

Slide 1: Introduction

Hello, and thank you for joining us to discuss Optional Practical Training hosted by the International Student and Scholar division of the Office of International Education.

Slide 2: Expectations

For the purposes of today's workshop, we will be discussing Optional Practical Training, also known as OPT. If you are interesting in learning about practical training opportunities while you are still enrolled as a student, please visit our website about Curricular Practical Training. During today's workshop, we will be discussing an overview of OPT as well as eligibility requirements, the application process, reporting requirements while on OPT, travel considerations, the STEM OPT extension briefly, Social Security Numbers, and the many resources OIE has for you regarding OPT. We would like for you to keep in mind that an application for OPT is the responsibility of the student. As such, it will be your responsibility to take initiative in seeking out resources in order to maintain your F-1 status while on OPT. The OPT workshop is just one of many resources provided by OIE, and we will review additional resources at the end of this presentation. It will also be your responsibility to contact USCIS should you have questions about your application, as well as keep them updated of any changes while the application is pending.

Slide 3: What is OPT?

What is Optional Practical Training? OPT is a benefit specifically for F-1 students.

It is a temporary employment authorization for F-1 students to engage in experiential learning opportunities in their field of study.

OPT is meant to expand what you've learned through your academic program by putting the knowledge you obtained in your classes to use in a professional experiential learning opportunity in your major area of study.

F-1 students are eligible for a total of 12 months of OPT per higher educational degree level. For example, once you complete your bachelor's degree, you are eligible to apply for 12 months of post-completion OPT. If you decide to continue your education, and graduate with a master's degree, you will be eligible for an additional 12 months of post-completion OPT at the master's level. You are not, however, allowed to combine multiple periods of post-completion OPT. For example, if you graduate with a bachelor's degree, but do not use your OPT, and move on to your master's degree, you will not be able to use your bachelor's level OPT after the completion of your master's degree.

If approved for OPT, you will receive an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) that is a plastic card the size of debit or credit card and it is issued by government agency known as United States Citizenship and Immigrations Services or for short USCIS.

Slide 4: Types of OPT

There are three types of OPT. First, there is Pre-Completion OPT, which is used before you complete your degree program. It is not very common for students to use pre-completion OPT, and is usually used for work opportunities that do not traditionally fit into a program's CPT option. Time used for Pre-completion OPT will be deducted from your 12 months of Post-completion OPT.

Post-Completion OPT is used after the completion of your program or graduation. This type of OPT is very popular among students at Georgia Tech.

There is also the STEM OPT Extension. Students with an eligible degree in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics are eligible to apply for a two year extension of their 12 month Post-Completion OPT. We will briefly discuss STEM OPT a bit later on in the presentation.

Slide 5: Eligibility to Apply for OPT

To be eligible for OPT, you must be in valid F-1 student status and physically present in the US. You must also be enrolled full-time for one academic year before you become eligible to file your OPT application. One academic semester is defined as 30 weeks, so at Georgia Tech an academic year is defined as a fall and spring or spring and fall semester. You must also be enrolled full-time in your final term or authorized by ISSS to have a reduced course load. For post-completion OPT specifically, you must be graduating or completing remaining thesis or dissertation requirements. You must meet all degree requirements. Thesis students have a bit of flexibility in applying for post-completion OPT. Thesis students are eligible to apply once all degree required coursework has been completed and may complete their thesis or dissertation requirements while working full-time on OPT. For thesis students, as long as they have completed all degree required coursework and only have their thesis remaining, they can apply for post-completion OPT based off an earlier semester program end date. Even if they submit their thesis later than the thesis deadline, or even into the next semester, they are able to still continue with their OPT as long as all coursework has been completed. After the semester end date when applying for OPT, F-1 visa holders will only be eligible for on-campus employment if they are on an authorized period of OPT, so you may not be eligible for on-campus employment after the end of term date.

Accruing more than 11 months and 28 days of *full-time* CPT makes you ineligible for OPT. Full-time CPT that is less than 11 months and 28 days does not deduct from your post-completion OPT. Part-time CPT has no impact on OPT eligibility. Additionally, on-campus employment does *not* count against your 12-months of OPT eligibility.

