Welcome!

We at the Student/New Member Special Interest Group are so excited you are thinking about a career in genetic counseling. We are here for you throughout your journey. Inside this newsletter, you’ll hear about the NSGC’s Annual Education Conference, hear from a new genetic counselor who took a more non-traditional path into the field of genetic counseling, and read some tips for interviewing for genetic counseling programs. We hope you will find this helpful! We know that the application season is in full swing and coming to a close soon, and the best of luck to the students who are applying this year.

Tia Moscarello, MS, LCGC & Erin Syverson, MGC, CGC
Prospective Students Task Force Leaders 2016
The Annual Education Conference

The National Society of Genetic Counselors’ Annual Education Conference (AEC) is a yearly event where genetic counselors from all over the United States and Canada get together to learn about new advances and updates in the field. They also use the conference to network, catch up with old classmates and colleagues, and spend time collecting genetics-themed goodies in the exhibitor hall. Indeed, the AEC is a place where genetic counselors are free to truly embrace all things genetic counseling, from our in-depth knowledge of human genetics to our love of cardigans. It is an extremely refreshing experience to be surrounded by thousands of people who will never ask you what a genetic counselor does; perhaps one of the most important and tangible parts of the conference is the sense of collective identity.

The AEC is located in a different city every year. This year it was in Seattle; next year it will be in Columbus. It is a four-day event that is a combination of diverse educational lectures, speeches by NSGC leadership that address the advances and needs of the society and workforce, and opportunities to visit the exhibitor suite and talk to labs and other organizations that are important to the field of medical genetics. Of course, it’s not all just work – there is plenty of time for fun, too. Many of the large laboratories will put on social and/or charity events in the evenings. This year, a couple of the labs rented out the space needle and the aquarium, and other labs held trivia contests, talent shows, and a game night at a large arcade.

While there is no official “theme” of the AEC and educational lectures touch on every aspect and area of genetic counseling, cancer genetics and

By Erin Syverson, MGC, CGC

Genetic Counselor at the Medical College of Wisconsin
Genomic medicine seemed to dominate the discussions this year. With the discovery and proposition of a new cancer syndrome and an increasing demand for personalized medicine, there was a lot to talk about. It is a well-known fact that the ability of our technology to find genetic changes in a person’s DNA is more advanced than our knowledge of what many of those changes actually mean. Genetic counselors oftentimes find themselves in the position of explaining to patients why we can’t change their medical management despite the fact that we found a change in a gene, or why a test that supposedly looks at every gene in the body is unable to find an answer as to why the patient is sick. These lectures provided a needed status report on the progress we have made in our knowledge of the human genome, how other institutions are handling the immense amount of data and knowledge that is being generated each day from the process of genetic testing, and opinions on for which indications and circumstances we should be offering these tests in the first place. Overall, it was a reminder of how much potential the field of genetics has, and how much farther we have to go. With how many discoveries are yet to be made, we will never be bored!

If you are a prospective student and live around Columbus, come join us for the 2017 AEC in September! The Student/New Member Special Interest Group hosts a prospective student event every year, where prospective genetic counseling students can meet genetic counselors and graduate school program directors, attend a couple lectures, and visit the exhibitor hall. The AEC is the genetic counseling profession intensified, so if you’d like to experience what it is all about, more information will be available from the Student/New Member SIG in later months.
The First-Time Attendee Experience

- **What does coming to your first AEC mean to you?**
  
  It’s an opportunity to meet my future colleagues and learn what is happening in the field right now.

- **What has surprised you the most about the AEC?**
  
  What surprised me the most about the AEC is how big the conference is (the number of people who attend, the vast number of topics covered, and all of the exhibitor booths).

- **What is the most interesting thing you learned or experienced there?**
  
  The most interesting thing I experienced at the AEC is talking to people at different exhibitor booths and learning about the wide variety of jobs they have available for genetic counselors.

