Optional Practical Training (OPT)

24-Month STEM OPT Extension

Definition of Optional Practical Training (OPT)

An F-1 student may apply to USCIS for authorization for a 24-month STEM Extension on their current OPT approval. STEM is Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics. The U.S. government has distinguished students graduating in these specific majors the ability to apply for a 24-month extension to their current 12-month OPT to total 3 years of OPT approval. [8 CFR 214.16]

Eligibility requirements for a 24-month STEM Extension for F-1 students:

- Students who have been approved for 12 months of post-completion OPT;
- Students who have earned a Bachelor’s, Master’s or Doctorate degree in a field included in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. In order to verify that your degree is included, look at the six-digit code listed next to “Major 1” on Page 1 of your I-20 form, then look for that code in the CIP code column of USCIS’s STEM Designated Degree Programs list;
- Students who are employed in a job directly related to his/her field of study;
- Students who are working for an employer who is enrolled in the E-Verify program. E-Verify is a database system operated by the Department of Homeland Security in partnership with the Social Security Administration. It allows participating employers to electronically verify the employment eligibility of newly-hired employees. E-Verify is currently voluntary in most states. For more information visit www.dhs.gov/e-verify.
- Students can qualify for the STEM Extension of OPT only twice during their academic careers in the U.S.

*Please Note: All of the above criteria must be met in order for a student to be eligible for the 24-month OPT extension.*

Deadlines for Submitting 24-Month OPT Extension Application to USCIS:

Students must apply for the 24-month OPT extension prior to the expiration of the first 12 months of “regular” OPT. The application must be received by USCIS prior to the expiration date of the first OPT period in order to be properly (timely) filed. USCIS will not accept I-765 applications for STEM extensions any earlier than 90 days before the current EAD expiration date. Please allow 5 business days after your assigned International Services Specialist has received all documentation for processing of the I-20 for STEM extension.
Types of Employment Allowed During a STEM OPT extension

A student authorized for a 24-month extension must work at least 20 hours per week for an E-Verify employer in a position directly related to his or her DHS-approved STEM CIP.

For students who are on a STEM extension, this employment may include:

- **Work for one or more employer.** Students may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to each individual student’s degree program and all employers must be enrolled in E-Verify. Each employer must also complete the form I-983.

- **Work for hire.** This is also commonly referred to as 1099 employment where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than an employment relationship. The company for whom the student is providing services must be registered with E-Verify. If requested by DHS, students must be prepared to provide evidence showing the duration of the contract periods and the name and address of the contracting company.

- **Self-employed business owner.** Not allowed on 24-month STEM OPT extension.

Restrictions on Unemployment:

For students on 12-Month OPT, F-1 status is now dependent upon employment. Students cannot be unemployed for more than an aggregate of 90 days while on the initial 12-month OPT period. While on the STEM Extension of OPT, students are granted an additional 60 days of unemployment equaling no more than 150 days in total.

Prepare and email the following items to your International Services Specialist:

- Completed I-983 form by both employer and student
- Completed and signed Form I-765 (with copies of all past EAD cards, if applicable) with correct address
- Copy of Offer Letter from Current E-Verify Employer

Once these items are received, ISSS will create a new I-20 endorsed for OPT. The student is then responsible for making sure that the final OPT packet that is sent to USCIS includes the following:
USCIS OPT Application Checklist:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Check for $410.00 made out to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two passport photos (write full name and I-94 number in pencil on the back for identification purposes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed and signed Form I-765 (with copies of all past EAD cards, if applicable) with current address</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copy of endorsed I-20 with OPT recommendation, DSO’s signature and student’s signature.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copy of valid passport, visa and I-94 card</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copy of transcript showing STEM degree completion</td>
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Students should file the OPT application within 60 days of the date ISSS enters the recommendation for OPT on the I-20. Failure to send the application in a timely manner will result in a denial of the STEM OPT extension. * Student should make copies of the entire application for their records and only send a copy of the signed I-20. ** If the U.S. Mailing Address included in Part 2 of the I-765 is located in Colorado, send the petition to the address below. If the U.S. Mailing Address is outside of Colorado, contact your International Services Specialist to find out where to send your petition.

