Applying for F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is designed to provide F-1 students with work experience in their fields of study. F-1 students are entitled to one year of OPT for each higher degree earned. To obtain OPT, you must have completed one academic year in full-time status and currently hold F-1 status.

If you would like to apply for OPT, you must apply no sooner than 120 days before beginning employment. OPT approval can take up to 90 days to process. Please plan appropriately.

Optional Practical Training (OPT) falls into three categories: (1) Pre-completion OPT which means: (a) during the student’s annual vacation and other times when school is not in session, if the student is eligible, and intends to register for the next semester; (b) while school is in session provided that OPT does not exceed 20 hours per week. (2) Post-completion OPT which is full-time after the completion of the degree; and (3) 17 month extension for students with degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM fields).

To find out if you are eligible for OPT you will need to set-up a meeting with Shannon Reesh. If you are eligible to apply for OPT you will need to prepare the following:

- Your current I-20, as well as any I-20’s that you have been issued
- Your unexpired passport with Visa and I-94 card (small, white card stapled inside your passport)
- A check or money order for $380.00 US dollars payable to “the Department of Homeland Security”
- Two US passport style photos: color photos with a white background (You can obtain passport photos at Walmart for a small cost). Photos must be unmounted, printed on thin paper, glossy and unretouched. Lightly print your name and your I-94 card# on the back of each photo with a pencil.
- Standard business-sized envelope holding required photos and check to USCIS. DO NOT SEAL THE ENVELOPE.
- If you have applied for OPT or any other employment authorization in the past, you must bring copies of all EAD’s or denial notices you have been issued
- If you know your OPT employer, please provide the name, address, phone number, and contact name of the employer.
- A copy of your degree or transcript (if applying post-completion) for 29 months of OPT based on having a STEM degree

Once all of the required documents are in order, please see Shannon Reesh. She will check all of your documents; photocopy your documents, and set-up an appointment for you to meet with Amy Becher, the Dean of Enrollment and Primary Designated School Official (PDSO). You will need to bring the above mentioned items to your appointment with Dean Becher. She will assist you in completing the final steps and will ultimately approve your OPT.

Please note: OPT approval can take up to 90 days to process. Again, please plan appropriately.
Optional Practical Training (OPT) General Information Sheet

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is defined as temporary employment for practical training directly related to the student’s major. An F-1 student who has maintained lawful F-1 status for at least one academic year may be eligible to apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT). OPT may be granted before or after completion of the student’s program, however limitations may apply. Students may apply for part-time OPT or 20 hours per week or less (except during normal school breaks when pre-completion OPT may be authorized full-time). Students applying for post-completion OPT must apply for full-time only. Once your OPT request is accepted by the Department of Homeland Security you will be sent an Employment Authorization Document (EAD). You may begin employment once you have received your EAD card and not before.

The maximum amount of time for which OPT may be granted is 12 months, full time per degree level. That means that if you previously completed a Bachelors degree and did 12 months of OPT and went on to complete a Master’s degree, you will receive another 12 months of OPT upon completion of the Master’s degree. *Students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields may be eligible to apply for a 17 month OPT extension if certain criteria apply. Students in the STEM fields may be granted up to 29 months full time OPT. This is the maximum amount of time and only applies to students in the STEM fields of study.

Part-time OPT counts towards ½ of the 12 month total. For example, if a student engages in 6 months of part-time OPT prior to degree completion, they will have 9 months of full-time OPT remaining. Be aware, that if an F-1 student has engaged in 12 months or more of full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT), he/she is ineligible for OPT. If student has engaged in CPT part-time, this does not count against OPT time.

Students applying for post-completion OPT must apply NO LATER THAN 60 DAYS AFTER COMPLETION OF ALL DEGREE REQUIREMENTS. Once a student has completed all degree requirements that student is considered to have finished their program. OPT applications must be received by USCIS no later than 60 days from that date.

Post-completion OPT may begin at any time up to 60 days after completion of all degree requirements. You must have the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) in your possession and the start date on the EAD must be reached before you may engage in employment. Also, once you have completed all degree requirements you may not continue to work in any capacity until you have received your EAD card. This includes on-campus employment.

During your period of Post-Completion OPT, you are still considered to be in F-1 student status. Therefore, you must keep the International Student Affairs Office at Thiel informed of any changes in your name, address, employer address, and employment status as well as any other pertinent information about your stay in the United States. If you travel outside of the U.S., you must obtain a travel signature from a Designated School Official (DSO). IMPORTANT NOTE: Regulations only permit you to re-enter the U.S. to resume OPT. It is not advisable to travel if you have not secured employment for your OPT. Your failure to keep the International Student Affairs Office at Thiel informed may jeopardize your legal status in the United States.

You may NOT travel outside of the U.S. while your OPT application is pending at USCIS. You may travel once you receive your EAD card. You will need the following to re-enter the U.S.:

- Unexpired passport
- Unexpired F-1 Visa
- The back of your I-20 signed for travel
- Your EAD card
- A letter from your employer stating that you are currently employed
You will have a 60 day grace period after the expiration date on your EAD. You may leave the U.S., change your status, or transfer to a new degree program during that time, but you may NOT continue to work under OPT.

If you choose to begin a new degree program full-time, during your authorized period of OPT, you will lose any OPT time remaining on your EAD. You will be required to cease employment upon release of your SEVIS record to the new Form I-20 for a different program.

Please note that only students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematical fields may extend OPT. For students in other fields, when the 12 months have been completed, the student must seek another visa status if he/she wishes to remain in the U.S. to continue employment. Also, once OPT has been granted you cannot cancel it. You have to use it or lose it.

When you receive your EAD card, you must provide the International Student Affairs Office with a copy of the card. We prefer to receive a copy of the card via email at sreesh@thiel.edu. Please send it as a pdf attachment. You can also fax, hand deliver or mail a copy to the International Student Affairs Office at:

International Student Affairs Office, Shannon Reesh
75 College Avenue, Greenville, PA 16125
Fax: (724) 589 - 2010