

The 21st-Century Classroom

BY PAGE BRODY, MS

It sounded like a crazy idea: Grad school at 40, far away, with two small kids and a partner whose schedule is inflexible. But I couldn't shake the burning questions: "Do I see myself working in fundraising for the rest of my life? Can I support my family this way?" The answers were always no. With only a few training programs and traditional brick-and-mortar models, it seemed impossible. The first time I met a genetic counselor, I remember thinking, "This nice person has such an interesting job." This thought simmered for seven years.

Fast-forward to 2016 when a local college, Bay Path University, announced a new model for a genetic counseling training program: an online format with clinical internships around the country. Finally! The technology of the 21st century was being applied to a career of the 21st century! After all the GRE prep and anxious dreams, this traditional mom became a non-traditional student, and while I mourned not having the camaraderie of classmates and close support of professor relationships, I knew this online program was my only shot at the career I imagined.

I briefly met my lovely classmates and professors as classes

I believe the contributions of graduates from online programs will far outweigh any existing skepticism of this non-traditional training program format.

began. We immersed ourselves in thought-provoking discussions and role-playing using technology in clever and collaborative ways. I quickly realized we would get to know each other far better than I imagined. We texted about exam fears, had late-night calls after wrapping group projects, laughed through our bumbles in video role-playing, and encouraged each other when things got tough. The professors were equally responsive, with many of them replying to questions seven days a week. It was a welcome surprise to be wrong about how isolated I might feel in such a program.

We were offered the opportunity to receive in-depth training in tele-genetics, an exciting new direction for the field using a format similar to our online training. But a strange thing happened as I came up for air that first year and began meeting more genetic counselors. Although supportive, I met counselors who doubted whether an online program could be rigorous enough or provide

enough experience. I was puzzled. What were they basing that on? This is 2019, after all, when most people spend 20 to 30 hours per week online, and online degrees in areas like engineering, nursing, and psychology are widely available. Shouldn't we be clambering to set up online programs given the dire need for more genetic counselors and the volume of non-traditional students with rich experience to bring to the profession?

I believe the contributions of graduates from online programs will far outweigh any existing skepticism of this non-traditional training program format and prove these students can be great genetic counselors. Indeed, they already are. ●



Page Brody, MS, lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, and is a former campaign organizer and development director with a passion for patient-centered care. She relishes her titles of mom, wife, student, yogi, and community activator and consults for several organizations in her free time.