How Advising Works in the Computer Science Department

How advising works in the computer science department

The Computer Science Department has a three-tiered approach to advising: the Academic Office, faculty mentors, and peer advisors. Below is a breakdown of what you should and should not expect from each source of advising:

The Academic Office

In general, to help students navigate their degree requirements and the policies of their department, their college and the university as a whole. The academic office staff (Professor Lenny Pitt - Director of Undergraduate Programs; Steve Herzog - full-time advisor; Heather Zike - advisor; Holly Bagwell - course scheduler and office manager; and Candy Foster - office support associate) can do the following for you:

- Review your degree requirements and assess your progress (note: you can find program requirements and a requirements flowcharts for all of our programs on the departmental wiki.)
- Help you plan your course schedule
- Explain the policies and procedures of your department, college and university
- Refer you to someone who can help if you are struggling - academically or otherwise
- Advise on transferring in or out of the department
- Assess transfer coursework (Computer Science coursework only, though)
- Make curriculum adjustments (e.g. declaring/changing your technical track)
- For international students: Process I-20 extension, Optional Practical Training (OPT) or Curricular Practical Training (CPT) paperwork

You should not expect the academic office staff to do the following:

- Help you with questions about the content of your classes
- Get you into classes (though, in certain cases, they can provide overrides or point you in the right direction)
- Get you out of classes (though they can advise you on the ramifications of and procedures for dropping classes)

Faculty Mentors

All students are assigned a faculty mentor, with whom they must meet at least once each academic year, typically before April. The department enforces this requirement with a registration hold. You can find your faculty mentor and schedule appointments with him or her on my.cs.illinois.edu.

Faculty mentors can:

- Be a central contact point and liaison between you and the faculty
- Help you map out the field of computer science and explain its various areas of specialization
- Based on your strengths and interests, help you sort out which area of computer science you might specialize in
- Suggest courses to take, based on your interests
- Provide information about possible career paths
- Provide information on research opportunities
- Provide information on graduate school
- Provide a letter of recommendation - if you get to know a faculty member well enough and demonstrate strong ability in their courses, that is.

You should not necessarily expect faculty mentors to help you with the following:

- Answer detailed or complicated questions about degree requirements or university policies (these should be forwarded to undergrad@cs.illinois.edu or someone else in the Academic Office)
- Select social science and humanities electives
- Tell you which courses are "easier" than others (ask peer advisors or other students)
- Determine how transfer and AP courses count towards graduation requirements (instructions for this are posted on the policies and procedures page of the CS website)
- Add or drop a class for students (instructions for this are posted on the policies and procedures page of the CS website)
- Get students out of academic troubles (students who are struggling should contact undergrad@cs.illinois.edu in the Academic Office as soon as possible for options and advice).

In addition to meeting with your faculty mentor, you should feel free to meet with other faculty, such as those with whom you’ve had classes you’ve enjoyed, or those from a research area that is of interest to you. You can arrange a meeting, or stop by during office hours. On the CS website, you can find a list of CS faculty members – arranged alphabetically or by research specialty – with links to each faculty member’s website and contact info.
Your peers (especially advanced students)

The best source of inside information on what to expect from individual classes and instructors. Your peers can do the following for you:

- Help you anticipate the workload and difficulty of each course
- Help you anticipate the individual teaching styles of various instructors
- Give you survival tips for each course
- Recommend specific courses to take for electives and/or gen eds (though you should always confirm that their recommendations actually satisfy the requirements in question)

You should not expect your peers to help you with the following:

- Answer detailed or complicated questions about degree requirements or university policies (these should be forwarded to undergrad@cs.illinois.edu - or someone else in the Academic Office)
- Suggest exceptions or alternatives to requirements or policies (you should view all such information with skepticism and confirm it with the Academic Office)