

PhD Student Orientation

Fall 2021

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Goals

- Extend a warm welcome
- Introduce the CS department
- Describe the PhD degree requirements
- Provide suggestions and general tips

Safety First..

- Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic is still running strong.
- GMU requirements
 1. All students, faculty, and staff must be vaccinated and share verification of their vaccination status with the university (Deadline: August 1, 2021)
 2. Everyone, even those who are fully vaccinated, must wear a face covering when inside university property (including classrooms)
 3. Visit
 - <https://www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus#>
 - <https://oips.gmu.edu/> (for international students)

PhD in Computer Science @ GMU

- 129 PhD students (Spring'21)
 - Many supported by assistantship positions and fellowships
- 10-15 graduates per year
 - Join academia or top companies (Google, Microsoft, Facebook,..)
- 54 tenured and tenure-track faculty (who can act as the dissertation director)
 - +15 instructional
- Research Expenditure: ~\$16,000,000

Fast facts about the department

- Students in other programs offered by CS dept
 - **Undergraduates:** Computer Science and Applied Computer Science (1800+ students)
 - **Masters:** in Computer Science, Software Engineering, Information Systems, Information Security and Assurance (400+ students)
- PhD and MS programs are integrated
 - Students entering with BS degree can receive a MS degree in addition to the PhD degree “along the way”
 - Students with a previous MS degree can receive a reduction of credit and waiver of course requirements

Areas of Research Expertise

- Algorithms and Theory of Computation
- Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- Robotics
- Bioinformatics
- Computer Game Design
- Computer Vision
- Databases
- Graphics and Image Processing
- Natural Language Processing
- Programming Languages
- Software Engineering
- Security
- Systems and Networks
- Parallel and Distributed Computing
- Data Mining
- Information Systems

Faculty Awards

- 17 NSF CAREER Awards
- 3 Lifetime Achievement Awards
- 1 AFOSR Young Investigator Award
- 5 Mason Emerging Researcher & Scholar Awards
- 11 Mason Teaching Excellence Awards

Key People

- Chair of the Computer Science Department:
David Rosenblum
- Director of the PhD program: Hakan Aydin
- Your **Academic Advisor**
 - Assigned based on your areas of interest at the time of admission
 - Advises you on academic/procedural matters
- Your **Research Advisor**
 - Advises you on your doctoral research
 - When you have one, he/she will also serve as your academic advisor.
 - When your dissertation committee is formed, he/she becomes your **dissertation director**

CS Department Office Staff

- Cecelia Kimes (graduate program specialist)
- Ryan Lucas (Office Manager, graduate program specialist)
- Michèle Pieper (Department Operations Manager)
- csphd@gmu.edu: The PhD program account for general questions about the PhD program, form submissions, etc.

What is PhD (in CS)?

- Highest academic degree awarded in Computer Science
- Quite different in nature from BS or MS degrees
- On top of multi-year graduate study, PhD degree requires producing **original research** in a sub-field of Computer Science, culminating in the **creation and defense of a research dissertation**
- The research must be worthy of publication in **peer-reviewed** academic journals and/or conference proceedings.

Success Criteria in PhD

- Success in the graduate courses and exams is a necessary condition
 - But not sufficient!

- The culmination of the PhD study is the dissertation which requires
 - Becoming an active researcher in a specific area
 - Producing original research

