WHAT IS STEM OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT) allows an additional 24 months of work authorization per educational level. It is a possible benefit for F-1 students who completed an eligible STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) degree and who are in a valid period of initial OPT. Students on an initial period of OPT may apply for STEM OPT after obtaining a STEM OPT I-20 from the ISSO, gathering additional documents and then applying to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for employment authorization.

STEPS TO APPLY FOR STEM OPT

Step 1. Verify your eligibility.

- Valid F-1 status at the time of application.
- In a valid period of initial OPT.
- Completion of a STEM eligible degree awarded by an accredited U.S. college or university.
- Extension must be based upon your most recent STEM degree or upon a STEM degree that was conferred within the 10 years preceding the date you were recommended for the extension by the ISSO.
- Must apply during the application period (final 90 days of initial OPT period).
- Must be a full-time compensated employee with an E-Verified employer.
- Employment must be directly related to the STEM degree that the work authorization is based upon.
- You may be eligible for up to two 24-month extensions based upon two separate STEM degrees at different subsequently higher educational levels.

Step 2. Complete Form I-983 with employer.

You and your employer must complete Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students, outlining learning objectives and a plan to meet those objectives prior to submitting your STEM OPT application to the ISSO.

Step 3. Decide:

- **Whether you should apply for STEM OPT.**
  - Apply for STEM OPT if you and your E-Verified employer have agreed on a training plan and have documented the plan on Form I-983.
  - Apply for STEM OPT if you intend to reside in the U.S. during the STEM OPT period for the purpose of maintaining employment directly related to the STEM eligible degree you completed.
  - Be aware that DHS may conduct sight visits to employers where STEM OPT students are employed.

- **When you should apply for STEM OPT.**
  - You are eligible to apply for STEM OPT within 90 days prior to the initial OPT expiration date. The application must be received by USCIS before your OPT initial OPT expiration date.

- **Which address you will use to receive your OPT correspondence from USCIS.**
  - The address you use on the I-765 will be used for all STEM OPT related letters and correspondence from USCIS. You may use your local address, or the ISSO address.
  - We do not recommend the use of your local address if you will move before you receive the STEM EAD as the U.S. postal service will not forward mail from USCIS.
  - If you use the ISSO address there will be a delay of approximately 5 business days from when the USCIS indicates that the STEM EAD has been received, and when ISSO notifies you that your STEM EAD is ready to collect.
Step 6. Compile the documents listed below.
For new STEM OPT requests, pay the $100 Practical Training fee before submitting forms or your I-20 will be delayed. Pay online at: utdallas.edu/isso/ptfee. There is no fee for a STEM OPT I-20 required to respond to a USCIS Request for Evidence Notice.

- STEM OPT I-20 Request Form
- Completed I-765 Form
- Completed Form I-983
- Copy of current EAD card
- USCIS Request for Evidence Notice (if any)
- Transcripts (if applying based on your previous STEM degree)
- Previous I-20(s) (if applying based on your previous STEM degree)

Step 7. Submit your documents to the UT Dallas ISSO.
- In person: Submit to the ISSO during office hours, SSB 3.4. Monday - Thursday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- By e-mail: Submit to ISSODocuments@utdallas.edu. Verify that the total size of attachments in one e-mail is not larger than 5MB. Do not send files in compressed formats, such as .rar or .zip. Instead, use a PDF, JPEG or DOC format.
- Processing time is 3-5 business days. You will receive an email from ISSO when your request has been processed.

Step 8. Pick up your STEM OPT I-20 from the UT Dallas ISSO. Compile the documents listed below.
- Form G-1145 (Optional). Authorizes USCIS to send you application processing updates via email/text. If this is desired, paperclip the completed form on top of application packet.
- Original Form I-765.
- 2 U.S. size passport photos. No glasses allowed. Lightly write name and I-94 number on back of each photo. Attach photos to top, left corner of Form I-765 (a plastic bag is supplied for your convenience).
- $380 check or money order. Make payable to “Department of Homeland Security,” write I-94 number at top. Staple check midway down the left edge of Form I-765. Effective Dec. 23, 2016 the fee will increase to $410. Applications and petitions postmarked or filed on or after Dec. 23, 2016, must include these new fees or USCIS will reject your submission.
- Copy of STEM OPT I-20. Pages 1 and 2. I-20 must be less than 60 days old, signed by you and an ISSO advisor.
- Copy of passport ID page. Showing picture and expiration date.
- Copy of I-94. Front and back of paper I-94, or electronic I-94 print out.
- Copy of F-1 visa. Most recently issued visa, valid or expired.
- Copies of any former OPT EADs.
- Copy of diploma. Related to STEM eligible degree, or official or unofficial transcript showing degree conferred.
- Copy of job offer letter, or other proof of current employment.
- USCIS Request for Evidence Notice (if any).

Step 9. Mail the application to USCIS. Mailing instructions will be provided with the STEM OPT I-20 and are also available at https://www.utdallas.edu/isso/forms/

Step 10. Wait for USCIS to process your request. Check case status online at https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do. If approved, you will receive a STEM OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD). The normal processing time for USCIS is 90 days, however it may take longer.

