Newsletter At a Glance

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2020-2021 Application Season General Timeline

- **September 9, 2020**: NMS Match applicant Registration opens and a list of participating programs is available.
- **December 15, 2020**: Recommended date by which applicants should register for the Match program.
- **December 2020 – January 2021**: General period in which applications are due; check your preferred programs’ website for program-specific deadlines
- **January 2021 – March 2021**: Interview invitations sent
- **February 2021 – April 2021**: Interviews conducted
- **March 31, 2021**: Match system opens to enter rankings
- **April 14, 2021**: Match rank order list deadline; both prospective students and GC programs submit their ranking lists
- **April 23, 2021**: Match Day” – Match results released and Post-Match process begins

Disclaimers: This newsletter was put together by members of the Student/New Member Special Interest Group of NSGC. The members of the SIG are current students or new genetic counselors. Content reflects that which was generated by SIG member volunteer working groups and guest contributors as noted. The content herein does not constitute official positions or statements by the NSGC or other professional genetic counseling organizations. Photos are courtesy of the task force leaders and are intended to be supplement only; they do not represent contributors in any form or fashion.
About the Student/New Member SIG

**OUR MISSION:** To create a positive and approachable environment in which students and new genetic counselors can get involved with their professional society early in their careers; to facilitate communication, mentorship, and collaboration within our membership and between other SIGs and Committees; to allow our members to participate in or lead projects in line with their personal interests via five task forces; to promote continuous growth of our members’ professional network and relationships.

**MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS**

**Education/Certification Task Force:** engages current genetic counseling students, organizes bi-annual boards study groups with support through the study period, creates educational resources for students and new graduates, and connects new graduates in cities through “ambassadors” who coordinate activities in the area

**Outreach Task Force:** works to increase awareness of the field across the nation, creates a handbook for launching and sustaining genetic counseling student interest groups on college campuses, participates in outreach activities directed towards the general population, high school students, and college campuses including guidance counselors, professors and students.

**AC Event Coordinator:** organizes an outreach event for local high school or college students in the city hosting the NSGC Annual Conference

**Prospective Students Task Force:** provides FAQ sheets for application requirements and deadlines, maintains a calendar of important dates for each genetic counseling program, and composes quarterly newsletters about the genetic counseling profession while highlighting a “hot topic” in genetics and a “day in the life” of a practicing genetic counselor

**NEW** Task Forces in 2019-2020:
- Clinical Supervision Task Force
- Mentorship Task Force
- GC Student/New Member Liaison
- Social Media Manager

**Additional benefits:** Scholarship opportunities (Travel grant to the Annual Conference and a 1-year membership to NSGC), monthly peer supervision group calls to discuss challenging cases or professional issues, and a built-in community of over 100 members.

Join Now: To add this SIG to your NSGC membership, please visit your member profile or click here. From the Actions tab, select the "Add Membership Package" option and select the SIG you would like to join. You will then be able to pay online or print an invoice to mail with a check.

Student Member Dues: $120
New Genetic Counselor Dues: $193
A Note from this Year’s Task Force Leaders

As a reapplicant, I was grateful for the advice I received from others that helped me fine-tune my application. After matching with a genetic counseling program, I vowed to help keep the door open for other GC hopefuls and am honored to have assisted with the creation of this resource. Working with the Student/New Member Student Interest Group only reinforced the idea that the genetic counseling community is so special. In this challenging year, our community has started necessary conversations on how to better support peers, educators, and patients while dealing with systemic racism. Our community has also worked to tirelessly to create solutions for working genetic counselors, students, and patients in light of a global pandemic. I am so proud to be part of such an amazing group of health professionals who are moving this profession forward in such thoughtful, innovative ways. Best of luck to all prospective genetic counseling students!

Yvonne Cardona
Augustana-Sanford Genetic Counseling Graduate Program, Class of 2021

Thinking back to my own discovery of the genetic counseling profession four years ago, I realize there has been a tremendous increase in the amount of resources provided to prospective students. Podcasts, blogs, webinars, and newsletters have increased accessibility for those wanting to learn about the field. Perhaps in the era of COVID-19 and increasing conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion, this is more important than ever. Though I was fortunate to connect with the few genetic counselors in my home state, I would have greatly appreciated these resources as I nervously prepared for my first application. Whether you are an excited first-timer, a dedicated re-applicant, or just curious if this field might be the fit for you, I hope you are able to take away something valuable from the content our team has put together. I am so grateful to be a small part in the effort of recruiting future genetic counselors and wish you all the best of luck!

Olivia Kesler
University of South Carolina Genetic Counseling Program, Class of 2020
A Day in the Life...

We had the opportunity to interview multiple genetic counselors across a variety of specialties as well as current genetic counseling students. Learn about them below!

Meet the Genetic Counselors

Clinical Setting

**ST: Sam Toy** works as a general genetic counselor at Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis. She earned a Master’s degree in Biology from Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis and then earned her Master’s degree in Genetic Counseling at Indiana State University in 2019.

**LG: Lauren Gima** graduated from the Northwestern University genetic counseling program in 2017. Shortly thereafter, she joined the clinical team at City of Hope in Duarte, CA as a cancer genetic counselor with a special interest in hereditary GI cancer syndromes. In addition to her clinical responsibilities, she is an active faculty member of the City of Hope Intensive Course in Genomic Cancer Risk Assessment, which provides continuing medical education for community-based physicians, physician assistants, nurses, genetic counselors and other health care professionals seeking skills in this area. She is a clinical rotation supervisor and community mentor for students of several Southern California genetic counseling programs. In her spare time, she loves dancing, cooking, traveling, and hanging out with her dog, Riley.

**RK: Reka Muller** is a board certified prenatal genetic counselor and clinical instructor at the University of South Florida in the Maternal Fetal Medicine Division. Her primary focus is to provide prenatal and preconception genetic counseling in various clinics in the Tampa Bay area. Additionally, she provides counseling about exposures to providers and the general public in the state of Florida through the USF Teratogen Information Services. Reka, originally from Budapest, Hungary, earned her MSPH in Genetic Counseling from the University of South Florida in 2019 as part of the inaugural class.

**SA: Sarah Austin** graduated from the Wayne State University Genetic Counseling program in 2018. Following graduation, she accepted a position at University of Michigan Cancer Genetic Clinic, where she counsels patients for a number of cancer/tumor predisposition syndromes. In addition to patient facing roles, she participates in research, teaching, student supervision, as well as community outreach to both patients and other healthcare providers. She is a Michigan native and loves spending time outside with her puppy, Luna!
Meet the Genetic Counselors

Industry Setting

KJI: Kisha Johnson-Isidore is a Certified Genetic Counselor with over 15 years of experience. She is a graduate of Howard University’s Genetic Counseling Program. She currently works as an Oncology Product Specialist at Myriad Genetic Laboratories. Prior to joining Myriad, Kisha spent 10 years working in a General Genetics Clinic at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. She maintained faculty appointments in both the Department of Pediatrics and the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology as an Assistant Professor. Her interests include finding resources to increase access to Genetic Testing for ALL appropriate patients who may be at risk. She is a patient advocate first. She has a deep commitment to providing quality patient care through ongoing education. Kisha is a native of the US Virgin Islands and lives locally in Newnan, Georgia, with her husband Benjamin and her daughter Mia. When Kisha is not working, she enjoys spending time with her family.

KW: Kenny Wong started out as a prenatal GC before venturing to the startup realm for 10+ years and realized that his passion was in product management. He was previously at Counsyl (acquired by Myriad Genetics in 2018) and did everything from sales, medical affairs, learning and development, product management, and random projects like creating a new CPT code via AMA. Kenny is currently the VP of Products at GenomeSmart (acquired by Ambry in February), serves as the Chair for Access to Expanded Carrier Screening Coalition, serves as a Strategic Advisor for Carmentix, and as a consultant for several other startups.
Meet the Genetic Counseling Students

**MBS: Michaela Bercovitch Sadinsky** is a second year student in the genetic counselling program at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She previously completed a BSc. in Anatomy & Cell Biology and an MSc. in Biochemistry, both at McGill University. Her research project will evaluate the patient experience of a newly implemented oncology-based genetic testing protocol for women with ovarian cancer. Michaela enjoys exercising, spending time with family and friends, binging shows and documentaries on Netflix, and attempting to bake!

**JH: Julia Heaton** is a second year student at the University of British Columbia. She was born and raised in Edmonton, and completed an undergraduate degree in biology and history at the University of Alberta. She’s a big fan of skiing, camping, and oat milk lattes.

