



**OPTIONAL  
PRACTICAL  
TRAINING (OPT)  
24-MONTH STEM  
EXTENSION  
TUTORIAL**

Updated on  
Feb 25, 2022.

MULTICULTURAL CENTER  
QIWEI ZHANG



## FORMS AND FEES

- USCIS has recently made the [I-765 form](#) and OPT/STEM OPT applications available for e-filing.
- USCIS may make updates to forms and fees from time to time. See the [Fees](#) and [I-765](#) sections of the tutorial for more information about the *current* form and fee changes.
- If filing by mail, make sure you are paying the [correct fee](#) and using the [correct form](#) on the date you are mailing your package to USCIS.



# OPT 24-MONTH STEM EXTENSION TUTORIAL

- Please note that the slides is for instructional purpose only.
- An OPT STEM application to USCIS is your own personal application. You alone are responsible for timely filing with full documentation, understanding F1 rules regarding OPT STEM Extension, and properly maintaining F1 status.
- Please review the entire slides and ask your DSO if you have any questions.

## OPT STEM EXTENSION ELIGIBILITY

- You must be a recipient of a U.S. Bachelor's (Master's or Doctoral) degree in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) designated degree program. [See this list of STEM Majors](#). (You can check the CIP code listed on your I-20.)
- You are currently authorized for 12-month OPT and have not exceeded 90 days of unemployment.
- Can apply based on any previous STEM degree from an SEVP, accredited U.S. institution within the last 10 years.
- Employed or have a job offer [directly related to your field of study](#) from an employer who is registered in the [USCIS E-Verify Program](#). Must complete Form I-983 with employer and all employers must have an EIN number.
- Your employer can work with you to fully complete the [Form I-983](#) and abide by all [employer obligations](#), including [Dept. of Homeland Security Site visits](#).
- You are applying no more than 90 days before your 12-month OPT expires and no later than the expiration of your 12-month OPT.
- **Two [24-month STEM extensions](#) may be granted per lifetime.**

# TYPES OF ALLOWABLE EMPLOYMENT

- Volunteer/Unpaid positions and self employment are NOT allowed by the 24-Month STEM OPT Extension. [STEM-eligible employers](#) must have e-Verify & EIN numbers and the student must have a "bona fide employer-employee relationship". To establish a bona fide relationship, the employer may not be the student's "employer" in name only.
- Cannabis Industry- be aware that use and sale of cannabis is illegal at the *federal* level, although it may be legal in some U.S. states. To avoid possible deportation or inadmissibility from the US, **students should avoid positions related to federally illegal substances.**
- According to [USCIS updates August 2018](#):
- Under no circumstances would another F-1 student on OPT or a STEM OPT Extension be qualified to train another F-1 student on a STEM OPT Extension.
- The employer that signs the Form I-983 *must be the same entity* that provides the practical training experience to the student.
- The employer has sufficient resources and personnel available to provide appropriate training in connection with the STEM opportunity at the location(s) specified in the Form I-983.
- The "personnel" who provide/supervise the training experience may be either employees of the employer, or contractors who the employer has directly retained to provide services to the employer; they may not be employees or contractors of the employer's clients or customers.
- DHS will review on a case-by-case basis whether the student will be a bona fide employee of the employer signing the Training Plan, and verify that the employer that signs the Training Plan is the same entity that employs the student and provides the practical training experience.

# UNEMPLOYMENT DURING STEM OPT

- As long as you have submitted a timely filed STEM application to USCIS, you can continue working for up to 180 days after the expiration of your original OPT EAD while you wait for the STEM EAP approval.
- During 12-month OPT you have a maximum of 90 days of unemployment over the 12 month period. During the STEM period you are allowed an additional 60 days of unemployment.
- Starting from the first date of your STEM OPT period, the total allowed unemployment days extends to a maximum of 150 days of unemployment during the entire OPT/STEM period, *beginning from the start of your original OPT EAD card*.
- This is NOT just 150 days at the *beginning* of OPT or STEM. You are only allowed 150 total days over the entire 3 years.
- If you exceed 90 days of unemployment during your original 12-month OPT you are not eligible to apply for the STEM OPT Extension.

