

This guide is provided by the UT Dallas International Student Services Office to UT Dallas alumni considering requesting STEM Optional Practical Training. The information is not intended as legal advice. For legal questions, please consult an immigration attorney.

WHAT IS STEM OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT)

The STEM OPT extension is a 24-month period of temporary training that directly relates to an F-1 student's program of study in an approved STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) field. 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.
- Must be a full-time compensated employee with an E-Verified employer.
- Employment must be directly related to the STEM degree that was conferred within the 10 years preceding the date of your current STEM extension request.
- 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. 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.
 - Be aware that DHS may conduct site 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 initial OPT expiration date.
 - ❖ Students may not apply for STEM OPT extensions during the 60-day grace period following an initial period of regular post-completion OPT.
- **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. USCIS will destroy EAD cards returned as undeliverable by the U.S. Postal Service after 60 business days if USCIS is not contacted by the document's intended recipient to provide the correct address.
 - ❖ 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 3. 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. For questions, watch the Form I-983 video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8SIpEFKiro&feature=youtu.be>.

STEP 4. DOCUMENT CHECKLIST FOR ISSO

Compile the documents listed below for STEM OPT request to UT Dallas.

- Pay the \$100 Practical Training fee before submitting forms or your I-20 will be delayed. Pay online at: utdallas.edu/isso/ptfee. Please note the ISSO charges a separate Practical Training fee for OPT STEM applications.
- 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)

Pick up your STEM OPT I-20 from the UT Dallas ISSO.

STEP 5. DOCUMENT CHECKLIST FOR USCIS

Compile the documents listed below for USCIS.

- 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).
- \$410 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. Or use Form G-1450, Authorization for Credit Card Transactions.
- 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) or F-1 approval notice if you changed your visa status in the U.S.
- 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).

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/files/24-month-STEM-OPT-Application-and-Mailing-Instructions.pdf>

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, although it may take longer.

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. Proof of continued OPT authorization is your STEM I-20, USCIS receipt notice, and the ISSO Pending STEM Status Letter.

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, although 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/>.

- You may not volunteer for an employer during the STEM OPT extension.
- All employment must average at least 20 hours per week.
- All employment must be compensated.
- It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the employment is directly related to the major and educational level that is on the student's current I-20.
- All employment must be with an E-Verified employer.
- The employment must include a legitimate employer-employee relationship.
- 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.
- 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.

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 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/>

Documents 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)

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/isso/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 neglect 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 your 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.
- Each day (including weekends) during the period of STEM OPT (when 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.

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.*

ISSO CONTACT INFO

ISSO advising is available:

- Walk-In Advising: Monday and Friday 1pm - 4:45pm (in person; no appointment necessary)
- Appointment Advising: Tuesday and Thursday 9am – 11:45am, Thursday 1pm – 4:45pm (call 972-883-4189 to schedule a phone or in person appointment)
- 5 Minute Express Advising: Monday, Thursday, and Friday 1pm – 4:45, Tuesday and Thursday 9am – 11:45am (in person; no appointment necessary)

To schedule an appointment, call 972-883-4189 or visit the ISSO.