Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is ONE year (12 months) of employment eligibility in the United States for F-1 students who have been enrolled for one full academic year (fall and spring semesters) and earned a degree from a U.S institution. The students MUST work in a position directly related to their academic studies and at the level of study commensurate with the degree. OPT is not a ‘visa’ type, but rather a benefit and extension of the valid F-1 visa status. To learn more about OPT eligibility, the ISSO expects all students to attend an informational workshop which are offered several times throughout the semester.

STEM Extension Regulations

An F-1 student currently engaged in 12 months of post-completion OPT who has been awarded a degree in a STEM field as it is listed at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) approved STEM field list and works for an E-Verify employer is eligible to apply for the STEM extension. A regulation published in 2008 allows F-1 students on OPT to apply for a one time 17-month extension of their regular 12 month OPT period. In March 2016 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) published new expanded regulations which took effect on May 10, 2016 which extends the period of STEM-OPT from 17 to 24 months.

24-Month Extension Eligibility

An F-1 student is allowed a maximum of two 24-month extensions total. Each extension must be used after the completion of a qualifying higher level degree and cannot be combined. The extension can be based on a recent OR previous earned STEM degree as long as the following apply:

- The student is currently in a valid period of 12-month post-completion OPT
- The current or previous STEM degree was obtained within the past 10 years of the STEM extension application date and awarded by an institution in the United States (the institution MUST be SEVP-certified at the time of application)
- The previous STEM degree is on the current STEM Designated Degree Program List at the time of application
- The work being done for the STEM extension relates to the recent OR previously earned STEM degree
- The USCIS MUST receive the completed STEM-OPT application within 90 days before the end date of the current OPT 12 month period and within 60 days from the issuance date of the STEM-OPT I-20
- An 180 day automatic work authorization extension will be granted while the STEM OPT application is pending
- Volunteering and self-employment are not allowed and work must be at least 20 hours per week in a paid position for an E-Verify employer.
- Students may NOT apply during the 60-day grace period following the regular 12 months OPT end date
OPT-STEM Extension
Instructions

Prepare and submit the following documents:

To ISSO

- Submit your completed “STEM Extension Application Form”
  - Be prepared to upload your EAD and Training Plan I-983 form

Suggested Application Checklist to USCIS

- Form G-1145 (electronic notification that your documents have been received)
- Completed and signed Form I-765
- Check or money order for $410, payable to “U.S. Department of Homeland Security”
- 2 color, U.S. passport-style, photographs with name and SEVIS ID printed on back
- Copy of the front and back of your current OPT (EAD) card
- Copy of new I-20 from ISSO, with recommendation for OPT extension (keep the original I-20)
- Copy of all previous I-20s issued to you including all pages
- Make sure that the CIP code listed on your I-20 under Major 1 is listed on the STEM Designated Degree Program List
- Printout of your current I-94 arrival/departure record
- Copy of your passport identity page, visa page, and any renewal pages
- Official transcript (Online Transcript Order at the Registrar’s Office website) OR copy of the diploma that shows your degree level and program of study
- If applying based on a previously earned U.S. STEM degree (within 10 years), include copy of previous transcript/diploma, I-20 and evidence that your degree meets the STEM requirements

Submitting OPT Application to USCIS

Mail the completed application within 60 days of I-20 issuance to the appropriate USCIS Service Center based on the residential address you use on the I-765. See www.uscis.gov/i-765 for guidance.

Remember

- Sign your STEM OPT I-20 when you receive it from the ISSO
- Make a copy of the entire application before you submit it to the USCIS.
- USCIS MUST receive your STEM-OPT application BEFORE the expiration date of your EAD card AND within 60 days from the issuance date of your STEM-OPT I-20
- Refer to our website at isso.uncc.edu for answers to important questions about reporting responsibilities, travel and other updates