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 on valid post-completion OPT the option to extend their authorization for an additional 24 months of practical training.

Important Factors to Consider:

- You can work anywhere in the U.S. related to your STEM field.
- 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 twice in your lifetime – not for each degree level.

8 CFR 214.2(f)(10)(ii)(C)

24-month extension of post-completion OPT for a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) degree. [...] An extension will be for 24 months for the first qualifying degree for which the student has completed all course requirements [...] If a student completes all such course requirements for another qualifying degree at a higher degree level than the first, the student may apply for a second 24-month extension of OPT while in a valid period of post-completion OPT authorized [...] In no event may a student be authorized for more than two lifetime STEM OPT extensions.
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 90 days prior to current OPT end date.
• **STEM eligible fields** can be verified by your CIP Code on [http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/science-technology-engineering-and-math-programs](http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/science-technology-engineering-and-math-programs). This is listed on the 1st page of your I-20 with your Major information, 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.

• Your employer **must** provide a formal training plan articulating your learning objectives during the STEM extension on the Training Plan Form I-983.

• 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/](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 – 07/15/2018
Application Timeline

12 month OPT Period

- Apply up to 90 days before your OPT ends.
- Grace period
- End date on EAD card

24 month OPT STEM Extension

- Cannot accrue more than 150 days of unemployment for entire OPT + STEM
- Important: You must show proof of your STEM degree AND employment by an E-Verify employer.

Grace period

- 60 days

OPT STEM End date

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 180 days). 8CFR213.2(f)(11)(i)(C) and 8CFR274a.12(b)(6)(iv)
Application Process

How to Apply

1. Review this OPT STEM Extension Tutorial and our STEM website.
2. Schedule an appointment if you have follow-up questions before applying.

3. Secure all the necessary documentation (** see next slides for requirements)
4. Submit your current OPT information to OISS via [http://oiss.rice.edu/opt](http://oiss.rice.edu/opt)

5. Submit your required documents to OISS as close to 90 before your OPT end date as possible
6. Respond to any inquiries from OISS regarding your STEM OPT Extension request

7. Receive your new I-20 from OISS and discuss next steps with an OISS advisor
8. Mail your application to the appropriate USCIS Lock Box location

9. USCIS must receive your application within 60 days of I-20 issuance
10. Send OISS a copy of your STEM OPT EAD card once your request is approved
Required OISS Documentation for an OPT I-20

OPT STEM Handouts

OPT STEM Handout (and required forms) can be found online at http://oiss.rice.edu/STEM/

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/
2) OPT STEM Student Statement of Understanding
3) I-765 Application Form
4) OPT STEM Employer Statement of Understanding
5) Form I-983
6) Proof of payment of the $500 STEM OPT extension administrative fee – https://signup.rice.edu/STEMextension/
7) If STEM OPT extension is based on a previous degree from another university, provide copies of the corresponding I-20 and posted degree

If you live outside the Houston area, please submit these to the OISS via email (oiss@rice.edu) and provide us with a mailing address to send your STEM OPT I-20.
2) OPT STEM Student 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)
4) OPT STEM Employer Statement of Understanding

This Statement of Understanding will outline the requirements for anyone employing an F-1 STEM OPT student.

5) Completed I-983 Form

6) Proof of payment of the $500 STEM OPT extension administrative fee

Pay the fee online at https://signup.rice.edu/STEMextension, and include a copy of the email confirmation with your application.
Next Steps After Submission of Documents to OISS

- An advisor will review your documentation and either process your OPT STEM I-20 or ask for more verification from you. This process usually takes approximately 5 working days.

- You will then be directed to schedule a pick-up 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:

- Check addressed to Department of Homeland Security for $410.00, make sure to put your I-94 number in the Memo section,
- 2 US Passport style photos taken within 30 days with your name and I-94 number on the back in pencil,
- Copies of your passport, visa, I-94, and current (and any previous) EAD(s) (front and back),
- A typed I-765. A USCIS uses computers to read the form and handwritten applications can cause issues with misinterpreted information,
- Official Rice Transcript,
- Photocopy of diploma showing degree received, and
- (Optional) G-1145 (This will allow you to receive an electronic confirmation when USCIS has received your application)
Mailing Your OPT Application to USCIS

Please mail your application with the following documents to the appropriate USCIS Service Center, based on the mailing address on your I-765 and preferred method of mailing.

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 in the order listed (make sure to make a copy of documents for yourself):

- (Optional) Cover Letter
- 2 Passport-style photos taken within 30 days
- $410 check addressed to “Department of Homeland Security
- (Optional) G-1145 E-notification
- Completed and signed I-765 Application Form
- Photocopy of current I-20 with OPT STEM Extension Recommendation (You will keep the original I-20, do not mail it out!)
- SEVIS employment history printout (OISS will provide this together with your new I-20)
- Photocopies of passport, visa (ok if visa is expired), I-94 card or printout
- Photocopy of front and back of current (and any previous) EAD(s)
- Official Rice transcript
- Photocopy of Diploma showing degree received and field of study

USCIS must receive your application for STEM Extension before the end date on your current EAD card.
[Today’s Date]

[Your Full Name]
[Your Address (use same address as the one listed on I-765)]

USCIS
Attn: I-765 for OPT STEM Extension
P.O. Box 660867
Dallas, TX 75266

Re: Form I-765, Application for Renewal of Employment Authorization for: [LAST NAME, First Name] I-94 #: [write out I-94 #]

Dear USCIS Officer:

I, [Your Name], am an F-1 student applying to renew my EAD in order to partake in the 24-month extension for STEM Optional Practical Training (c)(3)(C). My requested start date for the OPT STEM Extension is [list requested start date as the day after your OPT expires]. Please find my I-765 Application for Renewal of Employment Authorization enclosed with the following documentation:

- 2 passport-style photographs;
- Check/money order of $410 made out to U.S. Department of Homeland Security;
- Form G-1145, E-Notification of Application/Petition Acceptance;
- Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization;
- Copy of Form I-20 with OPT STEM Extension Recommendation;
- Employment history printout from SEVIS;
- Copy of passport;
- Copy of visa;
- Copy of Form I-94;
- Copy of previous EAD card;
- Official Rice transcript;
- Copy of diploma showing degree received and field of study

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

[Your Signature]

[Your Full Name]
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.

