OPT STEM Extension

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Definition of STEM OPT

Certain F-1 students who receive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees may apply for a 24-month extension of their post-completion optional practical training (OPT).

Eligibility Criteria for the 24-month OPT extension

To qualify for STEM OPT, you must:

- Have been granted OPT and currently be in a valid period of post-completion OPT; and
- File the STEM OPT application with USCIS during the final 90 days of your post-completion OPT authorization period; and
- Have earned a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) major within the last 10 years. The degree must be from an institution that is accredited by a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accrediting agency and is certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) at the time you submit your STEM OPT extension application; and
- Have a paid job or job offer of at least 20 hours/week with an employer enrolled in the U.S. Government’s E-Verify program, doing work that is directly related to your STEM major field of study; and
- Fully complete and sign, alongside an Employer Official from your E-Verify employer, the I-983 [1] form

Please Note: All five of the above criteria must be met in order for a student to be eligible for STEM OPT.

Additional Information

List of degrees in STEM fields
If a student earned a degree in a field that appears on the U.S. government’s official list of STEM OPT major fields, he/she may be eligible for the 24-month STEM OPT extension. In order to confirm if your degree is on this list, look at the major code(s) listed in the "Program of Study" section on Page 1 of your I-20 form, and then look for that code in the CIP code column of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security STEM Designated Degree Programs list.

- **Previously obtained STEM degrees:** If you are an F-1 student participating in a period of post-completion OPT based on a non-STEM degree, you may be eligible to use a previous STEM degree from a U.S. institution of higher education to apply for a STEM OPT extension. You must have received both degrees from currently accredited and SEVP-certified institutions, and cannot have already received a STEM OPT extension based on this previous degree. The practical training opportunity also must be directly related to the previously obtained STEM degree.
  
  - For example: If you are currently participating in post-completion OPT based on a master's degree in law but you previously received a bachelor's degree in mathematics, you may be able to apply for a STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor’s degree as long as it is from an accredited U.S. college or university and the OPT employment opportunity is directly related to your bachelor’s degree in mathematics.

**24-Month STEM OPT Extension Available Twice**

The 24-month STEM OPT extension is available to each student at two non-consecutive periods during their lifetime. Please note that this is different from the rules applicable to post-completion OPT, for which students can be approved for a new post-completion OPT period each time they go up to a higher degree level (i.e. bachelor’s, then master’s, then doctorate).

**E-Verify**

E-Verify is a database system operated by the Department of Homeland Security in partnership with the Social Security Administration. It allows participating employers to electronically verify the employment eligibility of newly hired employees. E-Verify is currently voluntary in most states. For more information visit [https://www.e-verify.gov/](https://www.e-verify.gov/).

**Application time frame for STEM OPT**

To be eligible for STEM OPT, students must file no earlier than 90 days prior to the end date of post-completion OPT, and no later than the end date of post-completion OPT. USCIS must receive your STEM OPT application within 60 days of the STEM OPT I-20 issuance date.

**Work authorization status while STEM extension is pending**

If you successfully file the application for STEM OPT with USCIS during the final 90 days of post-completion OPT, then you may continue employment even if your Post-Completion EAD card is expired.
This automatic extension of post-completion OPT is valid until your STEM OPT application is adjudicated or until 180 days has passed from the expiration date of your post-completion EAD card, whichever is sooner.

**Unemployment limits during STEM OPT**

Students on STEM OPT are allowed a maximum of **150** days of unemployment time, which is a cumulative amount that includes any unemployment time accrued during both STEM OPT plus the preceding post-completion OPT period.

**Types of Employment Allowed during STEM OPT**

Qualifying STEM OPT employment must consist of:

- At least 20 hours per week of work
- Paid work (unpaid employment is not permitted on STEM OPT)
- Employment which is directly related to the STEM-eligible field of study
- Employment must be with an employer enrolled in E-Verify
- The employer must have and maintain a bona fide employer-employee relationship with the student
- Employment must be tied to a fully completed I-983 form
- The employer agrees to comply with the STEM OPT Employer Requirements and Responsibilities, as outlined on the USCIS website [4]

STEM OPT employment may include:

- **Multiple employers.** Students may change employers during STEM OPT, and/or work for more than one employer simultaneously, but all employment must meet the criteria of qualifying STEM OPT employment as outlined above. Any changes in STEM employment must be formally reported [5] to the International Center within 10 days of any change.

