Post-Completion Optional Practical Training Instructions

2019 - 2020

Office of International Services (OIS)

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General OPT Information

Useful Terminology and Abbreviations

Graduation date	The date student will complete all required credits for graduation. This date is usually the official last day of the semester listed on the university's Academic Calendar.
Program end date	The expected end date of a student's academic program. This date can be found on page 1 of the USC I-20.
Commencement date	The graduation ceremony where students wear their caps and gowns
Final semester	The last semester of a student's academic program at USC
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
OPT	Optional Practical Training
SSN	Social Security Number

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What is Post-completion OPT?

F-1 students who wish to work in the US after graduation must apply for a type of work authorization called Optional Practical Training (OPT).

- OPT permits F-1 students to gain work experience in their field of study/major

- Employment begins after graduation

- While on approved OPT, student is still considered an F-1 student; therefore, OIS continues to monitor the student's F-1 status

- Students are eligible to work for companies or organizations located anywhere in the US.

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Eligibility Requirements

Students must have met all of the following requirements in order to apply for OPT:

- Maintained F-1 status for a minimum of one academic year – *one academic year is equivalent to two consecutive semesters*

- Have applied for graduation with the academic department

- Have not accrued 12 months or more of full-time [Curricular Practical Training (CPT)](#) at current degree level

⚠️ **A job or job offer is _not_ required in order to apply for OPT**

Application Filing Period

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When Should Students Apply for OPT?

- Students apply for OPT during their final semester at USC

- Regulations permit students to apply as early as **90 days prior** to the program end date and up to **60 days after** the program end date

- USCIS will **deny** any applications that are received before or after the filing period—no exceptions

When Can Students Request an OPT I-20 from OIS?

OIS accepts OPT I-20 requests *up to* 90 days prior to program end date, and *up to* 45 days after the program end date

If you are graduating in:	Your program ends on:	You can request your OPT I-20 as early as:	You must request your OPT I-20 no later than:
Spring 2019	May 10	February 8	June 21
Summer 2019	August 6	May 8	September 20
Fall 2019	December 18	September 19	January 31

⚠️ Plan ahead! Check processing times on Slide 12.

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When Can Students Request an OPT I-20 from OIS?

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Spring 2019	May 10	February 8*	June 21
Summer 2019	August 6	May 8	September 20
Fall 2019	December 18	September 19	January 31

⚠️ Plan ahead! Check processing times on Slide 12. Processing times do not include weekends and holidays.

*Note: February 18, 2019 is a holiday and is not included in processing time.

OPT Start Date

The OPT start date is the day the work authorization period officially begins. Some students prefer to start working immediately after they graduate. Others prefer to take a few weeks off before starting their new job; therefore, it is up to the students to select their preferred OPT start date from a range of dates. See chart below.

Graduating Semester	Select any day on or between the following dates as your OPT Start Date:
Spring 2019	May 11 – July 9
Summer 2019	August 7 – October 5
Fall 2019	December 19 – February 16

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OPT End Date

The OPT end date is the last day students can work in the US. By default, OPT expires 12 months from the requested start date.

EXAMPLE

Tommy graduated in Fall 2017. He selected 12/14/2017 as his OPT start date. Tommy's OPT will end on 12/13/2018.

Things to Consider Before Applying for OPT

- **Are you going to graduate on time?**

  - If there is a chance that your graduation date might be delayed due to low GPA or other circumstances, wait until you have final confirmation from your academic department before filing for OPT

  - It is extremely difficult to cancel an OPT application once it is sent to USCIS for processing

- **Plan ahead!**

  - **OIS OPT I-20 Processing Time:** 7 Business Days
  - **USCIS OPT Application Processing Time:** 3.5 to 5.5 months*

  *As of 1/2019. Always check https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/ for most up-to-date processing times. Select "I-765…" & "Potomac Service Center" from the drop-down menus.

