



USC OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICES

STEM OPT Extension Instructions

24-Month STEM OPT Extension Instructions
and Guidelines for USC Students in F-1 Status



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What is STEM OPT Extension?

STEM OPT Extension is an additional 24-month work authorization benefit for employed F-1 students on post-completion OPT, who obtained a DHS-approved science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) Bachelor's, Master's, or doctoral degree in the U.S.

The student must meet certain eligibility requirements in order to request a STEM OPT Extension I-20 from OIS and apply for a renewal of their EAD with USCIS.



What is STEM OPT Extension?

CONTINUED

If approved, USCIS will issue the student a STEM OPT Extension EAD and the student must fulfill specific employment and reporting requirements over the 24-month period to maintain F-1 status.

STEM OPT Extension is a benefit of F-1 status, not a separate visa status. Therefore, OIS continues to monitor status maintenance for F-1 students on STEM OPT Extension.

For more detailed information, students and their employers should refer to the STEM OPT Extension resources on the [Study in the States website](#).



When can students apply for STEM OPT Extension?



USCIS accepts completed STEM OPT Extension applications as early as **90 days prior to the post-completion OPT EAD end date** and no later than the OPT EAD end date.

In accordance with USCIS submission deadlines, OIS accepts STEM OPT I-20 requests up to **90 days prior to the post-completion OPT EAD end date**.

After receiving the STEM OPT Extension I-20 from OIS, the student must submit their STEM OPT Extension application to USCIS for adjudication. **USCIS must receive the application:**

- **Prior to student's OPT EAD end date**
- AND -
- **No more than 60 days after *Date Issued* on Page 1 of the STEM OPT Extension I-20**



How long does the entire STEM OPT Extension application process take?

***Approximately
4 to 5 months***

Students who file a timely application with USCIS may continue working after their post-completion OPT EAD is expired - until they receive the final decision from USCIS on the application (i.e., approved or denied) or for 180 days, whichever comes first

See 'Applying for STEM OPT Extension' on the [USCIS website](#)

- ▶ **Student requests STEM OPT I-20 from OIS as early as 90 days before the OPT EAD End Date**

OIS processing time for complete and correct requests submitted via [MyOIS](#) is 7 business days after submission date – students will be notified by email to download and print their signed STEM OPT Extension I-20 from [MyOIS](#) once processed

- ▶ **Student submits online Form I-765 and supporting documents to USCIS prior to their OPT EAD end date**

After submitting the online Form I-765, supporting documents, and filing fee, students will be issued a receipt number which they can use to [track the status of their application](#)

- ▶ **USCIS adjudicates STEM OPT Extension application and if approved, mails STEM EAD to student**

[USCIS processing time](#) from the "received" date on the receipt notice is approximately **2 to 5 months**

To be eligible for STEM OPT Extension, the student must:



- ▶ **Currently be on post-completion OPT and meeting all [OPT employment and reporting requirements](#)**
- ▶ **Have obtained a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in the U.S. listed on the [DHS STEM Designated Degree Programs List](#)***
 - CIP code (XX.XXXX) can be found on the I-20 under "Major"
- ▶ **Meet the following employment requirements:**
 - Student must be paid – volunteer or unpaid is not authorized
 - Student's position must be directly related to major and appropriate to degree level
 - Student must work more than 20 hours per week to meet full-time requirements
 - Employer must be enrolled in DHS's [E-Verify](#) system
 - Employer must maintain a bona fide employer-employee relationship with the student (as defined [here](#) by USCIS)
 - Student and employer must attest to employment information on the [Form I-983](#)



Students and their employers must review [Study in the States](#) for additional guidance