If you are outside of the U.S. after your program end date and have not applied for OPT, you will lose OPT eligibility.

Please keep in mind that OPT is an extension of your F-1 status, so you will be considered in F-1 status for the duration of your OPT period.

Slide 6: Post-Completion OPT

Now that we have discussed OPT, we will now talk about Post-Completion OPT in more detail. In order to apply for OPT, you do not need a job offer. It is possible to apply for OPT without an employer. Once employed, however, your employment must be directly related to your field of study. Active employment is required to maintain your OPT benefit and OPT participants must work a minimum of 20 hours per week. While in a period of post-completion OPT you are limited to a maximum of 90 days of unemployment. If you are unemployed at any point after the OPT start date on your EAD it will be counted toward the 90-day unemployment limit.

Slide 7: Application Process

Applying for OPT is a 3 step process, and you are currently completing step one, which is to review our OPT resources. Once you have reviewed our resources, you can move on to step two where you will need to submit a request in iStart to obtain your I-20 with OPT recommendation. You will need to pay a \$35 OIE Practical Training Fee so we are able to continue to support you after graduation. It is during this step that you will let us know what you want your recommended OPT start and end date to be. We will discuss choosing your OPT start date in the OPT timeline slide. You will also upload a draft of your I-765, or the application for employment authorization, for an OIE advisor to review. We will inform you of any suggested edits to this form. Please be sure to utilize the resources on our website for tips on how to complete the I-765, and keep in mind that you will be able to make edits to this form after submitting it in iStart and before you mail it to USCIS. If you are a thesis student, an e-form will also be sent to your thesis advisor to confirm that you have completed all degree required coursework and the processing time will begin on the date we receive your advisor's response.

An OIE advisor will review your request and respond to your request via email within our published processing times. If you are eligible to receive the OPT recommendation from OIE, we will issue you a new I-20 with an OPT recommendation and you can move on to step three. We encourage you to review page 2 of the I-20 form to ensure the OPT recommendation is listed and the requested OPT dates are accurate. You will then mail the I-20 with OPT recommendation and all of the contents of your OPT application packet to USCIS within 30 days of the recommendation. You can find a full application checklist on our OPT website. Because this is your application to USCIS, OIE is not able to review individual applications. We do encourage you to review the many resources on our website to ensure a successful application.

Slide 8: I-765 and the OPT application

The I-765 is the application form that you will send to USCIS to request the Optional Practical Training authorization. According to the instructions on the form, it must be filed from within the US. USCIS has detailed instructions on their I-765 website on how to complete the I-765, and OIE has also developed a resource on our website on how to complete the form. A few common things to note are the instructions to include "N/A" or "none" on any field that does not apply to you. The USCIS instructions specify, "If a question does not apply to you type or print "N/A" unless otherwise directed. If your answer to a question which requires a numeric response is zero or none type or print "None" unless otherwise directed." If you are not able to type N/A or None into the PDF version of the I-765, we recommend that you write it by hand. You will also want to include a mailing address that will be valid for at least 4 months into the future, as USCIS will send all correspondence to that mailing address. Should you change your address while you application is pending, you can update your address on the USCIS website. We ask that you do not use the OIE address as your mailing address. Finally, please be sure to sign the I-765 that you send to USCIS with your OPT application in ink.

You will need to include a check or money order for the I-765 filing fee. There is also the option to pay by credit card which sometimes causes challenges. It is important to include the exact fee amount with your application, since providing a different amount will lead to a rejection of your application. We recommend referring to the USCIS filing fee website for the most up-to-date filing fee, as they are subject to change. Please note that students applying for OPT do not need to pay the additional biometric fee. You will also want to verify that the I-765 form you are submitting is the most up-to-date form version. You can also find this information on the USCIS website, and compare it with the form edition found at the bottom of the page. Once your application is complete, you will need to mail the application to USCIS. You can find the filing addresses on the USCIS website. We recommend using tracking to ensure your application arrives at USCIS within 30 days of your OPT I-20 being issued. When

your application is received by USCIS, you will be issued an I-797 Receipt Notice with a receipt number. You will be able to use this receipt number to track the status of your case. In general, it takes approximately 2-4 weeks for USCIS to mail a receipt notice to the mailing address provided on the I-765.