- **Self-employment / business ownership.** F-1 students cannot qualify for STEM OPT extensions unless they will be bona fide employees of the employer signing the Form I-983. F-1 students may not provide the employer attestation (i.e., signatures) on their own behalf nor provide their own training. However, they may start a business so long as all regulatory requirements [4] are met. The employer that signs the Form I-983 must be the same entity that employs the student and provides the practical training experience.

**Application Procedures for Students**

1. **Prepare a fully completed and signed I-983 Form**

The I-983 [1] Form “Training Plan for STEM OPT Students” is a document which must be completed,
signed and dated jointly by the student and his or her E-Verify employer. The I-983 must clearly articulate the STEM OPT student’s learning objectives and affirm the employer’s commitment to helping the student achieve those objectives. STEM OPT students and their employers are subject to the terms and conditions of the 24-month STEM OPT extension regulations explained on the Form I-983, effective as of the employment start date requested for the associated STEM OPT period.

For assistance in completing the I-983, please view our U-M I-983 Instructions [6]. For an overview of I-983 information, please see the Study in the States [7] website.

2. Submit the electronic OPT STEM Extension I-20 Request Form

Please make sure to fill out all the fields and attach all the documents listed in the OPT STEM Extension I-20 Request Form [8]. Incomplete requests cannot be processed.

Remember that to be eligible for STEM OPT, students must apply no earlier than 90 days prior to the end date of Post-Completion OPT, and no later than the end date of Post-Completion OPT.

Accordingly, the International Center will not process a request for a STEM OPT recommendation I-20 submitted more than 100 days in advance of your current OPT end date. Having said that, we do encourage students to plan ahead and not wait until the last few weeks of Post-Completion OPT to submit a STEM OPT I-20 request.

Note for STEM OPT I-20 applicants who are employed by U-M: Once your OPT STEM Extension I-20 Request is received and approved by an IC advisor, the advisor will send an e-mail to your U-M supervisor with the U-M E-Verify number information. You will need this number to complete the I-765 form. Please ask your supervisor for the E-Verify number after you have been notified by an advisor that your request has been received.

Note for applicants who are applying for STEM OPT not based on their current degree indicated on the Post-Completion OPT I-20, but instead based a previously obtained STEM degree: Please use the comments text box on the OPT STEM Extension I-20 Request Form to declare your intentions to apply for STEM OPT based on a previously obtained STEM degree. Provide relevant details of this previously obtained STEM degree, such as the degree level, the major field of study and associated CIP code, and the university at which the degree was awarded.

3. Wait for an IC advisor to review your STEM OPT I-20 request

An International Center advisor will review your STEM OPT I-20 request, and follow up via email with any clarifying questions (if applicable). If we determine your STEM OPT I-20 request is valid and complete, we will then send your STEM OPT recommendation to SEVIS electronically to generate a new I-20. The STEM OPT recommendation will be printed on page 2 of the new I-20. The processing time required to produce your new I-20 is approximately 2 weeks.

- If you have requested in-person pickup, the International Center will notify you when your new I-20 is available. Bring your M-Card to the U-M International Center front desk to pick up your I-20. For office hours and more information about visiting the International Center in person, please visit our website
If you wish to have the OPT I-20 shipped to you, set up and pay for an eShip Global order. To avoid delays, if you choose eShip Global to receive your I-20, do not wait to be notified that the I-20 has been created before setting up the shipping request. Instead, set up the eShip Global request at the same time you submit your STEM OPT I-20 request.

As soon as you receive the I-20, review the information on pages 1 and 2 of the I-20. Pay particular attention to the employment information (for both Post-Completion and STEM OPT) on page 2. If everything looks accurate, add your signature and the date to the bottom of page 1 in the Student Attestation section.

4. Send your complete application and required documents to USCIS

Refer to the Sending Your Completed STEM OPT Application to USCIS sections of our website below. You may choose to either submit your STEM OPT application by filing online at the USCIS website, or by mailing a paper-based application packet to USCIS, but do not pursue both methods.

5. Track the status of your application

If you successfully file your STEM OPT application, USCIS will send you a receipt notice. If you file your application online, you should immediately obtain confirmation of your filing and have access to receipt information. If you apply for STEM OPT via a paper-based application, you should generally expect to have a receipt notice mailed to you approximately 3-4 weeks after your application is first received by USCIS.

