

CMI-AMCAS

Solutions for Premeds at MIT

June 2004, by Eric Swart (CMI '02)

The Problem:

So you've probably just gotten back from England, and as soon as you get into the US (or possibly before you even leave), you realize that you need to start filling out the AMCAS right away. The problem is:

- a) you don't even have your scores from Cambridge yet
- b) the scores, even when you do get them, don't really translate into the American A,B,C system, and
- c) the AMCAS itself is totally unclear on how to handle it, and calling them and asking any questions is pretty much useless.

After going through this process once and failing miserably, I sat down with Peggy Enders (in charge of CMI stuff) and Shonool Malik (the pre-med guru), and we came up with this way to deal with the issue. In the next couple pages I'll go over what I think is the most honest and efficient way to portray your time abroad.

My Approach:

First, realize that since you don't have grades from freshmen year, you really need to have scores from your junior year so that you're not just showing them how you did a few select classes. So, your best bet is to wait for your Cambridge grades to come back (by the end of July or early August), and then fill out the AMCAS.

The AMCAS doesn't have a lot of flexibility. Since it's online, you're stuck with their webform, which doesn't really leave any room for miscellaneous comments about what a "first" means, or why a 72/100 is a good score to get on Paper 1 of the Second Year Engineering Tripos. So, my approach is this:

- 1) Fill out the AMCAS being honest yet portraying yourself in the best possible way. Take advantage of the few opportunities you have to actually write text to explain what CMI is and what your grades mean.
- 2) During secondary application time, send your CMI "transcript" to those schools as additional material
- 3) Keep after the schools to make sure you don't disappear in their systems and that they understand what's going on. Then, pray.

In the next few sections, I'll give a step-by-step breakdown of how I handled this stuff, which will hopefully be helpful to other premeds trying to deal with this issue.

Note: this approach assumes that you did reasonably well in Cambridge, and that your marks from there are good enough to tell med schools. Bear in mind that you can play up the whole "I adapted to a new system" thing, so even 2-2's can seem good if you present them in that light. If you did less well (i.e. failed or low 3rds), you'll definitely want to speak with your premed advisor (and possibly Peggy and/or Shonool) about the best way to handle it.

The AMCAS:

This is the most ambiguous and the probably most important step of your application with respect to CMI issues. I'll go through the application in the order that I filled it out, and the one that I feel makes the most logical sense:

Schools Attended

In the Colleges section, I added an entry for MIT and an entry for Cambridge. The MIT one is self explanatory. For Cambridge, I designated it as "other" (i.e. not a US or Canadian school), picked the country as "United Kingdom" and the school as "Foreign College Not Coded - Main Program" since they only have 2 or 3 schools available to choose from. I entered the school's modified name as "University of Cambridge (England)", and filled out the other stuff (City, Country, Dates Attended), which I think is pretty obvious. I said my major was Chemical Engineering, but put "no degree expected" in the degrees section.

Coursework

When filling out this section, it's important to remember that AMCAS says *not* to list transfer credit from other institutions. That means when entering your MIT coursework, you don't make any entries for your junior year (since all of the credit there is transfer credit, presumably). For the Cambridge coursework, I entered all my grades saying the Academic Term was "TY - Full Year - Trimester System", and when they asked for the grade conversion, I chose "No conversion to AMCAS grades available or required". For grading system conversion, I chose "semester hours" as that way that credit appears on the transcript (although I don't think this especially matters, since they never see your transcript anyway).

Now comes the sketchy part. What you have is a series of exam scores out of the total possible points, and what they want is a class name, your OT grade, and the number of credit hours for the class. I'll go through an example - my unofficial "CMI transcript" had a line that said "Paper 1 Fluid Mechanics: 62 out of 75". Here's how that was entered into the AMCAS form:

-I put "Junior" for Academic Status, and "CET1, PI" for Course number (for Chemical Engineering Tripos 1, Paper 1), and for the course name, I put "Fluid Mechanics". The classification is obviously "Engineering", and it was a "Lecture Course Only".

