

STEM OPT Manual

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This manual contains instructions on how to apply for the 24-month STEM OPT extension. If you are applying for the 12-month OPT, go to the “OPT Manual.”

Warning:

The information in this manual is subject to change. Therefore, discard any copies you have googled, downloaded, or bookmarked!

Section **A**

Read this before you apply

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Is your degree a STEM major?

Students with a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) degree may apply for an additional 24 months of OPT.

If you do not see your major below, check the “STEM Designated Degree Program List” found at <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/stem-list.pdf>.

If the CIP code printed next to your major on your *Form I-20* is on this list, your degree is a STEM major. For example, the CIP code for the MS in Applied Finance is 27.0305.

- BA/BS in Biology
 - BS in Chemistry
 - BS in Computer Science/Mathematics
 - BA in Industrial/Organizational Psychology
 - BS in Mathematics
 - BA in Natural Science
 - BS in Nutritional Science
 - BS in Physics
 - Nutritional Science Certificate Program
 - MS in Applied Finance
 - MS in Business Analytics
 - Doctor of Education in Learning Technologies
- Update as of February 2022: This list of eligible Pepperdine STEM programs was updated and verified with the new expanded STEM eligibility list issued by the federal government in February 2022.

You may apply for two STEM OPT extensions during your lifetime. The second STEM degree must be at a higher degree level.

STEM OPT eligibility requirements

- Your employment must be directly related to your STEM major
- You must be paid, and you must work **at least 20 hours** per week with each employer, if you have more than one employer
- The employer completing the *Form I-983* cannot be a staffing/placement agency unless the staffing/placement agency is the employer that provides and oversees the training. If employment is obtained with or through consulting firm arrangements that provide labor for hire, make sure the employer that signs the *Form I-983* is the entity that directly provides and supervises your training experience
- Your employer must have an *Employer ID Number (EIN)*, also known as the Federal Tax Identification Number. Your employer must also have a valid *E-Verify Company Identification Number* or, if the employer is using an employer agent to create its E-Verify cases, a valid *E-Verify Client Company Identification Number*, and the employer remains a participant in good standing with E-Verify, as determined by USCIS
- The training experience must take place **onsite** at the employer's place of business or worksites to which the US Department of Homeland Security has authority to conduct site visits
- You may not be self-employed

Is your STEM degree from another school?

You may use a prior STEM degree to apply for a STEM OPT extension, even if your current 12-month period of OPT is based on a non-STEM major, if these conditions apply at the time the DSO recommends the 24-month OPT extension:

- **the prior degree was earned from a US institution of higher education not more than 10 years before the DSO recommends the STEM OPT extension.**
- **The prior degree was conferred by a U.S. institution in the United States that is accredited and SEVP-certified**
- **The prior degree is in a degree program category included on the current STEM Designated Degree Program List.**

Benefits of filing online

Filing a form online is better than mailing a paper form because you can:

- Enter your information using a phone, tablet, or computer
- Avoid common mistakes (for example, you won't be able to submit without signing)
- Save your draft application and finish it at your own pace
- Easily and securely pay your filing fee
- Receive immediate confirmation that we have received your form instead of waiting for the mail

After you file, you can use your account to:

- Get your current case status and the history of your case
- View appointment notices
- Respond to “Requests for Evidence (RFEs)”
- Access every notice sent to you
- Send USCIS secure messages and get answers
- Verify your identity and receive details on any decisions USCIS makes on your case.
- Update your address with USCIS to ensure you receive all correspondence and benefits from us in a timely manner and avoid possible delays related to your case

Extremely important filing deadlines!

USCIS must receive your 24-month STEM OPT application before these deadlines, or your application will be **denied**:

- Before your current post-completion OPT (standard or cap-gap) expiration date, but not more than 90 days before the expiration date; and
- Not more than 60 days after the date your DSO recommended the STEM OPT in SEVIS (this is also the date your DSO signed your new Form I-20).

If the I-765 is filed on time, you may continue to work for up to 180 days after your OPT expires, while your STEM OPT extension application is pending.

Can you cancel or withdraw your OPT?