Once you have received your receipt number, you can track the status of your application using USCIS online tools such as the case status search feature.

6. Receive an EAD card in the mail from USCIS

Once USCIS has completed their final review of your STEM OPT application, they will issue a formal adjudication decision of approval or denial. Expect at least 90 days processing time, recognizing that processing times can fluctuate from student to student and year to year. Current expected I-765 processing times can be found on the USCIS website.

If your application is approved, you then need to receive an EAD card in the mail from USCIS. It is the EAD card which confirms your STEM OPT approval and helps prove your ongoing F-1 status and work authorization. The start date of the STEM OPT EAD card should automatically be set to the day after the expiration of the current Post-Completion OPT authorization. The end date will be 24 months later.

Sending Your Completed STEM OPT Application to USCIS - Online Option
In April 2021, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that F-1 students applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT) may now file their Form I-765 online if filing under the pre-completion, post-completion, or the 24 month STEM extension categories. Please see the USCIS news release [13] for additional information.

NOTE: You may still mail your paper-based application to the appropriate USCIS mailing address or choose to file online [14], but not both. Multiple OPT applications may result in denial by USCIS.

USCIS encourages students to file their STEM OPT application online. If you prefer to file your STEM OPT application using a paper-based application process despite the benefits of online filing, be sure to carefully review the ‘Sending Your Completed STEM OPT Application to USCIS – Paper-Filing Option’ section below to ensure the accuracy and completeness of your application.

Benefits of Online Filing

- Immediate filing of OPT application with USCIS and issuance of I-765 receipt notice (the I-765 receipt notice may be useful in updating Form I-9 for employment authorization verification beyond the expiration of post-completion OPT);
- Direct access to USCIS notices including, but not limited to receipt notice, requests for evidence, approval notice, etc.
- Ability to communicate with USCIS through a secure inbox
- Option to provide additional unsolicited evidence/updates to your application if necessary
- Minimizes risk of rejection of the application by vetting common reasons for rejection such as applicant’s signature and proper fee payment
- Ability to pay application fee through your bank account (ACH), debit, or credit card.

Reminders for Online Filing

- You must be physically present in the U.S. when your OPT application is filed with USCIS.
- While filing Form I-765 online allows for immediate filing and receipt of your application, the overall processing time for the I-765 application is the same regardless of paper vs. online filing. See the USCIS website [12] for current processing times.
- Please carefully review all answers and documentation before submitting your application to USCIS. Any amendments to the application would need to be submitted to USCIS by uploading evidence in the ‘Unsolicited evidence’ section of the ‘Documents’ tab of your USCIS online account. Additional evidence that was not requested in a request for evidence will be considered by USCIS at their discretion, and USCIS will consider the timeliness and relevance of the information when adjudicating your application.
- USCIS has the discretion to require biometrics appointments [15] on a case-by-case basis.
- Since online filing has only been announced in April 2021, our office is unable to anticipate all potential challenges of online filing.

Guidance for Online Completion of Form I-765 for STEM Optional Practical Training Extension [16]
Sending Your Completed STEM OPT Application to USCIS - Paper-Filing Option

Reminders for Paper-Based Filing

- You must be physically present in the U.S. when your STEM OPT application is filed with USCIS.
- To be eligible for STEM OPT, students must file no earlier than 90 days prior to the end date of Post-Completion OPT, and no later than the end date of Post-Completion OPT. USCIS must also receive your STEM OPT application within 60 days of the STEM OPT I-20 issuance date.
- Unlike with the online filing option, applying for STEM OPT via a paper-based application will not provide you with immediate access to your receipt number, receipt notice, or other proof of filing. If you include the G-1145 form with a paper-based application, you may be notified by USCIS via text or email of your receipt number approximately two weeks after submitting your application. The receipt notice from USCIS may take 3-4 weeks or more to arrive after a paper-based filing.
  - Remember that if you successfully file the application for STEM OPT with USCIS during the final 90 days of post-completion OPT, then you may continue employment **even if your Post-Completion EAD card is expired**. This automatic extension of post-completion OPT is valid until your STEM OPT application is adjudicated or until 180 days has passed from the expiration date of your post-completion EAD card, whichever is sooner. Please note that your employer may request to see a copy of the STEM OPT receipt notice as documentation to verify eligibility for this automatic extension of work authorization.
- Unlike with the online filing option, applying for STEM OPT via a paper-based application will not provide you with immediate confirmation that your application fee payment was successful.
- Keep a copy of your entire application packet for your personal records (including signed I-765, photos, and check/money order), just in case you need to reference these documents in the future.
- Please carefully review all I-765 answers and application packet documentation before submitting your application to USCIS. If you realize after filing your STEM OPT application with USCIS that you have made an error in your application, please immediately consult an advisor with the International Center.
- Even if you file your STEM OPT application via a paper-based application, you can still create an online account with USCIS and benefit from some of their online tools to track your case status. See the USCIS website for more details.

