1. **What is STEM OPT Extension and how do I qualify?**
   The STEM extension is 24 additional months of OPT for F-1 students currently engaged in 12 months of post-completion OPT.

   In order to qualify, students must have been awarded a degree in a STEM field as it is listed at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) approved STEM field list and work for an E-Verify employer.

2. **How can I find out if my field of study is a STEM field?**

3. **Do I need a job offer to apply for the STEM extension?**
   Yes and this job offer needs to meet the following requirements:
   - It has to be directly related to your degree level and field of study
   - It has to be full time (i.e. more than 20 hours per week)
   - It must be from an employer who participates in E-Verify
   - It must be an eligible type of employment (unpaid or volunteer positions and positions with temp agencies do not qualify)

4. **What is E-Verify?**
   E-Verify is an internet-based system operated by USCIS in partnership with the Social Security Administration to help employers determine the employment eligibility of their employees. You can find more information about E-Verify here: [www.uscis.gov/everify](http://www.uscis.gov/everify)

5. **Is there a resource list of employers participating in E-Verify?**
   No, there is no public list of employers participating in E-Verify.

6. **How many times can I apply for the STEM OPT extension?**
   You may obtain up to 2 STEM extensions provided that the second STEM extension is for a higher qualifying degree. For example: if you receive a 24-month STEM OPT extension based on your bachelor’s degree in Engineering and you later earn a master’s degree in Engineering, you may apply for an additional 24-month STEM OPT extension based on your master’s degree (after obtaining OPT for the master’s degree).

7. **How long will it take the ISSO to issue the I-20 with the STEM OPT recommendation?**
   Once we receive the completed application package from you, it will take 10 business days to issue the new I-20.

8. **When should I apply for the STEM OPT extension?**
   You can apply no earlier than 90 days prior to the end date of your EAD card. USCIS must have received your application prior to the end date of your EAD card. Your application must also be received within 60 days of the I-20 issuance date (indicated by the date of the ISSO’s Advisor’s signature on page 1).

9. **What will be the dates of the extension?**
   The start date for the extension will be the day after your current EAD card ends and your end date will be 24 months after the start date. The dates are set by USCIS, they cannot be changed.
10. How long will it take for USCIS to process my STEM OPT extension?  
   The average processing time is 90 days.

11. What are my options for mail delivery of my EAD?  
   Beginning April 30, 2018, USCIS began using Signature Confirmation Restricted Delivery to increase the security, integrity, and efficiency of document delivery by mail. The Signature Confirmation Restricted Delivery process provides better tracking and accuracy of delivery information, improving service to applicants.

   As part of the new delivery method, applicants can choose any of the below options to receive their EAD:
   1. Present identification (Driver License, State ID or passport) to sign for their documents upon delivery.
   2. Designate an agent to sign on their behalf by completing the Postal Service’s PS Form 3801, Standing Delivery Order (PDF) or PS Form 3801-A, Agreement by a Hotel, Apartment House, or the Like (PDF).
   3. Arrange for pickup at a post office at a convenient date and time by going to the USPS website and selecting “hold for pickup.”

   Applicants can also sign up for USPS Informed Delivery to receive delivery status notifications.

   More information on how to track delivery of secure documents is available on the USCIS website.

   To request a change of address while your application is pending, follow the instruction on USCIS’s website: https://egov.uscis.gov/coa/displayCOAForm.do

12. What is the SEVP Portal and how do I use it?  
   Starting Friday, March 23, 2018 all students on approved OPT/STEM OPT will receive an auto email from do-not-reply.sevp@ice.dhs.gov telling them about the new SEVP reporting portal providing a link to create an account. Be sure to check your @uncc.edu and personal email accounts as well as spam folders if you don’t see the email within 2 days of OPT approval (check case status).

   If your OPT/STEM OPT has been approved and the EAD start date has been reached but you are experiencing one of the following issues, click here to submit this form to the ISSO and our staff will troubleshoot with USCIS on your behalf.
   1. You did not receive the SEVP Portal email from do-not-reply.SEVP@ice.dhs.gov
   2. You have been locked out of the SEVP Portal (exceeding login attempts or inactive for more than 90 days)
   3. You need to change/update your email address associated with your SEVIS record

   You must allow up to 10 business days for processing and then look for an email from SEVP (do-not-reply.sevp@ice.dhs.gov).

13. What types of employment am I allowed to do on 24-month STEM OPT?  
   All OPT employment is required to be in a job that is related to your degree level and field of study. Employment under the STEM OPT extension may include:
   - Multiple employers: You may work for more than one employer, but all employment must be related to your most recently completed degree program and all employers must be enrolled in E-Verify. You must work a minimum of 20 hours a week for each employer.
   - Bona fide employer-employee relationship. The new STEM rule requires that students have a bona fide employer-employee relationship for the employment to be eligible for STEM. This means that employment through a temp or staffing agency or work for hire where an individual performs a service based on a contractual relationship rather than an employment relationship may not be eligible under the new rule.

