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[News](#)

## Penn Medicine has been awarded a nearly \$10 million grant to educate genetic counselors

Genetic counselors to get more opportunities to advance their careers.



Genetic testing is rapidly evolving, and the ranks of genetic counselors is growing as a profession. Getty Images

by [Wendy Ruderman](#)

The job of a genetic counselor is both art and science. It takes knowledge and sensitivity to sit patients down and explain that DNA tests show they have a genetic predisposition for a certain cancer and a high probability that they'll get the disease — and then explain their options.

“We talk to them about what it means for themselves and their children,” said Kathleen Valverde, director of the Masters of Science in Genetic Counseling Program at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine. “It’s kind of life-changing to find out you’re at risk for a genetic condition, and there’s lots of options that people could take and the options can be overwhelming.”

While there are advanced continuing education classes for many professions, including nursing and accounting, there are not as many opportunities for genetic counselors to stay on top of a field that is rapidly evolving.

Penn Medicine on Wednesday announced a \$9.7 million grant from the Warren Alpert Foundation (WAF), a philanthropic group focused on public health, that will help keep genetic counselors stay abreast of developments in the field.

Penn will use the grant funding to offer one-credit online courses — 10 hours each — designed to keep genetic counselors up-to-speed on new research trends and hereditary disorders and teach them to better assess risks and help patients make proactive decisions in areas ranging from cancer prevention to family planning. The virtual continuing education courses could be especially valuable for genetic counselors who work at smaller hospitals and have fewer local training opportunities, according to Valverde.

Penn will lead the effort in collaboration with four other academic institutions: Baylor College of Medicine, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, and the University of Washington School of Medicine. All have robust genetic counseling programs.

The newly created WAF-Career Ladder Education Program for Genetic Counseling also will develop a certificate program for those who complete advanced training in a specific area of genomic medicine.

“Genetic counseling is only about 50 years old, and the world of genetics is moving at lightning speed,” Valverde said. “It can be challenging for genetic counselors to stay aware of rapid changes in the field.”

Genetic counselors are typically required to have a bachelor’s and master’s degree related to the field. They must also pass an exam to obtain national certification, and in many states, including Pennsylvania, genetic counselors need a state license. That license requires continuing education for renewal, said Valverde.

Penn’s master’s program currently has 18 students. About 400 students have graduated from the program since its start in 1995, Valverde said.

Interest in the field has mushroomed in recent years, in part thanks to celebrities who have drawn attention to its uses. For instance, many people had never heard of the BRCA1 gene mutation until actress Angelina Jolie revealed in 2013 that she had a double mastectomy after genetic screening showed she had inherited from her mother a mutation to her BRCA1 gene. The gene mutation dramatically increases the chances of getting breast and ovarian cancers.

“Given the increasing complexity of career development and the expanded roles for genetic counselors, support in career development is imperative,” said August Schiesser, WAF’s executive director.

[Wendy Ruderman](#) I'm an investigative reporter who is committed to bringing light (and sometimes heat) to broken systems and wrongs.

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