DSO to issue the I-20.
  - You must submit a complete online application to USCIS within 30 days of OPT recommendation.

Academic Eligibility and Degree Completion Requirements Before Post-Completion OPT Recommendation

- A DSO shall not recommend post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) if there is a reasonable indication that a student may be unable to complete all academic requirements and graduate by the program completion date currently recorded in SEVIS.
- Since students apply for Post-Completion OPT during their final semester, the following academic performance requirements will apply:
  - **Undergraduate students:** Students with a cumulative GPA below 2.2 at the time of their OPT request will not be recommended for post-completion OPT until their final grades are posted and the Registrar or appropriate academic department confirms that they have met all degree requirements and are eligible to graduate.
  - **Graduate students:** Students with a cumulative GPA below 3.1 at the time of their OPT request will not be recommended for post-completion OPT until their final grades are posted and the Registrar or appropriate academic department confirms that they have met all degree requirements and are eligible to graduate.
- Incomplete grades, grade appeals, and repeated coursework: Students must immediately notify at least **two Designated School Officials (DSOs)** if:
  - They receive an Incomplete (I) grade in any course that may affect their ability to graduate as scheduled.
  - They have submitted or intend to submit a grade appeal that could affect their academic standing, cumulative GPA, or eligibility to graduate.
  - They are required to repeat any course in a subsequent semester because they have not met the minimum academic requirements or the required cumulative GPA for graduation.
  - They become aware of any other academic circumstances that may

delay their graduation beyond the program completion date listed on their I-20.

- Extension of program completion date: If a student cannot complete all degree requirements by the program end date currently listed on the Form I-20, the student must immediately contact at least two DSOs and request an extension of the program completion date before the existing program end date expires. The student must provide appropriate supporting documentation from the academic department or Registrar confirming the reason for the delay and the revised expected graduation date.
- Student responsibility and OPT eligibility: It is the student's responsibility to provide accurate and timely information regarding academic progress and graduation eligibility. An OPT recommendation is contingent upon the student successfully completing all degree requirements within the applicable program period.

Important Notes:

- Students must not assume that submitting an OPT application or receiving an initial OPT recommendation guarantees graduation eligibility or USCIS approval. Students must immediately communicate any changes in their academic circumstances to at least two DSOs, Academic Advisor and Registrar.
- On-campus employment ends the same day as your program end date on your I-20 with OPT recommendation. You must have an approved EAD card on file with Western New England University's HR to work or volunteer as a research assistant with a faculty member.
- You cannot start working until you have physical EAD in your hands.
- During OPT you are still on F-1 status at Western New England University
- Employment must be a minimum of 20 hours per week.
- Employment must be directly related to your course of study. If you are in doubt, ask your academic advisor to review. OPT students can have an unpaid volunteer position but it must be related to your degree. Note about volunteer positions.
- Unemployment Caution: SEVIS records will automatically terminate for students who have no employment reported for 90 days. The DSO will not remind you. Be sure that you have made alternate plans and communicated them to at least two DSOs before your record is terminated.
    1. If you have accumulated 90 days of unemployment, you will no longer be on F-1 status and you do not have a grace period
    2. Any length of unemployment is tracked in SEVIS and failure to maintain status my result in automatic termination of the SEVIS record.
    3. You can only work during the authorized dates listed on EAD card.

Thesis or Dissertation Students

If you have applied for post completion OPT before you finish your final dissertation defense or thesis, it is recommended that the I-20 end date corresponds to your dissertation defense or date of submission of your final, edited dissertation. It will be impossible to change this date once your OPT application is submitted to USCIS should you change your dissertation defense plans.

Reporting Requirements

Students are required to report to the DSO **within 10 days**, any change in the following:

- Legal Name
- Residential address

- Employer name and address
- Change in status of current employment, including loss of employment, change of status to H-1B, transfer to another F-1 program, or change employers.
- Notify the DSO if you decide to permanently depart the U.S. during your OPT.
- Notify the DSO if you change or adjust your visa status during your OPT.

Mandatory 6-Month Reporting Requirements

Students are required to report the following information to a WNE Designated School Official (DSO) **every six months**, regardless of whether any information has changed since their previous report.

Students must confirm or update the following:

- Legal Name
- Residential Address
- Employer Name and Address
- Current Employment Status (including whether they are still employed)

Failure to complete the required six-month reporting may result in the termination of your SEVIS record and loss of your F-1 status.
Important: This reporting requirement applies even if there have been no changes to your information. You must submit your confirmation to the DSO by the required reporting deadline.

Keep records of your employment

Keep records of your employment history for your personal file, to present as evidence of maintaining lawful status should you apply for future immigration benefits. Scan all the items below and save electronically.

Examples of records to keep:

- Offer letters or contracts
- Job duties
- Payroll stubs and W-2s
- Letters describing volunteer activity and hours (if applicable)
- Taxes you have filed

Travel while OPT application is PENDING

This is not recommended as there may be problems returning to the U.S., especially after your program end date on the I-20. If international travel is unavoidable, consult an experienced immigration attorney before departure and carefully assess the potential risks. Ultimately, you are responsible for making an informed travel decision and understanding the possible consequences.

Travel during <u>APPROVED</u> OPT

Under normal circumstances, a student who has both (1) an EAD for post-completion OPT and (2) a job or job offer should not experience difficulty reentering the US. If either of these two conditions is missing, then the student is assuming risk. Each Port of Entry is different so be prepared with all documents. While on OPT, travel signatures on page 2 of the I-20 are only valid for **<u>6 months</u>** from the date of the most recent signature. If your travel signature has expired, request your DSO for a signature. You must have a passport, valid visa, and signed I-20 in addition to your EAD and job offer letter. Cap Gap Extension etc while traveling.

