Optional Practical Training

• F-1 students are eligible to participate in OPT once they have been in continuous, legal F-1 status for a full academic year. (two complete semesters or 9 months)
• F-1 students are eligible to receive a total period of 12 months of OPT for each successive degree level that is completed. (meaning 12 months for BA, another 12 months for MA for example)
• STEM degree students can apply for a 17 month extension – see below*
• Permission to participate in OPT is granted by the USCIS. An application that has been recommended by the ISSC (International Student Service Coordinator) must be submitted to USCIS.
• You do not have to have a job offer to apply for OPT. Furthermore, a student who is actively pursuing employment during the approved OPT period is considered to be in legal F-1 status.
• The OPT employment MUST be directly related to his/her stated course of study.
• Students may work for as many different employers as they choose during the approved OPT period.
• Only students that have completed his/her program of study can pursue full-time OPT employment.
• A student that has not completed his/her program of study is only eligible to apply for part-time OPT. (Please note that any part-time OPT will count against your 12 month allowance at half the rate – meaning if you work part-time for 6 months, 3 months will be taken off of your total 12 month OPT allowance)
• A student on OPT is still considered to be in F-1 status.
OPT Application process:

• Recommendation – All OPT applications are made through the SEVIS system and must be recommended by Salem College.

• Submission - Students are STRONGLY ENCOURAGED to submit the OPT application AT LEAST 120 days prior to the completion of their program of study. **F-1 students must apply within 60 days of completing program.**

• Receipt Notice - Once your application has been received by the USCIS, you will receive a receipt notice. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT AND SHOULD BE KEPT IN A SAFE LOCATION.

• Address – The address that you list on Form I-765 will be the address where your receipt notice and EAD (Employment Authorization Document) card will be sent. Keep in mind that it usually takes between 2-3 months for the USCIS to process an OPT application.

• Delays – The processing time will be significantly increased if your application is incomplete or has mistakes. For this reason it is very important that you take great care when submitting your application to not make mistakes.

• Beginning Date – When you apply for OPT, you choose a beginning date for your period of employment. The earliest date you are able to begin your OPT is the date you have fulfilled all of your academic requirements. The latest date would be 60 days after the completion date listed on your I-20. You cannot begin working until the date listed on the EAD card. You should keep this in mind when talking with prospective employers.

• End Date – All employment must stop on the end date listed on the EAD card. The non-immigrant may remain in the U.S. for a period of 60 days following the OPT, but no employment may be performed during this time.

• Beyond OPT – If you have the intention of remaining in the U.S. after you have completed your OPT, you will need to file for a change of status PRIOR to the expiration date of your OPT. For most, the next step would be to apply for an H-1B1 visa for a specialty occupation. If this is the case, you will need to find an employer who is willing and able to sponsor you for the H-1B1 visa.

• Cancellation – If after you apply you decide you want to cancel or change the dates of your application, you will need to have the ISSC (International Student Services Coordinator) contact USCIS before your application is processed. **ONCE YOUR APPLICATION IS PROCESSED, THERE IS NO WAY TO CANCEL OR CHANGE THE PERIOD OF OPT THAT YOU APPLIED FOR.**

• Mistakes on your EAD - Mistakes such as the misspelling of names or wrong date of birth can be reported, but can also just be ignored. (It is recommended that most small mistakes be ignored) However, if there is a mistake on the dates of employment or another serious inaccuracy, you will need to contact the ISSC at Salem.
• Lost cards – If you lose your EAD you will have to submit another I-765 and pay a filing fee to receive a replacement. It is important to make a copy of your card for your records.
• Entering and Leaving the Country – You are advised NOT to leave the country prior to finding employment. After you have begun your OPT, you can leave for temporary absences and reenter, but you must carry with you a valid visa, a signed and valid I-20, and proof of present employment (like a letter from your employer). If you remain outside the U.S for a period of time that exceeds 5 months, you will lose your F-1 status and any period of OPT.

CHECKLIST
2 – Two passport style photos. On the back of each photo, write in pencil your full name, and the 11 digit number on your I-94 card.
3 – $340 Fee (personal check or money order payable to Homeland Security)
4 – copies of your I-94 (both sides), passport data page and visa stamp, past and current I-20s.
5 – Letter from a faculty advisor approving your petition for OPT.
6- New I-20 issued by ISSC

F-1 students are responsible for reporting their address, their employer’s name and address, and any periods of unemployment while on OPT. YOU MUST CONTACT THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES COORDINATOR WITH YOUR ADDRESS AND EMPLOYER INFORMATION. YOU MUST REPORT ANY CHANGES WITHIN 10 DAYS.

*Additional Seventeen Months of OPT for Graduates with a "STEM" Degree

Be advised that this additional 17 months is only available to you if you have or will have earned a degree in one of the STEM fields:

• Science
• Technology
• Engineering
• Mathematics
Application Procedure

- A request for the additional time must be filed prior to the end of the original post-completion OPT.
- A student who wishes to apply for the additional time must first request a recommendation from the designated school official (DSO).
- Once this recommendation is received, Form I-765, copy of new I-20 with DSO designation on page three, and appropriate filing fee are filed with the USCIS.
- A student who has submitted a timely request for the additional OPT time automatically receives an extension of original OPT beyond the expiration date listed on the EAD card until the I-765 application is adjudicated by the USCIS (maximum period of 180 days of automatic extension).
- Any student requesting the additional OPT must be able to prove the following when submitting the application to the USCIS:
  - The employer for whom the student is working is registered with the USCIS's E-Verify program
  - The earned degree is in one of the STEM designated fields

- An employer who employs a student on extended OPT will be required to report to the DSO, within 48 hours, any termination or cessation of employment
- A student on the 17-month extension is required to report to the school official (DSO) every six months, starting from the date of the extension

Allowable Periods of Unemployment During OPT

- F-1 student pursuing the 12-month, post-completion OPT is allowed an aggregate maximum period of only 90 days of unemployment
- F-1 student with an approved 17-month extension period is allowed an aggregate maximum of 120 days of unemployment