

THINKING ABOUT PLASTIC SURGERY?

A Guide for Medical Students

We're glad you've decided to take a look at our diverse and exciting specialty. This guide provides information that will be helpful as you prepare to apply to Plastic Surgery residencies.

It is a competitive specialty, so you will need to work hard to present the best all-around application package you can. Each year, this program receives about 275 applications and we have 4 integrated positions. Nationwide, there are around 100 integrated positions available.

- **Get to Know the Specialty**

You've probably already found out that plastic surgery in the media and plastic surgery in real life are two different things. Non-medical people have an image of plastic surgery that consists solely of cosmetic surgery, but that is a fraction of the plastic surgery that is practiced across the country. Here at the UW, our Division encompasses hand surgery, cancer reconstruction, craniofacial surgery, pediatric plastic surgery, orthopedic reconstruction, urologic reconstruction, breast surgery and burn treatment, just to name a few. You will put yourself in a good position if you have a working knowledge about the scope of the specialty.

- **Scores**

This is obviously a subject that causes some anxiety. In the last few years, the average USMLE Step 1 score of matched plastic surgery applicants is around 250. BUT, if your USMLE is less than that, it is not a lost cause. If there is an average, there are clearly people below the average, so Plastic Surgery is still possible. We see people match with scores in the 230-240s (including here at UW) who are great residents. We here at UW don't use the score as a screening criterion for interviews, but some places do.

If you have a score less than 230, we recommend you take Step 2 prior to applications in an effort to bring that up. If you did not pass Step 1 on your first attempt, obtaining a position in Plastic Surgery will be extremely difficult, and we recommend you consider other specialties.

- **Grades**

To be competitive for plastic surgery, your clinical clerkship grades should be at least a mix of Honors and High Pass. In particular, you really should have Honors in Surgery and Plastic Surgery rotations to be competitive for interviews. Pass grades (i.e. below High Pass) in Surgery and Medicine clerkships will be very difficult to overcome when it comes time to obtain interviews at many programs, including ours.

- **Research**

For better or worse, research experience is expected when applying to Plastic Surgery, although programs do not officially state it as being so. Plastic surgery-specific research is preferred, although the specialty is diverse enough that research work in other specialties, particularly surgical ones, is good too. If you have already done research or have some underway, you're ahead of the game. If you do not – *don't panic!* We can work to get you involved in research work. Most of our projects are clinical outcomes studies, and these lend themselves well to student involvement. We also have a Research Open House every fall, and that is a good way to find out about projects with which you can be involved. Contact the advisors below for the date.

- **Plastic Surgery Rotations**

- Plastic Surgery rotation at UW: The rotation here is actually not a Sub-Internship in the conventional sense. It is a 4-week rotation where you spend a week at each of the major UW sites (UWMC, Harborview, Seattle Children's and the Puget Sound VA). This is structured in this way so that you can see the full breadth of surgery that we practice here. Students typically are not assigned patients for the full rotation, but you will work closely with our residents to care for patients in and out of the operating room.

When should you do the rotation at UW? Late spring or early summer of the year you are applying. June tends to be a good month because it is prior to the heavy-populated visiting student season (July-October) and with less rotators on service, you will have an easier time standing out.

- Visiting rotations: These are another unofficial requirement in Plastic Surgery. Doing visiting rotations shows programs that you have examined the specialty in a broad sense, and that you've spent a good amount of rotation time in the specialty. How many visiting rotations should you do? Two is the average. Some people do just one, and three is a lot of time away.

Where to do the rotations? Here are some programs that we know provide high quality student experiences:

- Stanford
- USC
- Mayo Clinic (Minnesota)
- University of Wisconsin
- University of Michigan
- Northwestern University
- Washington University in St. Louis

- Duke
- University of North Carolina
- Pittsburgh
- University of Pennsylvania
- Harvard
- Johns Hopkins

NOTE: this is 1) not a complete list and 2) does not imply that programs not on this list are bad rotations. There are great rotations at places not on this list. It simply means we know the people at these programs well and know that they are good educators. Another factor to consider when applying for rotations is to potentially target programs in cities/geographic areas where you have a connection or would just be interested in spending time. We're happy to talk with you to help tailor your rotation experiences.

