WHAT IS OPT?
Optional Practical Training (OPT) is off-campus employment authorization that allows F-1 students to gain work experience in their major field of study. The amount of work permitted is a maximum of 12 months of full-time employment for each higher level of study during which you are an F-1 student (Associates, Bachelors, Masters, Ph.D.). You can use it during or after completion of studies in your choice of time increments. You may work for any employer, anywhere in the United States, provided that the employment is related to your major field of study.

Think of it as an OPT bank account! There are 12 months of full-time optional practical training in that account for your current program of study. If you would like to work full-time for three months during the summer before you graduate with your bachelor's degree, it would be considered as a three-month withdrawal of full-time employment, leaving you 9 months to use during or after your bachelor's degree.

Or, for example, during the final year of your Master’s degree, you decide to work part-time (less than 20 hours a week) for two semesters or nine months. Since part-time employment accrues at half the full-time rate, you have made a withdrawal of four and a half months of full-time employment. This leaves you with seven and a half months of full-time employment still in your account to use after you graduate with your master's.

You are eligible for one 12-month OPT period for each higher LEVEL of study in which you are an F-1 student.

HOW CAN OPT BE USED?
Before completion of studies:
• Summer vacation and semester break - either part-time or full-time employment
• While school is in session - part-time employment only
• After completion of all course requirements for a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree, excluding the thesis or equivalent - part- or full-time employment

After completion of studies:
• After completion of ALL requirements for the course of study - full-time employment only

NOTE: YOU CANNOT START WORKING UNTIL DHS AUTHORIZES YOUR EMPLOYMENT AND YOU RECEIVE YOUR EAD CARD!
WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR OPT?

- You must have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year (fall and spring semester).
- You must be able to describe how the type of work you are seeking directly relates to your major. You do not have to have a job offer to apply for OPT. If you are applying for before completion of studies OPT, however, it is wise that you be as sure as possible of a job so that you don’t waste any of your OPT “account.”
- You may apply for Post-Completion of studies OPT up to three months before you complete your program of study, but not later than 60 days after. If you apply within the 60 day period after completion, you are likely not to receive your full 12 month OPT benefit due to USCIS processing.
- You cannot already have used 12 months of full-time Curricular Practical Training or 12 months of full-time Optional Practical Training for this level of study.

HOW DO YOU APPLY?
Pick up an application for F-1 Optional Practical Training Employment Authorization at the International Student & Scholar Services Office, complete it and return it to us. When you return it, we will review your application. If complete, we will issue you a new I-20 with OPT recommendation that you must sign and we will mail your application to DHS.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?
When you submit your completed application to the International Student & Scholar Services Office, please allow approximately 2 weeks for processing. Once submitted to DHS, it will take approximately 3 months for your EAD (Employment Authorization Document) to be issued to you. It could take less or more time depending on the service center’s workload. Unfortunately, there is no way to expedite this process.

It is important to take USCIS processing time into consideration when planning the date to start working! YOU CANNOT BEGIN WORKING UNTIL YOU RECEIVE YOUR EAD CARD!!

CAN YOU TRAVEL BEFORE STARTING AFTER-COMPLETION OF STUDIES OPT?
Contact your international student advisor before making any travel plans! If your OPT is still pending USCIS authorization, you are required to have your receipt notice to return to the U.S. Once your OPT is approved and you receive your EAD, you must have your OPT card, an official job letter from your employer, a valid F-1 visa, and an I-20 with valid travel signature to re-enter the United States.

HOW CAN YOU EXTEND YOUR OPT?
You can extend before completion of studies OPT by filing another application. You may not continue to work until it has been authorized by USCIS. Only qualified STEM graduates (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) may be eligible for an extension of their post-completion OPT. Check with your international advisor.

You will be entitled to another 12 month period of OPT if you go on to a higher level of study.

STUDY AND POST-COMPLETION OPT
Immigration regulations state that “Authorization to engage in optional practical training employment is automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level.” Therefore, if you start a new program your OPT will automatically be cancelled. If you want to complete your period of OPT then you should not begin a new program of study until after your OPT has ended.