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Things to Consider Before Applying for OPT

Continued:

- Students cannot begin working until both of the following requirements have been met:

  - They have received the EAD in the mail; *and*
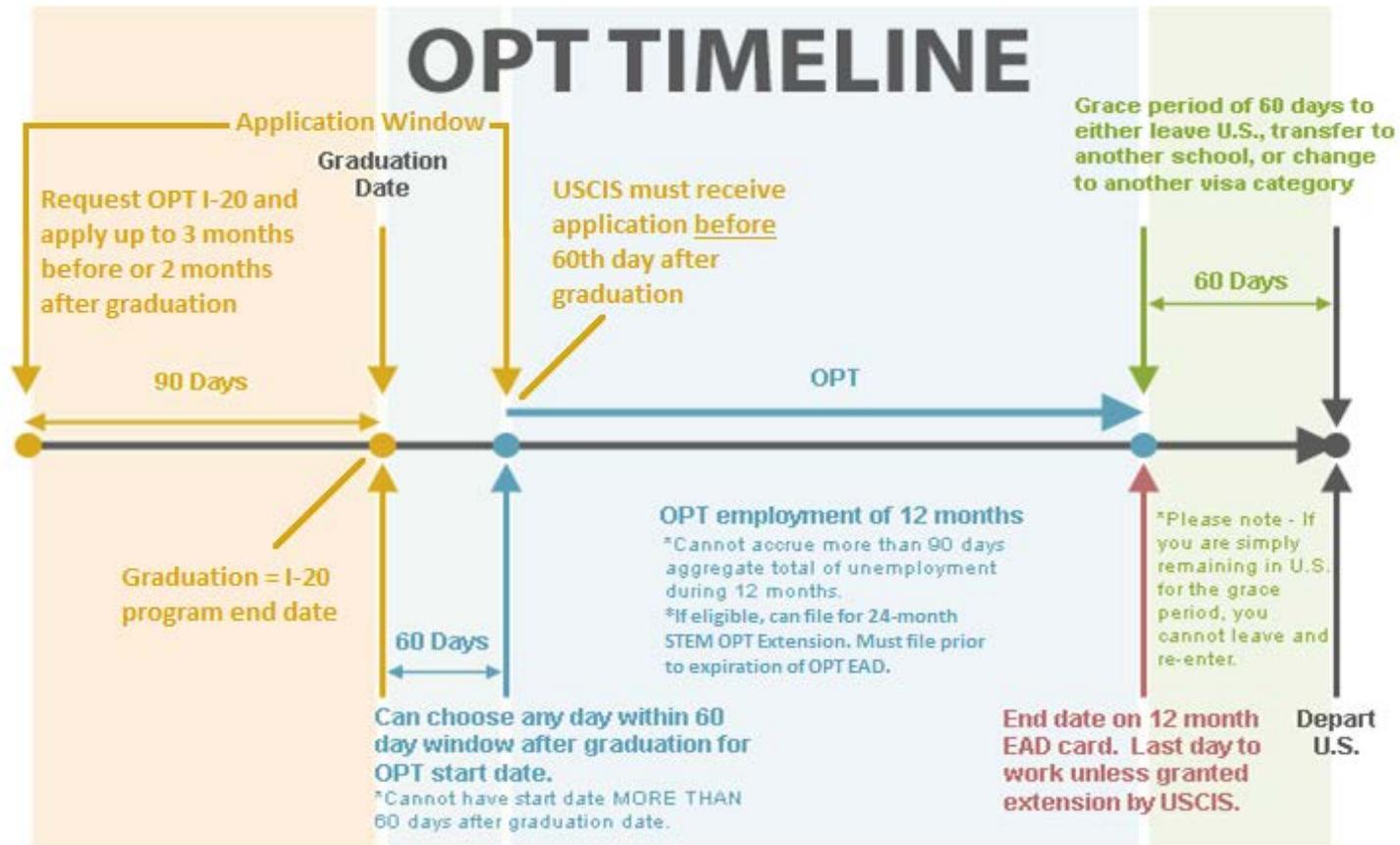
  - The start date on the EAD has been reached

