

Cultural Competency Scholarship Submission

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As humans, we are linked by conserved sequences of billions of nucleotides that spell out a universal code. Infinitesimal changes to that code lead to certain physical differences, but it is the influence of culture that truly makes us each unique. We constantly encounter patients and colleagues whose cultures differ from our own, and as genetic counselors, it is our responsibility to question how our cultures influence these encounters. Cultural mores impact how patients speak, interact with healthcare providers, perceive information about genetics and testing, and how we as counselors respond to these patients. With well-developed cultural competency, counselors have a better understanding of what motivates patients, such as religious or familial values, and can employ counseling skills that will create more meaningful connections with patients, allowing us to be better patient advocates. Genetic counseling is a career in which awareness and respect for genetic and cultural diversity are necessities, so it is imperative that the issue of improving cultural competency be addressed.

Currently, we obtain the majority of our education in cultural competency through literary resources, such as textbook and cultural competency toolkits. While literature is a valid and necessary tool, it provides a limited scope and can ultimately perpetuate generalizations that are more harmful than helpful. I suggest that, in addition to reading assignments, open dialogue about culture and increased opportunity for exposure to other cultures be explored. This can be achieved through various platforms, from having regular cultural diversity sessions at the AEC, hosting mini web symposiums or workshops highlighting cultural issues encountered by genetic counselors, to publishing semi-annual issues of *Perspectives in Genetic Counseling* devoted solely to diversity-related topics. Dialogue should also extend to the classroom; it would be beneficial for students to discuss their experiences with

cultural diversity in roundtables and even role-play scenarios in which the patient's cultural values strongly influence the course of counseling session. In a perfect world, every genetic counseling student would have the chance to study abroad, and although some training programs provide international student exchange opportunities, establishment of grants, scholarships, or sponsorships for cultural immersion experiences such as these would allow more students to have these opportunities. Luckily, the U.S. is a wondrously diverse country; for students who remain in the U.S., I suggest that training programs provide community service opportunities that allow students to go out into communities where they can interact with and learn from people from different cultures.

Genetic counselors serve a rapidly diversifying client population, but as the vast majority of genetic counselors are Caucasian, the genetic counseling profession does not yet reflect the diversity of the patients it serves. As an African-American woman, I am one of the people entering this career who deviate from the historical phenotype of a genetic counselor. While I appreciate and enjoy the experience of learning from and working with people from cultures different from mine, there are admittedly moments when being the only ebony face in a room of ivory can feel slightly isolating. There are also moments when I feel would benefit from interacting with teachers, mentors, and peers who "look like me" and share similar cultural perspectives. I look forward to seeing more diversity in the field, and I believe that improving cultural competency is essential to increasing the presence of counselors from underrepresented groups. Increased recruitment will create a positive feedback loop of sorts; an influx of culturally diverse counselors will lead to exchange of thoughts from unique viewpoints and more dialogue about culture within the field, which will expand cultural competency and generate new ideas for recruitment, resulting in a more heterogeneous group of genetic counselors.

As we live in world where information can be exchanged instantly over the internet, social media may be the best platform for reaching out to prospective students. NSGC already has a presence on Facebook; this medium can be used to spotlight NSGC's endeavors to promote diversity and to

interact with those interested in the field. Creating a YouTube channel to post videos about current issues in genetics would also increase the online presence of the profession. In addition to social media, counselors should interact directly with high school and undergraduate students by participating in career fairs or educational talks. Current genetic counseling students, especially those from underrepresented groups, would be particularly useful to the recruitment process. As a standard part of our curriculum, students are required to create educational presentations and present them to various audiences. Assignments such as these could allow students to visit schools with diverse populations and talk to students about genetic counseling as a career choice and about what life is like as a graduate student. These experiences could be rewarding for counseling students, and inspiring for their audience.

I am excited to be a part of endeavors that promote cultural competency and increased diversity in genetic counseling. Currently, I am working on my thesis, which examines the influence of culture on the genetic counseling process, primarily focusing on the perspectives of counselors from minority groups. I would appreciate the chance to visit schools in predominantly minority-populated areas and give genetics education talks and answer career questions; not necessarily with the goal of being seen as a “cultural ambassador”, but simply to provide students with the awareness that anyone can be a genetic counselor, even someone that “looks like them.” In the future, I have plans to become an NSGC mentor and an active participant in diversity or cultural competency related SIGs. I would also donate funds for students’ study abroad trips, if financially able. As I establish my career, it is my hope that my work will not only positively impact patients’ lives but will also serve as testament that diversity enriches the genetic counseling community. As Maya Angelou once stated, “...in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”