OPT STEM Extension Guide

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DEFINITION

- OPT STEM is a 24-month extension of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) employment benefit which may be granted, under specific circumstances, to F-1 students who are currently engaged in OPT to enable them to continue their employment authorization so that they may continue to gain practical experience in their field of study.
- There is a lifetime limit of two periods of 24-month STEM OPT; each occurring after a higher degree level has been obtained.
- A STEM degree obtained at a U.S. university prior to your current degree may be the basis for a STEM extension under certain circumstances.

DURATION OF THE STEM EXTENSION

- The STEM extension is used immediately following completion of the initial 12 month OPT period. You do not select the dates for your STEM extension period. The dates are calculated automatically to start on the day after your initial OPT ends and to end 24 months after that.
- You cannot apply for the STEM extension when you apply for your initial 12-month OPT period. This is not a single 36-month period of OPT, but a 12-month period followed by a 24-month extension.

ELIGIBILITY OF STUDENT

To be eligible for the STEM, you must meet all of the following conditions:

- You must be in Active F-1 status.
- You must be currently engaged in an authorized period of full-time, post-completion OPT.
- You must have completed a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree in a designated STEM degree program. A list of the STEM degrees, as defined by SEVP, can be found on their website here.
- You **must** be employed in a paid position by an E-verify employer, or have a job offer for such a position. **It is not possible to apply for the STEM extension if there is not employment with an E-verify employer. Unpaid positions are not eligible for the STEM extension.**

If you meet all of the above criteria, you are eligible to apply for the 24-month STEM extension. **Please email all required documents for your application to international@ltu.edu to be reviewed. Once the documents are reviewed, the OPT STEM requested i-20 will be issued.** You should contact the advisor approximately 3 months before the end of your initial OPT period.

ELIGIBILITY OF EMPLOYMENT

- Per federal regulations, employment during the STEM extension must relate directly to your field of study.
- Employment must be full time (21 or more hours per week).
- Must be a paid position. Unpaid or volunteer work is not eligible employment for the OPT STEM extension.
- Employer must be enrolled in the E-verify program. It is your responsibility to ask your employer if they are enrolled in the E-verify program. You may not work for an employer who is not enrolled in E-Verify while you are on your STEM extension.

UNEMPLOYMENT LIMITS

- During the initial period of OPT, you are limited to 90 days of unemployment. When you are authorized for the STEM extension, you are given an additional 60 days of unemployment, for a combined total of 150 days.
- After a total of 150 days of unemployment during the entire 36-months of OPT, you are considered to be out of status and must depart the U.S. immediately.
    - o You should start making plans to depart the U.S. or return to LTU or another school to pursue a new degree program well before reaching the 150 day limit.
- Unemployment time is monitored in SEVIS so it is critical that you update your employment to avoid termination.

F-1 STATUS AND OPT WORK AUTHORIZATION WHILE APPLICATION IS PENDING

- If your OPT expires before your STEM extension is approved, your F-1 status and OPT work authorization are automatically extended for up to 180 days while your application is pending, as long as USCIS receipts your STEM application prior to the end of your initial OPT period.

APPLICATION PROCESS

- The earliest you can apply for the STEM Extension is 90 days prior to the end of your initial OPT period. Therefore, you should contact International Programs approximately 3 months before your initial OPT period ends.
- The STEM Extension application must be receipted **BEFORE** the end of your initial OPT period.
    1. **Complete the required forms and gather the supporting documents as outlined on the checklist.**
    2. **Submit your OPT STEM application for review.** Once all your documents are gathered, please email them to international@ltu.edu as PDFs. An International Advisor will review your documents & advise you electronically.
    3. **Send completed OPT application to USCIS for processing.** Students should file their applications electronically with USCIS. Once the application is filed online you can download it from your My USCIS account. When you get your receipt, provide a copy to International Programs. If you receive any other correspondence from USCIS, contact International Programs

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

- Your employer & you must complete the I-983 Training Plan & notify International Programs of any major changes
- You must send a copy of your I-797C Notice of Receipt
- You must send a copy of the front & back of your EAD, which is your Employment Authorization Document (EAD)
- Use LTU's OPT update form to report the following information while you are on OPT:
    - Current residential address
    - Current employment status (employed, unemployed, etc.)
    - Employer name
    - Employer address – if your employer has multiple locations, use the address where you usually work
    - Employer EIN Number – this is different than their E-verify number & can be obtained from HR
    - Number of hours per week
    - Supervisor's name, phone number & email address
    - How your position pertains to your LTU degree

- You are required by law to report this information at the start of your OPT period, and within 10 days of changes
- While on OPT STEM you must also complete the 6, 12, 18 & 24 month reporting requirements.
    - o After 12 months on OPT STEM students are required to submit the evaluation on student progress section of the i-983.
    - o After 24 months on OPT STEM, or anytime employment ends, students are required to submit the final evaluation section of the i-983.

Failure to provide these documents and updates may result in the termination of your F-1 status.

