Applying for Residencies

By Chris Boehm

The first thing to do is to decide where you want to apply. See the March 2014 ASLAP newsletter for more information on choosing a residency. When you are scheduling externships, be aware that many programs will want to bring you in for a face-to-face interview in late December/early January. You do not want to be tied up at a rotation at an outside institution during this valuable time period. Remember that you will have limited time during December and January to do phone, Skype, and in-person interviews. You will not be able to do ‘screening’ interviews (usually phone or Skype interviews) with every program, so you will need to narrow your applications down to a reasonable amount. Only you can determine what is reasonable for you.

CV

Ensure that your CV is easy to skim and read. Remember that many of the folks evaluating your CV do a lot of reading every day, so using an 8 point font isn’t going to win you any points. Have a friend look it over for inconsistencies and typos. Ensure that you include your education, applicable lab animal rotations, research, publications, clubs you were in during veterinary school, and leadership positions you have had in those clubs. Leave off anything you did in high school. And only very pertinent undergraduate items should be listed, such as publications and research projects.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

The personal statement is where you can make a great impression. Programs want to know why you went into lab animal medicine, where the ‘spark’ started. They want to know what really excites you about LAM going forward. You don’t need to touch on every LAM or research experience, although it is fine to discuss what you really enjoyed about the experiences or what you’ve learned. If you went to an off-shore school and did a clinical year on the mainland, they will notice if you did or didn’t have LAM rotations. This is a great place to address that, as every vet school has different rules. It’s good to brag about yourself in the personal statement, because you really want to hook people into wanting to get to know you better... but be aware that there is a fine line between tooting your horn and brash arrogance. Also, if you did an internship... have been in practice for a while, discuss your choice, and if it is a career shift, why LAM now. You may want to discuss what you would like to get out of a residency.

REFERENCES

Hopefully, you have been cultivating references throughout your veterinary career. These are people who know you well and can assess your knowledge, skills, aptitude, and attitudes about your chosen career. It is wise to choose veterinarians; if you have worked with laboratory animal veterinarians and they know you well, they are also good choices. If you have an advanced degree, your advisor/mentor is an excellent choice. If you did a Merck Merial summer project, use that mentor. If you did an ASLAP summer fellowship, choose a mentor from that institution.

When asking, you want to give the person a graceful exit, as some people may not feel they know you well enough. And don’t be afraid to ask them for an excellent recommendation letter – you don’t want a mediocre one. Think about how you will approach them and ask them for a reference. Email is OK, as is in person and in private. A good ‘ask’ looks something like this “Hi, Dr. Smith, I’m applying for laboratory animal residencies this fall. Do you feel that you know me well enough that you can write me an excellent letter of recommendation? I understand if you don’t think we have spent enough time together to be able to assess my abilities accurately. I would need the letter sent in by XXX, as well.” Giving them the deadline also lets them decide if they have the time to do your letter justice. A good letter can take quite a bit of time to write, so give your references plenty of notice.

There are differing thoughts on what to do if someone tells you to write a letter for them and then they will edit it. Some folks think that you won’t get a good letter. Other folks know that you will be able to highlight what is most important to the prospective programs better than they may. Plus, great mentors are usually super busy, and this does save them a lot of time. In the end, it is your choice.

PHONE INTERVIEWS

If you’ve made it this far, congrats! Programs are interested in you! These are usually 1 hour interviews where programs are screening you to see how well your...
interests match to what they offer. Remember that this is your chance to find out more about the programs, too. Make sure you have a list of questions that you can use for each interview.

Try to find a landline in a quiet room to accept the call from, as that will reduce the interference and the chance that a call will be dropped. Make sure you post a sign on the door so you are not interrupted.

You’ll want to think about the types of questions you’ll be asked, and decide how to answer. There are no right or wrong answers (except for not answering a question). The questions you will be asked allow the programs to evaluate if you will be a good fit for their program, and if their program will be a good fit for you. You’ll be asked about items that are on your CV, so ensure that you have a copy of your CV in front of you. If a project was a number of years ago, take some notes beforehand so that you don’t ‘freeze’ in the moment. There are plenty of interview questions out there on the internet. Take the time to go through some of them and how you would answer them. It’s important to think about where you have been and where you want to go. It’s OK to have lofty career goals... no one is going to hold you to that career path if you shift directions down the road.

**SKYPE INTERVIEWS**

Skype is a great tool that many institutions use to screen potential candidates. There are some items you need to be aware of to help your Skype interview go smoothly. Dress professionally: gentlemen, this means a tie; ladies, a nice blouse. Figure out where you are going to Skype a few days before the interview. For most folks, a chair that doesn’t swivel or tilt is recommended, as you will be nervous, and you want to not let it show by wobbling the chair or bobbing back and forth. Make sure the table doesn’t jiggie if you get nervous and your knee will jiggie. Skype with a friend a few days beforehand and check that you know how to use the software. Also have them ask you a few questions to see if you can identify any nervous tics that you will want to try to control. It’s also good to see the quality of the image that your camera takes. While it is not something that programs will conscienously note, you want to make the best impression possible, including image quality. Group Interviews

Some programs use group interviews of candidates, as time is short from when applications are made and rankings are turned in. Everyone will approach these differently, some folks will be just as competitive as they were in vet school and want to know everything about you. Others will just want to talk. Just remember, these folks will be your colleagues in 3 short years, and they will remember you. Be yourself, and collect emails so you can stay in touch and see who matched where. You may end up studying for boards together down the road!

**TURNING DOWN INTERVIEWS**

If you’re lucky enough to have many programs that want to talk with you, this is a good thing. Hopefully you have saved your personal days during 4th year for this purpose. If you have more in-person interviews than you can attend, you will need to prioritize based on where you REALLY want to go, and what you found out during your screening interviews. Turning down interviews can be difficult. If a program was a little slower than others to schedule an in-person interview, and you would still like the opportunity to learn more and have the facility get to know you, offer to do more Skype interviews at the beginning or end of the day. However, if you are relatively certain that you don’t want to visit to a program after the screening interview, it is prudent to let them down gently. Remember that these folks will be your colleagues. If you are struggling with how to phrase it, ask a trusted faculty mentor or parent.

**IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS**

Dress professionally! You don’t have to purchase a whole suit, however remember that this is a job interview. Dressing professionally shows that you respect the process and the program. Ladies – while high heels look lovely, remember that you will likely be going on facility tours, and you will put some miles on. As well, you may be required to put shoe covers on, and that is really difficult with high heels.

**THANK YOU NOTES**

Thank you notes are still viewed positively. It is your choice if they are electronic or paper, but a well written thank you note can put you in the forefront of the mind of busy faculty members who have screened 10+ applicants!

**RANKING**

Ranking programs can be scary. Realize that programs are agonizing about their rankings as well. Due to the recent influx of eligible candidates, rank deep to increase your chances of matching.

Good luck!