International Student FAQs
OPT, CPT, & H-1B visa

International students at Amherst College on an F-1 visa should become familiar with the unique circumstances that allow them to work and intern in the U.S. as a student. The questions below are common for international students and the answers should help you better understand your options.

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

What is OPT?
Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary work authorization offered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to students studying in the U.S. on an F-1 visa. OPT allows these international students up to 12 months of work authorization as long as the work is directly related to their academic major(s) and commensurate with their achieved educational level. Students can use OPT during college after completing one full academic year (pre-completion OPT) and/or after graduation (post-completion OPT). If students go on to graduate school, they receive an additional 12 months of work authorization linked to their F-1 visa status at the new school.

Do I need to apply for OPT to do an internship?
It depends. If you are paid by an organization or company outside of Amherst College, then you probably will need to apply for pre-completion OPT to obtain work authorization for the duration of the internship. There are some exceptions for positions in the Five Colleges and with designated “international organizations” such as the World Bank, United Nations, etc. The internship must be related to your intended or declared major(s). Keep in mind that if you use 2-3 months of pre-completion OPT for an internship, you will only have 9-10 months remaining for future internships or a job when you graduate.

If you are being paid by Amherst College or are doing an unpaid internship and receiving funding from certain resources on campus, such as the Center for Community Engagement (CCE), then most likely you do not need to apply for OPT to work.

How do I decide whether to use some of my 12 months of OPT before I graduate?
The USCIS offers international undergraduate students a total of only 12 months of OPT, so typically (though not always) it is recommended that you save your OPT until at least your junior summer. There are many other ways to gain good experience through on-campus work and research, internships that are eligible for funding and do not require you to use your OPT, and summer opportunities back home. Ask yourself these questions to determine whether it is worth using your OPT or saving it until you graduate:

- Do you want to stay in the U.S. to work after graduation?
- Does the employer use the internship to recruit for full-time positions after graduation?
- Does the employer typically submit petitions for H-1B visas? Read more about the H-1B visa below. It allows you to work at a company or organization for at least three years. However, you usually need at least nine months of work authorization from OPT to bridge the gap between when you start your position and when the employer can submit your petition for the H-1B in April of the following year.
- Is the internship required to obtain future positions or will it give you highly valuable experience in your field of interest that will make you more competitive for future applications?

**Can I use my OPT to get a job after I graduate?**
Yes. If you have not used any pre-completion OPT for internships as an underclassman, you will have 12 months of OPT remaining for post-completion OPT. If you have used pre-completion OPT, you need to subtract this amount of time from your 12 months of eligibility.

**How do I apply for OPT?**
If you are thinking of using your OPT, you should meet with Lauren Clarke to discuss your plans and learn more about the process. It can take the USCIS 1-3 months to process the application so you need to think ahead to whether or not you will need work authorization.

**What do employers have to do to help me use my OPT?**
Nothing. You will apply for OPT through Amherst College. OPT does not require any extra work or fees for the employer. Once you are hired, the company only needs to submit Form I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification, as would be done for any new employee.

**What is a STEM Extension?**
Students in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math may be eligible for an additional 17 months of post-completion OPT after the expiration of the initial 12-month period. In order to be eligible for an extension your work must be directly related to your STEM-designated major. Amherst majors covered by the STEM extension are: astronomy, biology, chemistry, neuroscience, computer science, geology, mathematics, statistics, and physics. The employer must be registered in E-Verify, an Internet-based system that compares information from an employee’s Form I-9 to data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Social Security Administration in order to confirm employment eligibility.

**Do I need to secure a job/internship before I apply for OPT?**
No. You may submit an application for OPT in anticipation of finding appropriate employment. In fact, because of OPT processing delays, it may be advisable to submit your OPT application before you have a confirmed job offer. Once you have submitted an application, however, it may be difficult to rescind the application or cancel an already approved OPT period, even if you do not find appropriate employment, resulting in a forfeiture of some OPT time.

**Do I need to have work authorization through OPT before I begin a job?**
Yes. You must have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, a photo identification card issued by USCIS and showing the specific beginning and ending dates of your OPT employment permission. However, you do not need to have received your EAD or even applied for OPT before you accept an offer.

**Curricular Practical Training (CPT)**

**What is CPT?**
CPT is an F-1 option designed to support academic programs that require practical experience for credit and degree completion. Obvious examples are programs in nursing or teaching which require a practicum placement. CPT may also be used if the work is not only related to a declared major but is necessary for a planned thesis or a credit bearing course. If that is the case, then the request for CPT needs to be endorsed by the student’s advisor or faculty teaching the course, and approved by the Dean for International Students.
Are Amherst College students eligible for CPT?
Amherst College does not generally confer academic credit for internships so CPT authorization is rare. In most cases, paid internships will be classified as Optional Practical Training (OPT.) For more information, see this page on CPT and/or contact the Dean for International Students, Lauren Clarke.

H-1B Visas (Temporary Work Visa)

What is the H-1B visa?
Your F-1 visa does not allow you to stay and work legally in the U.S. after the 12 months permitted by OPT and, if you’re eligible, the additional 17 months permitted through the STEM extension. Employers who would like to hire international employees for a longer period of time can file a petition for an H-1B temporary worker visa with the USCIS. This visa is tied to employment at a specific employer and permits the international employee three years in a specialty occupation related to his academic field of study. The visa can be renewed for three additional years (for a total of six years of employment). There is a cap on how many petitions for H-1B visas that the USCIS will accept each year which is met very quickly after the filing period opens in April.

What do employers have to do to help me get an H-1B visa?
The employer has to submit a petition for an H-1B visa to the USCIS. They have to pay for the USCIS filing fees which total approximately $800-$2,300, depending on the size and nature of the employer. For premium two week processing through the USCIS, there are additional filing fees. The employer must also cover the cost of any attorney processing fees which can add $1,500-$2,500 if there is no one who can do it within the company. Lastly, the employer must file a Labor Condition application with the Department of Labor attesting to salary and working conditions. The employer does not need to prove that there are no qualified American applicants who have applied. This is only the case if the employer is sponsoring you for an application for permanent residence (a green card) through employment. This is a different process altogether, and if you’d like to learn more about permanent residence through employment, the H-1B visa, or other temporary work visas including TN-1, E-3, L-1, etc…visit the USCIS website, read this article Visas after Graduation, or contact an immigration attorney.

Relevant Resources

Lauren Clarke, Dean for International Students & Global Engagement: For specific questions related to your F-1 visa, OPT, and CPT and to apply for work authorization and STEM extensions. General questions about H-1B visas.

Laura Litwiller, Assistant Director for Career Advising: For general questions about how OPT and STEM relate to finding internships and jobs.

Dan Berger, Immigration Attorney at Curran & Berger, LLC: For more complicated immigration matters or for assistance explaining various forms of work authorization to your potential employer.

United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS): General information about OPT, CPT, STEM extensions, H-1B visa, and many other immigration related issues.

Going Global: Online resource that allows you to search companies, industries, geographic locations, etc. to find employers that have submitted petitions for H-1B visas in the previous year. In order to have free access, you must link to it from the Career Center homepage.