

# University of Pittsburgh

## Genetic Counseling Program

### Policy on Professional Impairment for Students

#### Introduction

The Pitt Genetic Counseling Program recognizes its responsibility to provide education and training that will promote student attainment of the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to function as a competent health care professional in genetic counseling. Attainment of knowledge, skills and competencies is a developmental process that occurs over time and varies from student to student. Program faculty and clinical supervisors are committed to providing instruction, feedback and, mentoring to students in a manner that allows students to meet the goals of the program and develop as a professional.

The *Policy on Professional Impairment for Students* applies to rare situations in which a student experiences significant difficulties in attaining the knowledge, skills, and/or competencies that will allow him or her to function as competent genetic counseling professional. This policy is intended to be used with students who are not adequately progressing through the developmental process of becoming a genetic counselor.

Program faculty, including clinical training supervisors, accept multiple responsibilities – not only to their students but also to the profession and to the public.

- Program faculty and clinical supervisors have a responsibility to teach and supervise students, which is typically done in the context of a collaborative relationship.
- These individuals also have a responsibility to protect the public from incompetent professionals and to maintain the accepted ethics and standards of the profession.
- Unfortunately, it is possible that some students will not be capable of becoming competent professionals and therefore they will not be able to maintain the standards of the profession.
- In these cases, the program is obliged to take action to protect the public as well as the profession.

#### Student Awareness

Effective summer semester 2018, this policy will be included in the Student Handbook and a copy of the policy will be provided to all students during orientation prior to starting the program.

## Definition of Professional Impairment

Generally, professional impairment for a genetic counseling student can be defined as any combination of personal characteristics, emotional difficulties, life situations, and/or lack of competence (knowledge or skills) that interfere with a student's ability to function in a professional manner.

In determining whether a student is exhibiting professional impairment, the following criteria are considered (adapted from Lamb, et al, 1987):

- The problem is not restricted to one area of professional functioning.
- The student has difficulty acknowledging, understanding and/or addressing the problem when it is identified.
- The problem is not merely a reflection of the normal progression in competency and skills that is expected throughout training or specific deficits in knowledge or skills that can be rectified by academic or didactic training.
- The quality of clinical services delivered by the student is consistently negatively affected by the impairment/problem.
- The student's behavior does not change as a function of feedback, remediation efforts and/or time.

*Documents that describe standards of professional practice include, but are not limited to, the following:*

- Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling (ACGC) Practice Based Competencies
- National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC) Code of Ethics
- Practice Standards and Guidelines published by professional organizations (e.g. National Society of Genetic Counselors, American College of Medical Genetics, and American Society of Human Genetics as well as other related organizations)

*Examples of behaviors, which **may** be evidence of professional impairment, include the following. Please note that the following list contains examples, and is not intended to be definitive or all-inclusive.*

- A violation of professional standards or ethical codes.
- Inability or unwillingness to acquire and demonstrate professional skills at an acceptable level of competency as judged by a clinical supervisor.
- Serious deficits in the areas of knowledge and application of professional standards.
- Behaviors that can reasonably be predictive of poor future professional functioning, such as extensive tardiness in client record-keeping, poor compliance with supervisory requirements, carelessness in case preparation or letter writing, etc.
- Interpersonal behaviors and intrapersonal functioning that impair one's professional functioning, such as psychopathology, inability to exercise good judgment, poor interpersonal skills, and pervasive interpersonal problems.

## **Documentation of Professional Impairment**

1. Evaluations of the Program Director, Assistant/Associate Program Director, Medical Director, other teaching faculty.
  - a. Concerns will be communicated to student verbally and documented in writing.
  - b. Documentation of concerns must be signed by student, the program faculty member who raises concern as well as program director. These will be kept in confidential student file.
  - c. Written documentation should include specific recommendations/ remediation plan.
  
2. Clinical rotation evaluations
  - a. Clinical supervisors must communicate concerns to student and Program staff both verbally and in writing.
  - b. The clinical supervisor, student and program staff must sign written documentation of concerns; these should be embedded in written evaluation forms and/or provided as separate documents. These will be kept in confidential student files.
  - c. Written documentation should include specific recommendations/ remediation plan.

## **Possible Actions**

*This list contains examples and is not intended to be definitive. These actions are not hierarchal and need not be applied in all cases.*

- A formal reprimand in the form of a written document signed by both the student and program faculty.
- An unsatisfactory or incomplete grade in the clinical rotation course with the requirement that the rotation or the course be repeated.
- Requirement that the student complete additional supervised clinical rotations.
- Requirement that the student complete additional coursework targeted towards remediation of deficiencies.
- Leave of absence from the program or suspension from the clinical rotation.
- Formal dismissal from program.

## **Due Process: Evaluation of Professional Impairment**

1. There is a written policy on professional impairment that all students were given and made aware of at orientation prior to starting the program.
2. All students routinely receive evaluations verbally and in writing, including written notification of problems through periodic meetings with Program Director and/or Assistant/Associate Program Director as well as clinical supervision evaluation meetings.
3. Students may also receive in writing descriptions of specific incidences that may evidence professional impairment.

4. The student evidencing professional impairment will usually be given opportunity for remediation, with specific descriptions of problems, suggestions for remediation, time limits and consequences if remediation is not successful, all noted in writing. However, in egregious cases, immediate suspension or termination may be warranted.
5. When the student does not meet the requirements of remediation as previously specified, a judgment about whether the student may progress in the Genetic Counseling Program will be made by the Program Director and Assistant/Associate Program Director in consultation with appropriate school administrators.
6. When a judgment is made that serious professional impairment exists and that the consequences to the student are significant, the student may request a hearing in which the student may present his or her perception of the situation. The hearing will be convened by the Program Director and will include the Assistant/Associate Program Director as well as any faculty member or clinical supervisors who are involved in making judgments of serious professional impairment.
7. Within one week of the hearing, the student will receive written notification of the outcome of the hearing that will include opportunities for revision, if any, of the initial decision, the basis of the decision, and the opportunity to appeal.
8. After receiving written notification, the student may request an appeal within 14 days by filing a written appeal to the Chair of the Department of Human Genetics. (See the Pitt Public Health Academic Handbook for details regarding Probation and Dismissal and the Appeals Process).

**Reference:**

Lamb, D. H., Presser, N. R., Fost, K. S., Baum, M. C., Jackson, V. R., & Jarvis, P. A. (1987). Confronting professional impairment during the internship: Identification, due process, and remediation. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 18, 597-603.