

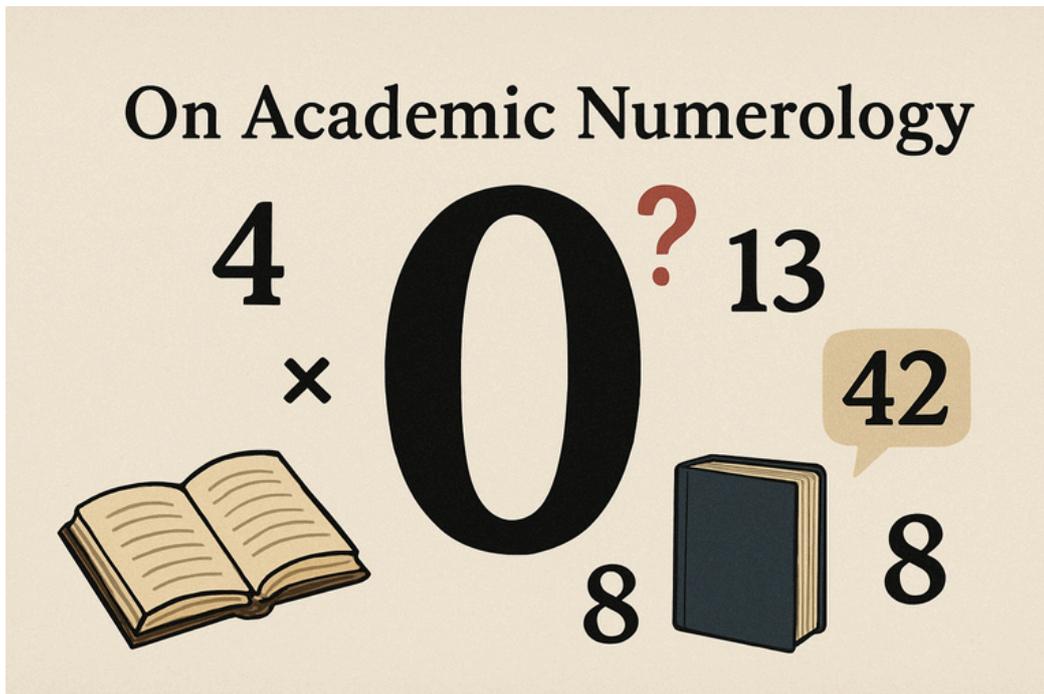


# CS@VT NEWSLETTER

## CS Graduate Programs

Message from the Associate Department  
Head for Graduate Studies

### On Academic Numerology



As computer science researchers, we like to think of ourselves as a numbers-driven community. This column is indeed about numbers, but not in the familiar form of statistical arguments, performance benchmarks, or complexity bounds. Instead, I want to explore a different kind of numerical significance: the curious, sometimes irrational power certain numbers seem to hold, both in culture and in academia.

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Many cultures attach symbolic meanings to specific numbers, often with colorful explanations that reflect history, language, and local beliefs. In Chinese culture, for example, the number 4 is considered unlucky because its pronunciation in Mandarin closely resembles the word for “death.” In much of the West, 13 carries a similar stigma, sometimes linked to the story of Judas, the 13<sup>th</sup> guest at the Last Supper, whose betrayal shaped the Christian narrative. By contrast, some numbers are considered auspicious. In the Abrahamic faiths, 7 symbolizes completeness or perfection. According to the creation story, the world was created in 7 days, making it a successful and complete enterprise. In Chinese culture, 8 is considered lucky, associated with wealth and prosperity because its pronunciation is similar to the word for “wealth.”

Writers have long recognized our fascination with numbers, often using them to explore human nature and its interaction with the world. Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* gently pokes fun at this tendency. In the story, a supercomputer spends millions of years calculating the answer to the “ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything”... only to return the number 42.

For my part, I’d like to focus on a less obviously “special” but equally fascinating number: 0. The concept of zero—a symbol for the absence of quantity—is anything but simple. The Roman numeral system famously had no representation for it. Historical evidence suggests the idea originated in the Indian subcontinent and traveled to Europe via Arab merchants. As an old joke goes: To the person who invented zero, thanks for nothing!

Just as cultures have long attached symbolic weight to numbers, the figures in your academic record tell a story, and sometimes zero in a category can speak volumes. Take research collaboration: starting your research career with zero collaborations is normal, but staying at zero can limit your growth and impact. Collaborations expose you to new ideas, complementary skills, and broader perspectives. They often lead to higher-quality work, more citations, and a stronger professional network. If you haven’t yet collaborated with labmates, other faculty, or external researchers, look for opportunities; even informal joint projects can be a great start.