SEVP Policy Guidance 1004-03

What happens if a student (excluding those students who have completed all program requirements aside from thesis or equivalent) applied for post-completion OPT before his or her program end date and subsequently fails to complete the requirements for his or her program?

- ✓ The student should contact his or her DSO immediately for guidance.
- ✓ If the employment authorization application has not been adjudicated by USCIS, the student may withdraw the application by notifying the Service Center where the application was filed. The DSO should also withdraw the recommendation for OPT in SEVIS.
- ✓ If the employment authorization application has already been approved, the DSO should extend the student's program end date to the appropriate date. The student may work **part time** while enrolled in courses to complete the requirements for his or her program and full time during breaks and vacations. After successful completion of all the program requirements, the student may work full time.
- ✓ However, even though the student's program end date was extended, because the OPT was granted as post-completion OPT, the student is subject to the 90-day limitation on unemployment.

Source: http://www.ice.gov/doclib/sevis/pdf/opt_policy_guidance_042010.pdf

- You may ask the OISS to cancel your STEM OPT request if you have not submitted your application.
- If you have already submitted your application, you should immediately send a letter to USCIS requesting a **withdrawal** of your application. Contact the OISS to receive a sample withdrawal request letter. You must act quickly, since there is no guarantee that your request will be received and processed by USCIS on time.

Section **B**

Steps to apply

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Submit your *STEM OPT Request e-form* to the OISS

8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f)(11)(i)

Student responsibilities. A student must initiate the OPT application process by requesting a recommendation for OPT from his or her DSO. Upon making the recommendation, the DSO will provide the student a signed Form I-20 indicating that recommendation.

Start of employment. A student may not begin employment prior to the approved starting date on his or her employment authorization except as noted in paragraph (f)(11)(i)(C) of this section. A student may not request a start date that is more than 60 days after the student's program end date. Employment authorization will begin on the date requested or the date the employment authorization is adjudicated, whichever is later.

- Submit the *STEM OPT Request* e-form to the OISS as early as possible before your current OPT expires. A completed and signed Form I-983 and employer letter must be uploaded at the same time. See page 5 for STEM OPT eligibility requirements.
- You will receive a new *Form I-20* indicating that you have requested the STEM OPT extension.
- See page 8 for filing deadlines!

Create an online account

1. Go to <https://www.uscis.gov/file-online>
2. Click on "sign in"
3. Click on "create account" (do not use your Pepperdine email address)
4. Select "File a Form Online"
5. Select "Application for Employment Authorization (I-765)"
6. Before filling out the I-765, read carefully the information about:
 - eligibility
 - filing deadlines
 - fee
 - documents you may need
 - biometric services appointment
 - what you should do after submitting your application

"Getting started"

- **Basis of eligibility**
 - Select **c(3)(C) STEM Extension**
- **What is your degree?**
 - Enter your degree level and major (for example, BS in computer science/mathematics or MS in applied finance)
- **What is your employer's name as listed in E-Verify? What is your employer's E-Verify company identification number or a valid E-Verify client company identification number?**
 - Make sure the employer's name and E-Verify number are exactly how they appear in the E-Verify system.
- **What is your reason for applying?**
 - Select "Renewal of permission to accept employment"

"About you"

Answer all questions that apply to you.

For your "mailing address," enter the name of the person other than you in the "in care of" field only if you are using that person's address.

What is your A-Number?

The *Alien Registration Number (A-Number)* is a number typically issued to individuals who apply for immigration (permanent residence) benefits. If you are applying for the STEM OPT extension, enter the USCIS Number on the front of your current EAD card.

What is your USCIS Online Account Number?

You may already have an OAN if you previously filed certain paper forms and received an Account Access Notice in the mail. You may locate this notice by logging in to your account. You can find the OAN at the top of the notice,

Social Security Card

Whether you already have or don't have a Social Security Number (SSN), carefully answer each question appropriately. If you are applying for a SSN, a social security card will be mailed to you from the Social Security Administration around the same time as your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card. Keep both cards in a safe place and do not freely share your SSN with anyone unless it is required by law.

