

# F-1 OPT STEM Extension Guide

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## General Overview

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 OPT based on a degree earned in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) field.

Visit the U.S. 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 accumulated more than 90 days of unemployment during 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.

## Form I-983 OPT STEM Training Plan

The OPT STEM 24-month extension regulations require the submission of a formal training plan that clearly articulates the STEM OPT student's learning objectives and affirms 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](#). Form I-983 must be completed and submitted to the MUSC Center for Global Health before you can apply for the OPT STEM extension with USCIS.

Employers can sometimes be confused about completing the Form I-983, if they have never completed this form previously for an individual applying for the OPT STEM extension. When asking your employer to complete the Form I-983, we highly recommend that you send your employer the link to the [DHS Study in the States Employers and the Form I-983 webpage](#). This webpage will provide your employer with more details on the Form I-983 and what they are agreeing to when they sign this form.

Both you and your employer are obligated to update the Form I-983 with any changes to the plan and provide this information to the Center for Global Health. 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 the Center for Global Health *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 Center for Global Health.

## When to Apply

The OPT STEM extension application process involves various steps and deadlines. The specific application steps are outlined in the next section. We recommend applying for the OPT STEM extension as early as possible.

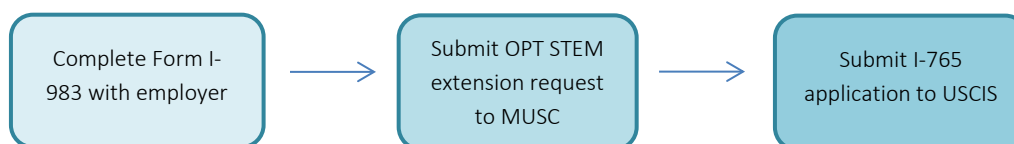
There are several timelines and deadlines related to the OPT STEM extension process:

- You must submit the OPT STEM Extension and the OPT Employment Verification records in Terra Dotta at least 30 days prior to your OPT expiration date.

- 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 can submit the OPT STEM extension I-765 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 I-765 application to USCIS within 60 days of the date that the DSO issues the Form I-20 requesting the OPT STEM extension.
- You must submit the OPT STEM extension I-765 application to USCIS before your post-completion OPT expires.

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

If you want to apply for the OPT STEM extension, you must first complete a customized training plan with your prospective employer by completing DHS [Form I-983](#). The form, instructions, and more information can be found on the [DHS Study in the States Form I-983](#) webpage.

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; or Hannah Casagrande, casagran@musc.edu, 843-792-1913
- *Student SEVIS ID No* – Your SEVIS ID number is found on the top left portion of your Form I-20. 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 Form I-20. 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 Required Requests through MUSC Terra Dotta Portal

To request the OPT STEM Form I-20 from MUSC, you must complete and submit the following requests to the MUSC Center for Global Health through your Terra Dotta portal:

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

Both of these records must be completed and submitted in Terra Dotta before we can process your request. You must complete a *new* OPT Employment Verification record as part of this request. You must submit your completed Form I-983 and a copy of your employment offer letter with these requests.

Both the OPT STEM Extension request and the OPT Employment Verification record must be completely submitted in Terra Dotta **at least 30 days prior to your OPT expiration date**. However, we highly recommend submitting these requests much earlier than this 30-day deadline.

The Center for Global Health processing time for these requests is highly variable and depends on the total case volume at the time of your request. Typically, requests can be processed within two to four weeks of the date of complete submission in Terra Dotta. If these requests are approved, the Designated School Official (DSO) will issue an updated Form I-20 for you requesting the OPT STEM extension. You will be notified by email if your request is approved.

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

### **STEP THREE: 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.

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

- Part 2: U.S. Mailing Address – Use an address where you will be able to obtain mail for the next several 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 I-765 Application Submission***

If you want to submit your OPT STEM extension application 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 submit your application online, you will be able to track your application through your USCIS account.