Think about publications. In most computer science subfields, conferences are the primary publication venue, typically carrying more weight than journals. That’s different from many other disciplines, where journals remain the gold standard. Still, having zero journal articles can be risky. People outside computer science often evaluate our work, and to them, a journal-free record can look incomplete. Consider submitting at least one journal article, perhaps an extended version of a published conference paper. Good journals typically require at least 30% new material, and many of us have results or insights that didn’t fit into the tight space of a conference paper.

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Now consider teaching. Imagine your advisor has abundant research funding, and you go through graduate school without ever serving as a teaching assistant. By graduation, you'd have zero TA experience. If you're heading for an academic career, that's a problem. Teaching is unavoidable even at a research university, and managing TAs will certainly be part of your role. Even if you don't have to TA, doing it at least once—perhaps for your advisor—will give you invaluable perspective on the pedagogical challenges in your research area.

Next, consider summer internships. Graduate school is not just about coursework and research. Internships offer valuable real-world experience and industry connections. Having zero internship experience can mean missing out on practical skills, a taste of workplace culture, and potential job offers. Even if your advisor's lab is well funded, making room for at least one internship can pay huge dividends in career readiness.

Finally, professional service is often overlooked. Serving as a reviewer, organizing workshops, or volunteering for committees may seem peripheral, but having zero service contributions can mean missed opportunities to develop leadership and communication skills. Service shows commitment to the community, strengthens your CV, and builds relationships in a more informal setting.

To wrap up, zero might be an underappreciated “special” number. It transformed how humanity could reason about nothingness itself. In academia, though, empty slots in collaborations, publications, teaching, internships, or service often point to opportunities not yet taken. Each of those areas is a chance to learn, connect, and contribute; showing up for them enriches both you and the community. Just as cultures have long attached symbolic weight to numbers, the figures in your academic record tell a story. Aim for one filled with presence, growth, and impact, so every number truly counts.

Dr. T

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# Welcome to the MEng Corner

ALEXIS L. SNYDER PRESENTS AT NACADA 2025

We are excited to highlight Alexis L. Snyder, who recently presented at the NACADA 2025 Annual Conference, held October 26–29, 2025 at Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada.

NACADA, the Global Community for Academic Advising, is dedicated to promoting student success through academic advising and providing professional development opportunities for advisors worldwide.

The NACADA Annual Conference is an event for academic advisors, offering opportunities to learn, network, and collaborate. The annual conference brings together experts and practitioners to share innovative strategies and research that strengthen advising practices. Its mission emphasizes inclusivity, global perspectives, scholarly approaches, and community, all the values that align closely with our commitment to supporting students.

During the conference, Alexis co-presented a session with Dr. Paige Johnson titled: “Early and Often: Advising Future STEM Graduate Students to Get from 4 to Plus One”

The presentation focused on:

- Identifying and supporting high-achieving STEM students as they transition from a bachelor’s program to a master’s program.
- Organizing advising and admissions teams to ensure a smooth and successful transition for these students.

Alexis’ contribution in NACADA 2025 reflects her dedication to continuous learning and innovation in advising. The insights gained will help academic advisors alike strengthen their support for STEM students and improve pathways to graduate education.

\*Alexis wanted to give a special thank you to Dr. Paige Johnson for working with her on such a cool presentation and she looks forward to working together on the next one!\*



Have MEng CSA questions?  
Contact our GPC:  
pamelau20@vt.edu



Thanks for tuning in. See you next month.

--MENG CSA TEAM



## Computer Science Travel Funding

The Computer Science department provides limited financial support for Computer Science Ph.D. students to present at conferences. Funding requests are reviewed on a rolling basis, subject to the availability of funds.

Requests for financial support must be submitted via the [Travel Fund Request Form](#) **before** the departure date of travel.

It is also highly encourage to seek additional support as well through your advisor, the conference directly, or through the [GPSS Travel Fund Program](#).

## 2026 CS Ph.D. Qualifier Exam

Tentative Timeline of the Exam:

- **November 20th:** Last day for students to express interest in taking the 2026 Ph.D. Qualifier Exam
  - **January 1st - 6th:** Ph.D. Qualifier Exam webpages go online. Students register for the exam
  - **January 20th to March 1st:** Students take the exam
  - **March 15th:** Committees finalize the results for (1) Qualifier Exam, (2) Excellence in Depth, and (3) Waiver, if applicable
  - **March 20th:** Results released to students
- Please reach out to Dr. Gulzar with any questions.

## Essential Information

### Helpful Graduate Student Information

#### Questions on where to find certain items?

- [students.cs.vt.edu](https://students.cs.vt.edu)
  - Here you can find information about specific forms, deadlines, graduate courses, and more.
- The 2025-2026 CS@VT Grad Manual is now live and goes more into depth and detail about the graduate programs offered.

2025-26 GRAD MANUAL

## Climate Survey

#### CS Graduate Student Experience Survey:

Please take this 5-minute survey about your experiences as a student in CS@VT during this year. Please answer each question as honestly as possible.

All responses to this survey will remain anonymous!

Please see the [link](#).