"Evidence"

- **2 x 2 photo of you (follow specifications provided)**
- **Form I-94**
 - Find your most recent I-94 at <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/i94/#/home>
- **Employment Authorization Document**
- **Form I-20**
 - Provide your new I-20 requesting OPT after you have signed and dated it.
- **College degree**
 - Provide a copy of your Pepperdine diploma or transcript
- **Institution accreditation**
 - Provide proof of school's current accreditation status if your STEM degree is from another school

“Additional information” Part 1

This section allows you to provide any additional explanation or information that may be helpful to USCIS. Be sure to include the following information:

If you have had more than one SEVIS number, provide all of the numbers you used before your current one:

1. For “section,” select “about you”
2. For “page,” select “your immigration information”
3. For “question,” select “what is your Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) Number (if any)?”
4. In the text box, enter the SEVIS number(s) you used previously

If you were previously authorized CPT or OPT, provide information about the CPT or OPT:

1. For “section,” select “evidence”
2. For “page,” select “previously authorized CPT or OPT”
3. For “question,” select “previously authorized CPT or OPT”
4. In the text box, enter the information about the CPT or OPT (see samples below)

Additional information (**the following are just samples!**)

--Post-completion OPT 08/15/2020 - 8/2021 Master’s degree, Pepperdine University
--Full-time CPT 05/01/2020 - 07/30/2020 Master’s degree, Pepperdine University

“Additional information” Part 2

Provide additional information about your STEM major:

1. For “section,” select “getting started”
2. For “page,” select “basis of eligibility”
3. For “question,” select “what is your degree?”
4. In the text box, provide information about your STEM major, like the sample below (your STEM CIP code can be found next to your major on your Form I-20):

Additional information (**this is just a sample!**)

My degree at Pepperdine University is the master of science in applied finance, which is associated with the STEM CIP code 27.0305, “financial mathematics.”

“Review and submit”

- After completing the *Form I-765*, we recommend that you send a copy of the draft I-765 to the OISS for review, in case of any errors.
- You will be directed to pay.gov to submit your fee payment by credit/debit card or withdrawal from a checking/savings account.
- Your receipt notice will be generated as soon as you submit your application. You should also expect an official paper receipt notice to be sent to you by mail.

Section **C** While your application is pending

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Respond to a “*Request for Evidence (RFE)*” on time

- Check the “documents” tab in your online account frequently in case you have been issued a *Request for Evidence (RFE)*. You should expect the *RFE* to be mailed to your mailing address.
- If you receive a *Request for Evidence (RFE)*, immediately send a copy of it to the OISS so we can make sure that you respond to it correctly. If you fail to provide the requested evidence to USCIS by the deadline indicated on the *Request for Evidence (RFE)*, your application will be **denied!**
- You may also receive a notice to appear for a biometric services appointment to provide fingerprints, photograph, and/or signature. If you fail to show up at your appointment, your OPT will be **denied!**
- If you are traveling or using someone else’s mailing address, it is important to have your mail checked often to make sure mail from USCIS is opened immediately.

Changing your employer or address

If you change your employer while your application is pending, you must:

- **Request a new Form I-20 by submitting a *STEM OPT Report* and new employer's *Form I-983* and letter within 10 days**
- **Sign and date the Form I-20 and send a copy to the DSO**

If your mailing address changes, immediately update your address through your USCIS online account:

1. **Log in to your USCIS online account**
2. **Select the Profile tab**
3. **Select Edit next to Mailing Address to update the address where you receive your mail**
4. **Select Edit next to Physical Address to update where you currently live**
5. **Select Save (during certain periods of the adjudication process, you may not be able to update your address information)**

We highly recommend that you go to <https://usps.com> and sign up for *Informed delivery*, a free service that allows you to digitally preview your mail and manage your packages that are scheduled to arrive soon.

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Submit the *OPT STEM Report* to the OISS

As soon as you receive your EAD, you must report to the OISS by submitting the *OPT STEM Report* e-form.

