Anatomy of an Applicant

Competency Resources and Self-Assessment Guide
for Medical School Applicants

Learn

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Contents

Introduction

This guide supplements the [Anatomy of an Applicant](#) student profiles featured on the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) website. It is based on the [15 Core Competencies for Entering Medical Students](#) that have been endorsed by the AAMC Group on Student Affairs (GSA) Committee on Admissions (COA). Many medical schools have identified the core competencies as important for entering medical students. The guide was created in direct response to inquiries from applicants, prehealth advisors, and admissions officers who asked the AAMC for help in better understanding how to demonstrate aptitude in the core competencies. It provides guidance on how the core competencies could be developed and demonstrated through an applicant's experiences in preparation for medical school. The guide contains sections that:

- Describe the individual components of a medical school application

- Define the individual core competencies

- Demonstrate how an applicant's responses inform admissions officers about an applicant's proficiency level in different competencies

- Help generate ideas about how to show experience and develop proficiency in the various competencies

Use this guide to:

- **Get organized!** This guide will help you organize and think strategically about your coursework and experiences before you begin completing and submitting medical school applications. If you have a prehealth advisor, we suggest that you consult with your advisor either before using the guide or after you have completed the self-assessment at the end.

- **Become a more competitive applicant!** The core competencies included in this guide reflect the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences valued by medical schools. This guide will help you better understand areas where you're strong and where you want to develop greater competency as you prepare to apply to medical schools. (For school-specific requirements, be sure to review the [Medical School Admission Requirements™ (MSAR®)](#), visit medical schools' websites, and consult with your prehealth advisor.)

- **Help you get started!** Use the worksheets in this guide to begin identifying where and how your current coursework and experiences can demonstrate the core competencies and how this can inform your future plans. Share your completed worksheets with your prehealth advisor or mentor, and update the worksheets regularly as you gain experience or develop strength in a competency. (These worksheets will be a helpful reference if you're planning to apply to the [Summer Health Professions Education Program (SHPEP)](#), medical school, or postbaccalaureate programs. They will also be helpful as you're preparing for interviews.) Remember, no applicant will be proficient in every area—that's not realistic or expected by medical schools.

Just a friendly reminder: When you submit your medical school applications, you will need to affirm that the information you have submitted is your own work. Although you may be inspired by the students featured in the Anatomy of an Applicant profiles, you need to be sure that you are telling *your* story in *your* words. Anatomy of an Applicant was created at the request of and with the guidance of the medical school admissions community. Admissions officers are already familiar with the stories that appear in Anatomy of an Applicant—your application is a chance to tell *yours*!

What the Parts of Your Application Tell Medical School Admissions Officers

You may have learned about the American Medical College Application Service® (AMCAS®) application and the Medical College Admission Test® (MCAT®), and you probably know that there are many components that go into a *complete* application. This section will help demystify all the components of a standard medical school application. You will learn why medical schools ask to see all this documentation and what it tells them about your qualifications as an applicant.

Primary Application

What it is: The primary application, AMCAS or the Texas Medical and Dental School Application Service (TMDSAS), is a verified record of most of the elements listed below compiled into a centralized application. This application is distributed to each medical school that you designate.

What it communicates: Why you've chosen medicine as a career, how you prepared for medical school, your experiences, and how people perceive you as a student and future physician.

Learn more about applying with the AMCAS application.

Secondary Application

What it is: An additional school-specific application that supplements your primary application. It helps explain why you're interested in a particular institution; how your goals, experiences, and plans align with the school's mission and goals; and how and what you would contribute as a learner at *that* institution. In other words, it's an opportunity to answer the question, why this school?