**LB: Lauren Boucher** is a second year student at Virginia Commonwealth University. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she pursued a major in animal sciences and a minor in chemistry. After she graduated, she spent a year as a genetic counseling assistant at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. Some of her favorite things to do include weightlifting, binge watching series on Netflix with her cat Simi, and hanging out with her friends.
Describe a typical day in the life at your job:

**ST:** On a typical day at work I might spend half of the day in the office and the other half in clinic. While in the office, I spend time reviewing patient cases, coordinating genetic testing, calling out results to families, and responding to patient calls. In clinic, I work with a medical geneticist seeing patients with a variety of indications. We see patients of all ages but the most common indications include global developmental delay and autism. One week every month I am on-call where I am available for genetic counseling and coordination of genetic tests for inpatients at the Children’s Hospital. It’s enjoyable to get a variety of experiences with my role as a general genetic counselor.

**LG:** I’m lucky that my current position allows me to split time between clinic, research, and educational/teaching opportunities. Mon/Wed/Fri are typically spent prepping for clinic, calling out results, attending multidisciplinary tumor boards, genomics case conference, and planning educational opportunities in genetic cancer risk assessment for community providers. Tues/Thurs are dedicated clinic days where we work both independently and with physicians to deliver cancer genetic counseling, testing, and high-risk screening and management.

**RM:** Depending on the day, I can take on many different roles. When I am in clinic, usually three times a week, I see up to seven patients for preconception or prenatal counseling who may have a family or personal history of genetic conditions, had abnormal genetic screening/testing or had an abnormal ultrasound. These days, I work closely with our Maternal Fetal Medicine doctors to provide the best care for our patients. Other days, I help coordinate care and testing, call out results, document and work on other administrative assignments. Since I work at an academic center, I am also involved in supervising and teaching genetic counseling and medical students, residents and fellows. Half a day every week, we have ‘academic time’ which includes lectures for continuing education and other meetings. Additionally, I also have the opportunity to participate in various research projects. I am in the unique setting of also providing counseling about exposures (such as medications) to providers and the general public in the entire state of Florida through University of South Florida’s Teratogen Information Services and MotherToBaby Florida. In addition to in person exposure counseling, I also provide information about exposures via phone and email together with my colleagues through our MotherToBaby Florida services.

**SA:** My typical days are a mix of seeing patients, attending meetings, or working in the office calling out results/working on documentation. I see oncology patients 2-3 days a week, and on clinic days’ patients are usually scheduled back to back, so those days are really dedicated to counseling patients. On my non-clinic days, I usually call out any pending results, work on notes and letters for patients I saw earlier that week, and work on prepping patients I am going to see the following week in my office. I also attend various meetings throughout the week, such as tumor boards, grand rounds, scheduling/staffing meetings, as well as our clinical case conference, where we discuss our challenging cases for the week. Currently, my day looks very different from how it did 2-3 months ago. All of my patients are seen virtually for time being (usually through video but occasionally through phone). Given this change, I am seeing less patients day to day, and spending more time in meetings and coordinating care for patients.
KIJ: For the past 5 years, I have worked for Myriad Genetics Laboratories. My first three years were spent as a Regional Medical Specialist where I supported a sales team that covered three states. In this role, my day to day included working with Surgeons and Oncologists involved in hereditary cancer risk assessment and testing to provide ongoing clinical support. This may have included discussing a new guideline update, taking a deep dive into a recently published and relevant article, or even case reviews. I have spent the last two years in a sales role. Now, I am the main point of contact for providers (Surgeons, Oncologists, Genetic Counselors) in my territory. Each day in the life of an oncology sales representative may look different. In general, I try to be in the field 3-4 days a week. My average day may include both planned/scheduled meetings and unplanned visits. If I have a lunch scheduled with a Breast Surgeon in Atlanta, I may try to stop at three or four of my offices that may be on the way and leave behind new information, try to schedule an appointment, or see if I may be able to speak with one of the staff members to see if there is anything their provider may need. The support that I provide is tailored to the needs of the individual/practice and may look different for everyone.

KW: A typical day in my job involves early morning check ins with the Product team (Software Engineering + UX Designer) on status of current software projects/features in development, and status of fixing issues that might be impacting our customers. For example, I have been working on a COVID-19 testing and employee management solution for employers (https://www.ambyrgen.com/covid). Other daily responsibilities include: interacting via instant messaging or emails with colleagues throughout the day related to the point above; commenting on Design Mocks, user flow diagrams, or Jira tickets (a task system to interact with software engineers) related to the 1st point; virtual meetings with internal stakeholders to create product requirements for projects related to the first point; virtual meetings with internal stakeholders on status updates related to projects that I'm involved with.

What is the dynamic like in your practice (a lot of GCs, big team, autonomy, etc.)?

ST: I am fortunate to work with six other genetic counselors with varied levels of experience. Two of these counselors specialize in cancer while the rest of the counselors are geared more towards general genetics. As a new genetic counselor, it’s really beneficial having an experienced genetic counselor working right next door! We work alongside metabolic dieticians, nurse practitioners, genetics fellows and medical geneticists so we have a fairly large team!

LG: Our multidisciplinary clinical team is comprised of 7 genetic counselors, 2 nurse practitioners, and 5 physicians (specializing in genetics, oncology, & gastroenterology). We also have an administrative team comprised of a genetic counseling assistant, clinic coordinator, pedigree project specialist, and volunteers. The genetic counselors/nurse practitioners see the patients at their pre- and post-test counseling visits, and then may refer the patient to one of the physicians if they need medical management recommendations, a physical exam, etc. As genetic counselors, we work autonomously in our clinic, but our entire team is collaborative and there for each other if we have questions/concerns about a case, need advice, or just a listening ear. It’s also a great learning environment, because we learn things from the physicians and nurses that we didn’t get during our GC training.
**RM:** Our practice includes 2 genetic counselors (including myself), 9 maternal fetal medicine (MFM) physicians and 3 MFM fellows. We work collaboratively with our MFM, each of us providing our own unique expertise. Some of our patients may require mostly genetic counseling while others require a multidisciplinary care team. Between the two of us genetic counselors, we attempt to cover all MFM clinics at our main site and one of us is always on-call in case of add-on patients. Additionally, we also help our OB/GYN team with calling out abnormal routine screening results and help coordinate care and additional testing for these patients.

**SA:** I work with 7 other genetic counselors and 7 physicians. Our team is really unique in that our staffing physicians come from a variety of specialties (GI, Endocrine, Genetics), so we see really unique indications for a cancer genetics clinic. The variety of specialties allows us to provide really comprehensive care and follow our patients and their families long term. Our team works together closely and we are constantly bouncing ideas/thoughts off of each other, which I think is a benefit to working with a big team. There is always a listening ear, someone to laugh with, or someone to lend a hand when needed, which I am so appreciative of.

**KIJ:** I do not work for a “practice”, I work for a laboratory, but I do work as a part of a team. I work on a team with 6 other sales reps, none of them are genetic counselors, two of them are oncology nurses. As a sales rep, I am essentially the owner of my business and I run it as I see fit. When you work for a company and are in sales, you are given strategic goals. However, how those goals are actually executed is completely up to you. Hence, I have a lot of autonomy in making decisions about how my business should be run. As a genetic counselor, clinical information is my greatest strength, therefore I try to find creative ways to share new information in my territory. I work with an amazing team of highly motivated professionals who put the patient at the forefront of everything they do. We are led by an amazing emotionally intelligent and fearless leader (our manager) who is also an Oncology Nurse by training. My team enjoys sharing best practices so that we can duplicate our success everywhere.

**KW:** I primarily work with non-GCs. There is a lot of autonomy and we interact frequently virtually to get things done.

**What do you do to stay current in your field?**

**ST:** I find the special interest groups (SIGs) through NSGC very helpful. There are many different SIG opportunities including the Student/New Member SIG which allowed me to connect to other new genetic counselors. Twitter has been another great way to stay in touch with the field. There are a lot of active genetic counselors on Twitter and it has been a great way to hear about different articles or happenings in the field.

**LG:** We host a weekly interdisciplinary web-based genetics case conferences where providers from across the world present their challenging cases, and often new data comes up during case discussion. We also commonly hold journal clubs to review new articles or “gene review” sessions to review data on lesser known genes. I belong to a few professional organizations (NSGC, CGA-IGC, SCGC) and take advantage of the various webinars, discussion boards, and conferences they offer to network with others and hear about new developments. Some of the larger testing labs even offer free online webinars for CEUs.
**RM:** As a recent graduate, I became a member of various Special Interest Groups (SIGs) which have wonderful resources and discussions. There are many opportunities to stay updated in the field through discussion posts, literature reviews, webinars and conferences offered through the SIGs, NSGC, other professional organizations, and my institution. I also discuss new topics with my classmates and colleagues. And, I always learn from preparing to see my patients.

