



# Fall 2026 OPT Workshop

September 9th, 2026

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# Workshop Overview

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

# Ground Rules

- Please submit your questions via the chat (ideally, 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?
  - Duration of Status (“D/S”) vs. Admit Until Date (“AUD”)
- Choosing My OPT Start Date
  - D/S vs. AUD
- Special Note: Thesis/Dissertation Students

# OPT Eligibility Criteria Requirements



Completion of **at least one** academic year in any visa 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 (I-94 says D/S, No Travel Plans)

Fall 2026 Graduation Date  
for OPT-purposes:  
December 11th



(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 **(September 12th, 2026)**

Apply by date deadline **(February 4th, 2027)**

# When To Apply (I-94 says AUD, Or Travel Plans)

Fall 2026 Graduation Date  
for OPT-purposes:  
December 11th

(up to 90 days  
BEFORE  
program end  
date)



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

(up to 30 days AFTER  
program end date)

Earliest date **(September 12th, 2026)**

Apply by date deadline **(January 5th, 2027)**

## OPT Start Date: D/S

OPT must begin  
1 to 60 days after  
program completion

Fall Graduation Date for  
OPT-purposes:  
December 11th, 2026



(1 to 60 days  
AFTER)

Riskier Start  
Date

Safer Start  
Date

Earliest OPT  
start date (**Dec. 12, 2026**)

Latest OPT  
start date (**Feb. 9th, 2027**)

Riskier: December

Safer: Late Jan./Feb.

# OPT Start Date: AUD/Intl. Travel

Fall Graduation Date for  
OPT-purposes:  
December 11th, 2026



(1 to 30 days  
AFTER)

OPT must begin  
1 to 30 days after  
program completion

Riskier: Early December

Safer: Early Jan.

Riskier Start  
Date

Safer Start  
Date

Earliest OPT  
start date (**Dec. 12, 2026**)

Latest OPT  
start date (**Jan. 10, 2027**)

## Choosing OPT Start Date

Consider the following:

- USCIS Processing Time  
(average of ~90-120 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 30 (AUD/Intl. Travel) or 60 days (D/S) after your program completion date.
- The “start date” is the earliest potential date you could work (you need the EAD as well).
  - 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 date CAREFULLY.

## OPT Start Date

Safe Sam chooses the following OPT Dates:  
02/09/2027-02/08/2028



- 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 Sam if USCIS issues her EAD on 12/15/2026?**

A: The start date will still be 02/09/2027, but Sam can't work until she has the EAD *and the Start Date has arrived*. Sam might get a job quicker than she expected and the employer may want her to start before 02/09/2027, but she can't—she has to wait.