Step One: Go to <https://oiss.pepperdine.edu/istart/controllers/start/StartEngine.cfm> and click on “New Student/Scholar Login”

Step Two: Select “Email me my Limited Access PIN” at the bottom of the page.

Step Three: Enter and submit your University Identification Number (CWID).

Step Four: After receiving the confirmation message, open a new browser window or tab and check your email to retrieve your PIN. Your PIN will be emailed to your alternate email, as provided to Pepperdine through your Wavenet account. Then, go back to the OISS Home Page.

Step Five: Fill in your CWID, Date of Birth, and PIN in the appropriate fields and click “Login.”

Step Six: On the left column, click on “F-1 Practical Training” and complete the *OPT Report*, making sure that all required fields are correctly filled in. Click “Submit” to submit your form.

If you have technical issues, clear your cache or try using a different browser.

STEM OPT reporting requirements

Failure to report to the OISS in accordance with the following schedule will result in termination of your status. Put reminders on your calendar to submit the following reports on time.

- **Validation Report:** Due every six months during the STEM OPT period. The purpose of this report is to verify that your information is still correct. Therefore, submit the *STEM OPT Report* even if the information has not changed.
- **Self-Evaluation Report:** The purpose of this report is to verify that you have received adequate training and new skills in your job. Complete page 5 of the *Form I-983* and submit all five pages to the OISS within the first year of the STEM OPT period, and again at the conclusion of the second year. If you have multiple employers during the STEM OPT period, a self-evaluation is also required at the end of employment with each employer, regardless of how long you worked, within 10 days of the last day you worked for that employer.
- **New information:** a *STEM OPT Report* or *Address Update form* must be submitted within 10 days of obtaining a new employer or changing the details of your job and your address/contact information.

Employers must also report directly to the DSO:

- Any material changes to the *Form I-983*, including but not limited to, any change of *Employer Identification Number* resulting from a corporate restructuring, any reduction in compensation from the amount previously submitted on the *Form I-983* 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, any decrease in hours below the 20-hours-per-week minimum required under this rule, and any evidence that the student is not receiving appropriate training as delineated in the *Form I-983*.
- The termination or departure of the student, within five business days.

The SEVP Portal

As soon as your STEM OPT becomes effective, you will receive an email message from SEVP with a link to create an account in the SEVP Portal. Use of the SEVP Portal is optional. **IMPORTANT!** You must report all changes to your data **directly** to the OISS, even if you have updated your information in the SEVP Portal!

The SEVP Portal allows you to :

- Update your physical home address, mailing address, and telephone number
- Monitor and update your employer information
- **STEM OPT** students are not able to add a new employer or change the start date with their employer

LOCKED OUT OF YOUR ACCOUNT?

Click the “Reset Password” link on the SEVP Portal Login page (<https://sevp.ice.gov/opt/#/login>). The SEVP Portal will send you an email from do-not-reply.SEVP@ice.dhs.gov and provide a temporary password. Return to the SEVP Portal Login page, use the temporary password to log in, and follow each step to create a new password. If you do not receive a notification email to create an SEVP Portal account, check your spam or junk mail folders. You should also contact the OISS to confirm that the correct email address is listed in your SEVIS record.

For more information go to <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/>.

How long can you be unemployed?

- If your STEM OPT extension is approved, an additional 60 days of unemployment will be added, allowing up to **150 days** of unemployment
- If you exceed 150 days of unemployment days, you will be considered out of status! Before you lose your status, prepare for departure or pursue other options, such as transferring to another school, in order to remain in the US lawfully.
- SEVIS tracks your number of unemployment days and may automatically terminate your status when you exceed the limit.

What if your STEM OPT is denied?

Unlawful Presence

An STEM OPT denial may trigger the INA § 222(g) visa cancellation and INA 212(a)(9)(B) unlawful presence provisions. If you are present unlawfully for more than 180 days but less than one (1) year, and you voluntarily depart the US prior to the initiation of removal proceedings, you will be rendered inadmissible for 3 years. If you are present unlawfully for one (1) year or more, you will be rendered inadmissible for ten (10) years.