What it communicates: From the school's perspective, the secondary application provides an opportunity to probe for more institution-specific information by, for example, evaluating your fit with their mission, assessing your reasons for applying to that particular school, and posing other school-specific questions.
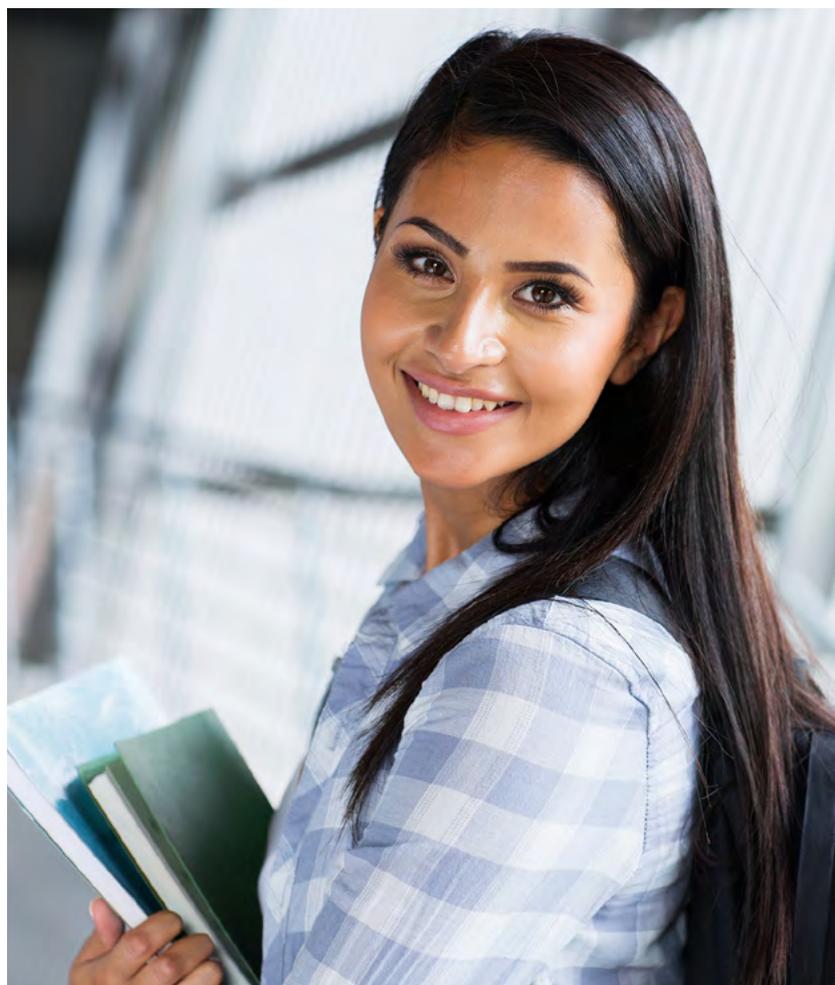
Official Transcripts and Coursework

What they are: The official record or records from each college or university you attended, the courses you took, and the grades or credit you received.

What they communicate: Tells part of the story about how you academically prepared for medical school. For example:

- Did you take upper-level science courses?

- What were your grade trends and coursework patterns?

- Do you have experience with writing-intensive courses?

- Did you challenge yourself with higher-level coursework in and outside your major?

- Did you formally study another language or take coursework in another language?

- Do you have a broad liberal arts background?

- Did you take community college courses or complete coursework at other institutions?

- Did you take postbaccalaureate or graduate courses?

- Did you have to overcome academic challenges?

MCAT® Score(s)

What it is: The Medical College Admission Test is a standardized multiple-choice test designed to assess your problem solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of natural, behavioral, and social science concepts and principles.

What it communicates: The MCAT exam tests the skills and knowledge that medical educators, physicians, medical students, and residents have identified as key prerequisites for success in medical school and beyond. The MCAT exam is one tool that medical school admissions officers use in combination with application materials (e.g., transcripts and personal statements) and interviews to select future medical students.

Personal Statements From Primary Application and Essay Questions on Secondary Applications

What they are: The personal statement on the AMCAS application is your opportunity to communicate your motivation for a career in medicine and to distinguish yourself from other applicants. The essay questions on your secondary applications will provide context for the other components of your application and further inform an admissions committee about how you may be a good fit for their institution.

What they communicate: This is your best opportunity to tell the medical school admissions officers something about yourself that they wouldn't necessarily learn by looking at the other parts of your application. You may focus on, for example, meaningful experiences, how your interests align with a school's mission, your desire to serve in a particular community or to work with a particular patient population, or any challenges or obstacles you've faced, including distance traveled. *Distance traveled* is how admissions officers and prehealth advisors refer to those life challenges you've faced and conquered.

Experiences, Publications, or Poster Presentations

What they are: An opportunity to highlight your extracurricular activities, including medically related experiences and exposure, employment, volunteer work, internships, and research.

What they communicate: The impact you made while engaging in the activity and the personal growth and transformation you experienced as a result of your participation.

Letters of Evaluation or Recommendation, Committee Letter

What they are: Confidential letters sent directly to the application service (or medical school) by individuals (or your undergraduate institution's committee) on your behalf.

What they communicate: Your personal qualities, characteristics, competencies, and capabilities as a future physician from the perspective of someone who knows you.

Biographical Information

What it is: Your family structure, parent or guardian education and career information, citizenship, language proficiency, self-identified race and ethnicity, legal residence, and criminal convictions.

What it communicates: Your biographical information gives admissions committees more context about your background, access to resources and services, and family structure. For example, you may include the education level of your parents or whether you are the first in your family to attend college.

Possible Review of Social Media and Internet Search

What it is: This is the public commentary, discourse, and images you post on social media sites, message boards, and blogs.

