

## **Considerations for Ophthalmology as a Medical Student at Columbia**

### **Pre-Clinical Years**

#### **Molecular Mechanisms (First Semester)**

Congratulations on beginning medical school and starting a career in medicine!

Beginning medical school can be overwhelming at first, so we don't recommend starting with too much on your plate.

If, and only if, you feel relatively well adjusted you can consider doing the following:

- Join the Ophthalmology Interest Group (OIG) listserv! Research and interesting opportunities are often sent out through this listserv!
- Shadow clinicians through the OIG spreadsheet or by contacting OIG for resident clinic shadowing, which is a great way to get exposure to the specialty.
- Check out our Columbia Ophthalmology YouTube Channel to see the types of surgeries that are performed by our surgeons
  - [Columbia Ophthalmology - YouTube](#)
- Follow our Columbia Ophthalmology Instagram Pages to get a sense of who we are and what we do
  - @columbiaophthalmology
  - @columbiaeyeresidents
- Explore research opportunities:
  - Are you interested in basic, translational, or clinical research?
  - Explore the [Columbiaeye.org](#) website to identify faculty and research interests that might be appealing.
  - Consider connecting with upperclassmen to see which research faculty have experience mentoring medical students. They may also have projects they need help with which is a great way to jumpstart research in ophthalmology!
  - You can also reach out to the Director of Medical Student Education in Ophthalmology with any potential questions or difficulties navigating the different options.

## **BHD (The Rest of Preclinical)**

By BHD, you will likely be more comfortable and can further explore ophthalmology. This would be the time to start exploring research opportunities and getting to know ophthalmology better.

Columbia's summer research program often allows you to get funded for your M1 summer.

### Things to be thinking about:

- Shadowing:
  - Am I still interested in Ophthalmology?
  - Does the day-to-day practice of it seem interesting?
  - Does the balance between surgery and clinic fit what I am looking for?
- Look out for any events that OIG hosts such as Slit Lamp Workshops or Cataract Surgery Simulation Labs!
- Research:
  - Have I found a research mentor?
  - Have I identified topics that are interesting to me?
  - Have I shadowed residents and attendings?
- As with all things, a holistic approach is applied to evaluating Ophthalmology applicants, so please don't stop doing any of the free clinics, clubs, and other projects you are doing! You would be surprised how many times these come up during interviews later on.

## **Major Clinical Year (MCY)**

### **On Your First Rotation**

Welcome to your first rotation on MCY! Regardless of what rotation you have first, it is likely that you will be fairly occupied for the first month. This can be a challenging month, so do not feel as if you need to be as productive outside of your clinical requirements.

### Things to be thinking about:

- Do I like the current specialty I am in? How does it compare to Ophthalmology?
- Focus on adjusting to the hospital and learning how to study on MCY!

## The Cadence of Clinical Rotations

You will have busier and lighter clerkship rotations. On busier clinical rotations (i.e. Surgery, Internal Medicine, etc.) you may find it difficult to continue research or explore Ophthalmology during this time. Your mentors will understand that this is a challenging time as well! Just make sure to keep the line of communication open and be transparent about research timing needs. Take advantage of rotations with more time and bandwidth to keep projects going.

### Things to be thinking about:

- Doing well on clinical rotations!
- Continue assessing how the current clinical rotations you are on compare to Ophthalmology.
- Communicate current schedule with mentors.
  - Wrap up projects when appropriate – can the work be submitted to a conference? Can it be published?
  - Start new projects as bandwidth allows

## **Electives (D&I)**

### **Early / Pre-D&I**

If you have not already met with the Medical Student Director and/or Residency Program Director, now would be a good time to go over anticipated schedules and away rotations. This is also a useful way to check in and make sure you are on track to be a competitive applicant. You will likely also schedule a meeting with the Chair of Ophthalmology early in the D&I year.

### An example of D&I Schedule might be...

January – March: Dedicated STEP Studying	August: Scholarly Project #2, SF Match Application Due
April: Scholarly Project #1	
May: Home Ophthalmology Rotation	September: Scholarly Project #3
June: Away Rotation #1	October: Elective
July: Away Rotation #2	November: Interview Month
	December: Scholarly Project #

### Things to be thinking about (December -> February):

- Have I met with an Ophthalmology Advisor to discuss my schedule?
- Have I identified and started the process for beginning my scholarly project? [see section on Scholarly Projects]
- Have I identified potential institutions to complete my away rotations? [see section on Away Rotations]
- Have I signed up for the mandatory meeting for all Ophthalmology Applicants, usually in March/April (OIG will send an email)?

### **Scholarly Projects**

While Columbia offers multiple avenues for the scholarly project, as an Ophthalmology applicant it is generally recommended that you consider a project in Ophthalmology. You can choose to continue with current mentors/projects or begin a new one! If you anticipate having to submit IRB / obtain approvals, you should start earlier rather than later. These processes may take a long time. We recommend starting this process as soon as possible in D&I so you can hit the ground running during your first Scholarly Project month. A total of four Scholarly Project months are required for you to graduate. There are exceptions to this requirement if you are on an MD/PhD track, taking a research year, or completing a different secondary degree. Please check with the relevant administrators as these requirements may change year to year. Ideally a scholarly project will be completed and submitted for publication prior to your SF Match application submission.