**Updated January 2022*



STEM OPT Extension Application Overview

STEP	PROCESS	SLIDES	REMINDER
1	STUDENT REQUESTS STEM OPT EXTENSION I-20: Student submits STEM OPT I-20 Request to OIS via MyOIS up to 90 days prior to OPT EAD end date	9-10	OIS processing time for complete and correct STEM OPT Extension I-20 requests is 7 business days after submission
2	STUDENT SUBMITS STEM OPT EXTENSION APPLICATION TO USCIS: Student receives an email from OIS notifying them their signed STEM OPT Extension I-20 is processed and ready to be downloaded from MyOIS ; student prints and signs STEM OPT Extension I-20 (in ink) and uses the Guide to Filing Form I-765 for STEM OPT Extension to submit application online to USCIS	11	Important reminders to prevent STEM OPT application rejection or denial
3	USCIS ADJUDICATES STEM OPT EXTENSION APPLICATION: USCIS provides receipt number to student upon submission of online Form I-765; USCIS adjudicates STEM OPT Extension application within 2 to 5 months of receipt date and mails decision notice to student	12	See USCIS processing times
4	STUDENT RECEIVES EAD: If STEM OPT Extension is approved, USCIS mails student STEM OPT Extension EAD; student completes all STEM OPT Extension reporting requirements	13-21	Review STEM OPT Extension reporting requirements

How do students determine their STEM OPT Extension start and end dates?



STEM OPT EXTENSION START DATE	STEM OPT EXTENSION END DATE
The STEM OPT Extension start date is always the day <i>after</i> the OPT EAD end date.	By default, the STEM OPT Extension expires 24 months from the STEM OPT Extension start date.
<p><u>Example</u></p> <p>OPT EAD ends Dec 16, 2020 STEM OPT Extension start date: Dec 17, 2020 STEM OPT Extension end date: Dec 16, 2022</p>	



How do students request a STEM OPT Extension I-20 from OIS?

»»» Up to 90 days prior to OPT EAD end date, student logs in to [MyOIS](#) and creates a new request for STEM OPT Extension

Student will enter personal information, OPT EAD end date, and STEM OPT Extension employer information, including company EIN and supervisor contact information.

»»» Upload PDF copies of the following documents with the request:

1. Current I-20 (all pages)
2. Current Employment Authorization Document (EAD) (front side only)
3. Completed Form [I-983](#) (typed and signed)
 - Refer to [USC's Sample STEM OPT Extension I-983](#) for guidance
4. Most recent [SEVP Portal](#) employment screenshot

»»» Pay \$200 OIS administrative processing fee* and submit request to OIS for processing

Processing time for complete and correct requests is [7 business days](#) after submission date. Students will be notified via email when their signed STEM OPT Extension I-20 is processed and ready to be downloaded/printed from [MyOIS](#), or if corrections to the request are required.

* This fee is non-refundable and must be paid upon submission; for addition information see [Slide 24](#)



What happens after receiving the STEM OPT Extension I-20?

Assemble
application
documents
and submit
Form I-765
online to
USCIS



- ▶ Refer to the [Guide to Filing Form I-765 for STEM OPT Extension](#) for required application documents and instructions on how to complete the online Form I-765

Follow the USCIS instructions and OIS guidance carefully; failure to comply could result in rejection or denial of the OPT application.

- ▶ USCIS must receive complete and correct STEM OPT Extension applications:

- ▶ Prior to student's OPT EAD end date
- AND -

- ▶ No more than 60 days after *Date Issued* on Page 1 of the STEM OPT Extension I-20

USCIS will deny any applications that are received after either deadline—no exceptions. Students at risk of missing either deadline should [contact OIS immediately](#).



Next, USCIS reviews and adjudicates the student's STEM OPT Extension application

After submitting the online Form I-765, supporting documents, and filing fee, students will be issued a receipt number which they can use to [track the status of their application](#)

USCIS processing time is 2-5 months; current processing times are updated [here](#) – select “Form I-765” and “Potomac Service Center” from the drop-down menus

If STEM OPT Extension is approved, USCIS will issue an approval notice and mail the student their Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

Student must comply with all STEM OPT Extension Reporting Requirements based on their EAD start and end date

Students can continue working after their OPT EAD end date with a pending STEM OPT Extension application. Refer to [Slide 6](#).





To maintain F-1 status on STEM OPT Extension, students must:



Comply with all [reporting requirements](#), including submitting data validation reports and Form I-983 self-evaluations to OIS



Report and submit all [changes to their employer or employer information](#) to OIS within 10 days of the change



[Not accrue more than 150 days of unemployment](#)



Update personal contact information via the [SEVP Portal](#)

Failure to comply with these requirements will result in termination of the student's SEVIS record by SEVP and/or USCIS.