If you choose to submit the I-765 application online, we 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 I-765 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 U.S. 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. You may be asked to provide your USCIS receipt notice for your I-765 application to the Human Resources office of your employer as evidence of the automatic extension of your employment authorization.

USCIS I-765 application processing times are highly variable and subject to change at any time. You can view currently estimated USCIS processing times on the [USCIS case processing times website](#).

USCIS currently offers the I-907 premium processing option for F-1 students filing the I-765 for OPT employment authorization. This means that you have the option to request expedited service for an additional fee. To request premium processing service, you must submit USCIS Form I-907 Request for Premium Processing Service along with the USCIS Form I-765. Refer to the [USCIS I-907 website](#) for current information on the I-907 fee. USCIS fees are subject to change at any time.

## 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 F-1 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 of your employer.

## Reporting Requirements During OPT STEM Extension

Just as you were required to report certain information to the MUSC Center for Global Health during your period of standard post-completion OPT, you will be required to continue to report to the Center for Global Health during your OPT STEM extension period. Keep in mind that MUSC will remain the sponsor of your F-1 status and SEVIS record during your OPT STEM extension. As the sponsor of your F-1 status, the Designated School Official (DSO) in the Center for Global Health is required to update your F-1 SEVIS record and report certain information to the federal government.

There are four general types of reporting requirements during the OPT STEM extension:

- 1) **Contact information.** You must report the changes in your residential address, mailing address, phone or legal name within 10 days.
- 2) **Changes to employment.** You must report the changes in your employment or employment status 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 complete a validation report every six (6) 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 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. 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](#) request in your Terra Dotta portal. To update your contact information, you will update your profile in Terra Dotta. Refer to the [Terra Dotta F-1 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. The Center for Global Health will not be reminding you to complete these reporting requirements. After your OPT STEM extension has been approved, we highly recommend that you write down all of the due dates for your 6, 12 and 18 month validation reports and as well as the 12 and 24 month I-983 evaluation reports.

Please be aware that failure to comply with reporting requirements could result in the termination of your F-1 SEVIS record for failure to report during OPT.

## Unemployment

Per federal regulations, 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. Each day (including weekends) during your OPT or OPT STEM extension period that you do not have qualifying employment counts as a day of unemployment. If you do have qualifying employment reported in SEVIS, then weekend days do not count towards unemployment.

You are responsible for keeping track of your days of unemployment during both the 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 the Center for Global Health so that we can update this information in SEVIS. In addition, you must complete the Form I-983 endpoint evaluation at the end of any particular employment opportunity and submit the I-983 evaluation to the Center for Global Health.

Exceeding the 150-day OPT and OPT STEM unemployment limit is a violation of your F-1 status. If you accumulate more than 150 days of unemployment, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has the authority to terminate your F-1 SEVIS record for violating your F-1 status and exceeding the OPT STEM unemployment maximum.

## Maintaining Records

In addition to reporting your employment details to the Center for Global Health, you are also responsible for keeping complete documentation of all of your employment during your OPT STEM extension. Specifically, for each job, you should maintain records indicating your employer, position, start date, contact information for your supervisor, description of the work, and how the position relates to your field of study. You must also maintain all Forms I-983 and corresponding evaluations for each OPT STEM training opportunity. You may be asked to provide proof of your OPT employment at a later time, especially if you ever apply for additional benefits (i.e., another visa status) through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

You are responsible for keeping records of the time that you are not employed during your OPT period. Remember that you can have no more than 150 days total of unemployment during post-completion OPT and the OPT STEM extension.

You are responsible for keeping the originals of all Forms I-20 issued to you throughout your time in F-1 student status (during your academic program and OPT). You should keep these forms indefinitely as part of your U.S. immigration records. You may need to present these at some point to prove your legal status in the United States.

## Travel

The regulations regarding international travel and OPT are not always clear. If you need to travel outside of the United States at any time during your OPT or OPT STEM extension periods, please be aware that you do so at your own risk. We do not recommend traveling outside of the United States if you have a pending I-765 application.

