Missouri Valley College

INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Optional Practical Training

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1.OPT Overview Guide

What is OPT??

- OPT (Optional Practical Training) is a 12-month work authorization for F-1 students.
- It allows you to work temporarily in a job directly related to your major or program of study.
- Most students apply for OPT during their final semester before graduation.
- OPT is not a separate visa or status—it is a benefit of your F-1 status, usually used after you finish your degree.

Eligibility Requirements

To apply for OPT, you must:

- Be in valid F-1 status when you apply.
- Have completed at least one full academic year of full-time study at Missouri Valley College.
- Be in your final semester and planning to graduate.
- Not have used more than 12 months of full-time CPT at your current degree level.
- Not have already completed OPT at the same academic level.

When Can You Apply?

- You have a total of 150 days to apply for OPT!
- You can apply for OPT starting 90 days **before** your program ends and up to 60 days **after** your program ends.

OPT Application Timeline for Upcoming Graduates

Term/Semester	Program End Date	Application Dates
Fall 2025 Graduates	December 12, 2025	September 15, 2025 – February 6, 2026
Spring 2026 Graduates	May 8, 2026	February 10, 2026 – July 6, 2026

Choosing Your OPT Start Date

What It Is: The OPT start date is the first day you can begin working after your program ends.

- It must fall within the 60-day grace period after your official program end date (as listed on your Form I-20).

IMPORTANT

- Always check with the International Office before applying. They can confirm your timeline and help with your application.
- Use your official program end date on the I-20.
- Not the graduation ceremony date.
- If you apply before or after these dates, your application will be denied.

Things to Consider When Choosing a Start Date:

USCIS Processing Time:
- OPT can take 2 to 5 months to get approved.
- Your chosen start date won't make the process faster, so apply as early as possible.

90-Day Unemployment Rule:
- You are only allowed to have up to 90 days total without a job during your 12 months of OPT.
- If you don't have a job yet, choosing a later start date gives you more time to find one.

Travel or Moving Plans:
- If you plan to travel or relocate after graduation, choose a start date that works with your schedule.

Job Offers:
- If you already have a job lined up, choose a start date that matches your employer's needs.
- If not, select a later date to give yourself more flexibility.

2.OPT Application Steps

01 **Read the OPT Student Guide**

- Read the OPT Student Guide from the International Office.
- The Guide explains what OPT is, how to apply, what to do after you apply, how to maintain your F-1 status, your responsibilities, deadlines, and more.
- You must follow all OPT rules and deadlines. The International Office can help, but it is your responsibility to follow all rules.

02 **Complete the OPT Graduation Audit Form**

The OPT Graduation Audit Form confirms you are on track to graduate and is required for your OPT application.

Steps to complete the form:
1. Student Section: Fill in your personal and academic information.
2. Registrar Section: Take the form to the Registrar's Office so a staff member can sign and confirm your expected graduation date.

3.Submit: Scan and email the completed form to:
  ○ David Alvarenga – dea0306@moval.edu
  ○ Yesenia Farfan – farfany@moval.edu
Important: You are responsible for coordinating with the Registrar's office and making sure both sections are completed.

03 Request Your New I-20

Next, request an updated Form I-20 with OPT recommendation.
Steps to Request Your I-20:
  1.Complete the **I-20 OPT Recommendation Request Form**
    ○ Include your personal and academic information
    ○ Provide your requested OPT work start date
    ○ Add your expected graduation date
  2.Review and Sign the Acknowledgment Section
    ○ Confirms you have read the OPT Student Guide
    ○ Confirms you understand your responsibilities while on OPT
  3.Submit: Scan and email the completed form to:
    ○ David Alvarenga – dea0306@moval.edu
    ○ Yesenia Farfan – farfany@moval.edu

IMPORTANT

- **Submit your I-20 Request Form as early as possible to allow enough time for processing and scheduling your OPT meeting.**
- **Delays in submitting the request may affect your ability to apply for OPT on time.**