-For grades, I followed the convention that 70+ is a first, 60-70 is a second, 50-60 is probably a third (or maybe a 2-??) and so on. 62 out of 75 is an 83%, so for OT grade I entered "1ST" for this exam. If you add up the total possible points on all my exams and all my exercises/labs, there are 525 total points possible. Since an average year is 32 semester hours, I said that the class was worth $(75/525) * 32 = 4.6$ credit hours, which is what I put in the Credit Hours slot.

I repeated this for all of my exams and all of the scores reported in my CMI transcript. It's basically a combination of common sense and trying to find what the fairest interpretation is. Realize that this isn't too important, since the AMCAS people will never see this transcript (AMCAS refuses to even look at foreign transcripts), so as long as your entries are honest and fair, you won't run into any trouble here.

Transcript Requests:

Entering the transcript info for MIT is self explanatory, but the Cambridge info might not be. When entering the information for your Cambridge transcript, first choose "Transcript NOT required by AMCAS" (IMPORTANT: you MUST pick this. AMCAS refuses to translate foreign grades, so sending them any kind of transcript will just confuse them. More importantly, if you click "transcript required", they won't send the AMCAS out until their system says they've received your Cambridge transcript. But even if they do get it, they won't look at it, so basically

your AMCAS will just sit there in limbo, even if it's done). When it asks for the reason for the exception, chose the option that says "Foreign college outside the US", and say the type of Foreign Attendance is "Study Abroad sponsored by a US college" (since MIT sponsors CMI). When prompted, select MIT as the school sponsoring the exchange, and give Peggy Enders as the contact person (Margaret Enders, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, 617-253-3561, peggy@mit.edu)

Post-Secondary Experiences:

I used this section as an opportunity to explain what CMI was. I added an experience and labeled the type as "Other", gave the dates as September-June of the year I was there, and gave the Title as "CMI Exchange to Cambridge, England," the organization as "CMI", and gave Peggy's contact info.

Under description, I gave a brief explanation saying that I had spent my junior year studying abroad in Cambridge, England through an exchange program with MIT. I gave my grades and their approximate equivalent, and I informed them that they would be receiving a more detailed account from the CMI office of MIT validating my scores and time there (see more about this in the "After the AMCAS" section).

That pretty much covers all of the sections of the AMCAS that involve CMI stuff. Hopefully that's enough info to help you figure out approximately what to put. I feel like the important thing to realize is that it's all common sense, and if admissions officers can read it and quickly understand what you're getting at, then you've been successful, and that's more important than following some official format or procedure.

After the AMCAS:

As of right now, the credit you received from your year at Cambridge is recorded on the MIT transcript as "S" - which indicates transfer credit, and that's all. (Course 6 students get "P" grades.) That doesn't mean very much. However, the CMI office has put together some very nice unofficial reports of your time in England that you probably want people to see (provided you did well) - including a report from your college (with your marks) and a copy of your Cambridge University transcript (which lists only the exams you took and doesn't contain marks).

So, the best time to send out your MIT transcript seems to be when you start getting secondary applications. Once you get a secondary application from a school, call or write the admissions office asking if they would be interested in receiving a copy of your CMI-produced transcript. Then, send it to them.

Closing:

Like I said earlier, this is a combination of common sense, and learning to portray yourself in the best possible light. BE HONEST, but don't feel bad about doing things that are logical (like changing exam scores into grades, and assigning credit hour values to them) if it makes your application more clear.

I'm happy to speak with anyone personally who has questions, and I'm willing to share my AMCAS to anyone who wants to use it as a guide - I can be reached most easily at [eswart\(a\).mit.edu](mailto:eswart(a).mit.edu). In addition, all feedback and opinions on changes that could be made to this are welcome. Thanks, and good luck!