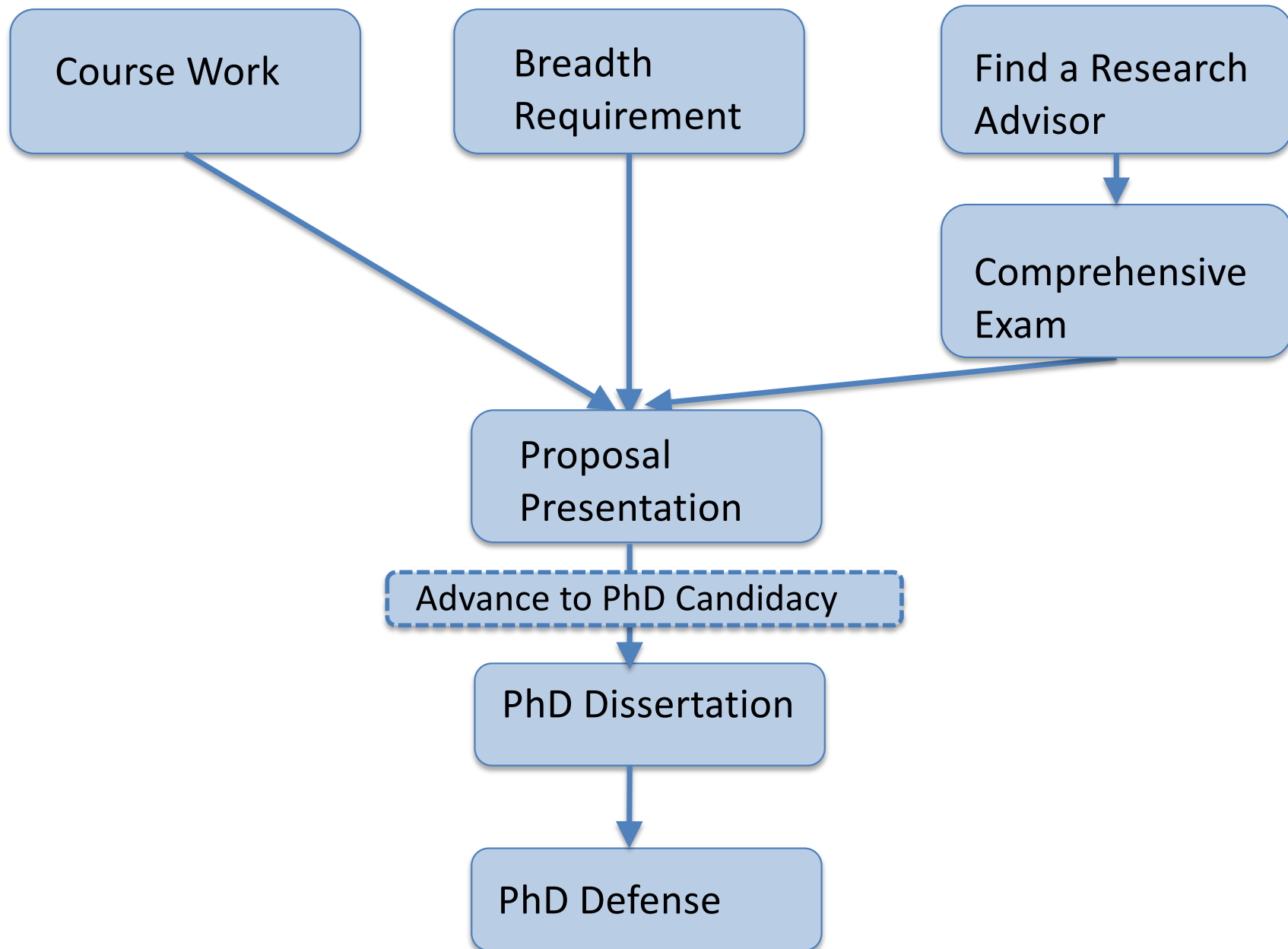
PhD Degree Requirements

- GMU Catalog is the official resource
<http://catalog.gmu.edu>
- Lots of information on the CS web site
<http://cs.gmu.edu>
- PhD Program underwent a significant revision effective Fall'18
- Main objective: Facilitate and speed up the involvement of PhD students in research

Degree Requirements

- PhD degree requires the completion of a number of well-defined milestones
 1. Course Work
 2. Breadth Requirement
 3. Comprehensive Exam
 4. Proposal Defense
 5. Dissertation

Overall Picture



1. Course Work

- 72 credits post Bachelor's degree (GMU requirement)
 - CS 600 (3 credits)
Theoretical Computer Science [requires B+ or better]
 - CS 700 (3 credits) - Research Methodology in CS
 - CS 701 (3 credits) - Research Experience in CS
 - 3 advanced graduate courses (9 credits)
 - Complete list of approved courses (~100) on the CS web site
 - CS 800 (2 x 0 credits) - CS Colloquium
 - CS 998 (proposal) and CS 999 (dissertation) [24 credits]
 - At least 12 in CS 999
 - Not more than 24 will be counted towards the degree
 - 30 credits of “elective” graduate courses
(MS- or PhD- level)

“MS along the way”

- If you don't have an MS degree, you can get one “along the way”
 - Strongly recommended
- 30 credits of “elective” graduate courses in the PhD course work list will count towards the MS degree!
- You need to declare “MS” as a secondary degree by filling out a form
- Contact csphd@gmu.edu for details and the form
- However, you need to select the 30 credits carefully to satisfy the requirements of the MS degree.
- Consult the catalog and the CS web page for the requirements of the MS degree.

Credit for Previous Graduate Work

- If you did graduate work in computer science you may get credit
 - Courses must be graduate level computer science (IT or business courses do not count).
 - Grade B or better
- A prior MS degree in computer science may get you a total of 30 credits (at most).
- Must apply during your first academic year
- Case-by-case evaluation
- Transcripts are required.

