

F-1 OPT STEM 24-MONTH EXTENSION

The 24-month OPT STEM extension allows certain F-1 students in a period of post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) to request an extension of this OPT based on a degree earned in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) field. The 24-month OPT STEM extension was enacted by the US Department of Homeland Security on May 10, 2016 and replaces the previous 17-month OPT STEM extension rule.

Visit the Department of Homeland Security's Study in the States website for a comprehensive overview of the new regulations, forms, and other resources: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opt-hub>.

Eligibility

To be eligible for the 24-month STEM extension of your post-completion OPT, you must:

- Be in valid F-1 status on post-completion OPT
- Not have acquired more than 90 days of unemployment on post-completion OPT
- Be requesting the OPT 24-month extension based on a degree earned from an accredited institution in a STEM field that is found on the DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List: <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/stem-list.pdf>
- Have a job offer in a paid position from an employer registered in the E-Verify program
- Complete the OPT STEM training Plan (Form I-983) with your employer and agree to abide by the terms outlined in the plan

You may be eligible for up to two separate STEM OPT extensions over the course of your academic career, upon completing two qualifying STEM degrees at different educational levels.

OPT STEM Training Plan (Form I-983)

The new OPT STEM 24-month extension regulations require the submission of a formal training plan. The formal training plan must clearly articulate the STEM OPT student's learning objectives and affirm the employer's commitment to helping the student achieve those objectives.

To fulfill this requirement, you and your employer must complete and sign [Form I-983](#) and submit it to the DSO (Designated School Official) in the MUSC Center for Global Health (CGH). Form I-983 must be completed *before* you can apply for the OPT STEM extension.

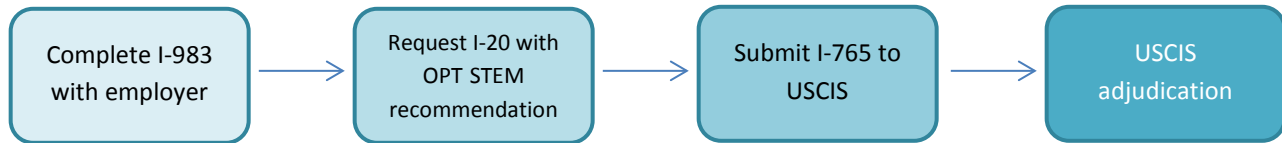
Both you and your employer are obligated to update the Form I-983 with any changes to the plan and provide this information to CGH. If you change employers during your OPT STEM extension period, you are required to complete Form I-983 with your new employer and provide the completed form to CGH *within 10 days* of beginning the new employment.

When to Apply

You may apply for an OPT STEM extension up to 90 days prior to the end date of your current post-completion OPT. You are required to submit the I-765 application within 60 days of the date that the DSO issues the I-20 recommending the OPT STEM extension.

You must apply for the OPT STEM extension before your post-completion OPT expires. If you apply for the OPT STEM extension prior to the end of your current OPT, your employment authorization will remain valid for up to 180 days while the OPT STEM extension application is pending.

Application Process



STEP 1: Complete OPT STEM Training Plan (Form I-983) with employer.

All F-1 students seeking the 24-month OPT STEM extension are required to design a customized training plan with their employer by completing DHS Form I-983. The form and its instructions can be found at <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/form-i-983-overview>.

Tips for filling out Form I-983:

- *SEVIS School Code of School Recommending STEM OPT* – ATL214F01400000
- *DSO Name and Contact Information* – Denise R. Smith, fowled@musc.edu, 843-792-7083
- *Student SEVIS ID No* – Your SEVIS ID number is found on the top left portion of your I-20 form. The SEVIS ID will begin with the letter “N” followed by 10 digits (like this: Nxxxxxxxxx).
- *Qualifying Major and CIP Code* – The CIP code is listed on your I-20 form. Refer to the Program of Study section on page 1 of the I-20 under “MAJOR.” The CIP code will look like this: xx.xxxx.

