Audio file

Genetic_Counseling_Episode705gg.mp3

Transcript

00:00:02 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast where preparation and hard work come together.

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This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you format your future.

00:00:12 Casey Ellis

I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

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Whether you're just starting out, considering a career shift, or just wanting to know more, this episode is your guide to navigating the various educational and professional options available.

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Today, we're diving into the exciting and impactful field of genetic counseling.

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No trick plays here, just a straightforward game plan to help you become a genetic counselor.

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Let's get started.

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Let's start with the basics.

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Genetic counseling is the process of helping people understand and adapt to the medical, psychological, and familial implications of genetic contributions to disease.

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Here's a quick breakdown.

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Many aspects of who you are determined by your DNA, which contain sections called genes inherited from your parents.

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Genetics is the study of these genes and how heredity affects your health.

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Genetic counseling helps individuals and families understand their genetic risk and options for managing them.

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Genetic counselors receive advanced training in both medical genetics and counseling.

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Their expertise allows them to guide and support patients who are seeking a deeper understanding of how inherited diseases or conditions might affect them or their families.

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They also play a key role in interpreting genetic test results by considering a patients personal and family medical history.

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In their clinical roles, genetic counselors collect comprehensive medical histories, create detailed family pedigrees, and educate patients about genetic principles and inheritance patterns.

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They explain genetic testing results, discuss treatment options, and advocate for patients addressing both medical and emotional concerns.

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Initial appointments typically last between 60-90 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussions and personalized care.

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Genetic counselors support individuals and families throughout the genetic testing process, discussing options before testing and explaining results afterward to guide next steps.

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For example, in cancer genetics, a positive result may lead to a referral to an oncologist.

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In pediatrics, a child with a genetic condition may require multiple doctors visits before being referred for specialized care.

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As part of interdisciplinary teams, genetic counselors collaborate with healthcare providers to ensure patients receive appropriate follow-up but are not responsible for long-term case management.

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Their specialties are as diverse as the needs of the patients they serve.

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You'll find genetic counselors working in areas like prenatal care, pediatrics, oncology, neurology, ophthalmology, psychiatry, and many others, including emerging fields like cardiogenetics, neurogenetics, public health genetics, and fertility genetics.

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For example, a common test a prenatal genetic counselor may run is the carrier screening panel, which determines whether either parent carries genetic conditions, such as cystic fibrosis, that could be passed to their child.

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Non-invasive prenatal screenings are also available, where a simple blood test from the mother analyzes placental DNA to screen for conditions like Down syndrome.

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Most genetic counselors work in hospital settings, providing direct patient care and collaborating with healthcare teams.

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Some genetic counselors have hybrid or in-person positions,

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offering flexible patient care models.

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Genetic counseling assistants, known as GCAs, often work remotely in fully virtual roles.

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Genetic counselors may also work directly for genetic testing laboratories, often serving as liaisons between healthcare providers and the lab.

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These roles typically focus on interpreting test results and facilitating communication rather than direct patient interaction.

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In certain states, genetic counselors can provide counseling to families after the sudden loss of a loved one when a genetic cause may be blamed.

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Postmortem genetic counseling involves guiding grieving families through potential genetic implications, though it is not widely available across the United States.

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In some states, genetic counselors may work in specialized centers.

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Facilities like the Greenwood Genetic Center in South Carolina focus on pediatric genetics and operate independently from hospitals.

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offering specialized genetic services through a private organization.

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While not equivalent to medical-grade genetic testing, some companies, such as Ancestry and wellness testing providers, employ genetic counselors to answer customer inquiries.

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However, these services do not meet clinical standards for medical care.

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Genetic counselors can work in academia as professors, balancing clinical practice with teaching responsibilities.

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These roles often involve a split schedule, with clinical work during part of the week and teaching during the other.

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Genetic counselors can contribute to the healthcare industry by working with insurance companies, assisting in policy development, coverage decisions, and advocating for genetic counseling services.