⚠️ **Working in a paid, unpaid, or volunteer position before receiving your EAD and reaching your approved OPT start date is considered _working without authorization_ and is a _very serious violation of your F-1 visa status_.**

Things to Consider Before Applying for OPT

Continued:

- Become familiar with the US hiring process

- Visit the [USC Career Center](#)

    - Improve and edit your cover letter and resume
    - Learn effective interviewing and job search strategies
    - Attend helpful workshops and career events

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OPT TIMELINE

Application Window

Graduation Date

Request OPT I-20 and apply up to 3 months before or 2 months after graduation

USCIS must receive application before 60th day after graduation

Grace period of 60 days to either leave U.S., transfer to another school, or change to another visa category

60 Days

90 Days

OPT

Graduation = I-20 program end date

60 Days

OPT employment of 12 months
*Cannot accrue more than 90 days aggregate total of unemployment during 12 months.
*If eligible, can file for 24-month STEM OPT Extension. Must file prior to expiration of OPT EAD.

*Please note - If you are simply remaining in U.S. for the grace period, you cannot leave and re-enter.

Can choose any day within 60 day window after graduation for OPT start date.
*Cannot have start date MORE THAN 60 days after graduation date.

End date on 12 month EAD card. Last day to work unless granted extension by USCIS.

Depart U.S.

Employment Requirements

Employment Must Be Directly Related to Major or Field of Study

- USCIS regulations require all employment on OPT to be *directly* related to a student's major or field of study

- What does "directly related" mean? If you answer "Yes" to the following, your job is *most likely* "directly related".

  - Can you explain to USCIS how your job relates to specific courses and skills you learned at USC? ***and***
  - Do you apply the knowledge you gained from studying in your major to your job on a day-to-day basis?

⚠️ **The determination of "directly related" is decided by USCIS. If you are not sure if your job(s) meet this requirement, OIS recommends finding different job(s) that you can clearly relate to your major or field of study to avoid any violations to your F-1 visa status.**

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Work Hours and Duration of Authorization

- Students are required to work **full-time** while on OPT
  - **Full-time** employment on OPT is defined as working a total of **at least *21 hours per week***

- Students are granted up to 12 months of OPT *per higher degree level*

EXAMPLE

Tommy applied for OPT based on his bachelor's degree in Computer Science. He was granted 12 months of OPT. After working for 12 months, he decided to go back to school to earn a master's degree in Business Administration (MBA). Tommy is eligible for another 12 months of OPT upon completion of his MBA program and must seek employment that is related to his MBA degree.

Acceptable Types of Employment While on OPT	
Standard full-time employer	Student can have one employer and work for that company on a full-time basis.
Multiple employers*	Student may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to student's field of study.
Multiple short-term employers (performing artists)*	Musicians or other performing artists may work for multiple short-term employers (i.e. gigs). Students should maintain a list of all gigs, including the dates and duration of the gigs.
Work for hire/contract	Also commonly referred to as 1099 employment, the term "work for hire" describes a service based on a contractual agreement rather than an employment relationship. This means that the individual is performing a service.

* Total work hours for all jobs must add up to at least 21 hours per week to meet full-time employment requirement

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Self-employed business owner	Students on OPT may start a business and be self-employed. In this situation, students must work full-time. Students must be able to prove to DHS that they have the proper business licenses and are actively engaged in a business related to their degree program. OIS recommends that self-employed students seek consultation from a lawyer.
Employment through an employment/staffing agency or consulting firm	Students on post-completion OPT must be able to provide evidence that they worked an average of at least 21 hours per week while employed by the agency.
Unpaid/volunteer jobs*	Students may work on a volunteer basis or as unpaid interns, where this does not violate any US labor laws. Labor laws vary by state. Check with the company's Human Resources office for restrictions.