**Courier completed petition to:**

USCIS
Attn: NFB AOS
1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S
Suite 100
Phoenix, AZ 85034

**Please Note:** Students should courier the application by Express Mail so that they can track it in case they don’t get a Notice of Action (I-797) within 45 days of posting it.
NEW SEVP POLICY GUIDANCE

Practical Training – Determining a Direct Relationship Between Employment and a Student’s Major Area of Study

On September 27, 2019, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued new policy guidance regarding Optional Practical Training (OPT). The guidance impacts both F-1 students who apply for and utilize OPT as well as Designated School Officials (DSOs) who authorize OPT and manage their institution’s F program.

- F-1 students applying for both 12-month OPT and a 24-month STEM OPT extension will need to provide a detailed explanation of how their OPT employment is directly related to their major area of study.
- DSOs are required to 1) review the explanation provided by students to ensure that there is a direct relationship between the OPT participant’s job and major area of study; 2) obtain additional documentation from the OPT participant if necessary to determine a direct relationship, and 3) retain both the explanation and any additional documentation.

ICE recognizes that you may not yet have a job offer at the time you apply for OPT. You have two options to report your employment information to the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) once you do find a job.

SEVP PORTAL

You may use the SEVP Portal to report details about your employment after OPT is granted by USCIS. For information about how to create your SEVP Portal account, please visit the following Study in the States website: https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/create-an-sevp-portal-account.

The SEVP Portal includes fields where you can enter the employer name, start date, whether the position is full-time or part-time, and the employer address. All OPT participants must also provide a description of how their practical training opportunity related to their major area of study using the field entitled, “Relation to Field of Study: Explain how this job relates to the degree that qualified you for this OPT.”

ISSS FORM

OPT participants may also report details about their employment directly to ISSS. Once USCIS grants your OPT, ISSS will send you a message instructing you to complete a form that includes fields to enter the employer name, start date, whether the position is full-time or part-time, the employer address, and a description of how your practical training opportunity relates to your major area of study.

EXPLAINING AND DOCUMENTING HOW YOUR JOB RELATES TO YOUR FIELD OF STUDY

Your goal is to show a logical explanation between the duties involved in the practical training opportunity and your major area of study.

Here are some sample explanations:

**Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering:** I work full-time as an Electrical Engineer at ABC Corp., a government’s contractor. In my job, I analyze client requirements for electrical systems and provide them with cost estimates of such systems. My work requires understanding of electrical circuit theory, which I studied in-depth at the University of XYZ.

**Bachelor’s degree in Business:** I work full-time as a Loan Officer at a mortgage company, Happy Homes, where I meet with clients and evaluate, authorize, and recommend approval of loan applications. I use the knowledge that I gained in my credit analysis, sales and marketing classes, which were part of my degree program, on a daily basis.

**Master’s degree in Kinesiology:** I work 25 hours per week in a health food store as a consultant for Self-Made, Inc., designing and teaching exercise classes that are incorporated into a customer’s overall nutrition and exercise plan. My designs and customer instruction draw upon my studies and classwork in exercise therapy and physical reconditioning.
NEW SEVP POLICY GUIDANCE continued

Below are examples of additional documentation that ISSS may request and that you should consider keeping in your personal records. You may be asked to provide evidence of the direct relationship between your studies and your OPT employment several years from now.

1) Detailed Job Description;
2) Degree Plan showing the required coursework to complete your degree;
3) Transcripts showing the courses you completed and the grades you received;
4) Course descriptions, and syllabi from your classes that provide details regarding learning objectives; and
5) Research papers, portfolios of work, or other evidence of projects completed.

WHAT IF I DON’T PROVIDE AN ADEQUATE EXPLANATION OR DOCUMENTATION?

- ISSS may not be able to issue you an I-20 authorizing OPT. Without this authorization, you won’t be able to submit an application for OPT.
- The Student and Exchange Visitor Program may terminate your OPT and your F-1 status. Currently, SEVP is relying on Designated School Officials (DSOs) to determine if the explanation and documentation provided by students is adequate, but they can review this information at any time.
- You may be denied future immigration benefits, such as H1B or employment-based permanent residency, if it is later determined that your OPT should not have been authorized.

You should also be aware that the government may utilize a “crosswalk” website such as those maintained by the College Board, the Department of Labor, and the National Center for Education Statistics to confirm that your degree is a match for the job you are in. You’ll find the College Board crosswalk website here - https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/majors-careers.

The potential issue with this is if the position that your major links to isn’t a “specialty occupation” under the H1B regulations, your employer’s request for H-1B status for you could be denied in the future. So, both you and your employer want to be aware of this potential issue and take some care with both the job title and the job description of your OPT position.