

OPT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Topics

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OPT FAQs - Application Process

1. What date should I pick for my start date?

Unfortunately OIS cannot give a specific answer to this question because there are too many factors to consider. How close to finding a job are you? Do you want to take a break after school before working? If you do have a job lined up, when is it supposed to start? Are you applying with enough time to allow for USCIS processing?

2. My OPT is still pending, but my 60 day grace period is almost over - can I stay in the US after my 60 day grace period has ended?

Yes, as long as you filed for OPT before the end of your grace period, you can stay in the U.S. until your application has been processed, even if that goes beyond the 60 day grace period.

3. Can I volunteer before I get my EAD (“employment authorization document” also referred to as an OPT Card)?

You should not engage in any activity (paid or unpaid) that is related to your degree program and/or is a position that satisfies your OPT employment requirements until you have your EAD in hand and have reached the start date on the EAD. Bona fide volunteer opportunities such as cleaning up a local neighborhood or serving food in a soup kitchen are the only types of volunteering that would not require the OPT EAD.

4. The case tracker on the [USCIS website](#) hasn’t updated in a while. Will it ever be updated?

The case tracker on the USCIS website will only provide general updates approximately 2 to 3 times during the OPT application process. You’ll know that your case has been received and is in processing. This is what the case tracker will indicate for majority of the time. It should update when OPT has been approved and then again when the EAD has been sent to you.

5. My case still says received on the USCIS website. When will the information change or my application be approved?

USCIS takes three to five months to review your OPT application, but it can take longer. Your case might show “received” status the whole time your case is being reviewed. You can call the USCIS Customer Service line 800-375-5283 to see if they can give you an update on your case status. You can also create an account on the USCIS website to receive email updates whenever there is a change in your case. Unfortunately, there is no way to expedite your application. You just have to wait.

6. My OPT has been approved but I have not received my EAD. What do I do?

Call your local US Post Office to see if they have any record of your EAD shipment. If not, call the USCIS Customer Service Number to see if it was returned to them or if the EAD was lost in the mail. If the EAD was returned to USCIS, you can request that they reship it to you, which can take up to 30 days. If the EAD was lost in the mail you will have to request a replacement. The replacement process is similar to the initial OPT application process and requires you to pay the application fee again. Once you receive the receipt for the replacement, you can work for up to 90 days while you wait for the new EAD.

OPT FAQs – During OPT

1. When do the 90 days of unemployment begin?

The 90 days of unemployment begin on the start date listed on the EAD.

2. Who determines if my job is related to major?

You have to determine if your job is related to your major. You need to be able to explain how the job uses the skills you gained from the degree program you just completed, if you are ever asked. OIS will update your F-1 record in SEVIS using the information you provide on the OPT reporting form. We recommend that you keep records of all job descriptions and offer letters you receive during OPT.

3. What is the SEVP Portal?

The [SEVP Portal](#) is an online system that allows students on OPT to view and update their employment and address information. Use of the SEVP Portal is optional. You can still update your address and employer information through iHopkins via the “OPT Reporting Form”. It is your choice as to which option to use but keep in mind that you must update your address and employment information using one method or the other.

4. Do I need to get a new I-20 after I report employment?

Although it’s not *mandatory* to get a new I-20 after you have reported employment, it is best practice to request one. The new I-20 will have up-to-date, accurate information. You will only be able to request a

new I-20 if you report your employer information via iHopkins. If you report through the SEVP Portal, you will not have the opportunity to request a new I-20.

5. What status am I in while I'm on OPT?

You are still in F-1 status. You maintain your status by working at least 20 hours per week in a job related to your major and complying with OPT reporting requirements.

6. Does JHU offer health insurance to students on OPT?

You may be eligible for JHU health insurance if you are employed by JHU while on OPT. Check with the JHU department where you are employed to see if you're eligible. Otherwise, JHU does not offer health insurance to former students.

7. If I work at JHU during OPT, do I have to report it?

Yes. OIS will not know you are working at JHU (or anywhere else) unless you report your employment through iHopkins or the SEVP Portal. Otherwise USCIS will assume that you are unemployed and you will continue to accumulate days of unemployment.

8. I received an email from SEVP about the SEVP Portal. Do I have to use the Portal or should I report my employment and address updates to JHU instead?

You can choose whether you report OPT employment via the SEVP Portal or directly to JHU via iHopkins. You do not have to report the same information to both. Once you report employment or address update either through the SEVP Portal or iHopkins, the information will be entered into your F-1 record and viewable in the SEVP Portal. The main difference is that reporting OPT employment updates through iHopkins will give you an opportunity to request a new I-20, while the SEVP Portal will not do that.

9. I reported my information through JHU but it doesn't show on the SEVP Portal. Does that mean they don't have my information?

It usually takes 48 hours for your information to display in the SEVP Portal after the OIS updates your F-1 SEVIS record.

