24-month Optional Practical Training (OPT) STEM Extension Application Guide & Tutorial for F-1 International Students

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Who is Eligible to Apply for the 24-month OPT STEM Extension?

• F-1 student with a **STEM-qualifying bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree** from an accredited, SEVIS-certified U.S. educational institution, who is in a valid period of standard post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT), and has an offer of paid employment for at least 20 hours per week from an employer that is enrolled in the E-Verify program and has an IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN). Note, if you change/add employers during the 24-month OPT STEM period, your new employer(s) must be enrolled in the E-Verify program and you must work at least 20 hours per week for each employer.

• F-1 student may not be self-employed (there must be a bona-fide employer-employee relationship – see next page for details). The student and the employer must also agree to comply with all reporting, training, supervision, evaluation, wage, documentation, and other obligations specified in the regulations and on Form I-983 during the OPT STEM extension period. Note, these employment/reporting conditions must remain true if you change employers during the 24-month OPT STEM period.

• To determine if you qualify for the 24-month OPT STEM extension, please do the following:
  o Check if your **CIP code** showing on your I-20 form is on the DHS STEM-designated degree program list: https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/stem-list.pdf.
  o Check with your supervisor or HR representative if your employer is enrolled in the E-verify program: https://www.uscis.gov/e-verify and is in good standing. You will need the **E-verify number** (typically 5 or 6 digits long, showing at the top of the employer’s E-Verify Memorandum of Understanding) and the IRS **Employer Identification Number (EIN)** for your OPT STEM application. Note, the E-verify number and the EIN number are not the same.
  o Review your employment records to verify that you have not exceeded **90 days of unemployment** during your current period of post-completion OPT, and check if your job (offer) directly relates to the level and (STEM) field of study showing on your I-20 form. Check if your job offer/employment meets the above mentioned criteria, including a **bona-fide employer-employee relationship** (see next page for additional information).
To qualify for OPT STEM extension, an F-1 student **may not be self-employed** (there must be a bona-fide employer-employee relationship). The employer must attest to this fact by signing the Form I-983, Training Plan for STEM OPT Students.

The employer may not be the student’s "employer" in name only, nor may the student work for the employer on a "volunteer" basis. Moreover, **the employer that signs the Form I-983 must be the same entity that provides the practical training experience to the student.** The "personnel" who may provide and supervise the training experience may be either employees of the employer, or contractors who the employer has retained to provide services to the employer; **they may not, however, be employees or contractors of the employer’s clients or customers.** Additionally, under no circumstances would another F-1 student on OPT or a STEM OPT extension (who is undergoing training in their own right) be qualified to train another F-1 student on a STEM OPT extension.

The student’s Training Plan must be customized for the individual student. The Training Plan must describe the direct relationship between the OPT STEM opportunity and the student’s qualifying STEM degree, as well as the relationship between OPT STEM opportunity and the student’s goals and objectives for work-based learning. Moreover, a **STEM OPT employer may not assign, or otherwise delegate, its training responsibilities to a non-employer third party** (e.g., a client/customer of the employer, employees of the client/customer, or contractors of the client/customer).

The training experience must take place **on-site at the employer’s place of business or worksite(s)** to which U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has authority to conduct employer site visits to ensure that the employer is meeting program requirements. This means that ICE must always have access to a student’s worksite; if the student is sent to different worksite locations as part of the training opportunity, ICE must be able to access such worksite locations. For instance, **the training experience may not take place at the place of business or worksite of the employer’s clients or customers** because ICE would lack authority to visit such sites. For the same reason, online or distance learning arrangements may not be used to fulfill the employer’s training obligation to the student.

Multiple employer arrangements; sole proprietorships; employment through “temp” agencies; employment through consulting firm arrangements that provide labor for hire **do not constitute a bona fide employer-employee relationship** due to the difficulty individuals employed through such arrangements would face in complying with, among other things, the training plan requirements of this rule. Another concern is the potential for visa fraud arising from such arrangements.