* Total work hours for all jobs must add up to at least 21 hours per week to meet full-time employment requirement

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Student's Responsibilities While on OPT

OPT Reporting Requirements

While on OPT, students are **required** to report the following information via the online SEVP Portal:

- Changes to employment status/situation (i.e. start a new job, quit current job, laid off from current job, unemployed)

- Changes to US address and telephone information

- All changes must be made via the online SEVP Portal within **10 business** days
  - An email with instructions on how to create an SEVP Portal account will be sent from do-not-reply.SEVP@ice.dhs.gov *on or after* the approved OPT start date
  - For guidance on the SEVP Portal, please visit the Study in the States website
  - See OPT Employment Reporting Requirements for additional assistance

⚠️ **Failing to report OPT employment information and/or US address updates in a timely manner may result in termination of your SEVIS record by USCIS.**

Recordkeeping Tips

- **Keep copies of all I-20s and EADs**

  - Students who apply for future immigration benefits in the US will likely be asked to provide evidence of all previous EADs and I-20s

- **Keep track of OPT employment**

  - OIS will continue to monitor students SEVIS records while on OPT, but it is the students' responsibility to keep track of their employment records

- **Keep original EAD in a safe place, not in a wallet**

  - Lost or stolen EAD will need to be replaced at the student's expense

90-Day Unemployment Rule

- Students are limited to a *total* of 90 days of unemployment over the 12-month period while on OPT

    - Students only start accruing unemployment **on/after** the start date printed on the Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

- If a student accrues 90 days or more of unemployment, it is considered a violation of F-1 status and their SEVIS records will be automatically terminated

    - USCIS may terminate SEVIS records of students who accrue 90 days or more of unemployment, and future U.S. immigration benefits may be negatively affected

90-Day Unemployment Rule

Continued:

- Student and Exchange Visitor Programs (SEVP) may audit SEVIS data for students on OPT and terminate students' records if there is no employment information updated in SEVIS

- Students who are unemployed should select <u>one</u> of the following solutions **before** their ninetieth (90th) day of unemployment:

    - Begin a new degree program at USC
    - Transfer SEVIS record to another SEVP certified school
    - Change visa status
    - Depart the United States

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International Travel

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Travel and Re-Entry into the US with Pending OPT Application

Travel *before* graduation date	Travel *after* graduation date
• Filing for OPT has no effect on students' ability to travel before the graduation date • Students will travel as they always have as F-1 students	• Students are strongly advised to wait for their EAD if traveling internationally after the graduation date

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Required Documents for Re-Entry into the U.S.

Pending OPT Application	Approved OPT Application
• Valid passport	• Valid passport
• Valid F-1 visa	• Valid F-1 visa
• OPT I-20 (signed for travel by OIS)	• OPT I-20 (signed for travel by OIS)
• I-797 Notice of Receipt (Payment receipt that can be used as proof of properly filing OPT application with USCIS)	• Employment verification letter, offer letter, or interview schedule
	• Valid OPT EAD (EAD says "Not Valid for Re-entry" since the card must be presented with above documents. The EAD alone does not suffice for re-entry to the US.)

Travel Signatures

- Students who have an OPT I-20 and need to travel internationally will need to request a travel signature from OIS prior to leaving the US.

    ⚠️ Travel signatures while on OPT are only valid for **6 months.**

- **Need a travel signature?** Submit the following documents to OIS:
    1) Completed [Travel Signature Request Form](#)
    2) OPT I-20 (Original)

- Students can **pick up their signed I-20 in person** *or* **request express mail delivery via** [eShipGlobal](#) (at the student's expense)

⚠️ Plan ahead – don't wait until the last minute to request a travel signature! Visit the OIS website for current [document processing times](#)

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Options After Completing OPT

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Options After OPT Ends

Students are allowed to remain in the US for *up to* 60 days after the OPT end date. This period of time is called a "grace period". During this time, students may **not** work and cannot leave and reenter the US as F-1 students.

