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

Finishing up research projects that may be submitted for publication, or starting short projects like case reports in order to add to the research section of your CV. Also, working with mentors in clinic that you would like to ask for letters of recommendation is key at this stage so that you can have a great longitudinal relationship with them!

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

I found my mentors through discussing my research and clinical interests with leadership in the department – a key go-to person is often the faculty member in charge of medical student education, who can connect you to the right people! I personally scheduled a “special elective” in March of my third year where I worked closely with my mentors in clinic so that I could develop better relationships with them, and this helped me have great letters, too!

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

This year, our personal statements were comprised of an “autobiography” and a choice of 2 out of 4 short answer (one to two paragraph) questions. I approached the autobiography in a way that told my unique story while weaving in my interest in ophthalmology throughout. It should be honest and really convey who *you* are – do not be afraid to be vulnerable, it truly pays off to tell your authentic story and be yourself!

Any pearls on how to succeed during Ophthalmology clerkships?

Be prepared for each day in clinic – read up about the patients you will be seeing that day and come up with questions you can ask about each patient. This shows that you are engaged and interested. Once you are comfortable enough, offer to “work up” patients – this will help you hone your skills and further demonstrates your dedication to the field! It also helps the technicians and residents out with their workload, which is an added bonus!

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 SE match?

I had two ophthalmology letters and one letter from my general surgery clerkship. I asked for my letters at the end of March because I was in clinic with my mentors and it felt organic to ask then, but I asked again in early July as well as a reminder. I also reminded my surgery letter-writer once in mid-August. All were submitted by the end of August.

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: letters of recommendation and USMLE scores. These two facets of my application were talked about at interviews often. Having great relationships with my mentors and being dedicated to USMLE studying were both key for my success!

Weaknesses: presentations/abstracts. While I had manuscripts published, I only had one abstract selected for poster presentation and did not attend any conferences in person. I was able to be successful still because of my other application strengths and because my letter-writers were well connected, which helped me with networking I may have been able to do at conferences.

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

I was the only person at my medical school applying ophthalmology this cycle. I was worried about not matching because I truly had no comparison or benchmark to show how competitive I was. Again, having great mentors helped me with this – I was able to talk openly about programs I was interested in and have meaningful discussions about what was important to me and what would ensure my success in the match.

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 letters of interest at all during the application cycle. I sent thank you e-mails following interviews, which allowed me to communicate with program leadership prior to rank lists.

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

One of my mentors reached out to a program prior to my interview to convey my interest, but I did not have mentors reach out in order to obtain interviews.

Any tips for virtual interviewing?

Have a comfortable and quiet space – I cannot emphasize the comfort part of this enough. You will be spending hours in front of your computer in this room, so make sure that you feel good about the space you are in! Make sure you have good lighting and not too much going on in the background as well.

Did you send a letter of interest?

No, I did not send a letter of interest.

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

First, my relationship with my mentors and with the faculty in my department. I felt very supported by people who truly wanted me to succeed. Second, I was honest about who I was from the application to the interviews. While it sounds cliché, really being myself was important to feeling comfortable and confident in the interview and rank list process. Third, feeling connected to the community of applicants (I achieved this through twitter mainly!) helped me feel less alone in the process and gave me an outlet to vent about this incredibly stressful and exciting time.

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

Yes, definitely! Mentorship and support from your peers are so crucial and I am more than happy to help anyone interested succeed in this amazing field!