Application checklist for Paper-Based Filing

For a paper-based STEM OPT application filing, you will need to prepare and submit the following list of items to USCIS. We recommend that you compile the documents in the same order as listed below:

- **G-1145, E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance** [19]
  - Please only include the I-765 filing fee and **do not include the additional biometrics fee** with the application. You may visit the USCIS I-765 website [20] and also use the USCIS Fee Calculator [21] to help determine the filing fee. Instructions for Utilizing the USCIS Fee Calculator for OPT [22].
  - A personal check, cashier’s check or money order are all acceptable forms of payment. If you use a personal check, be sure you have adequate funds, and if you are considering closing your bank account, wait to do so until after the check has been cashed. For students using a paper-based
application procedure, we do not recommend paying the application filing fee via credit card, although that is also an option. In our experience, the G-1450 [23] credit card application form/procedure has led to a disproportionately high level of errors.

- Unlike with the online filing option, applying for STEM OPT via a paper-based application will not provide you with immediate confirmation that your application fee payment was successful. If you submit the wrong application fee or format your payment incorrectly, your STEM OPT application will likely be rejected.

- Two recent passport-style photos. The photos must be identical and in color with a plain background. See the USCIS I-765 instructions [24] for complete photo formatting requirements. Do not re-use photos that you have previously used on your Post-Completion OPT application, or your passport or visa, as this may lead to your application being rejected. Photos can be obtained at U-M Photo Services [25]. Use a pencil to gently write your name and I-94 number on the back of each of your two photos. You may place the photos in an envelope (also marked with your name and I-94 number) that you then attach to the other documents. Do not use a staple to attach the fee and the photos.

- Completed USCIS Form I-765 [26].
  - Select "Initial permission to accept employment" in part 1 of the I-765. This recommendation is based on page 1 of the USCIS instructions for I-765 [24], which indicate that the “Renewal of my permission to accept employment” option is applicable to cases where an applicant is seeking a new EAD card issued under the same category as the prior EAD card. STEM OPT extension (c)(3)(C) is a different category of employment authorization compared to post-completion OPT (c)(3)(B). Therefore, “Initial permission to accept employment” is the most accurate choice.
  - Pay close attention to questions 27 and 28, and be sure to provide accurate information.
    - **What is your eligibility category?** - (c)(3)(C) is the eligibility category associated with STEM OPT.
    - **What is your degree?** - List the degree level and major field of study for your STEM OPT qualifying degree, as listed on page 1 of your I-20.
    - **What is your employer's name as listed in E-Verify?** - Please obtain this information directly from your employer's Human Resources department. If your STEM OPT employer is U-M, you should list “The University of Michigan.”
    - **What is your employer's E-Verify company identification number or a valid E-Verify client company identification number?** - Obtain this information directly from your employer’s Human Resources department. Please note that the E-Verify company identification number or E-Verify client company identification number is not equivalent to the company’s EIN number. Do not use the EIN number for this section.
  - You must sign the I-765 using a handwritten, black ink signature. USCIS will not accept a stamped or typewritten name in place of a signature.
  - One of the most important choices you will make when preparing the I-765 is the U.S. Mailing Address. This is the address to which USCIS will mail all OPT related correspondence. We recommend that you select a U.S. Mailing Address that will remain valid for at least the next 6 months. If you use a friend or family member's address, list their name in the section 5.a. “In Care of Name.”
  - Be sure that you are using the most up-to-date I-765 edition date. The current valid edition date is listed on USCIS's I-765 website [20].

