

Comprehensive Guide: Responding to an RFE questioning STEM degree qualification

Synopsis

For F-1 students applying for a STEM OPT extension and receiving an RFE questioning their degree's STEM qualification, a well-prepared response is essential. Key steps include securing official documentation, getting a DSO letter, compiling course descriptions, and drafting a clear cover letter to demonstrate your degree's compliance with STEM criteria.



Rajiv Khanna

Managing Attorney,
Immigration.Com,
Contributor Content

Khanna is a member of the Virginia and D.C. Bars and the principal of the Law Offices of Rajiv S. Kh...Show more »

As an [F-1 student](#) applying for a [STEM OPT extension](#), receiving a Request for Evidence (RFE) questioning your degree's [STEM qualification](#) can be alarming. However, with a well-prepared response, you can effectively demonstrate that your degree meets the STEM criteria. This guide will walk you through the process of responding to such an RFE.

Understanding STEM OPT Eligibility and the RFE

Before diving into the response process, it's crucial to understand the basic eligibility criteria for STEM OPT extensions. According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS):

"To qualify for a 24-month STEM [OPT extension](#), an F-1 student participating in an initial period of regular post-completion OPT must: Have a degree in an eligible STEM field from a Student and Exchange Visitor Program-certified school that is accredited when the student

submits their STEM OPT extension application to USCIS."

An RFE in this context indicates that USCIS needs more information to verify that your degree qualifies as STEM according to these guidelines. They're seeking evidence and explanation that your program of study aligns with the approved STEM fields eligible for OPT extension.

(Join our [ETNRI WhatsApp channel](#) for all the latest updates)

Key Steps to Respond to the RFE

1. Obtain Official Documentation of Your Degree

Your first and most crucial step is to gather official documentation that demonstrates your degree's STEM classification:

You Might Also Like:



US issues new guidelines on OPT eligibility, grace periods, and study abroad for international STEM students

a) Official Transcript: Request an official transcript from your university. This document should clearly show all the [STEM courses](#) you've completed.

b) Degree Certificate: Include a copy of your degree/diploma certificate, which should state your specific major or field of study.

2. Secure a DSO Letter

Request a detailed letter from your Designated School Official (DSO) that explicitly confirms:

- Your degree program's full name
- The program's Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code
- Confirmation that this CIP code is on the DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List
- A statement affirming and explaining how your degree qualifies for the STEM OPT extension

The CIP code is key. As per DHS:

"DHS's STEM designated degree program list includes all STEM fields qualifying an F-1 student for a STEM OPT extension. DHS determined a "STEM field" is a field included in the Department of Education's CIP taxonomy within the two-digit series containing engineering (CIP code 14), biological sciences (CIP code 26), mathematics (CIP code 27), physical sciences (CIP code 40) or a related field."

You Might Also Like:



Working in the US as a student: On-campus jobs, OPT, CPT, and visa rules explained

3. Read through these sources

CIP codes: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/>

CIP Code FAQ: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/FAQ.aspx?y=56>

4. Provide Your Form I-20

Include a copy of your most recent Form I-20, which should display:

You Might Also Like:



Study in US: An expert answers your biggest F-1 visa questions

- Your program's CIP code
- Your major field of study

5. Compile Course Descriptions

Gather detailed descriptions of all STEM courses you completed. These should come from official university sources (e.g., course catalog, letters from the school and/or professors) and demonstrate the STEM nature of your coursework.

6. Prepare a Comprehensive Program Overview

This step is crucial in demonstrating the STEM nature of your degree. Your overview should include:

a) Program Description: Provide a detailed description of your degree program, including:

- The program's overall focus and objectives
- How it aligns with DHS STEM criteria
- A breakdown of required STEM courses and their relevance to the field

b) Curriculum Analysis: Create a table or chart showing:

- All STEM courses taken, including course codes and titles
- Brief descriptions of each course's STEM content
- The percentage of your overall curriculum that consists of STEM courses

c) Projects and Research: Highlight any significant STEM-related projects, research, or theses you completed. Provide brief descriptions and explain their relevance to your STEM field.

d) Internships or Practical Training: If applicable, include information about any STEM-related internships or Curricular Practical Training (CPT) you participated in during your studies.

e) **Faculty Expertise:** Mention the STEM credentials of key faculty members in your program to underscore the program's STEM focus.

f) Leveraging DSO and Faculty Support

Your DSO can be an invaluable resource in preparing this overview:

- 1. Program Expertise:** DSOs are familiar with USCIS requirements and can guide you on what specific information to include in your program overview.
- 2. CIP Code Explanation:** They can provide a detailed explanation of how your program's CIP code aligns with DHS STEM designations.
- 3. Institutional Context:** DSOs can offer insights into how your program fits within your institution's broader STEM offerings.
- 4. Documentation Review:** Ask your DSO to review your program overview for completeness and accuracy before submission.

If your DSO is unable to provide extensive assistance, or if you need additional support, consider reaching out to your professors:

- 1. Course Content Verification:** Professors can provide detailed letters or statements about the STEM content of specific courses you've taken.
- 2. Research Validation:** If you've conducted research, a letter from your research advisor detailing the STEM nature of your work can be good evidence.
- 3. Program Insights:** Senior faculty or department heads can offer valuable perspectives on how your program aligns with STEM criteria.
- 4. Industry Relevance:** Professors with industry connections can show how your coursework prepares you for STEM careers in the industry.

When approaching professors for help:

- Clearly explain the purpose of your request and the specific information you need.
- Provide them with a draft of your program overview for context.
- Ask if they're willing to write a letter or statement supporting the STEM nature of your studies.

7. Include Relevant DHS Documentation

Provide a copy of the current DHS STEM Designated Degree Program List highlighting your CIP code. This will reinforce that your program is officially recognized as STEM-eligible.

8. Draft a Clear Cover Letter

Write a concise yet comprehensive cover letter that:

- Directly addresses the STEM qualification concern raised in the RFE
- Summarizes how each document proves your degree's STEM status

- Provides a clear list of all enclosed documents

Final Thoughts

Remember, the goal is to leave no doubt that your degree qualifies as STEM under DHS guidelines. Your response should paint a clear picture of your academic program's STEM focus and how it aligns with the criteria for OPT extension eligibility.

By leveraging the support of your DSO and professors, you can create a compelling case for your degree's STEM qualification. Their expertise and official statements can significantly strengthen your RFE response.

If you're unsure about any aspect of your response, don't hesitate to consult with your university's international student office or an experienced immigration attorney. A thorough, well-organized response to this RFE is crucial for maintaining your status and securing your STEM OPT extension.

While not a replacement for a response prepared by an experienced lawyer, following these steps and providing

comprehensive evidence and positions will help demonstrate your eligibility for the STEM OPT extension.

SECTIONS Comprehensive Guide: Responding to an RFE questioning STEM degree qualification

(Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are that of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of www.economictimes.com.)