Example: OPT EAD Dates: Jan 1-Dec. 31, 2020. STEM EAD Dates: January 1, 2021-December 31, 2022.

You used 60 days of unemployment during your 12 month OPT period from Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2020. Your STEM period begins on Jan. 1, 2021. You continue your work after Jan. 1, 2021 with Company A. On March 1, 2021 you end your job with Company A. You later apply for a new STEM I-20 authorization for a job with Company B that begins on April 30. You have used another 60 days of unemployment, for a total of 120. You now have only 30 more days of unemployment remaining for the rest of your STEM period until December 31, 2022.

## WHEN TO APPLY

- You may apply as early as 90 days before your OPT EAD end date.
- You must submit your STEM I-20 request AT LEAST 2 weeks before your current OPT EAD expires.
- USCIS must receive your application before the expiration date of your OPT\*. Check your OPT EAD card for the expiration.
- If you are applying for an OPT STEM Extension *at the same time* you are filing for an H-1B employment visa you MUST review both the [H-1B & STEM Extension](#) information at the end of this tutorial and the [Cap-Gap webpage](#).

### IMPORTANT!

- \* Your OPT employment authorization will be automatically extended for 180 days after your OPT EAD end date while your OPT STEM application is pending.

# OPT STEM APPLICATION STEPTS

- Step 1: Complete Form I-983

The formal training plan must clearly articulate the OPT STEM learning objectives and affirm the employer's commitment to helping you achieve those objectives. To fulfill this recruitment, you and your employer must complete and sign Form I-983 and then submit the pages 1-4\* to your DSO.

\* You don't need to include page 5 of the I-983 when you initially apply, but the annual evaluation requires you submit page 5.

<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opt-hub/additional-resources/form-i-983-overview>



---

## STEP 2: UPDATE WITH DSO AND DSO REVIEW YOUR ELIGIBILITY AND RECOMMEND ON SEVIS

- Make an appointment with your DSO Qiwei Zhang on the [Hive](#) stating that you with the OPT appointment as an option.
- I-983 to upload in SEVIS when recommend you.
- Obtain the I-20 for STEM OPT and **check it for accuracy.**
- STEM OPT travel signature is good for 6-month period.



## **STEP 4: PREPARING AND SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION MATERIALS**

- You can now file I-765 online, unless you choose to file it by mail. With e-filing, you can have your USCIS account, check the status of your application, pay the fee online instead of money order, complete the I-765 form online and upload documents.
- You should apply i-765 within 30 days after you received your STEM OPT I-20.
- The following instruction is for e-filing.
- USCIS will send all notifications to you via your online account. These include pending notice, requests for evidence, denials and approvals. USCIS will also send you these notifications through mail.

## MATERIALS YOU NEED TO FILE I-765

- ❑ 2 U.S. passport photos\* taken within the past 30 days. (You will need digital version of your passport photo. If you file by mail, you should include your name and I-94 number written lightly in pencil on back of each photo.)
- ❑ (Digital version) of your previous OPT and your I-20 STEM OPT.
- ❑ Scanned passport page and visa page.
- ❑ I-94 record.
- ❑ Proof of final STEM degree: Final transcript and/or copy of your diploma showing the major and degree level that makes you eligible for the STEM extension.

\* Passport photo details: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/how-apply/photos.html#:~:text=The%20correct%20size%20of%20a,the%20top%20of%20the%20head>



## E-FILING: USCIS FEE PAYMENT

- If you e-file the form I-765, the online form will automatically calculate the correct fee and you will pay online when you submit the e-filed application.
- You must pay with a valid credit or debit card or provide your bank routing and checking account numbers to have money taken directly from your U.S. bank account.
- Check the [USCIS I-765 website](#) for the current filing fee.
- DO NOT complete the submission of your I-765 or pay the fee until you have your OPT STEM I-20 and all other required documents!

