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

Getting more face-time with letter of recommendation writers via additional rotations and finishing up research projects. It can help to start the personal statement as early as possible, since it may take multiple iterations until you find the final version.

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

I initially found mentors who's research I found interesting and reached out to them to work on research projects. Once I had a good research relationship with mentors, I tried to plan my clinical rotations so that I would rotate with them too.

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

I wrote four paragraphs: 1 on my interest in ophthalmology, 2 on important experiences, and 1 on how my experiences prepared me to be a strong resident. From my first draft to my final draft, the biggest changes I made were to pick a smaller number of experiences and describe them in more specific detail.

Any pearls on how to succeed during Ophthalmology clerkships?

I found Tim Root's OphthoBook very useful. There is also an Anki deck that someone posted on reddit based on this book, which I used (www.reddit.com/r/medschoolanki/comments/gtmnip/tim_roots_ophtho_book_deck/). Aside from that, I would read about specific disease and surgical procedures prior to going to clinic or the OR. Given that there may be less active participation in clinical care as a medical student on ophthalmology in comparison to other rotations, keeping up to date with some landmark or recent studies was a good way to show that I was engaged and eager to learn. I mainly did this via The Lens (LensOphthalmology.com).

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?

I did my MPH between my 3rd and 4th year of medical school, and I asked for each of my letters prior to my MPH. I had 2 ophthalmology letter writers and one internal medicine writer, each of whom I initially asked for the letter soon after working with them. I sent reminder emails 3 months and 1 month before the "due date." The due date I mentioned to them was 2 weeks before the

application due date, so all of them were in on time with some leeway.

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?)

Strengths included a strong academic record with good grades, scores, and publications. One weakness was that I had spent my whole life in the Mid-West and hoped to move to a larger city on one of the coasts for residency. I had mentors reach out to a small handful of my favorite programs where I had no apparent geographical connections to explain my interest in the program and the location. However, I'm not sure how much this helped vs didn't matter.

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

I was very apprehensive about deciding how many programs to apply to. I got the best advice on this from my school's ophthalmology applicant advisor, a faculty member who is very familiar with my application and the application process. Other mentors who only mentor a couple students at a time were not sure about how to advise on this question.

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

I did not, however I did personalize each of my application essays. Anecdotally, I've talked to people who both did and didn't personalize their essays, all of whom got a lot of great interviews.

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

I had mentors with connections send personalized emails to a small handful of my top choices. I asked my mentor to include specific info on why I was interested in each that specific program. I got interviews at all but one of the programs my mentors reached out to, but it is hard to know how much of a difference this made since I also got interviews at a similar proportion of other programs in the same "tier".

Any tips for virtual interviewing?

Remember to smile! I tended to think that a plain background worked best (I just had a white wall with one plant at the edge of my screen). Interviewers commented positively on my background. It is also good for lighting if the wall behind you is well-lit, so I sat with the back of my chair directly against the wall so my ring light would illuminate the wall well. Another thing I found helpful was to make the zoom window as small as possible and center it just under your webcam, so that when you are looking at the interviewers, you are also

looking into the camera. I'm also an advocate for wearing sweatpants during virtual interviews.

Did you send a letter of interest?

Yes, but I sent it just a week before programs' rank lists were due, and I had heard that many rank lists were finalized before that time. If you know what your first choice is, it would be good to send one early! On the other hand, not sending one gives you more flexibility to change your list when you get new information (e.g. at in person second looks).

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

1. Frequent discussions with as many mentors as possible (some close, some less close mentors). 2. Reaching out to current residents to learn more about the inside scoop at each program I was strongly considering. 3. Creating a spreadsheet where you can write down brief descriptions of your thoughts on various aspects of a program (e.g. clinical volume, clinical complexity, research opportunities, culture, location, etc.). I kept a spreadsheet with both numerical grading and a written description for several of these types of factors, and I found that the written descriptions were more helpful.

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

Yes!