

Course Information

§ Course Overview (or – What Will I Learn from this Course?)

This course will equip students with foundational basics needed to understand, work with, and build distributed systems such as cloud computing systems. Topics include, but are not limited to, MapReduce, peer-to-peer systems, failure detectors, synchronization, election, consensus, inter-process communication, gossiping, concurrency control, replication, key-value stores, NoSQL, security, probabilistic protocols, stream processing, measurements, etc. These topics are discussed in the context of real-life and deployed systems such as clouds and datacenters, databases, peer to peer systems, clusters, etc. This course assumes knowledge of fundamentals in both OS and networking.

§ Course Essentials

Class Meets: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00 PM - 3:15 PM, 0027/1025 Campus Instructional Facility.

Professors:

Aishwarya Ganesan	https://aishwaryaganesan.github.io	aganesn2 at illinois dawt edu
Ram Kesavan	https://www.linkedin.com/in/ ram-kesavan-32588a1	rkesavan at illinois dawt edu

Course Website: <https://courses.grainger.illinois.edu/cs425/fa2026/>

All lectures and some announcements will be posted on this website, so please check periodically.

Discussion Forum: We will be using Piazza (link is on the website). Important announcements will be posted on this forum, so please check periodically. This is your go-to place to ask clarification questions for HWs (Homeworks) and MPs (Machine Programs, or Programming Assignments). Before you post, check if someone has already asked that question.

The course staff will attempt to ensure your questions are looked at within 24-48 hours of it being posted. We recommend you start Homeworks and MPs early; posting questions at the last minute, e.g., right before a deadline, has no guarantees of being answered in time (spare a thought for the TAs!).

Prerequisites:

- For all students: CS 240/241/340/341 (Systems Programming) or ECE 391, or equivalent course on Operating Systems or Networking (approval of instructor required if you've taken only a Networking course but not an OS course).
- For 4 cr On-campus and 4cr MCS-Chicago/City Scholars : Prior experience with a major programming language (for the MPs), and basic sockets programming experience. In the past, students have used Java, C++, Go, C, Rust, etc. (one of these suffices - you will have a choice).

- For MCS Coursera /DS4 students (Online, via Coursera 4cr): Prior experience with C++ (for the online Coursera MPs).
- This course assumes knowledge of fundamentals in both OS and networking. While CS240/241/340/341 are co-requisites, we assume students complete knowledge of OS (and socket programming for on-campus MPs).
- This course does not deal with details of computer networking and routing and wireless/mobile computing – other courses in the department (e.g., CS 438/439) cover those.

Credits: 3 hours or 4 hours.

- All On-campus 4 credit students and MCS-Chicago/City Scholars 4 credit students **MUST** do all the MPs. If are a 3 credit student and you want to do MPs, register/upgrade to 4 credits.
- We cannot grade MPs for students not in the 4 cr on-campus section. If you want your MPs graded, register/upgrade to 4 credits.
- We cannot give VMs to students not in the 4 cr on-campus section. If you want VMs, register/upgrade to 4 credits.
- All MCS Coursera/DS4 (4cr) students do the online Coursera MPs.

Main Textbook (Recommended, not Required): Coulouris, G., Dollimore, J., Kindberg, T., and Blair, G., *Distributed Systems: Concepts and Design*, Addison-Wesley, Fifth Edition, 2011, ISBN: 0132143011. [Recommended purchase – copies available at Illini Book Store. On reserve at Grainger Library]. We will refer to chapter, section, and problem numbers **ONLY** in the Fifth Edition. If you use an older edition, correct interpretation/translation of these numbers is solely the students' responsibility (no excuses).

Supplementary materials are listed at the end of this handout.

Course Staff Contact Information and Office Hours: To get the fastest responses, please first post to:

1. **Discussion Forum:** All students (3 cr, 4 cr, MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4, MCS-Chicago/City Scholars) **MUST** use Piazza. This is your default go-to place to ask **ALL** questions. See website for link.
2. If your question is private or not answerable on the discussion forum, then email the staff mailing list. See website for address. Please **DO NOT** email individual TAs, as the mailing list will get you the fastest response.
3. Use office hours of the TA or professor. See website for dates and times.
4. For private matters, you can contact the professor.

For more details, please see course website.