Please see next slide for options during the 60 day grace period.

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Options During 60-Day Grace Period
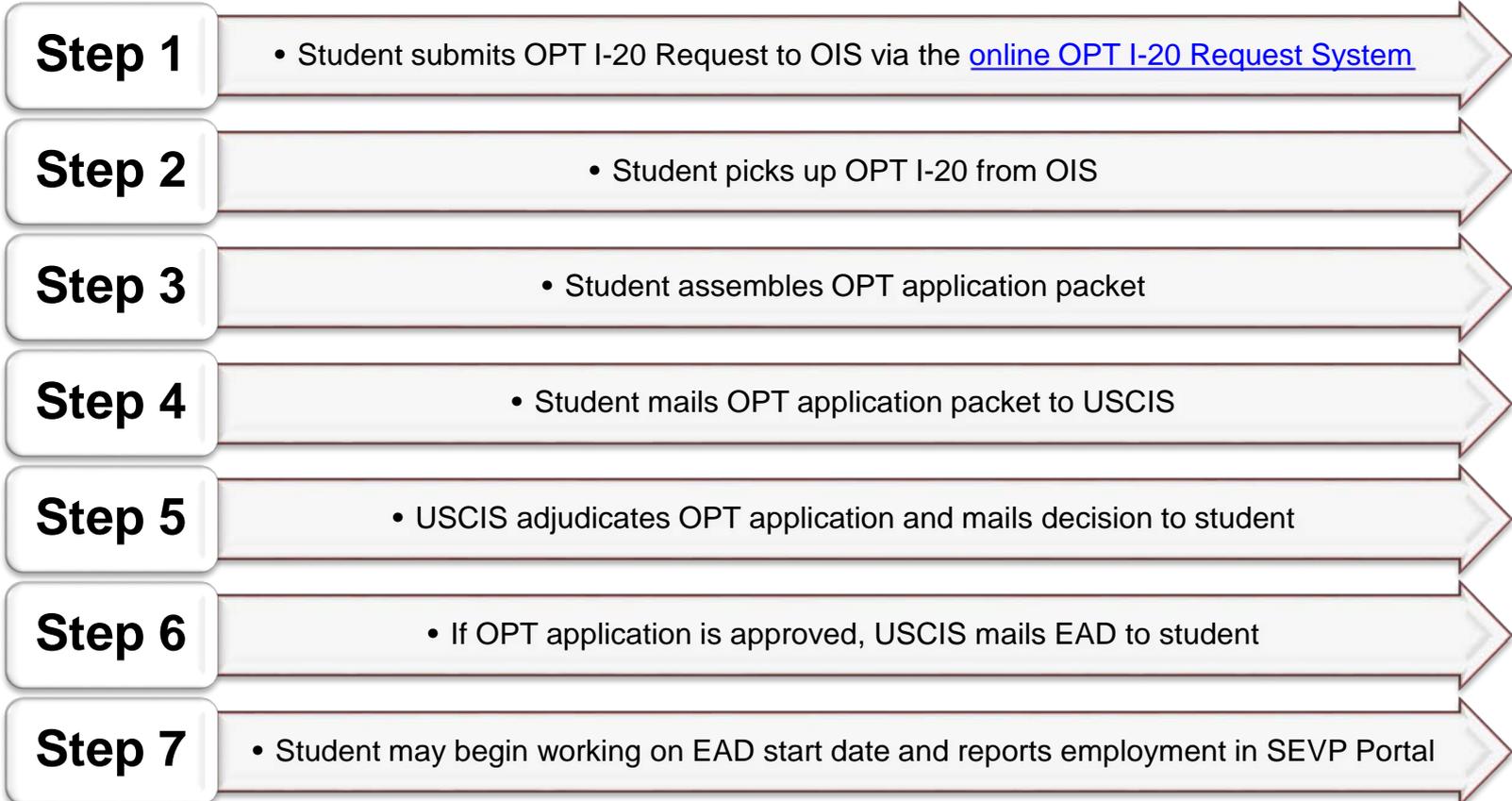
Begin a new program of study at USC	Students must apply to the new program, be admitted, and be issued a new I-20 from the [Graduate Admissions (GA).](#)
Apply for a change of status	USCIS must receive the application to change the immigration status before the end of the grace period.
Transfer to another institution	Students must request the transfer of their SEVIS record to that institution before the end of the 60 days. To request a transfer of SEVIS record, students will need to submit the SEVIS Transfer Release Form and the transfer in form (if applicable) to OIS.
Return home	Students can return to their home country or depart the US before the end of the grace period.

