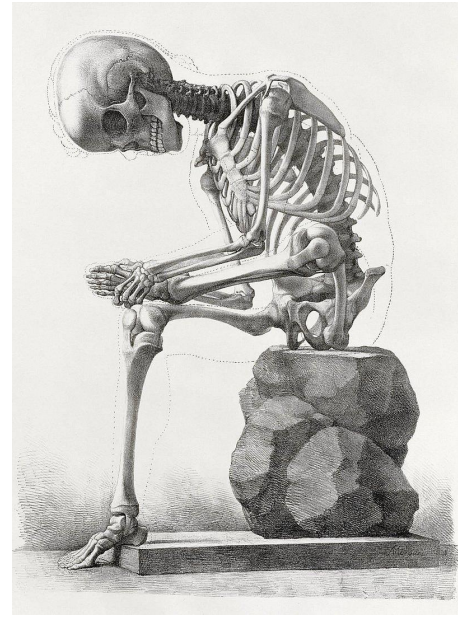

Navigating U.S. Clinical Rotations as an IMG: What I Wish I Knew

A guide by Dr. Ambreen Deol

Why this talk?

- Lack of clear guidance when I started
- Most advice was: *“Just Google it”*
- Confusion about where to apply, what’s required, am I eligible, how much can I afford?
- Where to even start?
- Aim: Help others avoid the chaos and do better



My Journey

Mid-2023 to early 2024

On and off Step 1 prep during internship

2023

July 2024

Post-Step 1: Started looking for rotations

2024

April 2024

- End of internship.
- Took extension.
- Dedicated Step 1 prep (April–July)

October 2024 -

- Attended ACSCC
- Observership : Stanford OHNS
- Acting internship: Cleveland CORS
- Elective: Mount Sinai Thoracic
- Elective: UAB Thoracic



Why Do U.S. Clinical Rotations matter?



Gain U.S. Clinical Experience

Familiarize with U.S. healthcare protocols, EMR systems, patient interactions



Letters of Recommendation (LORs)

Strong LORs significantly impact residency applications.