### Things to be thinking about:

- What projects would I be interested in for my Scholarly Project?
  - Have I identified a mentor / topic area?
  - Do I need an IRB application?
- Does the project timeline line up with the goals I have for submission?

Side Note: If you had trouble starting new projects in Ophthalmology or staying connected during your MCY time, please do not feel bad at all! You are not “behind”, and this is often a common situation that students encounter. Your commitment to doing well on your clerkships was likely more important.

### **Away Rotations**

Away rotations are generally recommended for ophthalmology applicants. There are a couple of criteria you may want to consider for away rotations:

- (1) Geographic Location / Ties to the Region
- (2) Program Training
- (3) Matched competitiveness of Program and your Application

(4) Structure of the away rotation (new person every day, paired with attending, or resident clinic / emergency department).

Speaking with your ophthalmology advisor may help you assess your standing and determine which away rotations may have the highest yield for you. At Columbia, you must complete a home comprehensive ophthalmology rotation prior to attending an away rotation. This is to maximize your chances of making the best impression possible at your away institution.

VSLO opens early January for applications to be sent to other institutions. The recommendation is to apply as soon as possible as some programs may be first come first served. SOME INSTITUTIONS DO NOT USE VSLO. If there is a particular institution you do not see they may not have published their application yet or may use an alternative away application system to VSLO.

The recommendation is that you aim to complete 1-2 away rotations. In the past few years, away rotations have become increasingly competitive. We recommend that you apply for 2-3 potential away rotations for every month you are considering rotating. Away rotations ideally will be completed prior to your SF Match application, but there may be benefits in September if there are no other options.

Remember that an away rotation is a month-long interview! You are there to show the best version of yourself and see if the institution is a good fit for you. You may not be guaranteed an interview even if you completed an away rotation at the institution.

You may need the following in order to apply:

- Personal Statement
- Why X institution Essay
- Transcript
- STEP 1 and/or 2 Scores
- Recommendation Letter(s)
- Various immunizations/background checks depending on state/institution

Things to be thinking about:

- Have I spoken with a mentor/advisor regarding my potential away rotation sites?
- Am I ready to apply immediately/soon after the application may open?
- Am I hearing back from programs at appropriate timelines or should I consider sending additional applications?

### **Dedicated Period (STEP 1 and 2)**

Columbia grants up to three months of dedicated studying time for your STEP exams. Some people choose to use the three months consecutively while others opt to break up the months



by using a less-intense elective or scholarly project time. Ophthalmology applicants generally have high STEP 2 scores, and it is worth investing the time to achieve a great score for your application. If you anticipate requiring more time you may consider taking a scholarly project month earlier in order to simultaneously consider studying. Make sure, however, to keep in mind the timeline for away rotations and the SF match application deadline.

### **Research Year**

Research years may be a useful and exciting opportunity for certain applicants; it is not required for application. The general recommendation is to consider taking a research year if you are interested in doing so. A productive research year can help demonstrate investment in the field. This year can also help supplement a lack of research on your application. However, an unproductive research year may harm your application. Speak with the Medical Student Director or Program Director to further explore this topic if you are interested.

### **SF Match Application**

The SF Match application is the system that Ophthalmology applicants use for the residency match process. The application is separate and differs from the ERAS application, which is utilized for the majority of other medical specialties. One significant difference is that it opens on average a month earlier than the ERAS application. The SF Match website is an important resource for application guidance, timeline, preparation and submission.

Apply to residency programs with the same mindset of applying to college: apply to reach, target and safety programs. You will typically apply to 60-80 programs but will hope to receive invitations to at least 8 programs. There is an annual invitation cap that is set nationally.

While the exact dates for the application vary, the application typically opens in early July. The first date programs can typically receive applications is early September. Just like medical school applications, it is crucial that you get your application in before this date. You may edit some parts of your application after your date, but programs may have already downloaded and printed the applications and printed them for review.

Perhaps the biggest tip for this process is to stay in touch with your ophthalmology mentors. They have many years of experience helping students navigate this complex process. However, they can only help you if they are aware of your situation.

### **Personal Statement:**

The personal statement is one of the core parts of your SF Match application. This is a chance to frame your application and journey to ophthalmology. While the personal statement may not “make” your application, it can certainly “break” it. Spelling, grammar, and style are critical. Represent yourself authentically and honestly. Remember that you do not know who is reading your statement at the other end.

At this time, your personal statement will consist of a 500-word autobiographical sketch and 2 short essays (250 words, chosen from several available prompts). Additional instructions and prompts can be found on the SF Match application website.

