



EMPLOYER HANDBOOK

Hiring International Students and Graduates



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Executive Summary

Hiring international students and recent graduates often appears more complex than it actually is. That hesitation is usually driven by uncertainty about legal responsibility and perceived risk, rather than by the structure of federal student employment regulations. In practice, most off campus employment for international students is already permitted, provided that specific authorization steps are followed and roles remain consistent with what is approved.

In most cases, employers do not sponsor the individual, do not file immigration paperwork, and do not communicate directly with federal agencies. Work authorization is obtained through the student's visa status and issued by the university or by US Citizenship and Immigration Services USCIS. The employer's role is limited to extending an offer, verifying work authorization through standard hiring procedures, and ensuring the position remains consistent with the approved terms.

This handbook explains how off campus employment works for international students and graduates, what employers are responsible for at each stage, and what typically happens next. Its purpose is to remove ambiguity, reduce hesitation, and support informed hiring decisions without unnecessary caution.

Most international students in the United States hold F-1 or J-1 status. These statuses allow specific types of employment when regulatory conditions are met. Curricular Practical Training CPT and Optional Practical Training OPT are not forms of employer sponsorship. They are student-based work authorizations tied to enrollment or recent graduation. Employers verify work authorization using Form I 9, the same process used for all new hires. Questions about eligibility or timing are handled by the university's Designated School Official DSO, who serves as the primary point of contact throughout the process.

This handbook describes common practices and responsibilities in plain language. It is informational in nature and should not be treated as legal advice.

Key Terms & Definitions

F 1 Student

An international student enrolled full time in a United States degree program. F 1 status allows limited employment when that employment is directly connected to the student's academic experience and authorized through mechanisms such as CPT or OPT.

J 1 Student

An international student participating in an exchange visitor program sponsored by a university or external organization. Employment is permitted through Academic Training when the role is directly related to the student's field of study.

Curricular Practical Training CPT

Off campus work authorization for F 1 students while they remain enrolled. CPT must be directly related to the academic program and formally integrated into the curriculum, such as through a required internship, practicum, or credit bearing experience.

Optional Practical Training OPT

Temporary work authorization that allows F 1 students to work after graduation in roles related to their field of study. OPT functions as a bridge between academic study and professional employment.

STEM OPT

A 24 month extension of OPT available to graduates in certain science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. STEM OPT allows continued employment but introduces additional employer obligations.

Academic Training

Work authorization for J 1 students that permits off campus employment related to the student's academic field. Authorization is issued by the program sponsor rather than by USCIS.

Terms continued

Designated School Official DSO

A university official authorized under federal regulations to advise international students, assess employment eligibility, and issue work authorization documents.

