



President’s Perspective



Catherine A. Fine,
MS, CGC®
ABGC President

Dear Diplomates and Colleagues:

It’s hard to believe 2022 is ending after what has been a unique year for ABGC.

In a world with many challenges, and a profession working together to meet these challenges, ABGC recognized an internal need to slow down and reflect. As an organization, we wanted to discover a better way to grow, adapt and support our profession. Thus, rather than continuing to drive forward with the status quo, the 2022 ABGC Board of Directors paused some of our initiatives as part of an evolution that we are excited to continue in 2023.

Key to that evolution, we have transitioned to a new management company, Smithbucklin. This change will allow us to achieve a significantly improved operational and financial foundation, which will be reinvested into our Diplomates, candidates and the public

we serve. Smithbucklin, which has been a trusted association steward for over 70 years, also manages the National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC). Although ABGC will remain an independent organization, we believe the strategic decision to move under the Smithbucklin “umbrella” with NSGC, will have long-term, beneficial outcomes for genetic counselors as we continue to work toward similar goals and initiatives.

We know transparency and trust is important to any organization. As such, in 2023, our improved operational foundation will include more frequent and relevant communication to the community. We are revamping the ABGC website to provide user-friendly, relevant information and content; we have invested in a new and improved recertification portal to provide you with more clarity and better tracking of your certification status; and this newsletter — which has typically been published once per year in the summer — is moving to a consistent quarterly schedule in 2023.

In the coming months, we will be revisiting our strategic plan to ensure our

four main goals continue to align with the current needs of our profession. We will also be evaluating our progress toward each of these goals, which includes our recently launched Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice (DEIJ) Committee and the relaunch of the LEAD Academy.

As ABGC continues with our transition and evolution, we hope to hear your ideas regarding how we can continue to improve the services we provide. As my tenure on the board and as president comes to an end, I want to thank all of ABGC’s past and present board members, committee members, association management companies and all of you for your support. Your new ABGC president, Sarah Noblin, MS, CGC®, will begin her term in January 2023, and I’m excited to see what Sarah, our new board and all ABGC volunteers will accomplish in the new year.

Sincerely,

Catherine A. Fine, MS, CGC®
2022 ABGC President

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The DEIJ Committee: Leading the Way to Transformation

By ABGC Staff



Kate Wilson, MS, CGC*,
*Genetic Counselor,
Product Director,
Oncology, Quest
Diagnostics; DEIJ
Committee Board Liaison*

ABGC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice (DEIJ) Committee held its first meeting this year. Created following the DEIJ Certification Assessment Report conducted by Nonprofit HR in 2021, the committee is dedicated to furthering ABGC's commitment to fair and objective decisions, transparency

in interactions and accountable stewardship. ABGC continually strives to develop assessments without bias, respect all voices and seek out diverse perspectives, and the DEIJ Committee will help lead the way toward these goals.

The committee's first priority is addressing Nonprofit HR's findings and recommendations, some of which ABGC has already begun implementing. These include offering live remote proctoring to mitigate instances of low proximity to test sites and researching methods to recruit demographically diverse item writers. All recommendations and findings can be found [on the website](#).

According to Kate Wilson, MS, CGC*, board liaison to the DEIJ Committee, the committee is aiming to "review the Nonprofit HR findings and create a priority list of action items that includes both short-term and long-term goals." Ultimately, these goals will be presented to the ABGC board for consideration.

Additionally, the committee is working on activities and projects that will support pillar one of ABGC's strategic initiatives: "Develop and encourage a culture of inclusivity within genetic counseling that supports visible and invisible diversity by expanding the perspectives represented in our field and fostering equity in assessing competence."

Supporting this pillar, Wilson explains, means implementing "structured, intentional and permanent efforts" to promote DEIJ within both ABGC itself and the exam and recertification processes.

"What this means in immediate terms is evaluating ways to collect demographic information on exam candidates and proposing DEIJ language and definitions for board of director approval," she

says. In the long term, it may include efforts such as providing scholarships or other cost-reduction options to offset exam costs, evaluating the length of the exam and participating in broader conversations regarding alternative methods of demonstrating competency.

Forming the Committee

Following 2020's #ABGCListens initiative, ABGC committed to hiring an independent third-party organization to conduct an objective review of aspects of the certification and exam development processes that could lead to inequities for exam candidates.

Ultimately, the board chose DEIJ-experienced consulting firm Nonprofit HR, whose report concluded that, overall, ABGC's Certification Exam and corresponding processes are in "good shape where information is available, but there are opportunities for further investigation and consideration to address DEIJ concerns."

