

International Travel FAQ for Students on OPT

As an international student in F-1 status using the post-completion OPT benefit, can I exit and re-enter the U.S. during the post-completion OPT period?

Yes, the [U.S. government guidance](#) states, "If USCIS has approved your OPT you will be expected to have your EAD in hand to re-enter the United States, in addition to your Form I-20, valid passport and visa, and a letter of employment if you have one. If you exceed the limits on unemployment while outside the United States, you will not be eligible to re-enter the United States in F-1 status."

Despite carrying the recommended documentation, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers have the right to deny entry if they do not think one meets all admissibility criteria.

As an international student in F-1 status using the post-completion OPT benefit, what do I need to re-enter the U.S. after traveling abroad?

- Your current I-20 signed in the last **six** months by an ISSS advisor.
 - Your re-entry to the U.S. must be within six months from the last time the I-20 was signed.
 - If you are employed, then ISSS recommends your OPT I-20 reflect your most recent employment.
- A passport that is valid at least six months beyond the date of re-entry to the U.S.
- A valid F-1 student visa (Citizens of Canada do not need a visa)
 - If you need to renew your F-1 student visa while on post-completion OPT, ISSS recommends you speak with an ISSS advisor to discuss the possible risks involved.
 - If you are traveling to Canada, Mexico, and the adjacent islands and you have an expired visa, contact ISSS to see if you are eligible for Automatic Visa Revalidation (AVR).
- Your valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD card)
 - There are risks to traveling with a pending STEM OPT Extension that ISSS would like to make you aware of.
 - DHS has stated, "Students on STEM OPT extensions (including those whose application for a STEM OPT extension is pending) may travel abroad and seek reentry to the United States in F-1 status during the STEM OPT extension period if they have a valid F-1 visa that permits multiple entries and a current Form I-20 Certificate of Eligibility endorsed for reentry by the DSO within the last six months. The student's status is determined by CBP upon admission to the United States or through a USCIS adjudication of a change-of-status petition." Furthermore, DHS has stated that the expired post-completion OPT EAD card itself is also "automatically extended and is considered unexpired when combined with a Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1/M-1) Students, Form I-20 or successor form, endorsed by the Designated School Official recommending such an extension."
 - The [ICE Travel FAQ](#) addresses travel while OPT is pending "Traveling during this time should be undertaken with caution. USCIS may send you a request for evidence while you are away, however, so you would want to make sure you have provided a correct U.S. address both to your DSO and on the application and would be able to send in requested documents. Also, if USCIS approves your STEM OPT application, you will be expected to have your EAD in hand to re-enter the United States. Like a request for further information, USCIS can only send the EAD to your U.S. address." Further, if your STEM OPT application is denied while you are outside of the U.S., you won't be permitted to reenter the U.S. in F-1 status.
- Proof of employment in your major field of study, either pending or ongoing.

If my F-1 visa has expired, can I re-enter the U.S. in a different status?

If you re-enter the U.S. in any status other than F-1 while on OPT, your F-1 status will be invalidated, and you will lose the OPT benefit.

Can I renew my F-1 student visa while on post-completion OPT or the STEM OPT Extension?

Yes. Students who are on OPT may apply for an F-1 student visa.

You will need a valid EAD as well as evidence that you already have a job or will have a job in the U.S. in your major field of study, along with the other required visa renewal documents.

When you apply for your F-1 student visa, you should have the following:

- A valid passport
- An I-20 signed in the last six months
- You do not need to pay the SEVIS fee again. Please be sure you take your [I-901 SEVIS fee receipt](#).
- A valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD card)
- An official job offer letter.
 - ISSS recommends the offer letter show your salary, location of employment, whether the job is full-time or part-time, job duties, etc. You should be prepared to clearly explain how the job is related to your field of study.

If you need to renew your F1 student visa while on OPT, ISSS recommends you speak with an ISSS advisor to discuss the possible risks involved.