STEP 2: Request an I-20 recommending OPT STEM Extension from Designated School Official (DSO).

Submit your request to the DSO in CGH by e-mail with the following items:

- F-1 OPT STEM Request form
- Form I-983 (OPT STEM Training Plan)
- Copy of offer letter from employer

The I-20 with OPT 24-month STEM extension recommendation will be mailed to you via regular US mail, unless you make other arrangements with the DSO.

STEP 3: Submit USCIS Form I-765 and supporting documentation.

USCIS Form I-765 *Application for Employment Authorization* along with the Instructions for Form I-765 can be found online at <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>. The eligibility category for the OPT STEM extension is (c)(3)(C).

It is very important that you thoroughly read the Instructions for I-765 document (found on the USCIS website listed above). This is a large document, but it is of great importance to read the instructions so that you complete Form I-765 correctly. The instructions also provide information on the required supporting documentation, how to write the check for the filing fee, and where to submit the application. Furthermore, the instructions document provides specific instructions on how to assemble the application (the order of the documents). Unless otherwise specified, copies of supporting documents (such as the I-20 recommending the STEM extension) should be provided; original documents will not be returned to you.

Tips for filling out Form I-765:

- Thoroughly read the USCIS *Instructions for Form I-765* found on the website.
 - Instructions specific to F-1 students begin on page 3
 - General instructions begin on page 14
- Part 2 – US Mailing Address – Use an address where you will be able to obtain mail for the next few months. If you change your mailing address while your OPT application is pending, this could cause issues.
- Part 2 (27) – eligibility category for the OPT STEM extension is (c)(3)(C)
- Part 6 Additional Information – Include evidence of previous CPT or OPT (see *Instructions* page 4)
- Include all seven pages of the Form I-765 in your application
- Answer all questions thoroughly and accurately (see #3 on page 15 of *Instructions for Form I-765*)

The USCIS Form I-765 application for the OPT STEM extension must be filed in a timely manner. The application must be received by USCIS prior to your current OPT end date and within 60 days of the date that the DSO issued the I-20 recommending the OPT STEM extension. You will file the required documentation with the appropriate USCIS Service Center based on where you live (refer the I-765 *Instructions* document).

STEP 4: USCIS processing and adjudication.

After USCIS receives your application, you will receive a USCIS receipt notice (Form I-797 Notice of Action). You must scan the receipt notice and e-mail a copy to huley@musc.edu.

If your application is approved, you will receive USCIS Form I-797 Notice of Action approving your OPT STEM extension along with a new EAD card (these items may arrive separately in the mail). Scan your new EAD card and send a copy to the Center for Global Health. You may also be required to present your new EAD card to the Human Resources office at your place of employment.

Reporting Requirements During OPT STEM Extension

There are three types of reporting requirements for students while on the STEM OPT extension:

General reporting. You must report the changes in your legal name, address, employer, or employment status directly to the DSO within 10 days.

Validation reporting. You must send the DSO a validation report (using the form provided by the DSO) every six months, starting from the date the OPT STEM extension starts. The validation report will confirm the validity of certain biographical, residential, and employment information.

Self-evaluations. You must report to the DSO on your progress with your practical training using the Form I-983 OPT STEM training plan outlined at the beginning of your 24-month STEM extension. Your employer must sign the self-evaluation prior to submission to the DSO. Self-evaluations must be submitted at the 12 and 24 month marks from the start date of the OPT STEM extension, and also at the end of any employment.

It is your responsibility to remember the reporting requirements and be aware of when validation reports and self-evaluations are due. Failure to comply with reporting requirements could result in the termination of your SEVIS record and F-1 status.

Unemployment

You may not have more than 150 total days of unemployment during the entire time of your post-completion OPT. This includes the initial period of post-completion OPT and the OPT 24-month STEM extension period.

If you obtain new employment during the STEM extension period, you must complete a new Form I-983 with your new employer. Federal regulations require that you submit the new I-983 to the DSO within 10 days of beginning the new employment. We are required to report these employment changes in SEVIS accordingly.

