

Optional Practical Training (OPT) Student Handbook

What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)?

OPT is **practical** work experience in your "field of study" (i.e. your major), typically after completion of a degree. Initial OPT can last up to 12 months. Students are allowed to have one 12-month OPT period per degree level. Students on OPT are still considered to be F-1 students at Marian University even if working elsewhere in the United States. The Employment Authorization Document (EAD) received for OPT is a benefit of your F-1 status for the purposes of practical training.

Who is eligible?

- F-1 students who are legally maintaining their status; **and**
- Who have been enrolled full-time for at least 2 consecutive semesters; **and**
- Who will be completing a course of study this term; **and**
- Whose OPT employment will be directly related to their major.

What should you do before applying for OPT?

Before applying for OPT, you should confirm with your academic advisor that you will be completing your degree. When you submit your OPT application to the U.S. government, you are informing them you are done with your classes in that term. Make sure this is true before submitting your OPT application. For the OPT application, you will need a completed OPT Request Form, which requires signatures from you and your academic advisor. Please plan ahead.

When should you apply for OPT?

Students can apply for OPT up to **90 days before and 60 days after** the program completion date. **Program completion is the last day of the term during which you are registered for all the necessary credits for your program.** It is currently taking **3-5 months** for USCIS to process applications and **you must have your EAD card in-hand** in order to start work. Apply early and plan accordingly! Your OPT may end no later than 14 months after your program completion date.

What should you know when applying for OPT?

- The OPT handbook contains **detailed instructions** for preparing your OPT application; please follow these instructions to avoid delay of your application. The handbook includes:
 - The OPT **application procedure**
 - List of **required documents** to bring to your GEO advising appointment
 - Information for **tracking** your application status
 - Detailed **photo** specifications
 - OPT Request Form
 - OPT Acknowledgements
- Once your application for OPT has been approved, your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) will be mailed to the address on the I-765 form. **The post office WILL NOT FORWARD mail from USCIS if you change your address after you apply.** Additionally, USCIS will also not deliver your EAD to a PO Box. Make sure the **address you list on the I-765 is where you will be living (and accepting mail) in the coming 3-5 months.** Because many students don't know their plans when applying for OPT, it's best practice to use GEO's mailing address.
- It is impossible to **cancel** your practical training once you have received your EAD. The time granted on your EAD will be counted regardless of your actual employment. You will not receive a refund of the fee paid and you are unable to apply for OPT again based on that degree.

Important OPT Information

While on OPT, you are still an F-1 student. OPT is a benefit of F-1 immigration status not a work visa.

During OPT, you MUST keep GEO informed by:

- Submitting a copy of your **EAD** upon receipt
- Reporting all **address changes, employment information, and unemployment periods** to GEO within **10 days of any change**. Submit all changes to GEO via email for record-keeping.
- Submitting a copy of **Change of Status** application receipts and approval notices, upon receipt (if applicable).

REMEMBER:

- **You cannot work** until you have your EAD **in-hand** and the start **date** is valid.
- Your **OPT will automatically terminate** if you transfer to another school or begin to study at another educational level.
- You **may not accrue** more than **90 days of unemployment** during the initial 12-month OPT period.
- You have a **60-day grace period** after your OPT ends; however you cannot work during this time.

Travel during OPT:

Traveling during OPT can be risky; we suggest you talk with GEO prior to purchasing an airline ticket. If you travel, you will need:

- **I-20**, including **current employment information** & a DSO **travel signature dated within the past 6 months**
- **Passport**, valid at least 6 months into the future
- **Visa stamp that will be valid upon re-entering** the United States. If your visa is expired, please consult GEO
- **Unexpired EAD**
- **Proof of employment**. Consider carrying copies of recent paystubs and a letter from your employer indicating you will have a job upon your return.

Dependent Travel – Since OPT is not noted on dependent I-20s, an F-2 dependent must carry copies of the F-1 student's I-20 with OPT recommendation, EAD, and proof of employment, in addition to their own F-2 I-20 when traveling.

