

Spring 2026 OPT Workshop

Vivian Klentos, ISSO Advisor
aklentos@uncc.edu

Workshop Overview

- What is OPT?
- Pre-Application Process
- OPT Application
- Awaiting OPT Approval
- While On OPT
- Miscellaneous Reminders

Ground Rules

- Please submit your questions at the end
- Questions submitted throughout the presentation will be answered at the end
- Please refrain from asking case-specific questions
 - E.g. of a case specific question: “In my specific situation, X is also happening, and I also will be traveling to country Y, and I don’t have Z document—will that impact my app?”
 - For those, sign up for an advising appointment

What Is OPT?

- OPT stands for Optional Practical Training
- It is 12 months of off-campus work authorization based upon completion of an academic degree (continues F1 status).
- Work must be in your field of study, at your level of study.
- A job offer is NOT necessary to apply!

Pre-Application Process

- OPT Eligibility
- When Do I Apply for OPT?
- Choosing My OPT Start Date
- Special Note!:
 - Thesis/Dissertation Students

OPT Eligibility Criteria Requirements



Completion of **at least one** academic year in a student status



Currently in **valid F-1 status**



Full time OPT cannot begin until program completion

Completion of degree

OR

Completion of coursework (thesis/dissertation students)

When To Apply

Spring 2026 Graduation
Date for OPT-purposes:
May 8th



(up to 90 days
BEFORE
program end
date)

USCIS processing
usually takes ~90 days
(and sometimes longer)

(up to 60 days **AFTER**
program end date)



Earliest date **(February 7th, 2026)**
ISSO OPT I-20 Request Application Opening
Friday, February 6th

Apply by date deadline **(July 6th, 2026)**

OPT Start Date

OPT must begin
1 to 60 days after
program completion

Spring 2026 Graduation Date
for OPT purposes:
May 8th, 2026



(1 to 60 days
AFTER)

Riskier: Late May/Early
June

Safer: Late June/Early July



Earliest OPT
start date (**May 9th, 2026**)

Latest OPT
start date (**July 7th, 2026**)

Choosing OPT Start Date



Consider the following:

- USCIS Processing Time
(average of 90 days)
- Interviews/Job Search/Employer Requirements
- Holidays/Travel Plans/Time to Rest
- ISSO staff cannot make this decision for you, nor will we change your start date

Remember:

- Your requested start date must be within 60 days after your program completion date.
- The “start date” is the date your permission to work begins.
 - You cannot work earlier than the start date, but you can start working later.
- It is **IMPOSSIBLE** to change the requested OPT date after the application has been submitted to USCIS. Choose your dates CAREFULLY.

Premium Processing

- Premium processing provides expedited processing on Form I-765 for an additional fee. In exchange for the additional fee, USCIS guarantees that it will take some adjudicative action (approval, denial, request for evidence) within 30 calendar days.
- \$1780 (PP fee) + \$470 (I-765 fee) = \$2250
- ISSO recommends students give careful consideration prior to submitting a premium processing application to USCIS.



OPT Start Date

Normette chooses the following OPT Dates:
07/07/2026-07/06/2027

The logo consists of the words "PLAY" and "IT SAFE" stacked vertically in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a solid yellow square. Thin white horizontal lines are positioned above and below the word "PLAY".

PLAY
IT SAFE

- May not have a job offer and is worried it may take a while to find one
- Wants to take a breather between study and work
- Doesn't trust USCIS to process average time

What happens to Normette if USCIS actually issues her EAD on 06/20/2026?

A: The start date will still be 02/07/2026, but Normette can't work until she has the EAD *and the Start Date has arrived*. She might get a job quicker than she expected and the employer may want her to start before her start date, but she can't—she has to wait.