**SA:** Attend various conferences, watch webinars, and participate in journal clubs within our clinical group. Personally, when I attend a conference like the NSGC annual conference, I try to attend a handful of sessions outside of my specialty to keep up to date in other areas. I also try to attend different conferences within my specialty instead of attending the same one year after year. Another plus of working in a large clinic is that we can attend different meetings/conferences and bring back information to share with the group as a whole.

**KIJ:** Working exclusively in cancer genetics means that I have very little time to pay attention to everything else. I stay current in the field by attending national and regional genetics meetings. At those meetings I try to attend talks that are not focused on cancer genetics. I try to network as much as I can with both new and old colleagues that work in various roles to understand what they do, what’s new in their world and what their day to day may be like. I do my best to attend webinars when possible. I also use social media.

**KW:** I try to attend ACMG and NSGC every year. I also have Google alerts on topics/companies that are relevant to me.

**What is the hardest thing about starting out as a new GC?**

**ST:** The administrative responsibility was the hardest learning curve when I first started as a genetic counselor. Understanding the billing process can be difficult especially when the billing process might be unique depending on the genetic testing laboratory. I was fortunate that my department has a billing specialist that handles the pre-authorizations and the other genetic counselors were able to help me understand the billing process.

**LG:** One of the hardest things for me starting out was the unrelenting discomfort of imposter syndrome. Internally, I felt inadequate, unqualified, and unconfident about my knowledge/abilities compared to my amazing teammates, and it led to a lot of undue anxiety. After being in my current position for 3 years, it’s something that I still struggle with on occasion. However, I believe there is some validity to the “fake it ‘till you make it” mentality. Things have gotten better with time, and I work with an amazing group of very supportive GCs who help reframe my thinking when I get too self-critical.
**RM:** For me, the hardest part of starting out as a new GC was constantly feeling a little out of my comfort zone. At first, it was being responsible for patients alone, then later it was taking on new roles such as supervising or teaching. The reality is that no one knows everything and we all continue to learn throughout our careers. I learned to embrace and enjoy new challenges and learned the importance of relying on the wonderful support of our genetic counseling community.

**SA:** For the first few months I experienced “imposter syndrome.” In hindsight, I think this is totally normal. I would have thoughts of “Am I really in charge of this? Am I really the expert here?” It was important for me to remind myself that I got through graduate school, I was selected to be in my current position, and I will only continue to grow and learn more in this field. I also had a great relationship with my new coworkers, which allowed me to discuss these feelings and bring questions to the group without feeling badly about it.

**KIJ:** Not sure how to answer this question given that I graduated 15 plus years ago and the hardest thing back then is not the hardest thing today! :) Back then, the sky was not the limit. Opportunities were few and far in between and you had to be willing to move, or to work in an area that was not your first choice. Now, new GCs have choices. I would say, that may actually be the hardest thing: having so many options. A new GC who is able to find a role as a Clinical Genetic Counselor in a general genetics clinic that gives them the opportunity to see a bit of everything may be in the best position to really discover where they want to be and what they really like. Being the only GC at a practice and being new may be hard as well; working as a part of a GC group where you can walk to your colleague’s office down the hall and bounce an idea off of him or her is an advantage that not everyone has. GCs that work for telegenetics companies work in isolation at home; this can be very difficult as well.

**KW:** Bring comfortable being uncomfortable and not needing to be an expert in everything to get the job done.

**What advice would you give to yourself as a prospective student?**

**ST:** Have an open mind and don’t be afraid to ask questions! I first heard about the field in the 8th grade and I thought I knew exactly which genetic counseling program I wanted to go to, and what I wanted to specialize in. Slowly, I started to ask more questions to genetic counselors and genetic counseling students and I realized that there are so many specialties and unique opportunities with each program. I would definitely encourage you not to box yourself in too early without exploring all there is to offer with this field!

**LG:** As you’re applying and interviewing, learn to love the things about your background that make you uniquely qualified to become a genetic counselor and how to market those qualities. Don’t give up if you do not see yourself reflected in the GC community yet; we need your distinctive voice! The field is growing rapidly, and we need people from different backgrounds with varying experiences to enrich our GC community. As a POC, I think this is especially important if you identify as an individual from an ethnic minority background! After you’ve applied/interviewed, don’t give up if you don’t get into a program on the first try. Listen to feedback from program directors or mentors and take some time to reflect on how you feel, how you can channel that into becoming a better applicant, and how to plan for more success in the following year(s).
RM: Keep an open mind and don’t be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. There are so many opportunities and roles a genetic counselor can take on. It is important to not shy away from these opportunities, even if they seem scary or uncomfortable at first because this is how we grow as professionals. Something that may have seemed scary at first may end up being your passion. Additionally, as new opportunities arise, new technology develops, the genetic counseling profession continues to change and evolve, it is important to embrace that there will always be something new we can learn.

SA: Be flexible with yourself and others. I think in graduate school we learn a lot about the “right” way to do things, but I truly believe the “right” way to be a good genetic counselor is so, so variable. Everyone’s technique, schedule, organizational tools, etc. are going to be different and that is OK. It was important to me to find a genetic counseling program and then job that would allow me to still be myself.

KIJ: I can’t imagine doing anything else. Becoming a genetic counselor was the best decision I ever made and I think most of my colleagues would agree. The sky is the limit for where you can end up. The genetic counseling profession has exploded over the last 5 years likely due to all the advancements in technology and precision medicine. We are everywhere (we are in clinic, we are in laboratories, we are in marketing, we are in public policy, we are VPs, we are Directors!) My advice to prospective students and to new genetic counselors (recent graduates) would be to give yourself time to develop. Understand how our profession started and consider starting your career as a Clinical Genetic Counselor seeing patients. I could not be the genetic counselor that I am today without the experiences I had while I was in clinic. Having the experiences of the traditional role of this profession will prepare you for future non-traditional roles in your career. At the end of the day, everything we do is about the patient; and without that experience, in my personal opinion there are some elements that you will never understand. Many GCs may not agree with me, but I think all Genetic Counselors should start out in clinic.

KW: Network early and reach out to genetic counselors working in specialties/sectors that you might be interested in.
A Day in the Life of a Genetic Counseling Student

Describe a typical day as a genetic counseling student.

**JH:** During my first year, I was at the hospital by 8:30 am almost every day for a morning class. My cohort and I would often also have another class at the end of the day, bookending our day to day schedule. In between class times, I would see patients with my supervisor. Any un-booked time during weekdays was spent working on class readings or clinic prep in the student office. My cohort and I were in the hospital every day and had the majority of our classes within the genetics clinic, so a professional dress code was in effect at all times— even if (like me) you like dressing up, this was a big change from being able to wear whatever I felt like during my undergrad.

**MBS:** A typical day really depends on the day! Some days are much busier than others, depending on how much class we have or how many patients are scheduled. My day normally starts with a quick meeting with my supervisor to confirm the plan for the day. Then, I’ll review my case preparations (I like to do the bulk of my reading at home) and fill in any holes or questions that are still there. My supervisor and I will review my preparation and agree on how much of the session I will lead. Then, we will meet with patients. In my various rotations, I have learned that different genetic counsellors will see fewer or more patients per week. After the sessions, I will usually have a quick debrief with my supervisors, and then it is time for writing the appropriate documentation! The majority of my day is discussing goals with my supervisor and then working independently to execute the plan. I like to find time for lunch with my fellow genetic counselling students at some point in the day, depending on our appointment schedules. At McGill, our classes tend to be in the late afternoon, which is a nice way to end the day.

