

SEVP Spotlight

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DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Understanding the STEM OPT Extension Transition



A message from
Louis M. Farrell,
Director of the Student
and Exchange Visitor
Program

As many of you are probably aware, on Friday, March 11, 2016, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [published](#) its final rule on the [science, technology, engineering and mathematics \(STEM\) optional practical training \(OPT\) extension](#). The rule will go into effect on May 10, 2016.

The new rule strengthens the educational experiences of international students pursuing STEM coursework at U.S. universities today by giving these students the chance to supplement their classroom education with practical on-the-job training to support successful careers.

DHS estimates about 34,000 international students currently participate in the 17-month STEM OPT extension. Under the new rule, DHS predicts the number of qualified international students will expand to nearly 50,000 during the first year following its implementation, growing the program to approximately 92,000 participants annually.

I would like to thank everyone who commented on the draft rule. DHS received over 50,000 comments. Stakeholder feedback is greatly valued and shaped many of the provisions of the final regulation.

Ultimately, the final regulation sought to balance extending the benefits of the STEM OPT program to students with strengthening oversight of the program. Thus, the final rule:

- Lengthens the STEM OPT extension from 17 months to 24 months and allows for a total of two STEM OPT extensions.

- Introduces formal training plans and provides for DHS site visits to employer locations where STEM OPT students are training.
- Better protects international students and U.S. workers through wage guarantees and other safeguards to prevent student exploitation and promote U.S. worker security.

Again, the new rule will go into effect on May 10, 2016. To help school officials, students and employers understand the new regulation, Study in the States launched the [STEM OPT Hub](#). This free, online resource center helps stakeholders transition and understand what the new rule entails.

Topics in the STEM OPT Hub are organized by intended audience, with individual Web pages geared to employers, students and school officials. The hub also includes clarification on what constitutes a [STEM degree](#), an explanation of the [benefits for small businesses](#), as well as a series of [frequently asked questions](#).

For example, as part of the new rule, international students and employers will need to develop individualized training plans that enhance the students' educational experiences with practical training. The training plans must be provided to the college or university where the student is enrolled. This is one of the topics explored in depth on the STEM OPT Hub. There is an entire section dedicated to the newly required [training plan](#) that provides specific information about what this plan means for [students](#), [employers](#) and [school officials](#).

The final rule also includes very specific transition instructions for students who find themselves with either existing 17-month STEM OPT work authorizations or pending 17-month STEM OPT extension applications on May 10, 2016.

This transition plan is arguably the most complex piece of the new regulation, and to make sure our

stakeholders understand it correctly, the STEM OPT Hub has a component dedicated to outlining the steps some students may need to take.

I recommend that you start with the [Transition Plan Overview](#) and from there explore the individual transition plan details. For more information about the STEM OPT extension, please visit the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\) website](#). USCIS adjudicates STEM OPT applications and is best suited to answer your case-specific questions regarding applications, especially during the transition period.

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) will continually roll out new resources and keep our current resources up to date to help school officials and students understand and comply with this new rule. If you have not had the opportunity to watch the [SEVP Special Report: STEM OPT webinar](#), I highly suggest you do so.

Additionally, the program will continue to communicate enhancements made to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) that will help you properly capture the rule's new requirements. Please [register](#) for the [SEVIS Workarounds for STEM OPT webinar](#) on April 29, 2016. If you cannot make the event, a live recording of the webinar will be available on the SEVIS Help Hub.

If you have any questions about how to properly comply with the new rule, please reach out to your [field representative](#). If your region does not currently have an assigned field representative, do not hesitate to [contact](#) the SEVP Response Center or to ask Study in the States on [social media](#).

Bottom line in all of this — It is our top priority to ensure that schools and students alike understand this new regulation that helps to expand the educational benefits of the OPT program.

Take care,
Lou



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

Trafficking of Student Athletes

For international students, navigating a new language and culture in the United States is in itself challenging, and this can be compounded by being far from family and friends. When students have difficulty with their new home and academic life, they are often unsure of where to turn or how to get help. Social services commonly available in the United States may be nonexistent in a student's home country, and some students may be fearful of involving the police.

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) has recently uncovered an alarming trend of student athletes being trafficked by their coaches and caretakers. Teenagers and young adults, lured by the promise of a college scholarship and professional sports career, are being brought to the United States on F-1 student visas to attend school. Instead of a structured academic program, many student athletes find themselves deprived of a formal classroom setting and isolated from other students. Often, they are met at the airport upon arrival in the United States and, instead of being taken to the school named on their F-1 visa and Form I-20, "Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status," are whisked away to a location far from their intended school. With all aspects of their life dictated by their caretakers, these student athletes have no control over their academic program, where they live or even when they can come and go from their housing. Parents of student athletes often have no financial resources to get them back home or out of these confines.

