



## F-1 24-MONTH STEM EXTENSION OPTIONAL PRACTICAL TRAINING (STEM OPT)

### **What is STEM Extension?**

F-1 students who are currently approved for a 12 month Post-Completion OPT and have completed a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) field are able to apply for an additional 24 month extension of their practical training (for a total eligibility of 36 months of practical training).

STEM degree must appear on the 2016 DHS STEM-Designated Degree Program List (<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/stem-list.pdf>).

Students are permitted a total of two periods of the 24 month STEM extension, each following a 12 month OPT period. Students applying for a second STEM extension must have earned a second qualifying degree at a higher education level.

Also referred to as: STEM OPT, STEM Extension, STEM OPT Extension, STEM, OPT STEM

**Please note that this is not an entitled benefit.** USCIS has the right to deny any OPT application at their discretion.

### **Who is eligible to apply?**

- Students who are currently approved for post-completion OPT
- Students who are engaging in employment directly related to their STEM degree
- Students who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher in a STEM approved field within the past 10 years
  - Students wishing to do STEM OPT for a previous degree must have received a degree from a SEVP Certified accredited institution, and the institution must be accredited at the time of the student's application for the STEM extension
  - School must also have been SEVP certified at the time of application for the extension
  - F-1 students who earned a prior STEM degree qualify for STEM OPT, regardless of whether he or she earned that prior degree as an F-1 student (other nonimmigrant status time may count)
  - Overseas campuses of U.S. educational institutions are not eligible for SEVP certification
- Students whose current or prospective employer is registered in the E-verify program.



## **STEM Student Responsibilities**

### **1. Initial Training Plan:**

- Upon application for STEM OPT, students must fill out the Form I-983, sections 1 and 2.
- Students must have their employer fill out and sign sections 3, 4, and 6 of the Form I-983
- Both student and employer must work together to fill out section 5 of the Form I-983
- Training plan must be submitted to ISS at the time of STEM OPT I-20 e-form request

### **2. Six Month Validations:**

- Every six months, students must confirm their student record in SEVIS by submitting a "OPT/STEM OPT Employment Update Request" e-form through the ISS ISTART e-form portal.
- This e-form request will update SEVIS with the student's most current: legal name, residential or mailing address, employer name and address, and status of current employment.
- Please note, students must report a change of information within 10 days of the change to ISS

### **3. Annual Self-Evaluation:**

- Students must submit to ISS an annual self-evaluation about the progress of their training experience on the Form I-983 (2 total: 1 at 12 months, 1 at end of employment)
- Evaluation must be signed by employer and submitted to ISS through the ISTART e-form portal

### **4. Material Changes to an Existing Form I-983:**

- Students must report any material changes to their training plan to ISS. Material changes include:
  - Any change in 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 objective as documented on the Form I-983
  - Student's employment authorization will not cease based on a change to the plan, as long as the regulatory requirements are being met

### **5. Changing Employers:**

- When a student changes employers, the new employer must be enrolled in E-Verify before the student begins to work for pay
- The student must submit a new Form I-983 to ISS within 10 days of starting the new practical training opportunity



- In cases where the period of time between employers is longer than 10 days, the student must first report the loss of employment by submitting the e-form “Report No Longer On OPT or Currently Unemployed” to ISS and then later submit a new I-983

## 6. Unemployment

- Any termination of employment must be reported to ISS within 10 days of termination

## 7. Employer Noncompliance

- If a student believes that their employer is not complying with the terms and regulations of the STEM OPT, the student may:
  - Contact the Student and Exchange Visitor Program at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at [sevp@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:sevp@ice.dhs.gov), or (703) 603-3400 between the hours of 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM ET on weekdays, except holidays
  - Report violations through the Homeland Security Investigations form: <https://www.ice.gov/webform/hsi-tip-form>


**\*\*Failure to comply with any and all requirements of the 24 month STEM OPT constitutes a violation of your F-1 status. It is your responsibility to provide updated and accurate information to ISS!\*\***