What are the reporting requirements students must complete while on STEM OPT Extension?

- ▶ Submit [data validation reports](#) to OIS every six months
- ▶ Submit [Form I-983 12-Month Self-Evaluation](#) to OIS
- ▶ Submit [Form I-983 Final Self-Evaluation](#) to OIS
- ▶ Report any [changes to their employment situation](#) to OIS within 10 days of the change
- ▶ Report any changes to their U.S. address and contact information online [SEVP Portal](#) within 10 days of the change





What are data validation reports?

Immigration regulations require students on STEM OPT Extension to validate their address, telephone number, and employment information with their school every six months

Refer to DHS's [Study in the States](#) website for additional information



When are these reports due?

Students must submit data validation reports 6, 12, 18, and 24 months after their STEM OPT start date

Students can determine their exact due dates by logging in to their SEVP Portal account and reviewing their reporting due dates in the “STEM Student Due Date Announcement” notice

How do students complete and submit their data validation reports?

Follow the [STEM OPT Extension Employment Reporting Requirements instructions](#); submit in [MyOIS](#)



What are Form I-983 self-evaluations?

Immigration regulations require students on STEM OPT Extension to submit Pages 1-5 of their Form I-983, with the appropriate self-evaluation completed on Page 5, to their school at the following points in time:

- 12 months after STEM OPT EAD start date
- 24 months after STEM OPT EAD start date (i.e., by STEM OPT EAD end date)
- On the final day of employment when changing employers, visa status, or transferring to another school

Refer to DHS's [Study in the States](#) website for additional information



When are Form I-983 self-evaluations due?

Students must submit self-evaluations 12 and 24 months after their STEM OPT start date, ***and***, if applicable, on their last date of employment when changing employers, visa status ([e.g., to H1B](#)), or transferring to another school

Students can determine their exact 12- and 24-month due dates by logging in to their SEVP Portal account and reviewing their reporting due dates in the “STEM Student Due Date Announcement” notice

How do students complete and submit their Form I-983 self-evaluations?

See [Slide 17](#)



How do students complete and submit their Form I-983 self-evaluations?

CONTINUED

Follow the [STEM OPT Extension Employment Reporting Requirements instructions](#) and upload the required documents in [MyOIS](#).

Form I-983, Page 5

The image shows Form I-983, Page 5, which contains two evaluation sections. The top section is titled 'EVALUATION ON STUDENT PROGRESS' and the bottom section is titled 'FINAL EVALUATION ON STUDENT PROGRESS'. Both sections include instructions for providing a self-evaluation of performance, listing accomplishments, and discussing areas for improvement. Each section has a 'Range of Evaluation Dates' field and a 'Signature of Student' field. A yellow box is placed over the 'Range of Evaluation Dates' field in the top section, and another yellow box is placed over the 'Range of Evaluation Dates' field in the bottom section. Red dashed lines point from the text '12-month self-evaluation' and 'Final (24-month or end of employment) self-evaluation' to these yellow boxes.

12-month self-evaluation

- Complete top section (only) of Page 5
- Due 12 months after STEM OPT EAD start date, regardless of start date with employer
- Range of Evaluation dates should cover first 12 months of STEM OPT Extension following STEM OPT EAD start date

Final (24-month or end of employment) self-evaluation

- Complete bottom section (only) of Page 5
- Due on STEM OPT employment end date
- Range of Evaluation Dates should cover final 12 months of STEM OPT Extension period, ending on STEM OPT EAD end date, or employment end date due to change of employer, SEVIS transfer, or change in visa status



What types of changes to their STEM OPT Extension employment do students need to report?

Students must report all changes to employment to OIS within 10 days of the change



Change to employment situation due to starting a new job, quitting a job, being laid off, etc.

If ending employment, or changing or adding employers, students **must** submit required documentation to OIS to request a new I-20.