10. My position title has changed but I am with the same employer. Do I still need to fill out the OPT Reporting form?

Yes, you should report the change, but it's important to note that the employer info listed on your I-20 will not be updated because it only lists the employer name. However, your job title is recorded in your F-1 SEVIS record.

11. I decided not to use my OPT and I have left the US. What should I do?

If you have left the U.S. or changed your status and **do not** plan to continue on OPT, please fill the OPT Reporting Form and indicate that you are reporting "A change in my immigration status" to confirm you will give up your OPT benefits. Only fill out the reporting form once you have already left the US or your change of status has been approved to avoid a loss in status.

STEM EXTENSION FAQs - Application Process

1. How do I know if I'm eligible for the STEM Extension?

If the CIP code (6-digit numeric code) listed in the Major 1 or Major 2 field of your I-20 is on the STEM Designated Degree Program List, then you are eligible for the STEM extension.

<https://www.ice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Document/2016/stem-list.pdf>

Remember that you are eligible for a STEM extension if you have a previous degree in a field that is eligible. You can find information about that on the OIS page on STEM OPT extension.

2. Do I need a copy of my diploma or my transcript to send with my application? Do they need to be official?

We recommend sending copies of both your transcript and your diploma with the STEM degree listed. The transcript does not need to be a sealed official transcript but it does have to show the degree name and completion date. An 8.5"x11" pdf copy of your diploma is sufficient.

3. Am I allowed to change employers while my STEM extension is pending with USCIS?

Yes, you are allowed to change employers while the STEM application is pending. If you are still within the initial 12 months of OPT, you can work for the new employer until your 12 month OPT ends. To continue employment with that employer after the end date on your initial OPT EAD, you must complete the OPT Reporting Form in iHopkins and submit a new I-983 and the new employer must be registered with e-verify. You will only need to report the employment changes to our office; if USCIS would like additional information, they will request it from you by mail. A request for evidence from USCIS could delay your processing times.

STEM EXTENSION FAQs – During STEM OPT

1. Can I work for a contractor?

Yes, you can work for a contractor but the contractor should be directly involved with your training and there should be a bona-fide employer-employee relationship between you and the contractor. The contractor should be the one to complete the I-983 with you as your supervisor. The contractor does not need to directly supervise you every day but does need input from you and the client (the other employer) to make sure you are reaching your training goals. The contractor will also need to complete a new I-983 every time you change site locations and you will need to submit the I-983 to OIS via the OPT reporting form in iHopkins.

2. Am I allowed to change employers while on the STEM extension?

While on STEM OPT you may change employers, but the new employer must be enrolled in E-Verify before you begin STEM OPT employment. Be sure to report any employment changes via iHopkins by uploading a new I-983 to the OPT Reporting Form.

3. I have lost the job I was working in during the OPT Extension. Do I have to leave the US?

You can be unemployed for up to 150 days total between your initial year of OPT and the STEM extension and you must report any changes in employment to OIS. If you lose your job but find another job before you accrue 150 days of unemployment, you may remain in the U.S. and you must report your employment details to the OIS using the OPT reporting form in iHopkins. If you do not find a job before accruing 150 days of unemployment, you should depart the U.S.

4. Do I still have to complete the STEM reporting if my information has not changed?

Yes, every six months you are required to report your employment and address details. Once you have completed one year on the STEM extension you must submit the self-evaluation found on the last page of your I-983 to our office (this satisfies your second 6-month reporting requirement). You will do the final evaluation on the last page of your I-983 every time you leave an employer or once you have finished 24 months of the STEM extension (this satisfies your fourth 6-month reporting requirement).

5. Where do I find the self-evaluation?

The self-evaluation is found on the last page of your I-983. You only complete that after you have been on the STEM extension for one year.

6. If I have a cap-subject H pending, should I apply for the STEM Extension within 90-days of the original end of my OPT date or the new cap-gap extension date?

You are generally eligible to apply for the STEM Extension within 90 days of your OPT expiration date as indicated on your OPT EAD and OIS is able to issue the I-20 you need to apply for the STEM Extension within that time period. Yet, there is sometimes confusion around whether or not the application should be submitted within 90 days of the OPT EAD expiration date or 90 days of the cap-gap extension end date which is typically September 30. So there is the possibility that if you submit the application within the 90 day period before your OPT EAD expiration date, USCIS could deny it because you submitted it to early.

7. If I have changed employers throughout my first year of the extension, or I am not currently employed, who should sign my self-evaluation?

Employed: You can have your new employer sign it. Your self-evaluation should be based on what you have learned in the last year in all the different jobs you have had.

Not employed: You can leave the supervisor signature blank or you could ask your previous employer to sign it. Your self-evaluation should be based on what you have learned in the last year in all the different jobs you have had.

8. Can I be self-employed during the STEM extension?

No.