In response to this conclusion, the board created the DEIJ Committee, requesting that ABGC Diplomates apply to join.

"[Interested Diplomates] completed an application that assessed work, volunteer, and DEIJ experience and expertise," Wilson says.

Ten certified genetic counselors now sit on the committee. Currently, they're in the process of selecting two co-chairs.

Wilson says she was honored to be the liaison to the committee because of her passion for genomic equity, which includes health care professional training and certification.

"When I applied to be on the ABGC board, one of my commitments was to evaluate the exam process for bias and support a culture of inclusion and belonging," she says.

Wilson believes DEIJ is incredibly important to everyone involved in ABGC.

"I'm excited to see us put together an official committee and framework for actionable and sustainable change in the DEIJ space," she says. "I believe genetic counselors should be dedicated to DEIJ since we are health care providers and patient advocates. As certified genetic counselors, we are trusted health care professionals who promote patient safety and ensure higher quality health care for all."

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2022 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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The DEIJ Committee: Leading the Way to Transformation

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Looking Forward

A key part of developing DEIJ Committee objectives will be establishing metrics for evaluating ABGC's progress. The committee will do so in conjunction with the board.

"The board does want to implement a way to track and measure the outcomes and progress, in order to know that successful change is happening and forward action is occurring," Wilson says.

Once objectives and metrics are established, the committee plans to evaluate other certification bodies, as well as professional organizations, to learn from their DEIJ best practices. ABGC is learning from and working alongside other genetic counseling professional groups toward achieving various DEIJ goals. Wilson

is interested in hearing member suggestions of any additional regulatory groups, certification bodies or professional societies that could provide examples.

Another future committee goal is expanding DEIJ efforts outside the exam process "to impact the greater ABGC landscape and Diplomates," Wilson says.

ABGC is committed to engaging those who bring a variety of ideas, experiences, backgrounds, talents and interests, and ensuring those diverse perspectives are incorporated as it continually evaluates and revises all stages of the genetic counseling certification exam development process and continuing competency. With the support and leadership of the DEIJ Committee, ABGC will be able to ensure these commitments become realities.

Highlighting Two ABGC Research Grant Recipients

By ABGC Staff

The purpose of the ABGC Research Award is to encourage and fund research initiatives that support the mission of ABGC to protect the public by setting certification standards and providing leadership to promote the value of certified genetic counselors. Learn more about the grant at abgc.net/research-resources.

We sat down with two recent recipients of the grant, Jeanna McCuaig and Lisa Schwartz, to learn more about their careers and research topics.



2020 Recipient

Jeanna McCuaig, MSc, PhD, CGC®, CCGC

Genetic Counselor, Bhalwani Familial Cancer Clinic at the Princess

Clinical Instructor, MSc in Genetic Counselling Program at the University of Toronto

What is your background, and how did you get involved in the field of genetic counseling?

I completed my Bachelor of Science in biology from the University of Waterloo. As part of my degree, I became involved in the field of genetic counseling by completing several a co-op terms in hereditary cancer clinics working with genetic counselors in a role similar to a genetic counseling assistant. During two work terms at the Familial Cancer Clinic (FCC) at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre (PM) in Toronto, Canada, I was also given opportunities to work on clinical research projects.



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Highlighting Two ABGC Research Grant Recipients

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I received my Master of Science in genetic counseling from the University of Toronto, where my independent research project fostered my growing interest in genetic counseling related research. Upon graduation in 2010, I took a job as a genetic counselor in the FCC at PM, where I continue to work in both clinical and research roles.

Given my interest in clinical research, I recently obtained a PhD from the University of Toronto.

What was your research topic's aims/objectives, and why did you choose it?

The aim of my study was to evaluate reported outcomes (including cancer-related distress, genetic testing-related distress and satisfaction) among newly diagnosed high-grade serous ovarian cancer (HGSOC) patients who had BRCA1/2 tumor testing and subsequent germline testing with post-test genetic counseling.

Initially, I was interested in studying the patient impact of mainstreaming (oncologist ordered genetic testing); however, by the time I was at the point of my PhD where I was defining a research question, many studies were already being done in this area. At the same time, Ontario implemented reflex BRCA1/2 tumor testing for all HGSOC, which was quite novel to me and was quickly becoming a growing area of interest in the field of hereditary cancer. As a genetic counselor, I had many questions about how this would impact patient care. I also thought it was extremely important area of study since this genetic testing model was implemented at a large scale prior to any patient outcome data.

What were your methods/research plan?

