



Pharmacy Residency Frequently Asked Questions

Why did you select the Columbia VA? What makes your program unique?




Sam Harrell, PGY1: I selected the Columbia VA because of the warm welcome I received every time I spoke with anyone from here and because of the genuine nature everyone has here. Every time I spoke with our RPD, Eric, I really felt like he was interested in me as a person before being a potential resident. I felt like this was a place and a program where I would be thoroughly supported, encouraged, and truly feel like a member of the team. Work-life balance was also an important factor to me when choosing the Columbia VA. I am living pretty far from my family but have my fiancé and dogs here with me. Being able to spend time with them and have the opportunity to go home to see my family some weekends was really important to me and the Columbia VA allows that with only staffing every 5th weekend. I believe the staffing component is one thing that makes our program unique along with others. Pharmacists at the VA get to practice at the highest level with their license, whether you are inpatient or outpatient. There are plenty of opportunities to directly interact with patients and really take on that role as a provider for patients and it is really awesome!



Stephen Burns, PGY1: Originally, the VA was not even on my radar. I applied to this VA residency program after failing to match in the first round of residency. Not only that, but I also failed to get into the residency program at this VA on my first try. However, after my initial interview with Aaron, Julian, and Eric I knew that the VA was THE place that I wanted to do residency. The comradery, kindness, care, and interest that they showed in the interview impressed me. Beyond that, every one of them were knowledgeable, professional, excited, and driven. This resonated with me, mirrored what I desired to become as a pharmacist, and embodied the program I wanted to train in. However, it was not the soft skills alone that encouraged me to select the VA. I also believed, and still believe, that the VA would be a place where I would be able to take my practice of pharmacy to a higher level and achieve a broader and deeper understanding of pharmacy practice. So far, I have not been disappointed and continue to learn at least one thing every day, though often I learn so many things. Admittedly, I also wanted to stay closer to home so I could visit with family in the Myrtle Beach area, which I get to do at least every few weeks. Finally, I will say that as a USC alum, I was enticed by the idea of partnering up with my alma mater to do a Clinical Teaching Certificate program. If you are looking for a place that will genuinely invest in you, helping you to become an awesome pharmacist, pushing you to the edge of your abilities, in a place that you can call home, then look no further than doing a residency at the Columbia VA.

What support is provided to residents? Are residents assigned a mentor?



Amy Wortkoetter, PGY1: Residents have support from everyone during their time here. At the beginning of the program, you are given: a general mentor, an MUE project mentor, a project mentor, a teaching mentor, and a USC school of pharmacy faculty mentor for the teaching certificate. However, every pharmacist you interact with has the potential to be your mentor as well! The great thing about this program is that everyone is cheering you on and wants you to succeed, and you will find support in each and every pharmacist here.

What is your favorite thing about the program?



Karen Hawkins, PGY1: My favorite thing about our program is the comradery between all the residents and our various mentors. Everyone has mutual respect, no matter if it's your first day as a PGY-1 or you're the director of all of pharmacy! I've never felt alone or like I couldn't ask for help. Before coming to the VA, I also heard that it was a great place for pharmacists to work and now I see why. There is always a friendly face waiting for you at work.

Bethany McAlhany, PGY2 Ambulatory Care: My favorite thing about the Columbia VA is the supportive environment that it provides to residents. Whether it is an RPD, preceptor, mentor, or a co-worker everyone tries to be intentional about getting to know residents and show that they care about your wellbeing and success. By providing residents with adequate support, the residents can thrive and become a well-rounded, confident pharmacist.



What rotation are you most looking forward to?



Amy Wortkoetter, PGY1: I am most looking forward to my primary care rotation. I am interested in chronic disease state management, and this rotation allows us to work closely with a primary care clinical pharmacy practitioner at the hospital and at either an outpatient clinic or in home-based primary care. It is also a two-month long rotation, so you have more opportunities to follow up with patients if necessary.

Stephen Burns, PGY1: While there is a core set of rotations, all of which offer lots of diverse and meaningful experiences, I am glad to be in a program that has the flexibility to let me pursue my specific interests as well. I have always enjoyed practicing the complex and dynamic side of pharmacy, as well as seeing the impact that pharmacy can have to help patients who have complex and complicated cases. Having already been exposed to some oncology pharmacy settings, I am looking forward to being able to continue to pursue my interest in a new hospital and setting. Further, I am excited to be in a residency that will allow me to dive farther into oncology through, not just one, but two elective rotations in this field.



