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What should applicants be working on at this stage in the application process? (April-June)

Probably one of the most important things for applicants to work on at this point is getting letters of recommendations in order and to ask early. This includes planning out what rotations to do (if you're planning on getting letters from them, it's good ask at least 4-6 weeks before the deadline) and fostering and maintaining relationships with current mentors (I found time to spend a few extra afternoons in clinic with my mentor even while I was on other rotations). In addition, I updated my CV and started working on a rough draft of my personal statement (now autobiographical statement and additional questions) so that I could provide both for my letter writers to reference. Another tip is to jot down impactful and/or memorable patient encounters that you may have during your Ophthalmology electives and other clinical rotations – I did so and it definitely came in handy when prepping for interviews.

How did you find your mentors? Can you give us practical tips on successfully getting to know mentors better?

I ultimately decided to work with the mentors that I did after talking to upperclassmen and recently graduated students – they're great resources for recommending mentors with a strong track-record when it comes to working with medical students. Luckily, my mentors turned out to be phenomenal ophthalmologists who were passionate about clinical teaching and also strong medical student advocates. Even though the relationships I had with them started out in research capacities, I was proactive about requesting to spend time with them regularly in the clinic and OR. It can be hard to get to know mentors in a natural way and to show different qualities and facets of yourself, but by increasing facetime and engaging in conversation during clinic, my mentors and I naturally got to know each other better on both professional and personal levels.

How did you approach the personal statement? Does it have to be about interest in Ophthalmology?

I knew how difficult it would be to successfully pull off writing a unique and creative personal statement that stood out from the thousands of others, so I just focused on writing something that felt true to me and was sincere. It certainly doesn't have to be "why ophthalmology" – programs want to learn more about you as an individual and not about why ophthalmology is the best specialty to go into (they know that already!). That being said, in my personal statement I did tie in how I came to decide on ophthalmology, but my interest in the field complemented the overall narrative and certainly was not the central focus.

Any pearls on how to succeed during Ophthalmology clerkships?

Ophthalmology rotations can be intimidating since the field is so procedural, and it may feel like you aren't actively contributing to patient care. It's important to remember that most medical students are not proficient with performing an ophthalmic exam and are not familiar with the majority of diagnoses in the specialty. Attendings are also aware of this! That being said, you can still prepare for your clerkships by doing some reading of common medical conditions in each sub-specialty and becoming familiar with the basic terminology (OphthoBook and EyeGuru are good resources to start with!). When in clinic, try to find ways to be an active part of the team, such as assisting with clinic workflow, being engaged and asking insightful questions, and seizing opportunities to work on those exam skills.

How many Ophthalmology recommendation letters did you obtain? Can you share the timeline of when you asked, how often you reminded letter writers, and when the letter writers submitted them to SF match?

Two ophthalmology letters and one IM letter. For my ophthalmology letters, I formally asked about two months before the deadline. I checked in at the one-month mark and then again at two weeks, and both had the letter uploaded one week before the deadline.

What do you feel like were the biggest strengths of your application? What do you feel like were your biggest weaknesses? (How were you also able to overcome these weaknesses?)

My letters of recommendations were probably the biggest strength of my application – I developed strong, long-term relationships with ophthalmology mentors who could speak to my qualities and skills in different settings, and received comments on the strength of my letters during most of my interviews. Research was also another strength, since I had taken a research year and was involved in ophthalmology research fairly early on in medical school.

In terms of weaknesses – I attended a small and nontraditional medical school that didn't have clinical grades, which was probably a disadvantage when program directors were doing an initial review of applications. To somewhat combat this, I had competitive scores for STEP 1/2 and had an IM letter that spoke to my performance on inpatient rotations (working on a team, general medical knowledge, interpersonal skills, etc).

What were you the most afraid of at the start of the application journey?

Ophthalmology continues to get more and more competitive, and there's only so much that's within an applicant's control. In the back of my mind there was the fear that my application would be overlooked, as well as uncertainty when it came to gauging how competitive I was as an applicant. Also, I was couples matching with my partner, who was applying through the NRMP match, and we were definitely worried about the prospect of not matching within the same geographic location.

Did you send letters of interests prior to receiving interviews or after the first wave of interviews came out? Do you believe this helped?

Because I was couples matching, before the first wave of interviews came out I emailed a few programs that he had already received interviews at. I do think it helped with receiving a few more interviews, especially for some programs that I had no geographic ties to.

Side note: For those who will also be couples matching in the upcoming cycle, I'd be happy to share the email template that I used and/or answer any specific questions you may have!

Did you have mentors reach out to programs on your behalf to obtain more interviews?

I did not. However, I did get one interview at a program because the PD for my partner's residency offered to reach out to the ophthalmology PD on my behalf after his interview.

Any tips for virtual interviewing?

The usual suggestions for having a good interview set-up (webcam, ethernet cable, good lighting, clean background, etc) are important because it does affect the first impression interviewers have of applicants. I would also recommend doing a mock interview virtually – I got helpful feedback on how I came across through a screen and on my general interview set-up.

Some specific strategies I used during interviews:

- I personally found it awkward initially to be looking straight into the camera during interviews, so I made the video screen as small as possible and placed it under my camera so that, to the interviewer, it seemed like I was looking into the camera and making eye-contact during the interview even when I was looking at the video screen.
- Along the same lines, I had a sticky note with a list of questions prepared and near my camera to quickly reference so that I didn't have to look down at my notes.
- I took advantage of breaks to turn my camera off and walk around/grab some snacks – the interview days can get long and you want to stay as energized as possible for the actual interviews.

Did you send a letter of interest?

I did send a letter of intent to my top choice. One of my mentors also offered to reach out to the program on my behalf.

Looking back, what are three things throughout the application process that you believe helped you succeed?

1. Starting early. Because I started working on the application material early on and knew what would be required for the process by the time application season came around, there wasn't anything that I was scrambling to complete. I had the time to revisit my application multiple times with fresh eyes, which helped me catch some errors and figure out what was the best way to present the material. Starting early and being prepared was also something that my letter writers appreciated.
2. Getting help from others. There are a lot of people around you who are happy to help and provide their expertise – utilize them! I sought advice from mentors, medical school advisors, residents, recently graduated students, and so on. I also had multiple people review my application material and did mock interviews with faculty members.
3. Decompress. I scheduled something fun to do with my partner and friends on a regular basis, which was absolutely critical in maintaining my spirits and keeping me energized through the interview season.

Would you be interested in offering advice to applicants this upcoming cycle in a one-on-one format?

Yes, absolutely! Please feel free to DM me on Twitter with any questions.