

Clements Center Coffee Hours

Purpose

The Clements Center hosts biweekly meetings open to all students to discuss topics in national security and foreign policy. The coffee hours are a forum in which students can engage with one another, debate ideas, and learn more about international topics and current events.

It is the Center's goal that hosting these discussions will enable participants to practice and improve communication skills, develop critical-thinking abilities, and increase their awareness of disparate perspectives in order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of complex topics.

Format

Coffee hours are one-hour meetings in which a student host (typically a Clements Center fellow) moderates a discussion on a topic of their choosing. Participants receive the topic and suggested reading materials in an email prior to the discussion. Though students are encouraged to do the readings in advance, no formal preparation is necessary; walk-in participants are welcome.

After introductions, the host presents their topic and poses questions to begin the conversation. Participants may raise their hands to offer thoughts, ask questions, and initiate debate. The host acts as moderator and calls on participants accordingly. When raising their hands to contribute to the conversation, participants should indicate to the moderator if their comment is:

- A **new topic or thought** they wish to express (raise one finger)
- A **direct reply** to the current speaker or idea (raise two fingers)

The host may redirect the discussion or pose alternate lines of inquiry at any time.

The conversation will conclude with ten minutes left in the hour, at which point the host will ask one post-meeting question about the discussion itself (e.g. What is one insight you learned from this discussion? What is one idea, topic, or viewpoint that you would like to learn more about?) After each participant has offered a brief response, the Clements Center staff will bring the coffee hour to a close. Students are encouraged to continue engaging with one another and discussing topics of interest on their own time.

Rules of Engagement

All students are held to the standards of behavior outlined in the University's code of conduct (available [here](#)) and are responsible for being aware of its provisions. In addition, coffee hour participants must abide by the following discussion rules:

1. Respect the host and other participants, even if you disagree with the positions they take. Passion and enthusiasm are encouraged, but hostility or antagonism will not be tolerated.
2. Follow the host's parameters for the discussion and defer to their direction of the conversation. Do not monopolize the discussion or move off-topic.
3. Keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about other participants' intentions, experience, or knowledge. Challenge one another's ideas respectfully and do not interrupt each other.

Our goal in having these rules of engagement is to maintain a respectful and stimulating learning environment for all participants. Students are encouraged to bring any issues, offenses, or questions to the attention of the Clements Center staff so that they can be promptly addressed. Staff may identify and address a violation when it occurs or privately after the discussion. A participant who does not adhere to the rules of engagement will receive one warning. After a second offense, the student will no longer be permitted at the coffee hour discussions.

Tips for Effective Communication

- Support your arguments with evidence and specify when your comments are speculative or exploratory. It is better to acknowledge uncertainty than to present potentially inaccurate or misleading information.
- Avoid acronyms, when possible. If acronyms or other technical language is necessary, offer a brief definition for other participants who may be unfamiliar with the term.
- Ask for clarification if a word, topic, or concept is unfamiliar. This is an opportunity to learn together; another participant is probably wondering the same thing!
- Learn and use participants' names, when possible.
- Ask questions to learn more about other perspectives. Consider whether your disagreement is over a fact, an interpretation, or a principle. When voicing your disagreement, present your alternative view politely and concisely.
- Allow others to contribute and do not monopolize the conversation. Speak clearly and offer concise commentary.
- Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.

Any questions regarding the coffee hour procedures, rules, or policies may be directed to Mike at alexandra.vermooten@austin.utexas.edu.