OPT is a benefit of the non-immigrant F-1 status which means if you indicate immigrant intent to the U.S. consular official, your F-1 visa could be denied.

Now that you are finished with your academic program and are on OPT, you must be prepared to clearly [demonstrate non-immigrant intent](#).

Can I re-enter the U.S. if I am maintaining my F-1 status while on post-completion OPT by volunteering at least 20 hours a week in my field of study?

This is a grey area. You must have proof of *employment* or pending *employment* when you re-enter the U.S. It is unclear whether the United States Customs and Border Protection officer at the U.S. port-of-entry will consider your volunteer employment sufficient to grant re-entry to the U.S. as an F-1 student on post-completion OPT. ISSS advises students to take this into consideration before they travel internationally.

Can I re-enter the U.S. after I have completed my post-completion OPT or STEM OPT?

Students who were in F-1 status cannot re-enter the U.S. during their grace period using their F-1 visa/status.

Can I travel internationally after my employer has filed an H-1B petition for me?

ISSS advises students in F-1 status with pending or approved H-1B petitions to discuss any international travel plans with the official who filed the H-1B petition. It is advisable to exercise caution when deciding whether to travel abroad after an H-1B has been filed.

- Travel outside of the U.S. while an H-1B petition requesting a change of status is pending may result in the denial of the change of status part of the H-1B petition.
- Travel after the H-1B has been approved is highly problematic and should be discussed with an immigration attorney
- ISSS will not advise F-1 students regarding international travel once an H-1B petition has been filed.

Can I travel during the OPT cap-gap period?

To re-enter the U.S. while on post-completion OPT you need to present a valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD). Because most students will not have a valid EAD during the cap-gap period, international travel is not recommended. International travel at this time could also negatively impact the H-1B petition. Please discuss any international travel plans with the official who filed the H-1B petition.

Will international travel while on post-completion OPT count as unemployment?

The U.S. government guidance states, “Time spent outside the United States during an approved period of post-completion OPT counts as unemployment against the 90/120-day limits, unless the student is either:

- Employed during a period of leave authorized by an employer; or
- Traveling as part of his or her employment. ([SEVP Policy Guidance 1004-03](#))

Will I get an I-94 when I re-enter the U.S.?

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has automated the Form I-94 at air and seaports of entry. The paper form will no longer be provided to an international traveler upon arrival, except in limited circumstances. A paper I-94 is still issued at the land border ports of entry.

Where can I get a copy of my I-94?

A copy of your I-94 (record of admission) can be obtained from the [Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\) website](#). Please print your I-94 upon return and confirm the status is correct (F-1) and that you are admitted for D/S (Duration of Status).

If you encounter difficulty retrieving your I-94, please review the [ISSS handout](#) for tips.

Should the Port of Entry Officer stamp my passport?

Yes! The Port of Entry Officer should stamp your passport. The stamp should be a date stamp reflecting the date of entry and the correct port of entry. Please make sure the Port of Entry Officer also notates your status (F-1), and writes D/S, which means you are admitted to the U.S. for Duration of Status. If the Port of Entry Office does not stamp your passport, you will want to make sure that your I-94 is recorded correctly. If your I-94 is recorded incorrectly, you will want to seek an [I-94 correction](#).

I am currently outside the U.S. and I forgot my I-20 or the signature is more than 6 months old! What do I do?

Please submit the [I-20 Reprint Request Form](#) and indicate “Travel” as the reason for the reprint. In the “Additional Comments” section, please indicate the date you intend to re-enter the U.S. so ISSS can determine if there is enough time to send the document.

- As of March 27, 2020, SEVP and USCIS issued guidance allowing I-20s to be sent to students by email during the COVID-19 crisis.

If ISSS cannot provide you with a new I-20 prior to your re-entry, then you may be provisionally admitted for a period of only 30 days with the form I-515. You will have 30 days to mail in Form I-515 with whatever missing documents you had at the time of entry. If you receive an I-515, contact ISSS immediately.