

Things I Wish I Knew When I Started

I – Academics/Advising

II – Registration

III – Classes

IV – Career/Professional

V – Social

I – Academics/Advising

Be proactive. While professors at the Center are usually eager to help, it is important for students to be proactive about seeking out help. The advising sessions required for registration periods are not enough to get all of the information necessary to be a successful student. One of the most helpful things you can do is to find a professor who shares your interests and try to form a relationship with them. Professors have a lot of demands on their time so they usually assume that you do not need their help unless you specifically ask for it. It can also be helpful to find academic mentors from outside of CMES who work on your area of interest but focus on a different region.

Talk to other students. Other students are one of the best sources of information and advice. Many of them have faced the same problems and challenges as you, and you can learn from both their successes and failures. They are the best sources for information about what it is like to take different classes and professors.

Look at other programs for ideas. One of CMES' strengths is the flexibility of the program, but this can also make it difficult for students to make a cohesive program of courses. It can be helpful to look at what type of requirements other programs both at UT Austin and other universities require of their students. While you will not be able to exactly copy their programs, they can provide inspiration for ways to make your courses seem more cohesive.

II – Registration

Registration can be confusing but it is a good idea to start thinking even before the course schedule is posted. You can research professors who are likely to offer courses that interest you. It is a good idea to fulfill your distribution requirements evenly throughout your four semesters since course offerings for a given field may vary. You should also identify professors that you may want to be your thesis/report supervisor as early as possible so that you can aim to take classes with them. Professors may go on sabbatical or fail to offer graduate courses in subsequent semesters, so making contact with them early is extremely beneficial. If you are

having trouble finding classes within CMES that seem appropriate, you can check other departments, but you should use your conference courses and bump-ups strategically for courses that relate to your thesis/report topic or are taught by professors with whom you want to work.

A seemingly obvious piece of advice is read course descriptions carefully. When possible, make sure that you agree with the style of evaluation used in the course and that the texts it uses are of interest to you.

III – Classes

Communicate with Professors. Once you have started courses there are a few things you can do to get the most out of them. One of the easiest and most important things you can do is communicate with your professor. If you are having trouble picking a paper topic or need extra time on an assignment, it is best to talk with your professor as soon as possible. They are usually understanding and helpful, but they prefer dealing with problems sooner rather than later. Talking to professors individually is an important way to get the most out of your courses. They will be able to direct you to authors and resources that interest you faster than you will be able to find them on your own.

Make Friends in Courses. It is understandably beneficial to become friends with other students in your classes. You can help each other stay on top of deadlines as well as information that you miss due to absences or lapses in attention. Other students can also help you stay motivated during times when you have lost interest in the course.

Difficult Classes & Time Management. A major danger is to become too focused on one or two difficult courses. For better or worse, some courses have workloads that require a lot of a time to complete. Avoid letting these courses consume time that you need to spend on your other courses. Try to distribute time between your courses responsibly. The most effective way to distribute time among your classes may not be evenly, but remain aware of the trade-offs you make when allotting your time.

Term Papers. When possible, try to tailor individual projects in your classes to fit your interests. It will be helpful when you begin to write your thesis/report if you have looked at your topic from different disciplinary perspectives. This will also help during the end of each semester, because research from your papers for different classes will reinforce each other. For this reason it can be helpful to make your term papers as related as possible even if they are not closely related to your thesis/report topic.

IV – Career/professional

Conferences. If you're thinking about a career in academia, conferences are an important way to get practice presenting your research, see how other people present their research, and make connections with other academics studying similar topics. They are also a good opportunity to get feedback from academics on your ideas.

Outside activities, volunteer work, and internships. Working with outside organizations related to your field of interest is a good way to make connections as well as learn what skills are important for career fields that interest you. If you are interested in an opportunity, but are worried about finances, CMES offers a limited amount of funding for summer internships and volunteer opportunities.

V – Social

Breaking the Grad School Bubble. Friends are an important part of your graduate school experience. While friends inside CMES are an important source of support, it can be hard to avoid talking shop with them. Making friends from other departments or who are not in grad school is recommended. Getting outside the grad school bubble is an important way to keep perspective and remain sane.

Another way to break the bubble is join social groups like sport leagues, religious groups, special interest organizations, etc. These can be ways to structure your relaxation time so that it is more difficult for you to cut it out of your schedule.

Weekends. Weekends are an important time to recharge. They are also an important time to get a jump start on work for the week. Setting aside one day where you do not do school-related work can be a good way to manage stress.