

GENETIC COUNSELING BROUGHT TO LIFE:

My Experience with Independent Studies in Genetic Counseling

BY AMBER GAMMA



“**W**hat do you want to do after graduation?” was the simple question my advisor asked me, but my answer, “Genetic counseling,” was an inspired and colorful view of a unique blend of genetics and psychology, a tango I could see myself dancing in the future. The truth was, my vision at that time was incomplete and only partially informed. It wasn’t until six months later, after I completed a University of Alberta course called “Independent Studies in Genetic Counselling” that I truly came to appreciate the many aspects of the field and made a decision that genetic counseling was my career choice.

“It didn’t really start with the idea of a course so much as strategizing about how to give undergraduate students an opportunity [to gain exposure to genetic counseling] in

our clinic,” said Sajid Merchant, lead genetic counselor at the Edmonton Medical Genetics Clinic at the University of Alberta. Faced with challenges regarding clinic volunteers, he approached Dr. Heather McDermid, Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta, to brainstorm. What flourished from this meeting was the very course I took. My advisor put me in contact with Merchant and McDermid, and I wasted no time in applying—and doing a little celebration dance when I was accepted.

As I glanced over the syllabus in January 2012, I saw course requirements like a written outline for each patient case, one formal oral presentation, and one written final assignment. The prospect of being in the clinic was overwhelmingly exciting for me, and, understanding the work required, I was ready to take the bull by the horns and run. I dedicated a three-hour block to the clinic each week and spent it discussing the previous week’s case, reviewing my written report for the current case, and

observing a genetic counseling session. The first week was challenging, but I left the clinic elated because “genetic counseling” was no longer just words on a page. It had become a real-life profession vibrating with successes and challenges. I could hardly wait for my next week.

When I received the evaluation from my first weekly outline, I was surprised to see that I hadn’t done all that badly. “We modeled the outline after a genetic counseling student log book,” Merchant pointed out. He added, “We thought the work would require the same thought process, but we adjusted our expectations to an undergraduate student level.” “We brought in some structure by adding section headings to direct [the students] to the specific things we wanted them to think about,” McDermid added.

My confidence increased as the weeks progressed, and when it came time to tackle the Journal Club oral presentation, I felt ready. That was, until I found myself in front of the entire Edmonton Medical Genetics Clinic with my heart pounding in my ears. “I thought a presentation was an important aspect,” McDermid said. Although I did not agree at the time, her words ring true now. I gained invaluable experience from the oral presentation, which has proven beneficial to me in even in the short year since.

My final hurdle in the course

was the written final assignment. I was encouraged to come up with something applicable to the clinic and profession. Prompted by previous discussion, I chose to write a Wikipedia-style entry about the genetic counseling profession. This project allowed me to truly delve into the history and core aspects of the profession and discover how it came to be. For their final projects, other students wrote patient care genetic counseling protocols or created a website [<http://geneticcounselling.biology.ualberta.ca/>] for students to learn more about a genetic counseling career.

As the semester ended, the sadness I felt at leaving the clinic struck me. The course animated genetic counseling for me, stimulated massive personal growth in me, and solidified that it is the career for me. I hated to let that all go. This course remains my favorite of all the undergraduate courses I have taken. It has been an invaluable stepping-stone in my education, and one that I would recommend to any undergraduate interested in genetic counseling.

My next goal? Getting accepted into a genetic counseling training program! ●



Amber Gamma is currently finishing her Bachelor of Science specializing in Molecular Genetics at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. She now awaits results from her applications to genetic counseling training programs.

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