USCIS may determine that additional information is necessary in order to adjudicate your request. USCIS will stop the processing of your application and issue a letter or RFE explaining what additional documentation is required. USCIS will communicate a deadline for when you must respond with the additional support documentation. If you do not provide the requested evidence by the deadline, USCIS will deny your OPT application. Once USCIS receives the additional information, an officer will resume the processing of your petition and the “processing clock” will resume.

In rare cases, your application may be rejected or denied. If your application is rejected by USCIS, USCIS will return your OPT packet along with a letter explaining the reason for the rejection. In this scenario, your OPT packet will not be receipted by USCIS. Please immediately contact OIE and provide a copy of the rejection or denial letter. OIE will assist you with understanding the reason for the rejection or denial and provide support with understanding your options for next steps. Please note, if you receive the rejection or denial notice after your filing window for OPT ends you may no longer be eligible to apply for the OPT benefit and will need to consult with an immigration attorney for additional support.

Current processing times are on average about 60-90 days. We do, however, encourage you to visit USCIS’s website for the most up-to-date processing times. You are also able to check the status of your case once you receive your receipt number.

Slide 9: The OPT Timeline

Let's discuss the OPT timeline. The first date I would like to call your attention to is the end of the semester in which you will meet all of your degree requirements. This is the end-of-term date and will correspond with the I-20 end date utilized for the OPT recommendation. In other words, when you apply for OPT, your I-20 will be shortened to this date. Thesis students who have completed all of their degree required coursework but have thesis requirements remaining are able to apply for OPT based off of the semester end-of-term date after which they wish for the OPT experience to begin.

So when can students apply for OPT? Students are able to apply for up to OPT 90 days before this end of term date, and up until 60 days after the end of term date. Your application for OPT must arrive at the USCIS filing location within this filing window. Remember you must first submit the OPT forms in iStart to receive your OPT I-20. After you receive your OPT I-20 you can send your application to USCIS no earlier than 90 days prior to the end of term date in which you will need all of your program requirements, and it must arrive no later than 60 days after your end of term date.

When you submit the OPT e-forms in iStart, you will inform OIE of your requested start date. This is the date that you are requesting to start your OPT experience. You can choose any date within 60 days after your end of term date. Keep in mind that USCIS will sometimes adjust the start date, so it is important to check your EAD card when it arrives to know your exact OPT start date. Before you can start working on post-completion OPT, you must have your EAD card and have reached the start date printed on the card.

Once you have obtained your EAD card and you are in your authorized period of OPT employment, you will have ongoing reporting requirements. You are expected to work a minimum of 20 hours per week in a position related to your field of study. You are expected to report employment and changes to your information within 10 days of any change. We will cover this in more detail in a later slide.

If you are eligible for the STEM OPT Extension, you are eligible to apply for this 90 days prior to the expiration of your 12 month OPT period. The application process is similar to your original OPT application in that you will first need to submit the e-forms in iStart, receive a STEM OPT I-20, and apply to USCIS with a complete application. Your application must arrive at USCIS before the expiration of your 12-month OPT period. When properly filed, your STEM extension will start directly following the expiration of your 12-month OPT period and you will be eligible to continue employment for 180 days after the OPT end date on the EAD while awaiting approval of the STEM Extension.

After completing all of your practical training, whether that be the 12-months of completion OPT or the STEM extension if you are eligible, you will have a 60-day grace period. During this grace period, you will have the option to transfer to another SEVP approved school, change your degree level within Georgia Tech, apply for a change in visa status, or depart the US.

