

Navigating CPT Challenges:

Institutional Policy vs. Immigration Regulations

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Tags

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Setting

Westwood Liberal Arts College is a prestigious institution with a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary education and intellectual exploration. As part of its academic framework, the college mandates that students wait until the spring of their sophomore year to declare a major. This policy is designed to encourage academic exploration across disciplines before committing to a specific field.

However, federal immigration regulations permit international students on F-1 visas to engage in paid off-campus internships through Curricular Practical Training (CPT) after completing one academic year. CPT must be directly connected to the students' declared major, creating a conflict for first-year international students at Westwood who fulfill the academic year requirement for CPT but are prohibited by institutional policy from declaring a major early.

Case

Ava Lin, an international student from Singapore, recently completed her first academic year at Westwood Liberal Arts College. Passionate about data science, she aspires to gain hands-on experience in the field. During her spring semester, she learns about a competitive summer internship with a financial analytics firm that aligns with her career goals.

Eager to apply, Ava consults with the college's international student office to discuss work authorization requirements. She is informed that while she meets the federal requirement of completing a full academic year,

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she cannot obtain CPT because she has not yet declared a major. Since CPT authorization must be directly linked to a student's declared field of study, Ava is unable to secure the required work authorization for the internship.

Frustrated, Ava talks to her international student friends attending two other liberal arts colleges in the U.S. with similar policies. She finds out that Hillcrest College and Northview University have responded to this policy tension in different ways. One allows international students to declare an intended major early for CPT purposes only, while the other creates exploratory CPT-aligned internship courses under general studies or "undeclared" categories to accommodate students without a declared major. These alternative models highlight the range of institutional interpretations and adaptive strategies used to bridge regulatory and educational priorities.

With this new information, Ava considers these possibilities:

- Advocate for policy changes at her institution that could provide international students with more flexibility in internship eligibility.
- Request an exemption from the institutional policy to declare her major early, which could allow her to qualify for CPT.
- Explore alternative professional development opportunities that do not require CPT, such as unpaid research, virtual internships, or work in her home country.

Ava brings these options to her advisor, who commits to working with the International Student and Scholar Services team to explore the complexities of institutional policies and federal immigration regulations, and advocate for Ava and the equitable treatment of students in academic and professional development settings.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How does the institutional policy of delaying major declaration align with the mission of liberal arts education?
- What are the implications—legal, ethical, and institutional—of allowing international students to declare their majors earlier than their domestic peers?
- What steps can institutions take to ensure that policies do not inadvertently disadvantage international students, particularly in the context of experiential learning?
- What role do career services, faculty, and international student offices play in shaping adaptive solutions and supporting students like Ava?
- What risks, such as equity concerns or inconsistent decision-making, arise from implementing case-by-case exceptions to policy?
- In what ways does this case reflect broader institutional priorities such as internationalization, DEI, and student-centered success?