Required Documents for OPT Applications:
- Passport(s) and F-1 visa(s)
- One passport-style photo (**Requirements**)
- All I-20s with CPT authorizations (if applicable)
- Most recent I-94 (**access via passport**)

If You've Applied for OPT Before, Include:
- Copies of all previous EAD cards
- Copies of all I-20s with OPT/STEM OPT recommendations
- Copies of all USCIS I-797 approval notices

Important: Once you complete steps 1–3, the International Office will email you when your new I-20 is ready, along with a link to schedule your OPT meeting. During the meeting, we will:

1. Review your progress to ensure all steps are completed.
2. Give you your new I-20 form with the OPT Recommendation.
3. Check your documents and help you scan them for your online application.
4. Explain the steps to submit your OPT application online.

This ensures you are fully prepared and your application can be submitted correctly.

After Your OPT Meeting:

- The International Office will email you step-by-step instructions on how to apply for OPT online using your USCIS account. Follow these instructions carefully to complete your application.

After Submitting Your Application:

- Email the International Office to let us know you have applied. This helps us send you important reminders, updates, and guidance throughout your OPT period.

IMPORTANT

- You must apply for OPT within 30 days of the issue date on your new I-20 form.

- Missing this deadline could cause your OPT to be denied.

3.OPT Pending Period

After submitting your OPT application to USCIS, it usually takes 2 to 5 months for approval. During this time, your application status is *pending*.

What You Can Do
- Stay in the U.S. with valid F-1 status.
- Travel within the U.S. without restrictions.
- Track your case online using your receipt number: Check My Case Status – USCIS
- Prepare for work: update your resume, apply for jobs, and practice interviews.

What You Cannot Do
- Start working before your EAD card is received and your OPT start date has arrived.
- Work on campus after the program end date listed on your I-20.

USCIS Notifications and Case Inquiries

After Submission
- You will receive a receipt notice (Form I-797) confirming USCIS received your application. This notice includes your receipt number to track your case.
- Pending over 90 days? Submit a case inquiry: USCIS e-Request

Once Approved, USCIS Will Mail You:
- An approval notice & Your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card.

Important Reminders During the OPT Pending Period

Responding to USCIS Requests:
- If you receive a Request for Evidence (RFE), contact the International Office immediately. We will guide you on what documents to provide to avoid delays or denial.

Travel Questions:
- Consult the International Office before traveling while your OPT is pending.
- Traveling internationally is not recommended without your EAD card and a job offer, due to risk of being denied re-entry.

Stay Informed:
- Check your case status online using your USCIS receipt number.
- If pending over 90 days, you may submit a case inquiry: **USCIS e-Request**

Update Your Address:
- Notify the International Office immediately if you move. We will update USCIS to ensure you receive all notices and your EAD card.

4.OPT Approval Period

Once your OPT is approved by USCIS, you must take a few important steps to maintain your F-1 status. This includes receiving your EAD card, setting up your SEVP Portal account, and updating your employment and contact information.

Step 1: Wait for your EAD Card

- You will receive your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) by mail.
- Your EAD will list the work start and end dates of your authorized employment.
- You cannot begin working until you have both received your EAD card and reached the work start date listed on the card.
- All employment must be directly related to your major and take place within the dates shown on your EAD Card.

Step 2: Create and Use the SEVP Portal

Once your OPT is approved by USCIS, you will receive an email from the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) with a personal link to create your SEVP Portal Account.

- This email comes from:
  do-not reply.SEVP@ice.dhs.gov
- Check your Spam, Junk, or Trash folders if you do not see the message.
- The email includes a personal link to create your portal account — this link expires in 14 days, so be sure to open it and create your account.
- If the link expires before you activate it, contact the International Office right away so we can help reset it.

You are required to use the SEVP Portal to:

- Report your job and employer information.
- Update your employment information within 10 days of starting or changing a job.
- Report any periods of unemployment.
- Do not delete previous employer records when updating your profile.

IMPORTANT

Trouble creating your SEVP Portal account? Complete the OPT Employment Information Form and email it as a PDF to both dea0306@moval.edu and farfany@moval.edu.