Slide 10: OPT Reporting Requirements

So now let's talk about your reporting requirements after your OPT is approved. F-1 student visa holders may not begin any employment activities until the start date indicated on the EAD card and until the EAD has been received by the student. Again, you cannot begin any kind of volunteering, paid employment, or unpaid employment before receiving your OPT EAD card, nor prior to the start date listed on your OPT EAD card. If you begin working before receiving your EAD card or before the start date listed on your EAD, your F-1 SEVIS record will be terminated for unauthorized employment. You would then be ineligible to continue working on OPT and you would be expected to depart the U.S. immediately.

Once you are approved for OPT and have your EAD card, you are required to report your personal and employment information to our office using the Personal Contact / Employment Update e-form in iStart. If there any changes to your residential address, phone number, email, name of employer, employer address, supervisor information, or you have an interruption or change in your employment, you are required to notify our office by submitting this e-form in iStart. If you fail to report your employment, it is possible that your F-1 record may be auto-terminated in SEVIS, so it is extremely important to have your employment updated in a timely manner. When you are approved for OPT, you will gain access to the SEVP Portal, which is an optional OPT reporting tool - use of this tool is not mandatory. Keep in mind that we are unable to transfer information from the SEVP Portal to iStart, so in order to keep your records up-to-date, we do require that you also submit your employment and contact updates via iStart, should you decide to utilize the SEVP Portal.

You have up to 90 days of unemployment starting on the approved OPT start date listed on your EAD card. If your OPT application is still pending after your requested start date, keep in mind that the unemployment limit only starts after the OPT start date listed on your EAD card, so be sure to check your EAD card carefully once it is issued to understand if any unemployment days have been counted. If you reach the 90-day unemployment limit, you should make plans to either depart the U.S. or seek alternatives if you wish to remain inside the U.S.

Slide 11: Travel & Visa Concerns

Now we will talk about travel and visa concerns while on OPT. When you are on an approved period of OPT you are able to travel abroad on a temporary basis, less than five months, and re-enter the US in order to continue your employment. You will be required to carry the following documents with you: a valid passport, a valid F-1 visa, a valid travel signature on your I-20, you're unexpired EAD card, and it is highly recommended that you also bring proof that you are returning to continue employment. This can be a document such as your employment offer letter, or a letter from your employer confirming your employment. Please keep in mind that while you're on OPT, you are still in F-1 student status. This means that you will need to make sure your F-1 student visa in your passport has not expired. If your visa has expired, you will need to make plans to renew your visa while you are abroad. Please also note that the travel signature on your I-20 is only valid for 6 months while you are on OPT. If your travel signature will be less than 6 months old when you plan to re-enter the US, please be sure to apply for a new travel signature in iStart prior to your travel.

While it is possible to travel with a pending post completion OPT application, OIE does not recommend travel abroad in this situation. Travel with a pending OPT application is considered to be high risk. For example if you are requested to supply more evidence to USCIS you will be issued an RFE. An RFE requires immediate attention, and applicants who are outside of the US may find it difficult to respond to this request. Additionally if the applicant is abroad when the application is approved, they may be asked to present an unexpired EAD card upon return. If the applicant is abroad it may be difficult to coordinate mailing the EAD card. Finally if the application is rejected or denied while the applicant is abroad the applicant is not able to re-enter the US once the I-20 end date has passed. Since the I-765 specifies that the application must be filed from within the United States, you will not be able to re-file your application even if you are still within the sixty-day filing window because you are not eligible to re-enter the U.S. during the sixty day grace period if OPT has not been approved. Because of this, OIE does not recommend travel with a pending application.

Slide 12 – STEM OPT Extension

We will now discuss the STEM OPT extension. For the purposes of this presentation, we will be discussing just a brief overview of the STEM OPT extension. Before applying for the STEM OPT extension, I would encourage you to review the resources on our website for the most up-to-date information. The STEM OPT Extension is a 24-month extension to the 12-month post-completion OPT period, meaning you must be on a valid period of post-completion OPT to be eligible for the STEM OPT Extension and you are not able to apply for the STEM extension while on pre-completion OPT.