## STEM Employer Responsibilities

1. **E-verify:** Employers must be enrolled in the E-Verify program
2. **Form I-983:** Employers must sign and assist
  - **Initial Training Plan-** employers are responsible for completing Section 3, 4, and 6 of the Form I-983, section 5 must be completed with the student
  - **Annual Self Evaluation-** employers must review the student’s self-evaluation on their own progress and sign it to attest to its accuracy
  - Please note that the official with Signatory Authority must be familiar with the STEM OPT student’s goals and performance, and have authority to affirm that the statements provided on the Form I-983 are true and correct
3. **Material Changes to an Existing Form I-983:** Employer must work with the student to report any material changes to the Form I-983
4. **Practical Training Termination:** Employer and student must both notify ISS when the student’s employment is terminated for any reason before the authorized extension period. Employers must report such change no later than **five business days** after the student’s employment terminates or the student has departed.
  - Departure date: the date the employer knows the student has left employment, or the date after five consecutive business days have elapsed and the student has not reported for their practical training (without the employer’s consent)



## **How To Apply For STEM OPT:**

1. Meet with your E-Verify approved employer and complete the Form I-983 Training plan (Sections 1-6). Form can be found here: <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/I-983.pdf>. Instructions on how to fill out this form can be found here: <https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/I-983-instructions.pdf>
2. Log into iStart through the  button on ic.utah.edu and submit an online request by completing “STEM OPT Extension Request” e-form. **Request will require you to upload your completed Form I-983.**
3. Once ISS receives a complete application of STEM OPT request, the ISS advisor will issue you a new STEM OPT I-20 within two weeks which will include our recommendation for extended employment on page 2. You will need to send in a copy of this I-20 to USCIS.
4. Mail all the required documents to USCIS **within 60 days** of when your STEM OPT I-20 was issued and signed by ISS.
5. Keep copies of everything you mail for your own records.

## **The following are the documents you will need to send to USCIS:**

- Form I-765** (downloadable from [www.USCIS.gov](http://www.USCIS.gov), see page 4 for instructions)
- A copy of **new I-20** issued from ISS with your STEM OPT dates.
- A copy of photo page (identification page) and expiration date page of your **valid passport**.
- A copy of your **visa** page of your passport- even if expired.
- A copy of both sides of your **I-94 card** (with the new online version, there is just one page, obtainable at <https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/request.html>).
- Copies of **ALL previous I-20** issued to you in your current education level (if you do not have these, contact ISS. We may have copies of your old I-20s, however, it is your responsibility to keep previous immigration documents. Requests for previous documents may be submitted via e-form request “Request for Document Copies.” Processing time may be up to 2 weeks.)
- Copy of **previous EAD card**, both front and back.
- Two passport type **photographs** (taken within 30 days of submitting application). Print your name and I-94 card number lightly in pencil on the back of each photo. Put the photos in an envelope and attach it to front of I-765.
- Fee of \$410-** In the form of check or money order, made to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Cash or debit cards are not accepted. **WRITE YOUR SEVIS # and STEM OPT ON THE MEMO** (starts with N on top left corner of your I-20).
- A copy of your **transcript and diploma** that states the degree field.
- G-1145** (optional) to receive an E-verification of application acceptance. Attach to the first page of your application (downloadable from [www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1145.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1145.pdf)).
- Meet with ISS advisor to **review your packet** (optional).



## **Instructions for filling out Form I-765:**

- For 24-month STEM extension; check “renewal”.
- Fill out lines 1 through 17; **sign and date** to certify.
- **#3 Return Address:** This must be an address at which you can receive mail. Please keep in mind it may take three or more months to receive your EAD card. You cannot put in a forwarding order on this address- the immigration service’s envelopes state “Do Not Forward”. If the card is sent to an address with a forwarding order, or if you cannot receive mail at the address you use, your card will be returned to the immigration services and destroyed. If you want to use a friend’s address, you need to make sure your name is on the mailbox. If you want your department to receive mail for you, check with your department first. Contact ISS if there are any issues finding a mailing address.
- **#3 Return Address:** If the return address you indicate on the I-765 is not located in Utah, please check the chart on page 3 for the proper mailing address for your application.
- **#10 Alien Registration Number:** In most cases you will use your I-94 number. If you obtained a most recent copy of your I-94 from the web (<https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/i94/reqeust.html>), it is the Admission (I-94) Record number on top of the page. If you have a small white card in your passport, the number is found on the upper left side of the I-94 card. It is usually an 11 digit number- sometimes the last two digits are separated by a space.
- **#11 Previous Employment Authorization:** For a 24 month STEM extension, please answer “yes” and complete the related information.
- **#16 Eligibility Categories:** For F-1 OPT, fill out as follows:
  - **For 24 month OPT STEM extension: (C) (3) (C)**
- **#17 OPT STEM Extension:** Since you are applying for the 24month extension, you must also complete this section with your degree field and your employer’s E-Verify number.