The International Office will use this form to update your employer information in SEVIS and issue your updated I-20.

Step 3: Keep Your SEVP Portal Information Up to Date

Once your OPT is approved, you must use the SEVP Portal to keep your information current. **Federal regulations require that you report any changes within 10 days.**
You are responsible for updating:

- Your U.S. residential address
- Your U.S. phone number
- Your personal email address
- Your employer's name and address
- Your job title
- The start and end dates of each job
- A brief explanation of how your job relates to your major
- Any periods of unemployment
- The date you leave the U.S. (if before your OPT end date)
- Any change in visa status (such as H-1B approval)

IMPORTANT

Keeping your SEVP Portal up to date is a legal requirement during your entire OPT period. Failing to report changes in your employment, address, or contact information within 10 days can result in termination of your F-1 status and loss of OPT benefits. Even if nothing changes, you are still responsible for checking that your information remains accurate in the SEVP Portal at all times.

REMINDERS

1.Unemployment Limit

- You are allowed up to 90 days of unemployment during your 12-month OPT. SEVIS tracks this through your SEVP Portal updates.
- Exceeding the limit will end your F-1 status and may affect future visa or immigration benefits.
- Unpaid work (like internships or volunteering at nonprofits) may count as employment if related to your major and follows labor laws.

2. What Happens After OPT Ends

After OPT ends, you have a 60-day grace period. You may:

- Prepare to leave the U.S.
- Transfer to another school.
- Apply to change your immigration status.(If eligible)
        No work is allowed during this time.

3.Tax Requirements for OPT Students

Most OPT students are considered nonresident aliens for tax purposes:

- You are exempt from Social Security and Medicare (FICA) taxes.
- You must file Form 1040-NR for U.S. income taxes.
- Check with your employer's HR department to ensure your taxes are correct.
- U.S. Taxes for OPT Students

5.OPT Employment Types

During your OPT period, you may work in various ways as long as the employment is directly related to your major field of study. Below are the types of jobs and work arrangements allowed under OPT, with examples of typical entry-level positions students often pursue:

01 MULTIPLE JOBS

You can work for several employers simultaneously, as long as each job relates to your field.
Example: A marketing graduate working part-time as a social media assistant and also as a content writer.

02 FREELANCE OR CONTRACT WORK

Independent contracting is allowed. Keep written contracts with details about the work and dates.
Example: An IT student freelancing as a junior web developer or providing tech support to small businesses.

03 SELF-EMPLOYMENT

You can start your own small business connected to your field. Ensure it is active and licensed if required.
Example: A graphic design student creating logos and promotional materials for local clients.

04 UNPAID INTERNSHIP OR VOLUNTEERING

Allowed if related to your major and compliant with labor laws. Keep records of your duties and hours.
Example: A public health student volunteering at a community clinic or assisting with health education programs.

KEEP RECORDS OF YOUR EMPLOYMENT

While on OPT, it is essential to keep detailed records of all your employment. These documents may be needed for future immigration benefits, visa applications, or when re-entering the U.S.
Examples of documents you should keep include:

- Offer letters
- Employment contracts
- Pay stubs or timesheets
- Letters confirming unpaid work or volunteer hours
- Your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card (keep it even after it expires)

IMPORTANT

These examples are for illustration only and do not include every possible job related to your field.
It is essential that your employment is directly connected to your major.
If you're unsure whether a job qualifies, please contact the International Office for guidance.

6.OPT Travel Rules

Traveling internationally while on OPT requires careful planning. Your EAD card alone is not enough to re-enter the U.S. You must carry all required documents to prove your F-1 status and OPT authorization.
Important: Your ability to travel depends on whether your OPT is pending or approved.

