OPT STEM Extension

Office of International Students and Scholars
Welcome to the STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT) tutorial for Rice F-1 international students! This tutorial is a comprehensive guide to OPT STEM extensions at Rice University, we hope you find it helpful. Please contact OISS should you have any questions.

The topics covered include:

- **Overview** – What is OPT STEM Extension?
- **Eligibility Requirements**
- **Application Process**
- **Application Timeline**
- **Required Documentation**
- **Sample OPT STEM I-20 Authorization**
- **Mailing Instructions**
- **USCIS Processing Timeline**
- **Travel During OPT STEM**
- **Cap Gap and STEM Extensions**
- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**
What is OPT STEM Extension?

OPT STEM Extension gives F-1 students who are currently doing post-completion OPT the option to extend their authorization for an additional 17 months of practical training.

Important Factors to Consider:
- You can work anywhere in the U.S. related to your STEM focus.
- Since you will continue to stay in F-1 status during OPT STEM, you must report to OISS.
- The STEM extension can only be applied for once in your lifetime – not for each degree level.

8 CFR 214.2(f)(10)(ii)(C)
17-month extension of post-completion OPT for students with a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) degree. [...] a qualified student may apply for an extension of OPT while in a valid period of post-completion OPT. The extension will be for an additional 17 months, for a maximum of 29 months of OPT, if all of the following requirements are met.
Eligibility Requirements

1. Must be in valid F-1 status & currently authorized for OPT.
2. Must have completed a degree in a DHS approved STEM field (science, technology, engineering, or math).
3. Must be working for an E-Verify employer (or have an offer of employment from an E-Verify employer) in your major area of study.
4. Must be within 120 days prior to current OPT end date.
5. Have not previously been granted a STEM Extension.
Eligible Fields of Study and E-Verify

- **STEM eligible fields** can be verified by your CIP Code on http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/science-technology-engineering-and-math-programs. This is listed at the top of page 3 on your I-20, as a 6 digit numerical code “xx.xxxx.”

- You **must have** a job offer by an employer with E-Verify to apply. It is best to check with your employer’s HR department to obtain their E-Verify information.

- You **must** submit your current OPT employment and STEM OPT employment information to OISS via our OPT Update Form found at http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/ before we can process your request.
Stem begins on the date after the expiration of standard OPT. For example:

Standard OPT:
07/15/2015 – 07/14/2016

STEM Extension:
07/15/2016 – 12/15/2018
**Important Factors to Consider:**

1. **Apply early.** USCIS can take up to 90 days to process OPT STEM applications.

2. **USCIS must receive your STEM Extension application before the end date of your current EAD.**

3. **You may continue working for your E-Verify employer while your STEM application is pending with USCIS (up to 120 days).** *8 CFR 214.2(f)(11)(iii)(A).*
How to Apply

**Student**

- Meet with an OISS advisor and/or review this OPT STEM Extension Tutorial. Contact OISS at 713-348-6095 or email oiss@rice.edu.
- Secure all the necessary required documentation (**see next slides for requirements**).
- Submit your current OPT employment and STEM OPT employment information to OISS via [http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/](http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/).

**OISS**

- Submit the required documents to OISS as close to 120 days before your program end date as possible. You must submit your application to USCIS **before** the end date of your current OPT.
- Receive your new STEM OPT I-20 and discuss the process with an OISS advisor.

**Student**

- Mail your application to the appropriate USCIS Lock Box.
- USCIS must receive your OPT application packet within 30 days of I-20 issuance or the application will be voided.
OPT STEM Handouts

OPT STEM Handout (and required forms) can be found in the OISS Office or online at [http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/](http://oiss.rice.edu/studentwork/)

The documents required to receive an OPT STEM I-20 are:

1) Updated OPT and STEM OPT employment information via [http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/](http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/)

2) OPT STEM Statement of Understanding

3) I-765 Application form

If you live outside the Houston area, please submit these to the OISS via email and provide us with a mailing address to send your STEM OPT I-20.
Required OISS Documentation for an OPT I-20

2) OPT STEM Statement of Understanding

This Statement of Understanding will outline the requirements of being in good F-1 status while on OPT STEM Extension. Also provides OISS with a non-Rice email for continued communication.