   Moreover, the employer that signs the Form I-983 must be the same entity that provides the practical training experience to the student. See 2016 STEM OPT Final Rule (pp. 13072, 13079).
• As of May 10, 2016, unpaid internships and employment and volunteer work are no longer eligible employment opportunities for the STEM OPT extension. Similarly, you cannot represent yourself as both employer and employee on the I-983 form, meaning self-employment is also not allowed.

14. What types of employment am I NOT allowed to do on STEM OPT?
Only employment that represents a bona fide employee-employer relationship is allowed on STEM OPT. In addition, the duties, hours, and compensation of all STEM OPT employment must be commensurate that of similarly situated US workers in the area of employment. This means the following types of employment are not allowed under STEM OPT:

• Unpaid or Volunteer Positions
• Employment through a temp or staffing agency
• Self-Employment

15. What should I do if I receive a ‘request for evidence’ notice from USCIS?
Please scan a copy of your RFE to the ISSO so an advisor may review it and help you prepare your response. Please make sure to include your name and SEVIS ID number in the e-mail.

16. How can I check the status of my case?
You may use the case number (the number begins with three letters followed by 10 numbers such as SRC1234567890) that is provided on the receipt notice to track the status of the application the USCIS website.

17. Can I change employers?
Yes, you may change your employer after your STEM OPT has been authorized. You must report any change of employer or employer address within 10 days. If you change your employer, you must update the ISSO through our Employment/Address Update Reporting Form. You will need to submit a new I-983 every time you change your employer. You will also need to always submit a final self-evaluation report each time you end employment by submitting an OPT STEM Extension Validation Reporting Form.

Note: If you change your employer while your STEM extension application is pending, you must first send an email to intlsso@uncc.edu with subject line ‘change of employer while STEM OPT pending’. You should then apply for a new I-20 with the new employer’s information following the instructions above. The ISSO will then issue a new I-20 and inform USCIS of the change. The ISSO will mail the new I-20 to the address you provide on the online request form.

18. Can I begin working before I receive the Employment Authorization Document?
Yes, as long as USCIS has received your application prior to your current EAD end date, your legal status and work authorization in the US are automatically extended by up to 180 days or until you receive a decision from USCIS regarding your request.

19. Why does page 2 of my STEM I-20 have CURRENT SESSION START DATES and CURRENT SESSION END DATES if I am no longer enrolled?
This is a technical glitch within the Department of Homeland Security’s SEVIS database. The ISSO has no way to fix this and it will not impact the review of your STEM extension application.

20. There is a mistake regarding my EMPLOYERS NAME on page 2 of my I-20. What should I do?
When you submit your request for a STEM I-20 by filling out the application request webform, the ISSO will reflect your employer’s name and address exactly as it is reported to us.

Note: If your Employer has a long name, the entire title may not be reflected on page 2 of your I-20. This is due to the allotted amount of space and characters that may be entered. Please be assured your employer’s complete name has been properly reported within the SEVIS system.
21. What are my reporting requirements to the ISSO while I am on my STEM OPT?
• F-1 regulations require you to report any change of your name, your address, your employer’s name or your employer’s address, as well as any interruption or loss of employment, within 10 days to the ISSO. Please report these changes using our Employment/Address Update Reporting Form.
• Additionally, you must complete validation reports every 6 months during your 24-month STEM extension. This report begins 6 months after the end of your 12-month OPT period. After that, they continue every 6 months until your STEM ends, or you change status or depart the U.S. even if your employment has not changed. The validation report is due to the ISSO within 10 business days of each reporting date. Please use the OPT STEM Extension Validation Reporting Form to submit these updates.
• You are required to complete a Final Evaluation on Student Progress (page 7 of your I-983) EVERYTIME you end employment while on your STEM extension.

22. Can I be unemployed while I am on STEM OPT?
Yes, temporarily. Under standard post-completion OPT, you receive a 90 day allotment to be unemployed. When you receive the STEM extension, you receive an additional 60 days to be unemployed giving you a total of 150 days of unemployment during your entire OPT time.