CS 700 & CS 701

- Two mandatory courses
 - CS 700 (Research Methodology in CS) is offered in Fall semester
 - CS 701 (Research Experience in CS) is offered in Spring semester
- You must take CS 700 in Fall'21 and CS 701 in Spring'22
- Remember to take CS 700 in Fall'21!

CS 700 (Research Methodology in CS)

■ Three main components

1. Basic research literacy

- Tips for reading, writing, evaluating, and presenting research papers
- Hints for becoming a successful PhD student
- Research integrity and ethics issues
- Research Computing Infrastructure at GMU

2. Quantitative models and methods in experimental computer science

- Use of analytic and simulation models
- Design of experiments
- Statistical analysis of data

3. Guest talks by the CS faculty

CS 701 (Research Experience in CS)

- Prerequisite: Grade of B or better in CS 700.
- Main objective is to give the student a first “research experience”
- The student works closely with a CS faculty on a preliminary research task.
 - The student reports his/her findings in a professionally prepared document
 - All CS 701 students give brief (10-minute) presentations about their projects at the end of the semester during a public meeting.
 - A departmental form is signed by the student and the faculty sponsor before the student can enroll in CS 701.

Advice: Courses

- Consult your academic advisor on your course plan.
- Students who join PhD after BS, or those who do not receive the full 30 credit reduction based on previous graduate work, should choose additional graduate level courses.
- Those additional graduate courses must be selected from CS or a field related to the intended doctoral research area of the student, in consultation with the academic advisor.
- Courses that will potentially help the student to satisfy the breadth requirement should be considered.
- Also consider getting “MS along the way” (if applicable)

Advice: Courses

- Students who do not receive the full 30 credit reduction may also choose to take additional credits of **CS 896 – Directed Reading and Research** with the research advisor's approval
 - Must satisfy the breadth requirement before enrolling in CS 896
 - May be repeated up to 18 credits

Another flexibility for “MS along the way”

- CS 600, CS 700, and three advanced graduate courses (up to 15 credits) may be counted towards the MS degree; the PhD student can then take multiple instances of CS 896 towards the 72 credits required for PhD.
 - Assuming that the selected courses satisfy the requirements of the MS degree.

CS 800 Computer Science Colloquium

- Take during two semesters (0-credit)
 - Each semester, attend and prepare summaries of at least 8 seminars
 - Purpose:
 - Help to choose a research area.
 - Broaden knowledge of cutting-edge research.
 - See examples of “new research results”.
 - Learn presentation techniques.
 - Must be completed within the first 36 credits

2. Breadth Requirement

- PhD students should demonstrate the breadth of knowledge at the graduate level in multiple Computer Science areas
- Two ways to satisfy the breadth requirement
 - Show superior performance in graduate courses (The course-oriented criterion – default)
 - Take and pass written qualifying exams in different areas

Course-Oriented Criterion for Breadth Requirement

- The student should demonstrate superior performance in **four** selected courses that span at least **three** different areas
 - In at least **three out of four courses**, the student should receive at least a grade of **A- or better**.
 - In the **fourth course**, the student should receive a grade of **B or better**.
 - *CS 583 Analysis of Algorithms* (from the *Theoretical Computer Science* area) must be selected.
 - A course may be repeated at most once (otherwise the course cannot be used to satisfy the breadth requirement)
 - If a course is repeated, the grade in the second attempt is considered for the breadth requirement

Breadth Requirement: Courses and Areas

Course	Area
Analysis of Algorithms (CS 583)	Theoretical Computer Science
Computer Networks (CS 555)	Systems and Networks
Operating Systems (CS 571)	Systems and Networks
Network Security (ISA 656)	Security
Database Systems (CS 550)	Databases
Artificial Intelligence (CS 580)	Artificial Intelligence
Data Mining (CS 584)	Artificial Intelligence
Compilers and Languages (CS 540)	Programming Languages
Software Construction (SWE 619)	Software Engineering
Software Testing (SWE 637)	Software Engineering
Computer Graphics (CS 551)	Visual Computing

Course-Based Criterion for Breadth Requirement

- The student can use the grade (s)he received in the past if the course was taken at GMU.
 - No more than five years must have elapsed since the student took the course.

- Exceptions to this rule are rare and require filing a petition with supplementary documents to the Computer Science department.

Written Qualifying Exams

- Qualifying exams are an alternative way to satisfy the breadth requirement.
- Must pass exams in **four** different areas:
 - *Foundations of CS* + any three from eight areas (software construction, software testing, operating systems, networks, languages & compilers, databases, AI, information security)
- Each area has a recommended graduate course
 - If you have MS degree, you may have taken suitable courses.
- Exams offered in August and January
 - **Two** chances to pass four exams in **two consecutive semesters**.

