

F-1 OPT STEM EXTENSION GUIDE

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.

Visit the Department of Homeland Security's [Study in the States STEM OPT Hub](#) for a comprehensive overview of the OPT STEM regulations, forms, and other resources.

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](#)
- 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 OPT STEM 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 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 request the OPT STEM Form I-20 apply for the OPT STEM extension with USCIS.

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. You must also complete the I-983 endpoint evaluation for your previous employment and submit it to CGH.

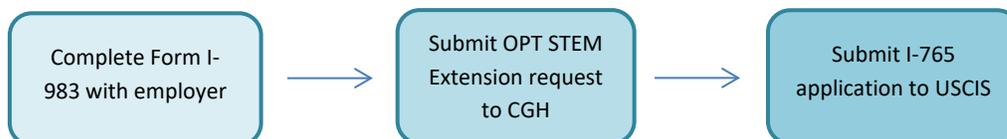
When to Apply

There are several timelines and deadlines related to the OPT STEM extension process:

- You can submit the OPT STEM extension application to USCIS up to 90 days prior to the end date of your current post-completion OPT period.
- You *must* submit the OPT STEM extension application to USCIS before your post-completion OPT expires.
- You *cannot* submit the OPT STEM extension I-765 application to USCIS until you have received the Form I-20 requesting the OPT STEM extension.
- You *must* submit the OPT STEM extension application to USCIS within 60 days of the date that the DSO issues the Form I-20 requesting the OPT STEM extension.

As long as USCIS receives your application for the OPT STEM extension prior to the end of your current OPT period, your OPT employment authorization will remain valid for up to 180 days while the OPT STEM extension application is pending with USCIS.

OPT STEM Application Process



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

All F-1 students seeking the 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 on the [DHS Study in the States I-983](#) webpage.

Tips for filling out Form I-983:

- *SEVIS School Code of School Recommending STEM OPT* – ATL214F01400000
- *DSO Name and Contact Information* – Erin J. Huley, huley@musc.edu, 843-792-6717
- *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 TWO: Submit OPT STEM Extension applications through Terra Dotta

To begin the OPT STEM extension process, you must complete and submit the following applications through your Terra Dotta portal:

- [OPT Employment Verification](#)
- [OPT STEM Extension Request](#)

Both of these records must be completed and submitted before we can process your request. You must submit your completed Form I-983 and a copy of your employment offer letter with these requests.

If these requests are approved, the DSO in CGH will issue the OPT STEM extension Form I-20. The Form I-20 requesting the OPT STEM extension will be sent to you via the option you chose in the OPT STEM Extension Request.

IMPORTANT: Do not submit the I-765 application to USCIS until you have received the OPT STEM Form I-20.

STEP THREE: Complete and submit USCIS Form I-765 and supporting documentation

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 Form I-20 requesting the OPT STEM extension.

USCIS Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization along with the Instructions for Form I-765 can be found on the [USCIS I-765 website](#). It is very important that you fully read the instructions so that you complete Form I-765 correctly. Unless otherwise specified, copies of supporting documents should be provided. Original documents will not be returned to you.

Tips for filling out Form I-765 for the OPT STEM extension:

- 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) – The eligibility category for the OPT STEM extension is (c)(3)(C)
- Part 6: Additional Information – Include evidence of previous CPT or OPT (see page 8 of the I-765 Instructions)
- Include all 7 pages of the Form I-765 in your application
- Answer all questions thoroughly and accurately (see #3 on page 20 of the I-765 Instructions)
- Refer to the Instructions for Form I-765 for details on the supporting documents you are required to submit with the I-765 application

There are currently two ways to submit the OPT I-765 application to USCIS:

1. Paper I-765 application
2. Online I-765 application

Online Application Submission

In April 2021, USCIS introduced the option for students applying for OPT to submit the I-765 application online. If you want to file online, you will click the 'File Online' button on the [USCIS I-765 website](#). You will be required to create a USCIS Account before you can proceed with the I-765 online application.

If you choose to submit the I-765 application online, we highly recommend that you complete the paper Form I-765 first and review your information to ensure that everything is correct and complete. You can then use the paper Form I-765 to help you fill out the I-765 online application. You do not need to submit the paper I-765 to USCIS if you are submitting your I-765 application online.

Paper Application Submission

If you choose to submit the I-765 paper application, refer to the [USCIS Direct Filing Addresses for Form I-765](#) to determine the specific address where you should submit the application. Click the Foreign Students section header on this page.

You will notice that there are two addresses provided in the instructions – one for US Postal Service, and one for express mail and commercial courier service (such as FedEx or UPS). Be sure to use the correct address, depending on the service you choose to use to submit the application. We highly recommend that you use a trackable service so that you can receive confirmation that your package has been delivered to USCIS.

If you are submitting the paper application, you must ensure that your application includes a complete Form I-765 along with all required supporting documentation and payment for the application. USCIS changes the versions of its forms from time to time. USCIS can also change the filing fee amounts at any time. Therefore, we highly recommend that you check the [USCIS I-765 website](#) and the [USCIS Fee Calculator](#) on the day that you are submitting your paper application to be certain you are using the correct form edition and submitting the correct fee. You should print the USCIS fee calculation sheet on the date of mailing to include with your application. Make sure the printout sheet includes the date (typically in the header or footer).