Networking Opportunities

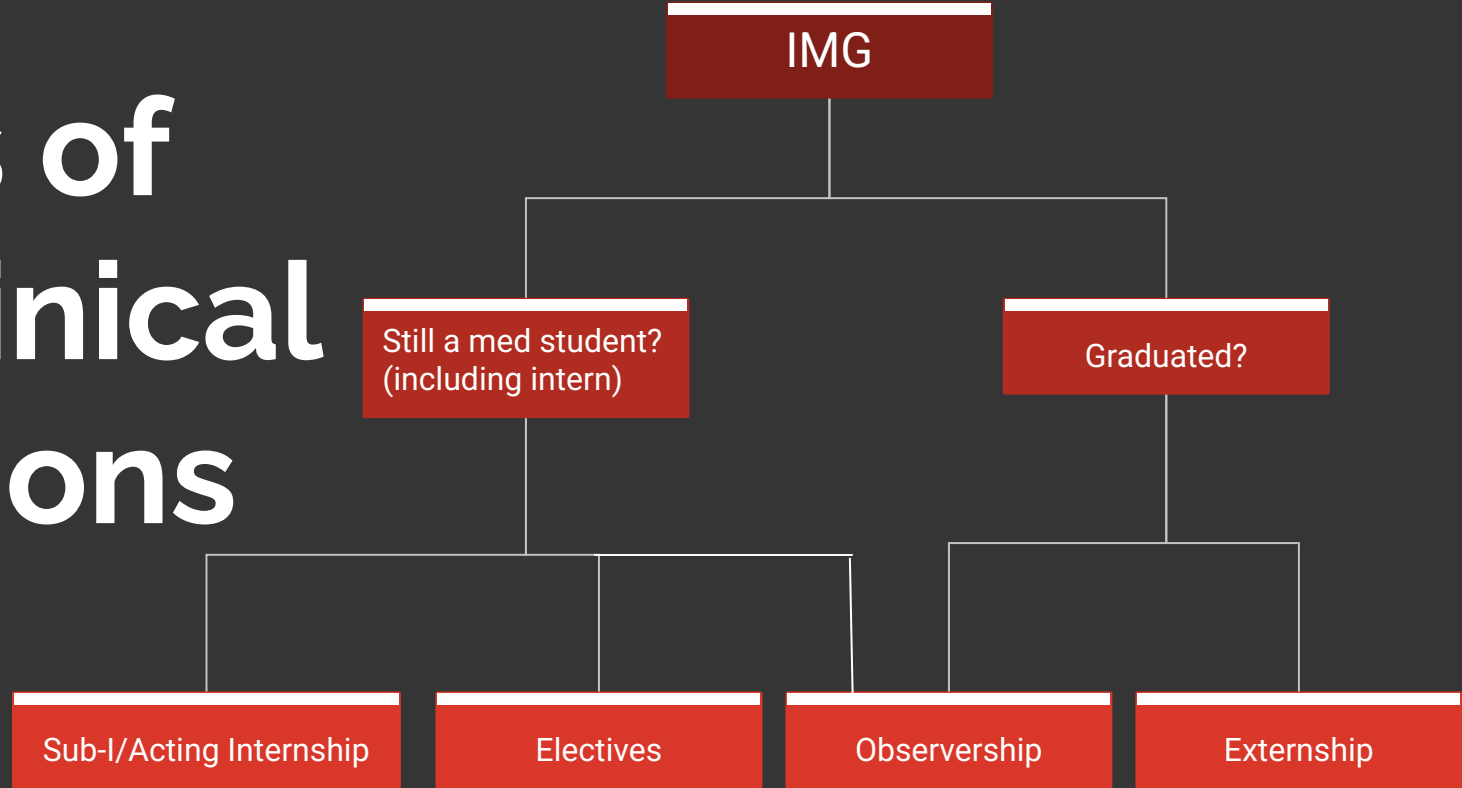
Connect with leading physicians and surgeons
Establish mentorship opportunities



Enhance Residency Application

Institutions where you rotate are more likely to interview you

Types of US Clinical Rotations



Term	Description	Hands-on?	Who is eligible?	Value for Residency
Sub-internship / Acting Internship	Advanced elective where you act like an intern: manage patients with higher responsibility, sometimes take calls	✓✓ Yes – intern-level duties	Final-year med students (less common for IMGs)	★★★★★ – highest value, best for LORs
Elective	For-credit clinical rotation during final year, often via VSLO or direct application	✓ Yes – full clinical participation	Final-year med students (IMGs eligible)	★★★★ – very strong, commonly used for LORs
Clerkship	Core rotations done during med school, often mandatory (medicine, surgery, etc.) usually through home institution (=internship in India)	✓ Yes	Home med school students; not for IMGs	★★★★ – high if U.S.-based, but rare for IMGs
Externship	Post-graduate clinical experience arranged privately, sometimes hands-on	✓ Yes (varies by program)	IMG graduates	★★ – less structured, useful if recent
Observership	Shadowing experience without patient contact or EMR access	✗ No	IMG students or graduates	★ – lowest value, decent for networking or understanding system, but weak for LORs

Tip



- Sub-I > Elective > Clerkship > Externship > Observership > Telerotations
- If you're an IMG **still in school**, prioritize **electives** and push for **sub-Is** if allowed.
- If you've graduated, you'll likely need to do **observerships** or rare **externships**.



Some basic questions

★ When can I do electives?

You must be an enrolled medical student at the time of the elective. Do it before graduation.

★ How early should I apply for electives?

Apply 6–12 months in advance, as some institutions take months to process applications.

★ How many U.S. rotations should I do to be competitive for residency?

At least 2–3 U.S. clinical electives (4 weeks each) are ideal for competitiveness and strong LORs. More is better if you have the time and money.

★ What are the requirements for doing an elective in the US?

