



F-1 OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (OPT) 17-Month STEM Extensions

F-1 students who are currently using their initial 12-month Optional Practical Training period may be eligible to apply for 17 months of additional OPT work authorization under a qualified STEM Extension. These extensions are available only in specific fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and only with eligible employers. While an additional 12-month regular OPT may be granted at each higher degree level, the STEM Extension may only be authorized once per student.

Eligibility Requirements

Students must meet the following criteria in order to be eligible for a STEM Extension:

1. Maintaining valid F-1 status and pursuing authorized OPT employment in their field of study
2. Completed a Bachelor, Master, or Doctorate degree in a USCIS-designated STEM field
3. Employed by an eligible employer which is enrolled in the DHS E-Verify database
4. Not previously authorized for a 17-month STEM Extension, at any degree level

Detailed list of federally approved STEM fields: <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/stemlist.htm>.

E-Verify: The E-Verify database is an internet-based system operated by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in partnership with the Social Security Administration. Enrolling in E-Verify requires participating employers to verify the employment eligibility of all newly hired employees, regardless of citizenship. For more information: http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/programs/gc_1185221678150.shtm.

Types of Employment: Once authorized for STEM Extension OPT, students are allowed to pursue the following additional types of employment, as long as the employer is registered with E-Verify:

- Self-employment (must set up a business and register with E-Verify)
- Employment as an independent contractor (1099 employment)
- Employment through an agency or consulting firm *

* For employment through an agency or consulting firm, the employing agency or consulting firm would need to be registered with E-Verify, but not the company for whom the student is providing services.

Application Guidelines for STEM Extension OPT

Optional Practical Training requires a two-step application process:

- 1) Request and receive an updated I-20 from the ISO using the Request for STEM Extension OPT I-20
- 2) Submit the appropriate application materials to USCIS for final authorization

The process to request a new I-20 from the University of Rochester may take place remotely. Interested students should contact the ISO to speak with an advisor about their plans and make arrangements to have documents mailed. The new I-20 is usually available within 1 week of submitting the request.

STEM applicants may file for this extension **up to 90 days** prior to the end date of the initial 12-month OPT authorization. As long as the application is received by USCIS *before* your OPT expires, you will still be considered eligible for the additional 17 months of OPT. Applications should be mailed to the USCIS Service Center that has jurisdiction over your current residence (see attached list). While the application is pending, you may continue working until a decision is made, up to 180 days after the expiration of your current OPT authorization. The start date of the STEM Extension OPT will be directly after that end date. The application requires documentation of eligibility of both the individual and the employer.

Please also review the OPT Travel Advisory section of this handout for important travel considerations.

Additional Reporting Requirements during STEM Extension OPT

During the STEM Extension OPT, your valid F-1 status will remain dependent on pursuing authorized employment and reporting all required information through the ISO at the University of Rochester. Please use our online reporting tool for OPT students at: www.iso.rochester.edu/optreporting.htm.

Required Information: All details must be reported within **10 days** of any change.

- Change in name or personal address
- Name and address of employer(s)
- Type of Employment (see table online)
- Change in employer information
- Any interruption of employment
- Notification of any changes in your immigration status or departure from the U.S.
- **Verification, every 6 months**, of all employer & personal contact information

Employer Reporting Requirements

- Employers must agree to notify the ISO **within 48 hours** of any termination of employment or departure of the F-1 worker previously authorized for STEM Extension OPT through the University of Rochester. Please use our online form at: www.iso.rochester.edu/optstem.htm

120-Day Unemployment Limit

The cumulative Unemployment Limit is extended to 120 days once the STEM Extension is approved. However, this does not replenish any days reported as unemployed during the regular 12-month OPT authorization. Whatever remains of the initial 90-day allotment is increased only by an additional 30 days throughout the 17 months of STEM Extension OPT. Therefore, if you are unemployed for an aggregate of more than 120 days during your complete 29 months of authorized OPT, your work permission will be terminated and your F-1 status is ended. No grace period currently exists for students who exceed this limit. Periods of unemployment are monitored through the required OPT reporting, so it is important to provide the ISO with timely and accurate information. Volunteer, unpaid, and part-time activities (20 hours per week, or more) may be used to satisfy the employment qualification for OPT reporting purposes. Please contact the ISO to speak with an advisor about any specific concerns.

Travel Outside the U.S.