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OPT Application Instructions

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OPT Application Overview

Step 1	• Student submits OPT I-20 Request to OIS via the [online OPT I-20 Request System](#)
Step 2	• Student picks up OPT I-20 from OIS
Step 3	• Student assembles OPT application packet
Step 4	• Student mails OPT application packet to USCIS
Step 5	• USCIS adjudicates OPT application and mails decision to student
Step 6	• If OPT application is approved, USCIS mails EAD to student
Step 7	• Student may begin working on EAD start date and reports employment in SEVP Portal

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STEP 1: Student Requests OPT I-20 Online

- Login to the [OPT I-20 Request System](#)

  - Indicate the preferred OPT start and end dates
  - Have academic advisor sign the Graduation Verification Form
    - Viterbi Master's students: email the PDF Request Form to masters@gapp.usc.edu for signature
    - Viterbi Ph.D. students: meet with a Graduate and Professional Programs (GAPP) advisor in OHE 106
  - Upload the signed Graduation Verification Form
  - Upload copy of current I-20 (page 1 only)

- Please allow **7 business days** for OIS review and process the OPT I-20 Request

  - Incomplete applications will require additional processing times

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STEP 2: Student Picks Up OPT I-20 from OIS

- Pick up OPT I-20 from OIS

    - If you are unable to come to OIS, you may have a friend pick up the I-20 on your behalf. Your friend must present a printed letter/email from you stating that you give him/her permission to pick-up your I-20 on your behalf. OIS will not mail OPT I-20s to students so please plan accordingly.

- Student must sign and date OPT I-20

Remember to check "Date Issued" and "Program End Date" on Page 1 of your OPT I-20. If your application is received by USCIS more than 30 days after "Date Issued" and/or more than 60 days after "Program End Date" on Page 1, your OPT will be **denied**.

STEP 3: Student Assembles OPT Application Packet

Assemble all documents as indicated on the OPT Application Checklist:

- Original Form G-1145
- Original Form I-765 – *see next slide for instructions*
- Passport Photocopy
- I-94 Printout
- Photocopy of complete OPT I-20, sign and date "Student Attestation" section
- Two US Passport Style Photos*
- Application Fee Payment (check -or- Form G-1450)*
- Photocopies of all previously issued EADs, CPT I-20s, and OPT I-20s (if applicable)

Paperclip the 2 photos and payment method on top of the application packet

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Instructions for USCIS Form I-765

- [Download](#) most recent form from USCIS
- Type all information
- Refer to USC's [Sample OPT I-765](#) for further instructions
- Print and sign completed form in black ink