## **Am I ready to send in my application?**

Gather all documents together and send by **certified mail** with a return receipt OR **federal express** (so that you may have a tracking number). You will receive a receipt notice (Form I-797) from the USCIS once they receive your OPT packet. If you attached G-1145 form to the first page of your application, they will also send you an E-verification of application acceptance once they receive your packet.

- Am I sending my application within 60 days of ISS creating my OPT STEM I-20?
- Am I sending my application before my current OPT end date?
- Did I include all of the documents listed above?
- Did I make copies of my STEM OPT documents for my record?
- Did I meet with an ISS advisor to review my packet?



**Where to mail:**

<p><u>If you live in (return address on I-765):</u></p> <p>Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington (state), Wisconsin, Wyoming, or Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands</p>	<p><u>Mail your application to USCIS Phoenix Lockbox:</u></p> <p>For U.S. Postal Service deliveries including <u>U.S.P.S. express mail:</u>          USCIS          PO Box 21281          Phoenix, AZ 85036</p> <p><u>For (non-USPS) courier service:</u>          USCIS, Attn: AOS          1820 E. Skyharbor Circle S, Suite 100          Phoenix, AZ 85034</p>
<p><u>If you live in (return address on I-765):</u></p> <p>Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, U.S. Virgin Islands, or West Virginia</p>	<p><u>Mail your application to USCIS Dallas Lockbox:</u></p> <p>For U.S. Postal Service deliveries:          USCIS          PO Box 660867          Dallas, TX 75266</p> <p><u>For Express Mail:</u>          USCIS, Attn: AOS          2501 S. State Hwy, 121, Business          Suite 400          Lewisville, TX 75067</p>

**GENERAL RULES WHILE ON STEM OPT**

**HOURS PER WEEK**

A minimum number of 20 hours per week or more is required on STEM OPT to count toward employment

**VOLUNTEER WORK**

Students CANNOT receive STEM approval for a volunteer opportunity. For more information on what constitutes volunteer work: <http://webapps.dol.gov/elaws/whd/flsa/docs/volunteers.asp>