What teaching and/or precepting opportunities are available in your program?



Karen Hawkins, PGY1: A Clinical Teaching Certificate is part of the residency requirements. You work with the University of South Carolina College of Pharmacy and you are assigned a faculty mentor. Throughout the year, you will be able to teach a lecture, facilitate monthly student topic discussions, help with grading pharmacy student assignments, and precept students. You have plenty of guidance along the way and the program ensures you feel prepared to teach and precept through seminars that teach you how to be a great preceptor.

What leadership opportunities are available to residents?



Sam Harrell, PGY1: Our residency program at the Columbia VA offers numerous opportunities for leadership! The most direct way is during our "leadership" months. Each resident has three months where they are in charge of preparing the agenda, leading, and recording the minutes for the pharmacy service meeting. In addition, we have weekly resident meetings where we are again in charge of creating the agenda, leading the meetings, and then sending out the minutes. We create the PBM newsletter for the health system each month updating everyone on shortages, new drug facts, and new work processes related to pharmacy. Outside of these months, we are involved in getting a teaching certificate through USC's school of pharmacy where we teach 1-2 lectures to the students, precept 1-2 students on rotation, grade multiple assignments, and can take on mentor roles for reviewing CVs and participating in mock interviews. There are also multiple leadership opportunities at the national level within the VA if you choose to do that as well!

What are the staffing requirements at the Columbia VA? What duties are you responsible for while staffing?



Amy Wortkoetter, PGY1: Staffing here is a bit different from other programs. Residents staff every 5th weekend for 12 hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday, but there are no evening staffing requirements during the week. On your weekend, you will be responsible for working in the outpatient pharmacy. Your main duties will include taking care of admission and discharge medication reconciliations and education of patients in the hospital along with processing prescriptions for patients coming from the emergency department. Luckily, you will also be working alongside a clinical pharmacy specialist who can answer any questions you may have.

What are the responsibilities for your major project?

Stephen Burns, PGY1: The long-term research project is flexible to meet each resident's interests and level. The projects can range from full research to process improvement with the main difference being the Institutional Research Board approval requirements. However, both types of projects have identical deliverables and presentation opportunities. The responsibilities include: 1) Identifying a topic pertinent to pharmacy practice at the Columbia VA and determining the impact and feasibility of completing the project in the allotted timeframe, 2) Collecting and analyzing your data, 3) Presenting your project formally and as a poster, and 4) Developing a manuscript suitable for publication. Lastly, if applicable, present a plan to implement changes based on your project results. You will have a project mentor who will provide a large amount of support with the project. There are also plenty of informational resources made available. A less obvious, but important, one of your responsibilities as the project progresses is to learn how to manage your resources and time to get the optimum outcome.



What is it like living in Columbia?



Karen Hawkins, PGY1: My favorite part about Columbia is the proximity to Lake Murray. In my opinion, you can never be bored with access to water. When not at the lake, it is also fun to float along the river. You can even float past the zoo and you might be able to hear the howler monkeys (my favorite!). I also enjoy going to my favorite restaurant (Cantina 76), hanging out at breweries, going to Segra Park for baseball games, and walking along the Riverwalk. Being in the middle of the state also has perks! It's very easy to have a weekend away since other cities like Charlotte, Charleston, and Greenville are all an easy day trip.

Bethany McAlhany, PGY2 Ambulatory Care: Columbia has something to offer for everyone! If you like food, our downtown area has lots of restaurants and breweries, some even have live music. If you like history there are a few museums, and you can tour the state house. If you like the outdoors, you can explore the USC campus or take a stroll on the riverwalk trails which is my personal favorite. We also have a farmers market called Soda City on Main Street every Saturday where local vendors will sell a variety of art, food, jewelry, clothes, candles, etc. If you are a sports person, you can attend a Gamecocks football game or go to a Fireflies baseball game. There is also a zoo which is fun to go with friends or family. If you like the water, you can go rafting down the river or spend the afternoon on Lake Murray or at the public beach area. I have loved living here and exploring the area!



[Stephen Burns](#)
PGY1



[Karen Hawkins](#)
PGY1



[Bethany McAlhany](#)
PGY2 Ambulatory Care



[Sam Harrell](#)
PGY1



[Amy Wortkoetter](#)
PGY1