Students can change employers while:

- [STEM OPT Extension application is pending with USCIS](#)
- [On approved STEM OPT Extension](#)



Any material changes (as defined by DHS) to their Form I-983 Training Plan

Student must submit a revised [Form I-983](#) to OPTSTEM@usc.edu – in email subject line write *I-983 Material Change: Last Name, First Name – SEVIS ID #*; a new I-20 may not be required*

**If there are any changes to the employer's name or EIN, student is required to report this to OIS as a “change of employer”*





How do students change employers while their STEM OPT Extension application is pending with USCIS?

OIS **strongly advises against** changing employers while STEM OPT is pending to avoid any complications, delays, or potential denials with USCIS.

In the event a student needs to change employers while their STEM OPT Extension application is pending, they must:

- 1) Have a receipt number from USCIS for their pending STEM OPT Extension application
- 2) Request an updated I-20 from OIS
- 3) Submit updated I-20 and supporting documents via their [myUSCIS](#) account for USCIS for review

STEP 1: Within 10 days of changing employers, student must request an updated STEM I-20 from OIS by completing and following the instructions on the [STEM OPT Extension Change of Employer I-20 Request Form](#)

STEP 2: Upon receipt of the new STEM I-20, student must immediately submit the following documents online to USCIS in their [myUSCIS](#) account by uploading their documents under “Your Cases” > “Documents” > “Unsolicited Evidence”:

- 1) Copy of signed I-20 with new employer information
- 2) Letter of explanation – be sure to include I-797 receipt number, I-94 admission number, full name, and new employer’s name and E-Verify number



How do students change employers while on approved STEM OPT Extension?

Students may change employers while on STEM OPT Extension, so long as their new employment opportunity [meets all eligibility requirements](#), and the student continues to comply with all [reporting requirements](#).

Students are required to request a new STEM OPT Extension I-20 from OIS within 10 days of the change.

To report their change of employer to OIS and obtain a new I-20, students must complete and follow the instructions on the [STEM OPT Extension Change of Employer I-20 Request Form](#).





What is the 150-day unemployment rule on STEM OPT Extension?

● Students on STEM OPT Extension may accrue up to 60 additional days of unemployment from the 90 days allowed on OPT, for an aggregate **total of 150 days**

● Accrual of more than 150 days of unemployment is considered a violation of the F-1 status and the ***student's SEVIS record will be automatically terminated***

What happens if a student accrues more than 150 days of unemployment?

SEVP and/or USCIS will **terminate** SEVIS records of students who accrue more than 150 days of unemployment, which would end the student's F-1 status and may negatively affect future U.S. immigration benefits

If a student is unemployed, they must forfeit their STEM OPT Extension *prior to* accruing more than 60 days of unemployment on STEM OPT, or an overall total of 150 days of unemployment, by selecting one of the following options:

- Begin a new degree program at USC
- Transfer SEVIS record to another school
- Change visa status
- Depart the United States



STEM OPT Rejection, Request for Evidence (RFE), or Denial

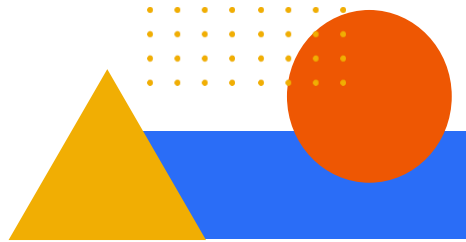


Students that receive a returned or rejected STEM OPT application, RFE, or denial notice from USCIS must contact OIS for guidance *before* responding or resubmitting their application to USCIS

Returned or Rejected: If a student's application returned or rejected, the student may need to request a new STEM OPT I-20 from OIS. USCIS will deny the OPT application if the student re-applies with an expired STEM OPT Extension I-20. USCIS must receive the new application prior to the OPT EAD end date.

RFE: If USCIS needs more information to process a student's application, they may issue an RFE. The RFE will explain which additional documents are required to process the STEM OPT Extension application and a specific deadline to respond by.

Denial: If a student's STEM OPT is denied, USCIS will indicate the reason for the denial on the denial notice. Due to the long STEM OPT application processing time with USCIS, students whose applications are denied will likely not be eligible to re-apply for STEM OPT.