Travel

The regulations regarding travel and OPT are not always clear. Students in F-1 status who need to travel at any time during OPT should be aware that they do so at their own risk. Please be aware that re-entry into the US is never guaranteed.

Travel while OPT STEM extension application is pending

Travel abroad while your OPT extension application is pending with USCIS should be avoided and is generally not recommended. If your OPT application is approved while you are abroad, you will be expected to re-enter the US using your new EAD card. Furthermore, if USCIS sends you a request for additional evidence, you will not be in the US in order to provide any additional documents needed to continue processing your OPT application.

Travel if OPT has expired and OPT STEM extension application is pending

You are strongly advised not to travel outside of the US if your current OPT employment authorization has expired and your OPT extension application is still pending. Department of Homeland Security guidance indicates that students in this situation must wait to receive the new EAD card prior to traveling outside of the US.

Travel during valid period of OPT STEM extension

If you need to travel abroad during a valid period of OPT employment, you should be able to re-enter the US as long as you have the following:

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa stamp
- Valid I-20 with travel authorization signature from DSO that is no more than 6 months old
- Valid EAD card
- Current letter from your employer stating that you are still employed

If your visa has expired and you need to travel abroad during OPT, you will need to apply for a new visa stamp at a US Embassy before you can re-enter the US. Please be aware that the risk of denial for an F-1 visa when you are on OPT is higher than while you are in your active student program. This is because the focus of your stay in the US now is to work rather than to attend school. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the consular officer is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application could be denied.

In addition, time spent outside the US during an approved period of post-completion OPT counts as unemployment against the 90/150 day limits unless you are either:

- Employed during a period of leave authorized by an employer; or
- Traveling as part of your employment

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to have a job to apply for the OPT STEM extension?

Yes. You must have a job offer from an e-Verify employer.

Are there any restrictions on the number of hours I can work during the OPT STEM extension period?

You must work at least 20 hours per week in a qualifying paid position to be considered employed. There are no limits on the maximum amount of hours you can work.

Can I work for more than one employer during the OPT STEM extension period?

Yes, as long as all employers are enrolled in E-Verify and all employment is directly related to your degree program.

What happens if my current OPT authorization expires while the OPT extension application is still pending?

As long as you have filed the application for the OPT STEM extension prior to the expiration of your current period of OPT, then your employment authorization is automatically extended for up to 180 days while the OPT STEM extension application is pending.

What happens if I move while my OPT STEM extension application is pending?

It is *extremely* important that the address you put on the I-765 be valid for the next several months. The U.S. Postal Service will not forward mail from USCIS. Change of address may delay the arrival of the card. If you must move while your OPT extension application is pending, you need to file the USCIS online change of address form AR-11, which can be found at www.uscis.gov/ar-11. Have your USCIS receipt notice handy. You are also required to notify CGH with your new address so that we can update the SEVIS system accordingly.

Do I still need to get a travel signature on my I-20 during the OPT STEM extension?

Yes. During OPT STEM, if you want to travel outside the US, you must have your I-20 authorized for travel within the past 6 months. If you are not located in Charleston, you will need to mail your original I-20 to the Center for Global Health for

endorsement. You must allow for plenty of time for mail delays both ways. CGH will send you back your signed I-20 via regular mail. If you need your I-20 to be sent back quicker, then you must provide a pre-paid express envelope and include it in the package that you mail to CGH with your original I-20.

Do I still need to report information to the MUSC Center for Global Health if I sign up for the SEVP Portal?

Yes. The SEVP Portal is an optional tool that will allow you to update and view your personal and employer information with SEVP. However, this does not release you from your responsibility to report this information directly to the Center for Global Health. Even if you update your information in the SEVP Portal, you still must notify CGH directly with changes to your address, contact information, and employment. Also, during OPT STEM, you will not be permitted to update employer information in the SEVP Portal. The Form I-983 requires that the DSO add and update employer information.