

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): International Student Applications

1. Are there any specific tips on how to pick or rank a genetic counseling school?

All accredited programs in the US will meet the minimum requirements set by the Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling (ACGC), and the curriculum is usually similar across programs on the fundamentals of genetic counseling. Programs may differ in how they balance psychosocial education, genomic/genetic science topics, and a research experience, and you will have to assess that fit based on your personal interest and skillset. Another factor to consider is clinic rotation timing and placement. Some programs will initiate clinical experiences in the first year while others begin this experience in the summer between years one and two of the program. In addition, you will need to consider the location of clinical sites and if travel is required for these placements. You will also have to consider the prerequisites for acceptance into a program, which can be found on the programs' website. Please refer to the ACGC website for a list of programs: <https://www.qceducation.org/program-directory/>.

Other key factors for international applicants include the cost of the overall program, student visa considerations, the program's experience with international students, the existing diversity in the student population, and perhaps the academic focus of the program and how it fits with your philosophy of life. For international applicants, the main consideration is often the cost of the program, as you will have to show that you have the financial means to pay out-of-state tuition for the entire duration of the program and there may be limited scholarship or job opportunities, if any. The location of the program (state/city) can impact the cost of living and tuition fees. Other costs to consider include housing (on campus vs off campus options, rent, utilities), food and commute to classes as well as rotation sites (buying/ renting a car, gas cost vs. public transportation).

2. What are my prospects of getting accepted into a university that offers genetic counseling in the US or Canada?

Overall, admission into a graduate program for genetic counseling is very competitive. For example, in the US, there are currently 51 accredited genetic counseling programs. Available seats at the programs vary from ~6 per year to ~30 per year, and programs receive an average of 100 – 250 applicants per year. Acceptance rates are about 5%-10%. Even though that seems daunting, programs report that an average of 10% of the applicants a year are international students and anywhere from 15-40 a year may be granted interviews. In Canada, there are 5 programs across the country, and interviewing/admission opportunities may be more limited. For more information on the Canadian programs, you can watch this webinar hosted by the Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors (CAGC): <https://www.cagc-accg.ca/?page=314#Do%20you%20need%20to%20speak%20French%20to%20get%20into%20McGill>

3. Are the GC programs in other countries comparable to those in the US?

It is difficult to draw comparisons between programs in different countries, as there may be country-specific educational, regulatory, and healthcare infrastructure factors that influence the pre-requisites, length of the program, type of degree offered, curriculum, language requirements, licensure and credentialing considerations, scope of practice and employment opportunities. In addition, cultural difference may influence your training experience in different countries. A list of programs in different countries can be found on the Transnational Alliance for Genetic Counseling (TAGC) website: https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/medicine/centers_and_institutes_new/transnational_alliance_for_genetic_counseling/index.php.

This document does not contain legal advice. Please check with each program, its international center and USCIS for up-to-date information on prerequisites and student visas.

4. What are examples of internships/ experiences that students can try to obtain before applying for graduate school?

Advocacy experience is an important part of the application process for most genetic counseling program. Genetic counseling programs encourage obtaining some volunteer or paid experience in genetic counseling clinics or other types of community service. Some examples are to volunteer time at crisis hotlines, hospices, centers that provide pregnancy planning and support, genetic disease organizations and/or rare disease support groups. Experience in tutoring related subjects or working in research labs can also be valuable. Some examples of international student profiles can be found here: <https://igcspotlight.wordpress.com/>. Please check with your programs of interest if they have specific requirements.

5. Will one year of work experience in medical genetics and/or genetic counseling in my home country prove to be advantageous in applying for genetic counseling school in the US?

Experience in genetic counseling or medical genetics, regardless of where you obtained it, will most likely enrich your application, although it may depend on the type of experience (e.g., observation vs. participation, research project vs. patient interaction). It is important to know that every individual is assessed based on their entire portfolio.

6. What type of research is required as part of a genetic counseling training program?

In general, all the accredited programs based in the US and Canada require completion of a research thesis or capstone project for graduation. The program faculty guides and mentors you while you pick a topic to study for the duration of your graduate program. Your project can be quantitative or qualitative and you are expected to present findings in your final semester before graduation. Many programs provide a summary of past projects, which you can find on their website.

7. Are students encouraged to take up jobs while studying?

Many students do take up hourly jobs during their graduate training program. In general, you may be able to find and manage a job during your graduate training, but there are usually restrictions on the types of jobs and the number of hours you can work while on a student visa. Your student visa also requires you to maintain a certain number of credit hours during each semester/quarter enrolled in the program, and your foremost priority is maintaining this requirement and completing your coursework, thesis/capstone project as well as clinical rotations. For more information on working while on a student (F-1) visa, please refer to the USCIS website on 'Students and Employment': <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment>. We also recommend discussing this with your program and the school's international center.