Employment Authorization Document EAD

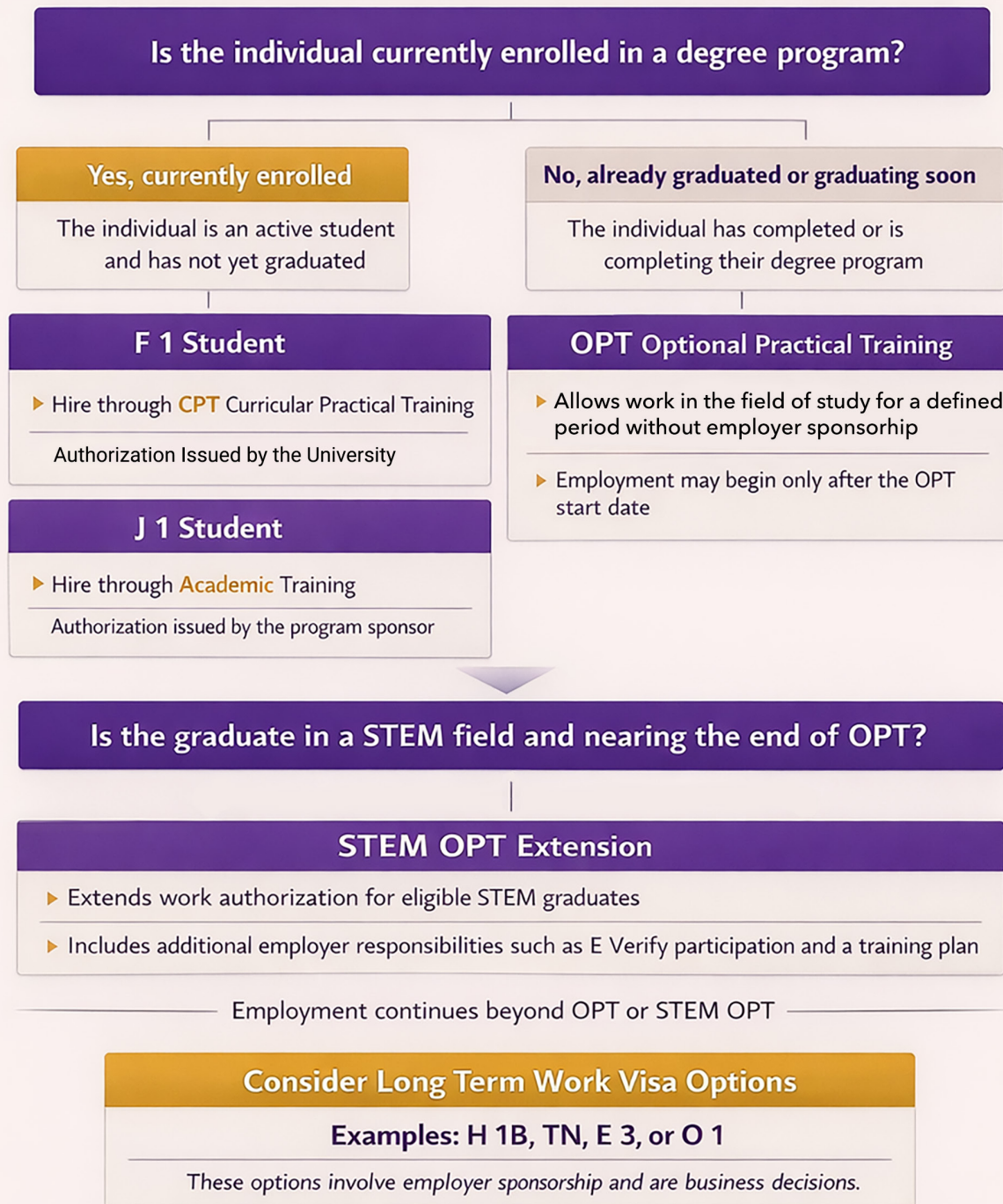
A physical card issued by US Citizenship and Immigration Services USCIS that confirms work authorization for OPT and STEM OPT and specifies valid employment dates.

Sponsorship

An employer initiated process to petition the US government for a longer term work visa, such as H 1B. Sponsorship involves legal filings, government fees, and compliance obligations that are separate from CPT and OPT.

Quick Decision Guide for Employers

Determine the correct hiring pathway based on the individual's academic status.



Important Notes

- ▶ CPT, OPT, and STEM OPT are not sponsorship
- ▶ Authorization must be approved before work begins
- ▶ Sponsorship is optional and considered only after student work authorization ends.

Hiring Current Students

F-1 CPT and J-1 Academic Training

This section addresses off campus internships and employment for students who are still enrolled in their academic programs. These arrangements are common across industries and generally require limited administrative involvement from employers.

The central compliance requirement is that work authorization must be issued before the student begins employment. Once authorization is in place, the employer's responsibilities largely mirror those associated with any other hire.

F-1 Curricular Practical Training CPT

Curricular Practical Training allows F 1 students to work off campus in positions that are directly related to their academic program. The role must be connected to the curriculum itself and evaluated by the university as an integral part of the student's course of study.

CPT authorization is issued by the university and documented on the student's Form I 20. The authorization specifies the employer, work location, approved dates, and permitted hours. These details define the scope of employment and must match actual working conditions.

From the employer's perspective, CPT involves a defined and limited set of responsibilities. The employer provides an offer that includes the position title, duties, location, start and end dates, and expected weekly hours. The employer does not assess eligibility, submit documentation to USCIS, or pay fees related to CPT authorization.

Once the student provides an updated Form I 20 reflecting CPT approval, the employer verifies work authorization using Form I 9 and ensures employment remains within the authorized scope. Employment may begin only on or after the CPT start date and must end no later than the authorized end date.

Compliance issues most often occur when a student begins work before CPT authorization is issued or when job duties, work location, or hours change without updated approval. Authorization requirements apply regardless of whether the role is paid or unpaid.

