STEM OPT Extension - 2016 and Beyond

In March 2016, The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) amended F-1 nonimmigrant student regulations on OPT for certain students with STEM degrees. The amended regulation, which provides for an extension of the OPT period by 24 months (a STEM OPT extension), will go into effect on May 10, 2016.


Are You Eligible for the STEM OPT Extension?

DHS grants STEM OPT extensions to eligible F-1 students once per degree level. A student may participate in the STEM OPT extension over the course of their academic career. To participate twice in the STEM OPT extension, a student must earn a second qualifying degree, at a higher education level, and be participating in an initial period of OPT at the time they apply to USCIS for their second STEM OPT extension. Students may not apply for STEM OPT extension during the 60-day grace period following an initial (usually 12-month) period of post-completion OPT.

Degree
To qualify for the STEM OPT extension, an F-1 student must currently be working in a period of post-completion OPT and must hold a bachelor’s degree or higher in an eligible STEM field from an SEVP-certified school that is accredited at the time the student submits their STEM OPT extension application to USCIS.

Employer
In order to receive the STEM OPT extension, a student must pursue their practical training through an employer that is enrolled at USCIS’ E-Verify employment eligibility verification program.

Application Process for STEM OPT

Eligible students should begin their application process by visiting istart.uga.edu and submitting the STEM OPT extension request forms. After reviewing the mandatory STEM OPT Online Workshop (linked within the form), there are three steps to follow in this process in iStart.
STEP 1-STEM OPT Extension Application
This step will collect information pertaining to your requested STEM OPT extension. Please complete this form in its entirety and click submit.

STEP 2- Form I-983
The 2016 final rule that reinstates the 24-month STEM OPT regulations increases the educational benefits that F-1 students receive from their practical training experiences by requiring the submission of a formal training plan. The formal training plan must clearly articulate the STEM OPT student’s learning objectives and affirm the employer’s commitment to helping the student achieve those objectives. To fulfill this requirement, a student and their employer must complete and sign Form I-983 and submit it to the student’s DSO.

Applicants will download and complete Form I-983. Once all signatures and fields are completed, the student will upload Form I-983 to the second step of the STEM OPT request in istart.uga.edu. Please visit the link below to view the Form I-983 tutorial, which provides step-by-step guidance for completing the form. https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/assets/stem-opt-hub/story.html

STEP 3- Reporting Compliance Confirmation
The final step in requesting a STEM OPT Recommendation in iStart is to confirm that you understand all reporting requirements while on the STEM OPT extension. In order to maintain legal F-1 status, a STEM OPT student must regularly check in with their DSO throughout the duration of the extension to validate Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) details and report changes made to the student's training plan.

Upon completion of the steps listed above, an Immigration advisor will review your application. If eligible, the advisor will issue a STEM OPT Form I-20 that the student will need to submit with additional required materials to USCIS to determine a STEM OPT extension.

What Are the Student Reporting Requirements on STEM OPT?

Validating SEVIS Information
Every six months, a student must submit the STEM OPT employment confirmation form in istart.uga.edu to confirm that the SEVIS record reflects current employment.

Annual Self Evaluations
Each STEM OPT student must submit an annual self-evaluation about the progress of their training experience in istart.uga.edu. Students and their employers must sign the student’s self-evaluation before the student submits it in istart.uga.edu. The evaluation form is included in Form I-983.
Material Changes to an Existing Form I-983

Each STEM OPT student must report in istart.uga.edu any of the following changes to Form I-983:

- Any change of the employer’s EIN.
- Any reduction in student compensation that is not tied to a reduction in hours worked.
- Any significant decrease in hours per week that a student engages in a STEM training opportunity.
- Changes to the employer’s commitments or student’s learning objectives as documented on Form I-983.

Changing Employers & Unemployment

When a STEM OPT student changes employers, the new employer must be enrolled in E-Verify before the student begins work for pay. The student must also submit a new Form I-983 in istart.uga.edu within 10 days of starting the new practical training opportunity.

STEM OPT students must report the termination of their practical training experience within 10 days of the event. Students who are granted a 24-month STEM OPT extension are allowed an additional 60 days of unemployment beyond the initial post-completion OPT limit, for a total of 150 days of allowable unemployment.

Employer Noncompliance

If a STEM OPT student believes that their STEM OPT employer is not complying with the terms and conditions of the 24-month STEM OPT extension regulations (the Form I-983 instructions and the completed Form I-983 on file at UGA), the student may contact the Student and Exchange Visitor Program at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement by following the instructions found on ICE.gov.

Additional Resources for STEM OPT Applicants

STEM OPT Online Workshop
Study in the States: STEM OPT HUB
STEM OPT Frequently Asked Questions
Form I-983