OPT Start Date

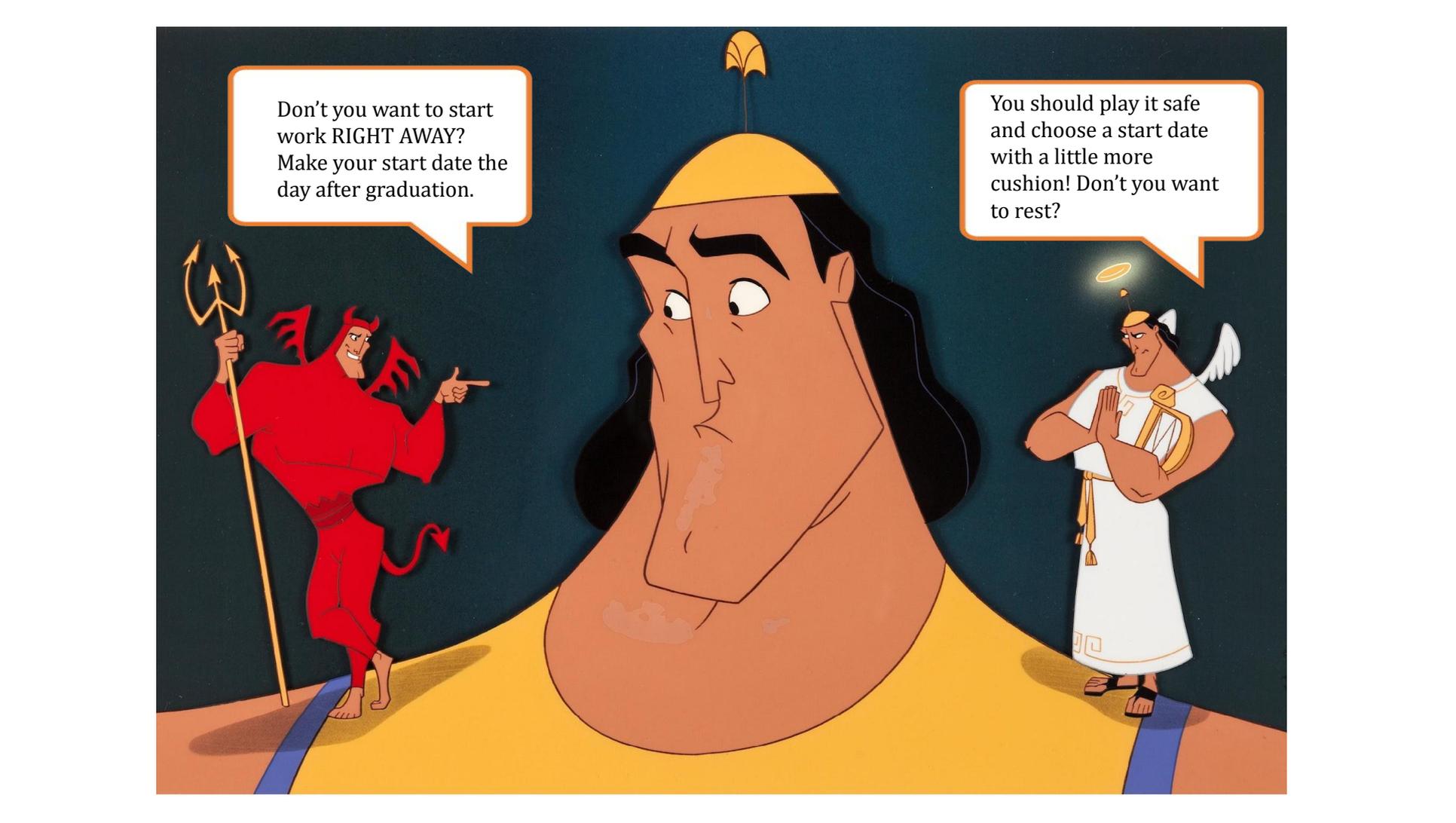
Norm chose the following OPT Dates:
05/08/2026-05/07/2027

-If everything goes perfectly, he's good.

What happens to Norm if USCIS actually issues his EAD on July 1st?

A: USCIS might NOT edit the EAD to reflect the delayed issuance date, but Norm can't work until he has the EAD and Start Date has passed; employer might be put off by delay and even rescind offer.





Don't you want to start work **RIGHT AWAY**?
Make your start date the day after graduation.

You should play it safe and choose a start date with a little more cushion! Don't you want to rest?