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, as long as you filed your extension request before the end of your post-completion OPT.

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!
Can I travel outside of the U.S. while my STEM application is pending?
Traveling during this time is **not** recommended and 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/](http://www.ice.gov/sevis/travel/) for further discussion of travel during OPT (or travel while STEM application is pending).
After OPT Application Approval

**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/opt](http://oiss.rice.edu/opt)) 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
- If you change your employer, you must submit an updated I-983 to OISS
- Update and send to OISS the Form I-983 when you complete your mandatory self-evaluations (1st evaluation within 12 months, 2nd evaluation at the end of your STEM OPT Extension)
- Make sure OISS is aware of any visa 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 STEM OPT. Students are permitted 150 total days of unemployment during the entire 36-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 1st 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). Please send OISS a copy of your H-1B Approval Notice so that we may update your record.

*For more information on possible options for working in the U.S. after OPT, please contact an OISS Advisor.*
FAQs

What is a STEM Extension?
Students in STEM fields are eligible to apply for an additional 24 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 90 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 https://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/general/photos.html. 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.
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 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 1st 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/opt/](http://oiss.rice.edu/opt/)) 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
3. Submit an updated Form I-983 to OISS when you complete your self-evaluations (1st evaluation within 12 months of your STEM OPT Extension, 2nd evaluation at the end of your STEM OPT Extension)
4. Submit an updated Form I-983 to OISS if you change employers during your STEM OPT Extension

**What status am I on while on OPT STEM?**
You are still 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?**
USCIS must receive your application within 60 days of I-20 issuance, and before the end date of your current EAD.

**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).

**I’ve had a STEM Extension before, can I have another one?**
Possibly. Under the new 24-month STEM extension regulations, students are now eligible for up to two STEM Extensions during their lifetime. Please contact OISS for more information.
FAQs

May I apply for the STEM OPT Extension based on a previous STEM degree, even if my current degree is not in a STEM field?
Possibly. Students may apply for the 24-month STEM Extension based on a prior eligible STEM degree if they did not have a STEM Extension associated with this degree in the past. However, the work performed under the STEM Extension must be directly related to the STEM degree obtained, instead of the most recent degree.

Can I use a previous STEM degree from abroad to apply for a STEM extension?
No, only U.S. accredited universities may be considered. In addition, the degree must be from within 10 years.

How much does it cost to apply for the STEM Extension?
There are two separate fees that you must pay:
1. The USCIS application fee is $410
2. The one-time Rice STEM OPT Extension administrative fee is $500.

How do I pay for the $500 Rice STEM OPT Extension administrative fee?
Please go to https://signup.rice.edu/STEMextension, where you will be able to pay the fee with a credit or debit card. You will receive a confirmation email once the fee has been paid, which you will need to submit to OISS as proof of payment.

Is my employer allowed to pay the fees on my behalf?
Yes, your employer is allowed to pay both the USCIS application fee and the Rice STEM OPT Extension administrative fee.

Can I start my own business or work for a start-up company on STEM OPT?
The official communication states that the employment “Must be a bonafide employer and employee relationship.” If you have a start-up, there must be someone else in the company that can serve as a supervisor and train you in the STEM field you have studied. Additionally, the company must also fit all the government requirements to be a STEM OPT eligible employer.
What is the Form I-983 Training Plan?
The Form I-983 is the Training Plan required under the 24-month STEM regulations. Please visit the Study in the States website for an explanation of the Form I-983 as well as guidance on how to complete it.

What information about Rice and my DSO do I need to complete the Form I-983?
In section 1 of the Form I-983 you will be asked to complete the following:

• SEVIS School Code of School Recommending STEM OPT – You will find Rice’s School Code on your I-20 under the section titled “School Information”
• Designated School Official (DSO) Name and Contact Information – Please use “Adria L. Baker, 6100 Main Street, MS-365, Houston, TX 77005, 713-348-6095, oiss@rice.edu”
• Student SEVIS ID – You will find your SEVIS ID at the top of the first page of your I-20
• Qualifying Major and Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Code – You will find your CIP code on your I-20 under the Major information in the section “Program of Study”

There is also a slide in this tutorial with tips on completing the first page of the Form I-983, and it is also included in our 24-month STEM Extension Handout.

Will my training be evaluated during my STEM employment?
Yes, in addition to submitting a validation report to OISS every 6 months, you are also required to conduct an annual self-evaluation which will be reviewed and signed by your employer and submitted to OISS on the Form I-983.

I still have questions, where can I get more information?
You can schedule an appointment with an OISS advisor either in person or over the phone. Please also see the following helpful websites:

• Study in the States STEM OPT HUB
• STEM OPT Extension Overview
• Overview of the Form I-983 Training Plan
• The 24-month STEM OPT regulation
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