- Make sure all scanned copies are clear and all information on the original document can be read on the copy.
- Be careful when writing dates and make sure to use the U.S. format: mm/dd/yyyy (2-digit Month/2-digit Date/4-digit Year)

○ **Completed OPT Information Update Form**
  - This is an internal LTU form that is required by the school - https://goo.gl/forms/Rh7mZLLd3EFHlLb12
  - We must have your current employment information in order to issue your STEM I-20
○ **Completed form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization**
  - **You will fill out the electronic I-765 within your myUSCIS account**
  - Eligibility Category for the STEM extension should be (c) (3) (C)
  - ***Use the address where you currently reside. DO NOT use an address where you plan to live in the future.*** If you might move during the application process, please let us know during your document review so we can advise you how to update it.
    - Canadian addresses will not be accepted.
  - Mark YES to having a SSN number. You MUST put your SSN on the application
  - For online applications, the A/alien number is the USCIS number on your EAD card
  - You do not have a travel document number
  - You must complete the (c)(3)(C) Eligibility Category question. You will need to get the E-Verify information from your employer
    - The E-verify number should be 4-7 digits with no dashes. This is not the same as the EIN number
  - (c)(26) and (c)(35) and (c)(36) Eligibility Category questions do not apply to F-1 status. Leave them blank
○ **Completed I-983 Training Plan, with all attestations and supporting documents.** This must be completed with your employer International Programs should receive a copy & be notified of any changes to the plan
  - *The I-983 does not get submitted with your application*
○ **Color copy of front and back of your current EAD card**
○ **Proof of your degree** – You may submit a copy of your diploma or an official transcript that shows the degree was awarded
○ **Application fee** – Check with International Programs for current fee
  - If you file electronically you must pay via credit card directly after completing the online application
○ **Color photo of you, taken according to U.S. passport specifications**
  - U.S. passports specifications can be found online - https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/passports/photos.html
  - Photos must be current. DO NOT USE OLD PHOTOS – IT WILL DELAY THE APPROVAL PROCESS
  - When filing electronically you will need digital files of your photos (JPEG)
○ **Copies of all prior I-20 forms, even those issued by other schools**. Include pages 1 & 2 only. You do not need to include the page with the regulations
○ **Color copies of your passport page(s) showing biographical and validity information.**
  - This is the page with your photo on it.
○ **Color copies of your U.S. visa page(s) from your passport.**
○ **Copy of your I-94 form.**
  - For electronic I-94 records, print your I-94 using the online form at https://i94.cbp.dhs.gov/I94/#/recent-search
  - If you were issued an I-94 card upon entry to the U.S., make a color copy of the front and back of your I-94.
○ **Copy of new I-20 showing OPT STEM request on page 2.** *This will be issued after document review is completed*

IP Advisor will provide instructions for submitting the application to USCIS.

USCIS must receive your application within 30 days of issuance of the OPT I-20, or it may be denied. You should submit your application within 2 weeks of getting your new i-20. However, we recommend submitting it ASAP.

I-983 Helpful Instructions

An F1 student must submit a completed I-983 training plan to LTU in order to apply for the OPT STEM Extension. The I-983 can be downloaded from USCIS' website here. Below are some helpful hints when completing the I-983 form. More detailed instructions are available online here.

- **Section 1: Student Information**
    - Name of School Recommending STEM OPT: Lawrence Technological University (abbreviations okay)
    - Name of School where STEM Degree was Earned: Lawrence Technology University or abbreviate as LTU
        - *If STEM application is based on a prior US degree. Notify advisor for more information if you think this scenario applies to you*
    - SEVIS School Code of School Recommending STEM OPT: DET214F00335000
    - Designated School Official Name & Contact Information: Leave this blank until you know which International Advisor is reviewing your application, then you can fill out her name & info
    - Student SEVIS ID No: Located on the top of your I-20 in the upper left corner
    - STEM OPT Requested period: 24 month period, beginning the day after your current OPT ends
    - Qualifying Major & Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code: Major 1 & code listed on your I-20 under Program of Study Information
    - Level/Type of Qualifying Degree: Undergraduate or Graduate
    - Date Awarded: Date printed on your diploma
    - Based on Prior Degree: No, *unless your STEM application is based on a prior US degree. See advisor for more information if you think this scenario applies to you*
    - Employment Authorization Number: USCIS number as printed on your EAD card
- **Section 2: Student Certification**
    - Student must read & sign stating confirmation of their requirements while on OPT STEM
- **Section 3: Employer Information**
    - Student should NOT complete any of this portion. The entire section must be completed by the employer
- **Section 4: Employer Certification**
    - This section must be signed by someone who is an appropriate individual in the employer's organization, who is familiar with the student's goals and performance, and who is an employee who has signatory authority for the employer should review the certification and affirm the statement by signature
- **Section 5: Training Plan for STEM OPT Students**
    - This section should be completed by both the employer & student
- **Section 6: Employer Official Certification**
    - Employer must read & sign verifying confirmation of their requirements while employing an individual on OPT STEM
- **Evaluation of Student Progress**
    - This should NOT be completed for the STEM application
    - This section is to be completed 12 months into the STEM period
    - This section should be submitted to LTU once completed
- **Final Evaluation of Student Progress**
    - This should NOT be completed for the STEM application
    - This section is to be completed at the completion of the student's STEM period
    - This section should be submitted to LTU once completed within 10 days of leaving an employer

If you have specific questions pertaining to your OPT STEM application, please email international@ltu.edu for assistance.