Research Question:

What factors influence whether a Bachelor's-degree international student's OPT status ends as Active/Completed versus Terminated? Specifically, does participation in Curricular Practical Training (CPT) significantly reduce the number of Unemployment Days during the initial post-completion OPT period, thereby lowering the risk of OPT termination?

Motivation:

As an international student in the United States, I face significant uncertainty in the post-graduation job market due to the strict 90-day unemployment rule governing Optional Practical Training (OPT). Failing to secure employment within this period can result in visa termination, creating intense pressure and forcing students to make critical career decisions under time constraints. Although international students are often advised to secure employment as quickly as possible or gain prior work experience through Curricular Practical Training (CPT), these strategies are largely based on anecdotal evidence. This project is motivated by the need to move beyond speculation and use administrative data to examine whether CPT participation and unemployment duration are systematically associated with OPT status stability. The findings aim to provide data-driven insights to inform international students' academic and career planning decisions.

Proposed Data Sources:

I will utilize a comprehensive, individual-level dataset from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Library (specifically the 2023-ICFO-43657 release). This dataset contains anonymized, individual-level records of F-1 international students. Key variables include Start/End Dates (Authorization, Employer), CPT participation indicators, Status Codes (Active, Terminated, Completed), and demographic details like Major (CIP Codes) and Education Level.

Methodology

The project will use a quantitative approach to examine OPT outcomes among Bachelor's-degree international students. Key variables, including OPT status (Active/Completed versus Terminated) and Unemployment Days, will be directly extracted from the dataset, along with indicators for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) participation. After basic data cleaning to address duplicate records, the analysis will compare average Unemployment Days and OPT status outcomes between students with and without CPT experience. Simple statistical comparisons and visualizations will be used to explore whether CPT participation is associated with lower unemployment duration and greater OPT status stability.

Challenges

A key challenge of this project is that OPT outcomes may be influenced by factors not fully captured in the dataset, such as individual job search effort, networking ability, or broader labor market conditions. As a result, the analysis can identify associations but cannot establish causal relationships. In addition, the administrative nature of the ICE FOIA data may include duplicate records or inconsistencies, requiring careful data cleaning to ensure accurate measurement of OPT status and Unemployment Days. Finally, because the data reflects formal visa records rather than the full job search process, it may not capture all dimensions of students' employment experiences during OPT.