

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FAQs: OPT, CPT, & H-1B VISA

International students at Amherst College in F-1 status should become familiar with the federal regulations that dictate how they may 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 work authorization that students in F-1 status are eligible to apply for via U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). OPT allows students in F-1 status to engage in up to 12 months of work, as long as that work is directly related to their academic major(s). Students engage in work with OPT during college after completing one full academic year (Pre-Completion OPT) and/or after graduation (Post-Completion OPT). If F-1 visa-holding students go on to graduate school, they are eligible to apply for up to 12 months of OPT at the new degree level.

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. 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 doing an unpaid internship and receiving funding from certain resources on campus, such as the Loeb Center, then most likely you do not need to apply for OPT for that work. Please check with the Center for International Student Engagement (cise@amherst.edu) if you are unsure whether an internship will require OPT.

How do I decide whether to use some of my 12 months of OPT before I graduate?

Students in F-1 visa status are only eligible to apply for up to 12 months of OPT at each degree level, 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:

- 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 on the next page. 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? 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 undergraduate, 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 OPT eligibility.

How do I apply for OPT?

If you are considering using your OPT, you should contact the Center for International Student Engagement (cise@amherst.edu) to discuss your plans and learn more about the process. It can take the USCIS 3-4 months to process the OPT application, so you will need to think ahead and consider 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 (STEM) may be eligible for an additional 24 months of Post-Completion OPT following the initial 12-month period. In order to be eligible for this OPT 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, Economics, 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. The employer must also commit to providing the employee with formal training and learning objectives.

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 the 3-4 month OPT processing time, 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 the requested OPT period, even if you do not find appropriate employment, resulting in a forfeiture of OPT time.

Do I need to have approved OPT work authorization before I begin a job?

Yes. You must have received your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, a photo identification card issued by USCIS that shows the specific beginning and end dates of your approved OPT employment period. However, you do not need to have received your EAD or even applied for OPT before you accept a job offer.

CURRICULAR PRACTICAL TRAINING (CPT)

What is CPT?

CPT is curricular-based work authorization 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. For more information about CPT and the rare cases where you might be eligible, see the Center for International Student Engagement website. <https://www.amherst.edu/mm/553369>.

H-1B VISA (TEMPORARY WORK VISA)

What is the H-1B visa?

F-1 status does not permit work beyond the 12 months of OPT (and, if you're eligible, the additional 24 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 or her academic field of study. The visa can potentially be renewed for three additional years (for a total of six years of employment). For most positions, 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.

Resources

Center for International Student Engagement, Amherst College

For specific questions about your F-1 status and work authorization eligibility
(cise@amherst.edu)

Laura Litwiller, Associate Director for Career Advising, Amherst College

For general questions about how OPT and STEM relate to finding internships and jobs
(llitwiller@amherst.edu)

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