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

Consider if you want to do an away rotation(s) and figuring out if it'll be financially feasible/how you can secure funding to complete one if you do. A specific thing you can do to smooth the process over is having the VSAS immunization form completed and up to date.

This is also the perfect time to reach out to mentors and indicate that you're going through with the process of applying into ophthalmology and rounding up your letters of recommendation.

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

I'm fortunate to have trained at an institution with a robust ophthalmology department. I was introduced to one of my letter writers during my 1st year and worked on a research project with them over the course of my time in med school. I also scrubbed in with them in the OR quite a bit during 4th year. I met others through residents and other faculty who knew about my interest in ophthalmology and specifically glaucoma.

We also have a student ophthalmology clinic at Sinai that we run with the help of residents and attendings. This was a fantastic way to meet mentors.

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

I only went through 2 major drafts of my autobiographical sketch (aka PS). My first was well over the 500 word limit so I pared it down with the help of a mentor and worked the other things I wanted to write about into the 2 250 word short answer prompts that we had to submit as well. I

wrote a little bit about my identity as a Nigerian-American, a little bit about my interest in ophthalmology (family history, experience in student clinic), and tied my values into the narrative.

I asked 2 mentors to look over the final draft as well as my mom, all of whom I really trust.

Any pearls on how to succeed during Ophthalmology clerkships?

Everybody has different levels of exposure to clinical ophthalmology so don't be afraid to say you don't know. I'm sure everyone's already been recommended Tim Root's Ophthobook, but it's a great entry-level resource to review. EyeWiki is another great resource for specific pathology and procedures that you encounter during clinic and OR days. Just be genuine and curious and you'll do great!

If you're a bit more comfortable with things like refracting, using a slit lamp, and doing a basic dilated exam and whoever you're with is amenable to it, offer to get lower acuity patients started in a different room to help keep clinic moving. I think this helped me stand out during my ophtho rotations but it isn't at all necessary or expected of you.

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 had 2 letters from ophthalmologists and 1 from a vascular surgeon who I got along with really well during my surgery clerkship. I asked my 3 letter writers between the months of June and August. I only had to follow up with one writer a couple of times but they clearly understood the deadline and got it to me before it.

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

Strengths: my activities and undergraduate background. I included 5 activities that are particularly important to me and wrote a line or 2 about each. Multiple interviewers across all my programs spent a lot of time talking with me about my activities. Half of 2 of my PD interviews were spent talking about the NYT crossword. I even got to talk with a PD about our mutual interest in gaming! Every interviewer across the board was interested in the fact that I was a German major in undergrad and lived in Germany for a year so I got really used to talking about that.

Weaknesses: clinical grade in medicine, research. I got a P in medicine despite good feedback. I was only explicitly asked about it at 1 program and asked to explain why I think it panned out that way. Medicine was my first clerkship so my understanding of it was I wasn't really adjusted to being a medical student in a clinical setting. There was a disconnect between the verbal feedback I'd received and the grade that I ultimately got but I didn't lose much sleep over it. As for research I had 1 finished 1st author manuscript in ophthalmology, another in process, and then a couple projects still in data collection. I was prepared to talk about any of the projects I had listed in a meaningful way. This isn't strictly a weakness but being a hardcore physician scientist isn't my goal so I was at peace with where my research experience stood.

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

This is a tough one. Everyone has the fear of going unmatched and I guess this was probably my worst fear throughout the cycle. I really didn't have a contingency plan if I didn't match into ophthalmology. I think I would've been doing myself a favor if I had been more thoughtful about that potential outcome. I definitely would've

reapplied but I'm unsure of the specific path I would've taken.

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 sent out 3 in total all after the initial wave of interviews. Each of these programs had a handful of invites (~5) remaining that they were sitting on. I have no clue if they actually helped or not but I did get an interview after sending one. It was actually penned to the program I matched at! I was genuinely interested in having the opportunity to train at Montefiore and it was among my top choices considering my priorities.

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

I didn't explicitly ask mentors to help with this. I did reach out to a mentor after the first day that invites could go out because I received 0 that day and was freaked out. They told me to calm down and see how things play out over that week and they were definitely right about chilling out.

Any tips for virtual interviewing?

Have a nice desk light/light source so that your face comes out well-defined! I also used a headset for all of my interviews. I received a lot of positive comments about how clear I sounded.

I did 1 mock interview with a mentor who was a former PD and after she told me I was ready I didn't overdo it.

As for determining fit, if something about a program or someone comes through in a positive way over zoom, do not ignore it. I valued fit/feel over rank/prestige.

Did you send a letter of interest?

I did not. I think it's totally okay to send one if it will help you feel that you've done all you can for yourself.

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

Having a friend to talk to who was going through the same thing. We'd hype each other up before interviews, talk about cool or not-so-cool stuff we encountered along the way, and were a great venting resource for each other.

Having interests outside of ophthalmology. While there's nothing else I could imagine myself doing within medicine, I still exist as a person outside of medicine. The majority of my interviews were spent talking about crossword, German, and cinnamon rolls. Honorable mention to Naija Jollof rice.

Having time off from rotations Nov-early Jan to specifically focus on interviewing. Having a period of time where interviewing was my only responsibility worked really well for me. That did mean having 2 required rotations after interviewing, unfortunately.

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

I don't mind at all, I'm online often!