If you are unemployed, need to renew your F-1 visa, or your OPT application is pending, talk with GEO before purchasing your flight.

Other information you may need to know:

- **Taxes** – Generally, if you have been in the United States less than 5 years, you should be exempt from Social

Security Tax & Medicare Tax, also known as FICA (See Internal Revenue Service Publication 519, "U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens"). However, earnings are subject to applicable federal, state, and local (county) taxes unless your country has a tax treaty with the U.S. exempting you from payment. Tax returns must be filed on or before April 15 each year, for the previous calendar year.

- **Health Insurance** – It is extremely important that you have health insurance while living in the United States. If your employer doesn't provide health insurance, you should obtain another plan. You are eligible to have the Marian University international student insurance plan through LowerMark. Charges must be paid at the time of request to be included on the insurance roster.

OPT Application Procedure – 12 Months Validity

- Step 1. **Read** through this **entire OPT handbook**.
- Step 2. **Meet with** GEO to discuss your OPT plans, such as when to file, required documents, and employment options.
- Step 3. **Create your USCIS account** and upload documents. Do NOT submit your application.
- Step 4. **Make an appointment** with GEO to finalize your application.
- Step 5. **Electronically submit** your application, get receipt notice, & track status. Share receipt # with GEO.
- Step 6. **Submit a scan or photocopy of both sides of your EAD** to GEO.
- Step 7. **Report Employment and Changes to GEO**, such as your address, address where employment is taking place, and periods of unemployment.

OPT Application Required Documents

When you meet with GEO, please bring or save on your laptop the following documents:

- ☐ Completed **OPT Request Form**
- ☐ **Passport and F-1 visa** (Canadians will not have an F-1 visa in their passports).
- ☐ **I-94 Arrival/ Departure Record**. Download from- <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94>.
- ☐ **U. S.-issued debit or credit card**.

If applicable:

- ☐ Photocopy of any **previous EADs** and I-20s with previous CPT or OPT authorization(s)

GEO now only files OPT applications online as it is a cost savings to the student and prevents typos on EADs.

Tracking Your Application Status

Once your application has been accepted by USCIS, your USCIS account will show a receipt number. Within 2 – 6 weeks of sending your application you will receive a printed **Notice of Action(I-797)**; this and your portal account provide proof that you have an application pending with USCIS. Use your receipt number to track the status of your **case status** on the main USCIS website or in your USCIS portal account.

Biometrics Appointment

You will receive notification in the USCIS portal and via regular mail when you will have your biometrics appointment. You will take the printed notice and your passport to USCIS for an in-person appointment. There they will take your photo and could potentially request your signature and fingerprints. Your application will be paused until this is completed.

Color Photograph Specifications

You **must** an **electronic color photograph** of yourself taken **within 30 days** of the filing your OPT application.

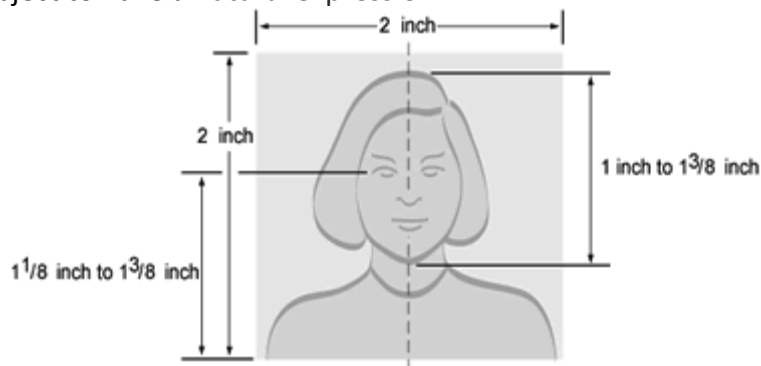
The **passport-style** photos must be:

- **2" x 2"**
- **full face**, frontal view
- have a **white to off-white background**
- printed on **thin paper** with a ***glossy finish***
- be **un-mounted** and **un-retouched**
- Your **head must be bare** unless you are wearing a headdress as required by a religious order of which you are a member