## OPT Start Date

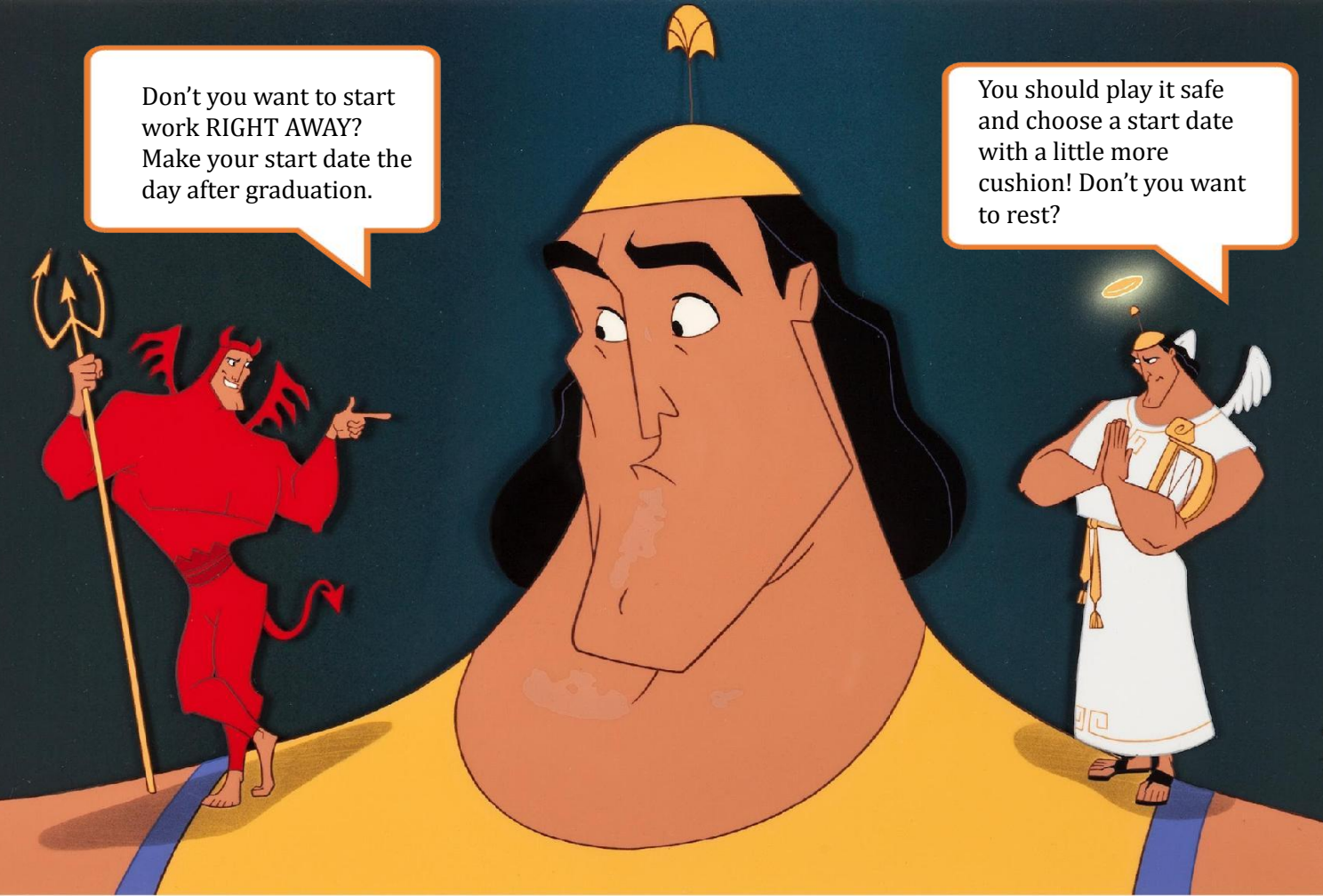
Tricky Ricky chose the following OPT Dates:  
12/12/26-12/11/27

-If everything goes perfectly, he's good.



**What happens to Ricky if USCIS actually issues his EAD (late) on February 1, 2027?**

A: USCIS will edit the EAD to reflect the delayed issuance date, but Ricky 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: D/S

### 1. Apply Online through ISSO Portal

- Request new I-20 based on start date & Academic Advisor input via e-form 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](#) for online I-765
- Print e-signed I-20; sign yourself
- Pay the Form I-765 fee (and optionally add premium processing)

### 4. Submit Application

- Submit your complete online I-765 application **WITHIN 30 DAYS of OPT I-20 Issuance** to USCIS

\*Students with D/S on I-94 and no intl. travel plans do not need to file an Extension of Stay with their OPT I-765.

# How to Apply: AUD/Intl. Travel

### 1. Apply Online through ISSO Portal

- Request new I-20 based on start date & Academic Advisor input via e-form 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 + EOS

- Follow [Guide Filing I-765 Online](#) for online I-765; follow filing guide for Form I-539 Extension of Stay (EOS)
- Print e-signed I-20; sign yourself
- Pay the Form I-765 fee (and optionally add premium processing); pay Form I-539 fee

### 4. Submit Both Applications

- Submit your complete online I-765 application **WITHIN 30 DAYS of OPT I-20 Issuance** to USCIS; submit Form I-539 up to 180 days prior to existing program end date.

\*Some students may decide to exit and re-enter the U.S. with USCIS-issued EAD, job offer letter etc. instead of filing Form I-539—risky strategy.

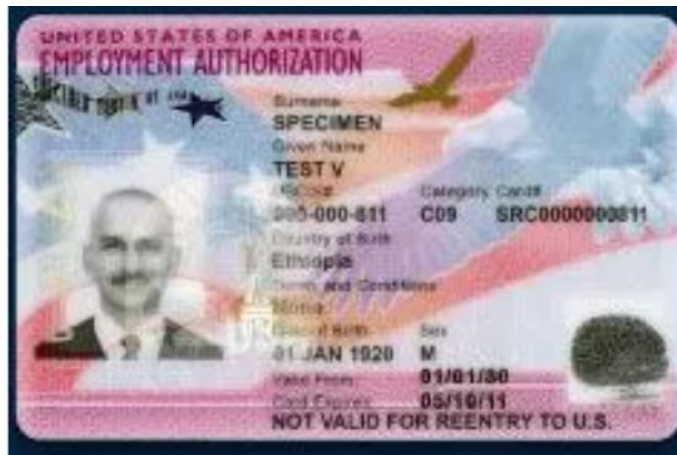
# Waiting on OPT Approval

- New (Kind Of): Attend Biometrics (photo, fingerprints) Appt.
  - Do not miss your appt!
    - You can reschedule in advance, but if you simply miss it, it's a headache to reschedule/can lead to denial
  - There is an USCIS Applicant Service Center (ASC) here in Charlotte
- 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!
  - You cannot report employment prior to EAD delivery date (DHS can cross-track delivery date with first date of reported employment)
- 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"
- USPS can lose cards in the mail (rare but bad outcome; often requires Replacement Card I-765)
- Lengthy processing times (5+ months)