Step 11. Employment while STEM OPT application is pending. If timely filed, your initial OPT authorization will extend up to 180 days past the initial OPT expiration date while the extension application is pending. However, during that time you must meet the job requirements of the extension, such as working for an E-Verify employer.
Step 12. Maintain F-1 status while on STEM OPT. To maintain F-1 status during OPT you must comply with U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employment and reporting requirements. Refer to more information at http://www.utdallas.edu/isso/opt-extension-maintaining-status-during-stem-extension/

Managing Your F-1 Status After Applying for STEM OPT

Check your case status online. https://egov.uscis.gov/casestatus/landing.do If STEM OPT is approved, you will receive a STEM OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD). The normal processing time for USCIS is three months, however it may take longer.

Check for errors! Review the information on your USCIS I-797 Receipt Notice and STEM Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. Speak with an ISSO Advisor if you find any errors.

Maintain appropriate STEM OPT employment. The Department of Homeland Security instructions regarding acceptable OPT employment may be found at http://www.utdallas.edu/isso/opt-extension-maintaining-status-during-stem-extension/

- All employment must average at least 20 hours per week.
- All employment must be compensated.
- All employment must be directly related to your major and educational level that is on your current I-20. You and the employer make this determination.
- All employment is with E-Verified employer.
- Maintain the training plan as indicated by Form I-983.
- You may change employers as long as each job is directly related to your current major and educational level. Please note that any new employment will require a new Form I-983 Training Plan and 24-Month Reporting Form.

Document your job search and keep employment records. You may be asked for detailed proof of STEM OPT employment or job search activities for future immigration applications or interviews including:

- Copies of job-specific cover letters and resumes.
- Any letter or email that contains info about interviews, testing, information sessions.
- Timesheets, paystubs, logs of volunteer hours.

Learn what is needed to re-enter the U.S. after travel abroad.

- Valid passport
- Valid F-1 visa
- STEM OPT I-20 endorsed for travel within the past 6 months
- STEM OPT EAD
- Proof of employment (for example, pay stubs, employment verification letter)

Learn OPT Reporting procedures. Information regarding OPT requirements and links to the OPT Reporting form may be found at http://www.utdallas.edu/isso/opt-extension-maintaining-status-during-stem-extension/
Managing Your F-1 Status While On STEM OPT

Submit the OPT Reporting Form – 24 Month STEM Extension to the ISSO. Information regarding OPT requirements and links to the OPT Reporting form may be found at [http://www.utdallas.edu/issos/opt-extension-maintaining-status-during-stem-extension/](http://www.utdallas.edu/issos/opt-extension-maintaining-status-during-stem-extension/).

- Updates must be reported within 10 days of the start of your STEM OPT work authorization and within 10 days of any subsequent change.
- While on STEM Extension, you must validate your employment every 6 months by submitting the STEM OPT reporting form.
- You are required to update Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students, 12 months from your STEM EAD start date and include a progress report on accomplishments and skills or knowledge obtained. Employers must sign the 12 month evaluation as well.
- If you add or change employers you must submit a new Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students, to the ISSO.
- You and your employer must report material changes to or deviations from the student’s formal training plan on Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT outlined above.
- You and your employer must additionally complete and submit to the ISSO a concluding 24 month evaluation on Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students.
- If you neglects to submit Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students to the ISSO within 10 days of the conclusion of the reporting period you will be in violation of their F-1 status.

Stay within unemployment limits. F-1 alumni on STEM OPT may have up to 150 days of unemployment.
- F-1 alumni on post-completion OPT are allowed a maximum period of 90 days of unemployment.
- Students on the 24-month STEM OPT extension are allowed an additional 60 days of unemployment for a maximum period of 150 days of unemployment.
- If you are in a period of the 17-month extension, and currently pending the additional 7 month extension you are allowed a maximum period of 120 days of unemployment. After approval to the 24 month extension the student is allowed a maximum period of 150 days of unemployment.
- Each day (including weekends) during the period when STEM OPT authorization begins and ends that you do not have qualifying employment counts as a day of unemployment.
- STEM OPT authorization begins on the employment start date shown on your EAD.

Engage in appropriate employment. The Department of Homeland Security instructions regarding acceptable STEM OPT employment may be found at [http://www.utdallas.edu/issos/opt-extension/](http://www.utdallas.edu/issos/opt-extension/)
- You may not volunteer for an employer during the STEM OPT extension.
- Employment must be for at least 20 hours a week.
- The employment must be compensated.
- The employer must be E-Verified.
- The employment must include a legitimate employer, employee relationship.
- The employment must be directly related to the STEM degree that the work authorization was based upon.
- You are allowed to work for multiple employers while on a period of STEM OPT, however each employment must meet all of the student and employer requirements outlined above.

Learn options available at the end of STEM OPT. After the STEM OPT end date, there is a 60 day grace period in which you can:
- Start another academic program at UT Dallas
- Transfer to another school
- Change to another visa category
- Leave the U.S.

*Notify the ISSO of your departure by submitting an OPT Reporting form so that a note can be placed in your immigration record.*