

## 24-MONTH STEM OPT Extension Packet

This handout explains the various extension periods of Optional Practical Training (OPT) for which some students, with degrees in a designated-STEM program, are eligible.

Procedure to apply for 24-month STEM OPT extension:

1. You can apply for the 24-month STEM OPT extension no sooner than 90 days prior to your current OPT end date and no later than the day your current EAD card expires. As long as your application is received by USCIS by your current EAD end date, you will be allowed to remain in the U.S. and continue employment for 180 days or until a decision is made on your application.
2. Complete [Form I-983 Training Plan for STEM OPT Students](#). Please visit Study in the States website for more information on the I-983 and how to complete it by clicking [here](#).
3. Complete the [Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization](#). **Do not use AAMU's address** as your mailing address on the I-765 application for STEM OPT. Please write in a personal mailing address on the I-765 application.
4. Submit an email Request for OPT Extension to your DSO with the requested dates. Include a copy of the signed Form I-983, and your Post-Completion EAD card with your request. If approved, a new I-20 will be created with the STEM extension recommendation.

*If you are employed by AAMU, you and your department should work with the Office of Human Resources to ensure you have everything you need to complete form I-983.*

5. Sign your new I-20 and use copy to send with completed application packet (checklist below) to the appropriate [USCIS lockbox](#) within 60 days of your DSO's recommendation.
6. Receive your new EAD card and continue employment.

**STEM OPT Extension Application Checklist:** You will apply using the same Form I-765 you used to apply for post-completion OPT, but there are slight differences so ensure you read these instructions carefully when assembling your application. It is your responsibility to the STEM OPT Extension Application Checklist below.

### ELIGIBILITY FOR 24-MONTH STEM OPT EXTENSION

- Applicant must be an F-1 student who is currently engaged in post-completion OPT and has a job or job offer from a participating E-Verify employer.
- Applicant has completed a degree in a STEM-eligible field from a U.S. accredited institution with SEVP certification within the last 10 years and has not already utilized this degree to apply for an OPT STEM Extension;  
Or, applicant is in a period of post-completion OPT and is currently engaged in a STEM-eligible Master's or PhD program, has completed all degree-required coursework and lacks only the thesis or dissertation to complete the degree.
- Applicant is in an active period of post-completion OPT at the time of requesting the STEM extension.

- Applicant files the [I-765](#), with all required documentation and filing fee, to USCIS to request the STEM extension within the necessary filing timeline.
- Applicant is working in a paid position for a participating E-Verified employer; cannot be self-employed.
- Applicant has filed a completed [I-983](#) with all attestations and supporting documentation to their DSO to request the 24-month STEM extension.

Note: After the student and employer complete the necessary sections, the STEM OPT student must submit their completed and signed Form I-983 to their DSO. The student's DSO will keep the completed form in the student's record. For more information about how to complete this form, visit the Form I-983 resource pages for [students](#), [school officials](#) and [employers](#).

- Applicant must have their application received by USCIS within **60 days** of the STEM OPT recommendation in SEVIS, or the application will be denied. If you are unable to adhere to this deadline, then you must contact your DSO for a new I20. This will cause a delay in your filing as reissued STEM I-20s take longer to process.

### ELIGIBILITY FOR 24-MONTH STEM OPT EXTENSION

1. The STEM OPT start date will begin the day after the initial OPT ends. You do not choose the dates.
2. TWO STEM OPT extensions are allowed per lifetime.
3. A STEM Extension can only be applied for while the applicant is in a valid period of post-completion OPT even if you do not receive your new EAD card before the end of your initial 12-month period of OPT.
4. Failure to comply with reporting requirements will result in the loss of your immigration status and employment authorization. YOU MUST PAY ATTENTION TO AND COMPLY WITH REPORTING REQUIREMENTS AND DEADLINES.
5. Individuals engaged in a period of 24-month STEM extension cannot be unemployed for an aggregate of more than 150 days.

### ASSEMBLING AND MAILING THE APPLICATION TO USCIS

You must submit a timely application to USCIS in order to continue working and obtain the STEM OPT extension.

Follow these steps:

**STEP 1: Be informed:** Read this handout thoroughly and carefully. For more detailed information, consult the [immigration policy guidance on OPT](#).

