

The Ophthalmology Community LGBTQ+ Community's Medical Student Handbook: A Survival Guide for Applying to Ophthalmology Residency

Introduction

Applying to residency is no easy task and can be even more daunting when worrying about whether your identity will be a big asterisk when committees are reviewing your application. Knowing there are [other resources](#) with tips on applying to residency, the purpose of this handbook is to impart the collective wisdom of those who have traversed this path so that your experience is a little bit easier. Of course, there will be unique issues you may face that are not covered here, but please know that you have a community of people who support you and who will advocate for your success.

We have divided this handbook into the following sections:

1. [Choosing Ophthalmology](#)
2. [Mentorship](#)
3. [The SF Match Application](#)
4. [Interviewing](#)
5. [The Match](#)
6. [Finding Community in Residency](#)

As no journey is the same, we encourage you to reach out to lgbtq@aao.org if you have any advice or questions that are not covered here. Encourage others in our community to [join our online community](#). The bigger our group, the more we can advocate for ourselves and our patients.

Sincerely,

David Ramirez, MD and the LGBTQ+ Community Leaders

We would also like to acknowledge the amazing contributions of others including: Ta Chen Cheng, Taylor Coleman, Gregg Miller, Daniel Connors, Ryan Lange, Ben Meyer, and Kalla Gervasio.

1. Choosing Ophthalmology

For those who are starting to explore Ophthalmology, know that choosing a specialty can be intimidating, and particularly so when there is minimal exposure during medical school. Ophthalmology is a wonderful specialty that blends the precision of surgery with the relationships and whole-person care of medicine. You have likely already encountered a patient, a procedure, or another experience that has drawn you to the specialty. We encourage you to lean into these experiences and immerse yourself in the field to help you make your decision. Mentorship, shadowing/clinic experience, and surgical exposure will influence each person differently, so take some time to find those experiences that feel right to you.

With regard to being LGBTQ+ in ophthalmology, new progress is achieved every day. In 2021, a band of LGBTQ+ ophthalmologists revived a working group to address the lack of representation within our specialty. With support from the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), we established a unique [landing page](#), created an email account (lgbtq@aao.org) for inquiries from our community, and published multiple editorials in the Young Ophthalmologist (YO) community to establish visibility. At AAO 2021 we held the inaugural LGBTQ+ and Allies mixer, a space designed to meet others like us, build a network, and find mentorship. At AAO 2022, the first instructional course addressing issues facing the LGBTQ+ community specific to ophthalmology was held.

Although more work is to be done, the LGBTQ+ community is growing larger and stronger in our specialty. Ophthalmology stands out as it seeks LGBTQ+ voices and is committed to supporting our goals as a community. When considering which specialty is right for you, we recommend scrutinizing the field for evidence of support, inclusivity, and empowerment.

2. Mentorship

For many members of the LGBTQ+ community, mentorship by another member of the community may be an abstract concept. Issues relating to visibility and fear of discrimination have impacted our ability to openly support one another. In spite of this, mentorship remains an important factor in supporting trainees entering a profession and is important even after training. Below we list advice from current and past trainees:

“Actively seek out LGBTQ mentors. [The AAO LGBTQ+] forum is a PHENOMENAL resource that will...continue to grow and flourish. Visibility is powerful and having mentors who you find an extra special kinship with by way of shared community will help you find extra opportunities to stand out. These mentors will also know a vulnerable, and sometimes societally stigmatized, aspect of you, and will better be able to advocate to your strengths, resilience, and write a strong letter of recommendation.”

“...keep in mind that there is no such thing as too many mentors, it may take time to find the right mentor, and do not burn bridges. I did not connect with any LGBTQ+ mentors until I had already completed my residency interviews, and their perspectives were invaluable at the time...Although my first mentor was not LGBTQ+, she fully supported me, was crucial to my commitment to

ophthalmology and development into a prepared applicant, and I would not be where I am today without her."

If you are a mentee, please reach out to lgbtq@aao.org or post in our online community. The online community is meant as a forum of support, whether you need advice about specific programs, want to connect with an ophthalmologist at a specific institution, or even want feedback on any part of your application. We encourage you to come to the LGBTQ+ events at the annual meeting for the Academy, as this is a great place to meet other trainees and ophthalmologists across the country. Finally, use this manual to inform questions to ask yourself and to ask programs should you decide to pursue ophthalmology. The more informed and proactive you can be, the more success you will have, and the more beneficial these relationships become.

If you are a mentor, please continue to support our mentees in our online community and at our meetings. Be kind, be generous, and be supportive. We have each experienced adversity during this long career trajectory, and it benefits our community to share these experiences and to create a collective knowledge from which our trainees can benefit. Email lgbtq@aao.org or post in our online community if you are interested in being a mentor.