§ Course Participation

Sections and Assignments:

There are 3 categories of students (i.e., sections) in this class. They are listed, and their assignments summarized in Table 1 below. More description is below.

	3 cr (On-campus & MCS-Chicago)	4 cr (On-campus & MCS-Chicago)	MCS Online DS3/DS4 (Coursera only)
HWs 1-4 On-campus	Yes	Yes	Yes (On Gradescope)
MP On-campus	No	Yes	No
Coursera Quizzes 5 + 5=10 Coursera Finals: Part 1 + Part 2	No	No	Yes (On Coursera)
Coursera Programming Projects Part 1 + Part 2	No	No	Yes for DS4, No for DS3
On-campus Midterm Exam + On-campus Final Exam	Yes	Yes	Yes (On Gradescope)

Table 1: Assignments for Sections in CS425/ECE428.

The three categories (sections) of students and their assignments are:

1. On-campus Students 3 credits: Homeworks, Midterm Exam, Final Exam. Henceforth referred to as **“3 credit students”**.
2. On-campus Students 4 cr: Homeworks, Midterm Exam, Final Exam, On-campus Programming Assignments (MPs). Henceforth referred to as **“4 credit students”**. These include all 4 credit on-campus students and 4cr MCS-Chicago/City Scholars students, but does not include MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students on Coursera.
3. **All MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 Students:** All weekly Quizzes (5+5=10) on Coursera, and 2 final quizzes on Coursera. All homework sets (given to On-campus students), Midterm Exam and Final Exams. 2 Programming Assignments on Coursera for DS4 only; MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students do not do the MPs given for on-campus students. Each of the 5+5 Coursera quizzes will have a Pass/Fail grade (cutoff is 70% of the quiz points for that quiz). Overall, the work for the MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students is equivalent to (though not equal to) the 3/4 credit on-campus version (respectively) of the course.
4. MCS Coursera DS3 vs. DS4: DS4 students do the 2 Programming Assignments (MPs) on Coursera, while DS3 students do not need to do those. The rest of the Coursera course and assignments are common for all MCS Coursera DS3/DS4 students.

Assignments - Detail:

1. (For All Students) All HW and MP Assignments (except Coursera MPs) will be clearly marked Fall 2026 and have deadlines on them. The deadline time+date printed on the assignment is final – no extensions or late submissions (for whatever reason)! If you see an older version (except Coursera MPs) please let staff know ASAP!
2. (For MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 Students) **Course staff is not responsible if your Coursera account shows you older HWs – please ensure that you are doing the HW version that says “Fall 2026” on the first page (and not some older semester/year). Submitting a solution to an older HW will unfortunately result in a zero grade, and will not be graded.**
3. (For MCS Coursera/DS4 Students) The only exception is that Coursera MPs may say “Revised Fall 2020” - that is just the date the MPs were last revised; they are current.
4. (For All Students) There will be four homework sets (HWs) , with about 1-2 weeks turnaround time per homework. **Your homework solution submissions are required to be typed** (you may use any of your favorite word processors). We will not accept handwritten solutions. Figures and equations (if any) may be drawn by hand. With some exceptions, Homeworks are **due Sunday midnight US Central time zone, except for HW4**. For Fall 2026, we will use only the highest 3 of your 4 individual HW scores. **Online students must be mindful of what this time translates to in your local timezone**. More details will be available with each HW on how to submit your HW. There are **no exceptions to the submission deadline** (Medical exceptions will need a doctor’s certificate at least 24 hours before the deadline, and are not approved until an instructor replies positively. Interviews, travel, and other deadlines are not acceptable reasons for seeking extension.).
5. (For all 4 credit Students and MCS-Chicago/City Scholars students, but not MCS Coursera/DS4 Students) Four programming assignments (aka MPs) will be given during the semester, each requiring 2-4 weeks of effort. All MPs are evaluated via a **report**, and a live **demo** (done in-person). Chicago students do the demo on zoom. All groups will receive access to a cluster (on the CS VM Farm cluster). All groups can choose their programming language of choice (past groups have used C++, Java, Go, C, Python, Rust, etc.). There are **no exceptions to the submission deadline** (Medical exceptions will need a doctor’s certificate at least 24 hours before the deadline, and are not approved until an instructor replies positively. Interviews, travel, and other deadlines are not acceptable reasons for seeking extension.).
6. (For Only MCS Coursera/DS4 Students) 2 Programming Assignments Building Distributed Systems via a C++ Emulator. **Prior knowledge of C++ is required and essential**. Please be mindful of the deadline times noted in Coursera, especially as there are many deadlines! There are **no exceptions to the submission deadlines on Coursera**, due to the automated nature of Coursera.
7. (For Only MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 Students) All weekly quizzes (5+5=10) on Coursera, 2 Final quizzes on Coursera. The 5+5 quizzes will each be pass/fail (cutoff is 70% of points on that quiz). Coursera final quizzes are not pass/fail. There are **no exceptions to the submission deadlines on Coursera**, due to the automated nature of Coursera.