Travel Rules After OPT Approval

If your OPT is approved and you have your EAD card, you may travel internationally and return to the U.S. if you carry all of the following:

- **Passport:** Must be valid at least six months beyond your return date.
- **F-1 Visa:** Must have a valid F-1 visa stamp; renew if expired before travel.
- **I-20 Form:** Signed for travel by your PDSO within the last 6 months.
- **EAD Card:** Proof of your OPT employment authorization.
- **I-797 Approval Notice** – Official notice from USCIS that your OPT was approved.
- **Job Offer Letter (Strongly Recommended):** Shows your intent to work in your field during OPT.

Travel While OPT Is <u>Pending</u>

Re-entry Risk: If your OPT has not been approved and you do not have your EAD card, you may not be allowed back into the U.S.
Immigration officers at the airport can question your F-1 status and OPT eligibility, and even with your other documents, re-entry is not guaranteed.

Emergency Travel: In case you must travel due to an emergency, please contact the International Office first. You will need to carry:
- Valid passport (6+ months beyond return date)
- Valid F-1 visa
- I-20 Form signed for travel within the last 6 months
- USCIS Receipt Notice (I-797)

Note: Even with these documents, re-entry is not guaranteed. Always check with the International Office before traveling.

Important Travel Reminders
- Do not re-enter on another visa (e.g., B-2). This will cancel your F-1 status and OPT.
- Consult the International Office before traveling internationally.

7. STEM OPT Extension

If you completed a degree in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math) field and are currently on Post-Completion OPT, you may be eligible for a 24-month STEM OPT Extension, allowing you up to 36 months of total work authorization.

Who Qualifies?

- Your degree must be on the DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List.
- You must be working for an E-Verify employer in a job related to your STEM major.
- You must apply before your current OPT ends.

Important Reminders

- The STEM OPT extension application must be submitted on time to avoid any gap in work eligibility.
- You can continue working for up to 180 days after your current OPT ends while your STEM extension is pending, as long as your application is submitted before the expiration date.

Need Help or Ready to Apply?

Contact the International Office at international@moval.edu.
We'll walk you through each step and make sure you have all the requirements and instructions you need for the STEM OPT Extension process.

8.OPT Common Questions

01 How much does the OPT application cost?

The OPT application fee is $470 (as of 2025) and must be paid to USCIS when you submit Form I-765. This fee is non-refundable.

02 Who is eligible for OPT?

F-1 students who have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year at MVC are eligible to apply for OPT.

03 How long can I work on OPT?

- Initial OPT: Up to 12 months per degree level.
- STEM OPT Extension: Up to 24 additional months. (If eligible)

04 When can I start working?

You may only begin working after receiving your EAD and on or after the work start date printed on it.

05 Do I need a job offer before applying?

No. OPT does not require you to have a job offer before applying.

06 Where should I have my EAD card mailed?

You must use a U.S. address where you can receive your official OPT documents. If you are unsure, you may use Missouri Valley College's address. The International Office will receive your mail, pick it up on your behalf, and notify you by email.

07 How many unemployment days are allowed?

You may not exceed 90 calendar days of unemployment during your 12-month OPT period.

08 What if I exceed 90 days of unemployment?

Exceeding 90 days may lead to the termination of your OPT and affect future immigration benefits.

09 What must I report via the SEVP Portal?

Within 10 days, you must report:
- Employer name, address, and start/end dates.
- Any changes to your address or legal name.
- Any change in your immigration status. (e.g., H-1B, new degree level)

Failure to report on time may result in OPT termination.

10 Can I apply for a job related to an old major?

No. All employment while on OPT must be directly related to your most recently completed major.

11 Can I travel internationally while OPT is pending?

Travel while your OPT application is still pending is **not recommended**. If you need to travel, please contact the International Office so we can advise you on which documents to carry.
 Keep in mind that re-entry is still not guaranteed.

12 Can I travel internationally after OPT is approved?

Yes, but you must travel with:
- A valid passport and F-1 visa
- A recently signed I-20 (within the last 6 months)
- Your EAD card
- Proof of employment

13 Do I need a travel signature while on OPT?

Yes. While on OPT, your I-20 must have a travel signature (on page 2) that is less than 6 months old to re-enter the U.S.

Contact Us

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