**EMPLOYMENT SITE VISITS**

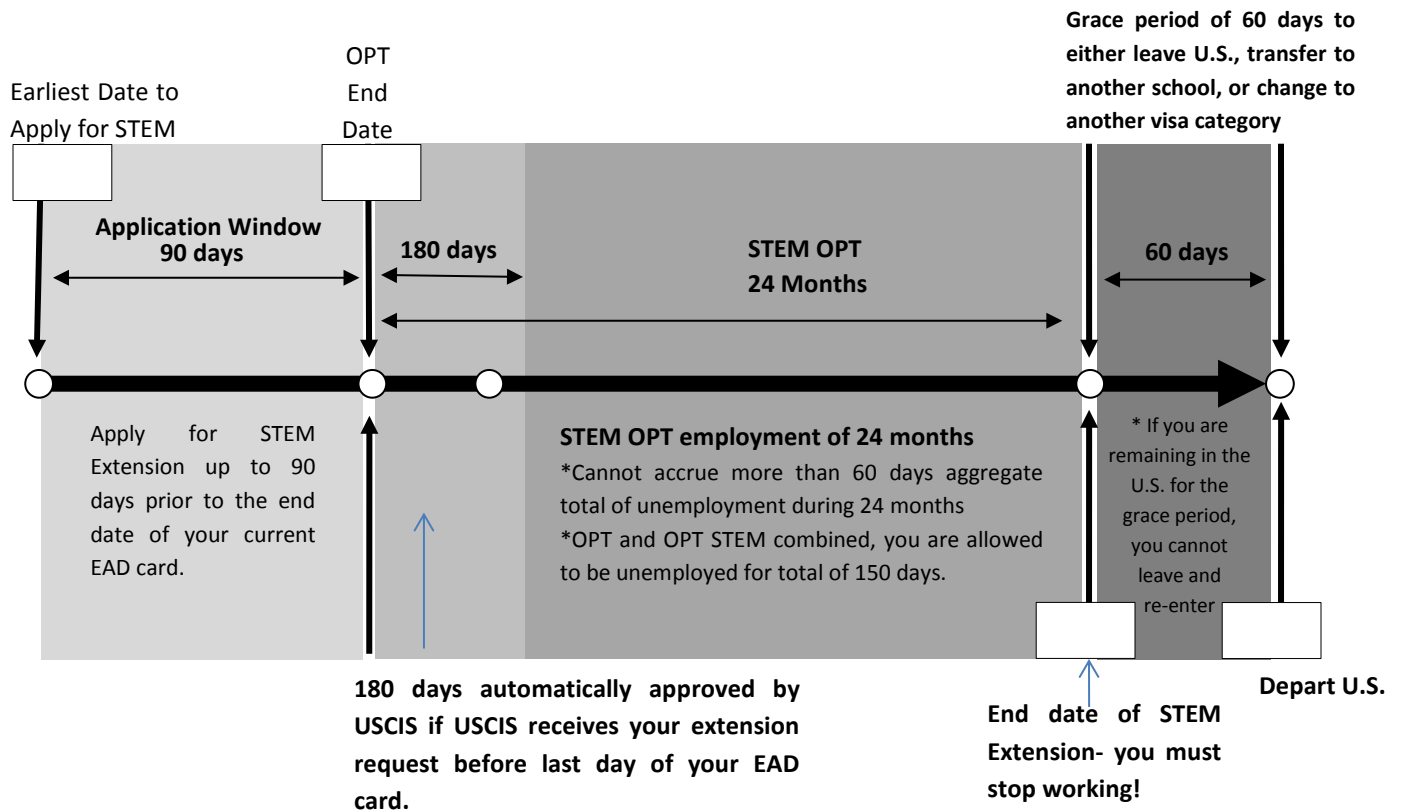
DHS may perform site visits to employer locations that train STEM OPT students. Site visits are to ensure STEM OPT students receive structured and guided work-based learning experiences. DHS will provide notice to the employer at least 48 hours in advance of any site visit, unless the visit is triggered by a complaint.

**UNEMPLOYMENT**

Students with current, approved OPT STEM extension must report to ISS office their participation in the OPT on their 6 months and 12 months after the employment start date. If ISS staff is not able to report the students participation in the OPT to USCIS on time, the students will automatically be terminated 32 days after the reporting due date.



## Your OPT STEM Timeline



- **Processing:** Request for OPT I-20 should be received by the International Student & Scholar Services no later than 3 weeks before your current OPT end date.
- **Start date:** The employment authorization for STEM extension begins on the day after the expiration of the initial post-completion OPT employment authorization.
- **End date:** It is the date on your EAD card. You must end your employment on this date unless you are approved for a change of status.
- **60 day grace period:** You have 60 days of grace period once you complete STEM OPT. If you are remaining in the U.S. for the grace period, you cannot leave and re-enter. You can either leave U.S., transfer to another school, or change to another visa category.
- **H-1B and Cap Gap:** Current regulations allow students with pending or approved H-1B petitions to remain in F-1 Status during the cap-gap period. For more information, please refer to our H-1B OPT Cap-Gap Extension Policy guide (<http://ic.utah.edu/forms-publications/documents/Policy-Guide-H1B-OPT-CapGap-Extension.pdf>) and consult with an attorney.





## GENERAL

### **1. How long will my STEM OPT application take to process?**

Applying for practical training is a two-step process. You must first obtain your certified OPT STEM I-20 from the International Student & Scholar Services, which can take up to 2 weeks to process, and then mail your application with all the required documents to USCIS to request an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card, which can take 3-5 months to approve.

### **2. When should I submit my STEM OPT application?**

You must apply before your current OPT EAD expires. The earliest you can send in your STEM extension request is 90 days prior to the end of your post-completion OPT.