Sample Form I-765

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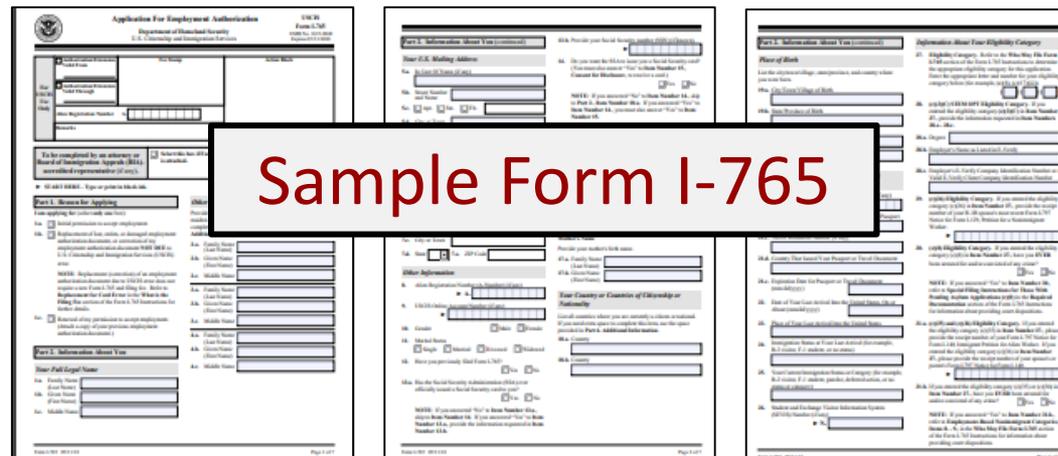
U.S. Address

- Students are strongly advised not to move or change their mailing address while the OPT application is pending with USCIS – it can cause delays with processing and receiving EADs in a timely manner.

  - Refer to USC's Sample OPT I-765 for address instructions
  - A Post Office Address (P.O. Box) is acceptable for mailing address, but not physical address
  - The U.S. Postal Service does not forward mail from USCIS
  - If students are no longer residing at the address listed on the I-765, the EAD will be returned to USCIS
    - Students are *not* notified when EADs are returned to USCIS

If it is absolutely necessary for you to change addresses after mailing your OPT application to USCIS, you **must** notify OIS **and** the USCIS National Service Center of this change. Please call USCIS at 1-800-375-5283 or complete the online USCIS Change of Address form.

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Two U.S.-Style Passport Photos

Passport Photo Requirements *– click on link for specifications*

- Only U.S.-style passport photos taken in the U.S. will be accepted by USCIS

Handwrite on the back edge of each photo:

- Name in the format of "LAST NAME, FIRST NAME"
- I-94 Arrival/Departure Admission Number

Note: Damaged photos are not accepted by USCIS. Do not press too hard when writing on them. Do not let ink smear on the face of the photo.

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I-765 Application Fee Payment

- Non-refundable
- Fee Amount: $410
- Two payment options available, choose **one**:
  - Form G-1450 for credit card payment
       -OR-
  - Check (personal, cashier's, or money order) payable to the US Department of Homeland Security (do not abbreviate) – *see sample check below & next slide*

⚠️

Tommy Trojan   Check # # # #
1234 Sample Street #123
Los Angeles, CA 90089   mm/dd/year

Always format dates as MM/DD/YYYY

Pay to the order of: US Department of Homeland Security

The sum of: Four hundred ten dollars

$410.00

Date of birth: 08/20/1989

Memo: I-94#12345678910   _Tommy Trojan_

Check Payment for Application Fee
***If you are paying with a credit card, please skip to the next slide**

- **Pay to the Order of:** "US Department of Homeland Security"
- **Amount:** "Four hundred ten dollars"
- **Memo section** (bottom left corner): Write date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY) and I-94 admission number
    - If check is a cashier's check, money order, or from another account holder, be sure to write student's name as well

- Do not write on or sign the back of the check
- Check must have imprinted name and either imprinted or hand-written address in upper left corner
- Check must be a U.S. check from a U.S. bank, but does not need to be from students' own accounts
- Ensure sufficient funds are available
- If the check "bounces" (is not valid due to insufficient funds), USCIS will suspend the application until receiving valid payment, which delays the application processing time

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Credit Card Payment for Application Fee

- Use a card from a U.S. bank & ensure sufficient funds are available
- Type or print legibly in black ink