Authorization for the STEM Extension OPT extends your eligibility for valid F-1 status and ability to travel. However, in order to document your status, you must prove that work authorization is granted by showing an unexpired EAD card when traveling. While the STEM Extension application is pending, you may continue to travel using the current EAD card authorizing your regular 12-month OPT. Once that card expires, **do not travel until the new STEM Extension EAD card is received**. Travel at any time during F-1 OPT requires the following documents: 1) valid passport, 2) current I-20, with a recent travel signature, 3) valid F-1 stamp, and 4) unexpired EAD card. You may also be asked to demonstrate that you are using your OPT appropriately, by showing proof of current employment. Throughout your OPT authorization, you must obtain a valid **travel endorsement every 6 months** from the ISO.

Additional Considerations

- **Selecting OPT dates:** The STEM Extension OPT will begin immediately after the expiration of your 12-month OPT authorization. There is no option to delay the start date of the extension.
- **OPT Cap Gap Extensions:** F-1 students with a pending or approved H-1B petition are eligible for an automatic extension of their F-1 status and valid OPT work permission. The purpose of this extension is to cover any lapse in status and expiring employment authorization before the H-1B Temporary Worker status can begin (usually limited to Oct 1st). H-1B petitions filed by cap-exempt employers are not intended for this benefit. You are still eligible for the Cap Gap Extension after being approved for the STEM Extension OPT, provided you maintain F-1 status throughout that time and your employer files the H-1B petition on your behalf. Please notify the ISO and find more information on our website: www.iso.rochester.edu/optcapgap.



Application Procedures for the 17-Month STEM Extension OPT

Please plan on 7-10 days for the new I-20 to be issued by ISO, followed by 2-3 months processing at USCIS. **You may apply 90 days before your current OPT expires**, by completing the following steps:

Step 1: Obtain new recommendation from University of Rochester

1. **Discuss your plans and timing** with an advisor in the ISO, either by phone or in person.
2. **Submit the necessary documents to ISO for processing:**
 - Completed form: Request for 17-Month STEM Extension for F-1 OPT
 - Photocopy of your current EAD card authorizing OPT
 - As needed, a prepaid self-addressed envelope for new I-20 (*Express or US Registered mail*)
3. **The ISO Advisor will issue a new SEVIS I-20** (approx. 1 week) to recommend that your OPT be extended by 17 months from the current OPT expiration date.

Step 2: Submit application to USCIS for employment authorization

1. **Include the following documents in your application:**
 - a. Check or money order for \$340.00 (payable to Department of Homeland Security)
 - b. Two passport size photos (lightly print your name and I-94# on the back)
 - c. Completed and signed Form I-765 (attached or at <http://www.uscis.gov>)
 - i. Question 3: Use your current U.S. residential address for the delivery of your new EAD card. This address determines which USCIS Service Center should process your application and is not necessarily where you applied for your 12-month OPT.
 - ii. Question 16: Use code **(c)(3)(C)** to apply for STEM Extension OPT.
 - iii. Question 17: List your major as it appears on your I-20 and obtain your employer's name and E-Verify Identification Number, as it listed in the E-Verify program. This information is usually available from your employer's Human Resources Office.
 - d. Photocopy of new I-20, with endorsement by an ISO Advisor no more than 30 days old
 - e. Photocopies of all previous I-20s (first & last pages) related to current degree program
 - f. Photocopies from passport: ID page, proof of validity, & F-1 visa stamp (if available)
 - g. Photocopy of current I-94 (front and back) or Approval Notice for Change of Status to F-1
 - h. Photocopy of your current EAD card and any previously issued EAD cards
 - i. Photocopy of your most recent degree from the University of Rochester. (Document should show your name, degree earned, date awarded and field of study. This can be a copy of your diploma, official transcript, or other academic summary.)
 - j. Brief statement from your employer describing how the employment is directly related to the STEM field of study.
2. **Copy** your entire application for your records, especially Form I-765.
3. **Mail your OPT application by express or certified mail** (with a return receipt) to the USCIS Service Center with jurisdiction over your current residence. The "USCIS Service Center Filing Chart" is attached or available online (p. 11): <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/I-765instr.pdf>.
4. **Track** the status of your application and current processing times through USCIS, using the Receipt Notice mailed within 2-3 weeks: <https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp>
5. **Authorization is granted by the EAD card (Employment Authorization Document):**
 - a. The EAD will be mailed only to the address listed on Form I-765. Government mail cannot be forwarded, so you must notify USCIS immediately if your residential address changes.
 - b. **You may continue working up to 180 days after your 12-month OPT expires**, while the STEM Extension is pending. Provide a copy of your Receipt Notice to your employer.
 - c. You may switch employers at any time during your STEM Extension OPT, as long as the new employer is also enrolled with E-Verify. Notify the ISO within 10 days.