Frequently Asked Questions about STEM OPT Extension (FAQs)

Topics

Click topic to navigate to slide

- [OIS administrative processing fee](#)
- [STEM OPT based on previously obtained degree](#)
- [Tips to avoid STEM OPT rejection and denials](#)
- [U.S. mailing address & change of address](#)
- [Form I-765 application fee](#)
- [Applying for STEM OPT from outside the U.S.](#)
- [Student signatures on I-20s](#)
- [Options while STEM OPT application is pending with USCIS](#)
- [Travel while STEM OPT is pending or approved](#)
- [Cancelling STEM OPT](#)
- [Enrolling in classes while on STEM OPT](#)
- [Working remotely on STEM OPT](#)
- [Working for multiple employers](#)
- [Change of status to H1B](#)
- [Options after STEM OPT ends](#)



► What is the \$200 OIS STEM OPT Extension Administration Fee?

- Students requesting a STEM OPT Extension I-20 from OIS will be required to pay a **non-refundable** \$200 fee. This fee supports OIS services related to [DHS reporting requirements](#) and maintenance of status throughout the period of request and STEM OPT Extension employment. Extended services provided to STEM OPT Extension students include I-20 travel endorsements, review and processing of mandated reports, and continued access to advisors for questions pertaining to their F-1 status and STEM OPT Extension employment matters.

► What are the requirements for STEM OPT Extension eligibility based on a previously obtained degree?

- **Most** USC students apply based on their current (i.e., most recently obtained) USC degree. However, students who are currently on OPT for a non-STEM OPT Extension eligible degree ***may*** be eligible to apply for the STEM OPT Extension if they have earned a prior bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree from USC or another school that matches a CIP on the [DHS STEM Designated Degree Programs List](#). For further instructions, refer to [Applying for STEM OPT Extension Based on a Prior Degree](#).
- Students may [contact OIS](#) with questions regarding their eligibility for STEM OPT Extension based on a prior degree.



► What are common, avoidable reasons for STEM OPT Extension rejections or denials?

- **REASON 1:** USCIS received Form I-765 STEM OPT Extension application after OPT EAD end date
 - If USCIS receives the student's STEM OPT Extension application after their OPT EAD end, their STEM OPT Extension application *will be denied*
 - **Note:** USCIS will also deny any application received more than 60 days after the ***Issued Date*** on Page 1 of the STEM OPT Extension I-20, even if an application is submitted before the OPT EAD end date
 - **REASON 2:** Missing or invalid student signatures on I-20s
 - Students must sign I-20s by hand in black ink; USCIS does *not* accept typed or electronic student signatures on I-20s
- If a student's application is returned or rejected for any reason, or if they receive a Request for Evidence (RFE) or denial notice, the student **must contact OIS immediately** before responding to USCIS. Refer to instructions provided on [Slide 22](#).



► What U.S. mailing address should student use on the Form I-765?

- OIS recommends students use a mailing address they can reliably retrieve mail from for up to 6 months after graduation – this may require using a friend or relative's address.
 - Students are strongly advised not to change their mailing address while their OPT application is pending with USCIS, since this can cause delays with processing and receiving the EAD in a timely manner.
- Refer to the [Guide to Filing Form I-765 for STEM OPT Extension](#), noting:
 - USPS *does not* forward mail from USCIS, even if a student has signed up for mail forwarding.
 - If the EAD is undeliverable due to a change in address, the EAD will be returned to USCIS – the student will not be notified if this happens.

► How do students report a change of address to USCIS and OIS if they move while their STEM OPT Extension application is pending?

- Students must notify USCIS by completing the online [USCIS Change of Address](#) form **AND** OIS by updating their address in the [SEVP Portal](#).



► What is the I-765 application filing fee and how can students pay?

- After completing the online Form I-765, uploading the required documents, and providing the necessary electronic signatures, students will be prompted to complete the **non-refundable \$410** filing fee online through a secure Pay.gov portal.
 - The filing fee amount is subject to change without advanced notice. Students should confirm the current filing fee on the [USCIS I-765 webpage](#).
- Students can complete payment by electronic bank transfer or with an approved credit or debit card. The payment page will indicate which brand of credit or debit cards are accepted.
- STEM OPT Extension applications will not be submitted to USCIS until payment is successfully completed.