- **How do you think the AEC contributes to the profession of genetic counseling?**
  
  It provides a place for genetic counselors to discuss current issues in the field, whether it is in a large formal group or in conversations throughout the conference.

- **What do you most enjoy about being a GC student?**
  
  I enjoy being immersed in the latest of genetics every day and having the opportunity to explain these concepts to patients.

- **What is the most challenging aspect of being a GC student?**
  
  The most challenging aspect of being a GC student is balancing my time between work and taking breaks to take care of myself, whether that is working out or hanging out with friends.

- **What do you wish you had known when you were applying for schools?**
  
  When I was applying for schools, I wish I had known more about how clinical rotations work differently at the programs I was applying to.

- **What is your number one tip for the application process?**
  
  Follow your gut instinct about how you feel about a program when you are deciding on places to apply and when it comes time to deciding where you want to go.
A Non-Traditional Path

You could say that during the summer of 2011 I was having a bit of a quarter life crisis. I was a year out of college, living in Washington DC, had a job that valued and appreciated me and a wonderful group of friends. I was working for a law association and studying for the LSAT, and the plan was that I was going to begin applying to law school the next year. However, soon after I took the LSAT, I realized that I just doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing after graduating with a political science degree, but not in fact pursuing a career I actually wanted. I had absolutely no passion, excitement or motivation to be a lawyer, so what was I doing applying to law school? After this realization, I did some soul searching and had many thoughtful conversations with the people I loved and soon decided I needed to start down a new path that invigorated me, both personally and professionally.

And that's how I found genetic counseling. I remembered my biology teacher briefly discussing it in high school, and while I thought it was fascinating at the time, I shrugged it off because I was not a "science person." It's funny how time and growth can change a person because as soon as I started taking science classes, I couldn't get enough. I was fascinated, hungry for more and excited for what lie ahead. I didn't have a car in DC and the closest community college was in Northern Virginia, which required an hour and a half commute after a full workday. Needless to say, I was exhausted after those long Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I always made sure to remind myself that it was for the greater good of leading me to a fulfilling career. Once I connected with genetic counselors and learned about their love of the job, it did not take long for me to
decide to move back home to Virginia Beach in order to complete all the
pre-requisites needed to apply to a genetic counseling program.

While I was living at home, I worked at Eastern Virginia Medical School
(EVMS) as a research assistant, volunteered at an after school program for
students with intellectual disabilities, volunteered on the Rape Abuse & Incest
National Network hotline, helped organize a community carrier screening event
and shadowed as many genetic counselors as possible. In the midst of all those
activities, I was taking classes part-time at both a local university and community
college, which just depended on time, cost and offerings available each
semester. I took all the classes needed to get into a masters in genetic
counseling program, which included, but is not limited to, biology, chemistry,
organic chemistry, biochemistry, cell biology, psychology and genetics.

Once I completed the pre-requisites, I began applying to schools. To say
that I was not nervous about my chances to get an interview would be a lie. I
feared my non-traditional background and lack of undergraduate degree in
science was going to hinder me from being considered a serious applicant.
However, to my complete surprise, I got an interview at almost every program I
applied to. I interviewed at eight programs in what was a whirlwind (and
expensive) couple weeks, but felt even more excited when I was done that I had
truly picked the right career. After meeting all the wonderful program directors,
faculty members and applicants, I was proud and humbled to be considered
among so many bright and passionate individuals. On match day, I woke up to an
acceptance and cried to my parents that after all my hard work, I now had a
career I was so very proud and passionate to begin. My roommates (read:
parents) were my ultimate cheerleaders and I could not have gotten through the
classes, applications and overall stress without them.
Graduate school was hard. There's really no sugar coating that. But I truly believe I would have been disappointed if it wasn't. I was constantly challenged to dig deeper and prove to myself that I was capable and deserving of this career. I knew going into grad school that I was going to struggle some days with the molecular and research components because I didn't encompass the same extensive science background as others, but I wouldn't have traded that challenge because I am now a more competent and knowledgeable counselor. Fortunately, I had a set of wonderful classmates who were always my cheerleaders when mouse models and the pathway for nonketotic hyperglycemia was not clicking for me, and I theirs when a psychosocial intervention just didn't go their way that day. With the strong support of our faculty and program director, we all graduated as a class of bright-eyed and exceptionally prepared genetic counselors.