8. Do Master's programs in Genetic Counseling qualify for OPT/ STEM OPT extensions?

Most genetic counseling programs will qualify for Optional Practical Training (OPT), which allows you to work for up to 12 months on a student visa. However, not all programs are coded as STEM programs, so you may not qualify for the STEM-OPT extension (which allows a 24-month extension on the original OPT). Please check with the international office associated with your program/school, as OPT/OPT extension eligibility may depend on how the degree is 'coded' with the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Education. Additional information is available here: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/stem-opt-hub/additional-resources/eligible-cip-codes-for-the-stem-opt-extension>.

9. What are my prospects of getting a job after I finish my course?

The job market for genetic counseling graduates is overall very good. Burns et al. (2019) described the evolving job market and the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected a 21% growth up to the year 2029 for the field of genetic counseling, which is much faster than the average growth rate for all occupations. However, there may be fewer job opportunities for international students when compared to US citizens, as not all employers are willing or able to sponsor a work visa. Your chances of finding a job are likely highest if you have some flexibility with the location and specialty. Make sure to check with a prospective employer about work visa sponsorship as early as possible.

10. Can I use my US-based GC degree and training to work in my home country?

This is dependent on the training requirements and other regulations in your home country, and whether there are recognition pathways for genetic counseling certification between the two countries. There are also significant cultural differences, especially related to counseling, that may lead to significant differences in the educational process and the practice of genetic counseling between different countries. Please check with the American Board of Genetic Counseling (ABGC) and the relevant professional organization in your home country for updated information on recognition pathways.

11. Is there any supplemental reading that would help me learn more about the application process?

We don't have any specific recommendations for supplemental reading, but we do encourage you to try and learn as much as you can about the field before you apply. Some publicly available content on applications as well as more general information is linked below. Important tips from program leadership and international genetic counselors are on the next page.

Applications:

1. NSGC Genetic Counseling Prospective Student Frequently Asked Questions <https://www.nsgc.org/page/frequently-asked-questions-students#appprocess>
2. AGCPD website section on prospective students: <https://agcpd.org/prospective-students/>
3. My Gene Counsel website:
 - a. survey of prospective students <https://www.mygenecounsel.com/advice-for-the-genetic-counseling-grad-school-application-process/>
 - b. blogpost on advice for graduate school applications: <https://www.mygenecounsel.com/advice-for-the-genetic-counseling-grad-school-application-process/>

General information:

1. Wikipedia post on Genetic Counseling (updated by Marketing and Communications workgroup, NSGC, in 2019): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_counseling
2. About Genetic Counseling, ABGC: <https://www.abgc.net/about-genetic-counseling/>
3. About Genetic Counselors, NSGC: <https://www.aboutgeneticcounselors.org/Who-Are-Genetic-Counselors/Who-Are-Genetic-Counselors>
4. What to expect when meeting with a Genetic Counselor, Cancer.net: <https://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/cancer-basics/genetics/what-expect-when-meeting-genetic-counselor>
5. Genetic Counseling, CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/genomics/gtesting/genetic_counseling.htm
6. Genetic Counseling Globally: where are we now? <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29575600/>

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Tips:

1. Do as much as possible to learn about genetic counseling and how the field might be different in different countries! Consider speaking with GCs in various specialties and attending career events or local conferences.
2. If you have a medical degree from another country, please note that genetic counseling is not a pathway to medical school in the US and is a distinct profession with a certifying exam and licensure in many states. Currently, the terminal degree for genetic counseling is a Master's degree from an accredited program.
3. Start your transcript conversion early! Many program directors have indicated that this step can hold up completing the assessment of a candidate's portfolio. One resource is 'World Education Services', (<https://www.wes.org/>) a credential evaluation service that offers free and paid options for converting your GPA to the 4-point system used in the US. Check with your programs of interest on whether they require a specific credentialing service.
4. Consider online courses to fulfill prerequisites for entry in a genetic counseling program. You can find relevant courses through your program(s) of interest or other online platforms. Check with your program(s) of interest to find out what is acceptable as a pre-requisite.
5. When selected for interviews, you can ask to connect with current/ past international students that trained at that program.
6. Make sure to do your research ahead of time, and if you have any specific questions during the application process, you can reach out to programs for additional information. Programs often have a contact person or information request form listed on their website.

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