Staffing and temporary agencies may seek to employ students under the STEM OPT program, but **only if** they will be the entity that provides the practical training experience to the student at its own place of business and they have a bona fide employer-employee relationship with the student. For instance, a student might possibly receive STEM-related training while working in such an entity's information technology (IT) department. Such entities **may not, however, assign or contract out students to work for one of their customers or clients, and assign, or otherwise delegate, their training responsibilities to the customer or client.**

For more information on this subject, including employer responsibilities, please visit this USCIS link: [https://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment/stem-opt](https://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment/stem-opt) as well as the STEM OPT Hub: [https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opt](https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opt).
Who Qualifies for a **Second** Period of the 24-month OPT STEM Extension?

The government allows qualified F-1 students a maximum of two 24-month OPT STEM extensions in their lifetime based on two separate STEM eligible degrees. For example, if you receive an OPT STEM extension for a bachelor’s degree, and then complete a higher degree in a STEM field, you will qualify for a new STEM extension.

If you never applied for the STEM extension based on the lower STEM degree, you can still qualify for a STEM extension as long as you are eligible for post-completion OPT based on the new non-STEM degree. For example, if you are **currently participating in post-completion OPT** based on a master’s degree in Business and Management, but you previously received a bachelor’s degree in Mathematics, you may be able to apply for a STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor’s degree in Mathematics as long as you meet the following criteria:

- You have received both degrees from **currently** accredited and SEVP-certified institutions.
- Your previous degree **cannot** have been conferred **more than 10 years ago** at the time of application.
- You have **not** already received an OPT STEM extension from the USICS based on this previous degree.
- Your practical training opportunity (job offer) is **directly related** to the previously obtained STEM degree.
- Your employer is registered in the E-verify program, has an IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN), and agrees to comply with all reporting, training, supervision, evaluation, wage, documentation, and other obligations specified in the regulations and on Form I-983 during the STEM OPT extension period.
When Can I Apply for the 24-month OPT STEM Extension?

- You can apply for a 24-month OPT STEM extension as early as **90 days before** your current post-completion OPT Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card expires.

- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must receive your 24-month OPT STEM extension application **before** your current post-completion OPT EAD card expires.

- USCIS must also receive your 24-month OPT STEM extension application **within 60 days** of when the ISS advisor makes the (electronic) OPT STEM recommendation in SEVIS (the government database).

*If you miss the above-mentioned timeline/deadline, USCIS will reject/deny your OPT STEM application!*
How do I apply?

1. Request OPT STEM I-20 form by sending an email to your ISS advisor with the following information/documentation:
   - Your full legal name and student ID number in the subject heading of your email;
   - Copy of Form I-983 Mentoring and Training Plan: https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/I-983.pdf completed/signed by you and your employer (you and your employer should keep the original);
   - Your employer’s E-verify number (showing at the top of the employer’s E-Verify Memorandum of Understanding);
   - Confirmation if you previously obtained OPT STEM authorization from USCIS (the government allows a maximum of two OPT STEM extensions);
   - Confirmation if you have any international travel plans in the next 3-4 months; and
   - Confirmation if you have any plans to move (change your U.S. residential address) in the next 3-4 months.
   - Please allow 1-2 weeks for review/processing of new OPT and OPT STEM I-20 form(s). If your request is incomplete, it will require more time.

2. Assemble your OPT STEM application materials once you receive the I-20 form showing OPT STEM recommendation from ISS:
   - Original signed Form I-765 (see page 10-13 of this tutorial for details);
   - Form G-1145 (see page 9 of this tutorial for details), which is recommended/optional;
   - Two identical color photographs not older than 30 days (paper-clipped to the top of Form I-765; see page 14 of this tutorial for instructions);
   - Money order for the appropriate USCIS filing fee: https://www.uscis.gov/i-765 made payable to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (paper-clipped or stapled to the bottom of Form I-765, with your name and I-94 card number written in the memo section, if the space allows for it). Note, the biometric fee is not applicable to F-1 students seeking OPT STEM benefit.
   - Copy of your signed I-20 form showing the OPT STEM recommendation;
   - Copy of your signed I-20 form showing your current OPT authorization and employer details;
   - Copy of your current and any previously issued EAD cards (front and back) and corresponding I-20 forms, if applicable;
   - Copy of your biographical passport page(s) showing the validity date;
   - Copy of your current/latest visa page in your passport showing your last entry-date stamp into the U.S.;
   - Copy of your current I-94 record: https://www.cbp.gov/travel/international-visitors/i-94-instructions showing your latest entry;
   - Copy of your I-797 approval notice (and I-94 card), if you did not travel and obtained a “change of status” to F-1 from USCIS;
   - Official paper transcripts showing your STEM degree conferral: https://offices.depaul.edu/depaul-central/records/transcripts/Pages/default.aspx.