We strongly recommend that you consult experienced immigration counsel if you wish to apply for reinstatement to F-1 status (unlawful presence accrual will stop while reinstatement is pending) or file a motion to reopen or reconsider the OPT denial on Form I-290B within 30 days from the date of the denial.

Arrests

Several cases were reported by other schools in which OPT was denied if students had a DUI, substance-related (including marijuana), or other type of arrest. Furthermore, an arrest can trigger a cancellation of your visa by the Department of State. We strongly recommend that you consult with an experienced immigration attorney if you have an arrest record. Do not travel abroad until you have been fully counseled and are prepared to apply for a new visa.

Travel during STEM OPT

8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f)(13)

Temporary absence from the United States of F-1 student granted employment authorization.

An F-1 student who has an unexpired EAD issued for post-completion practical training and who is otherwise admissible may return to the United States to resume employment after a period of temporary absence. The EAD must be used in combination with an I-20 ID endorsed for reentry by the DSO within the last six months.

Before departure, fill out a *Travel Permission or I-20 Update Request!*

Documents required for reentry to the US to engage in STEM OPT:

1. Pepperdine University *Form I-20* signed on page 2 less than 6 months before your reentry
2. Passport valid for 6 months beyond your reentry
3. Valid F-1 visa stamp in your passport
4. If STEM OPT is pending, *Form I-797C* receipt notice
5. *Form I-797* approval notice and/or employment authorization document (EAD card)
6. Proof of employment (if you are unemployed, be prepared to present evidence that you are actively seeking employment)

Warning! You will not be able to return to the US to engage in OPT...

1. ...if you enter the US in "visitor" status (B-1/B-2 visa or ESTA). You will not be allowed to work, and your STEM OPT authorization will be lost.
2. ...if you exceed the number of days you are allowed to be unemployed (see page 26).

H-1B cap-gap OPT Extension

- ✓ Students who wish to continue working after STEM OPT usually apply for the H-1B visa. Go to the USCIS website for more information on the H-1B and other temporary work visas.
- ✓ Each Fiscal Year (FY) a limited number (or “cap”) of H-1B visas may be approved. Each filing period begins in early spring, with the requested employment date to begin not earlier than October 1. Due to the high demand for H-1B visas, a random selection process has been used to limit the number of cases that will be accepted for processing.
- ✓ The following employers are exempt from the cap:
 - institutions of higher education
 - nonprofit entities related to or affiliated with an institution of higher education
 - nonprofit research organizations
 - governmental research organizations
- ✓ If you are selected for H-1B processing, and your STEM OPT is still valid at the time you file your H-1B petition, your OPT will be automatically extended to September 30, if your STEM OPT will expire before that date. This is known as the “cap-gap” OPT extension.
- ✓ To request a new *Form I-20* with the cap-gap OPT extension, submit a *Travel Permission or I-20 Update Request e-form* to the OISS.

If you terminate or complete your STEM OPT

8 C.F.R. § 214.2(f)(10)(ii)

Duration of status while on post-completion OPT. For a student with approved post-completion OPT, the duration of status is defined as the period beginning when the student's application for OPT was properly filed and pending approval, including the authorized period of post-completion OPT, and ending 60 days after the OPT employment authorization expires (allowing the student to prepare for departure, change educational levels at the same school, or transfer in accordance with paragraph (f)(8) of this section).

Termination of practical training. Authorization to engage in optional practical training employment is automatically terminated when the student transfers to another school or begins study at another educational level.

You must promptly submit the ***Exit or Transfer Request*** e-form to the OISS if you intend to take any of the actions below.

- Depart the US before or after your STEM OPT expires and complete your F-1 status
- Transfer to another school or start at new program at Pepperdine (your STEM OPT work authorization will be terminated on the date your SEVIS record is transferred to the new school or new program).
- Report the approval of a change of status from F-1 to another visa classification

Important deadline: These actions must be taken within the 60-day grace period following your STEM OPT expiration date. If you exceed the allowed number of days of unemployment during STEM OPT, however, you will lose your 60-day grace period and must depart the US immediately or apply for reinstatement in order to remain in the US in lawful F-1 status.