Hiring Current Students

F-1 CPT and J-1 Academic Training Continued

Sample CPT offer letter language

This offer is contingent upon the candidate receiving Curricular Practical Training authorization from their university. Employment may begin only on or after the CPT start date listed on the student's Form I 20 and must end no later than the authorized end date.

J-1 Academic Training

Academic Training allows J 1 students to work off campus in roles related to their field of study. Authorization is issued by the student's program sponsor, which may be the university or an external organization.

As with CPT, Academic Training does not involve employer sponsorship. The employer extends an offer with standard job details, verifies work authorization using Form I 9 once approval is issued, and ensures employment remains within the authorized dates and conditions.

Sample Academic Training offer letter language

This offer is contingent upon the candidate receiving Academic Training authorization from their J 1 program sponsor. Employment must comply with the authorized dates and conditions.

Supervisor Expectations for CPT and Academic Training Roles

Supervisors play an essential role in maintaining compliance for CPT and Academic Training positions. They are responsible for assigning duties that align with the approved job description, monitoring work hours, and coordinating with HR when questions or changes arise.

Supervisors should not make substantial changes to job duties, extend employment beyond authorized dates, or assume that authorization automatically applies to a different role or location. When uncertainty exists, issues should be escalated rather than handled informally.

Hiring Recent Graduates

Optional Practical Training OPT

Optional Practical Training allows F-1 graduates to work in the United States in roles directly related to their field of study. OPT is a temporary benefit connected to the academic program and commonly serves as a transition into professional employment.

OPT authorization is issued by USCIS and documented through an Employment Authorization Document EAD. OPT is not employer sponsorship. The employer does not file immigration petitions or pay government filing fees.

From the employer's perspective, OPT closely resembles standard employment. The employer extends an offer, completes Form I 9 using the EAD, and ensures employment begins no earlier than the EAD start date and ends when authorization expires.

Sample OPT offer letter language

This offer is contingent upon the candidate receiving Optional Practical Training authorization and presenting a valid Employment Authorization Document. Employment may begin only on or after the start date listed on the EAD.

STEM OPT Extension

The STEM OPT extension allows eligible F-1 graduates in designated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields to extend their OPT by an additional 24 months. This option enables continued employment without immediate sponsorship but introduces specific employer obligations.

Employers must be enrolled in E-Verify and support a structured training experience. A formal training plan outlining supervision, learning objectives, and professional development is required. Employers must also report certain changes and be prepared for potential government review.

Despite these obligations, STEM OPT remains distinct from sponsorship and does not involve filing a visa petition or paying long term visa fees.

Hiring Recent Graduates

Optional Practical Training OPT Continued

Sample STEM OPT offer letter language

This offer is contingent upon the candidate receiving STEM Optional Practical Training authorization. Continued employment is subject to compliance with federal training plan and reporting requirements.

Retaining Talent Beyond OPT

Sponsorship Pathways

Employers who wish to retain international graduates beyond OPT or STEM OPT may consider longer term work visas. These pathways involve employer sponsorship and represent a different level of commitment than student based work authorization.

<u>Visa Type</u>	<u>Typical Use Case</u>	<u>Employer Commitment</u>
H 1B	Professional roles requiring specialized knowledge	High
TN	Canadian or Mexican professionals in specific occupations	Moderate
E 3	Australian nationals in specialty occupations	Moderate
O 1	Individuals with extraordinary ability or achievement	High

Sponsorship involves legal filings, government fees, and ongoing compliance obligations. Decisions to sponsor are business decisions and are never required by law.

Guidance

Common Myths and Compliance Reminders

Hiring an international student does not automatically require sponsorship. CPT, OPT, and STEM OPT are governed by student status, not employer petitions.

Authorization requirements apply regardless of compensation. Unpaid roles are not exempt.

Employers should pause and seek guidance when job duties, work location, hours, or company structure change. Starting work before authorization or extending employment beyond approved dates are common compliance errors that can be avoided through early communication.

Working With the University

DSO Coordination: The Designated School Official serves as the primary institutional contact for employment authorization questions. Employers should reach out when there is uncertainty, an anticipated change, or timing concerns.

Providing clear job details and communicating early allows issues to be resolved before they become compliance problems.

When in doubt, pause and ask!

Official Resources and Regulatory Updates

For Employers Hiring International Students and Graduates

Purpose of This Page

Immigration and employment regulations can change over time. While the Employer Handbook explains how hiring international students and graduates typically works, this page directs employers to official government and regulatory sources that publish the most current guidance.