Visiting rotations are secured through the VSAS system and the application system opens in March of the year you apply for residency.

- **Books**

There are several paperback plastic surgery texts that will be helpful on rotation. It's a good idea to get one that you can carry in a white coat. Many students use the Michigan Manual of Plastic Surgery

- **Letters of Recommendation**

The time to request letters is in the summer of the year you apply. You will need 4 letters of recommendation. Here are some pointers to consider as you request those letters:

1. You **HAVE** to get to know your letter writers. Do **NOT** expect to work with a faculty member for only 1-2 days on rotation and then get a good letter. You must put the time in to get to know them and for them to get to know you. What you really want is to get a *great* letter, and if a letter writer does not know you, the letter will be mediocre. Think of it like this: the quality of the letter will be reflective of the effort you put into the relationship, so more effort = better letter.
2. It is OK to have a non-plastic surgeon write a letter for you, but do not get more than one of these letters. Examples include faculty from other surgical rotations or research mentors. These are valuable letters, but the majority of your letters need to be from plastic surgeons.
3. It's a good idea to get a letter from a plastic surgery faculty member at a visiting rotation. This can be challenging in a 1-month rotation, but ultimately very valuable. However, the issues from #1 above still apply.
4. When you are on rotation, you may hear about students being provided a composite letter of recommendation (i.e. one letter signed by multiple

faculty). That is only done for non-UW students. UW students get individual letters from UW faculty, keeping in mind #1 above.

5. Plastic Surgery has a letter template (see below) developed by the American Council of Academic Plastic Surgeons, and your letter writers should use this (including the non-plastic surgeons).
6. Letters are submitted via the ERAS Letter of Recommendation Portal (LORP). You will need to provide each letter writer with the number generated by the LORP system.

- **Applications and Personal Statement**

The summer of 4th year will be busy with plastic surgery rotations, applications, getting letters, and writing your personal statement. Applications are done through the ERAS system. The personal statement in particular can require a lot of effort to make it readable and compelling. Have friends and family members read it. We are happy to read statements too and give advice. A couple of points about personal statements:

- DO: What you really need to do is tell your story. We all have a story to tell and you should try to authentically describe your journey to plastic surgery and even beyond.
- DO NOT: The readers of personal statements are plastic surgeons, therefore you don't need to tell them about the specialty, for instance, how it's innovative and diverse and cool. They want to know about you and what plastic surgery means to you. Also, statements that make a point of saying you became interested in plastic surgery after some cursory encounter with a plastic surgeon, such as suturing your chin/cheek/arm/etc in the ED, are kind of cheesy and won't help you much. It doesn't demonstrate depth of knowledge of the field. However, if you've had more of an in-depth relationship with a plastic surgeon or the specialty (for instance, if you had reconstruction of a face/hand/etc), those can be very compelling.