Thesis/Dissertation Students

Flexibility in OPT start date

- Full time OPT available upon completion of coursework
- Defense date should be scheduled within first 6 months of proposed OPT start date.
- All on-campus employment, stipends, university health insurance ends by OPT start date.

By discretion of ISSO; we may not approve if you are not making normal progress toward your degree.

Thesis/Dissertation Students

Time Management Challenges

- It is hard to work full-time and finish a thesis/dissertation
- You cannot extend your I-20 for more time to complete your Thesis/Dissertation
- Cannot apply for a STEM extension without a copy of your diploma (which won't be available if thesis or dissertation is incomplete).

How to Apply

1. Apply Online through ISSO Portal

- Request new I-20 based on start date & 1x Academic Advisor recommendation through **ISSO Portal**.

2. Schedule OPT Review

- Sign up for an [OPT review session](#) that is at least 5 business days after you submit your OPT I-20 Request.
- OPT Reviews are Wednesdays at 11am, and Fridays at 9am over Zoom

3. Prepare OPT Application

- Follow Guide Filing I-765 Online under OPT Application Resources
- Print e-signed I-20; sign yourself
- \$470 fee

4. Submit Application

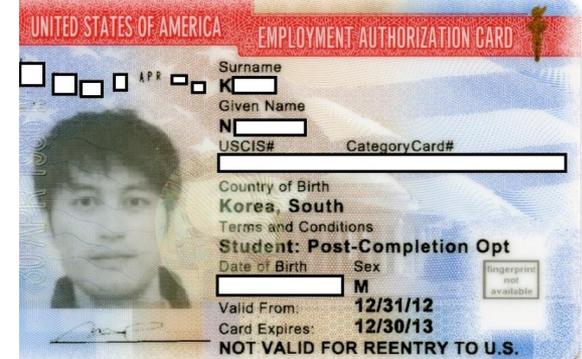
- Submit online your complete application **WITHIN 30 DAYS of OPT I-20 Issuance** to USCIS

Waiting on OPT Approval

- Tracking Your OPT Application
- EAD Issues
- OPT Issues
- Managing your stress while waiting

EAD (Employment Authorization Document) Issues

- Employment can begin only when EAD is received and employment start date is reached. Check for typos!
- EAD envelope cannot be forwarded (federal mail does not get forwarded)
 - Might need to go to nearest post office to see what's up if Case Status says "Delivered"
- Look of EAD card is changing

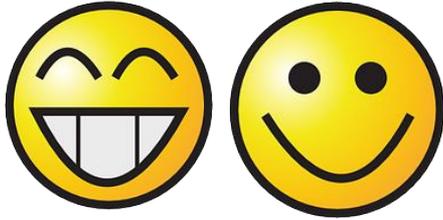


Other “Waiting” Issues

- NC Driver’s License expires before EAD arrives:
 - 60 day extension possible until EAD arrives
- **Make sure EAD is correct once you receive it**
 - Sometimes USCIS makes typos—easy to fix if caught early
- If you happen to get an RFE or Rejection, contact ISSO immediately (rare)



Managing Stress



Good Ideas

- Exercise
- Spend time on your hobbies
- Prepare resumes & cover letters
- Work on interviewing skills
- Focus on positive things in life



Bad Ideas

- Checking case status every day
- Reading non-credible websites
- Pondering scary what-if's
- Calling USCIS every day
- Listening to friends on various social media platforms

While on OPT

- Reporting Requirements on OPT
- Unemployment on OPT
- Travel on OPT
- Taxes
- EAD Ending

Reporting Requirements & SEVP Portal

- After the EAD Start Date has passed, within 1-14 days, you will receive an email invitation to create an SEVP Portal account
 - Create an account right away! Even if you don't have a job yet.
 - If your account creation link hasn't come, email Vivian!

An official website of the United States government OMB 1033-0004 (EXPIRES 11/01/2025)

 **SEVP Portal | Student and Exchange Visitor Program Portal**

Announcements X

PRON GRAVIDA
(posting date 2021-03-30)

Pron gravida vel sapien ut suscipit. Pellentesque vel tacite lectus. Ut diam. Ut enim semper, magna eu euismod aliquet, odio sem placerat libero, eu placerat ipsum lectus in sapien.