Employers are encouraged to consult these resources when questions arise about updates, rule changes, or documentation requirements. The sources listed below are authoritative and maintained by the agencies that administer student employment and work authorization programs.

Primary Federal Sources for Student Employment and Work Authorization

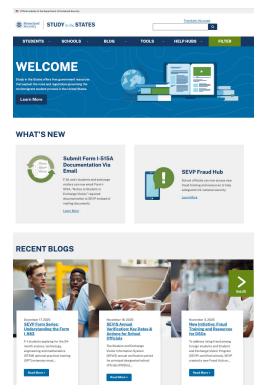
US Department of Homeland Security: Study in the States

Study in the States is the primary federal resource for information related to international students in F 1 status. It provides official guidance on Curricular Practical Training CPT, Optional Practical Training OPT, and STEM OPT, as well as updates when policies or procedures change.

This site is especially useful for confirming:

- CPT and OPT eligibility rules
- STEM OPT requirements
- Student and employer responsibilities
- Regulatory updates affecting international students

<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov>



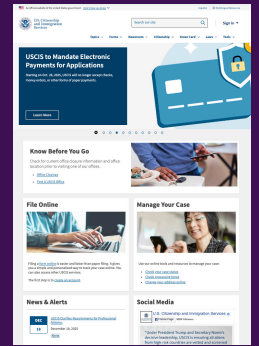
US Citizenship and Immigration Services USCIS

USCIS administers employment authorization for OPT and STEM OPT and oversees many long term employment visa programs. Employers can use this site to verify current forms, instructions, and policy updates.

Key areas include:

- Employment Authorization Documents EAD
- OPT and STEM OPT filing guidance
- Form I 9 and employment verification
- Sponsorship related visa programs

<https://www.uscis.gov>

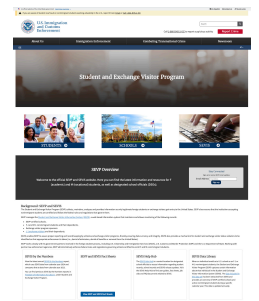


Immigration and Customs Enforcement: Student and Exchange Visitor Program SEVP

SEVP oversees compliance for schools and exchange visitor programs that enroll international students. This site publishes policy guidance and regulatory updates that affect how student employment is administered.

Employers typically do not interact directly with SEVP, but this resource provides context when rules or interpretations change.

<https://www.ice.gov/sevis>



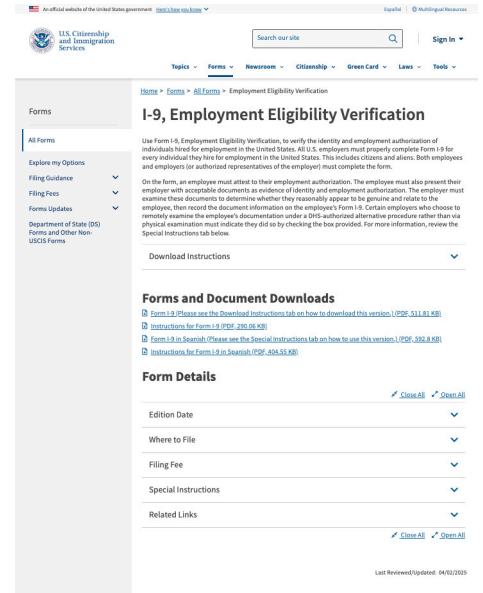
Employment Verification and Compliance

Form I 9: Employment Eligibility Verification

All employers must use the official Form I 9 to verify employment eligibility. USCIS maintains the current version of the form, instructions, and compliance guidance.

Employers should rely only on the official USCIS site to ensure they are using the correct form and procedures.

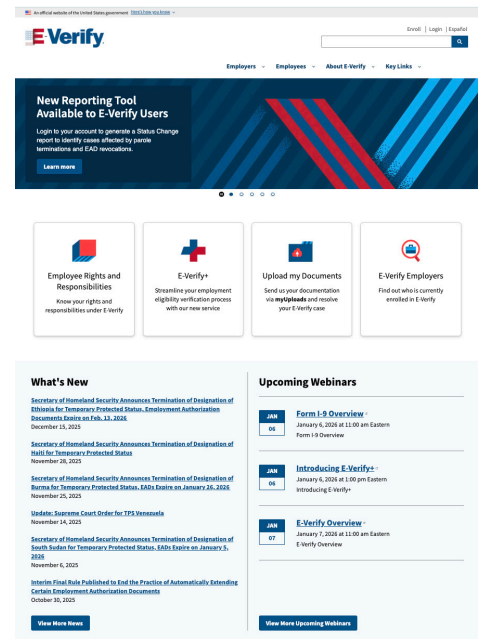
<https://www.uscis.gov/i-9>



E-Verify

E-Verify is required for employers participating in the STEM OPT program and may be used voluntarily in other contexts. This site provides enrollment instructions, employer responsibilities, and system updates.