3) Completed I-765 Form (use a computer to fill out this form to insure legibility – do not hand write)

(http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-765.pdf)
Next Steps After Submission of Documents to OISS

• An advisor will review your documentation and either process your OPT STEM I-20 or ask you for more verification from you. This process usually takes up to 3 working days.

• You will then be directed to sign up for a pickup appointment time. If you no longer live in the Houston area, an advisor will work with you via phone and/or email to complete the remaining steps to submit your STEM Extension paperwork.
Please collect the following documents:

- **G-1145** (This will allow you to receive an email confirmation that USCIS has received your application),
- Copies of your passport, visa, and I-94,
- Check made out to U.S.A. Department of Homeland Security for $380.00, make sure to put your I-94 number in the Memo section,
- 2 **US Passport style photos** with your name and I-94 number on the back in pencil,
- A typed **I-765**. A USCIS computer reads the form and handwritten applications can cause issues with correct information being entered,
- Official Rice Transcript, and
- Photocopy of diploma.
Mailing Your OPT Application to USCIS

Please mail your application, with the following documents to the appropriate USCIS Service Center, depending on where you listed your mailing address on your I-765 form. To find out which address to use, visit http://www.uscis.gov/i-765-addresses#LockboxAddresses.

Include the following when mailing your OPT Application to USCIS (make sure to make a copy of documents for yourself):

- Optional G-1145 E-notification
- $380 check made out to “Department of Homeland Security
- 2 Passport-style photos
- Completed I-765
- Photocopy of current I20 (You will keep the original I-20)
- Photocopy of passport, visa (ok if visa is expired), I94 card or printout
- Official Rice transcript
- Photocopy of Diploma
- Previous EAD(s)

*If the address on the I-765 is not a Texas address, please consult with an OISS advisor before mailing your Application as the address may be different.

USCIS must receive your application for STEM Extension before the end date on your current EAD card.
USCIS Processing Timeline

- **Two Weeks:** USCIS typically sends a I-797 Notice of Action form once your application is received. This notice will contain a receipt number (usually starts with “SRC,” if you applied for OPT in the Houston area) which you can use to check application status at [https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsp/index.jsp](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsp/index.jsp).

- **90 Days:** Average processing time for the STEM Extension request.

- **180 Days:** Amount of time from your current OPT end date that you are allowed to work for your E-Verify employer while STEM application is pending with USCIS.

- **10 Days:** Your reporting window to send updates to OISS. This includes a copy of your new EAD card once it arrives, and information on your address and employment!

If you have any questions regarding your application, we advise you to contact an OISS advisor before calling USCIS Customer Service.
Can I travel outside of the U.S. while my STEM application is pending?
Traveling during this time is not recommended should be undertaken with caution. Please talk with an OISS Advisor for more information. If USCIS approves your application, you will be expected to have your new EAD in hand to re-enter the United States. Remember, USCIS can only send the EAD to your U.S. address. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT (especially while the STEM application is still pending) can be risky.

Can I reenter if I left the U.S. while on OPT?
F-1 students authorized for OPT (+STEM) can travel outside the U.S. and re-enter provided they have all of the following documents: 1) Passport valid at least 6 months; 2) unexpired F-1 visa stamp in passport; 3) I-20 signed for travel by OISS advisor within preceding six months; 4) EAD card; 5) employment letter. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT can be risky.

Note: If you need a new travel signature, please keep in mind that OISS does not express mail documents. You will either need to leave enough time for regular mail or have a Rice friend pick up your new I-20 and express mail it to you.

Please meet with an OISS advisor and refer to http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/ for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while STEM application is pending).
Required Communication with OISS

- Scan OISS oiss@rice.edu a copy of the front of your EAD card
- Complete F-1 OPT status updates online (http://oiss.rice.edu/gateway.aspx?id=204) whenever you start a new job, move, or change to another visa status. OISS uses this information to accurately maintain your F-1 SEVIS record.
- Make sure OISS aware of any status changes
- Remember you are required to send a validation report to OISS every 6 months!