We have provided you with some general information below in order to assist you in planning your travel. However, please be aware that re-entry into the United States is never guaranteed for nonimmigrant F-1 visa holders. Admission into the U.S. is at the sole discretion of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

### ***Travel while I-765 OPT STEM extension application is pending***

Travel outside of the United States while your OPT STEM extension I-765 application is pending with USCIS should be avoided and is generally not recommended. If your OPT STEM extension application is approved while you are outside of the U.S., you will be expected to re-enter the U.S. using your new EAD card. Furthermore, if USCIS sends you a request for additional evidence, you will not be in the U.S. in order to provide any additional documents needed to continue processing your OPT STEM extension application.

### ***Travel if EAD has expired and I-765 OPT STEM extension application is pending***

We do not recommend traveling outside of the United States if your current OPT employment authorization has expired and your I-765 OPT STEM extension application is still pending. U.S. 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 United States.

### ***Travel during valid period of OPT STEM extension***

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

- Passport
- F-1 visa stamp in passport
- Form I-20 with travel signature (page 2) from past six months
- EAD card
- Current letter from your employer stating that you are still employed

During OPT, the Form I-20 travel signature is only valid for six (6) months. Only a DSO in the MUSC Center for Global Health can provide the I-20 travel signature. If the travel signature on your most recent Form I-20 has expired, and you need an I-20 travel signature for upcoming travel, please submit the [OPT I-20 Travel Signature](#) request through your Terra Dotta portal. This request must be submitted at least three (3) weeks prior to your estimated departure date. Once the request has been processed, the DSO will send you an updated Form I-20 with the travel signature. The I-20 will be sent to you via secure email as a PDF attachment. You can then print the updated Form I-20 to take with you for your travel.

If your F-1 passport visa has expired, and you need to travel outside of the United States during your OPT STEM extension, you will need to apply for a new F-1 visa stamp at a U.S. embassy/consulate before you can request re-entry into the United States. Please be aware that the risk of denial for an F-1 visa is higher during OPT than while you are in your active student program. This is because the focus of your stay in the U.S. now is to work rather than to attend school. The F-1 student visa requires nonimmigrant intent, which means that the applicant intends to return to the home country at the end of the program. If the consular officer is not convinced of your intention to return home, your visa application could be denied.



## 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 physically present in the United States when you submit the I-765 application to USCIS.

### **Which person at my employer needs to complete and sign the Form I-983?**

You and your employer must decide who is the appropriate person to complete and sign the Form I-983. Each employer is different and will have different practices in this regard. Refer to the [DHS Employers and the Form I-983](#) website for section-by-section guidance on completing the Form I-983. You should send this website to your employer. Note that the person who signs Section 4 of the I-983 does not have to be the same person who signs Section 6 of the I-983. However, the same person can complete both sections.

### **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. You may be asked to provide this receipt notice to your employer's Human Resources office.

### **What is the fee for the USCIS I-765 application?**

USCIS fees are subject to change at any time. Please check the [USCIS I-765 website](#) and the [USCIS fee calculator](#) to view the current fees.

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

The decision regarding how to submit your I-765 application (online or paper) is completely up to you. There are 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. Also, the USCIS filing fee for the online application may be less expensive than the paper 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 U.S. 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 F-1 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 a separate [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 the Center for Global Health 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](#) request in Terra Dotta. Refer to the [Terra Dotta F-1 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 United States, you must have your Form I-20 authorized for travel within the past six (6) months. If you need a new travel signature on your Form I-20, please submit the [OPT I-20 Travel Signature](#) request through your Terra Dotta portal at least three (3) weeks in advance of your anticipated travel departure date. Once the request is processed, the DSO will send you an updated Form I-20 with the travel signature.

**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 MUSC Center for Global Health. Even if you update your information in the SEVP Portal, you still must notify the Center for Global Health directly with changes to your address, contact information, and employment. Reporting is done through the Terra Dotta portal. Refer to the [Terra Dotta F-1 OPT STEM User Guide](#) for detailed instructions on how to submit various reports and update information.