I completed a prospective, exploratory cohort study of newly diagnosed HGSOC patients receiving reflexive BRCA1/2 tumor testing at two hospitals in Toronto. Participants were asked to complete two study surveys that measured various outcomes, including cancer-related distress, genetic testing-related distress and satisfaction. Surveys were completed after receiving tumor results and after receiving germline results with post-test genetic counseling.

Once you were given the grant, how long did the full process of conducting the research and publishing/presenting take?

I was awarded the grant in December 2019 and am just completing revisions on the second of two papers now (November 2022). While I had relevant research ethic board approvals prior to receiving the grant, data collection was significantly delayed due to pausing of research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thankfully, ABGC granted an extension so I was able to complete data collection as well as present my findings at the 2022 Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors Annual Education Conference and publish two peer-reviewed articles.

What is the anticipated impact of the project?

The anticipated impact of this project is to inform genetic counseling practices and facilitate the expanded implementation of

tumor genetic testing in other disease sites and at other institutions, thereby improving outcomes for individuals and families with hereditary cancer syndromes.

What advice would you give others looking to apply for an ABGC research grant?

Just try! It seems that more and more genetic counselors are becoming involved in research, which they are trying to do "off the side of their desk." The ABGC grant allowed me to hire a research assistant to help with participant recruitment and data collection. This allowed me to complete my research study while continuing to meet my clinical demands. You also don't know if you will be successful in obtaining a research grant until you apply. I had several unsuccessful grant applications before receiving funding, so don't give up!



2021 Recipient

Lisa S. Schwartz, EdD, MS, CGC®

Associate Professor, Department of Biomedical Laboratory Sciences

Director, Pre-Health Professions Advising, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, The George Washington University

What is your background, and how did you get involved in the field of genetic counseling?

I was originally a pre-med student in college, but after volunteering in an emergency room, I realized that medicine was not the right field for me. I was fortunate to attend a guest lecture by the late Beth Fine, a genetic counselor, in one of my classes at Cornell, who sparked my interest in the field. Well before the advent of the internet, I was able to secure a summer internship with a genetic counselor and in a cytogenetics laboratory at the National Institutes of Health, and I was convinced genetic counseling was the right path for me.

I completed the genetic counseling program at the University of Pittsburgh in 1992 and worked in a variety of clinical settings (prenatal, pediatrics and cancer) for a number of years before assuming the role of director of the University of Maryland genetic counseling program in 1997. I was in that role until my family moved to Northern Virginia in 2004, where I completed my doctorate in higher education administration and joined the faculty of the School of Medicine and Health Sciences at The George Washington University in 2010.

Although I haven't practiced as a genetic counselor since leaving the University of Maryland, I remained engaged in the field by teaching an undergraduate and graduate-level genetics course, serving as a dissertation chair for genetic counselors enrolled in GW's PhD in Translational Health Sciences Program, and volunteering with ACGC and NSGC.

What was your research topic's aims/objectives, and why did you choose it?

As a faculty member in the Department of Biomedical Laboratory Sciences at GW, I was interested in exploring the potential need for a post-master's certificate for genetic counselors working in the laboratory setting. I ended up turning what was initially intended to be a market needs assessment into the ABGC Research Grant application. The specific aims of the study were to:

- Identify knowledge, skills and competencies required for an entry-level laboratory genetic counselor as noted by experts in the laboratory (e.g., laboratory genetic counselors with more than five years of experience, genetics and non-genetic laboratory directors and managers).



- Determine the perceived level of preparation in laboratory genetic counseling knowledge, skills and competencies among currently practicing genetic counselors, both within and outside of the laboratory setting.
- Assess the perceived value of an additional credential for genetic counselors practicing in laboratory settings.

- Suggest the preferred method by which laboratory genetic counseling knowledge, skills and competencies may be best developed and attained, such as more hands-on experience through existing accredited genetic counseling programs, credit-bearing academic program (e.g., post-master's certificate) or continuing education (e.g., non-academic credit-bearing certification).

What were your methods/research plan?

The study used a two-phase, exploratory mixed-method approach. Phase I involved interviews of genetic counselors working in the laboratory setting, the results of which informed the development of a survey used in Phase II.

Once you were given the grant, how long did the full process of conducting the research and publishing/presenting take?

After getting the agreement between ABGC and GW settled, as well as approval from the GW IRB, Phase I (qualitative interviews) took about nine months, and then Phase II (quantitative survey) took another six months. I will be presenting the qualitative phase of the study as a platform presentation and the quantitative phase as a virtual poster at the NSGC conference in November in Nashville. I am working on revisions to a manuscript submitted to the *Journal of Genetic Counseling* on the qualitative phase and, if accepted, will submit a manuscript on the quantitative phase results to JOGC.