HSI agents have seen firsthand the substandard housing trafficked student athletes endure. They have listened to student athletes' stories of being given inadequate amounts of food or of being deprived of much needed medical care. In many cases, students never attend school and are forced to play sports for club teams, in violation of their student visa. Students also tell of being forced to labor on school grounds or at the homes of their caretakers. Although mistreated, most student athletes cannot

leave their guardians because they have nowhere to go or have been threatened with deportation by their caretakers if they do not comply. Through their investigative work, HSI agents have removed student athletes from these situations, closed down the offending programs and prosecuted the violators.

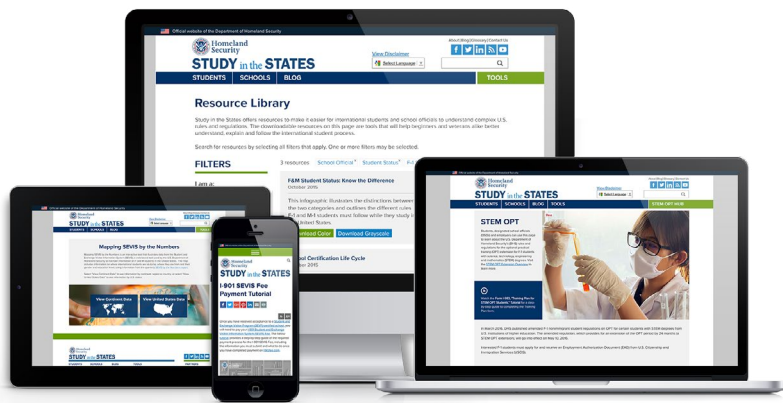
Students can protect themselves by taking precautions and by knowing that they do have basic legal rights while residing in the United States. Before leaving their home country, students should thoroughly research their intended school, looking at both the academic and athletic programs. School websites post valuable information about academic programs, housing and campus life, and usually boast about any championship sports teams. Additional articles about sports teams can be found on open source media. If this information is absent on their school's website, students should be suspicious.

Some schools require that students on scholarship work on campus. Students should be aware that work hours for teenagers under the age of 18 are regulated by state or [federal labor laws](#). Additionally, students can get information and ask questions about U.S. schools at the [U.S. embassy or consulate](#) in their home country when applying for a visa. To further protect themselves, students should maintain control of their passports and avoid being forced to turn personal documents over to coaches or caretakers. Students should know how to contact their country's embassy in the United States for help and how to seek assistance from their local police or HSI office.

Designated school officials, teachers and other academic professionals who suspect that a student athlete is being trafficked or mistreated can contact their local HSI office to report potential violations or call the HSI Tip Line at 866-DHS-2-ICE (866-347-2423).

STUDY IN THE STATES UPDATES

Check Out What's New on Study in the States



- The [STEM OPT Hub](#) is an online resource center that provides students, school officials and employers with the latest information about the new regulations for the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) optional practical training (OPT) extension for F-1 international students.
- The new [Resource Library](#) includes 22 different infographics that students and school officials can download and print for easy reference. These resources break down Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) reporting requirements and complex federal regulations into easy-to-follow graphics. You can find specific resources in the library by applying audience and topic filters. The library can be accessed through [Study in the States' Tools section](#) on most web browsers and mobile devices.
- The updated [I-901 SEVIS Fee tutorial](#) reflects the new I-901 SEVIS Form that includes a mandatory email address field that allows the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) to send instant notifications to students when their I-901 SEVIS Fee payment status changes. The updated tutorial also clarifies instructions for making payments through the Western Union payment process.
- Finally, be sure to visit the recently enhanced [Mapping SEVIS by the Numbers](#). This latest update provides users with more options to explore data released in quarterly SEVIS by the Numbers reports. You can still view international student data by continent, region or country — but now, you also have the option to view data by U.S. state. Users may also select a specific reporting period to view historical data and trends.

Conferences & Outreach

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) strives to increase engagement with the academic community. In 2015, thanks in large part to our field representatives, we attended over twice as many events as we did the previous year. If you are interested in having SEVP participate in your upcoming conference or event, please email your request to SEVPOutreach@ice.dhs.gov and a representative will follow up with you.