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Many genetic counselors may work any combination of the roles I mentioned, balancing clinical practice with research, education, policy development, or lab-based work to diversify their professional experience.

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Regardless of the setting or specialty, genetic counselors contribute to research, industry, and education.

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Genetic counselors can switch specialties or settings at any point in their career.

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Upon completion of their master's degree, they take their board certification exam, which qualifies them to work in a wide range of professional environments.

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If you're interested in this career, here's the game plan.

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Start with a bachelor's degree and take the UGA recommended courses, which include general biology, Biology 1107 with lab, and 1108 with lab.

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Elementary Statistics, Stats 2000, General Psychology, Psychology 1101, Abnormal Psychology, Psychology 3230, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, BCMV 3100, and Genetics, Genetics 3200.

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Next, you will attend a genetic counseling master's program typically lasting 22 months.

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In Georgia, there is only one program which is at Emory University.

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You will want to apply to a handful of schools.

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Before we discuss how to apply to genetic counseling programs, I want to discuss five essential experiences that you can work on throughout college to strengthen your application.

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First, counseling experience.

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Develop interpersonal skills and empathy through roles that involve guiding individuals through challenging situations.

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Counseling experience is critical for navigating ethical considerations such as family dynamics and reproductive choices.

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Examples in the greater Atlanta area include Crisis Text Line volunteer,

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Emory Metabolic Summer Camp Assistant Counselor, Camp Sunshine Counselor, Camp Twin Lakes Volunteer, and Aspire Clinic Volunteer.

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Second, focus on advocacy and volunteering.

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Showcase your ability to advocate for others by volunteering in healthcare or community organizations.

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Examples in the greater Atlanta area are Extra Special People, Athens Area Homeless Shelter, American Cancer Society Hope Lodge, The Cottage, and Project Safe.

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This can also mean being on specific boards and committees for diseases you care about.

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Examples of causes you can advocate for include national organizations such as the Huntington Disease Society of America or local organizations such as the Georgia Chapter Alzheimer's Association.

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Third, shadowing and informational interviews.

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Observing genetic counselors allows you to gain first-hand insights into their work and build connections in the field as well as decide if this career is right for you.

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Even if you can't find shadowing opportunities,

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I suggest contacting genetic counselors and conducting informational interviews.

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You can go to the National Society of Genetic Counselors website at www.nsgc.com and you can fill out the student form for access to over 3,000 genetic counselors and even narrow them down by specialty.

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Fourth, research.

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Research is optional, but if it is something that interests you then it is a great addition to your application.

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You can participate in genetics-related research to strengthen your scientific foundation.

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Genetic counseling relies on evidence-based approaches to provide accurate information and care.

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Research experience enables students to critically evaluate the quality of studies and apply findings effectively in clinical settings.

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Engaging in research often involves collaborating with mentors, genetic counselors, or other professionals.

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These connections can provide mentorship, letters of recommendation, or insights into the profession.

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Finally, showing you care about the field and work being done.

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The field of genetic counseling is rapidly evolving with advancements in genomics and personalized medicine.

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Staying informed allows students to assess how developments in technology and ethics may impact their future roles.

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Some ways students can do this are gaining certificates and participating in educational camps, such as the Georgia Association of Genetic Counselors Prospective Student Camp,

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the University of South Carolina Genetic Counseling Certificate, and the Keck Graduate Institute Online Summer Camp in clinical genetics and bioinformatics.

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Students will apply using the National Match Service System, also known as the Genetic Counseling Match.

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It is $100 to apply in the system and allows programs and applicants to rank each other as they connect through the interview process.

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Students will apply to their prospective programs after applying to the match.

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The Genetic Counseling Admissions Match

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is designed to place applicants into accredited genetic counseling master's programs.

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Similar matching services have been utilized in fields such as medicine, psychology, and other professions.

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The match has several advantages.

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It simplifies admissions offers by aligning all decisions concurrently.

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It ensures fair, optimal placements for applicants and programs.