**STEP 2: Obtain your DSO recommendation and new I-20**

Request the STEM OPT extension (include a copy of your EAD card and a completed and signed I-983), no more than 90 days prior to the end of your initial OPT period. PLEASE TYPE YOUR I-983.

**STEP 3: Form I-983 Training Plan**

For full details, you can see the tutorial on Study In The States' website: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opthub>.

- All questions must be answered clearly and completely. Incomplete forms will not be accepted and may delay the processing of your STEM OPT extension application.
- "SEVIS School Code for School Recommending STEM OPT" – AAMU's school code is: **ATL214F00018000**
- "Name of School Recommending STEM OPT" – Alabama A&M University
- "Designated School Official (DSO) Name and Contact Information"

## DSO INFORMATION

**Undergraduate students with family names beginning with A-L: [pamela.little@aamu.edu](mailto:pamela.little@aamu.edu)**

**Undergraduate students with family names beginning with M-Z: [atari.steele@aamu.edu](mailto:atari.steele@aamu.edu)**

**All graduate students: [nicole.jackson@aamu.edu](mailto:nicole.jackson@aamu.edu)**

- “STEM OPT Requested Period” – For the start date, list the day after your post-completion OPT end date.
- “Qualifying Major and Classification of Programs (CIP) Code” – List your major and the CIP code listed next to your major in the “Program of Study” box located on the first page of your I-20.
- Page 2, Section 3 “Start Date of Employment” -- Write the first date of your STEM OPT period, not the original start date of your employment
- Leave pages 6 and 7 blank!

### **STEP 4: Complete the USCIS Application Materials**

You will need to gather the following application materials and submit them to USCIS to apply for the STEM OPT extension.

HERE IS WHAT YOU MUST SEND TO USCIS (*in this order*):

- Include a check or money order for the I-765 filing fee made payable to US Department of Homeland Security. Please review USCIS’s website for the filing fee amount, <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>. Check or money order payable to “US Department of Homeland Security.” If paying with credit card, you must complete Form G-1450, Authorization for Credit Card Transaction and mail with your application [Authorization for Credit Card Transactions | USCIS](#).
- Original I-765 form completed by you with your original signature (in black ink) – use the most current version available from the “Immigration Forms” section of the USCIS website since older versions are not acceptable. Note that the address you use must be valid for *at least* 3 months from the time you send the application. The US Postal Service DOES NOT forward EAD cards. for instructions on how to fill out the I-765, please refer to the I-765 website: [https:// www.uscis.gov/i-765](https://www.uscis.gov/i-765)
- Enter the correct eligibility category: **STEM OPT extension (c)(3)(C)**
- Photocopy (NOT original) of STEM I-20 with the OPT recommendation from your DSO on page 2.** You must obtain your new I-20 from your DSO with the STEM OPT recommendation before you can proceed with this application. NOTE: Sign the I-20 before copying it; all I-20 copies must be signed.
- Photocopies of all previously issued and signed I-20 documents dating back to beginning of F-1 status.
- Proof of degree: *Official transcript* is recommended. Alternatively, the applicant may choose to provide a copy of the diploma showing the level and program of study.
- I-94 record or front and back of paper record (if applicable).
- Photocopy of the most recent I.D. page(s) of your passport (these are the page(s) which contain the picture, number, and expiration date).
- Photocopy of the most recent US visa stamp (in a page of your passport).
- Two “passport” photos. In pencil, print your name and I-94 number on the back of each photo.
- Copy of any previously-issued EAD card(s).

**STEP 5: Mail the Application Pack to USCIS** ○ When you have completed the entire application, make a complete set of photocopies for your files, and send the entire application to USCIS to complete the authorization procedure.

- YOU must mail the application to the USCIS PO Box/office that has jurisdiction over the [address you have used on the I-765](#).

- Mail the application so USCIS *receives* it before the application deadlines:
  - Ideally within a few weeks of the DSO recommendation since it must be received by USCIS within 60 days (the date in item 10 on the I-20) AND
  - Before the end of your current OPT period, ideally 90 days prior to the OPT end date.

