

GENETIC COUNSELING, MASTER OF SCIENCE (M.S.)

Program accreditation

Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling

Program goals

1. Competency in genetic counseling
2. Eligibility for certification by the American Board of Genetic Counseling
3. Preparation for careers in genetic counseling and human genetics and genomics

Successful candidates will demonstrate competency in all seven genetic counseling domains: genetics and genomics expertise, risk assessment, counseling, communication, research, health care systems, and professional identity.

Program objectives

1. Demonstrate knowledge of the principles of human, medical and public health genetics and genomics and their related sciences
2. Apply knowledge of genetic principles and understand how they contribute to etiology, pathophysiology, clinical features, disease expression, natural history recurrence risk, clinical management and disease prevention
3. Apply knowledge of genetic principles to understanding of differential diagnosis, genetic testing, genetic test report interpretation and population screening

Student learning outcomes

1. Competency in practice: The candidate should demonstrate development of competency in the responsible practice of genetic counseling. This will be assessed in the clinical setting by certified genetic counselors and medical geneticists. The assessment is based upon the core clinical competencies established by the Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling. These competencies are documented with written and oral evaluations at the completion of each of the clinical rotations by the rotation supervisor.
2. General knowledge of sciences: The candidate should demonstrate a general knowledge of the elements of the sciences as related to genetic molecular/cellular bioscience and a detailed knowledge of his or her area of research, including an appropriate familiarity with the research literature. The student is evaluated by academic performance, face-to-face and written evaluation of clinical performance in multiple rotations by multiple supervisors and annual written and oral exams.
3. Communication skills: The candidate should demonstrate that an appropriate level of oral, written and visual communication skills has been acquired. This is achieved by evaluations of clinical rotations both written and verbal that are based on the competencies established by the Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling and the scope of practice as set forth by the National Society of Genetic Counselors.
4. Education skills: Effectively educate clients, orally and in writing, about a wide range of genetics and genomics information based on their needs, their characteristics and the circumstances of the encounter.

VCU Graduate Bulletin, VCU Graduate School and general academic policies and regulations for all graduate students in all graduate programs

The VCU Graduate Bulletin website documents the official admission and academic rules and regulations that govern graduate education for all graduate programs at the university. These policies are established by the graduate faculty of the university through their elected representatives to the University Graduate Council.

It is the responsibility of all graduate students, both on- and off-campus, to be familiar with the VCU Graduate Bulletin as well as the Graduate School website (<http://www.graduate.vcu.edu/>) and academic regulations in individual school and department publications and on program websites. However, in all cases, the official policies and procedures of the University Graduate Council, as published on the VCU Graduate Bulletin and Graduate School websites, take precedence over individual program policies and guidelines.

Visit the **academic regulations** section for additional information on academic regulations for graduate students. (<https://bulletin.vcu.edu/academic-regs/>)

Graduation requirements

As graduate students approach the end of their academic programs and the final semester of matriculation, they must make formal application to graduate. No degrees will be conferred until the application to graduate has been finalized.

Graduate students and program directors should refer to the following graduation requirements as published in the Graduate Bulletin for a complete list of instructions and a graduation checklist.

Visit the **academic regulations** section for additional information on graduation requirements. (<https://bulletin.vcu.edu/academic-regs/grad-graduation-info/>)

Other information

School of Medicine graduate program policies

The School of Medicine provides policies applicable to all programs administratively housed in the school. Information on **master's programs** is available elsewhere in this chapter of the Graduate Bulletin.

Apply online today. (<https://www.vcu.edu/admissions/apply/graduate/>)

Admission requirements

Degree:	Semester(s) of entry:	Deadline dates:	Test requirements:
M.S.	Fall	Dec 15	Non-native English speaking applicants must achieve a satisfactory TOEFL score, consistent with VCU policy.

In addition to the general admission requirements of the VCU Graduate School (<https://bulletin.vcu.edu/graduate/study/admission-graduate-study/admission-requirements/>):

1. Applicants must have successfully completed undergraduate training and hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited university or college.
2. Applicants must respond to prompts as noted in the VCU M.S. in Genetic Counseling program application.
3. Applicants must provide two letters of recommendation from individuals who can address the student's strengths, potential for graduate study and demonstration of skills needed for competency in genetic counseling. References may include professors, supervisors or other professionals.
4. Applicants must provide a CV/biosketch that should include education; relevant academic, work and clinical experiences; research and publications; and awards/honors.
5. Prerequisites for admission include six credit hours (two full-semester courses) each of biology, chemistry and behavioral science. While related course work may be considered (e.g., religion, philosophy), at least one course (three credits) must be in a traditional behavioral science field (psychology, sociology and/or anthropology). Additional prerequisites are three credit hours (one full semester) each of biochemistry, statistics and genetics. It is recommended that all prerequisite courses have been completed within 10 years of application. A prerequisite may be in process at the time of application. Please note that AP high school credits do not satisfy program prerequisites.
6. For admission to graduate study at VCU, the Graduate School requires a minimum undergraduate grade-point average of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale or equivalent); however, the program may waive this requirement as identified through holistic review of an application.
7. Additionally successful applicants often have experience with shadowing, working and/or interviewing with genetic counselors and medical geneticists. Exposure to crisis hotlines, support groups, advocacy and community activities related to individuals with disability and genetic conditions is also helpful. Leadership activities in community or academic organizations are also considered.

