Genetic Counseling

The Program in Genetic Counseling is an innovative, 21-month Master of Science program that will prepare graduates to become certified genetic counselors. The program is composed of medical genetic- and counseling-focused curriculum, clinical rotations, and a research project.

In the United States, genetic counselors are generally recognized as individuals who have obtained a master’s degree (either MS or MA) from a genetic counseling graduate program accredited by the Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling (ACGC) (https://www.gceducation.org/). The Program in Genetic Counseling at Washington University has been granted accredited, new program status. Admission to programs accredited by ACGC requires registering for the Genetic Counseling Admissions Match (https://natmatch.com/gcadmissions/).

Applicants to the Program in Genetic Counseling must have a bachelor’s degree (or equivalent if from a foreign college or university). Most applicants will have majored in biology or a related field (e.g., biochemistry, genetics) or in psychology. Along with the required prerequisite undergraduate course work in genetics, biochemistry, statistics, and psychology, the Program in Genetic Counseling also highly recommends that applicants have obtained the following types of experiences prior to applying:

• Exposure to the field via shadowing and/or informational interviewing
• Advocacy and/or counseling experience

The mission of the Program in Genetic Counseling at Washington University is to educate future generations of genetic counselors to serve the growing need for diverse, culturally competent, innovative genetic counselors serving patients, working in industry, and conducting research. The objectives of the program are to provide a rigorous curriculum, broad and robust clinical experiences, and expert research guidance to graduate students who are well prepared to fill the ever-expanding professional roles in which genetic counselors may be employed.

All graduates of accredited genetic counseling graduate programs are prepared for entry-level genetic counseling positions, regardless of the area of specialization. Common areas of specialization for genetic counselors include oncology, prenatal, pediatrics, neurogenetics, and cardiology. Many genetic counselors do select a specialty area of practice that they focus on throughout their careers. Others change their area of practice many times. The field of genetic counseling provides a great deal of career flexibility.

As a result of its ACGC accreditation, the Program in Genetic Counseling curriculum meets the educational requirements to sit for the American Board of Genetic Counseling (ABGC) (https://www.abgc.net/) Certification Examination and to pursue licensure in all states and territories of the United States and Washington, DC, in which licensure is available.

Email: geneticcounseling@wustl.edu
Website: http://geneticcounseling.wustl.edu

Degrees & Offerings

• Master of Science in Genetic Counseling (http://bulletin.wustl.edu/medicine/degrees-offerings/ms-genetic-counseling/)

Research

Program in Genetic Counseling faulty members are active collaborators and leaders of interdisciplinary research projects that inform the practice of genetic counseling. To benefit from this active research portfolio, our students will undertake research-related activities throughout the program. Students will be introduced to key genetic counseling research concepts and encouraged to note areas of research interest throughout the first semester. Formal training in genetic counseling research methods and responsible conduct will take place during the second semester course, Genetic Counseling Research Methods and Ethics. Assignments in this course will culminate in students having a proposal for an independent research project that will be completed prior to graduation.

Our program is committed to generating research results that enhance the genetic counseling evidence base and patient care. To support impactful research, students will have the opportunity to collaborate across cohorts on legacy research projects. Students are also strongly encouraged to submit their findings for peer-reviewed publication and presentation.

Faculty

Rachael Bradshaw, MS, CGC
Program Director

Tomi Toler, MS, CGC
Associate Director
Clinical Fieldwork Coordinator

Erin Linnenbringer, PhD, MS, CGC
Assistant Director
Research Coordinator

Marwan Shinawi, MD, FACMG
Medical Director

Elizabeth Yoder
Program Coordinator

Meagan Corliss, MS, CGC
Course Director
Introduction to Genetic Counseling II
This course is a seminar focusing on preparing students for their clinical rotations and learning and practicing basic counseling skills. Students who complete this course successfully will be able to describe and demonstrate a genetic counseling session, demonstrate basic counseling skills, calculate risks using Bayes theorem and Hardy-Weinberg, adapt presentation styles to the audience, and outline basic human development.

Clinical Genetics Specialties
This course is a seminar focusing on a variety of specialty areas in clinical genetics. Students who complete this course successfully will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the many specialties that involve genetics and critically evaluate family histories to recommend appropriate genetic testing.

Genetic Counseling Research Design & Ethics
This course will provide the foundation for the development and execution of the research project required for successful completion of the genetic counseling MS degree. Through a series of interactive lectures, class discussions, student presentations, guest presentations, and outside reading, students will learn about common genetic counseling-relevant research methods; areas of active genetic counseling research on both the local and national levels; and ethical guidelines for the conduct of responsible human subjects research. By the end of the course, students will select a topic for their research project and submit a research proposal. Students will register for Research Project I, II, and III to complete their research projects with faculty mentorship and peer support.

Elective Course (to be approved by Program Director)

Research Project I, II, III
The primary objective of this course series is to ensure the timely completion of student research projects. This course series provides research project scaffolding, mentorship, and opportunities for peer feedback. Research Project I is an eight-week course taken remotely or in person during the summer between the first and second years; Research Project II is taken during the fall semester of the second year; and Research Project III is taken during the spring semester of the second year.

Clinical Fieldwork Rotations I, II, III
This course covers clinical fieldwork rotations. Participation as requested by supervisors is required. Clinical Fieldwork Rotations I is a 28-day clinical rotation over the summer between the first and second years; Clinical Fieldwork Rotations II involves two 14-day clinical rotations during the fall semester of the second year; and Clinical Fieldwork Rotations III includes two 14-day clinical rotations during the spring semester of the second year. Students who complete this course successfully will be able to demonstrate management of a genetic counseling case from contracting to follow-up and successfully use psychosocial counseling skills with patients.
Advanced Genetic Counseling I
This course is a seminar focusing on starting to build advanced genetic counseling skills. Students will become familiar with unique aspects of various genetic counseling specialties, with a focus on prenatal genetics. Students will also learn about counseling theories, psychosocial assessment, psychosocial counseling techniques, and professional development skills. Attendance and active participation are expected and required.

Genetics and Genomics of Disease (BIOL 5487)
Precision medicine (also called personalized or genomic medicine) utilizes the genetic/genomic changes as key elements in defining disease and determining treatment. For many diseases, significant challenges prevent the routine practice of precision medicine, including the following: determining whether sequence variation is medically relevant (pathogenic); achieving comprehensive phenotypic characterization; developing therapeutic approaches specific to pathogenic variation while minimizing unwanted side effects; determining whether genetic/genomic information affects overall patient outcomes; and resolving policy and ethical issues related to the reporting and delivery of genomic information to patients and clinicians. This course will prepare students to be at the forefront of meeting the challenges in defining and implementing precision medicine by introducing students to the use of genomic and genetic information in the diagnosis and treatment of disease.

Advanced Genetic Counseling II
This course is a seminar focusing on building and honing advanced genetic counseling skills. Students will learn about complex issues such as family dynamics, crisis intervention, and implicit biases, and they will use this knowledge to increase their psychosocial assessment and counseling skills. This course will also help prepare students for graduation with a focus on ABGC Board Examination readiness and learning how to use self-care techniques to assist with stress management.

Teratology
This course is a weekly seminar focusing on human teratogens. Students will become familiar with the mechanisms by which exposures affect human development, learn about known and potential teratogens, and understand the methods by which exposures are studied to understand their potential effects. Finally, students will learn how to incorporate data available in the medical literature and databases to provide information about teratogens to patients and providers.