CPT vs OPT: What Is the Difference and How to Apply

Introduction:

The purpose of this document is to provide a clear understanding of the differences between Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT) and to guide students on how to apply for these programs.

Curricular Practical Training (CPT):

CPT allows F-1 visa students to gain practical work experience directly related to their field of study.

Eligibility: Students must have completed one academic year in their program and have a job offer or internship that is an integral part of their curriculum.

Duration: CPT can be part-time (up to 20 hours per week) or full-time (more than 20 hours per week) during the academic year. There is no set limit on the duration of CPT, but students should be mindful not to exceed the allowed total of 12 months of full-time CPT, as it may affect their eligibility for OPT.

Optional Practical Training (OPT):

OPT allows F-1 visa students to work in the United States for up to 12 months (or up to 24 months for STEM graduates) after completing their academic program.

Eligibility: Students must have completed at least one academic year in a degree program. They can apply for OPT before graduation or within 60 days of completing their program.

Duration: The standard duration of OPT is 12 months, but students in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) may be eligible for a 24-month extension.

Application Process: To apply for OPT, students need to file Form I-765, obtain a recommendation from their Designated School Official (DSO), and submit the required documents to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Key Differences:

Purpose: CPT provides work experience directly related to the student's program of study, while OPT focuses on practical training after completing the program.

Timing: CPT is used during the academic program, while OPT is typically used after program completion.

Duration: CPT has no set time limit, but OPT is limited to a maximum of 12 months (or 36 months for STEM graduates).

Impact on OPT: Engaging in 12 months or more of full-time CPT may reduce eligibility for OPT. Students should consult with their DSO to understand the potential impact.

How to Apply:

To apply for CPT and OPT, follow these steps:

Meet the eligibility requirements for either CPT or OPT.

Consult with your Designated School Official (DSO) for guidance and support throughout the process.

Complete the required forms for either CPT or OPT, ensuring accuracy and thoroughness.

Gather the necessary supporting documents, such as job offers, academic transcripts, and recommendation letters.

Submit your application to the appropriate authorities within the specified timelines.

Stay in contact with your DSO to address any questions or concerns during the application process.

Additional Considerations:

Travel restrictions: Be aware of any travel restrictions that may affect your ability to engage in CPT or OPT.

Employment limitations: Understand any limitations on employment types or hours for CPT and OPT.

Reporting requirements: Stay informed about reporting requirements to maintain compliance with immigration regulations.

Valid immigration status: Ensure that you maintain valid immigration status while on CPT or OPT.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, understanding the differences between CPT and OPT is crucial for F-1 visa students. By following the application guidelines and working closely with your DSO, you can make informed decisions and successfully apply for CPT and OPT.

Please note that it's essential to regularly check the official websites of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for any updates or changes to the CPT and OPT regulations.

Remember, this document is intended as a general guide, and it's important to consult with our university's international student office for personalized advice and assistance tailored to your specific situation.

Best of luck with your CPT and OPT applications!