3. The SF Match Application

Let's first address the elephant in the room: Should I be out for the application and interview process? This is a personal decision, but the overwhelming majority of us recommend being open about yourself. Here are some words from current and prior trainees:

"My overall advice is to be out, and then to be as 'open' about it as you want to be. It can be as little as mentioning your partner once. Or more direct as in asking about LGBT acceptance in the community and institution. Or as much as coming in with a history of presiding over every LGBT group you've ever been a part of, and wanting to establish a bigger, better one at your next institution. So why be out and open? Medical training is intense and all-encompassing. It just is. Your sexuality is a part of you, and when you're feeling down and out (which is bound to happen), you want your community behind you in a way that's honest and respectful. So get a feel during the application process about how supported you would feel when you're not at your best."

"I chose to be open about [being LGBTQ+] in my personal statement as well as indirectly through some of my extracurricular activities in the application, however I know multiple LGBTQ+ residents and attendings who are where they are today without having been "out" in their applications...I believed it augmented my application because it helped paint a better picture of who I am and probably made me stand out from the crowd. It helped me address why I am the character I am today and what my values and goals are. It was also likely appealing to LGBTQ+-friendly programs. It may have hurt my application if any of its readers felt uncomfortable by my story or believed that I would not be the best fit because of it. I was willing to take this risk because I preferred to spare myself of interviews with programs where being myself would not be a good fit for me."

"I would say my biggest piece of advice to trainees...is not to be afraid to be open about your sexual orientation on your application or during your interviews. If a program is not LGBTQ+ friendly you want to know that before committing to go there. Having LGBTQ+ activities on your application or mentioning your partner/significant other in conversations during interviews can give you a sense for the culture at a program and whether they would be welcoming/inclusive."

"Don't be afraid to share that you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. I had family members and even mentors try to steer me away from this, and I am so glad that I did not listen. Think of it as a litmus test for a program's culture / receptivity to the diversity and uniqueness that you offer: if they embrace it, you'll feel all the more welcome and supported; if you feel like you get weird responses or suggestions to 'mute' or 'dilute' your authentic self, then this is probably not a program that you will thrive in (and it will be THEIR loss for not having recruited you!)"

"The way in which you share it can help make it feel less intimidating; for instance, adding something into your personal statement is a subtle yet intentional way to 'come out' to a program. For example, if highlighting one's hobby of painting, one could write 'When I couldn't find the words to come out to my parents, I found agency through painting' as a way to shed insight on multiple facets of one's personality."

"A regret I have regarding residency and my identity is not being broadly out sooner within my program. I started residency in an already long-term relationship with my now-husband, but I definitely harbored concern or even fear of how others could react to knowing that I love someone of the same gender. In fairness, medicine can broadly be a conservative field, and I was attending a program in the Southeastern US. My husband is also a medical center employee which added to our collective hesitance at being out at work. I was always open with my residency classmates, but I worried that there was potential for someone with influence over my future not reacting well and this somehow impacting my training, experience, evaluations, etc. As it turns out my fear was unfounded. During late PGY2 year my partner attended a department function for the first time with me and despite it being a little nerve wracking on both of our ends the world didn't stop turning. Nothing was different when I went back to work Monday. Fast forward a few years, and I'm no longer the only resident who is out in the program which is great. I suppose my advice is to avoid trying to hide who you are. It certainly takes courage and sometimes a leap of faith to be open and honest about yourself, but odds are high you'll be happy for it. And you've certainly made things better for anybody following in your footsteps."

In summary, being out in the application process can serve not only to relieve the pressure of having to conceal a part of yourself, but also to help allow programs to demonstrate that they are (or aren't) supportive of you. Residency is a stressful and busy period and having a community of support at the outset can help mitigate this stress.

4. Interviewing

You've gotten interviews! Great job! Whether in-person or virtual, the interview process is a great way to get to know programs more intimately and is a great time to ask questions. Remember this is a two-way interview – programs are just as nervous as you are, since they are also trying to sell themselves! No matter what, it is worth reminding yourself that you are being seriously considered as a candidate, and that is a huge accomplishment in itself. With these reminders, enter each interview with confidence and treat it as an opportunity to get to know your potential future colleagues. Return the favor of being yourself so they can get to know you as a potential future colleague.

It may be a good idea to be inquisitive about a program (without being annoying). There may be conferences, informational events, or even away rotations where you can meet people from a program to start building relationships. You could contact a program with questions about LGBTQ+ resources, which serves a dual benefit: they know you're interested, and you get to find out more about whether this would be a supportive program.