► Can students apply for STEM OPT Extension while they are outside the U.S.?

- No. Students must be physically in the U.S. in order to apply for the STEM OPT Extension. If a student is outside the U.S. during OPT, they *must* re-enter the U.S. before their OPT EAD end date. Furthermore, USCIS must receive the student's STEM OPT Extension application prior to their OPT EAD end date.



▶ **Does USCIS accept students' electronic signatures on I-20s?**

- No. Students must provide a wet signature (i.e., in ink) on their I-20s. A student's typed or electronic signature on an I-20 will not be accepted.

▶ **Can a student remain in the U.S. if their application is pending?**

- Yes. Students that have filed a timely STEM OPT application can remain in the U.S. while their OPT application is pending with USCIS.

▶ **Can students with a pending STEM OPT Extension application continue working?**

- Yes. Refer to [Slide 6](#).

▶ **Can students travel while their STEM OPT Extension is pending and after it is approved? If so, what documents do the students need?**

- Travel document requirements while STEM OPT Extension is pending and/or approved are on the travel section of the [OIS website](#).



▶ Can students cancel their STEM OPT Extension after it has been approved?

- STEM OPT Extension cannot be cancelled after it is approved, but students may choose to forfeit their STEM OPT Extension.
- Students who wish to forfeit their STEM OPT Extension and return to their home country must notify OIS and submit a Form I-983 final self-evaluation via MyOIS so that their SEVIS record can be completed. Refer to the [STEM OPT Extension Reporting Requirements](#) for further guidance.
 - Failure to report departure information to OIS can result in the automatic termination of their SEVIS record as a result of accruing more than 90 days of unemployment, which could negatively impact future U.S. visa applications.

▶ Can students enroll in classes while on STEM OPT Extension?

- Per USCIS regulations, students **cannot** be enrolled in a certificate or degree-seeking (in-person or online) program while on STEM OPT Extension.
- Students may take classes that are avocational or recreational in nature and are *incidental* to their employment.



► Can students work remotely on STEM OPT Extension?

- Remote work is authorized, but student must obtain written confirmation from their employer indicating they have permission to work remotely.
 - This document is for personal records only and does not need to be submitted to OIS or USCIS .
 - Student must continue to comply with all [STEM OPT Reporting Requirements](#).

► Can students work for more than one employer while on STEM OPT Extension?

- Yes, however, the student must file a Form I-983 for each employer. In addition, each employer must meet **all** eligibility requirements, including working at least 20 hours per week.



► What do students who change to from STEM OPT Extension to H1B need to report to OIS?

- Students must submit their Form I-983 with a completed final self-evaluation via [MyOIS](#). Refer to the [STEM OPT Extension Reporting Requirements](#) for further guidance.

► What are students' options after STEM OPT Extension ends?

- Students are allowed to remain in the U.S. for up to 60 days after the approved STEM OPT Extension end date printed on their EAD. This period of time is called a “grace period”. During this time, students may not work and cannot leave and re-enter the U.S. as F-1 students. During their 60-day grace period, students can:
 - **Begin a new degree program at USC** - Students must apply to the new program, be admitted, and be issued a new I-20 from [USC Graduate Admissions](#)
 - **Transfer SEVIS record to another school** – Student must submit a [SEVIS Transfer Out Request Form](#) to OIS
 - **Change visa status** - USCIS must receive and approve the application to change the immigration status before the end of the grace period
 - **Depart the United States**



Questions?

OIS International Student Advisors are available to answer questions via email, one-on-one advising, or through group advising sessions.

Email

Email OPTSTEM@usc.edu with a brief description of issue or question. Be sure to include student name, SEVIS ID, and if applicable, photocopies of any documents received from USCIS.

OIS Live – Virtual Front Desk and Advising

OIS Advisors are available for one-on-one consultation Mondays through Fridays via Zoom. No appointment is necessary. Advising hours and Zoom meeting link are posted on the [OIS website](#).

OIS Zoom Group Advising and Webinars

OIS offers group advising sessions covering topics such as STEM OPT Extension via Zoom. Refer to the [OIS eCalendar](#) for upcoming dates and times.