---

## STEP 5: RECEIVING THE EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION DOCUMENT (EAD)

- If filed by mail: You should receive the notice by mail within 2-4 weeks after mailing the OPT application to USCIS.
- If filed online: You will receive a receipt notice immediately via your USCIS online account, and later receive the paper receipt notice by mail.
- The paper notice is I-797C. The form is very important.
- Use the receipt number to check the status of USCIS website: <https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do>
- You can check your status with your USCIS online account.

## STEP 6: MAINTAINING YOUR F1 STATUS & STEM REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

- You must report any changes to your employment, address, and/or name, change of status to another visa category within 10 days.
- Student and employer: Complete and sign student's evaluation **ANNUALLY or when requested**. Annual Evaluation (I-983) due at 12 and 24 months.
- **Every 6 months**, provide validation report confirming name, address and employment information to DSO within 10 business days of the report due date.
- Report to DSO any material changes to or deviation from an existing Form I-983 **as soon as possible**.
- Notify DSO and submit new Form I-983 upon change of employer or start of a new practical training opportunity **WITHIN 10 DAYS**.
- Reporting the early completion of your OPT: if you are ending your OPT before your EAD end date, you must report this to your DSO **within 5 business days**.
- **Check your STEM OPT start date and mark your calendar for each 6-month interval of your STEM Extension for your reporting deadlines.**



## SEVP PORTAL

- The Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) has its own “SEVP Portal” for students on OPT/STEM. On day 1 of your approved OPT, you will receive an email from SEVP with instructions on how to create an account. This email will come from [do-notreply.sevp@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:do-notreply.sevp@ice.dhs.gov).
- Be aware of scams: SEVP will NEVER ask you for a payment to register for the optional SEVP Portal.
- Registration for SEVP Portal is OPTIONAL.

# TRAVEL DURING STEM OPT PERIOD

- Avoid long absences from the U.S. during the STEM OPT period. Time spent outside of the U.S. while unemployed by a U.S. employer counts toward your 150 days of unemployment.
- Attempting to re-enter the U.S. close to the expiration date of your OPT can be risky.
- You must not enter the U.S. in a status other than F-1. This may result in the loss of your OPT eligibility.
- Travel While STEM OPT is Pending, But Before STEM OPT Card is Received
  - There is a higher risk associated with travel and return while your STEM OPT is pending after the program completion date of your OPT EAD. If there are any problems with your application, you may not be able to respond to USCIS in a timely manner, which could delay processing of your EAD.
  - If your STEM OPT application is denied while outside the U.S., and your original OPT EAD has expired, you will not be able to re-enter the U.S. in F-1 status and will not be able to reapply.



# APPLYING FOR AN F1 VISA ON STEM OPT

- If you are traveling abroad and your F-1 visa has expired, you must obtain a new F-1 visa before returning to the U.S. When going to your visa interview, bring the documents below. For more information, visit: [http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/visa\\_application](http://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/visa_application).
1. Valid passport (at least 6 months in the future)
  2. Valid STEM I-20 with travel endorsement from a DSO within the past 6 months
  3. STEM EAD Card
  4. Proof of current STEM OPT employment (employer should match employer info listed on the I-20)
  5. Evidence of sufficient funds (e.g. a bank statement, a letter from a sponsor or a job offer letter)
- Check the [U.S. Department of State website](#) for more information about getting a visa and specific requirements at the local embassy or consulate.



## COMPLETING OPT & GRACE PERIOD

- You have a 60 day grace period following the end of your STEM OPT EAD.
- The only additional extension of OPT available is the [OPT Cap-Gap Extension](#), for students who have an accepted cap-subject H-1B application.
- Failure to exit, continue your F-1 status, or timely request a Cap-Gap Extension or USCIS Change of Status will result in accrual of days of unlawful presence.
- If you receive an extension of your OPT, the grace period will begin after the end of the extension period.