After class, I like to head straight to the gym to recharge and relax my brain before heading home. Once home, I settle into a cozy area of my apartment to do any readings for class or case preparation for the next day that I didn’t have time to get to during the day. I found that I developed a good rhythm in my days, where I slowly had less work in the evenings, which leaves more time for relaxation! At McGill, our rotation schedules are staggered, so not everyone is in clinic at the same time. When not in clinic, you have a lot more time to yourself, which can be used for working on our research projects or anything else you would like! Most of us took the time to do the things we may not have had time for while on rotation.
LB: Our schedules vary from day to day, but generally our time is divided between attending classes, clinic, and events/conferences within the department of Human Genetics. We generally have classes 3-4 days per week and VCU leaves 1-2 weekdays open so we have time to attend clinic or fit in our elective courses. A typical day for me would be getting to the student room between 8-9 am to drop my stuff off and prepare for the day. Then I’d attend classes and departmental conferences from roughly 10:00am-3:00pm. Late afternoon and early evening are pretty flexible, so I use this time for research meetings with my committee, to attend office hours for classes, or use it to see a few patients in clinic if there is availability. In the late evening I try to take some time for myself to relax, and work on homework or prepare for upcoming clinics. Graduate school is demanding, so I personally do not have a lot of free time during the week. I do make a point to try to limit the amount of work I do on the weekends, so that I can spend time with people and do things that I enjoy. However, like in real life, there are some weeks that are more relaxed and some weeks where I feel like I only have time to eat, sleep, and work. The most important thing no matter what program you go into, is to find that work/life balance. Self-care is important, so don’t feel guilty about taking that one or two hours a day to do something that isn’t necessarily productive but is good for your mental health and overall well-being.

What about your program is special/unique?

JH: We start our clinical rotations from the very first day of the program. This doesn’t mean you need to be counseling patients right from the get go, but it does get you thinking in a clinical mindset early on. I found it satisfying that I could see how our class material translated right away, and I knew I didn’t want to wait very long to get a chance to apply what I was learning. I’m also partial to the fact that on clear days I have a view of the mountains when I leave the hospital!

MBS: The McGill program is special or unique in a number of ways. Our rotations begin early, so we are kind of “thrown” into clinic almost from the start. At first, this seemed daunting to me, but it really emphasizes an experiential self-directed learning model that empowers students. For me, I found that my coursework served to compliment what I had already experienced in the clinic. This type of model really makes you process and evaluate each case as a learning opportunity, and you start to weave together a quilt of experiences and skills.

Another aspect of the McGill program that is special is obviously our bilingual healthcare system. Personally, as an anglophone who learned French throughout high school and pursued my prior degrees at McGill, meeting with a patient in French was definitely a different level of language requirements than I thought I was capable of. Interestingly, after a gentle push from a supervisor, I realized that slowly, I was developing more and more confidence in my French, and was soon able to conduct full sessions in French. We also have students who do not speak French, and they are still able to learn and engage in many sessions with patients in our clinics.

LB: There are several aspects of VCU’s program that make it unique, such as clinical case conference, enrichment experiences, and comprehensive exams. The first hour of clinical case conference consists of students presenting a difficult or interesting case they saw to fellow students, genetic counselors, fellows, and physicians. This provides students with a great opportunity to practice their public speaking skills and to obtain feedback and support from members of the genetics community. The second hour of our weekly conference changes from week to week. We rotate between journal club, case conference, laboratory/metabolic case conference, and presentations from guest speakers which is everyone’s favorite week because of pizza rounds! (continued...)
VCU also requires all students to complete 5 enrichment experiences before graduation. These experiences can be nearly anything you want as long as it applies to genetic counseling, and they give you the opportunity to pursue your individual interests and personalize your education. For example, I chose to shadow at an Artificial Reproduction Technologies clinic where I was able to watch procedures like an embryonic implantation, a transvaginal oocyte retrieval, and an Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). In addition, I got the opportunity to watch what happens behind the scenes and learn more about the process that some couples go through to conceive, which was extremely impactful and a valuable learning experience.

Lastly, VCU also requires all of their students to complete comprehensive examinations after the first and second years of the program. These exams consist of all material we have gone through at a given point and are meant to be reflective of questions we will see on the genetic counseling board examinations. While these are definitely not the most fun part of being a genetic counseling student at VCU, I appreciate this opportunity to assess my current knowledge and to identify the areas where I need to improve in order to be prepared for boards.

What was the hardest thing about adjusting to grad school?

**JH:** For me, the hardest part was the momentum shift. I came into the program straight out of my undergrad, and had been working towards my goal of getting into a genetic counseling program for three years. It was a hard shift for me to not be working “towards” something anymore, but to focus on learning material for the sake of knowledge and clinical application, rather than grades. I think this shift can be especially hard if you identify as a type A, competitive personality. In undergrad, everything was graded on a curve and there was always a feeling of in-class competition, so I had to consciously turn that part of my brain down to remind myself that my genetic counseling cohort are not my competition.

**MBS:** I don’t know if it was a particularly “hard” thing to adjust to, but something enlightening and special happened when I started this program. I realized that in this program, competition is not a factor. We are all in this together, helping each other grow and develop at our own paces so that we may all become successful genetic counselors. I slowly had to shift my mindset from my previous degrees, learning to “respect the process” of the program, that we are meant to experience challenges in our courses and clinics, and that we will learn and grow together. Likewise, in the first few months, I had to remind myself of the very important “work-life balance.” With required readings for our courses and cases to prepare, work can sometimes pile up. I found that keeping a consistent schedule, finding time for exercise, and prioritizing my tasks helped me to stay calm and accomplish as much as possible.

**LB:** The hardest thing about adjusting to grad school for me, was moving across the country and away from my family, friends, and significant other. Leaving an established support system is never easy, but I am appreciative of the opportunity it provided me with to meet new people and make new friends. Through VCU’s genetic counseling program, I have made friends that I will have for the rest of my life. I am still amazed to this day at how complete strangers from such drastically different backgrounds and stages in life can come together and support each other to achieve our common goal of becoming genetic counselors.
What advice would you give to yourself as a prospective student?

**JH:** You’re qualified! Imposter syndrome is real, and I had myself convinced that my interview invites were all sent to me as mistakes. Especially if you don’t know anyone who has interviewed or attended a program before the application process can be very intimidating. Remember that you’ve worked really hard, and that just because your qualifications aren’t identical to someone else’s doesn’t mean yours aren’t good enough.

**MBS:** As a prospective student, I would tell myself to talk to as many people as possible. In my first round of applications, I did it completely on my own. Looking back now, I had no clue about genetic counselling or what I was doing! In my second round of applications, I reached out to as many people as possible to learn more about the field and about the application process. I felt much more confident in my application, and it paid off! Sometimes, it can feel awkward to reach out to students or program directors at different universities, but the information and confidence you will gain will be worth it!

**LB:** It is okay to not know everything. I remember during certain interviews I would be asked questions about what I would do if I was placed in an ethical dilemma. Whenever I was presented with these questions, I would get rattled because I did not know if I answered correctly. Upon reflection, I realized that there was not always one correct answer. What they were trying to do was get a sense of how I analyze a problem and my approach to determining a course of action. This advice holds true for all incoming genetic counseling students as well. Your program does not expect you to know everything before you get there. That is why you are going to graduate school, and everyone involved in the program is there to teach and support you along the way. Genetic counseling is a field of lifelong learning, so if you are passionate about genetic counseling, believe in yourself and your ability to learn.

What has been your favorite clinical experience so far?

**JH:** My standout memory of my first year in the clinic is the first full appointment I did by myself! My supervisor was incredibly supportive, and I knew she was there to help out if I needed her, but it also felt really great to be trusted to take the lead on a patient session. It was a huge confidence boost for me, and forced me to recognize the knowledge and skills I had built.
MBS: It’s hard to choose just one clinical experience as my favourite. An experience that stands out to me was in my cancer rotation, when I was able to form a close rapport with a patient based on our shared culture. Typically, I don’t share much personal information with patients. Somehow, throughout our pre-session communication and in the session, we discovered that we spoke the same language, which was the patient’s native language. All of a sudden, the patient became more animated and excited, and asked to spend some time with me to speak in that language, while my supervisor consulted the geneticist about her case. In those brief fifteen minutes, she opened up to me and I learned so much about her psychosocial concerns about her cancer risk, prophylactic surgeries, and her lack of a support network. I felt that I connected with her on a deeper level, while still respecting my boundaries, and this was extremely beneficial to my counselling and the session.

Similarly, I always find sessions with children to be quite special. As someone with a large family and who has enjoyed volunteering with children, I want children to feel comfortable and welcome in the session. It’s always sweet to engage with a child and to answer any questions that they may have, or to get an unprompted hug at the end of a session. After these experiences, I feel that my session has been educational, but more importantly, that the patients have felt comfortable to express themselves with me to address their concerns.