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It allows evaluation and ranking without pressure for premature decisions.

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It prevents overfilling and unfair practices like retracting or holding multiple offers.

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Registration for the match opens every fall.

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It is recommended that students register by December.

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Decisions for all participants in the match are released on the same day in mid-April.

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The genetic counseling match fee is non-refundable and non-transferable.

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Waivers are available for those demonstrating financial need and have a GPA of at least a 3.0.

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Waivers require an essay and supporting documents.

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When you're navigating the application process, there are a few key steps to keep in mind.

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First, you'll receive your match code, which is essential for your applications and any related correspondence.

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Next, it's time to apply an interview.

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This phase is all about mutual evaluation, as both you and the programs assess each other independently.

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Finally, once you've done your research and completed your interviews, you'll submit your ranked order list.

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Your ranked order list will include tracks you may be interested in.

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Many schools have tracks that allow you to gain more exposure into the field of genetic counseling

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and often come with a stipend or in-state tuition.

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Tracks may be focused on teaching and help prepare students who might want to be faculty, or may focus on certain genetic counseling specialties or service-focused tracks.

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Tracks aren't a commitment to that role post-grad, but are valuable learning opportunities.

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The program matches applicants to their highest ranked program where they meet eligibility.

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Programs are matched with the most preferred applicants based on their rank order list.

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If applicants do not get matched, applicants and programs can independently negotiate post-match.

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Let's break down the numbers nationally from 2024.

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There are 58 accredited genetic counseling programs in the United States and Canada, with additional programs currently in development.

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In 2024, 59.1% of applicants were matched, while 40.9% remained unmatched.

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For the same year, 94.8% of program positions were filled, leaving only 0.5% of positions unfilled.

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Students do not have to know what area they want to work in before graduate school and will gain a lot of exposure in graduate school.

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Students are encouraged to explore various specialties by shadowing genetic counselors across all available areas offered by their program.

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During the second year of their program, students typically complete four 6 to 8 week clinical rotations

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usually having rotations in prenatal, pediatric, and cancer genetics.

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Additionally, engaging in shadowing opportunities and actively participating in full sessions with genetic counselors, particularly those involved in teaching, can provide valuable insight and help students identify their areas of interest.

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Oftentimes, students will use their summer studying more niche areas, such as cardiology, pulmonology, metabolic disease genetics, and more.

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Genetic counseling is not just a rewarding career it's one that professionals genuinely love.

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According to a survey by the National Society of Genetic Counselors, nearly nine out of 10 genetic counselors report being happy with their profession, and it's easy to see why.

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This field combines meaningful patient interaction with cutting-edge science, offering a unique and impactful career path.

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The financial outlook is equally encouraging.

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The average salary for a full-time genetic counselor has risen by an impressive 31% since 2016, now averaging around 106,000.

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For new graduates, the average salary is approximately 81,000.

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The demand for genetic counselors is growing rapidly, with over 6,500 professionals currently in the field, and that number is projected to reach 10,000 by 2033.

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Job prospects are excellent, with most new graduates securing positions before or shortly after graduation.

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Whether it's job satisfaction, financial growth, or opportunities for advancement, genetic counseling is a career with both immediate rewards and long-term potential.

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Genetic counselors call the plays that guide patients through critical decisions about their genetic health.

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They help patients and families build strategies to tackle complex challenges with confidence and compassion.

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This career isn't just about individual wins it's about teamwork, perseverance, and making a lasting impact.

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So whether you see yourself as a star player in patient care or leading the charge in research and innovation, genetic counseling offers a field where you can truly shine.

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Remember, every great team starts with preparation and hard work, and your path to success is no different.

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Thank you for tuning in to the Pre-Professional Playbook podcast.

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If you have any questions or want more resources,

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feel free to reach out to me in the Pre-Professional Advising Office.

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Don't forget to subscribe for more insights into exciting careers.

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Until next time, keep working hard and preparing for success.