What it communicates: Increasingly, admissions officers may view these sites to learn more about your opinions, biases, social behaviors, and judgments. This can be both positive and negative. Note: Be sure you know what's available about yourself (or about someone else with your name or a similar name).

Read more about how social media can affect your application.

Interview

What it is: An in-person (or sometimes video) meeting between you and one or more individuals representing a medical school.

What it communicates: If you are invited to interview, it means that the school is interested in finding out about you and whether you would be a good fit there. It is an opportunity for the school to see how you present yourself, how you communicate, and how you engage with other current and future members of the school's community. It is also your opportunity to assess how you feel about the medical school and its environment and to ask additional questions.

Financial Information

What it is: This is a snapshot of your ability to finance or pay for your education.

Note: Your ability to afford medical school will not factor into the admissions decision.

What it communicates: Medical schools make different use of financial information. Some may use it either to help distribute need-based aid and scholarship funds or to develop a financial package to help you finance your education.

Criminal History Search

What it is: A search and report of your criminal history. The report is used to ascertain the ability of conditionally accepted applicants to become licensed physicians, to enhance the safety and well-being of patients, and to ensure the public's continuing trust in the medical profession. The AAMC recommends that all U.S. medical schools obtain a national background check on applicants upon their conditional acceptance to medical school.

Read more about the criminal background check service.

What it communicates: This confirms your integrity and whether you have been forthcoming and truthful about your criminal history on your application or during your interviews. It also communicates to medical schools your potential ability to become a licensed physician. Some medical schools may require an additional form asking you to disclose any other information.

The Core Competencies and What They Mean

The 15 Core Competencies for Entering Medical Students, endorsed by the AAMC Group on Student Affairs (GSA) Committee on Admissions (COA), help communicate the standards expected of all applicants accepted to medical school. The competency list was developed after an extensive search of the medical education and employment literature and with the guidance of several blue-ribbon and advisory panels, including Scientific Foundations for Future Physicians (SFFP), Behavioral and Social Sciences Foundations for Future Physicians (BSSFFP), Institute of Medicine (IOM), 5th Comprehensive Review of the MCAT Review Committee (MR5), the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Outcome Project, the MR5 Innovation Lab, and others.

Preprofessional Competencies

Service Orientation. Demonstrates a desire to help others and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings; demonstrates a desire to alleviate others' distress; recognizes and acts on his/her responsibilities to society—locally, nationally, and globally.

Social Skills. Demonstrates an awareness of others' needs, goals, feelings, and the ways that social and behavioral cues affect peoples' interactions and behaviors; adjusts behaviors appropriately in response to these cues; treats others with respect.

Cultural Competence. Demonstrates knowledge of sociocultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; shows an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity; recognizes and acts on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engages diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognizes and appropriately addresses bias in oneself and others; interacts effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

Teamwork. Works collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; shares information and knowledge with others and provides feedback; puts team goals ahead of individual goals.

Oral Communication. Effectively conveys information to others by using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed.

Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others. Behaves in an honest and ethical manner; cultivates personal and academic integrity; adheres to ethical principles and follows rules and procedures; resists peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourages others to behave in honest and ethical ways; develops and demonstrates ethical and moral reasoning.

Reliability and Dependability. Consistently fulfills obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; takes responsibility for personal actions and performance.

Resilience and Adaptability. Demonstrates tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapts effectively to them; is persistent, even under difficult situations; recovers from setbacks.

Capacity for Improvement. Sets goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engages in reflective practice for improvement; solicits and responds appropriately to feedback.

Thinking and Reasoning Competencies

Critical Thinking. Uses logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems.

Quantitative Reasoning. Applies quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world.

Scientific Inquiry. Applies knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems, and formulate research questions and hypotheses; is facile in the language of the sciences and uses it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated.

Written Communication. Effectively conveys information to others by using written words and sentences.

Science Competencies

Living Systems. Applies knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems, including biomolecules, molecules, cells, and organs.

Human Behavior. Applies knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, sociocultural, and biological factors that influence health and well-being.

Developmental Planning Worksheets

The developmental planning worksheets are designed to help you gauge your performance in each of the core competency areas. Remember, medical schools do not expect that you will have fully mastered each competency or mastered each one to the same extent. The purpose is to gauge where you are now, identify opportunities for growth, and help you articulate how and why you are proficient in the core areas.

Performance Reflection and Assessment: A Six-Step Process

Step 1. Read the definition of the competency at the top of each worksheet.