In order to be eligible to apply for the STEM OPT extension, you must have earned a degree that is on the STEM Designated Degree Program list. The degree is designated by the 6 digit CIP code. You can find the CIP code that corresponds with your degree listed on the first page of your I-20. Unlike post-completion OPT, where you don't need an employer to apply, you must be employed by an eligible employer in order to apply for the STEM Extension. Employers must be registered with E-verify, which is an employment verification system. Employment must be in a paid position directly related to your STEM eligible degree. Employment must also meet a minimum of 20 hours per week. When applying for the STEM OPT extension, you will also need to complete an I-983 training plan. This must be completed and signed by you and your employer prior to applying for the STEM extension in iStart. This document will be retained by OIE, and you should keep a copy for your records. It is not required to send this document to USCIS. It is possible, though rare, to have more than one job while on the STEM OPT extension. Keep in mind that each opportunity must meet all of the STEM extension eligibility

parameters, including being enrolled in e-verify, working at least 20 hours per week, and completing an I-983 training plan.

Slide 13 – STEM OPT Extension Considerations

While the STEM OPT extension application and reporting requirements are similar to 12-month post-completion OPT, there are several key differences. You are able to apply for the STEM OPT extension within 90 days of your post completion OPT expiring. You will submit e-forms in iStart, and an I-20 with a STEM Extension recommendation will be created for you, and you will mail this I-20 with your I-765 application and supporting documentation to USCIS. For the complete application checklist, please review our website. If your application is timely applied for, meaning USCIS received your application by the expiration of your EAD card, you can continue your employment uninterrupted for 180 days, or until a decision is made on your application. We recommend that you apply with enough time to receive your I-797 receipt notice to provide proof of filing to your employer.

In addition to reporting any changes to employment or address, you will also be required to verify your employment details every 6 months during your STEM OPT Extension period. You will be required to submit verification e-forms in iStart every 6 months. If you end an employment opportunity while on the 24 Month OPT Extension you are allowed additional unemployment days. While on the 24 Month OPT STEM Extension you will have an aggregate of 150 days of unemployment time between your 12-month OPT period and your STEM extension. For example if you use 50 days of unemployment while on your post completion OPT, you will have an additional 100 days while on the STEM OPT extension. Please remember that any loss of employment must be reported to OIE via iStart within 10 days of any change. You can find more information about your reporting requirements while on the 24 Month STEM OPT Extension on our website.

Slide 14: SSN

Now let's talk about social security numbers, or SSN. In order to work in the US you must have a Social Security number. If you have already been issued a social security number for previous employment, such as on-campus employment or curricular practical training, you do not need to apply for a new Social Security number. The Social Security number you are issued is valid for life. If you don't already have a Social Security number it can be requested as a part of the I-765 application. There are several questions on the I-765 that will allow you to apply for an SSN at the time of your 12-month OPT application. Please keep in mind that OPT and SSNs are processed by two separate government agencies; it may take a few additional weeks to receive your SSN after your EAD card arrives. It may be possible to start working before you receive your SSN, you will want to check with your employer to see what documentation they require before you can start your employment, and if there will be any impact on your ability to receive pay.

If you get a Social Security Number, you should protect it in order to avoid becoming a victim of identity theft. You should not carry your Social Security card around with you. You should keep your card and your number in a safe place and do not give it out to anyone who does not have a legitimate reason to ask for it. If someone is able to get your Social Security Number, they can open bank accounts or buy things under your name. You can quickly become a victim of identity theft if someone gets your number and they can cause problems far into the future. Do not give your number over the phone or via email, particularly if you did not initiate contact.

Slide 15: OIE Resources

We hope you enjoyed our OPT Workshop. If you have additional questions about OPT we encourage you to visit the OIE website. This website has a lot of additional information including information about OPT eligibility, how to apply for OPT, guides for completing the I-765, how to mail the application, maintaining status on OPT, OPT and travel, options for you after your OPT ends, as well as links to additional resources. If you have additional questions please send us an email. If you have a specific question or a unique situation it may be best to arrange to speak to an advisor. You can find information about how to speak to an advisor on our website. Please be sure to review our resources, as many common questions are addressed on our website.

Thank you for attending our OPT workshop, and best of luck as you near the end of your academic journey at Georgia Tech!