The program participates in the Genetic Counseling Admissions Match, which is administered by National Matching Services Inc. on behalf of the Genetic Counselor Educators Association. Prospective students may visit the Genetic Counseling Admissions Match website (<https://natmatch.com/gcadmissions/>) for additional information.

Matriculating genetic counseling students are eligible for competitive selection in the VA-LEND certificate in neurodevelopmental disabilities, which runs concurrent to the M.S. in Genetic Counseling program. Information is available on the VA-LEND website (<https://rampages.us/virginialend1/>).

Degree requirements

In addition to the general VCU Graduate School graduation requirements (<https://bulletin.vcu.edu/academic-regs/grad/graduation-info/>), students must complete a minimum of 60 credit hours. The program is a full-time, on-campus program. (Part-time on-campus options may exist at the discretion of the program director.) There is no online option for degree completion. Students are expected to complete their course work in four semesters (21 consecutive months). To be considered full-time, the VCU School of Medicine requires students to register for nine or more credit hours in the fall and spring semesters. Occasionally

special circumstances may occur that could require a temporary leave of absence. The VCU Graduate School requires that master's degrees be completed in a maximum of six years.

In order to be considered in good academic standing, a student must maintain a 3.0 GPA. Students who fail to maintain a 3.0 average are permitted one semester to bring their averages up to the required level.

As part of their course work, students begin clinical rotations in the spring semester of the first year and continue through the summer and both semesters of the second year. Students are required to engage in clinical experiences during the intervening summer. Options exist for summer experiences to occur outside the city of Richmond.

Students must pass a written comprehensive exam at the conclusion of the first two semesters of study and a written and oral comprehensive exam prior to graduation. The oral examination covers clinical competency and research competency.

Students are required to complete a capstone project during their course of study. The capstone project is similar to a thesis in that it is a culminating, synthesizing experience that may involve hypothesis-based research; however, capstone projects may also represent a more applied genetic counseling project.

Students are strongly recommended to select a primary adviser and the members of their advisory committee by the conclusion of the second semester. There should be at least two full committee meetings prior to the student's oral exam. The committee must include at least three members, at least two of whom are clinical genetics professionals. One member serves as the advisor, and that person must be a VCU/VCU Health genetics professional affiliated with the MSGC program. At least one other committee member must represent a discipline not related to clinical genetics/genetic counseling.

In addition to participating in course work, the capstone project and counseling rotations, students in the department also participate in a number of community and education programs. These opportunities may include lectures and presentations to local schools and community events, participation in health fairs, School of Medicine-sponsored activities, and state of Virginia Newborn Screening Advisory Board meetings.

The straddling of the student and professional roles is a lifelong process in the changing field of human genetics and genetic counseling. Graduates of this program will be contributing members of the clinical genetics team of counselors, physicians and basic scientists and contributing members of commercial genetic testing laboratories and the developing field of human genomic medicine.

Course requirements

Course	Title	Hours
Required core courses		
ANAT 612	Human Embryology	2
HGEN 501	Introduction to Human Genetics	3
HGEN 525	Practice of Genetic Counseling	3
HGEN 526	Practice of Genetic Counseling	3
HGEN 527	Medical Genetics	3
HGEN 528	Medical Genetics	3
HGEN 600	Clinical Genetics (repeated four times)	3
HGEN 601	Research in Genetic Counseling	2

HGEN 607	Processes in Genetic Counseling I	1
HGEN 608	Processes in Genetic Counseling II	1
HGEN 609	Clinical Genomics	3
HGEN 615	Techniques in Genetic Counseling	3
HGEN 616	Cultural Diversity in Genetic Counseling	1
HGEN 618	Evidence Based Genetic Counseling (repeated twice)	2
HGEN 622	Cancer Genetic Counseling	3
HGEN 690	Genetics Research Seminar (repeated for two credits)	1
HGEN 697	Directed Research in Genetics (repeated for a minimum of eight credits)	1-15
PATH 691	Special Topics in Modern Instrumental Methods (diagnostic genetic testing)	2
Required additional courses		
OVPR 601	Scientific Integrity	1
or OVPR 602	Responsible Scientific Conduct	
or OVPR 603	Responsible Conduct of Research	
Elective courses		
As approved by the program director		2
Total Hours		60

The minimum number of graduate credit hours required for this degree is 60.

Students who complete the requirements for this degree will receive a Master of Science in Genetic Counseling.

Typical plan of study

Many students may take more than the minimum number of hours required for a degree program. The total number of hours may vary depending upon the program, nature of research being conducted by a study or in the enrollment or funding status of the student. Students should refer to their program websites and talk with their graduate program directors or advisers for information about typical plans of study and registration requirements.

Contact

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Program website: genetics.vcu.edu (<https://genetics.vcu.edu/>)

General questions: MS-GCprogram@vcuhealth.org

Note: Email is the preferred method of contact. On-site informational meetings with faculty and students may be available depending on the time of the year and faculty/student availability. If applicants desire this opportunity, requests should be made at least six weeks in advance.