Step 2. In the top right corner of each page, select one of the options from the list that best describes your current level of proficiency:

> *Planning:* Preparing to gain experience or exploring options

> *Progressing:* Currently gaining experience, somewhat familiar

> *Demonstrating:* Experienced, significant familiarity

Step 3. If you selected **"Planning,"** complete the first five sections of the worksheet (see Step 4). Next, use the **"My plan(s) to develop this competency"** section to draft a strategy to gain experience or mastery in this area. Include next steps, a timeline, and any additional notes for yourself, such as whether you need to speak to a faculty member, attend a meeting, or join a club.

Step 4. If you selected **"Progressing"** or **"Demonstrating"**:

- Describe the knowledge or skills you gained from the experience and enter the information in the section **"How I demonstrate(d) this competency."**

- Reflect on what you think the experience says about you as a unique individual and enter the information in the sections **"Why it's important"** and **"What this says about me."**

- Explain why the experience was important and how it allowed you to grow as a person and enter the information in the section **"What I learned or how I grew from this experience."**

- Describe ways in which you believe your experience influenced your pursuit of a career in medicine and enter the information in the section **"How this prepared me or influenced my interest."**

- Use the **"My plan(s) to develop this competency"** section to draft a strategy for building on your experience in this area.

Step 5. After you have completed the worksheets, share them with your prehealth or academic advisor or mentor. Your advisor or mentor may be able to help assess your performance and perhaps help you plan future opportunities to improve your skills.

Step 6. Update the worksheets regularly to reflect your current level of performance. The worksheets will be extremely useful when you complete your primary and secondary applications and prepare for interviews.

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Preprofessional Competency: **Service Orientation**

Definition: Demonstrates a desire to help others and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings; demonstrates a desire to alleviate others' distress; recognizes and acts on his/her responsibilities to society—locally, nationally, and globally.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

AAMC

Preprofessional Competency: **Social Skills**

Definition: Demonstrates an awareness of others' needs, goals, feelings, and the ways that social and behavioral cues affect peoples' interactions and behaviors; adjusts behaviors appropriately in response to these cues; treats others with respect.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Preprofessional Competency: **Cultural Competence**

Definition: Demonstrates knowledge of sociocultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; shows an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity; recognizes and acts on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engages diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognizes and appropriately addresses bias in oneself and others; interacts effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Preprofessional Competency: **Teamwork**

Definition: Works collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; shares information and knowledge with others and provides feedback; puts team goals ahead of individual goals.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

AAMC

Preprofessional Competency: **Oral Communication**

Definition: Effectively conveys information to others by using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Preprofessional Competency: **Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others**

Definition: Behaves in an honest and ethical manner; cultivates personal and academic integrity; adheres to ethical principles and follows rules and procedures; resists peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourages others to behave in honest and ethical ways; develops and demonstrates ethical and moral reasoning.

| CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL: | PLANNING | PROGRESSING | DEMONSTRATING |

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Preprofessional Competency: **Reliability and Dependability**

Definition: Consistently fulfills obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; takes responsibility for personal actions and performance.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL: PLANNING   PROGRESSING   DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

Preprofessional Competency: **Resilience and Adaptability**

Definition: Demonstrates tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapts effectively to them; is persistent, even under difficult situations; recovers from setbacks.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Preprofessional Competency: **Capacity for Improvement**

Definition: Sets goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engages in reflective practice for improvement; solicits and responds appropriately to feedback.

| CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL: | PLANNING | PROGRESSING | DEMONSTRATING |

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

AAMC

Thinking and Reasoning Competency: **Critical Thinking**

Definition: Uses logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

Thinking and Reasoning Competency: **Quantitative Reasoning**

Definition: Applies quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

AAMC

Thinking and Reasoning Competency: **Scientific Inquiry**

Definition: Applies knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems, and formulate research questions and hypotheses; is facile in the language of the sciences and uses it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

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Thinking and Reasoning Competency: **Written Communication**

Definition: Effectively conveys information to others by using written words and sentences.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

Notes:

AAMC

Scientific Competency: **Living Systems**

Definition: Applies knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems, including biomolecules, molecules, cells, and organs.

| CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL: | PLANNING | PROGRESSING | DEMONSTRATING |

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

What this says about me:

What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

How this prepared me or influenced my interest:

MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

Next steps:

Timeline:

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Scientific Competency: **Human Behavior**

Definition: Applies knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, sociocultural, and biological factors that influence health and well-being.

CURRENT COMPETENCY LEVEL:	PLANNING	PROGRESSING	DEMONSTRATING

How I demonstrate(d) this competency:

Why it's important:

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What I learned or how I grew from this experience:

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MY PLAN(S) TO DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

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Association of American Medical Colleges

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Questions, Comments, or Suggestions?

Send your questions, comments, or suggestions for future applicant and premed resources to corecompetencies@aamc.org.