8. (For All Students) In-class Midterm Exam and Final Exam. Both exams are in-class for all on-campus and MCS-Chicago/City Scholar students, and closed book/closed notes. All MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students will take a timed midterm and final exam online via ProctorU (instructions will be shared closer to the exams). Everyone **MUST** these two exams. MCS-Chicago/City Scholars students must take the exams (midterm, final) at the Chicago location. It will be at the same time and date as the corresponding on-campus exam.
9. (For On campus students and MCS-Chicago/City Scholars students) We cannot offer a conflict if you have double-booked your timeslot with another course (an instructor has already informed you about this when you emailed them). Exceptions and makeup exams are very rare (due to the size of the course, we keep it streamlined).
10. DRES students must email instructors at least 2 weeks before the exam time (DRES exams are offered at the same time and date, except in and by the DRES office.) **DRES students MUST book a slot at the DRES testing center. Please book as early as possible, and for the same date and time as the on-campus exam.**
11. If you need an exception, email instructors at least 2 weeks before the due day/exam day—requests are not approved until an instructor replies positively. (Medical exceptions will need a doctor's certificate, and are not approved until an instructor replies positively. Interviews, travel, and other deadlines are not acceptable reasons for seeking a conflict.).
12. **Start** your HWs and MPs (and for MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students: quizzes, programming assignments, and exams) **early**. We recommend **attempting each HW problem right after the lecture that covered it**. DO NOT start the entire HW or MP at the last minute – these assignments involve more time than you think. If you start an assignment a day before the deadline, you may already be too late. Did we say **start early**?

Grading:

For grading purposes:

1. We curve the 3cr undergraduate and 3cr graduate students separately from each other (we realize the two groups have different backgrounds!).
2. We curve the 4cr undergraduate and 4cr graduate students separately from each other (we realize the two groups have different backgrounds!). Note: 4cr CS425 satisfies the department's team project/one-term capstone project requirements (which requires the programming project be at least 30% of course grade)
3. MCS Coursera/DS3 students will be curved and graded separately.
4. MCS Coursera/DS4 students will be curved and graded separately.

Grading (tentative splits):

- 4cr On-campus: 5 (participation) + 30 (HW) + 50 (MPs) + 25 (Midterm) + 50 (Finals) = 160.

- 4cr Chicago: 30 (HW) + 50 (MPs) + 25 (Midterm) + 50 (Finals) = 155.
- 3cr On-campus: 5 (participation) + 30 (HW) + 25 (Midterm) + 50 (Finals) = 110.
- 3cr Chicago: 30 (HW) + 25 (Midterm) + 50 (Finals) = 105.
- 4cr Coursera: 31.75 (weekly quizzes) + 15 (final quizzes) + 45 (MPs) + 30 (HWs) + 25 (midterm) + 50 (finals) = 196.75.
- 3cr Coursera: 31.75 (weekly quizzes) + 15 (final quizzes) + 30 (HWs) + 25 (midterm) + 50 (finals) = 151.75.

All grades will be available only on Canvas. Coursera students: Coursera-only assignment (quizzes, final quizzes, coursera programming assignments for DS4) grades are NOT available on Canvas, and only available on Coursera.

Grading for undergraduate and graduate students will be separated. Grades will be assigned on a curve (relative grading). The fraction of students receiving any grade (e.g., A's) is not fixed a priori, and there are no hard cutoffs (because every semester's batch and questions are different!), and so the curve depends on the overall class performance. In past years, the median grade in each grading group in this class has been a B+/B.

On-campus 3 credit vs 4 credit Students: The on-campus MPs are only for 4 credit on-campus students. We will be grading and evaluating only MPs submitted by on-campus 4 credit students (includes MCS-Chicago/City Scholars 4cr students).