### **3. I sent in my application but my POST OPT EAD card expired. What happens?**

If the STEM application is properly and timely filed, the student's employment authorization is considered automatically extended for up to 180 days while the STEM OPT extension EAD application is pending. Please note USCIS must have received your OPT STEM application before your POST-OPT has expired for you to be considered for STEM OPT.

### **4. Can I get a confirmation that my application has been received by USCIS?**

If you would like an email confirmation that your application has been received by USCIS, you may fill out Form G-1145 (<http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/g-1145.pdf>) and attach it to the top of your application. The notice you receive will not be a guarantee that they will approve your application, but merely a confirmation that it arrived at their office for processing. You will receive the official receipt I-797 within 2-3 weeks.

### **5. Does the job I have while on STEM OPT have to be paid employment, or can it be unpaid/volunteer work?**

Yes, it must be paid. The STEM OPT rule prohibits students from using the extension to work in a volunteer capacity.

### **6. If I complete one STEM degree program, and then complete a second non-STEM degree program and apply for OPT am I eligible to apply for the STEM extension?**

Yes- only if:

- Your second non-STEM degree was at a higher education level
- Your STEM degree was earned within the past 10 years
- The STEM degree was earned from a SEVP certified accredited school

### **7. Do I get a grace period after my STEM OPT?**

Yes, your lawful F-1 status expires 60 days (called a '60-day grace period') after the date you complete degree requirements. You are expected to leave the country by that date or make other arrangements to lawfully remain in the U.S. If you decide to no longer pursue STEM OPT, you must leave the U.S. immediately, as no grace period applies in that situation.

### **8. What if I have lost or thrown away my old I-20s?**

The International Student & Scholar Services *may* have copies of your old I-20s in your file. You can request that ISS make you copies of your old I-20s through istart using the e-form "Request Document





Copies”, but keep in mind that it could take up to 2 weeks to process your request. Also note that it is your responsibility to keep your I-20’s in your record. Your file may or may not contain copies of the documents you are looking for. It is best if you maintain a well-kept file of your documents in a safe place.

**9. Since I am moving this summer (and I still have not moved to my new address), can I use a foreign address to receive the EAD?**

No, USCIS requires that you indicate an address in the United States and the address must be appropriate to the Service Center address to which you send your application due to jurisdiction issues. You may not put a foreign address on form I-765. The address you use may be a P. O. Box. Contact ISS if you have further issues with your mailing address.

**10. Should I keep a copy of my application?**

Always keep copies of all official documents that you send through the mail. We also strongly recommend that you make copies of any checks or money orders that you mail to USCIS as proof of payment in the case that your application is lost in the mail.

**11. How can I check on the status of my application?**

When the USCIS sends you your receipt notice in 2-3 weeks, you will receive a receipt number which begins with the letters "LIN". Please check their website at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>. You can use this "LIN" number to access information about your application.

**12. What happens to my dependents, who are on F-2 visas, during the application and OPT STEM process?**

If you are granted STEM OPT work authorization, you are still in legal F-1 immigration status. Your dependents also remain in legal F-2 immigration visa status. You will receive new I-20s for yourself and all dependents if you are eligible for the OPT STEM work authorization.

### **STEM OPT AND TRAVELING**

**13. Can I travel home (or anywhere outside of the U.S.) while I am on the OPT?**

**Pending and Approved STEM OPT:** Students with pending and approved STEM OPT may travel abroad during the pending time periods (pending means all documents have been submitted and received by USCIS). It is recommended students travel with:

- I-797 receipt
- STEM OPT I-20 signed for travel
- valid visa
- passport valid for at least 6 months after re-entry date
- EAD card (if approved already)
- letter from your employer (The letter may state that they have employed you or plan on employing you, and you are coming back to the U.S. to work for them.)

**Please Note:** When you receive your EAD card it will say, “not valid for travel”. This means besides your EAD card you will need your I-20, valid passport, visa, and I-20 in order to travel. However, you must carry your EAD card with you when traveling.

**Please understand that entry into the U.S. is granted at the discretion of the USCIS officer, and you travel at your own risk.**



**Dependent travel:** Since STEM OPT is not noted on dependent I-20s, an F2 dependent must carry copies of the F-1 student's I-20 with STEM OPT recommendation, EAD card, and proof of employment, in addition to their own F-2 I-20 when traveling.