Requirements vary by institution, but I'll cover the basic prerequisites so you know what to expect.

★ What is the duration of electives in the USA?

Typically 4 weeks long, but some places may offer 2 weeks rotations.

★ What is VSLO?

VSLO (Visiting Student Learning Opportunities) is an AAMC platform that lets med students apply for various clinical experiences across U.S. institutions through a single, centralized system.


VSLO Vs Non-VSLO

- VSLO: Central platform used by most U.S. med schools
- 90–95% of U.S. universities are on it
- Only a few Indian colleges participate
- Non-VSLO: Email outreach, independent applications, cold emailing

Indian medical colleges part of the

VSLO Global Network:

1. Government Medical College Chandigarh
2. B.J. Medical College, Ahmedabad
3. Dayanand Medical College, Ludhiana
4. Dr. P.S.I. Medical College, Chinoutpalli
5. J.S.S. Medical College
6. Kasturba Medical College Mangalore
7. Kasturba Medical College Manipal
8. Mallareddy Medical College for Women



If you're doing MBBS from one of these, you are kind of lucky. You have more doors open and life is easier.

Finding Non-VSLO Electives



- ❑ Curate your own list (I'll show mine in the next slide)
- ❑ Google: "[University Name] international visiting medical student electives". For eg:
- ❑ Reach out directly—irrespective of VSLO status (you never know if someone might be willing to make an exception until you try)

UAB international visiting med student electives



Application Strategy tips

- Mark application open/close dates early—make a list of institutions with rotations that suit you and mark the dates on your calendar
- Apply as soon as portals open— same day!
- Keep your documents ready beforehand so you don't lose time
- Don't wait—even if they say it's not first-come-first-serve
- Broader net = better odds
- Be mindful of

Institution	Application Fee	Tuition (4 weeks)	Notes
University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)	\$350	\$5,150 (includes housing)	Early application recommended; slots fill quickly.
University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC)	None	\$3,000	Application details available on their website.
University of Pittsburgh (UPSOM)	\$50	\$4,500 (excluding housing)	Application details available on their website.
Cleveland Clinic	\$400	None	Requires USMLE Step 1 and TOEFL
Johns Hopkins (Research Elective)	\$500	None	Research-focused; requires direct faculty contact.

Institution	Application Fee	Tuition (4 weeks)	Notes
Florida International University (FIU)	\$300	\$3,000	Application details available on their website.
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai	\$500	\$3,500	Application details available on their website.
Yale University	\$200	\$4,200	TOEFL required; accepts about 200 students annually.
Emory University	\$500	\$3,600	Rotations available in select specialties; USMLE Step 1 required.
Stanford University	\$300	\$6,200	Application details available on their website.

Institution	Application Fee	Tuition (4 weeks)	Notes
Kansas University Medical Center	\$50	\$2,750 (includes housing)	TOEFL required; Apply 1 year in advance.
UT Southwestern Medical Center	\$150	Not specified	Rotations available only in Pediatrics and Pathology; Step 1 and prior USCE required.
Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center	None	Minimal fee	Opens in September; check website for more information.
Marshall University West Virginia	No fee	Not specified	Step 1 required

Institution	Application Fee	Tuition (4 weeks)	Notes
Sinai Hospital Baltimore (LifeBridge Health)	Not specified	Not specified	USMLE Step 1 required; contact via email for application.
University of Colorado	\$150	\$4,000	Externship available; Step 1 required; Rotations available in select specialties
University of Washington	\$44	\$5,000	Need a faculty sponsor; limited capacity
Jackson Park Hospital	\$250 (malpractice)	\$1,200	Can be done post-graduation as an externship.