3. Retain a copy of the application for your records and mail the OPT STEM application to the appropriate USCIS Service Center before the deadline (see page 4 and page 15 of this tutorial for instructions).
How to Complete Form I-983

This information refers to frequently asked questions on Form I-983 Mentoring and Training Plan. For complete instructions on Form I-983 Mentoring and Training Plan, please visit this link: https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/i983Instructions.pdf

- **What is the SEVIS School Code of School Recommending STEM OPT (including 3-digit suffix)?** This is DePaul University’s SEVIS school code and can be found on page 1 of your current I-20 form under the “School Information” section. It will begin with the letters “CHI”.

- **Who is my Designated School Official (DSO)?** This is your ISS advisor. Enter the full name and contact information, including official address, phone, and email, of the DSO (ISS advisor) who will process your Form I-983 and who is recommending the STEM OPT extension for you.

- **Where can I find my SEVIS ID number?** Your SEVIS ID number can be found in the top left corner on page 1 of your current I-20 form. It will begin with the letter “N”.

- **Where can I find my Qualifying Major and Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code?** Your qualifying major and CIP code are available on page 1 of your current I-20 form under the “Major 1” heading of the “Program of Study” section. Your CIP code will be 6 digits and your qualifying major will be written immediately before your CIP code. Please note that some students’ qualifying majors on their I-20 forms will read differently than what is listed on their diplomas. Be sure to copy the qualifying major and CIP code exactly as they read on your current I-20 form into the correct Form I-983 field. *If you are applying for the 24-month STEM OPT extension based on a prior degree (i.e. not your most recently completed degree), please speak with your ISS advisor to confirm your qualifying major and CIP code.*

- **Should I complete the last page 5 of Form I-983?** The last page of Form I-983 is for you to provide an initial 12-month and final 24-month self-evaluation of your employment performance during your OPT STEM extension. Therefore, please leave this page blank until it’s time for you to submit the self-evaluation to ISS. Note, this evaluation for your OPT STEM work period (not your post-completion OPT period).

Please remember to type or clearly hand-write the content of Form I-983, print the completed form for you and your employer’s **hand-written** signatures, and then scan and email it to your ISS advisor for review. You and your employer should **keep the original** I-983 form.
Important Reminders – Student Responsibilities

OPT STEM Application Filing:

• USCIS must receive my OPT STEM extension application within 60 days of when ISS makes the OPT STEM recommendation in SEVIS and before the post-completion OPT expiration date.

• If USCIS has any questions about your OPT STEM application or requires additional documentation, you will receive a Request for Evidence (RFE) notice from USCIS. If that happens, please contact your ISS advisor immediately for assistance.

OPT STEM Employment:

• If USCIS timely receives your 24-month OPT STEM extension application, you can continue working for up to 180 days beyond the expiration of your original post-completion OPT authorization while your application is pending with USCIS. You must work at least 20 hours per week for an E-verify employer in a paid position that directly relates to the STEM field/degree showing on your I-20 form during the OPT STEM extension period, including the 180-day period referenced above. And if you work for more than one employer (concurrently) during the 24-month OPT STEM period, you must work at least 20 hours per week for each employer.

• If there is a “material” change in your employment, please submit an updated I-983 form to ISS. If you change employers while your 24-month OPT STEM extension application is pending or after it is approved by USCIS, you must notify ISS within 10 days of the change. You will need to submit a self-evaluation (last page of form I-983) for your previous employer and a new I-983 form. Mentoring and Training Plan for your new employer. ISS will need to update your employment information in the SEVIS system, and you will be required to update your application with USCIS, if it is still pending.

