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

My process was a little bit different than others going into the summer before applications because I was planning to do a venture capital internship as a part of my MBA. Because I knew I would be busy over the summer, I set out to get ahead on application materials like my personal statement, letters of recommendation, and my activities section. I would also prioritize wrapping up any outstanding research projects. The publication process can really drag on and you want to be able to hit that “Published” button on your app! I would also suggest that you begin to take networking seriously – ophthalmology is a small field and relationships really can help secure interviews.

Do you have any advice for applicants that are trying to “couple’s match”?

Navigating the SF Match process with a partner is incredibly frustrating, and I am sincerely sorry if you are going through that this cycle. My girlfriend (she applied into orthopedic surgery) and I went through it this year and we really wish there had been more guidance for us. Whenever I spoke with mentors about this, the typical response was: “Yeah, that’s not great....” Unfortunately, there is no way to officially couple’s match through SF Match, so you have to get a little creative to give yourselves the best chance of staying together. I suggest reaching out to program directors as soon as you secure an interview with a program and asking them to help get your partner an interview at that school as well. I felt a little uncomfortable doing this initially, but everyone was very accommodating and did their best to help us out – they’re all truly kind people who genuinely want things to work out for you. In the end, I didn’t rank certain programs because my girlfriend didn’t get an interview at that school. So truly it’s in the best interest of the program directors to help your partner get an interview because you won’t actually consider a program unless your significant other also has a shot there. Sadly, orthopedic surgery doesn’t release interview invites until late November and ophthalmology interview invites were all sent out by that time, so this really only worked in one direction for us.

The trickiest part of couple’s matching is not being able to really lean on your home department if there is somewhere else you would like to match. Because our best chance of staying together was for each of us to stay at NYU (fortunately we both love our home programs), we had to keep that door as open as possible. So, we each did our best to avoid sending too strong of a signal that we were interested in leaving, which obviously limited our ability to fully leverage our network. I am more than happy to speak with you about navigating the pseudo-couple’s match to give you and your partner the best shot!

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

The faculty at NYU have always been incredibly approachable and open to mentoring. I've also been very fortunate to find mentors at conferences and through my involvement with industry. A common misstep in networking is making the relationship too transactional. Don't just email your mentors when you need something, but also try to build a more collegial relationship – for example, you could shoot them a congratulatory email when they publish a paper or receive an award.

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

The personal statement is your chance to show programs who you are, where you come from, and what drives you. If your activities section is the *What* of the application, your personal statement is your *Why*. In my essay, I used three stories from throughout my life which helped provide context for the rest of my application. Your stories do not need to be ophthalmic in nature but try to create a coherent story that explains your interest in ophthalmology and why you will be a talented, empathetic eye surgeon. Honestly, most of our applications look relatively the same – take advantage of the personal statement to differentiate yourself and leave reviewers wanting to learn more about you. We got thrown a curveball this past cycle with the introduction of the new “prompt style” essays. Personally, I liked this addition a lot because it gives you more opportunities to showcase how amazing and resilient you are!

Any pearls on how to succeed during Ophthalmology clerkships?

The ophthalmology clerkships were obviously my favorite rotations in medical school, but they can also be pretty frustrating. Some attendings will ask you maybe one pimp question and spend the rest of the day explaining things to you (the same things that you spent all night studying in hopes of impressing them), while others will ask you questions that even the fellows do not know the answers to. Unfortunately, that's just how it goes sometimes. But the key to succeeding really boils down to showing enthusiasm and initiative. Demonstrate that you chart-reviewed for clinic by asking high-level, thoughtful questions about a specific pathology. Practice your exam skills. And, of course, try not to annoy anyone!

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 used two ophthalmology letters and one from an internal medicine attending. I wanted to be able to show that people outside of ophthalmology enjoyed working with me and the evaluation this attending wrote me during my clerkship was incredibly flattering. To jog his memory, I actually sent a copy of his evaluation of me when I asked if he would write my LOR.

One of my ophthalmology letters was from our department chair and the other was from a more junior attending. I chose the younger attending over bigger names because we had spent significant time together in the clinic and OR – I think a strong letter from a junior faculty beats a boring letter from a big name. All of my letter writers submitted within a few weeks of asking without any follow-up from me.

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?)

I think my greatest strengths were my research and my extracurriculars. I say that because, at a certain level, we are all pretty much equivalent academically. I would say that, above a threshold, interview committees don't give too much weight to board scores, so your extracurriculars really need to stand out. In my own application, I think most places I interviewed with were really interested in my work with biotech startups and venture capital. But I also believe this worked against me at some of the more purely academic programs. To alleviate the potential concern that I may just go work at McKinsey or Allergan after residency (this does happen sometimes), I did my best to showcase those activities through a clinical lens and demonstrate how they would contribute to making me a well-rounded eye surgeon. Whatever your "thing" is, do your best to tie it into clinical practice.

Regarding addressing any weakness or failure in your application, find a way to spin the story into a positive or a lesson learned. It demonstrates that you are a thoughtful, self-aware individual and redirects attention away from the shortcoming. At some point in our careers, we all fail or encounter complications – try to show that you're the type of person who will use these opportunities to learn and grow.

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

I think something we all deal with at some level is a low-grade sense of insecurity. Deep down, I knew I had a competitive application but it's hard to shake the "What if I don't match" mentality. You should be proud of what you've accomplished and go into the cycle with confidence.

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 didn't send any cold LOI's but I did lean on my network to help secure interviews. If you've worked with someone before or met them at a conference, I think it is totally worth reaching out. People love helping mentees out! But I don't see the harm in sending letters – the worst possible outcome is you don't receive an interview. If you are going to send an LOI, try to be as genuine as possible and communicate explicitly why you want to train at *their* program.

Any tips for virtual interviewing?

Make sure you have a clean background and buy yourself a cheap ring light. I pulled my desk out and had a blank white wall behind me. Some of the other applicants had pictures or plants in the background, I don't think there's any harm in that. Pro tip: During interviews, make the zoom window small and place it directly below the camera at the top of your laptop screen so that it looks as if you are making eye contact.

Did you send a letter of intent?

I did send one letter of intent to my #1 program. I think it is worth doing but be sure to only do this for one program – it's a small field and people talk.

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

1. Leaning on my network of mentors and strong letters of recommendation. Relationships mean a lot in this field.
2. Having a cohesive, compelling story and clearly communicating my career goals and who I am outside of medicine.
3. I researched my interviewers and crafted individualized, thoughtful comments/questions to help me relate to them on a deeper level. Show genuine interest in who you are speaking with and don't just recite lines from your CV. Interviews should be fun!

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

I'd be happy to. In particular, if there are any questions about couple's matching or how to discuss the MD/MBA in their applications.