When filing online, use the photo cropping tool to ensure your photo meets specifications.
<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/photos.html>

7 Steps to Successful Photos

- ✓ Frame subject with full face, front view, eyes open
 - ✓ Make sure photo presents full head from top of hair to bottom of chin; height of head should measure 1 inch to 1-3/8 inches (25 mm to 35 mm).
 - ✓ Center head within frame (see Figure 2 below); ensure that there is some space above the top of your head.
 - ✓ Make sure eye height is between 1-1/8 inches to 1-3/8 inches (28 mm and 35 mm) from bottom of photo
 - ✓ Photograph subject against a plain white or off-white background
 - ✓ Position subject and lighting so that there are no distracting shadows on the face or background
- Encourage subject to have a natural expression



Getting a Social Security Number (SSN)

You should apply for an SSN, if you do not have one already. You will need to apply at the local Security Administration office. You will need:

- Your EAD
- Your latest I-20 with the OPT authorization
- Your immigration documents- passport, visa, I-94 printout, and SEVIS Fee Receipt (I-901)
- Completed SS-5 (Social Security Number application found at <http://www.ssa.gov/forms/ss-5.pdf>)
- Two utility bills, bank statements, or government documents no more than 6 months old that contain your current address
- You will need to phone to schedule your appointment. 1-800-772-1213

Once you have obtained your SSN card, sign it in ink. You'll need to share it with your employer's Human Resources office.

Please keep your Social Security card in a safe place. Do not take a picture of your card or carry it on a daily basis; the SSN can be easily used for identity theft. GEO does not need a copy of your Social Security card and you should be cautious when sharing the card and number with others.



Optional Practical Training Request Form

Section to be completed by student:

Last/ Family Name:	First/ Given Name:	Have you been approved for CPT or OPT before at Marian? Yes or No Dates:
Marian Email and Non-Marian Email:	Phone:	Have you been approved for OPT before at another U.S. school? Yes or No
Company Name (if known):		
Company Address:		
City:	State:	Zip Code:
Job Title:		Number of Hours Per Week:
Requested OPT Start Date: (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expected Date of Program Completion: (mm/dd/yyyy)	Major(s):
I will update GEO should my job duties or employment information change. I understand I will lose my F-1 visa status if I fail to abide by the OPT regulations, including a maximum days of unemployment, and my SEVIS record will be terminated.		
Student's Signature:		Date:

Section to be completed by Academic Advisor:

1. Has the student already **completed all program requirements** for degree completion? **Yes** or **No**
If the student is still in classes, please choose No.
2. **Expected completion date** of degree requirements: _____
(mm/dd/yyyy)
3. Is the student in good academic standing and eligible to complete the degree? **Yes** or **No**
4. Has this student applied for graduation? **Yes** or **No**

Academic Advisor's Name

Academic Advisor's Signature

Date

The purpose of this form is to confirm that this Marian University international student is poised to complete his/her/ their academic program in order to apply for an employment benefit from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

You may either return this form to the student or scan and email it to Rhonda J. Hinkle, Executive Director, GEO, at rhinkle@marian.edu.

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Excerpts from:

Alien Liability for Social Security and Medicare Taxes

For full text- <https://www.irs.gov/individuals/international-taxpayers/foreign-student-liability-for-social-security-and-medicare-taxes>

In general aliens performing services in the United States as employees are liable for U.S. social security and Medicare taxes. However, certain classes of alien employees are exempt from U.S. social security and Medicare taxes.

Nonresident aliens, in general, are also liable for Social Security/Medicare Taxes on wages paid to them for services performed by them in the United States, with **certain exceptions based on their nonimmigrant status**.

F-visas, J-visas, M-visas, Q-visas. Nonresident Alien students, scholars, professors, teachers, trainees, researchers, physicians, au pairs, summer camp workers, and other aliens temporarily present in the United States in **F-1, J-1**, M-1, or Q-1/Q-2 nonimmigrant status are exempt on wages paid to them for services performed within the United States as long as such services are allowed by USCIS for these nonimmigrant statuses, and such services are performed to carry out the purposes for which such visas were issued to them.