We expect all partners on an MP group to contribute equivalent amounts of effort to the MP. There are no exceptions to this rule—the best way to learn is to actually do it! Any violations will result in a zero for the student deemed to have contributed less than their fair share. (We understand that contributions can never be exactly equal from all partners. So we expect partners to do their utmost best and share the load fairly and do equivalent amount of efforts as the other partner.)

If you are a 4 cr student and already found a partner, and subsequently want to drop to 3cr or to drop the course, we expect that you will (1) first help your MP partner find another partner (this is required), (2) drop only right after an MP deadline (and before the next MP is released) so that your (4cr) partner can find a new MP partner. Please be nice to your partner! Before you drop, we expect you will contribute your equivalent share to the MP effort. Dropping requires both partners to send email to the instructor with all partners (dropping/old and new) cc-ed, and approval from instructor.

MP Groups:

- All MCS Coursera/DS4 students must do their (Coursera) programming assignments individually (see “Academic Integrity Policy” on the next page of this document).
- On-campus MPs must be done only in **groups of 2**. Groups of size 1, 3 (or more), or groups of size zero or negative, are not accepted. Here's your chance to practice pair programming! Please read the “Academic Integrity Policy” on the next page of this document.

HW Groups: There are no HW groups. All HWs must be done individually. You cannot discuss

solutions or ideas with anyone else other than course staff (but you can discuss lecture concepts and the HW question itself). Please read the “Academic Integrity Policy” on the next page of this document.

Lecture Participation:

- For on-campus students: Attending the lectures is important. Some lectures will have an in-class pop quiz. Your score in the pop quiz is ignored, however your participation in the quiz will be recorded, and that participation will add up to 5 points in your final grade. If you miss more than one quizzes, you will lose some of those points.
- If you can’t attend an occasional lecture, you can see the lecture video (posted a few days after the lecture; links on course website).
- For MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students: viewing all Coursera lectures is a must. Do not attempt quizzes, homeworks, or exams without viewing and studying lecture material carefully.

§ Course Policies

Best 3 of 4 Homeworks Policy Each HW is worth 10 points, and there are 4 HWs. For Fall 2026, we will use only **the highest 3 of your 4 individual HW scores**, which adds up to at most 30 points. Because of this policy, you may be tempted to completely neglect one of the HWs but then you risk losing out on valuable learning required for the midterm and final exams. This policy is applicable to all students in class (on-campus, MCS Coursera, and everyone else).

Academic Integrity Policy We adhere by the CS academic integrity policies outlined at the webpage <https://siebelschool.illinois.edu/academics/honor-code>. It is the course policy that all of the work you submit for grading, or in support of graded material, as an individual or project group, shall be your own product, from inception to completion. The only resources you can avail of in your HWs and MPs are the provided course materials (slides, textbooks, etc.), and communication with instructor/TA via newsgroup and email. You cannot use any AI tools like LLMs, ChatGPT, Gemini, etc. (trust us, they will give you wrong solutions). Only when a HW question explicitly mentions that you can use Web resources can you do so. Please do not reveal solutions on any discussion forums, internal to the university or external. Exams are closed-book, closed-notes, unless otherwise specified.

All homeworks are individual. Other than with course staff, you should discuss, or share, or work together on, **solutions with no one else** (whether in the class or outside). You can however discuss with other students **lecture concepts** or **the HW question itself** (but not the solution or any ideas for the solution).

For MP groups, other than with the course staff, you can discuss, share the **solution** (or ideas or code or whatever), or work together on, the MP, **only with your group partners**. You cannot discuss, work on, or share, the MP solution with anyone else. You can however discuss with other students **lecture concepts** or **the MP spec itself** (but not the solution or any ideas for the solution).

Please use the Piazza discussion forum for all questions/discussion on HWs and MPs. **All students, on-campus and MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4, must use Piazza for all course-related questions.** **MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students – if you use Coursera forums to post questions, your question may be answered very late (or never). So please use Piazza.** (MCS Coursera/DS3/DS4 students must use Salesforce for non-technical issues, e.g., issues related to features on the Coursera platform).