Key Documents to Prepare Early

- **STEP 1 score** - preferable as majority of institutions require STEP 1, especially at top institutions. Some electives may waive this but it lowers your options
- **Letter of Good Standing (Dean's letter)**
- **Medical School Transcripts** - proof that you are enrolled as a med student at the time of elective, not graduated
- **Home institution approval** - get a form filled by home school
- **Personal Statement & CV**
- **Immunizations & Health Insurance**
- **English Proficiency test – TOEFL or OET**
- **B1/B2 Visa** – need an Invitation Letter
- **Application Fees** - non-refundable, so apply carefully
- **Malpractice insurance** - after acceptance to the elective



What If You Don't Get Accepted?

Plan B Options:

- Cold email faculty from your alumni network or specialty
- Cold call departments directly
- Leverage personal contacts / seniors already in the U.S.
- Last resort: Paid agencies (expensive & unpredictable)



Pro tip

Don't wait to hear back from programs before starting these outreach efforts. These options are free and can run in parallel with formal applications. Everything takes time—act early.

—
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Got accepted for
rotation! **Now what?**



How to Stand Out During the Rotation?



Excelling at rotations:

- Be obsessed, not passive
- Read up before cases
- Ask smart, not basic questions
- Know your patient inside-out from the EMR
- Offer to help: notes, pre-rounding, patient updates
- Respect nurses and allied health staff





Networking During Your Rotation

- Access system email: use it to set up meetings
- Schedule short chats with faculty/residents
- Ask about research opportunities
- Follow up and keep in touch
- Show interest beyond medicine: be human, not a robot doctor

Final Thoughts: What I Wish I Knew Sooner

Start Early

- ★ Application windows open and close unpredictably — some fill within days.
- ★ Immunizations, documents, and visas take months to arrange.
- ★ If you wait for perfect clarity, you'll be too late. Start messy.

Plan Smart

- ★ Track deadlines in a calendar — every institution has different timelines.
- ★ Group document collection: request multiple items (e.g. transcripts, bonafide, good standing) at once from your med school.
- ★ Instead of doing things sequentially — parallelize.
- ★ Do things like Step 1, TOEFL, applying for VISA well in time

Shoot Your Shot

- ★ Cold emails do work — especially to IMGs, faculty from your home region, or those who value mentoring.
- ★ Phone calls can get you answers even emails can't.
- ★ Think of every answered email as one small push closer to a yes. One right connection can change everything.

A person wearing a blue surgical gown, cap, and mask stands in a hospital hallway. The person's hands are clasped in front of them. The background shows a typical hospital corridor with a door, a fire extinguisher, and a rack of red and blue scrubs.

It's Brutal... and Worth It

- Yes, you'll face rejections, ghosting, last-minute chaos, and imposter syndrome.
- But every accepted elective, every attending who remembers you, every LOR you earn — it builds your story.
- If you persist, network, and show up with intention, it WILL open doors.



2. Examples

By the end of this section, your audience should be able to visualize:

→ **What**

What is the pain you cure with your solution?

→ **Who**

Show them a specific person who would benefit from your solution.



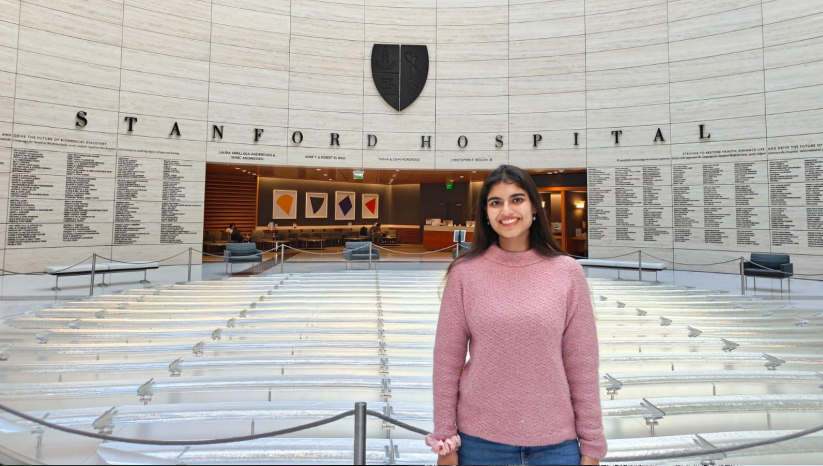
Tip

Tell the audience about the problem through a **story**, ideally a person.