Exempt Employment includes:

- **On-campus student employment** up to 20 hours a week (40 hrs during summer vacations).
- **Off-campus student employment allowed by USCIS.**
- **Practical Training student employment on or off**

Limitations on exemption:

- The exemption does not apply to spouses and children in F-2, J-2, or M-2, nonimmigrant status.
- The exemption does not apply to employment not allowed by USCIS or to employment not closely connected to the purpose for which the visa was issued.
- The exemption does not apply to F-1, J-1, or M-1 nonimmigrant's who change to an immigration status which is not exempt or to a special protected status.
- The exemption does not apply to F-1, J-1, or M-1 nonimmigrant's who become resident aliens.

The IRS has published regulations which stipulate that aliens who arrive in the United States on F, J, or M visas will be assumed to be "NONRESIDENT ALIENS" but only to the extent that the assumption is consistent with the residency rules of section 7701(b) of the Code. Since the social security/Medicare tax exemption for foreign students, scholars, teachers, researchers, and trainees under the Code requires that the payee be a "NONRESIDENT ALIEN", then the social security/Medicare tax exemption ceases to exist at the point the payee becomes a "RESIDENT ALIEN" under the residency rules of section 7701(b) of the Code.

Thus, to summarize, both the Internal Revenue Code and the Social Security Act allow an exemption from social security/Medicare taxes to alien students, scholars, teachers, researchers, trainees, physicians, au pairs, summer camp workers, and other nonimmigrants who have entered the United States on F-1, J-1, M-1, Q-1, or Q-2 visas and who are still classified as NONRESIDENT ALIENS under the residency rules of the Internal Revenue Code. As discussed above, **this means that foreign students in F-1, J-1, or M-1 nonimmigrant status who have been in the United States less than 5 calendar years are still NONRESIDENT ALIENS and are still exempt from social security/medicare taxes.** This exemption also applies to any period in which the foreign student is in "practical training" allowed by USCIS, as long as the foreign student is still a NONRESIDENT ALIEN under the Code. **Foreign students in F-1, J-1, M-1, Q-1 or Q-2 nonimmigrant status who have been in the United States more than 5 calendar years are RESIDENT ALIENS and are liable for social security/Medicare taxes** (unless they are exempt from FICA under the "student FICA exemption").

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Optional Practical Training is intended to provide hands-on, practical work experience that is complimentary to your academic program. An F-1 student may be eligible for 12 months OPT, provided this practical training is **directly related to your major and is commensurate with your educational level.**

Requested OPT start date: _____ **and end date:** _____

Program End Date	Fall 2026 12/18/2026	Spring 2027 04/30/2027
Application		
First Date to submit OPT application	09/13/2026	01/30/2027
Last Date for USCIS to receive application	02/16/2026	06/29/2027

Employment		
Earliest Employment Start Date	12/19/2026	05/01/2027

In making this request I understand and agree to abide by all requirements, including:

- ☐ I will **submit my OPT application** immediately. USCIS must receive my OPT application within 30 days of my OPT recommendation.
- ☐ **If I apply late**, my OPT period may be less than 12 months. All OPT must be completed within 14 months of program completion. I may have a maximum of 90 days unemployment.
- ☐ I will inform GEO if I decide not to continue OPT.
- ☐ I will **report all changes** in my U.S. or overseas **address** to GEO within 10 days of such change.
- ☐ I will provide GEO with a **copy** of my Employment Authorization Document (**EAD**).
- ☐ I understand that I **cannot begin working until I have my EAD in-hand and have reached the start date** listed on the EAD.
- ☐ I will **report the name and address of my employer** to GEO within 10 days of starting work. I understand that I **should have health insurance** coverage for the duration of my F-1 status, including OPT.

Last Name

First Name

Student's Signature

Date