On the Piazza forum, if you post a solution (code or write-up) to the forum, that is a violation of academic integrity, and the rules below will apply, i.e., you will lose all points for that particular assignment and it is treated as a first violation. Email the staff only when you cannot use the discussion forum, e.g., if you have an urgent question, or if you have a personal matter to ask/discuss.

Regrading Policy: This applies to both on-campus and Coursera students:

- All regrade requests must be submitted back within 1 week of the graded HW/MP being returned. Regrade requests must be submitting in the same system as the original HW was submitted in (Gradescope or Coursera). Be sure to clearly indicate the reason for the regrade request.
- Regrade requests submitted after one week of the HW/MP being returned will not be regraded.
- All regrading decisions by the TA will be final (i.e., no regrade requests on regrades). Please do not engage in back-and-forth discussion with the TA(s).

Result of Cheating Violations of this academic integrity policy will be treated seriously. A first violation of these academic integrity guidelines will result in a zero grade on that HW/MP. A second violation will result in an F grade for the entire course. (And yes, in the past, we have caught almost all cheating students. And these cheating students have suffered both above types of consequences.)

Just don't cheat – your time is not worth it. If you cheat in this course and get away with it miraculously, later in life, when you are working in a job and need to use these concepts, you will be at a loss (Karma comes around).

Policy on Late Submission: Unless otherwise specified, **all MP assignments**, or components thereof, that are to be electronically submitted are usually **due at 11:59 PM US Central Time** on the due date. Similarly, with some exceptions, **homework sets**, or components thereof, that must be submitted by other means are usually **due at the beginning of class** on the due date (US Central time zone), so online students please be mindful of what this time translates to in your local timezone (please watch for exceptions to this rule).

All MP and HW submission deadlines are hard and will not be extended. No late homework sets or MPs will be accepted except under extremely rare non-academic circumstances (which usually require approval from the Dean's office). So please ensure you have submitted everything necessary by the deadline time.

Conflict Exams Policy: If you need a makeup/conflict exam, please contact instructors at least 2 weeks before the posted exam date (midterm/final). Conflict exams are not given for routine reasons (includes interviews, trips, etc.). Conflict exams are not given for course conflicts–this is clarified before semester starts, when the student requests permission from instructor to double sign-up for another course. Conflict request is approved only upon a positive acknowledgement from instructors. We will of course accommodate genuine emergencies, including medical emergencies. All medical reasons must come with a doctor's letter that is for the patient in question, and the letter is not generic. Request is not approved until an instructor responds positively. Instructors' decision is final on each case.

Midterm date is posted on the course schedule ("Lectures" link)–plan accordingly. Final exam date is decided by campus, so please wait until they announce it–do not book travel, etc., before you know

it (we don't offer conflicts for travel).

DRES On-Campus Student Policy: DRES Students – Please note:

1. Our lecture videos are on DRES' list for being closed captioned.
2. We also release our slides before the lecture (see Course schedule page).
3. Please plan to take your midterm exam and final exam at the DRES center, as they can accommodate the quiet environment and the extra time you may need. Please plan to take your (respective) exam on the same day as the on-campus exam (for midterm and for final), anytime is ok. We will send DRES the exam directly. Please schedule the DRES exam request EARLY (at least 3 weeks before exam day), as time slots get filled quickly for exam days!

§ Supplementary Textbooks

We will use many readings off the Web - these will be available under the Lectures link on the course website. The following textbooks may be used for supplementary course material. You are not required to own these books. They are on reserve at the Grainger Library (if available). You may be able to use a prior edition of the textbook if you own one.

1. Fourth edition of the Coulouris-Dollimore-Kindberg textbook.
2. "Distributed Systems: An Algorithmic Approach," Sukumar Ghosh, CRC Press, 2006, ISBN: 1584885645. (Available online free at the Illinois Library Catalog).
3. "Distributed systems: principles and paradigms," A. Tanenbaum and M. Steen, Prentice Hall, Second Edition, 2005, ISBN: 0132392275.
4. "Distributed algorithms: concepts and design," N. Lynch, Morgan-Kaufmann, 1ed, 1996, ISBN: 1558603484.

§ Copyright All material used in this version of the course is copyrighted by Indranil Gupta and the University of Illinois. This version of the course has evolved based on past lectures given by the following professors during the 1990s and 2000s: Jennifer Hou, Mehdi Harandi, Nitin Vaidya, Klara Nahrstedt, and Sayan Mitra.