- Nullam elementum quis nibb non varius.
- Mauris nec justo id eu gravida convallis.
- Curabitur justo sapien, mollis a metus non.

Sign In

Attention: Only students who have OPT approved may use the SEVP Portal. You must create an account and set a password before using this log in page. Go to [portal_help](#) for more information.

Email

Password

[Login](#) [Reset Password](#)

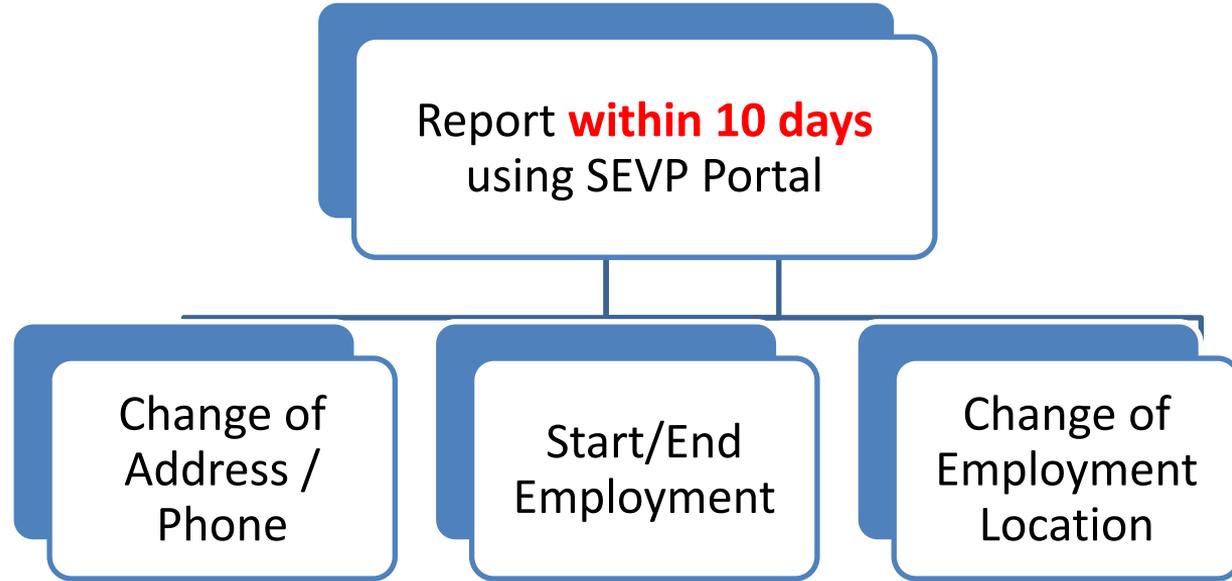
For instructions on how to reset your password, go to the [SEVP Portal - Student Guide](#) and the [Portal Help](#) page on Study in the States.

Department of Homeland Security Consent

You are accessing a U.S. Government information system provided for authorized use only. By accessing this information system you agree to be bound by the following:

- Unauthorized or improper use or access of this system may result in disciplinary action, as well as civil and criminal penalties under Title 18 United States Code 1030(a)(2) for unauthorized access to a government computer system or Title 18 United States Code 1031 providing false statements, or engaging in acts of concealment.
- By using this information system, you understand and consent to the following:
 - o You have no reasonable expectation of privacy when you use this information system; this includes any communications or data transmitted, stored on, originated from or directed to this information system. At any time, and for any lawful government purpose, the government may monitor, intercept, search and seize any communication or data transmitted, stored on, originating from or directed to or from this information system.
 - o The government may disclose or use any communications or data transmitted, stored on, originating from or directed to or from this information system for any lawful government purpose.
 - o You are NOT authorized to process classified information on this information system.