<https://www.e-verify.gov>



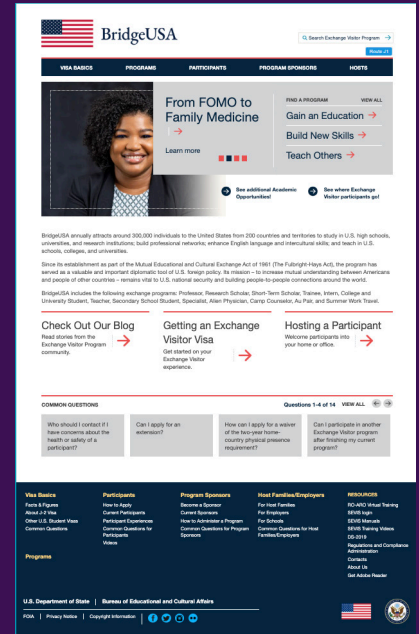
Exchange Visitor Programs for J 1 Academic Training

US Department of State: Exchange Visitor Program

The Department of State oversees J 1 exchange visitor programs, including Academic Training. Employers hiring J 1 students can reference this site for general program information and regulatory context.

Authorization for Academic Training is issued by the program sponsor, but this site provides official background guidance.

<https://j1visa.state.gov>

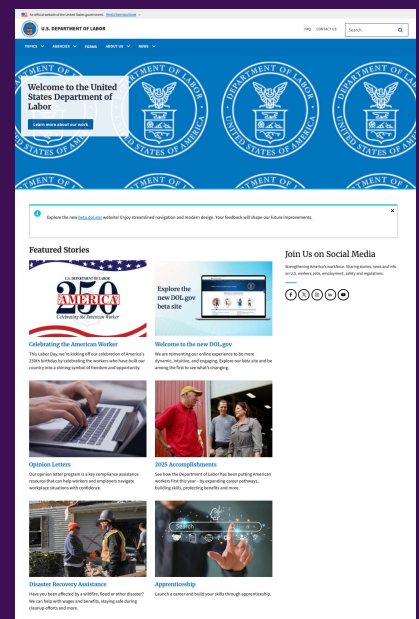


Sponsorship and Long Term Employment

US Department of Labor: Employment and Wage Requirements

The Department of Labor plays a role in many employment based visa programs, particularly H 1B. Employers considering sponsorship can reference this site for information related to wage requirements, labor condition applications, and compliance obligations.

<https://www.dol.gov>



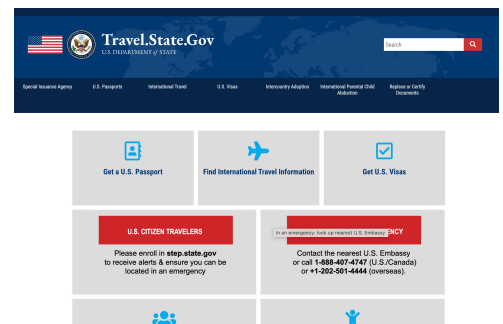
Sponsorship and Long Term Employment Continued

US Department of State: Visa Classifications and Consular Processing

The Department of State administers visa issuance and maintains official information about visa classifications, eligibility, and consular processing abroad.

This resource is useful for understanding visa categories such as H 1B, TN, E 3, and O 1 from a regulatory perspective.

<https://travel.state.gov>



Using These Resources Effectively

These resources are intended to provide the most current and authoritative guidance available. Employers should rely on these sources when:

- Confirming current rules or documentation requirements
- Reviewing changes to OPT, STEM OPT, or sponsorship programs
- Verifying official forms and instructions
- Seeking clarification when policies evolve

For questions specific to a student or a particular position, employers should contact the university's Designated School Official DSO. The DSO can help interpret how current guidance applies within the context of the student's academic program and authorization.