What was the anticipated impact of the project?

Overall, the results of the study indicate that genetic counselors working in the laboratory setting feel well-prepared and uniquely positioned to serve in their roles, but recommend that more didactic and field work training about the clinical laboratory be incorporated into master's in genetic counseling training programs. They also reported that the current (2019) PBCs were transferable to their roles but could benefit from being revised and expanded to better reflect the oftentimes non-direct patient care roles in the laboratory setting.

Interestingly, while I was conducting the study, ABGC was conducting a practice analysis and working on revision of the Practice Based Competencies for Genetic Counselors. Nearly all participants expressed not wanting an additional credential or specific training to be required to serve in a laboratory-based role, as they felt it would restrict genetic counselors' ability to move into these roles.

What advice would you give others looking to apply for an ABGC research grant?

If you have an interest in exploring something that you've observed or are curious about, even if not obvious at first glance, the likelihood is that with some creativity and hard work, and support of other like-minded genetic counselors like those I was able to convince to join my Advisory Board for the study, you can successfully turn it into an ABGC research grant application.

Aiming to Make the Exam More Equitable

By ABGC Staff



Kathryn Spitzer Kim, MS, CGC®, Stanford University; CEC Vice Chair



Courtney Berrios, MSc, ScM, CGC®, Genomic Medicine Center, Children's Mercy Research Institute; Research Assistant Professor, UMKC School of Medicine; CEC Chair

Each year, the ABGC Certification Exam Committee (CEC) has two primary tasks: 1) revise and approve new items written by item writers for the certification exam; and 2) review each item and exam form to be used in upcoming exam cycles.

In recent years, including 2022, the CEC has also focused on addressing concerns about diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ) in the exam.

Diversity in Committee Representation

“Diversity and inclusivity are important so that the makeup of genetic counselors in the field is reflective of the clients we serve,” says CEC Vice Chair Kathryn Spitzer Kim, MS, CGC®. “There is good data that clients respond well to counselors who come from a similar background. And while that may not always be possible, having a wide range of individuals in the field will increase awareness and familiarity with issues among all practitioners, leading to better satisfaction for more patients.”

The CEC’s job is to make sure the questions on the exam are as clear, fair and unbiased as possible. To do this, the committee’s members come from a wide range of specialties, work settings and backgrounds to reflect practicing genetic counselors as a whole.

“We have made a concerted effort over the last few years to ensure diversity of the CEC so that we can accomplish this goal,” Spitzer Kim says.

Diversity in Item Writing

In addition to having a diverse committee, another way the CEC is working to make the exam more equitable is by encouraging item writers to submit questions that reflect the wide range of clients that present for genetic counseling.

“We have tried to be very aware that candidates have been trained at many programs and work in many settings, so we screen questions to be sure we believe that the answers are widely regarded as correct and not only correct in certain circumstances. To this end, we are looking for updated references and might reject a question as biased even if an older reference supports it,” Spitzer Kim says.

“We are actively working to make the pool of item writers more diverse,” says CEC Chair Courtney Berrios, MSc, ScM. “We have begun asking item writing applicants if they identify with any groups that are under-represented in the genetic counseling field and are using this information to intentionally build diversity into the item writer pool.”

Spitzer Kim adds that the committee also takes candidate feedback seriously. “The best way they can ensure the integrity of the process is to volunteer to be an item writer and to join the CEC if they are asked,” she says.



Outside Counsel

Also as part of ABGC’s DEIJ efforts, in 2021, ABGC partnered with Nonprofit HR on a [DEIJ Certification Assessment Report](#). The report included recommendations relevant to the CEC that the committee immediately worked to implement. In its review of 607 active exam items, for example, Nonprofit HR identified nine items as needing revisions or removal and an additional 38 for which they had questions that required consideration by subject matter experts.

“The CEC immediately reviewed all nine items marked as needing revision or removal and either removed them from the exam bank or edited them to address the concerns, after which they’ll be placed in the exam bank for future pre-testing,” Berrios says. “The 38 items with questions were marked in the exam bank with a note about the question by Nonprofit HR that will be addressed before the items are potentially used on any future exam forms. In addition, the co-chairs reviewed the questions/concerns on the 38 items and summarized learning points from these items that are being used by the CEC as we review future exam items.”

Challenges

The biggest challenge Spitzer Kim sees in addressing DEIJ concerns is the “eagerness to have the items on the exam be sensitive to DEIJ concerns immediately.” It takes time to write, approve and pre-test questions, so change can’t happen overnight.

