



# USCIS Updates Guidance for International Students

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Recent updates from USCIS, effective as of August 27, 2024, bring significant changes that provide more flexibility and opportunities for international students on F and M visas. These updates include when students may be eligible for optional practical training (OPT), as well as clarifying matters concerning online classes, school transfers, grace periods, and study abroad.

## What is Optional Practical Training (OPT)

OPT is an opportunity given to students on an F-1 visa to work temporarily in an area directly related to their studies. Students who are eligible for the program can work up to 12 months either during their studies (known as “pre-completion”) or immediately after they finish their studies (known as “post-completion”). If a student decides to work during their studies based on pre-completion OPT but does not reach 12 months, they can work after obtaining their degree based on post-completion OPT as long as they do not exceed the limit.

## Key Changes in the Updated Guidance

### 1. More Flexibility for Online Classes

In a world where online learning has become the norm, USCIS now allows students to take one online class or three credits per academic semester as part of their full course of study.

### 2. Grace Period Flexibility

Students have a 60-day grace period following completion of OPT during which time they may change their education level, transfer to another SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program)-certified school or apply to change their immigration status.



### 3. School Transfers and Changing Educational Levels

USCIS has streamlined and provided clearer guidelines on eligibility and procedures for [students to transfer](#) between SEVP-certified schools or between education levels. Eligibility for transfers differs for F-1 and M-1 students.

#### a. Eligibility for F-1 Students:

- F-1 students must notify the Designated School Official (DSO) of their intent to transfer to another SEVP-certified school.
- Students are allowed to start this transfer process while maintaining valid F-1 status at their current SEVP-certified school or during their 60-day grace period.
- An F-1 student may transfer at the same educational level (e.g. Bachelor's program to Bachelor's program) or change educational levels (e.g. Bachelor's program to Master's program) as long as they maintain valid student status.
- A student must generally maintain a full course of study during F-1 status. If the student fails to maintain a full course of study and is deemed out of status, they cannot transfer to another school without first requesting reinstatement or departing the U.S. and re-entering in a new F-1 status.

NOTE: When transferring between schools or programs, the student must start the new program within five months of their prior program ending.

#### b. Eligibility for M-1 Students:

A student who is on an M-1 visa cannot transfer to another school after six months from the day they are admitted or change of status to an M-1 student.

If the student cannot remain at the school due to circumstances beyond their control, an M-1 student may transfer after the 6-month cutoff if the student:

- Is a bona fide nonimmigrant.
- Has been pursuing a full course of study at the last authorized school.
- Intends to pursue a full course study at the new school.
- Is financially able to attend the new school.

M-1 students must file Form I-539 Application to Extend/Change Nonimmigrant Status with USCIS to request transfer and notify both the current and new schools.

### 4. Eligibility for Post-Completion OPT

[USCIS confirmed](#) students are eligible for post-completion OPT after completing an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree program. This ensures that those who completed degrees at various levels can gain practical experience in their field of study.



## 5. Timing for STEM OPT Extensions

If a student ever had issues with applying for STEM OPT on time due to misleading deadlines, this USCIS update [clarifies the correct timeframe](#):

### Application Window:

- Students can apply for the 24-month STEM OPT extension up to 90 days before the end of their initial 12-month OPT period or up to 60 days after their OPT ends.

NOTE: Students who apply on time are granted an automatic extension of their work authorization for up to 180 days while their application for STEM OPT is being processed by USCIS.

## 6. Study Abroad Program

Studying abroad is a perfect opportunity for students to learn about other cultures, experience new perspectives, and work with diverse peers. These new guidelines allow students to worry less about their status in SEVIS. [USCIS clarified](#) that if a study abroad lasts less than five months, the student will remain active in SEVIS and may return to the U.S. to continue their studies; if the student's study abroad lasts more than five months, they will need a new Form I-20 before being permitted to return to the U.S.

## Looking Forward

These updates aim to provide international students on F and M visas with clearer and more straightforward procedures to follow. With this greater flexibility, students can better take advantage of the available opportunities, gaining knowledge and experience in their fields of interest.