When interviewing, there are a few things we recommend you consider:

1. **Networking:** Prior to your interview date, if there are trainees/faculty at a prospective program who are part of our Academy LGBTQ+ network, consider reaching out to them as a means of gauging a program's friendliness. Some program coordinators may also be able to connect you with LGBTQ+ trainees or faculty at your request. This is another way to gently 'come out' to a program while also showing your genuine interest in the place's culture and may connect you with a future mentor.
2. **Diversity offices:** Most training programs are affiliated with universities, and it is worthwhile to network with the university's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) office to get a sense as to the presence of the LGBTQ+ community on campus. You might even consider visiting the office in person to get a sense of the community.
3. **Coming out:** As mentioned above, this is a personal decision, but the more you can be yourself, the more natural an interview will be, and the more likely you'll leave a positive impression. This can be anything from wearing a LGBTQ+ pin, to mentioning it verbally during interviews if the topic comes up or as a follow-up point in your application. You might even find your interviewer has the same identity as you!
 - NOTE: Interviewers are not allowed to bring up certain topics or ask certain questions during interviews, so if you do choose to volunteer this information, then this may open the door to follow-up questions. Just like any interview topic, only bring up things you feel comfortable discussing.
4. **Safety:** Residency and fellowship training often involve moving to a new and unfamiliar city. Some cities are more LGBTQ+ friendly than others. Use known resources for housing, and know the neighborhood you're staying in.

5. **Significant other:** If you have a significant other to consider, it would be advisable to include them in the selection process. A great training program but a miserable spouse does not a happy physician make.
6. **Social media:** Be aware of the impression you might leave with your social media presence. There have been numerous instances of applicants sinking to the bottom of the list because a member on a review committee felt uncomfortable with the person's social media content.

When interviewing for a job, the same considerations apply. It is worth noting to consider being out during the interview process. You can always walk away from a job offer, but it would be disastrous to discover your business partner or employer harbors homophobic opinions after starting.

5. The Match

Making your rank list is one of the most exciting, yet scary, parts of applying to residency. After interviewing, it initially seems like there are so many factors to consider comparing each program to another that it feels overwhelming. We advise making a list of each program prior to interviewing and taking meticulous notes after the interview about specific facets (e.g., inclusivity/visibility of LGBTQ+ faculty, ability to be out without issue, etc.). Overall, prioritize those factors which will help your well-being both at and outside of work, and consider your support systems. Residency will be a time where you will need to lean on your support more than ever, and you will be thanking your former self during residency when taking this aspect into consideration.

When making your list, consider if the program is a good fit for you. This is a good time to connect with LGBTQ+ residents, faculty, and alumni at different programs to ask more specific questions about support, resource groups, culture, and community in the location of the program.

Overall, go where you'll be happy. There will be lots of competing factors; but at the end of the day, you want to check your gut, and then choose happiness. Sounds easy (it's not). One way to figure this out is to look at the most senior people at the program you're interested in (4th year medical students, senior residents, etc.). Do you admire them? Are they people you like, or would want to be friends with? Like it or not, they are the "products" of the system you're interested in. Are they happy? And are they happy for reasons that would make YOU happy? Ask them! (And if you can, observe them!) Can you envision their success being your success? What did they expect this stage of their education to be like, and what did they actually get?

The second piece of choosing happiness is predicting your own future. What will be your personal and professional goals in 1 year? Or 5 years? This part can be trickier because it's hard to know how you'll change. Will you want kids? How important will it be to be near your family? Medicine is a long, exhausting road. It's easy to get shortsighted or lose focus. Don't get lost in the sunk cost fallacy – that you've worked so hard that you have to choose the most prestigious or difficult next step. Instead, think to yourself that you have worked this hard so that you now have the CHOICE to go down the path that optimizes your happiness and the quality of the relationships in your life. Choose that path, and don't look back.

6. Finding Community in Residency

Whether you matched at your number-one program or not, life goes on! Applying to residency is a huge feat and whatever the outcome, you deserve a pat on the back. Be sure to stay in contact with your mentors and any residents or colleagues that helped you along the way. Give them updates and thank them for their help in this journey. If you are relocating for residency, start to get excited about the change in scenery and all the new people you will meet! Research the area of your new home and learn what events or groups or advocacy opportunities are available that cater to the LGBTQ+ community. Connect with the other incoming co-residents and the existing ones and plan a meet-up. Lastly, be sure to have fun and relax before your first day of work. Spend time with family. Travel if you can. You will not regret it! Once intern year starts, stay connected with your ophthalmology program and continue to network when opportunities arise.

Finally, make sure you stay true to yourself in residency. You will see many people employ the “fake it till you make it,” persona. For example, pretending you’re competent in putting in a central line (even though you’ve never done one before), or even pretending you’re not gay (just to get through that toxic culture of the rotation). But the inauthenticity of that strategy on both fronts will eat away at you because you’ll feel insecure all the time. So, from the professional side, don’t try to fake it; try instead to incorporate and practice small, new skills to becoming the kind of doctor you want to be, each and every day (keyword there: small! No one becomes a doctor overnight). Never be afraid to ask for help, or to ask someone to show you something you’ve never done before. If you do this, then, your confidence in your abilities will be based on truths (i.e. your previous actions and behaviors) rather than the shame that comes with “faking it.” Being an honest, responsible doctor will be a part of your identity. Likewise, hiding your sexual identity with one that’s inauthentic will also ramp up your anxiety. There are a million reasons to not feel good enough in medicine without that nagging feeling that it might be because you’re gay. So go somewhere supportive and go somewhere you can be the happiest version of yourself.

9/7/22 DR