LB: Due to COVID-19 our clinicals have been mostly telegenetic counseling so far. However, I am eager to be back on campus so I can make full use of all the specialty clinics that the VCU program has to offer. I am considering one day specializing in cardiogenetics, so I am most looking forward to participating in the Cardiovascular Genetics Clinic at the University of Virginia. I am excited to expand my clinical skill set and learn more about this area of the field to see if it is something I would like to pursue in the future.
Plan B: Advice from Those Who Unsuccessfully Applied for a GCA or Other Relevant GC Experience

We’ve noticed an increased creation of these opportunities for prospective GC students, but also an increased demand. Several students hope for these experiences to get them ready for a program, but what happens when things don’t work out? We were interested to hear applicants’ experiences with applying for these positions and how they created a back-up plan.

Q: Did you apply for a GCA position? What was the outcome?

A1: Yes, I applied to many GCA positions throughout the country. I interviewed for one but was not offered the position.

A2: Unfortunately, there were no GCA positions available where I lived or in cities near me. I did apply for a position in another state being willing to relocate to get the experience, but I was not offered the position.

A3: Yes! I applied to several GCA positions and only was selected to interview for one. I was not able to get a GCA position.

A4: Yes, I applied to four GCA positions. All required me to relocate out of state, which I was willing to do. However, I did not receive any interviews or offers.

Q: What opportunities were/are more available than GCA positions to help gain exposure?

A1: Volunteer experience not directly related to genetic counseling and interviewing GCs by phone have been the most readily available opportunities for me. Not so common were shadowing opportunities, but they are out there! I ended up finding a great job as an ABA therapist that is giving me exposure to some aspects of GC as well.

A2: There were only a couple of GCs where I lived at the time and I had shadowed them both briefly. Having gone through my first interview cycle without acceptance, I received feedback that I needed more clinical/counseling experience rather than just exposure. I chose to volunteer with Crisis Text Line (CTL) and have met other GC students/applicants who did the same. It’s a great way to get hands-on counseling experience and I have already been able to apply the skills I learned from it into my rotations.

Aside from volunteering with CTL, I was able to interview other GCs about their work and gain feedback on my application. I also joined a neurogenetics research lab at my university that exposed me to the laboratory aspect of the genetics field. This was probably the most useful experience as I was able to participate in hands-on benchwork, journal club, and network with the clinical genetics members in my community.

A3: The main experience I have been able to get is shadowing. I was able to shadow in my hometown with several different types of GCs. I called around and most people were willing to let me observe at least for a few days. I also shadowed GCs where I lived during college, but they had a more limited number of GCs and more strict rules on shadowing. I also found a pregnancy counseling center that I could volunteer with, but I wasn’t really able to participate in the counseling aspect. It was a good experience, but it was not as related to GC as I was looking for.

Since I applied to GC, I have done some more graduate coursework specifically in genetics. I also have gotten experience working in a few genetics labs for more hands-on experience. Recently I have been working as a pharmacy tech, which doesn't seem as relevant, but I have gotten a lot of experience working directly with patients.
Plan B: Advice from Those Who Unsuccessfully Applied for a GCA or Other Relevant GC Experience (ctnd.)

A4: I am lucky to live in an area that has a decent amount of GCs, and found most of them through the NSGC website. I was able to shadow all except one. Even though I was unable to shadow the one GC, they still took the time to sit down with me and do an interview. I also live near Emory University, so I have attended their Georgia Association of Genetic Counselors GC camp over the last few years. Those experiences have provided a lot of exposure. I have volunteered as a crisis counselor with CTL as well. That was something I was able to do for the community and balance with my undergraduate studies. In my time off between graduating and re-applying, I do plan to get plugged into more in-person volunteer settings like my local disability & special needs center (which many counties have) and a women’s health clinic. It’s important to get plugged into causes that you’re passionate about. After receiving application feedback, I can tell that programs are interested in hearing about what you are genuinely passionate about, and it will help your personal statement and interviews shine. Other opportunities in my undergraduate career consisted of a work-study position for the science department’s Lab Coordinator and volunteer chaplain program at my university. I believe the work-study position provided me background for the preferred lab component of applications. The chaplain program was beneficial as a way to serve other female students that lived around me, build counseling-related skills, and gain great mentors. Recently I accepted a full-time position as a patient services representative in a doctor’s office. I felt that I was missing the patient aspect of my application, so I’m looking forward to familiarizing myself with the clerical side of healthcare—entering patient data, insurance, scheduling, working with other health professionals, etc.

Q: Did you change your path at all?

A1: Yes! Starting undergrad I was studying engineering. I decided pretty quickly to pursue genetic counseling though. I originally wanted to apply to a graduate program directly out of undergrad, but after changing my major I ended up graduating early and felt I needed to boost my experience for a more competitive application. Now, I feel like I have some valuable volunteer, shadow, and work experience to finally go through with applications in the 2020-21 cycle.

A2: Oddly enough, I was on a different path prior to finding genetic counseling. Having already made a switch in career goals, I was pretty set on becoming a genetic counselor. I was a three-time applicant though, and there were definitely some bumps along the road, but I hung in there! Each setback reaffirmed my aspiration to become a genetic counselor and I’m glad I stuck with it.

A3: Yes! I have really changed my path a few times. I started out as pre-med and didn't even know what a genetic counselor was until I was more than halfway through college. After I was unable to secure a spot in GC school, I decided to get a PhD instead. After a year of working on the PhD, I decided I wanted to be working directly with patients in a healthcare setting. At this time I can’t say for sure where I will end up.

A4: I heard about genetic counseling when I was in middle school, and I have been pursuing the field ever since! My path hasn’t changed for a long time. I’ve known throughout my pursuit of genetic counseling that it may mean applying multiple times, but it has been helpful to understand that from the start. That way, I’ve been able to plan ahead and get prepared for time off between undergrad and grad school.
Plan B: Advice from Those Who Unsuccessfuly Applied for a GCA or Other Relevant GC Experience (ctnd.)

Q: What has given you the encouragement to keep applying?

A1: The genetic counselors that I have met really love their work and have made the long road much brighter. Everyone has made it seem like a really special field of work. The possibility of being part of that makes it worthwhile.

A2: I credit my perseverance with reapplying to the genetic counselors I spoke with throughout the process who truly became mentors to me. They kept me motivated and were encouraging throughout the long process of applications and interviews.

A3: I am honestly not sure if I will be applying again.

A4: It definitely helps that I’ve been pursuing genetic counseling since before college. An encouraging thing I’ve heard directly from programs is that a lot of times, they want to take you! It’s just that they don’t necessarily have the room since programs are small and competitive. “Don’t be discouraged if you don’t get in the first time. It’s not uncommon. If this is what you want, please try again.” This is something I’ve heard multiple times. I knew applying right out of undergrad would be tough, but I also knew that if I didn’t get in, I automatically became a reapplicant. The feedback programs offer is insightful and helpful. Getting told “no” or “not right now” can sting but also know you’re not alone. Many of the applicants that got accepted the year that you didn’t were reapplying for their second or third time. So it can be beneficial to take that year or two off and focus on strengthening who you are as a person and what you plan to bring to the field!

Q: What advice do you have for applicants who are unable to find/attain GCA positions or are reapplying?

A1: Be proactive and don’t lose hope! You absolutely do not need GCA experience to be accepted into a program or become a genetic counselor. Try and find unique opportunities that will help set you apart from other applicants. Reach out to programs, students, and/or genetic counselors to see what suggestions they might have. I remember reading student bios on program websites to get ideas of the experiences they had gotten. The wonderful thing about this field is that everyone is cheering you on and wants to help, so don’t be afraid to reach out to others for support or guidance!

A4: Don’t be afraid to reach out to programs, GCs, or current students. I’ve found that they all want to help you in the ways that they can. It truly is a special community. I focused my job search on positions that would provide patient experience. I applied for various positions like a newborn hearing screener, caretaker roles in disability centers, and patient service representatives in multiple clinical settings. Getting your foot in the door in a healthcare setting is valuable and may bring more connections than you’d initially think! Even if you aren’t yet applying, reach out. They want to hear that you’re interested. It’s helpful to hear what they’re looking for specifically and the values and strengths they offer as a program. What’s important is that, whatever you find, you can connect it back to the field. Dig into it, see how it could relate to genetics, and how that experience will prepare you to be a GC. I think if you are actively pursuing the career and finding ways to relate what you’re doing to the field, then you will grow as a person and candidate. And ultimately, programs will be able to see that, too.
New Programs: Reflections on Being Part of a First Cohort

New programs continue to pop up at an exciting rate! We were grateful to hear from several students and practicing GCs that have been part of the first few cohorts of their respective programs.

• “For me, the most rewarding aspect of being part of a new program was the opportunity to truly make an impact on improving the program by having our feedback incorporated. It was also fantastic to experience the enthusiasm of supervisors in an area that didn’t have a program before. The most challenging part may have been adjusting to unexpected changes on sometimes short notice; however, it was also a great adventure at the same time.”