FIELD REPRESENTATIVES FEATURE

SEVP Field Representatives: Better Connecting SEVP-certified Schools with DHS

Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) [field representatives](#) serve as liaisons between the program and SEVP-certified schools, and play a critical role in connecting the academic community to the other important entities within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

SEVP field representatives make these connections by attending and presenting at events hosted by other DHS entities and national security partners. At these events, field representatives learn about national security initiatives that impact the international student community and share information about our program.

For this issue of SEVP Spotlight, we asked three field representatives to share their experience with national security-focused events and to describe how participating in these events helped them better serve both DHS and the SEVP-certified schools in their region.

Academia and Related Export Controls: The Impact and Implications of Compliance and Non-Compliance, Chicago, IL

Event presented by the University of Illinois at Chicago

“SEVP was invited to speak at this event presented by the University of Illinois at Chicago. The event itself focused on the key aspects of trade compliance in the research community and was facilitated by private sector partners and designed for academic institutions, labs, federally funded research and development centers, and any entity doing research with foreign nationals. Researchers, students and school officials were all invited to attend. Other government agencies, like the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Commerce also were invited to present.

This opportunity helped introduce designated school officials from large research institutions in Illinois to the role of field representatives. We were able to explain that institutions are the ones responsible for inspecting visa holders for possible International Traffic in Arms Regulation or Export Administration Regulations conflicts. Because of the information exchange that occurred during this event, both federal agents and large research institutions walked away with a better understanding of the academic export controls process. Field representatives were able to share with federal agents that export control offices on the campuses of large research institutions may not be in the same location as international offices. From an SEVP perspective, attending this event was a win-win: Attendees learned about our role as field representatives, while we learned more about the possible implications of academic export controls.”

—Kelly Pilleux-Petronia, Illinois

Tour of the International Border and Highway 95 Port of Entry, San Luis, Arizona:

“The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents gave me a tour of this port of entry, which has a walk-through entry, auto entry, Trusted Traveler entry, and it may also be one of the only ports of entry with a specific bicycle entry point. This particular port processes several border commuter students each day. These border commuters are students who study in the United States but reside in Mexico.

Taking this tour gave me a better understanding as to why we encourage border commuters to enroll in the Trusted Traveler / Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection program for faster processing at the port of entry. Taking this tour provided me with insight about the border commuter process and about the important issues CBP faces. Understanding this allowed me to take back important reminders to the schools in my region that may enroll border commuter students or have other international students who enter through a land port of entry when returning from vacation. Specifically, CBP stressed these two important points:

- Students should carry all proper documentation, including the Form I-20 “Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status,” a passport, a visa and their I-901 Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) Fee receipt, when crossing through a port of entry.
- Students should also remember that they will need to have the redesigned Form I-20 in hand for travel purposes by July 1, 2016.”

—Kimberly Large, Arizona

Homeland Security Working Group Meeting, West Valley City, Utah:

“The quarterly Homeland Security Working Group meeting coordinates different DHS entities based in Utah. Attending this meeting each quarter allows SEVP to share its mission with DHS partners and helps tell the story of how our program connects Utah schools to the department.

The meetings allow me to share important SEVP updates, such as information about the redesigned Form I-20 or any planned SEVIS enhancements. It gives me the opportunity to answer questions about our program and to learn how the information we manage in SEVIS affects the national security mission as a whole. I continue to regularly attend this working group because it helps me coordinate and share relevant information with other DHS entities in Utah. This information sharing allows SEVP, and the department, to continue to fulfill and strengthen its national security mission.”

—Mary Weir, Utah and Nevada

CONTACT US

SEVP Contacts

The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) is dedicated to maintaining open communication with international students and academic officials. SEVP has multiple contact options:

Our offices are open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. EDT, except holidays

Phone: 703-603-3400

Email: SEVP@ice.dhs.gov

Find us on the Web:

www.ice.gov/sevp

<http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov>

Disclaimer: The information presented in the SEVP Spotlight is provided for informational purposes only and should not be considered legal advice.

Follow us on Twitter [@StudyinStates](https://twitter.com/StudyinStates)

Like Study in the States on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/studyinthestates)

If you need assistance with passwords or Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) technical help, call the SEVIS Help Desk at 800-892-4829 between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. EDT or email SEVISHelpDesk@ice.dhs.gov

ICE Contacts

To report national vulnerabilities or national security concerns:

Contact ICE's **Counterterrorism and Criminal Exploitation Unit** at CTCEU@dhs.gov

To report exploitation of student visa programs:

Contact your local **HSI special agent**, call 1-877-4-HSI-TIP or visit www.ice.gov