Satisfying the Breadth Requirement

- The breadth requirement must be satisfied within the **first 24 credits** in the program either through the course-oriented criterion **or** written qualifying exams
- The course-oriented criterion will apply by default
- **Mixing and matching** the written qualification exams and the course grades is not allowed
- *If the student takes a written qualifying exam, the course-oriented criterion no longer applies.*

Advice: Research Advisor

- Remember: The most important component of the PhD study is the PhD **research**
- Common mistake: Postponing research activity to the completion of the formal course work or breadth requirement
 - Finding a PhD research topic and research advisor does not happen in one day!
- Start exploring potential research topics and interacting with the faculty while taking courses!

How to get involved in research?

- Identify the areas of Computer Science you are interested in
 - But be open-minded as well!
- Attend departmental research talks / symposia
- Take the courses in those areas to build a good background
 - Seminars, independent-study based courses.
- Check the web pages of the CS faculty, learn more about their research activities

How to get involved in research?

- Make the best use of CS 700 and CS 701
 - In CS 700 (Fall), CS faculty will give research talks in a couple of class meetings
 - In CS 701 (Spring), you will have a chance to pair up with a CS faculty to work on a preliminary research topic.
- Interact with the faculty outside class hours
 - The faculty will be happy to provide more pointers/papers to get you trained in their areas
- Get involved in their research!

Determining Research Advisor

- All full-time PhD CS students must determine their research advisor within the **first 24 credits**.
- This is also important because the **comprehensive exam** (with the deadline of 36 credits) assumes that:
 - you have determined your research area,
 - you have linked up with your research advisor, and,
 - you have gained the depth of knowledge in that specific area to start your original research.

3. Comprehensive Exam (Depth Exam)

- Checks the **depth** of the student's knowledge in the target PhD research area
 - Has both written and oral components.
 - Administered by a departmental comprehensive exam committee
- The student can form the dissertation committee only after passing the comprehensive exam
- Comprehensive exam must be taken within the **first 36 credits** in the PhD program.

Comprehensive Exam

- Written Part: The student prepares a **critical review** of the research literature on a specific topic, and submits to the exam committee in advance
- Oral Part: The student makes a short presentation about his/her report, which is followed by the **question-answer phase**

Comprehensive Exam (Written Part)

- The written report will summarize the state of knowledge in the target area with particular emphasis on open problems, and possible approaches to tackle those problems
- The report should be 8-10 pages long and should contain a minimum of 20 references

Comprehensive Exam (Oral Part)

- About two hours, student presentation is limited to 20 minutes
- The committee asks questions about the presentation and material in the reading list
 - Key textbooks, important papers in the broader research area and determined by the examination committee
 - Papers selected by the student/advisor
- The oral exam is public (but only the examination committee can ask questions).

Decision in the Comprehensive Exam

- The exam committee consists of 4 members
 - Research advisor
 - Another CS or School of Engineering faculty member determined by the advisor and the student
 - Two tenured CS faculty members appointed by the PhD CS Program Director (one of them chairs the committee)
- Majority vote is needed to pass the exam
 - At least 3 out of 4 members should give PASS in both written and oral components
- A student who fails in the exam must succeed in the next attempt (which must occur during the next semester).

Comprehensive Exam Preparation

- The comprehensive exam is the culmination of your research activities within the first 36 credits
- Starting to prepare in the beginning of the semester during which you will take the exam is not likely to succeed
- Plan for the comprehensive exam early (preferably at the end of the first year)

The role of the advisor in the comprehensive exam

- The written report must reflect the student's own writing and paper reading skills.
- The advisor may not work closely with the student on the comprehensive exam preparation
- *The student's reliance on the advisor for the exam should be at a minimum*

Dissertation Committee

- Each student forms a dissertation committee.
 - Must first pass the comprehensive exam
- Four (or five) members:
 - **Three** members must be tenured or tenure-track faculty in CS Department.
 - **One** member must be from GMU but outside the CS Department.
 - The fifth member (if any) may be from outside the university.
 - Dissertation director chairs the committee.
 - Committee must be approved by the Chair of the Computer Science Department.

4. Dissertation Proposal

- Each student must prepare a written dissertation proposal.
- While preparing the proposal, student enrolls in CS 998.
- Proposal must be presented to and approved by the dissertation committee.
 - Two chances to pass
- Committee determines:
 - Whether the proposal has merit and can lead to significant research contributions, and
 - If the student has knowledge and skills to complete proposed work successfully, and in timely manner.
- Upon completing proposal successfully and finishing the course work, the student is **advanced to candidacy** for the PhD degree.