• “I love being a graduate from a new program. My program set up individual interviews with each student at the end of each semester to discuss ways to improve. The program director listened to our feedback and incorporated this the next semester. Having this open communication between the leadership and the students was so important. I loved having this active involvement and this helped me take more initiative in my own learning. While new programs might face different challenges than more established programs, I think there is a lot to gain as a student with being a part of a newer program!”

• “I chose to apply to new programs because I wanted to leave a lasting impact and have the opportunity to help shape the program for other students who will come after us. I have also been able to learn a lot about leadership skills and taking initiative. It has built up my confidence in sharing my ideas and thoughts so that they might be incorporated into a class or extracurricular activity. My cohort and I share the same goals and it has been fun to work together on finding new ways to make our program more successful. There are challenges with any new program, but the leadership has always been open about asking for feedback from the students. It makes me proud to be part of a new program knowing that my experiences will help the program improve for others.”

• “I just loved the enthusiasm that welcomed me into a new program. By the time our inaugural class entered, the program had been thought about and planned for years, so being able to welcome a first or second class was a huge accomplishment for the faculty! They were extremely motivated to make sure the training experience for their students is top-notch, so you don't need to worry about organization or feeling like a guinea pig. They bring so much fresh energy and innovation to training new genetic counselors.”

• For up-to-date info on all genetic counseling programs, including those in development, visit https://www.gceducation.org/program-directory/
New Programs: Suggested Interview Questions and a Director’s Perspective

We brainstormed questions that might be worth asking new programs during the interview process. We then asked a program director to provide her thoughts on these questions.

I have heard program leadership describe their first cohort of students as flexible, resilient, independent, and organized. There should probably be a formal study on this population since we now have many first cohorts. For now, I will simply report this as information gained from informal discussions. Though I was not personally part of a first cohort, I described myself in similar ways.

As I reflect on the list of questions applicants may ask during interviews, I have a few thoughts. First, applicants should know there are standard requirements for all programs including how to prepare students for boards, how often you review the curriculum, and even how you incorporate student feedback.

Second, it may be helpful to share background knowledge on new programs (from my experience). When you finally open your admissions, you have spent anywhere from 2-10 years planning for your program and your first class. You have developed admission criteria, syllabi, and supervisor evaluations. You have assembled a team of course directors, fieldwork supervisors, research advisors, and advisory board members. You have a vision for your first cohort and cannot wait to hear feedback from your students. Your campus and communities are typically excited (because they have heard your excitement for 2-10 years), and you welcome the opportunity to collaborate with students, with other programs, and with the profession.

With all of this in mind, I love answering this first list of questions because I can share the vision for our program. I light up in a sense because I get to share with you all of the work we have done to be ready for you.

• What do you envision your program and/or first cohort to look like?
• For newer programs, how fast does the program plan to incorporate feedback?
• What has been the community/university response to this new program?
• How will a newer program be collaborating/interacting with other programs in the area?
As I review the second list, I would say applicants should consider asking all programs any of these questions though be careful not to sound rehearsed. Do not ask a question just to ask a question. Consider what you would do with the information or how it could support your rank list. Is there a question not on this list you would want to ask?

- What do you believe are your program’s strengths? What sets your program apart from other programs?
- What do you anticipate the most challenging aspects of the program will be?
- Are program directors/faculty/staff open to student feedback?
- For programs with established cohorts, how have they responded to this feedback?
- What are the resources for rotations?
- How has the program prepared graduated classes for board exams/do the students feel prepared? If they have not graduated a class yet, how has the program addressed this?
- What networking is available to students when considering jobs?
- What kind of mentoring opportunities does the program provide?
- What opportunities for continued involvement with the program will be available to students after graduation?

Be prepared to answer the flip of the above questions. Take some time to reflect on your answers:

- What are you looking for in a program? What sets you apart?
- What do you anticipate the most challenging aspect of training will be for you?
- What is your experience providing open and honest feedback to faculty and staff?
- How have you responded to feedback in the past?
- What resources are you looking to have during your placements?
- How do you envision your preparation for the board exam? What do you think you will need to be successful?
- What networking opportunities would support your job search?
- What kind of mentoring opportunities are you looking to find?
- How can our program foster a relationship with our alumni?

Above all, you be you. Don’t be who you think the program is looking to find.
Gain further insight into the field
While this can’t supplement shadowing or career interviewing a genetic counselor, genetic counseling prep courses can serve as another experience to help you understand whether this field is a good fit for you. The courses vary from giving a broad overview of the field to specific courses usually taken during a genetic counseling program.

Gain understanding about graduate level courses
Graduate school can sound intimidating. By taking a course before committing to a genetic counseling program, students are able to get a taste of the intensity and the pace of graduate level courses.

Demonstrate your level of commitment
Taking the time to commit to a course related to genetic counseling shows that you are serious about pursuing a career in this field. Programs want to make sure candidates have an understanding about the field prior to being accepted into a program.

Beef up your academic record
Taking graduate level courses related to genetics may be a good option for prospective genetic counseling students who are concerned about their undergraduate academic record or those who have been out of the academic setting for longer periods of time. Doing well in these courses can help demonstrate you will be successful in similar courses as a graduate student.

Networking Opportunity
While the format of some courses is instruction via pre-recorded lectures, depending on the setup and timing of the course, some students may get to experience in-class participation. This can be a great way to connect with other students who are also interested in getting into the field.

Which genetic counseling programs currently offer prep courses?

University of Cincinnati:
https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/education/clinical/student-grad/genetic-counseling/online-ceu-courses

University of South Carolina:
https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/medicine/education/graduate_programs/genetic_counseling/preparing_for_graduate_school/genetic_counseling_online_course/index.php

Indiana State University:
https://www.indstate.edu/academics/online/graduate/certificate-licensure/ga
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background

Maybe GC will be a second career, maybe you changed career paths, or maybe a biology/biological sciences or genetics major just wasn’t the best fit for you. We wanted to hear from those with different backgrounds and how they’ve used their uniqueness to stand out.

Q: Weren’t most GCs biology or genetics majors? Shouldn’t I do that too?

A1: I agree that the majority of GC students I have met had a biology-related major, but I believe people from different backgrounds and non-traditional majors offer unique and interesting perspectives that are valuable to the field. I majored in Animal Sciences during my undergraduate career, and while my major did have a foundation in biology, I would definitely consider it to be non-traditional. I didn’t realize the interesting perspective it provided me with until much later. Directly comparing human genetics/genetic counseling to animal science does not make much sense, but when I looked back on the tools and processes that animal sciences taught me to utilize, I could see similarities between the two fields which was amazing. When selecting a major, I believe that the most important thing is that you have a passion for the subject you’re choosing to study. If a science background is not for you, don’t be afraid to select something else because, at the end of the day, programs appreciate diversity. The most important thing is to fully embrace your background and feel confident in what you can bring to the field of genetic counseling.

One of this student’s program directors offered thoughts on how the program perceives non-traditional majors entering the field:

“While many of our applicants do choose a science or psychology background, as long as the prerequisites are completed, a non-traditional major is completely fine. We’ve had excellent applicants who were music majors, foreign language majors, English majors, etc. We like to see students who are well-rounded, and juggling the rigorous prerequisites with a different major is an asset. Similarly, non-traditional paths to genetic counseling may be considered positively as well.”

A2: In my experience, those are definitely the most common majors to hear about, but don’t feel like you need to be one major or the other. A lot of times, people select majors based on how easy it will be to complete the pre-reqs for their desired field of study. The GC field is becoming more and more diverse with individuals of different backgrounds. One of the easiest ways to stand out as an applicant is to have a non-traditional major! It will likely make programs curious about your journey to genetic counseling and how you’ve used your other major to enhance your preparation for the field.

A3: I think it is more important to approach genetic counseling from a standpoint of intentionality rather than what others are doing. What increases your chance of being a genetic counselor is authentically representing the life experiences you want to build or develop. If you have a passion for biology or a science-related career, then that is a phenomenal foundation for you to represent. If you represent another educational background or set of life experiences, this is welcome as well. No matter your starting point, there is a lot you will need to learn and integrate. You want to choose a school that honors what you represent.
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background (ctnd.)

Q: Why might someone choose a non-traditional major even if they know they are pursuing GC?