“Each new item that is written by an item writer must be reviewed and approved by the CEC, then placed on an exam as a pre-test item, and only if it performs well (as determined by a psychometrician) can it become a scored item on the exam,” Berrios says. “We are actively working to address biases in existing exam items immediately, while building in more inclusive items as new items are approved.”

Measuring Success

While the CEC is able to view statistics about the performance of individual items on the exam, the committee relies on the psychometrician at the exam development company to help it interpret those statistics and to use those to develop the exam.

“In the past, demographics have not been collected for exam takers and we, therefore, are not able to determine how performance for the exam or specific items differs based on demographics,” Berrios says. “It is my understanding that the ABGC’s newly formed DEIJ Committee and BOD are considering collecting demographics in the future in ways that are sensitive and may support measuring outcomes.”

In the meantime, the committee will continue to diversify the item writer pool and CEC while soliciting input from the genetic counseling community.

LEAD Academy: Leading Yourself, Engaging Others

By ABGC Staff

ABGC’s Leadership Education Advancement Development (LEAD) Academy offers online training programs aimed at helping certified genetic counselors build leadership skills to advance their careers.

One program offered is Fundamental Four: The Four Skills Every Leader Needs To Be Successful. This four-week course teaches leadership competencies proven to be essential at all

leadership levels: self-awareness, learning agility, influence and communication.

Two genetic counselors — Chinmayee Bhimarao Nagaraj, MS, CGC®, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, and Melissa Racobaldo, MS, CGC®, University of South Florida, Pediatrics, Division of Genetics and Metabolism — shared their experiences taking the course, including key takeaways and recommendations for future students.



Chinmayee Bhimarao Nagaraj, MS, CGC®, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital



Melissa Racobaldo, MS, CGC®, University of South Florida, Pediatrics, Division of Genetics and Metabolism

What made you decide to participate in LEAD Academy?

Chinmayee Bhimarao Nagaraj (CBN): I saw this as a chance to formally explore the topic of leadership and expand upon my existing skills to apply in my current roles as well as prepare for future opportunities.

Melissa Racobaldo (MR): I had been acting as a supervisor/leader for several months and was getting ready to transition into a more formal

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LEAD Academy: Leading Yourself, Engaging Others

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leadership position. I value self-awareness and a growth mindset and thought this would be a great opportunity to learn more about the values a leader possesses and how to motivate team members.

How would you describe the program's scope?

CBN: The program covers four main topics or skills important in a leader. Each topic takes a few hours to review, and the content is mostly bite-sized, with apt exercises and reflection questions.

MR: I really liked the format of the program, how it focused on intrinsic characteristics first and then extrinsic, as I think the greatest tool we have is awareness of ourselves and our motivations, how they can differ from other individuals and how to use this awareness to our advantage. The time commitment was very manageable. You could do some sections spread out over a few days or one overall section in one day.

What was your biggest takeaway from the program?

CBN: My biggest takeaway was being able to think about leadership skills in concise terms and a structured way. What this course provides is guidance on the skills we may need as a leader in any position.

MR: You are more likely to succeed as a leader when you are most aware of how you can positively influence your team members and make changes for the greater good. You can never be stagnant as an individual, let alone as a leader, so by setting good examples for your team, you can motivate them to achieve common goals.

Why do you think it's important for ABGC to continue offering programs like this?

MR: ABGC focuses on education for genetic counselors, and it is important to offer education through less-traditional avenues, such as leadership opportunities. Genetic counselors are able to take on more leadership roles than ever before, but leadership isn't always a skill that is learned or taught during our formal training programs.

CBN: With the speed of our profession's growth, the capabilities of individuals in this field and the potential of our scope, it is very important to be discussing topics such as leadership and equipping genetic counselors with such skills.

What would you tell other certified genetic counselors considering participating?

CBN: This program is broad enough in its scope that it could be useful for professionals at any stage of their leadership journey. It may be a repetition of some of what we already know, but some exercises may provide good ideas that we can use with our teams. Overall, it is certainly a good venue to help anyone approach leadership skills in a structured way.

MR: I found it really enlightening to be able to get back in touch with myself and the qualities that make me a good team player and leader outside of my role as a genetic counselor and patient advocate. It was a great opportunity to be able to connect with other counselors in similar roles who I wouldn't have otherwise been able to meet. There were many opportunities for self-reflection and even input from team members that I work directly with, so that sort of feedback was really eye-opening and something I may not have gotten outside of this course.



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