What To Report on OPT



A new I-20 is **NOT** generated when employment is updated; SEVP Portal is not controlled by ISSO

Unemployment= No More than 90 Days

- Max 90 days of unemployment during 12 months of OPT
 - Counting begins from the start date on EAD
- Employment must be 20+ hours per week in your field of study, including:
 - unpaid internships
 - self-employment
 - paid employment
- You are allowed to have more than 1 employer and can change employers
- Keep employment offer letter for personal filing purposes
 - But...letters are not the “be-all-end-alls” of OPT
 - Employment starts on first day of work, not when you get an offer letter
- Unemployed more than 90 days = violation of status

90
Days

Travel Outside U.S. on OPT

- Short-term travel is allowed AFTER EAD is received
- Must have necessary documents for re-entry:
 - EAD Card
 - Valid passport, at least 6 months into the future
 - Valid F-1 visa stamp
 - I-20 signed for travel within the 6 past months
 - Employment offer letter
- Remember to apply for I-20 Travel Signature/Reprint > 5 bus. days before re-entry

Study While on OPT?

- Additional study is generally NOT allowed while on OPT
- Examples of what we mean:
 - Starting “part-time degree program” while on OPT – Nope.
 - Starting new higher level program (e.g. MS->PhD) – Nein.
 - Trying to study while on OPT=U.S. government terminates your EAD=BAD.
- Main point: you shouldn’t be studying while on OPT. OPT is for work, not study.
- If you want to start a new program, notify us, we end your OPT and transfer your record (to another university) or change your level (if at UNC-Charlotte)
 - **However: basket weaving class at local community college, swimming or tennis lessons etc. are allowed. Nice!**

Paying Taxes

- Federal & State taxes will be withheld
- Less than 5 years in F1 status these aren't withheld:
 - FICA
 - Social Security
 - Medicare Taxes
- Check for accuracy on your 1st paycheck
 - don't wait!



Paying Taxes (cont.)

- Understand your tax treaty (if applicable)
- Make friends with your human resources manager!
- Consult IRS publication 519 for details
- www.irs.gov/forms-pubs/about-publication-519
- ISSO staff cannot answer tax related questions
- Refer to the IRS website



As OPT EAD is ending...

- You may have options!
- Grace period – up to 60 days after EAD expiration
 - May **STAY** in the U.S., cannot work or re-enter U.S. in F-1 status
- Transfer F-1 record to another university
 - Earn a higher degree = 12 more months of OPT
- ‘Cap Gap’ work authorization
 - For period of time between end of OPT and start date of H1-B
- Apply for a STEM extension (before EAD expires)
 - Students **ONLY** in STEM degrees are eligible to apply
 - 24 month extension on top of 12 month OPT
 - See [ISSO STEM OPT Extension instructions](#)

Ethical Job Search

UNC Charlotte expects any student accepting a job offer to honor their commitment to the accepted position and company by ceasing their job search and withdrawing other open applications upon accepting an offer.

When faced with an offer you are not sure about:

- Ask offering employer for 24 hours to consider.
- Inform any 'first choice' employers of your offer and ask if they have made their hiring decision yet.
- Based on what you learn, make the best decision you can and **STICK WITH IT!**
- DO NOT promise an early start date before your EAD start date/arrival

<http://career.uncc.edu/resources/policies>

ISSO Information

- **ISSO Advising Hours**
 - Walk in advising:
 - Tuesdays, 2-4pm
 - Fridays, 10am-12pm
 - Phone Advising
 - Mondays, 10am-12pm
 - Thursdays, 2-4pm
- **OPT Review over Zoom (must sign-up online)**
 - Wednesdays at 11am
 - Fridays at 9am
- **Email and Phone Communication**
 - 704-687-7781 or intlssso@uncc.edu
 - 3 business days processing time for responses
 - Email only ONE ISSO staff member
 - Professional communication expected

Workshop Feedback?



Please give us your feedback on this event anonymously by scanning this QR code with your smartphone and completing the program evaluation form. (Select “OPT Workshop”)

A photograph of a brick clock tower at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, with the word "Questions?" overlaid in large white text. The tower is a prominent feature, with two clock faces visible. The building is surrounded by lush green trees and a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Questions?