A1: Pursuing a non-traditional major can be a great way to diversify yourself as an applicant. Genetic counseling programs have become increasingly competitive over the years, so standing out from the crowd is never a bad thing. Certain majors at my school offered outside opportunities that were not accessible to everyone at the university, so selecting a major based on the experiences and opportunities it could provide you with is an idea, especially since advocacy experiences and extracurriculars are so important in the application process. A non-traditional major may also prepare you more for a specific subset of genetic counseling. Genetic counselors can work in a variety of settings and you may not be exposed to everything during the two year program. As a result, you could select a major that more closely aligns with your future career goals within the field. For example, a business degree may better prepare you for a career in a genetic testing laboratory or industry setting. I believe this would be seen favorably by programs because it shows that you’ve put an immense amount of thought into your future.

A2: A lot of the standard GC program pre-reqs are courses you can take as part of a different major. I was able to take several pre-reqs as electives. You may have other interests outside of biology/genetics and this is great! So many areas of study relate to genetic counseling and can help you become a well-rounded professional. My major allowed me to select a more specific concentration that exposed me to courses in counseling, human/child development, and psychology, so it worked out well. When preparing to apply to GC school, I was lacking a course in human genetics (ironically) and was able to get permission from the dean of my department to take it as an elective. Approaching that office was a little scary, but all you have to do is ask. In my experience, those in higher-ed really love to hear about your goals and will be as accommodating as they can in helping you reach them.

A3: I think it is important to realize that genetic counseling is a profession practiced in a wide variety of settings. It can also be entered at different life stages. GCs work in utilization management, pharmaceutical companies, universities, hospitals, public health institutions, business ventures, etc. Someone may choose to emphasize an aspect of the profession that addresses the environment they will work in. Regardless of whether you choose a traditional or non-traditional major, you will need to pursue what you are doing with an end-goal in mind and work toward that.
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background (ctnd.)

Q: Did you enter a non-traditional field of study knowing you were pursuing GC? If so, what were your reasons for pursuing that non-traditional track?

A1: I had a strange path into genetic counseling and didn't realize the career existed until my last year of college. To answer your question, no I was not living under a rock- haha! A lot of my academic preparation for GC school was nonexistent and I was fortunate that my curriculum and interests closely aligned with the prerequisites for programs. I was on the Pre-Veterinary medicine track of Animal Sciences, so I already had a lot of biology and chemistry. I also met the minimum psychology requirements due to required gen eds. There are also certain GC programs that will work with you if you’re planning to take a prerequisite course during your final semester of undergrad (after applications are due). If this is a situation you find yourself in, I definitely recommend reaching out because it doesn’t hurt to ask!

One area I was definitely not prepared for was the required advocacy experiences and exposure to the genetic counseling field; this resulted in me not even receiving an interview for the Fall 2018 application cycle. I obtained a lot of helpful feedback from program directors and this allowed me to address this issue during the following year. I became a GCA, which provided me with a great clinical skill set, a clear understanding of the field, ambitious career objectives, and an absolute certainty that I want to be in the GC field. Based on all of this, I want to normalize not being fully prepared for entering a GC program straight out of undergrad. Don’t be afraid of taking the extra time to feel prepared to enter graduate school whether that be by taking extra courses, getting more exposure to the field, or diversifying your advocacy experiences. Looking back, I wouldn’t change anything because I know that the extra year was instrumental in my development as an individual and helped me enter graduate school more confident in my ability to succeed.

A2: Not at all! Fun fact: I also didn’t hear about GC until my last year of college. Thankfully, I had spent much of my college career preparing for a non-specific career in the health sciences or psychology/counseling, so I had the basic pre-reqs covered. I say basic because I did have to research programs’ pre-reqs. I noticed that many require or strongly recommend advanced science courses that I had not taken. I was personally not willing to spend the extra time and money to take those when there were still a number of programs that I qualified for as-is, so while this forced me to eliminate several programs from my list, it helped me really focus in on the ones I was already a great fit for. Looking back, even if I had known about GC entering college, I think I would’ve strongly considered a “non-traditional” major. I really love psychology and the specialty courses you can take within that field, and I know it relates so well to genetic counseling.

A3: I did not choose a non-traditional path knowing that I would be a GC. My career switch came many years after working in another field. I had to take several classes in order to apply for genetic counseling school.

Q: What advice would you give to someone considering changing their major to better fit the general GC school program requirements?

A1: There are definitely financial and time repercussions of switching majors. However, if switching would help you feel more confident and prepared to enter a genetic counseling program, then absolutely go for it! I think non-traditional backgrounds have a lot to offer. (continued...)
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background (ctnd.)

Your experiences are what make you unique and not everyone has to have the same path to genetic counseling in order to be successful. The most important thing is that you are able to speak to how your experiences have impacted you as an individual and led you to pursue a career in genetic counseling.

A2: I think there are always many angles to consider, especially the logistical details. Money: is this cost-effective/too expensive/fitting with the scholarships or loans I’ve received, etc. Time: does this work with my plans to graduate, or am I “in too deep” now with my other major? I would say if these things aren’t issues and you are really only considering to be prepared for GC, go for it. But you also want to be in a field of study you truly enjoy, and, as you’ll see in many other responses, it’s great to be different! If you’ve been working on a degree that you’ll miss and would be proud to have once you’ve finished, maybe re-think switching and instead focus on how to incorporate it into your postgrad interest in genetic counseling.

A3: As mentioned above, you want to address logistical issues given how far along you are in your current program of study. I do not believe having certain classes is ultimately what gets you in. I do feel your perception of how prepared you are for graduate-level learning and what you can contribute can get you in. It is important to have solid experiences and solid grades. But there is not a one size fits all. Remember, outside of core requirements, each GC school may have a particular emphasis. Which GC schools are compatible with you and the coursework you are taking? What major are you changing to and are you passionate about it? Which department offers the network associations that you could build solid exposure and experiences from in the arenas of medical, psychology, or genetics? Also think about what value and experience you want to bring to prospective patients. There is a lot to consider- just make clear choices that bring you peace.

Q: If changing my major really isn’t an option, what other things can I do to prepare for GC school?

A1: The best thing you can do is look closely at various programs because all of them have different prerequisites. This will allow you to focus your preparation efforts and make the most of the time you have left on campus. As another respondent mentioned earlier, there were schools that I was not qualified to apply to due to prerequisites, so being informed and targeting the most important classes will be imperative. In addition, classes are important, but it is my understanding that experiences and exposure to the field are more highly regarded by programs. Therefore, once you’ve met the prerequisites, I’d focus on shadowing/interviewing genetic counselors, working with individuals who have disabilities, crisis counseling, research, and any other opportunities that will make you a diverse and well-rounded applicant! I’d also highly recommend attending local or national genetic counseling conferences if possible. I attended the NSGC Annual Conference in 2018 as a prospective student and it was an amazing experience! I was able to sit in on continuing education lectures for genetic counselors (most of which were way over my head at the time- haha), become familiar with current research being done in the field, and network with a variety of individuals in the genetics community.

A2: Crisis counseling in pregnancy centers or via crisis text lines is an idea. You can also look for resources that are happening on your campus. For example, the education, psychology, or therapy departments may host clinics or tutoring for individuals with disabilities. These resources may also be available in the community. Research opportunities and GCA positions are always great to look for but can be hard to come by, especially if you hope to avoid relocating. Also remember to browse the NSGC ‘Find a Genetic Counselor’ site and look (continued...)
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for those with a ‘Student Contact Welcome’ button. You can set up a phone call, Zoom meeting, or an in-person visit to learn more about the field and maybe even shadow one in your area. You can reach out to current students in GC programs and ask about shadowing or meeting up for a day. Of course, COVID-19 has impacted a lot of these opportunities, and I expect programs will provide guidance on how to best prepare your application when these opportunities are more difficult/limited.

A3: Become an expert on you and have a command of your life experiences and education. Be able to communicate your dreams, goals, and strategies and own your narrative. Whatever your major, know how you best learn large volumes of information and perfect that. Know the subject matter of your major very well. I think it would be helpful to have a mentor in the sciences/med/psych prior to entering based on what skills you want to enhance. I also think having a long-term research study or community project that you have engaged in and that allows you to learn and develop several skills is important. Shadowing other GCs is beneficial to see what a typical day is like and ask about their experiences. Begin to learn the technical language and target goals of a wide variety of genetic literature plugging into recent publications such as Genetics in Medicine, Journal of Genetic Counseling, whatever you can find through Google Scholar or Pubmed. If you have a specialty area, remember there is most likely a journal for it. Practice asking questions of those who have pursued the degree you are getting and the path you are on. If someone is not helpful, ask another person. Being excellent is not a major or any one thing. It’s small steps daily.

