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 four genetic counseling domains: I – genetic expertise and analysis, II – interpersonal, psychosocial, and counseling skills, III – education and IV – professional development and practice.

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 have 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.

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 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.

Degree candidacy requirements
A graduate student admitted to a program or concentration requiring a final research project, work of art, thesis or dissertation, must qualify for continuing master’s or doctoral status according to the degree candidacy requirements of the student’s graduate program. Admission to degree candidacy, if applicable, is a formal statement by the graduate student’s faculty regarding the student’s academic achievements and the student’s readiness to proceed to the final research phase of the degree program.

Graduate students and program directors should refer to the following degree candidacy policy as published in the VCU Graduate Bulletin for complete information and instructions.

Visit the academic regulations section for additional information on degree candidacy requirements.

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.

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 at graduate.admissions.vcu.edu (http://www.graduate.admissions.vcu.edu).

Admission requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree:</th>
<th>Semester(s) of entry:</th>
<th>Deadline dates:</th>
<th>Test requirements:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Applications received prior to Jan 15</td>
<td>GRE within five years of application; international applicants must score 100 or greater on the TOEFL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the general admission requirements of the VCU Graduate School (http://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 write a personal essay, no longer than two pages, indicating their interest and suitability to the field of genetic counseling.

3. Prerequisites for admission include six credit hours each of biology, chemistry and behavioral science (psychology, anthropology, sociology, religion or philosophy) and three credit hours 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. A minimum grade of a B must be obtained prior to admission if the course is in progress at the time of acceptance.

4. Students accepted to the program are generally drawn from applicants with a minimum undergraduate grade-point average of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale or equivalent), with an average GPA of 3.3 to 3.5 for matriculating students.

5. The Graduate Record Examination is required for admission; there is no MCAT substitution. The GRE should be taken within five years of application submission. Matriculating students generally have GRE verbal scores at or above 153, quantitative scores at or above 144 and a writing performance above a score of 3.5 on the analytical section.

6. Applicants holding an undergraduate degree from foreign institutions must display an acceptable level of English proficiency by achieving a score of 250 on the computer-based TOEFL examination or 600 on the written version.

7. Additionally, successful applicants often have experience with shadowing genetic counselors and medical geneticists, interviewing genetic counselors and exposure to individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities. Exposure to crisis hotlines, support groups and community activities related to individuals with disability and genetic conditions is also helpful.

Note: The department receives an average of 120-150 applications annually. Of those, 40 to 50 are invited for an onsite interview, and eight to 10 students matriculate. The onsite interview is required for all North American applicants.

In the certification cycles from 2011-2016, graduates of the program have a 100 percent pass rate on the ABGC national certification examination.

The program participates in the Association of Genetic Counseling Program Directors program match. Prospective students may see the National Society of Genetic Counselors (http://www.nsgc.org/p/cm/ld/fid=44%23accept) website and the American Board of Genetic Counseling (http://www.abgc.net/ABGC/AmericanBoardofGeneticCounselors.asp) website for additional information.

Matriculating genetic counseling students are eligible for selection in the VA-LEND certificate in neurodevelopmental disabilities. Information is available at wp.vcu.edu/virginialend (https://rampages.us/virginialend1).

**Degree requirements**

In addition to the general VCU Graduate School graduation requirements (http://bulletin.vcu.edu/academic-regs/grad/graduation-info), students must complete a minimum total 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 15 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 research project during their course of study. The purpose of the research project is to give the student hands-on experience in developing a research question or exploring a professional or program problem, reviewing the literature, and attempting to answer the question or problem. Projects will enhance the student’s professional development and represent a strong component of the “portfolio” of experience brought to the job interview process. Projects can range from laboratory to clinical and may include development of educational materials, videotapes or patient protocols. All projects are required to have defined goals and/or hypotheses to be tested. Institutional review board application and review is often required for student research. Publication and professional presentation are strongly encouraged.

Students are encouraged to consider projects in the first semester and to choose a project topic by the second semester. The project proposal is due to the program director by the first of June during the student’s first year of study. All project proposals must be in writing and approved by the faculty member with whom the project will be performed and the program director. Some projects will require review by the Office of Research and Innovation for subject protections, and some projects may require that the student seek grant funding or participate on an existing faculty grant. The student is responsible for preparing documents and meeting these research requirements in a timely fashion.

Students must select a primary research adviser and the members of their research committee by the conclusion of the second semester. The committee must have at least one meeting by July 1 of the intervening summer. The research committee must include at least three faculty members with one outside of the department. Additional members may be added if needed for optimal project advising.

The student’s supervisors and the genetic counseling program director work together in mentoring the student. Students are provided ongoing written and verbal evaluation regarding their academic and clinical progress.

In addition to participating in course work 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, state of
Virginia Genetics Advisory Board meetings, and DNA Day on the Hill in Washington, D.C.

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.

**Curriculum requirements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Code</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Credit Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANAT 612</td>
<td>Human Embryology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 501</td>
<td>Introduction to Human Genetics</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>HGEN 502</td>
<td>Advanced Human Genetics</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>HGEN 510</td>
<td>Classic Papers in Human Genetics</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>HGEN 525</td>
<td>Practice of Genetic Counseling</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 526</td>
<td>Practice of Genetic Counseling</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 527</td>
<td>Medical Genetics</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>HGEN 528</td>
<td>Medical Genetics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 600</td>
<td>Clinical Genetics (course repeated three times as noted in plan of study)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 601</td>
<td>Research in Genetic Counseling</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 607</td>
<td>Processes in Genetic Counseling I</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 608</td>
<td>Processes in Genetic Counseling II</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 615</td>
<td>Techniques in Genetic Counseling</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 622</td>
<td>Cancer Genetic Counseling</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGEN 690</td>
<td>Genetics Research Seminar (repeated for four credits)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>HGEN 697</td>
<td>Directed Research in Genetics (repeated for a minimum of eight credits)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>OVPR 601</td>
<td>Scientific Integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>or OVPR 602</td>
<td>Responsible Scientific Conduct</td>
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<tr>
<td>or OVPR 603</td>
<td>Responsible Conduct of Research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PATH 691</td>
<td>Special Topics in Modern Instrumental Methods (diagnostic genetic testing)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electives</td>
<td>(to be approved by the program director)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 One credit to be taken in the summer semester as noted in the plan of study.

**Total graduate credit hours required (minimum) 60**

**Typical plan of study**

Many students often 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.

**Graduate program director**

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**Additional contacts**

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**Program website:** gen.vcu.edu (http://www.gen.vcu.edu)