- Photocopy of the new I-20 with STEM OPT recommendation, pages 1 and 2.
  - Remember to review and sign/date the I-20 at the bottom of page 1 in the Student Attestation section, before making a photocopy. Also, note that unlike when applying for Post-Completion OPT, STEM OPT applicants are not asked to include copies of all previously issued CPT and/or OPT I-20s,
just include a copy of the new I-20 issued with the STEM OPT recommendation.

- Remember that to be eligible for STEM OPT, USCIS must receive your application within 60 days of the date the STEM OPT I-20 is issued. You can confirm the date your STEM OPT I-20 was issued by viewing the “DATE ISSUED” section on page 1 in the “School Attestation” box. If your STEM OPT I-20 recommendation is about to expire or has already expired, please contact [17] the International Center as soon as possible for assistance with obtaining an updated STEM OPT I-20.

- Photocopy of your current Post-Completion OPT EAD card, front and back sides both included.
- Photocopy of your U-M diploma and/or official transcript indicating the degree level and major field of study for your STEM degree.

- **Note for applicants using a previous STEM degree (not the degree listed on their current I-20):** You will also want to include a copy of the following documents with your application packet to further document you are eligible for STEM OPT based on a prior degree:
  - Include copies of your previous diploma and/or transcript corresponding to the prior STEM-eligible degree.
  - Your previous I-20 (if applicable) which was associated with the prior STEM-eligible degree.
  - If your previously earned STEM degree was conferred by the University of Michigan, the accreditation information can be found on the Higher Learning Commission website [27]. Please print the action letter.
  - If your previously earned STEM degree was not from U-M, please search for documentation of your academic institution's accreditation online or contact your previous academic institution to verify how to obtain evidence of school accreditation.
  - SEVP certification [28] documentation from the university at which your prior STEM-eligible degree was earned (must be currently certified).

- Photocopy of paper or print-out of electronic Most Recent Form I-94 [29] (please click on the link for instructions). Please note that if you changed to F-1 status within the US via a successful in-country change of nonimmigrant status (Form I-539) application with USCIS and have not since traveled outside the US, the I-94 is located on your change of status approval notice document (I-797).
- Photocopy of your passport picture page (the page(s) showing your biographical information, your photograph, and official passport validity dates and details). If the photo in the passport is not clear or varies widely from your current appearance, we recommend that you also include a clear copy of another form of identification, such as a state-issued driver’s license or identification card.

### Mailing tips and instructions for Paper-Based Filing

- Confirm the correct USCIS address to which to send a paper-based application by visiting the USCIS I-765 website [30]. Search by clicking the drop arrow tab titled "Foreign Students", and locate the address options associated with STEM OPT.
- Mail your STEM OPT application using a trackable method and keep evidence of delivery. If you send your application with a method that requires a signature upon delivery, use the appropriate "Express Mail & Courier Service Deliveries" address location.
- Please review our After You Have Applied for OPT [31] page for a summary of recommended next steps after filing your OPT application.
Reporting requirements with a Pending or Approved STEM OPT

At all times while your STEM OPT application is pending, as well as during any subsequent periods of approval, you must continue to comply with F-1 address reporting and insurance requirements. You must also comply with employment reporting guidelines, reporting any changes of employment within 10 days of a change.

- More information about F-1 reporting requirements during Post-Completion OPT
- More information about F-1 reporting requirements during STEM OPT

Source URL: https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/students/f1-students/stem-extend

Links

[5] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/students/f1-students/stem-opt
[8] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/resources/forms/opt-stem-extension-i20-request
[9] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/about/location
[10] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/express-mail-through-eship-global
[14] https://myaccount.uscis.gov/users/sign_up
[16] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/sites/default/files/Guidance_Online_Filing_Form_I-765_STEM.pdf
[17] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/advising-hours
[18] https://www.uscis.gov/file-online/how-to-create-a-uscis-online-account
[20] https://www.uscis.gov/i-765
[21] https://www.uscis.gov/feecalculator
[22] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/sites/default/files/Utilizing_the_USCIS_Fee_Calculator_for_OPT.pdf
[25] https://photography.umich.edu/services-pricing/passport-photos/
[28] https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/school-search
[29] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/i-94
[31] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/students/f1-students/opt-after
[32] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/address-notificationrequirement
[33] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/resources/healthins
[34] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/opt-employment-forms
[35] https://internationalcenter.umich.edu/students/f1-students/on-opt