CAP GAP: The H-1B "cap-gap" occurs when an F-1 student's status and OPT work authorization expires after April 1, and before the student can start approved H-1B employment during the next fiscal year that begins on October 1. For example, a student currently on OPT on April 1 who timely-filed an H-1B petition that requests an employment start date of October 1 of the following fiscal year will have their duration of status and OPT employment authorization extended to October 1, called "cap-gap."

However, if you need an I-20 for any other reason to prove you are in cap-gap status, contact your DSO. You should send an e-mail to your DSO with end date on EAD card, current mailing address, current employer name and address including the start date of that employment, and employer name and address during Cap-gap dates.

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY WNE

OPT Request Form

Section 1: Student Information ***(REQUIRED, to be completed by student)***

Students Name: _____ **SEVIS#** N _____

Current Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Email address: _____ Major: _____

Degree Level: Bachelor _____ Masters _____ PhD/J.D./PharmD _____

Term finish coursework: Fall ____ Winter ____ Spring ____ Summer _____ Year: _____

Section 2: OPT Dates: ***(REQUIRED, to be completed by student)***

Your requested OPT start date must fall within ***60 days after your program end date*** *listed on your Form I-20. Your 12-month OPT authorization must be completed within 14 months of your program end date.*

Dissertation/Thesis Students: *If you have completed all required coursework and only your dissertation or thesis remains, you may be eligible to apply for OPT. We recommend selecting a start date after your anticipated dissertation defense or final submission. Please plan carefully, as changing your requested start date after submitting your application to USCIS may not be possible.*

Important: *Your on-campus employment authorization ends on your I-20 program end date. You must have separate employment authorization to continue working beyond that date.*

Student Acknowledgment:

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the OPT eligibility requirements, application procedures, and responsibilities. The information I have provided is true and accurate. I am requesting 12 months of post-completion OPT beginning on the date specified below.

Requested OPT Start Date: _____

Section 3: Academic Advisor/Department Recommendation ***(REQUIRED, completed by Faculty Advisor/Dean)***

To be completed by your academic advisor, department chair, or dean. Please keep in mind that your advisor or department can only confirm the expected graduation date; they cannot confirm eligibility for post-completion OPT.

***If you do NOT believe the student will complete all degree requirements by the term indicated below, do not complete this form. Please wait until the student's final grades are declared.**

**PhD/Thesis students are eligible to begin OPT once all coursework is completed. It is recommended they choose their dissertation defense or date of final submission as their end date.

After conducting a degree audit for _____, *(student's full name)* I expect this student will be able to complete all degree requirements for a _____(*Degree level)* in _____*(major)* in _____*(final term)*.

Advisor's Name: _____Advisor's Signature: _____Date: ____

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Section 4: OPT Agreement: ***(REQUIRED, to be completed by student,)***

Section 4: OPT Agreement (REQUIRED – To Be Completed by the Student)

By signing below, I, _____ (Student Name), acknowledge that I have read, understood, and agree to comply with the following OPT requirements and responsibilities:

1. **Maintaining F-1 Status:** I understand that I must comply with all applicable F-1 immigration regulations and OPT requirements throughout my authorized OPT period to maintain my immigration status.
2. **On-Campus Employment:** I understand that my on-campus employment authorization based on my F-1 student status ends on the program end date listed on my Form I-20. Continuing to work without appropriate authorization result in a violation of my F-1 status and termination of my SEVIS record.
3. **Reporting Changes Within 10 Days:** I understand that I must report the following changes to the ISSS office within 10 days of the change:
    - Legal name changes.
    - Changes in residential or mailing address.
    - New employment, changes in employment, or termination of employment. I must provide the employer's name, address, employment start date, job title, and a statement explaining how the employment relates to my degree. Providing the employer's EIN is also recommended.
    - Changes in immigration status, including filing an H-1B petition, an application for adjustment of status, or any other change in immigration status.
    - Early departure from the United States if I decide not to use my OPT or leave the country permanently before my OPT authorization expires.
4. **Unemployment Limit:** I understand that I may not accrue more than 90 days of unemployment during my initial 12-month post-completion OPT period. Exceeding this limit constitutes a violation of my F-1 status.
5. **Unemployment Tracking:** I understand that unemployment days are tracked in SEVIS and that I am responsible for keeping accurate records of my employment and unemployment periods and reporting all employment changes promptly.
6. **Six-Month Reporting:** If I am authorized for the STEM OPT extension, I understand that I must complete the required six-month validation reports, even if none of my personal or employment information has changed.
7. **Previous Immigration History:** I understand that previous SEVIS terminations, leaves of absence, interruptions in enrollment, failure to complete my academic program as planned, or failure to make accurate and timely application to the USCIS may affect my eligibility for OPT. I agree to disclose any relevant circumstances to the DSO.
8. **STEM OPT Eligibility for Thesis/Dissertation Students:** (If applicable), I understand that completing my coursework alone does not necessarily mean I have completed my degree. I must officially complete my degree and meet all applicable STEM OPT eligibility requirements before applying for a STEM OPT extension.
9. **DSO Recommendation and USCIS Adjudication:** I understand that the DSO's role is limited to only making an OPT recommendation in SEVIS. The final decision rests solely with USCIS, which may approve, deny, or request additional evidence regarding my application. I understand that WNE and its DSOs have no authority over USCIS adjudication or processing times. I understand that any delay, denial, or adverse decision by USCIS may affect my employment authorization and immigration status. To the extent permitted by applicable law, I agree not to hold Western New England University or its DSOs responsible for USCIS decisions, processing delays, or consequences.

Student's Signature: _____Date: _____

*If this is a PhD/Thesis student, when did they complete the coursework? _____

When are they expected to defend their dissertation/thesis? _____