Things to be thinking about:

- Does my personal statement make clear why I am interested in ophthalmology?
- Do I highlight some key strengths that I believe will help me be an effective resident and ophthalmologist?
- Mentors will likely ask for your personal statement as they write your recommendation – make sure it is as finely honed as possible prior to sending their way. However, this is also a good opportunity to ask for any personal statement feedback.

**Recommendation Letters:**

Recommendation letters are another core part of your SF Match application. Ophthalmology residencies are often very small, ranging from 3-8 residents per class. Having even one resident who is irresponsible or who works poorly in teams is highly detrimental. Letters of recommendation from colleagues in the field allow interviewers to get a better sense of how you are viewed professionally and academically.

Making sure you have strong relationships with your letter writers can not only produce a great letter but also provides an opportunity for them to talk about you in other settings. Sometimes programs may call letter writers to get additional information about students.

When applying from Columbia, you will generally have the following 3 letters:

1. A research-heavy letter from a research mentor or, if you are an MD/PhD, your lab PI – ophthalmology-focused is great but not required
2. A clinical letter from an ophthalmologist; a non-ophthalmology letter is also potentially OK if the research letter is ophthalmology-based
3. A Departmental letter written by the Chairman and other educational leadership.

A note about letters from away institutions: At Columbia we do not recommend that you use a letter of recommendation from an away rotation outside of that program. Programs may find it to be a red flag if you are not able to produce 3 letters of recommendation from your home institution. For this reason, we recommend you only use the letter of recommendation from an away rotation for the specific program itself. You will not always obtain a letter of recommendation from an away program, but if it was happily offered it is a wonderful idea to use it for that specific program.

**Research and Publications:**

Research is an important part of the field of ophthalmology and likewise an important part of your application. Most interviews will include some component of this in the discussion. While

there is no way to comprehensively summarize the way each program evaluates an applicant's research experience, here are some important considerations:

- Do I have at least one project for which I can demonstrate some level of independent work?
- Can I speak confidently about all my projects in great detail? This includes ANY project that is listed in your application.

Publications are also a component of your application and may help demonstrate scientific productivity and your ability to see a project through to the end. **One important note about the SF Match application is that you can list publications that have been submitted to a journal.** This may be an important incentive for you to accelerate your manuscript writing timelines prior to the SF Match application deadline. Other items that can be listed in the publications section include peer reviewed abstracts, oral presentations, and poster presentations.

### Signals:

Signals are a relatively new phenomenon in Ophthalmology. They are essentially a sign of special interest that you can send to programs with your application. The number of signals is set nationally every year. While you can and should apply to far more programs than signal allowance, signals are likely meaningful when programs evaluate applications for possible interview invitations.

### Interview Invites

After you submit your SF Match application in late August / early September, there will be a period of waiting before interview invites start trickling out in October. Prior to interview invites going out it is generally recommended to organize the listed interview dates and times on a calendar application (available usually on SF Match website). You should know what the preferred time and date is for each institution prior to the interview invite as spots can fill up quickly. Unfavorable dates may be those that overlap with many other institutions, and sometimes applicants need to cancel or decline an interview invitation because it overlaps with a second invitation. Remember that there will be a national cap on the number of invitations you are allowed to accept; if you have the pleasure of surpassing this cap, you can politely decline previously accepted or future invitations depending on your program preferences.

Some tips for this period include:

- Create a separate email address just for SF Match and make sure that the notifications are turned on. Turn off spam for this email.
- Sometimes students may opt to allow a family member, significant other, or close friend to access their email and SF Match portal. Often, the window for accepting invitations may be as short as 2-10 minutes for the most desirable spots.



- Given the competitiveness of interview invites, you may consider choosing an elective in these months that allows you to easily access your phone throughout the day.
- You may choose to consult a crowdsourced spreadsheet to know whether interview invites have been extended. This document is usually circulated on the Ophthalmology reddit page and discord chat.

## Interviews

This is the fun part! You get to finally talk about all the wonderful things you did during medical school and show yourself off to the other institutions. Interviews are as much about you learning about the program as it is the programs evaluating you.

Things to be thinking about:

- Have I completed a mock interview?
- Is my background for my camera clean and simple? Is the lighting appropriate?
- Have I read over my SF Match application?
- Have I brushed up on all my research projects?
- Am I prepared to talk about all my activities?
- Can I clearly articulate why I am interested in X institution?
- Have I practiced answers to some of the common behavioral questions?
- Do not use a rolling chair as you can accidentally move around when distracted.
- Once I have completed all my interviews, have I discussed my top choice/s with ophthalmology education leadership to make sure I am on the right track prior to sending a letter of intent to my top choice?

## The Remainder...

You did it! You completed your application to Ophthalmology. Programs typically submit rank lists before applicants do, and some programs have open houses after their rank lists are submitted. Match typically occurs in February.

## PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

**Lora Glass, MD**

*Medical Student Director*

**Royce Chen, MD**

*Program Director*

**Jack Cioffi, MD**

*Chair, Department of Ophthalmology*