Q: I’m thinking about pursuing GC as a second career. Aside from making sure I have the pre-reqs in place, what else can I do to prepare myself for a brand new field?

A1: I think the best thing you can do to prepare for genetic counseling as a second career is increase your exposure to the field by interviewing genetic counselors and shadowing. I was amazed at how many people in this community are willing to dedicate their time to helping out prospective students. It never hurts to reach out and even having a 15-20 minute phone conversation can provide you with a lot of great information and help you learn more about the diversity within the genetic counseling field. I found it very enlightening to interview a lot of genetic counselors with different backgrounds as well. For example, I spoke to genetic counselors in clinical settings, laboratory sales/marketing, telegenetics, and several specialties. I was able to learn something new from all of them and it helped me realize how diverse the field is and how many different options there are for people entering this field. Furthermore, even though individuals may carry the same titles, every GC has their own unique counseling style and shadowing multiple genetic counselors can be a valuable learning experience.

A2: Keep up with current events regarding GC! You can read recent publications on Pubmed. Many states are also fighting for licensure, so knowing what is happening in your state/states with programs you’re interested in is also a great idea. You can also seek out individuals in your community that have been impacted by a genetic condition or other developmental/intellectual disability via personal connections or even support groups. One of my favorite memories from GC school was attending support groups, and I realized this was something I likely could have done before starting the program. There are also several books out there based on true experiences with genetic conditions (Down syndrome, Huntington’s disease, BRCA1/2, etc) that are worth looking into. A newer book that has not made it on a lot of program reading lists yet is Mercies in Disguise by Gina Kolata. I’ve enjoyed it so much that I’ve read it twice!
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background (ctnd.)

A3: Sometimes you might be able to organize your prerequisites into a subspecialty. I had a degree in counseling and needed many prerequisites before applying. I was able to pursue a subspecialty in biotechnology from a local community college using combined university and community college credits earned. This can open doors to certain clubs, organizations, or experiences. The biotechnology course had very interesting experiences that overlapped with genetics. Aim to learn a syndrome or two per week as you complete your major.

Q: What other logistical considerations exist for those switching to a second career?

A1: I would imagine that a few significant considerations would be if it is financially feasible for you to stop working and go back to school, evaluate your willingness to relocate to attend a program, and to consider what your work/life balance would look like. Graduate school is demanding and is similar to a full-time job in many ways except that the work follows you home. Therefore, especially if you have a family, I would encourage you not to underestimate the time and dedication required to be successful in a genetic counseling program. With that being said, I have met several individuals that are pursuing genetic counseling as a second career and are doing exceptionally well in balancing everything on their plate which is inspiring.

A2: I imagine it could be hard to get back into “school mode” especially if it has been a while since you’ve been in the classroom. That is why I think reading up on current events and books about genetics might help get you back in the habit of reading/studying. In the first year of programs, you do this a lot! There are also the practical concerns, like money and family responsibilities that will need to be thought about too. Those are going to be variables more specific to your individual situation but are very important to consider ahead of time.

A3: There is no exhaustive list but it may be helpful to ask yourself a few questions: How do you best learn? What problems do you like to solve? How do you inventory what you like most or least in the field and improve along the way? Do you need to work while at school? To what extent do you engage your support system and/or build new supports and resources? Will you be away or close to your support system? How do you best schedule your commitments? These are all going to be individual considerations but important ones.

Q: How did you use your unique background to enhance your GC school application?

A1: I mainly used my application to highlight my unique background and help me tell the story of my non-direct path to finding genetic counseling and how my experiences have prepared me to pursue this career. I received feedback after my first application cycle because they wanted to know more about how I got from majoring in Animal Sciences to genetic counseling. (continued...)
Standing Out With a Non-Traditional Major or Background (ctnd.)

Coming from a non-traditional background, I believe telling your story is an important thing to emphasize in your personal statements because you want to show that you’ve put a lot of thought into genetic counseling and it’s what you truly want to do, not just something you decided on last minute. Let your passion for genetic counseling show in your application and I am confident that programs will recognize your potential and value no matter what your background may be.

One of this student’s program directors gave perspective on how the program views non-traditional applicants and what they look for:

“I think everyone who reviews applications may think about this slightly differently. I don’t pay attention to an individual’s major. I make sure that the prerequisites are met and I look at their courses overall and think about the different perspectives they may give individual applicants. I pay more attention to what a student has done like shadowing, jobs, experiences with those with genetic disease or disability, leadership, research and volunteer activities. I especially like reading essays from those with less traditional backgrounds and seeing the different ways that they relate their experiences to the profession.”

A2: I enjoyed using my background to tell the story of how I encountered and prepared for the field. I think being proud of being well-rounded and having different experiences is really something to own when you are applying and interviewing with programs. It’s awesome when you are able to reflect back on your “non-traditional” journey and explain how it all fits together into the person you are today. Demonstrating that you have woven all of your experiences into being a confident, competent applicant will go a really long way.

A3: I think for me it was the other way around. I had to use the GC application to highlight aspects of my unique background. I didn’t intend to become a GC when I started out, so my background was what it was. I just tried to use the application elements to state why my experiences and education were relevant complements, what inspired me to enter the field, and why that program. With a unique background, I had enough experiences that I didn’t feel pressure to put everything in my personal statement. If there was an experience that I wanted to highlight but didn’t feel fit in the personal statement, I chose a reference who could speak to that experience. I didn’t want to re-highlight the same things in each part of the application. I feel my application told my story and crossed fingers that it would be valued. It was.
Other Helpful Resources:

• National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC) webpage
  https://www.nsgc.org/

• National Matching Services Genetic Counseling Page
  https://natmatch.com/gcadmissions/index.html

• List of accredited genetic counseling master’s programs (ACGC)
  https://www.gceducation.org/program-directory/

• About Genetic Counselors webpage, created by NSGC
  http://www.aboutgeneticcounselors.com/

• Master Genetic Counseling Series (NSGC), including brief genetic counseling vignettes
  https://www.nsgc.org/page/prospective-applicant-master-genetic-counselor-series

• GC Admissions Match FAQ through the Association of Genetic Counseling Program Directors (AGCPD)
  http://www.agcpd.org/AdmissionsInfo

• Video from NMS explaining the match process (YouTube)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvgfgGmemdA

• Genetic Counseling Cultural and Linguistic Competence Toolkit
  https://www.geneticcounselingtoolkit.com/

• Social Media Resources, including official pages of AGCPD, NSGC, ABGC, the SNM SIG, among others.

• #GCchat on Twitter for valuable content shared by genetic counselors, students, and professional organizations.
Thank You to Our Contributors!

We were fortunate to have substantial volunteer interest in helping the SNM SIG develop this year’s newsletter. Thank you to these current students, genetic counselors, hopeful future genetic counselors, and program directors for your valuable insight and for making this publication a great success!

- **Misha Asif** | University of Arizona Genetic Counseling Program Class of 2021
- **Sarah Austin** | Cancer Genetic Counselor, Michigan Medicine
- **Lauren Boucher** | Virginia Commonwealth University Genetic Counseling Program Class of 2021
- **Meagan Bratton** | Hopeful Future Genetic Counselor, Mississippi State University Class of 2019
- **Tahnee Causey** | Co-Program Director, Virginia Commonwealth University Genetic Counseling Program
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- **Kisha Johnson-Isidore** | Genetic Counselor, Myriad Genetics Laboratories
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- **Emily Soludczyk** | Baylor College of Medicine Genetic Counseling Program Class of 2021
- **Miki Stovarsky** | Case Western Reserve University Genetic Counseling Program Class of 2021
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- **Samantha Toy** | Pediatric Genetic Counselor, Washington University in St. Louis
- **Catherine Trapp** | Hopeful Future Genetic Counselor, Mississippi State University Class of 2019
- **Kenny Wong** | Genetic Counselor/VP of Products, GenomeSmart
- **Holly Zimmerman** | Program Director, University of Nebraska Medical Center Genetic Counseling Program
We Welcome Your Feedback!

The topics for this year’s newsletter were generated by past suggestions and surveying prospective students/applicants.

Though task force and SIG leadership typically changes every year or two, we are happy to pass along feedback, ideas, and words of wisdom to new leadership as they consider future projects and resources.

And of course, most of this content is written as if COVID-19 hasn’t drastically impacted our lives as professionals, students, and prospective students hoping to enter the field. We encourage all prospective students to stay tuned in to program websites as they address any modifications to application requirements in light of these challenging times. Best of luck to you all!

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