23. Can I travel outside of the US during my STEM extension? What if my STEM extension is pending?
Yes, Traveling outside of the U.S. while on an approved STEM extension is permitted. You must have the following documents to reenter the US or apply for a new F-1 visa:
• STEM OPT I-20 signed on page 2 by an ISSO advisor within the last 6 months;
• Valid Employment Authorization Document (EAD);
• A passport that is valid for at least six months in the future;
• A valid F-1 visa stamp (except for visits solely to Canada or Mexico less than 30 days, Canadian citizens, or those wishing to apply for a new visa);
• A job offer letter/proof of employment.
The regulations allow you to travel outside of the US if you are in your 180-day period of interim employment while your STEM extension is pending. If you are traveling outside of the US under these circumstances, you need the documents mentioned above, as well as the receipt notice you received proving your I-765 for your STEM extension was filed in a timely matter. Page 3 of 4
Note: Travel at any time while in F-1 status carries some risk. The risk increases for individuals on OPT if your F-1 visa has expired and a new one is required in order to reenter the US. Travel during the “cap-gap” period may not be possible if your EAD card has expired. Consult with your employer/immigration attorney if you have plans to travel in that circumstance.

24. If I am outside of the US and unemployed, does that count as unemployment time?
Yes, any time you are unemployed, whether you’re in the US or outside, counts against your 150 day allotment.

25. After my STEM extension ends, do I have a grace period?
Yes, you have a grace period of 60 days to go back to your home country unless your status has been changed or extended. You may not work during these 60 days nor should you travel outside the U.S and re-enter during this time.

26. What is my immigration status if I am on OPT (post-completion or STEM) with a pending H-1 B petition?
If you have a pending or approved H-1B petition with a request for a change of status, your F-1 status and OPT authorization will automatically extend if your employer has filed a timely H-1B petition. If you require a Cap-Gap I-20, you may request one at Cap-Gap Extension Request Form.
Please note that ISSO will NOT be able to update you on the status of your H-1B application. Therefore, you should forward all of your inquiries about your H-1B status to the immigration attorney helped you with the H-1B application.
Under 8 CFR 214.2(f)(11)(i)(C), USCIS must receive the student's 24-month STEM OPT application package:
- Before the expiration of the student's current post-completion OPT (standard or Cap-Gap), but no sooner than 90 days before that date; and
- No later than 60 days from the date the DSO recommended the STEM OPT in SEVIS.

27. If I have a pending H-1B petition and a Cap-Gap I-20, should I still apply for a STEM extension?
If your H-1B application is selected or is in pending status and you meet the standard eligibility criteria, it is strongly advisable to apply for the STEM OPT extension as a ‘back-up’ plan in case your H-1B petition is denied, rejected or withdrawn.

In the case of an H-1B denial, rejection or withdrawal, you may continue working until the end date indicated on your OPT EAD or cap gap I-20, whichever is later. You will then be entitled to a 60-day grace period with no work authorization or re-entry to the U.S. from the end date on your EAD.

28. My cap gap I-20 has expired. Can I apply for an extension of my cap gap?
No, however you may still be eligible to apply for a STEM OPT extension as long as USCIS can receive your completed application within the 60-day grace period of the cap gap, as reflected on p.2 of your cap gap I-20. Work authorization is not allowed during this period of time.

29. What if I change my status to H-1B?
If your status changes to H-1B, the SEVIS database system will automatically update your F-1 record. No further action or reporting is needed to the ISSO once you are in H-1B status.

30. Will I have to pay taxes?
Employment is subject to all federal and state taxes, unless exempt under certain country tax treaties. Employment is not subject to Social Security Tax if residency in the U.S. has been for less than five (5) years. For your reference, please consult IRS Publication 519 at https://www.irs.gov/forms-pubs/about-publication-519

31. Once I receive my new I-20 for STEM extension, it indicates Oct. 1st as the start date rather than the day after the end of my EAD for 12-months OPT. Is this an error?
This is a known issue and unfortunately not something that the ISSO has control over. Because SEVP has received your H1B request, your SEVIS record shows change of status pending and has the cap gap memo at the bottom. The start date automatically defaults to October 1 because of the H1B fiscal year. There is nothing our office can do to change this however we automatically issue a letter for you to use with your new I-20 in your STEM OPT application requesting USCIS to use the actual dates from the EAD.

If you have an immigration attorney, you can speak with him/her regarding this if you'd like but in the meantime we encourage you to submit the STEM extension application if you are still unsure whether or not your H1B will be approved.

32. I will be working for a branch or subsidiary of a large entity, or somewhere other than headquarters for my company. What should I use as the ‘Site Name’ in section 5 of the I-983 training plan?
See p. 3 under ‘Section 5: Training Plan for STEM OPT Students (Completed by Employer)’

33. Who should I indicate as the ‘Name of Official’ in section 5 of the I-983 if the person with signatory authority for Form I-983 at my place of employment is NOT my supervisor?
See p. 3 under ‘Section 5: Training Plan for STEM OPT Students (Completed by Employer)’

34. Do I need to submit a ‘final evaluation’ when I leave an employer even if I haven’t reached one of the 6-month milestones?
Yes, the expectation is that the final evaluation should be submitted in this situation using the webform provided by the ISSO.