• If you change employers during your 24-month OPT STEM extension period, your new employer(s) must be registered in the e-verify program, have an IRS Employer Identification Number (EIN), and agree to comply with all reporting, training, supervision, evaluation, wage, documentation, and other obligations specified in the regulations and on Form I-983. Even one day of employment with a non-E-Verify employer while on OPT STEM, including the 180-day interim period, would be unauthorized and be viewed as a status violation.

• In addition to the 90 days of unemployment that you are eligible for during your initial period of post-completion OPT authorization, if USCIS approves your 24-month OPT STEM extension application, you will be granted 60 more days of unemployment for the duration of your 24-month OPT STEM extension authorization (for a total of 150 days of unemployment over up to 36 months of OPT authorization should you need to use it).

• If you transfer to another school/college or start a new degree program during OPT STEM period, your OPT STEM extension will no longer be valid.

OPT STEM Reporting:

• Student must report to ISS at 6, 12, 18, and 24-month intervals (after the STEM OPT start date) with an update on employment, address, and contact information. Student will also need to submit a self-evaluation (last page of I-983 form) to ISS at the 12-month and 24-month stage or earlier, if student terminates employment. If your address, legal name, or contact information changes, please update your Campus Connection account with this information within 10 days of the change. Failure to report your employment information to ISS or to comply with unemployment restrictions will result in the automatic termination of your SEVIS record and F-1 immigration status by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

• Keep your own complete records of all periods of employment and unemployment during your OPT STEM period, including the original signed and finalized I-983 form for each employer. If USCIS approves your 24-month OPT STEM extension application, you will receive a new EAD card from USCIS. Please send a copy of your new EAD card (front and back) to your ISS advisor.
What do I need to report/submit to ISS during OPT STEM period? And how often do I need to report to ISS during OPT STEM period?

- If you there is a “material” change in your employment, please submit an updated I-983 form to ISS.
- If you change employers while your 24-month OPT STEM extension application is pending or after it is approved by USCIS, you must notify ISS within 10 days of the change and submit a self-evaluation (last page of form I-983 form) for your previous employer as well as a new I-983 form Mentoring and Training Plan for your new employer. Note, if your OPT STEM application is still pending with USCIS at the time you change employers, you will be required to interfile an updated application with USCIS.
- You must also confirm your contact and employment information at the 6-month, 12-month, 18-month, and 24-month intervals (after the STEM OPT start date). ISS will contact you via email at those intervals to request an update on employment, address, and contact information. You will also need to submit a self-evaluation (last page of I-983 form) to ISS at the 12-month and 24-month stage or earlier, if you terminate employment.
- If your address, legal name, or contact information changes, please update your Campus Connection account with this information within 10 days of the change.

How do I report changes in my OPT STEM employment?

- To report any changes to your employment to ISS login to https://campusconnect.depaul.edu by using your Campus Connection ID and password. Click on Menu>Self Service>Student Resources>ISS Forms Requests. Select “OPT Update” to proceed. ISS will need to update your employment information in SEVIS and generate a new I-20 form, if applicable. Note, not all changes trigger a new I-20 form.
- Effective March 23, 2018, the government created a SEVP Portal (government database) for students to report directly to SEVIS. However, the ability to edit employment information in the SEVP Portal will be limited for OPT STEM students due to additional I-983 form requirements. Therefore, you must continue to report to ISS using Campus Connection instructions showing above. You will receive an email from the government on how to set up a SEVP Portal account. For more information on the SEVP Portal, please visit this link: https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sevp-portal-help

*** Failure to report your employment information to ISS or to comply with unemployment restrictions will result in the automatic termination of your SEVIS record and F-1 immigration status by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. ***
Submit form G-1145 with your 24-month OPT STEM extension application and USCIS will alert you via SMS text message and/or email that your application has been accepted for review. You will also receive your receipt number in this text/email.