### 3. Waiting on Approval



# 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 Christina!

AN OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

OMB 3530-0004 (Expires 7/31/2022)

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

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**Announcements** X

**PRON GRAVIDA**  
(posting date 2021-03-30)

Pron gravida vel sapien ut suscipit. Pellentesque vel taculis tectis. id diam accipit. Sapi. Etiam fermentum, magna eu euismod aliquet, odio sem placerat libero, eu placerat ipsum lectus in sapien.

- Nullam elementum quis nibb non varius.
- Mauris nec justo id dui gravida convallis.
- Curabitur justo turpis, 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](#)

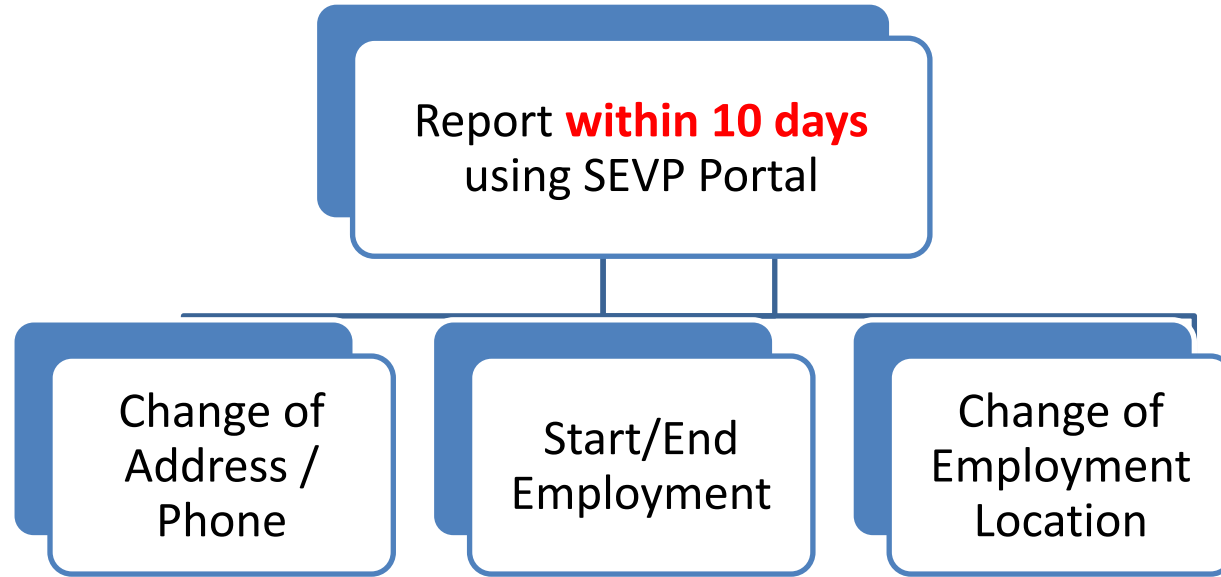
For instructions on how to reset your password, go to the [SEVP Portal - Student Guide](#) and the [Portal Help](#) page on Study in the States.

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 1030a(c); for unauthorized access to a government computer system or Title 28 United States Code 1001 providing false statements, or engaging in acts of concealment.
- By using this information system, you understand and consent to the following:
  - You have no reasonable expectation of privacy when you use this information system; this includes any communications or data transmitted, stored on, originating 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.
  - 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.
  - 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 (cannot work before you have it too!)
- 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) - if you’re eligible to transfer
  - **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 1<sup>st</sup> 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](http://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 30 (AUD) or 60 days (D/S) 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
  - May require filing Extension of Stay (EOS) Form I-539 with USCIS
- ‘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](mailto:intlsso@uncc.edu)
  - 3 business days processing time for responses
  - Email only ONE ISSO staff member
  - Professional communication expected
  - Expedite requests = not accepted

# 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 the University of North Carolina Charlotte clock tower, a tall brick structure with two clock faces, set against a blue sky with clouds. The tower is surrounded by lush green trees and a paved walkway. The entire image is framed by a thin gold border.

# Questions?