USCIS I-765 Application Processing

After USCIS receives your application, you will receive a USCIS receipt notice (Form I-797 Notice of Action). If you submit the I-765 application online, you should also be able to access your case number and receive status updates on your application through your USCIS Account.

If USCIS received your OPT STEM extension I-765 application prior to the expiration of your current period of post-completion OPT, then your OPT employment authorization is automatically extended for up to 180 days while the OPT STEM extension application is pending with USCIS.

USCIS I-765 application processing times are highly variable and can take several months. You can view currently estimated USCIS processing times on the [USCIS Check Case Processing Times website](#).

USCIS I-765 Application Approval

If your OPT STEM extension I-765 application is approved, you will receive USCIS Form I-797 Notice of Action indicating approval of your OPT STEM extension employment authorization along with a new Employment Authorization Document (EAD card). The dates that you are approved for OPT STEM employment authorization will appear on the new EAD card.

Once you receive the OPT STEM EAD card, you must scan the card and upload a copy through your [Terra Dotta portal](#). Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT STEM User Guide](#) for instructions on how to submit your new EAD card.

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 four general types of reporting requirements for students while on the STEM OPT extension:

- 1) **Contact information.** You must report the changes in your residential address, mailing address, phone or legal name directly to the DSO within 10 days.
- 2) **Changes to employment.** You must report the changes in your employment or employment status directly to the DSO within 10 days. If you change employers, you must complete a Form I-983 final evaluation from the previous employer and complete a new Form I-983 with the new employer.
- 3) **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.
- 4) **Form I-983 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.

OPT STEM reporting must be done through the [OPT Employment Verification](#) form in your Terra Dotta portal. Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT STEM User Guide](#) for detailed instructions on how to submit the various reports.

It is your responsibility to remember the reporting requirements and be aware of when validation reports and Form I-983 evaluations are due. Failure to comply with reporting requirements could result in the termination of your SEVIS record and F-1 status. Upon approval of your OPT STEM extension, you should record all of the due dates for your 6-month validation reports and I-983 evaluation reports.

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.

You are responsible for keeping track of your days of unemployment during both post-completion OPT and the OPT STEM extension periods. You are also responsible for reporting the end of any particular employment (within 10 days) to CGH so that we can update this information in the SEVIS system. In addition, you must complete the Form I-983 endpoint evaluation at the end of any particular employment opportunity.

Exceeding the 150-day OPT and OPT STEM unemployment limit is a violation of F-1 status. If you have more than 150 days of unemployment, you should prepare to depart from the United States immediately to avoid accruing unlawful presence.

Travel

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

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 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. Also, your employer must be willing to complete the Form I-983.

Do I have to be in the United States in order to apply for the OPT STEM extension?

Yes, you must be present in the US when you submit the I-765 application to USCIS.

What happens if my current OPT expires before the OPT STEM extension is approved?

As long as USCIS has received your I-765 OPT STEM extension application before the expiration of your current period of OPT, then your OPT employment authorization is automatically extended for up to 180 days while the OPT STEM extension application is pending. The receipt notice from USCIS showing the receipt date of your application is proof that USCIS received your I-765 application.

Should I submit the I-765 paper application or online application?

The option to file the I-765 online was introduced in April 2021. There do seem to be some benefits to the online submission system, such as getting the USCIS receipt number immediately (meaning that you get immediate confirmation of the receipt of your application). Submitting the form online will also ensure that you are paying the correct filing fee and using the correct version of the Form I-765. Ultimately, the decision regarding how to submit your I-765 application (online or paper) is completely up to you. Regardless of which method you choose, you must read the I-765 instructions and review your application materials thoroughly before submitting to ensure that you are submitting a complete application.

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

It is *very* important that the address you use on the Form I-765 be valid for the next several months. The US Postal Service will not forward mail from USCIS. Change of address may delay the arrival of your EAD card. If you must move while your OPT STEM extension application is pending, and you submitted the I-765 application online, you should be able to update your address through your USCIS account. If you submitted the I-765 paper application, you should be able to submit the [USCIS Form AR-11 Change of Address](#) form online. You are also required to update your address in your Terra Dotta portal so that we can then update your address in the SEVIS system. Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT STEM User Guide](#) for instructions on updating your address.

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, if all employers are enrolled in E-Verify and all employment is directly related to your degree program. Also, you must submit an OPT Employment Verification request through Terra Dotta for each job.

Can I change jobs during the OPT STEM extension period?

Yes, if the new employer is enrolled in E-Verify and the employment is directly related to your degree program. You must report the end of your previous employment to CGH within 10 days (by updating your current OPT Employment Verification record in Terra Dotta). For the new employment, you must complete a new Form I-983 and submit a new OPT Employment Verification in Terra Dotta. Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT STEM User Guide](#) for detailed instructions.

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. Reporting to CGH is done through the Terra Dotta portal. Refer to the [Terra Dotta OPT STEM User Guide](#) for detailed instructions on how to submit various reports and update information.