A sample G-1145 form is shown here. Complete the form with your name, e-mail address and mobile telephone number as directed. Please type the information on this form to avoid USCIS misreading your hand-writing.

Form I-765

Application for Employment Authorization

Form I-765 is the other USCIS form you will need to submit with your 24-month OPT STEM extension application. A sample I-765 form is shown here.

Important: You are required to use the most current version of the I-765. It is best to download it directly from USCIS website: [https://www.uscis.gov/i-765](https://www.uscis.gov/i-765) right before you mail your application since USCIS updates forms frequently.

How to Complete the I-765: Completing the I-765 for your 24-month OPT extension application is a simple task, but a few items can be confusing. The following pages will cover how to complete those “tricky” questions so you can avoid any delays in receiving your work authorization extension.

Please type most of information on this form to avoid USCIS misreading your hand-writing. Note, some information will not always fit (name and address information primarily). For these areas, if applicable, please hand write the information clearly.
Completing the I-765

Do not write in the space at the top of the I-765 form.

Begin by selecting the box labeled “Renewal of my permission to accept employment.”
Completing the I-765

Items 1-13

Item #1: Your Name
Please list your full legal name as it appears on your passport (the spelling and order should match). It’s best to list your family (last) name in ALL CAPS. If you have several given names and do not have space to list all of them, that is okay.

Item #2: Other Names Used
You only need to complete Item #2 if you had a name change while studying in the U.S.

Item #3: Address in the United States
The address you put here is where your new EAD card will be mailed if approved. This address needs to be valid for at least the next 3 months, the typical length of time it will take to process your 24-month OPT extension application. If you think you may move in the months after you mail the application, use a reliable friend or family member’s address to receive your EAD.

If you are using an address other than your own, use “c/o” to indicate that your mail is being delivered “in care of” the resident of that address. You may use the ISS address if you are unsure if your current address will be valid for 3 months. For example, c/o Friend’s Street Name, Apt #, Chicago, IL, 60604. Otherwise, USCIS will think that is your new address, and it will conflict with the address showing in SEVIS (database).

Note, USCIS does not forward mail when applicants move. USPS will simply return your mail to USCIS as undeliverable. If your name does not appear on the c/o address you list, USPS may also return your mail to USCIS as undeliverable. Starting April 2, 2018, USCIS will destroy EAD cards returned as undeliverable by the U.S. Postal Service after 60 business days if USCIS is not contacted by the document’s intended recipient to provide the correct address.

Item #9-13: SSN Related Questions
If you do not have a social security number (SSN), then this is your opportunity to request it. If, however, you already have an SSN, then it is yours for life and you should inform USCIS that you do not want the SSA to issue you the SS card. The reason your SSA card says “valid for work only with DHS authorization” is because SSN is just a tax identification number, and in order to actually work in the U.S. you need some kind of work authorization document like an EAD card.

Items 14-19 (continued)

Item #14: I-94 Number
Use your current I-94 number. This is the 11-digit number found on the top left corner of your paper I-94 card or on your electronic I-94 record: https://www.cbp.gov/travel/international-visitors/i-94-instructions.

Item #15: Previous Employment Authorization
Check “Yes,” include the appropriate USCIS Office (first three letters of receipt number) and start date for your current post-completion OPT authorization as well as any previously issued EAD cards, and write “Granted.” A photocopy of all previously issued EAD cards must be included with your 24-month OPT extension application packet. If you have lost any of your previously issued EAD cards, write “lost EAD” in this space.

Item #16: Date of Last Entry into the U.S.
This is the date of your most recent entry into the U.S. This entry date can be found stamped on your paper I-94 card, on your electronic I-94 record, or in your passport admission stamp.

Item #17: Place of Last Entry into the U.S.
This is the name of the city where you landed in the U.S. This information is found on your passport admission stamp (usually as a code like “CHI” for Chicago). If you drove across from Canada or Mexico, enter the name and the city where you entered the U.S.

Item #18: Status of Last Entry
This is the status you had upon entering the U.S. Most students entered in F-1 status, however, you may have initially entered with an H-1B work visa or in another visa/status, and later changed their status with USCIS.