Meet Alberto.

He recently moved from Spain to a small town in Northern Ireland.

He loved soccer, but feared he had no way to talk to a coach or teammates.



Cost Breakdown of U.S. Clinical Rotations

- Elective Tuition (4 weeks): \$1,200 – \$6,500
- Application Fees: \$50 – \$500 per program
- TOEFL / OET Exam: \$200 – \$300
- Visa (B1/B2): ~\$185
- Flight: \$800 – \$1,500
- Accommodation (1 month): \$1,000 – \$2,000
- Food & Local Transportation: \$300 – \$600
- Health Insurance: \$50 – \$150
- Malpractice Insurance: \$300 – \$400
- Immunizations & Blood Tests: \$100 – \$400
- Miscellaneous (scrubs, SIM card, etc.): \$100 – \$300

Tip

> Always budget extra (~10–15%) for unforeseen costs — delays, document requests, extra testing, etc

> Most IMGs spend between \$15,000 and \$22,000 total, depending on number of rotations, city choices, and rotation discipline.



From outsider to star

Alberto scored 30 goals in 21 games. He is now being scouted by several professional clubs in the Premier League. And he's a favorite of the other boys on the team.

[See a short video on Alberto's story](#)



Tip

Stories become more credible when they use concrete details such as the specific complex moves Alberto learned through Translate and his 30 goals in 21 games performance stats.



3. Examples

People need to understand how rare or frequent your examples are.

Pick 1 or 2 statistics and make them as concrete as possible. Stats are generally not sticky, but here are a few tactics:

→ **Relate**

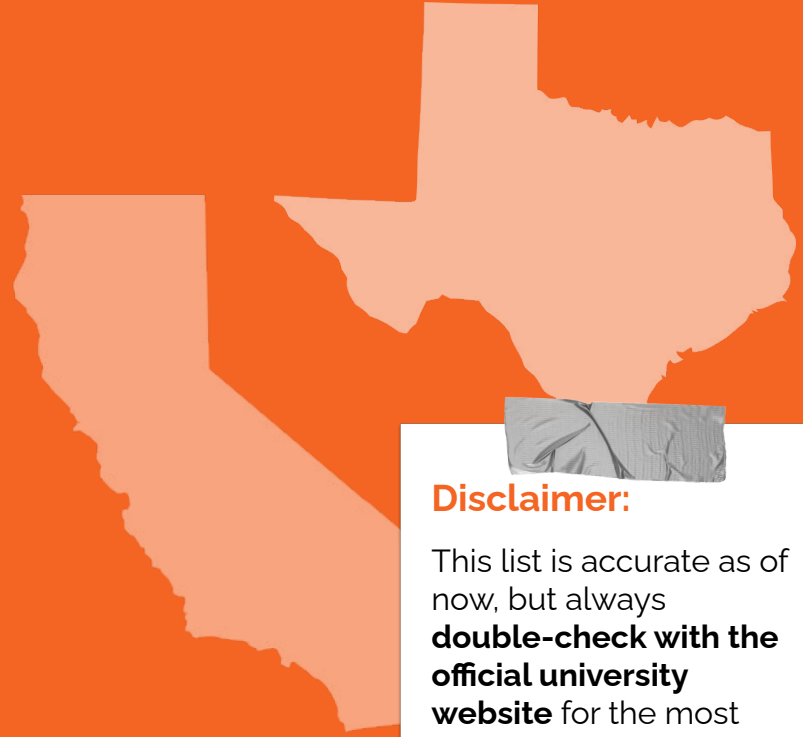
Deliver data within the context of a story you've already told

→ **Compare**

Make big numbers digestible by putting them in the context of something familiar

My Curated Non-VSLO Electives List:

- Created after weeks of deep research
- Scoured Reddit threads, forums, and old lists
- Found many lists to be outdated or incomplete:
 - Fees had changed
 - Some universities had joined VSLO
 - Others had stopped accepting international students entirely
- Verified each entry by visiting individual university websites and reading their eligibility + application requirements



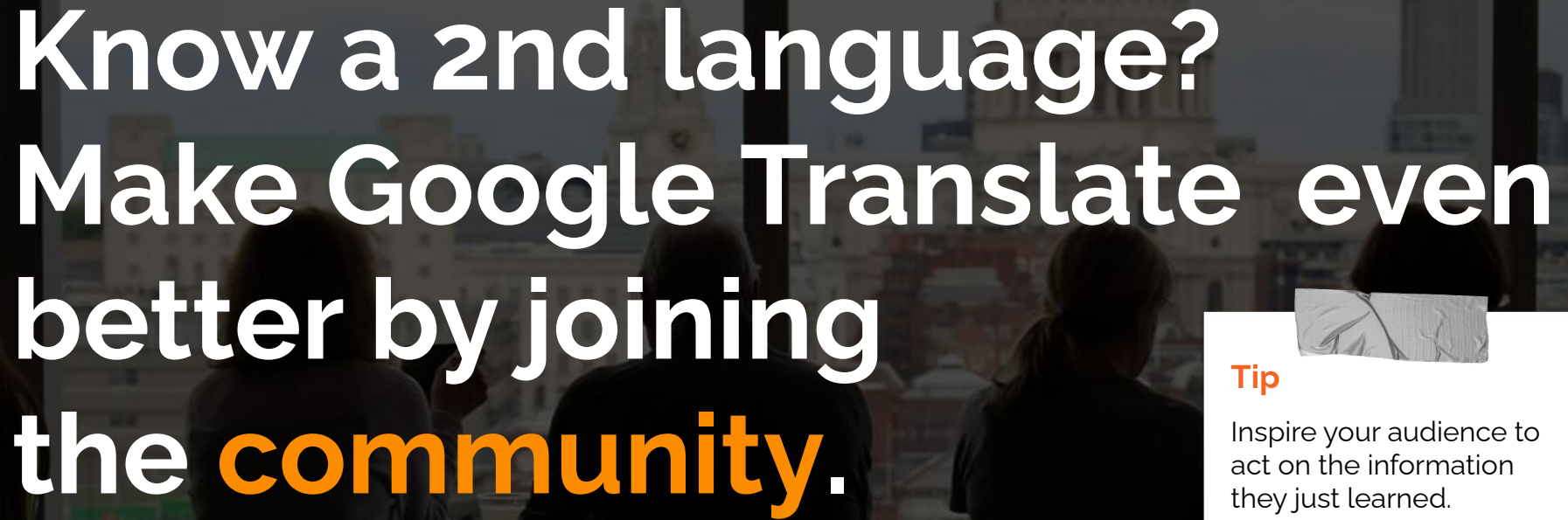
Disclaimer:

This list is accurate as of now, but always **double-check with the official university website** for the most current info before applying.



What I did on my rotations:

- **Attended didactics, grand rounds and tumor board meetings**
- **Saw patients in the clinical and added clinical notes**
- **Prepared lists and pre-rounded on 1-2 patients before morning rounds**
- **Asked the residents and fellows how I could be of help and learn the most**
- **Reached out to attendings, especially in my field of interest, to request short meetings**
 - Specifically contact IMG attendings and residents, if any, for mentorship and guidance
- **Talked with the nurses, scrub techs, PAs, NPs, etc. to understand the do's and don'ts around there.** Every hospital system and service has different work environments
- **Interacted with US med students and residents**
 - This gives you a deeper insight into the university education and hospital system there



Know a 2nd language? Make Google Translate even better by joining the **community**.



Tip

Inspire your audience to act on the information they just learned.

Depending on your idea, this can be anything from downloading an app to joining an organization.



Good luck!

<https://thematchguy.com/electives-us/>

For more about making
your ideas stick with
others, check out our book!

