



August 27, 2024

PA-2024-22

Policy Alert

SUBJECT: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Optional Practical Training

Purpose

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is updating policy guidance in the [USCIS Policy Manual](#) regarding when students may be eligible for optional practical training (OPT) for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields; as well as clarifying guidance concerning online study, school transfers, the grace period, and study abroad.

Background

Practical training (PT) is employment that is directly related to a student’s major area of study. Among other types of PT, F-1 students may engage in OPT at the pre-completion and post-completion stages. F-1 students may be further eligible for a 24-month STEM OPT extension if they meet certain qualifications, including applying within a certain time frame and having a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree in a field determined by the Secretary, or their designee, to qualify within a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field.

“STEM field” means a field included in the Department of Education’s Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) taxonomy. The DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List is the complete list of qualifying STEM fields (designated as CIP Code Titles), and corresponding CIP Codes, and is published on the Student and Exchange Visitor Program website.¹

Students also may count a limited number of online or distance education classes or credits per academic session toward the full course of study requirement. Subject to certain restrictions, students may also transfer between schools and study abroad in the course of their studies. Following the conclusion of their studies and any authorized employment, students have a 60-day grace period to prepare for departure or transfer.

This guidance, contained in Volume 2 of the Policy Manual, is effective immediately and applies to requests pending or filed on or after the publication date. The guidance contained in the Policy Manual is controlling and supersedes any related prior guidance on the topic.

Policy Highlights

¹ See the [Student and Exchange Visitor Program website](#).

- Clarifies that students may count one class or three credits (or the equivalent) during each term or semester toward a full course of study if the class is taken online or through distance learning not requiring physical attendance for any purpose integral to completion of the class.
- Explains that students may transfer between SEVP-certified schools at the same educational level or move between educational levels.
- Explains that, during the 60-day grace period following an authorized period of post-completion of OPT, students may change their education level, transfer to another SEVP-certified school, or file an application or petition with USCIS to change to another nonimmigrant or immigrant status.
- Clarifies that students may be eligible for post-completion OPT after completion of an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree program.
- Corrects the time period during which students may apply for STEM OPT extensions and makes other technical corrections.
- Clarifies that a student enrolled in an ICE SEVP-certified school during a study abroad program may remain active in SEVIS if the study abroad program lasts less than 5 months, but the student will need a new [Form I-20](#) if the program lasts longer than 5 months.

Summary of Changes

Affected Section: Volume 2 > Part F > Chapter 3 > Section B, Online and Distance Education Courses

- Revises last paragraph of Subsection 1 (F-1 Students).

Affected Section: Volume 2 > Part F > Chapter 4 > Section A, F-1 Students

- Revises first and third paragraphs.

Affected Section: Volume 2 > Part F > Chapter 5, Practical Training

- Revises fourth bullet point in Section B (F-1 Student Curricular Practical Training).

Affected Section: Volume 2 > Part F > Chapter 5 > Section C, F-1 Student Optional Practical Training (CPT)

- Revises fifth paragraph.
- Revises first bullet point under italicized subheading “Eligibility” in Subsection 2 (Post-Completion OPT).
- Revises italicized subheading “Previously Obtained STEM Degrees” content in its entirety, revises the second paragraph under italicized subheading “Future STEM Degrees,” revises the

first and fourth paragraphs under italicized subheading “Adjudication” and retitles the italicized subheading “Adjudication” as “Validity Period” in Subsection 3 (STEM OPT Extension).

- Revises first and second paragraphs, second and fourth bullet points, and final paragraph in Subsection 4 (OPT Reporting and Employment Requirements) and adds content to new italicized subheading “STEM OPT” in Subsection 5 (OPT Filing).

Affected Section: Volume 2 > Part F > Chapter 7 > Section A, F-1 Students

- Replaces second paragraph with two new paragraphs.

USCIS may also make other minor technical, stylistic, and conforming changes consistent with this update.

Citation

Volume 2: Nonimmigrants, Part F, Students (F, M), Chapter 3, Courses and Enrollment, Full Course of Study, and Reduced Course Load [[2 USCIS-PM F.3](#)]; Chapter 4, School Transfer [[2 USCIS-PM F.4](#)]; Chapter 5, Practical Training [[2 USCIS-PM F.5](#)]; and Chapter 7, Absences From the United States [[2 USCIS-PM F.7](#)].