Important Reminder

This resource page links to official government sources. It does not replace legal counsel and should not be interpreted as legal advice. Employers considering sponsorship or complex employment arrangements are encouraged to consult qualified immigration professionals.

Frequently Asked Questions

FAQs

General Questions

Do employers need to sponsor international students to hire them?

No. International students are commonly authorized to work through their student status. CPT, OPT, and STEM OPT are not sponsorship programs. They do not require employers to file immigration petitions, pay sponsorship related fees, or communicate with federal agencies beyond standard Form I 9 verification.

Sponsorship becomes relevant only if an employer chooses to pursue a longer term work visa after student based authorization ends.

Is hiring an international student riskier than hiring a US citizen?

No. When authorization is in place, hiring an international student follows the same employment verification process as any other hire.

Most compliance problems occur when work begins before authorization is issued or when job details change without review. These risks are avoidable through standard onboarding checks and early communication with the student and the university.

Can international students work unpaid internships?

Authorization rules may apply regardless of compensation. Employers should not assume that unpaid status eliminates authorization requirements.

If the role resembles employment in duties, expectations, and supervision, the student should confirm authorization with the university before beginning work.

FAQs Continued

Questions About Current Students

What is CPT in simple terms?

CPT allows an enrolled F-1 student to work off campus in a role that is part of their academic program. The university reviews the role and issues authorization before work begins.

What does the employer need to do for CPT?

The employer provides a job offer with basic details such as duties, location, dates, and hours. Once CPT is approved, the employer verifies work authorization using Form I-9 and follows the approved terms.

The employer does not apply for CPT or determine eligibility.

When can a student start working on CPT?

Only on or after the CPT start date listed on the student's Form I-20. Work cannot begin earlier, even if an offer has been accepted.

What is Academic Training for J-1 students?

Academic Training allows J-1 students to work off campus in roles related to their field of study. Authorization is issued by the student's program sponsor.

From the employer's perspective, the process is similar to CPT.

FAQs Continued

Questions About Graduates

What is OPT?

OPT allows F 1 graduates to work in the United States in roles related to their field of study for a limited period after graduation. Authorization is issued by USCIS and documented through an Employment Authorization Document EAD.

Does OPT require employer sponsorship?

No. OPT is a student benefit. Employers do not file petitions or pay sponsorship related fees.

When can a graduate start work on OPT?

Only on or after the start date listed on the EAD. Work cannot begin earlier.

What is STEM OPT?

STEM OPT is a 24 month extension of OPT for certain science, technology, engineering, and mathematics degrees. It allows continued employment but includes additional employer requirements.

What additional responsibilities do employers have under STEM OPT?

Employers must be enrolled in E Verify and support a structured training experience. A formal training plan is required, and certain changes must be reported.

STEM OPT still does not involve visa sponsorship.

FAQs Continued

Questions About Changes and Compliance

What changes require review or notification?

Employers should pause and seek guidance if there are changes to:

- Job duties
- Work location
- Work hours
- Compensation structure
- Company ownership or control

Making changes before review is one of the most common compliance mistakes.

What happens if authorization expires?

Employment must end when authorization expires unless new authorization has been issued. Employers should track end dates listed on the Form I 20 or EAD.

Questions About Sponsorship

When does sponsorship become relevant?

Sponsorship becomes relevant only if the employer wishes to retain the individual beyond the limits of OPT or STEM OPT.

Are employers required to sponsor?

No. Sponsorship is optional and based on business needs.

FAQs Continued

Questions About Sponsorship Continued

What visas are commonly used for sponsorship?

Common options include H-1B, TN, E-3, and O-1. Each has different eligibility criteria, timelines, and costs. Employers typically consult immigration counsel when considering these pathways.

Working With the University

Who should employers contact with questions?

The university's Designated School Official DSO is the primary contact for questions related to student work authorization.

When should employers contact the DSO?

Employers should reach out when:

- They are unsure which authorization applies
- Job details are changing
- There are timing concerns
- They want to confirm compliance before proceeding

Early communication helps prevent problems.

Final Reminder

Hiring international students and graduates is common and manageable. Most roles do not involve sponsorship, and most employer responsibilities align with standard hiring practices.

When in doubt, pause and ask!



Document purpose:

This handbook is intended to support employers in understanding common pathways for hiring international students and graduates for off campus employment. It explains general processes and responsibilities and does not constitute legal advice.

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