Unemployment During OPT STEM

Students are required to work full time (defined as over 20 hours per week) during OPT. Students are permitted 120 total days of unemployment during the entire 27-month OPT (+STEM) period. Unpaid work within a student’s major field counts as employment.
When Your STEM Extension Has Ended

**Grace Period**
You have a 60-day grace period at the end of your OPT STEM Extension before you must depart the U.S. You cannot work during that time but you can travel around the U.S., transfer to another institution, or change your visa status. If you do leave the U.S. during your grace period you will not be allowed back in on your F-1 visa.

**Cap Gap Extension**
Cap Gap provides an extension of OPT for students whose H-1B applications are pending or approved before the annual October 1 H-1B start date. This allows F-1 students to remain in the U.S. and continue working even after the completion of OPT. The extension is automatic and does not require a new I-20 (one may be requested, however, if needed to prove ongoing work authorization to an employer).

*For more information on possible options for working in the U.S. after OPT, please contact an OISS Advisor.*
Office Location
Lovett Hall, Entrance A, 2nd Floor

Phone
713-348-6095

Email
oiss@rice.edu

Website
http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/
FAQs

**What is a STEM Extension?**
Students in STEM fields are eligible to apply for an additional 17 months of OPT. However, employment with an e-Verify employer is required in advance and application must be made before the regular OPT has expired. For additional information, make an appointment with an OISS advisor.

**When should I apply for OPT STEM Extension?**
You may begin applying for a STEM Extension as early as 120 days before the end date of your current OPT. Please keep in mind USCIS must receive your STEM application before your current authorization expires.

**What do the photos for my application need to look like?**
Standard U.S. passport photos: Square 2” x 2” (5cm x 5 cm), front view, full face, white or off-white background. For full specifications, see [http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/general/photos.htm](http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/general/photos.htm). Many FedEx, CVS, and Walgreens branches offer reasonably priced passport photo services near Rice.

**What happens after my OPT application is mailed to USCIS?**
1. USCIS sends a Notice of Action form once your application is received, usually in about two weeks. This notice will contain a receipt number to check application status at [https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp](https://egov.uscis.gov/cris/jsps/index.jsp).
2. USCIS mails your EAD card. Processing time varies but can be up to three months.

**What happens if my plans change after applying for OPT?**
Immediately schedule an appointment with an OISS advisor if your plans change after your OPT STEM application has been submitted.

**What if I want to travel outside of the U.S. during my OPT period – what do I need to keep in mind**
F-1 students authorized for OPT STEM can travel outside the U.S. and re-enter provided they have all of the following documents: 1) Passport valid at least 6 months; 2) unexpired F-1 visa stamp in passport; 3) I-20 signed for travel by OISS advisor within preceding six months; 4) EAD card; 5) employment letter. Application for F-1 visa renewal during OPT can be risky. Please meet with an OISS advisor and refer to [http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/faq_f2.htm#_Toc81222042](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/faq_f2.htm#_Toc81222042) for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while OPT application is pending).
What is “Cap Gap”?  
Cap Gap provides an extension of OPT for students whose H-1B applications are pending or approved before the annual October 1 H-1B start date. This allows F-1 students to remain in the U.S. and continue working even after the completion of OPT. The extension is automatic and does not require a new I-20 (one may be requested, however, if needed to prove ongoing work authorization to an employer).

Is there any required follow-up with OISS when I am on OPT STEM Extension?  
Yes! You are required to:  
1. Bring or send OISS a copy of your EAD card.  
2. Complete F-1 OPT status updates online (http://oiss.rice.edu/gateway.aspx?id=204) whenever you start a new job, move, or change to another visa status. OISS uses this information to accurately maintain your F-1 SEVIS record.

What status am I on while on OPT STEM?  
You are on F-1 status. OPT is not a status in itself.

Once I receive my OPT STEM I-20, how long do I have for USCIS to receive my application before it is voided?  
30 days

My EAD states ‘not valid for re-entry” on it. Does that mean I cannot travel outside of the U.S. while on OPT?  
No. It means that your EAD card alone will not allow you admission into the U.S. You will need to bring the other required documentation (see travel slide).