**STEP 6: Wait for the EAD card!**

Within one month of sending the application to the USCIS, you should get a standard receipt notice. If you do not get this letter within 6 weeks contact your DSO for more information. The “Receipt Number” in the top left corner of this receipt notice can be used to check the status of your case on the USCIS website at [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov) or by calling the phone number indicated on the receipt. Keep in mind that this information is updated infrequently.

It takes *approximately 90 days* from the date USCIS receives your application, to receive your EAD card.

**OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

**A. Reporting Requirements and Limitations on Unemployment**

- **F-1 regulations REQUIRE you to report any change of your name, your address, your employer’s name or your employer’s address, as well as any interruption or loss of employment, within 10 days to your DSO.** Report any of these changes on the SEVIS Information Update Form located on CCRGI’s webpage and this information will be reported to the Department of Homeland Security, as required in the immigration regulations.
- **Additionally, you must report to your DSO every 6 months, within 10 business days, to confirm that the employer information you submitted with this request is still correct.** This report begins 6 months after the end of your 12-month OPT period. After that, they continue every 6 months until your STEM ends, or you change status or depart the U.S.
- As regulations may change, your DSO must have your current email address in order to contact you quickly.
- **Period of “unemployment” are limited to 150 days while on OPT.** This dates back to the start of your initial 12month OPT period.
- **You must report status changes to your DSO while you are on OPT.** Examples include:
  - Apply for and are granted a change of status from F-1 (OPT) to H-1B or any other status.
  - If you leave the U.S. and make a new entry in another status.
  - If you leave the U.S. permanently before the end date of your EAD card.
  - If you plan to return to AAMU as a student or continue studies elsewhere after OPT.

**B. Authorization may not be rescinded.** Once authorization to engage in OPT is granted, it may not be rescinded or canceled. This means that after OPT is authorized by USCIS, it is impossible to have it canceled and restored at a later date. If you do not use the work authorization, it is forfeited.

**C. Change of employer after OPT has been authorized:** You must report any change of employer or employer address within 10 days. If you change your employer, you email your DSO and include a new I-765 and I983.

**D. Social Security and Other Taxes**

In general, F-1 students who have been in the U.S. fewer than five tax years are “nonresidents for tax purposes” and are exempt from Social Security (FICA) and Medicare taxes (see Internal Revenue Service Publication 519, “U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens”). However, your earnings are subject to applicable federal, state, and local taxes. Beginning in the sixth tax year, most students in F-1 status become “residents for tax purposes” and employers should withhold Social Security and Medicare taxes. Tax returns must be filed on or before April 15 each year for the previous calendar year, for both “nonresidents” and “residents.”

**E. Traveling Outside of the U.S. While on OPT**

Reentry provisions of the regulations require students who have graduated and are on authorized OPT to present the following documents to reenter the U.S.:

1. STEM OPT I-20 signed on page 2 by the DSO, within the last six months. Should you require an updated travel signature, contact your DSO.
2. Valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD).
3. A valid passport.
4. A valid F-1 visa stamp.
5. A job offer letter/proof of employment. F-1 regulations allow for travel and reentry in order to “resume employment.”
6. Dependent travel: Since dependents do not receive an EAD, an F-2 dependent must carry copies of the F-1 student’s I-20 with OPT recommendation, EAD card and job offer letter, in addition to the F-2 I-20 when traveling.
7. Note: Travel during the “cap gap” period (see below) may not be possible if the EAD card has expired; consult with your employer if you have plans to travel in that circumstance.

Travel at any time while in F-1 status carries some risk. This risk increases for individuals on OPT if the F-1 visa has expired and a new one is required in order to reenter the U.S. or if the F-1 student has been unemployed for more than 150 days. Be sure to consult with your DSO when contemplating travel outside the U.S. and reentry to continue OPT.

**F. Employment Authorization with a pending H-1B petition (“Cap Gap” employment authorization)**

- All students on OPT who have a *pending or approved* H-1B petition with a request for change of status will have their F-1 status and OPT authorization automatically extended if the employer has filed a timely H-1B petition with a change of status request with a requested October 1<sup>st</sup> start date.
- Should your employer require a new Cap-Gap I-20, contact your DSO for assistance.
- The OPT employment authorization automatically ends if the H-1B petition is denied, rejected or withdrawn (although the student can continue working until the end date indicated on the OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD). The F-1 would have a 60-day grace period with no work authorization after the end of OPT.