Sample **Form G-1450**

Applicant's/Petitioner's/Requester's Information (Full Legal Name)		
Given Name (First Name)	Middle Name (if any)	Family Name (Last Name)
Tommy		Trojan

Credit Card Billing Information (Credit Card Holder's Name as it Appears on the Card)		
Given Name (First Name)	Middle Name (if any)	Family Name (Last Name)
Tommy		Trojan

Credit Card Holder's Billing Address:

Street Number and Name		Apt. Ste. Flr.	Number
1234 Sample Street		☒ ☐ ☐	123
City or Town		State	ZIP Code
Los Angeles		CA	90089

Credit Card Holder's Signature and Contact Information:

Credit Card Holder's Signature *Tommy Trojan*

Credit Card Holder's Daytime Telephone Number	Credit Card Holder's Email Address
555-555-5555	tommytrojan@usc.edu

Credit Card Information

Credit Card Number	Credit Card Type:	Authorized Payment Amount
1234 1234 1234 1234	☒ Visa	$ 410 .00
	☐ MasterCard	
Credit Card Expiration Date	☐ American Express	
(mm/yyyy) 08/2022	☐ Discover	

Form G-1450 01/04/18 — Page 1 of 1

Credit card holder must sign here in black ink

Authorized Payment Amount: $410.00

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Standard OPT Processing Time

⚠️ • **USCIS OPT Application Processing Time:** 3.5 to 5.5 months*

*As of 1/2019. Always check https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/ for most up-to-date processing times. Select "I-765…" & "Potomac Service Center" from the drop-down menus.

• Students can check the status of their I-765 application online

    • Enter receipt number from I-797C Receipt Notice of Action

Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

Once the OPT application is approved by USCIS, students will receive the Approval Notice in the mail. A few days later, the EAD will also arrive by mail.

Sample EAD

- A valid passport, I-94, OPT I-20, and OPT EAD will satisfy employer's request for proof of work authorization.

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Rejection, Request for Evidence (RFE), or Denial

- If there are errors or omissions in the application packet, USCIS may reject (and return) the application *or* issue a RFE

⚠️ **Contact OIS and schedule an appointment as soon as you receive a rejected application, RFE, or denial notice**

- **Rejection:** If the application is rejected, students may need to request a new OPT I-20 if it has been more than 20 days since the I-20 was issued (refer to "Date Issued" on Page 1)
- **RFE:** The RFE will explain which additional documents are required along with return mailing instructions
    - If provided, use the return envelope included by USCIS to send the requested documents to USCIS
    - Respond to the RFE by the stated deadline; otherwise, students risk having their request for OPT significantly delayed or denied
- **Denial:** USCIS will indicate the reason for the denial on the denial notice

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OPT Cancellation

- Students who wish to forfeit their OPT and return to their home country must notify OIS so that their SEVIS records can be closed out. Failure to report departure information to OIS can result in the automatic termination of their SEVIS record as a result of excessive unemployment days, which could have a negative impact on any future U.S. visa applications.

OPT and Taking Classes – "Avocational Coursework"

- Students may take classes that are avocational or recreational in nature, and are incidental to their employment. Per USCIS regulations, **students cannot be enrolled in a certificate- or degree-seeking program while on OPT.**

Social Security Number

Social Security Number (SSN)

- SSN is a 9-digit number issued to US citizens, permanent residents, and temporary (working) non-residents (i.e. F-1 students on OPT) by the Social Security Administration (SSA)
  - Its primary purpose is to track individuals for taxation purposes; it is not intended to be used for identification purposes

- Students who have had paid employment in the US prior to OPT should already have a SSN, and do **not** need to apply for another one.

- Students who have never worked for pay in the US and therefore need a SSN must apply for one using the OPT I-765 application. See the USC's Sample OPT I-765 for instructions.

Questions Regarding OPT?

Call OIS at (213) 740-2666 to schedule an appointment (phone or in-person) with an advisor or email ois@usc.edu.

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