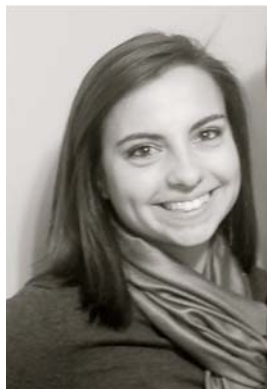


Student Forum

A Year of Growth: Transitioning to Graduate School

By Leslie Gress, University of Cincinnati Genetic Counseling Program, Class of 2012



Early this spring, I was watching a group of potential genetic counseling students sitting in a room at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, waiting to be interviewed by program staff of the University of Cincinnati Genetic Counseling Program. They were dressed in business suits and skirts with their hair done just right. They had only sipped on water and asked a few questions. They were trying hard to assert themselves – to show us they were great candidates. As I was sitting chatting with them and assuring them to just be themselves, I thought, "Wow – you were here just one year ago, Leslie."

When I think back from last year when I was an interviewee to now wrapping up my first year of school, I cannot believe the changes in myself, my work ethic, my view of this profession – my life. I knew coming to graduate school would be a transition, but I think I highly underestimated all that was in store for me in this twelve-month span.

I chose to attend the University of Cincinnati (UC) at Cincinnati Children's Hospital for my genetic counseling training. A native Ohioan from Cleveland, I came straight from a three-year stint at the University of Dayton (UD). I have been passionate about genetic counseling since I first learned about it during my junior year of high school in biotechnology class. At that time, I never thought, five years later, I would be halfway through my degree.

I expected transitioning to graduate school to be an experience full of challenges and growth. Yet when I reflect on my years at UD and my first year in Cincinnati, I have come to truly appreciate the transition; it is one I thought would last a few months, but I am quickly learning it will continue through my entire career.

College is completely different from graduate school, as most people who have experienced it can verify. While some of my classmates took time off and worked in labs

or other settings, I kept steamrolling through school. I have been blessed with naturally doing well in school. I remember during my interviews that everyone said the key to being in any program was “time management.” I thought I had that down! I juggled a full course load, drove to Cleveland to visit my family, enjoyed the social aspect of college, and worked full time jobs. What did I need to learn?

Oh, how naive I was.

Six months after my interview, I was moving to a new city and decorating my apartment, placing knick-knacks here and picture frames there. Little did I know those shelves would quickly fill up with books and articles that I would not get the chance to read. I paid my first bills, got lost in the city, and signed my first lease. These changes made me feel like a grown-up more than ever, yet I was nervous for my first quarter of school.

Eight months after my interview, I was learning the ins and outs of genetics, seeing patients in clinic, and beginning research for my thesis. I realized that time was the most precious thing in my life – that one hour in clinic could give me an experience I would remember for the rest of my training and perhaps career; that one class discussion would open my eyes to just how diverse the class of 2012 at UC truly is, and how I am surrounded by such wonderful people.

During this time, I recognized and came to appreciate the large difference between my undergraduate and graduate school experiences. My classes are AWESOME. No longer do I have to sit through Philosophy 101 or Physical Chemistry to complete my degree audit. Everything I learn every day is directly applicable to my career and training. While I have always had the desire and need to succeed in my studies, I feel that graduate level education truly relies on your passion: I *want* to learn everything about hereditary breast cancer, I *want* to role play in class to enhance my psychosocial skills, I *want* to go on a consult at 6pm on a Friday to talk to a family about autosomal dominant inheritance. However, while I expected that I would be excited and involved in my schoolwork, I never thought I would dive right in with such responsibility and an endless “To-Do” list.

Ten months after my interview, I was on Christmas break. I came to learn that between work as a Graduate Assistant and trying to see my family, I would have little chance for relaxation on this break. This was completely unlike college, where I would spend my vacation in my pajamas snuggling with my cat and watching hours of “chick flicks.” This break was spent learning that the thesis portion of my program would be one of my biggest challenges. Beginning a background literature review, deciding what I was researching, and realizing how little I knew about this process soon became overwhelming.

Since then, our entire division of Human Genetics analyzed my research question (which has changed three times), and I have learned the frustrations – and joys – of a thesis project. A year ago in my undergraduate work, I would have changed projects to a more relatable topic, or cried. In graduate school I have to be my own advocate – I have to be able to say no to seeing a patient in order to begin initial analysis for my thesis; I have to

allow myself to take a nap on a Saturday and play with my dogs instead of doing school work. I need to be able to truly have balance.

Now, twelve months after my interview and with the end of my first year of school approaching, I am coming to see myself as a more mature, professional, and passionate student than I ever thought I could be. My parents and family always joked that I was a “dork” when it came to my studies, but now, I am a full-fledged, genetic-counseling-loving, business clothes-wearing, Gene Reviews-searching, GEEK. I cannot even compare myself to the student that I was when I first interviewed.

In reflecting back on my transition from a college to a graduate student, from interviewee to a first year student, I feel that even if you come to expect a change in your life, it is never actually what you believed it would be. I knew the classes would be harder, but I never knew they would be so integrative. I knew that I would get along with some of my classmates, but I never thought that I would love some of the girls like sisters. I knew I would succeed, but I never thought I would see such growth in myself over a year’s time.

I strive to maintain balance in my life and education daily, something I have never been so aware of until my journey to become a genetic counselor began. I feel that I am continually an elephant on a ball at the circus – one lean away from falling off but somehow still balancing. I think I am learning important lessons in school that will carry through my career: the hard work will always be required, the patients will always be interesting, research will always need to be done, and most importantly, the learning – and transitions – will never end.

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