**14. I want to leave the U.S. for a short time while my STEM OPT application is in process, but I need to return before the card will arrive. I have a tourist visa (B2) that is valid for 10 years. Can't I just enter the U.S. on my tourist visa while I'm waiting to get the EAD card, and then start work with the card once I get it?**

NO!! If you intend to continue working on your OPT, **NEVER** enter in any other immigration status except F-1. If you leave the U.S. and re-enter with a B status, and you will have lost your F-1 status and your OPT will be **invalid!**

**15. Can I renew my F-1 visa while on the STEM OPT?**

The risk of denial of an application for a renewed visa stamp for STEM OPT is somewhat higher than while you are in your active student program. The F-1 student visa requires that the applicant must intend to return to the home country at the end of the program, and if the embassy official is not convinced of your intention to return home, the visa application will be denied. However, it is possible and many students on OPT get their F-1 visa stamps renewed. You do have to be careful to demonstrate non-immigrant intent. Please see ISS advisor to discuss more in detail.

**16. What documents do I need to show at the embassy for a new visa stamp under STEM OPT?**

You need to take a valid passport, the EAD card or the receipt notice for your application, an I-20 created by the International Student & Scholar Services for your STEM OPT application, **AND your job offer letter or proof of employment.** The official job offer letter be clear that your position is temporary, not permanent. You should also be prepared to discuss how this job experience will apply to the job market in your home country, and how you intend to apply it there.

**17. Do I still need my I-20 endorsed for travel if I am on the STEM OPT?**

Yes, during the STEM OPT year, if you travel outside the U.S., you need to have the travel line signed every six months in order to re-enter the U.S. If you are not located in the Salt Lake area, mail the original I-20 to ISS for endorsement, leaving plenty of time for possible mailing delays both ways.

### **OPT AND EMPLOYMENT**

**18. Do I need to have job offer to apply for the STEM OPT?**

You are required to have a job offer to apply for STEM OPT. To be eligible for a STEM OPT extension, your employer must be registered in the E-verify program. Please check with your employer if they participate in E-Verify. You are required to provide their E-Verify number on your STEM OPT application, as well as a completed form I-983.

**19. Do I need to have a job while I am on the STEM OPT?**

Yes, you do need to be employed while on our STEM OPT. You are only allowed to have a total of 150 calendar days of unemployment between OPT and STEM (90 days on OPT, 60 days during STEM). This



total number of unemployment applies through the entire period of OPT. Please remember that you MUST update your employment information and your training plan with ISS while on STEM OPT.

**20. Can I change my employer during STEM OPT?**

A student may change employers during the 17-month period, but all employers that a student will work for during the STEM extension period must be registered in the DHS E-Verify program, and the student must report the change, including submitting a new Form I-983 to ISS within 10 days of the change.

**21. Can I be self-employed on STEM OPT?**

Students *may* be employed by **start-up businesses**, however, *all regulatory requirements* must be met and the student may not provide employer attestations on his or her own behalf.

**22. How do I calculate the 10 year eligibility period for STEM for a previous degree?**

10 year eligibility period for previously earned STEM degrees is determined from the date the degree was conferred/earned (reflected on the official transcript). Application date is the date on which the DSO recommends the STEM OPT extension. Students who have not completed their thesis ARE eligible to apply for STEM. However, this is not applicable to prior degrees earned on STEM.

**23. What kind of compensation should I be receiving from my STEM OPT employer?**

OPT STEM employers must provide compensation to the student commensurate to that provided to similarly situated U.S. workers. Alternative compensation may be allowed during a STEM OPT as long as the student can show that he or she is a bona fide employee and that his or her compensation, including any ownership interest in the employer entity (such as stock options) is commensurate with the compensation provided to other similarly situated US workers.

**24. What happens if I do not comply with parts of/any of the STEM requirements?**

Failure to comply will result in a loss of F-1 status. Students who lose their F-1 status must depart from the country immediately as their F-1 visa status is no longer valid.

**25. Can I have multiple employers on STEM OPT?**

Yes, each employer must fully comply with the regulations (complete and sign a Form I-983 for each employer) and employ the student full time. Full time consists of 21 hours or more per week.