I'm now a cancer counselor and can say with all honesty that every long night on the metro, every tear about an exam misstep, and every revision of my thesis was worth it. I truly love my job and feel like I have just scratched the surface of what I will be able to achieve as a genetic counselor. There are so many opportunities for expanding my clinical practice, collaborating on research, volunteering within NSGC and mentoring future genetic counselors. Not a day has gone by since my quarter life crisis in DC that I have regretted completely shifting my life path. Being a genetic counselor affords me so much personal, intellectual and professional growth and I think you'll feel the same way!

Any prospective student (traditional or nontraditional!), please always feel free to reach out with any questions! I can be reached at mlubaton@aahs.org. GOOD LUCK!
So You’ve Got An Interview… Now What?

Interview season for genetic counseling programs is an exciting time for prospective students and the genetic counseling programs alike. However, not knowing what to expect from interviews can be a little intimidating. We’ve compiled some general thoughts about the interview process from our own experiences:

-Schools interview different numbers of applicants depending on how many students they plan to admit. As an estimate, the bigger schools may interview 80-90 students, and the smaller schools may interview about 25.

-Different schools have different formats for interviewing. Many schools will have you meet individually with 3-4 faculty members. Some schools will have you meet with multiple faculty members at one time and some schools do small group interviews. Interviews may be half-days or full days.

-You may meet current students during lunch or between interviews. Some programs also have little get-togethers the night before with the current students. These extra get-togethers are usually optional, however they are a great chance to get honest thoughts from current students, gain insights into what daily life is like for students at that program, and to ask questions you may not think are best suited or aimed for program directors or faculty (i.e. living situations, car situations, difficulty of the coursework, work-life balance).

-Unless otherwise stated that other attire is required or acceptable, most applicants choose to wear business professional attire.

-Make sure to ask questions! This can sometimes be difficult, we know. If you’re on your 4th interview of the day, you may have had all your questions answered, but ask one anyway. It shows that you are interested in the program! We recommend coming in with a group of general questions that you would like to know about every school you apply to, and then a few specific questions about that particular school you’re interviewing at. Is there a unique class, volunteer opportunity, or rotation that they offer that you want to know more about?

-From our personal experience, programs do not ask too many science-based questions. Because we didn’t interview at every school, we cannot guarantee that all schools stay away from testing your knowledge. However, any genetics questions that we were asked at the schools where we interviewed seemed to be aiming at communication skills (i.e. are you able to explain complex concepts in simple terms?).

-Finally, be yourself! This really is a match process. If they’re interviewing you, you’re a qualified candidate. They want to learn more about you as a person and student, your motivations, how you present and compose yourself, and if you will be comfortable and successful in the culture of their program.
**Want to learn more about genetic counseling?**

If you want to learn more about the genetic counseling profession and application process, there are so many resources out there!

**SOME OF OUR FAVORITES…**

NSGC: Explore a Career as a Genetic Counselor

http://nsgc.org/p/cm/ld/fid=44#masters

Master Genetic Counselor Series: Tape-recordings of genetic counseling sessions!

http://nsgc.org/p/cm/ld/fid=248

List of schools with accredited genetic counseling programs

http://gceducation.org/Pages/Accredited-Programs.aspx

Become A Genetic Counselor: the ins and outs of who genetic counselors are and how to become one

http://www.becomeageneticcounselor.org

The DNA Exchange: a blog about newsworthy genetics stories, written by genetic counselors

https://thednaexchange.com

Journal of Genetic Counseling: peruse our peer-reviewed journal!

http://www.springer.com/biomed/human+genetics/journal/10897