- **Have a Backup Plan**

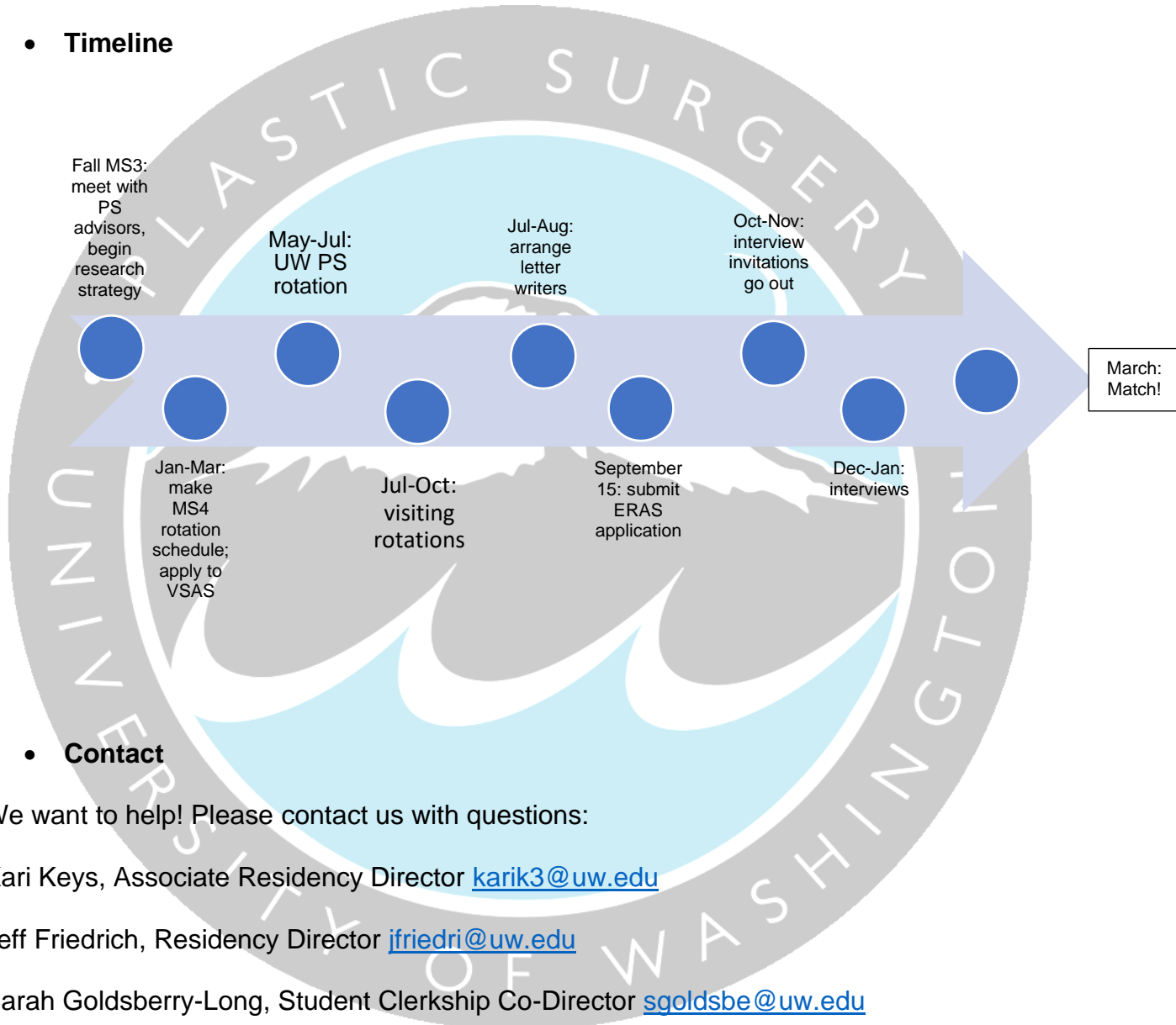
You'll find that Plastic Surgeons always have a Plan B in the operating room because sometimes things don't go exactly as planned. Because this is a competitive specialty, you too need to have a Plan B at every stage. Here are some critical time points that require a backup plan:

- Fall/Winter of MS3 year: We will help you critically look at your overall package. If you have some issues that you are concerned about (for example, low Step 1 score, lack of research, shaky rotation grades), you should consider expanding to a 5th year and taking a research year. Many students do a research year anyway because of the competitive nature of the field.
- During application/interview season: We really can't assure even the most competitive applicants that they are guaranteed to match, so it is wise to maximize your efforts. This usually includes widely applying and interviewing at 15-20 programs. A reasonable backup plan during this time is to

simultaneously apply and interview at General Surgery programs since Plastic Surgery training can be done after Surgery training in a fellowship-style program.

- If you don't match: This is very unlikely if you put in the effort and you have optimized your application. However, you need to have a backup plan if this does happen. We can work with you to improve your application and reapply.

- **Timeline**



- **Contact**

We want to help! Please contact us with questions:

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