5. Dissertation

- While preparing the dissertation, the candidate enrolls in CS 999.
- When the work is complete, the dissertation is defended.
- Public defense is preceded by a **pre-defense** meeting:
 - Candidate meets with the dissertation committee and the Director of PhD program.
 - If the committee approves, the candidate may schedule the **public defense**.
- At least one month between pre-defense and public defense.

5. Dissertation (cont.)

- Dissertation
 - Must make significant contributions to its area
 - Must be publishable in quality journals or conferences.
- Dissertation Defense is oral and open to all
 - Two chances to pass

Summary of Milestone Deadlines

- Complete CS 700 in Fall 2021
- Complete CS 701 in Spring 2022
- Complete the breadth requirement and determine the research advisor:
Within the first 24 credits
- Take the comprehensive exam and complete both instances of CS 800:
Within the first 36 credits

Milestone Deadlines are Firm

- *Students who fail to meet the deadlines will be dismissed from the program unless there are extenuating circumstances approved by the department.*

(From the PhD CS program GMU catalog entry)

Time Frame for Graduation

- GMU rules:
 - Maximum time from starting PhD program to advancement to candidacy – 6 years.
 - Maximum time for the entire PhD – 9 years.
- This does not distinguish between full-time and part-time students.
- Expectation from full-time students:
Complete the program in 4-5 years.

Suggested Timeline for Full-time Students

- Semester 1-3: Complete CS 700, 701, and the breadth requirement. Determine the research advisor.
- Semester 4-5: Take the comprehensive exam.
- Semester 6-7: Complete the coursework (except the dissertation research) and advance to the candidacy
- Semester 8-10 (Year 4-5): Dissertation Research and Public Defense

How many credits per semester?

- Depends on your capabilities and available time.
- Remember that milestone deadlines for full-time students are expressed in terms of credits
 - Example: a GTA taking 9 credits per semester is required to satisfy the breadth requirement in 3 semesters and pass the comprehensive exam in 4 semesters.
 - But this translates to 4 and 6 semesters, respectively, for a GTA taking 6 credits per semester

Course Selection for the first year (Suggestion)

- Fall'21
 - CS 700 (required)
 - One additional course for the breadth requirement and/or an advanced PhD course in your interest area
- Spring'21
 - CS 701 (required)
 - One or two additional courses

About CS 530 & CS 531

- CS 530 (Mathematical Foundations of CS) and CS 531 (Fundamentals of System Programming) are for MS students and they can't be taken for credit by the PhD CS students

International Students

- Students with F-1 visas must be in “full-time” status
 - At least 9 credits per semester
 - 6 credits for GTAs and GRAs
 - May not switch to part-time status.

DHS-ICE Directive for Incoming International Students

- Incoming F-1 students currently in US must enroll in at least one F2F or hybrid course in Fall'21
 - If you are an incoming F-1 student, you can't take ONLY online courses
- Contact GMU OIPS if you have further questions about this

Graduate Assistantships

- **Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs):** Participate directly in instructional activities, such as giving recitations, grading, holding office hours. Funded by the school /department.
- **Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs):** Participate in a research project administered by the GMU faculty. Funded by the sponsored research project.

Graduate Assistantships

- We expect that the doctoral GTAs will
 - Become gradually research active
 - Transition to GRA positions funded by the specific CS faculty
- This will also help with the research progress!

Annual Progress Report

- Submit report every year in Fall semester (you will be contacted).
- Helps us monitor the progress of each individual, advise students about the upcoming “milestones”, etc.
- Students who fail to submit are blocked from enrolling in classes.

Communication

- GMU email will be used to communicate with you.
- General queries about the PhD program:
`csphd@gmu.edu`
- Announcement listserv for PhD CS students:
`phd-cs-l@listserv.gmu.edu` (moderated list)

PhD CS Student Organization

- Mission

1. Establish strong connection with other graduate students and faculty members
2. Be the students' voice towards the department
3. Share experiences among students during regular coffee hours
4. Pizza party/group outdoor activities inside/outside the campus

- Communication through Slack

- Send e-mail to Abdulrahman Alshammari (aalsha2@gmu.edu) to join!

Graduate Student Orientation from CEC

- Pre-recorded videos for general incoming CEC graduate students available at:
<https://cec.gmu.edu/admissions/graduate-admissions/new-graduate-students>
 - Graduate Academic Affairs: Student Policies and Procedures
 - Computing Resources
 - Library Services
 - Career Services
 - Graduate Student Life

Thanks for your attention...

QUESTIONS?