Item #19: Current Immigration Status
Your current status should be F-1 student. If not, talk to your ISS advisor immediately.
Completing the I-765

Items 20-23

Item #20: Eligibility Category
Use the following code to apply for 24-month OPT STEM extension authorization: (C)(3)(C) 24-month STEM extension

Item #21: (C)(3)(C) Eligibility Category
Enter the 5 or 6-digit CIP code for the degree program you completed at DePaul University (available under the “Program of Study” section on page 1 of your I-20 form), your employer’s name as listed in E-Verify, and your employer’s 5 or 6-digit E-Verify number.

Item #22: (c)(26) Eligibility Category
Leave this line blank.

Item #23: (c)(35) and (c)(36) Eligibility Category
Leave this line blank.

Finalizing the I-765

Remember to sign your the form. Please note that your signature must fit in the space provided on the name, include the date of your signature, and enter your telephone number at the bottom of form. If your signature is too big your EAD card may not contain your signature or your application may be returned to you and delay the processing time of your application. USCIS might issue EAD with "signature waived" notation. However, EAD cards without signature may cause problems with DMVs in some states. Be conservative and use a signature smaller than your normal handwriting.

Signatures must be in BLUE ink so they look original!

Applicant's Signature
I certify, under penalty of perjury, that the foregoing is true and correct. Furthermore, I authorize the release of any information that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services needs to determine eligibility for the benefit I am seeking. I have read the "Who May File Form I-765?" section of the instructions and have identified the appropriate eligibility category in Question 16.

Signature __________________________
Date of Signature (mm/dd/yyyy) 09/05/2015
Telephone Number (312) 123-4567

If you prepared your own I-765 form, then you do not need to complete the bottom portion of the form. Please leave it blank unless someone else like an attorney is preparing your I-765 form.

Signature of Person Preparing Form, If Other Than Applicant
I declare that this document was prepared by me at the request of the applicant and is based on all information of which I have any knowledge.

Signature __________________________
Date of Signature (mm/dd/yyyy) __________________________
Printed Name __________________________
Address __________________________
Photograph Specifications

You must submit two identical color photographs of yourself taken within 30 days of filing your application:

• The photos must have a white to off-white background, be printed on thin paper with a glossy finish, and be unmounted and unretouched.
• The passport-style photos must be 2” by 2”.
• The photos must be in color with full face, frontal view on a white to off-white background. Head height should measure 1” to 1 3/8” from top to bottom of chin, and eye height is between 1 1/8” to 1 3/8” from bottom of photo.
• Your head should be centered within the frame.
• There should be no distracting shadows on the face or in the background.
• Make sure you have a natural expression.
• Your head must be bare unless you are wearing headwear as required by a religious order of which you are a member.

Please refer to I-765 instructions on USCIS website: https://www.uscis.gov/i-765 for details. You may also refer to the U.S. Department of State website: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/photos.html for additional information on photo requirements.

Using pencil or felt pen, lightly print your name and I-94 card number on the back of each photo in case they get separated from your application.

Most places that take passport photos are already familiar with the specifications. However, you may want to print this page, or the pages from the web site above to take with you when you get your photo taken.
Mailing Instructions

Mail your (paper) OPT STEM application to the appropriate USCIS Service Center based on your residential address using a fast and trackable mailing service like Priority Express, certified USPS mail, FedEx, UPS, or DHL. Do not E-file your 24-month OPT STEM extension application!

Please do not use regular USPS mail, as it may take too long and/or get lost in the mail. Check USCIS website https://www.uscis.gov/i-765-addresses for the appropriate/current USCIS mailing address. Note, USCIS offers two different addresses, including a P.O. Box address, depending on the type of mailing service you use. FedEx e.g. does not deliver to P.O. box addresses.

Remember to keep a copy of the OPT STEM application for your own records before you ship it to USCIS. If anything happens to the shipment and/or if there are any discrepancies/mistakes on your EAD card later, USCIS will want to see proof of what you submitted.