Biology major Hayley Walston spent a week in Chicago learning more about her chosen field, solidifying her career goals, and exploring a new city.

Briefly describe your internship experience.

“I spent a week in Chicago learning about the field of genetic counseling through the Northwestern University Graduate Program in Genetic Counseling Summer Internship. The internship was led by the Program Director and Associate Director of the graduate program. As an intern, I met with many genetic counselors in varying areas of the field, genetic counseling students, and other individuals involved in genetic counseling. I learned a lot and gained experience I wouldn't have been able to otherwise.”

What exactly is Genetic Counseling and why Northwestern?

“Genetic counseling is the process of interacting with a patient to gather information regarding their family history in order to estimate their own or their child's risk of inheriting a genetic disorder. Genetic counselors educate their patients about the vast array of genetic tests available, what they can and cannot reveal, help them to decide if they want the tests, and explain the results, all while supporting the patient and their family. I chose to apply to an internship at Northwestern because I am interested in going to school there. I was initially drawn to Northwestern because of their dual degree program in Genetic Counseling and Medical Humanities and Bioethics.”
How did you find out about this opportunity?

“I found this internship online while researching graduate schools, and Cheryl Minnick at Internship Services helped me prepare my application. I took on this internship because I am very interested in pursuing genetic counseling as a career and wanted to learn more about it, as well as the program at Northwestern.”

How competitive was the program and what was the application like?

“The application process was very straightforward. All they required was an official college transcript and a short essay describing your interest and how the internship would benefit you. About 60 students applied and 16 were selected.”

What types of activities did you do as part of your internship?

“We met with many people involved with various areas of the field, including genetic counselors working in the three major areas of genetic counseling: pediatrics, prenatal, and cancer. We spoke with counselors who work in more specialized fields, such as cardiovascular, and others who have more non-traditional roles working in labs. As interns we really got to pick their brains about anything and everything, which was extremely helpful. Recent graduates of the Northwestern program discussed the application and interview process with us, while providing some useful tips. We watched a few mock counseling sessions to get a feel for how a session generally works. We also took a field trip to Misericordia, which is a wonderful housing community for people with developmental disabilities.”

Did you feel that the week timeframe was long enough?

“This internship is really intended for educating students about genetic counseling so they can make an informed decision about their future. This was definitely accomplished in the one week time frame.”

What would you say was the most rewarding part of the internship program?

“For me, the most rewarding part was realizing just how important genetic counselors are and how much they can help people. The counseling side is just as important as the genetics. People go to genetic counselors for guidance, and counselors have a great opportunity to use their knowledge in
order to help people make often difficult decisions. As science and technology advances, genetic counselors will only become more important.”

**Did you enjoy being in Chicago?**

“I loved the internship experience itself, but being in the city of Chicago was definitely exciting to me. During our down time, we were able to explore the city and go to places like Millennium Park and Navy Pier. I enjoyed being somewhere that is rather different than what I am used to living in Montana.”

**How has participating in this internship impacted your career goals?**

“I now feel more confident and excited about my future and career path. I realize now how much more I can do if I pursue a degree in genetic counseling. And I never saw myself as a city person before, but I think I would actually enjoy city life.”

**What was the biggest challenge you faced and how did you overcome it?**

“The biggest obstacle was probably finding a way to make the trip affordable. It is not easy to find a cheap place to stay in Chicago. I ended up staying in a hostel and taking a 25 minute subway ride to the campus every day. This only enhanced my trip though, because I got to meet people from all over the world and explore a different area of the city. Besides the financial cost, navigating the city was sometimes a challenge and the internship met different places so we were always trying to figure out how to get somewhere new.”

**What advice do you have for other students thinking about pursuing similar experiences?**

“My biggest piece of advice would be to just go for it. Fill out that application, don't be afraid to ask for help, and do what you can to make it work. In my experience, the effort is well worth it. The worst that will happen is you won't be accepted, and if you are, you will be opening some large doors for yourself.”