

The Civic Role of Community Colleges: Preparing Students for the Work of Democracy

Robert W. Franco

Abstract

Community colleges were created to democratize both American higher education and the students who came through their open doors (Brint and Karabel 1989; Gleazer 1994). However, some observers have argued that community colleges have become overly focused on diverting students into low- and mid-level occupations and that they have not played a major role in transforming perpetuated structures of inequality.

With a rapid growth trajectory, America's 1,166 community colleges now serve increasingly diverse populations. Community college leaders need to recommit to three essential missions: developing strong transfer programs that provide students with equal educational opportunities; preparing students for twenty-first century careers; and preparing students for the work of democracy in the world's dominant democracy. Service-learning is the leading pedagogy that community colleges can employ to achieve these missions and truly become civically engaged campuses in the communities they serve.

Introduction

Community colleges were created to democratize both American higher education and the students who came through their open doors (Brint and Karabel 1989; Gleazer 1994). Early proponents of the junior colleges referred to them as America's democracy colleges, "giving thousands of worthy students who would otherwise have been excluded a chance to attend higher education" (Brint and Karabel 1989, 10).

Today, America's 1,166 community colleges represent a higher education movement, enrolling 5.4 million ethnically and age diverse students, 44 percent of all U.S. undergraduates, 45 percent of first-time freshmen, 46 percent of Black, 55 percent of Hispanic, 46 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander, and 55 percent of Native American undergraduate students. Approximately 40 percent of community college students are under the age of 22; the average age of community college students is 29; and over 15 percent of all community college students are over the age of 40 (*National Profile* 2000). As American society becomes increasingly diverse in the decades ahead, and colleges and universities remain prohibitively expensive for low-income students (Kipp, Price, and Wohlford 2002), community colleges will increasingly become the access point to higher education for lower- and perhaps middle-income students.

Advocates for community colleges see them as nimble, responsive to needs and opportunities in the towns and states they serve, and providing open access to higher education for traditional and nontraditional students across the ethnic, income, and age spectrum. Beyond access to higher education, community colleges also clearly provide transfer opportunities to America's finest universities.

Other advocates, and perhaps a majority, view this movement more narrowly as effectively providing vocational education attuned to local, state, and national economic development priorities. In this view, community colleges are seen as key institutions in preparing mid-level employees for the workforce (Bailey and Smith 1998). For these advocates, student opportunities to transfer to universities are subordinate to institutional opportunities to exploit a large niche in the local, state, and national occupational training environment (Brint and Karabel 1989).

By providing open-door *access* to higher education for all Americans, and developing the learning strategies that result in university and career *success*, community colleges fulfill the promise of American democracy, that is, equal opportunity for all for social and economic mobility.

Critics see community colleges as institutions making higher education too easy to attain, thus responsible for “dumbing down” standards in higher education, drawing community colleges and higher education into the Nation At Risk debate (Buckley 1999). More serious critics see community colleges as playing an “ambition management” function that reduces pressure on American universities to accept students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (Brint and Karabel 1989, 7). For these critics, community colleges play an important “cooling out” or diversion role by creating the illusion of opportunity and diverting low-SES students from achieving greater personal and professional goals at universities (Brint and Karabel 1989, 54).

Many analysts of American higher education have hailed the institutional heterogeneity that so distinguishes it from higher education systems in other developed nations. But these same analysts are concerned that this institutional diversity really “obscures” (Calhoun 1999, 12), or “makes opaque” (Brint and Karabel 1989, 224), significant institutional differences in financial and other resources. By obscuring the significance of these differences, institutional diversity conceals and reproduces a “profound prestige and reward hierarchy” (Calhoun 1999, 12) and contributes to “the transmission of inequality from generation to generation” (Brint and Karabel 1989, 24). Thus, community colleges are implicated in the perpetuation of inequality and are diverted from their dream of making real America’s promise of equal opportunity for all.

Lost in these assessments is one of the original functions of community colleges, that is, to create a “genuinely egalitarian system of education that fosters the development of a citizenry fully equal to the arduous task of democratic self-governance” (Brint and Karabel 1989, 232).

This article will explore the cultural and historical development of America’s junior and community colleges, will determine whether their dream was diverted, and will clarify and make explicit the future civic role of America’s community colleges in preparing students for transfer to universities, mid-level careers, and the work of democracy. Preparing students for the work of democracy requires the commitment of two-year colleges to become engaged in addressing and solving the problems that beset the communities that support them.

To do this, community colleges need to develop effective service-learning pedagogies and authentic collaborations with community- and school-based partners. Nationally, one in two community colleges is in some stage of developing service-learning programs (American Association 2002). Thus far these programs have been developed to support associate degree and vocational/technical learning outcomes, as well as to promote greater social and civic responsibility in individual students. By committing more human and financial resources to service-learning, community colleges can generate new levels of social capital, focus anew on their dream, and once again become America’s democracy colleges.

Junior Then Community Colleges: The Dream Diverted?

“There is in community college history a discernible search for institutional identity, that is, for recognition and public understanding in terms of a mission different from and yet in some respects similar to the missions of both of its progenitors, the secondary school and the college” (Gleazer 1994, vi-vii).

As a cultural anthropologist I frequently read and reflect on the shared values and beliefs of American community college culture as they relate to America’s culture—past, present, and future. I am a participating member of the culture of community colleges. Because the community colleges are a movement, a work in progress, we are susceptible to shifts in the winds of local, state, and federal funding and economic growth and recession. Our adaptability is a strength, but it can also be a source of ambiguity and tension.

When ambiguity and tension exist, it is appropriate and wise to look to framing documents for direction and decision making. For the purposes of this article, I will juxtapose two major works on the history of the community colleges. The first is the Foreword to *America's Community Colleges: The First Century* (1994) by Edmund J. Gleazer, President Emeritus, American Association of Community Colleges, who frames a generally positive view of the roots and development of today's junior to community college movement. The second is *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900–1985* (1989) by Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, two university researchers who both extol the praises and severely criticize the developmental trajectory of junior and community colleges.

Gleazer (1994) emphasizes three shared values and beliefs in American community-college culture:

- Community colleges should have a strong relationship to their communities, emphasizing civic participation.
- Community colleges should extend educational opportunity.
- Community colleges should value diversity.

Early in the twentieth century, Dean Alexis Lange of the University of California School of Education and other leaders in education “urged the junior colleges to give high priority to programs that would prepare their students for effective participation in community life” (Gleazer ix).

According to Bogue (1950, 336–337), Lange called for:

- 1) A junior college department of civic education
- 2) [As an educational goal]: their studies and other activities must be expected to have greatly quickened their communal sympathies and deepened their sense of indissoluble oneness with their fellows...they are possessed of the will to participate vigorously, militantly, if need be, in advancing community welfare.
- 3) [As a suggested method]: suitable opportunities for observation firsthand and for direct participation in the civic activities, of one sort or another, of the community maintaining the junior college.

But Lange and other elite university presidents, including William Rainey Harper and David Starr Jordan, promulgated another, largely hidden mission for the junior college. According to Brint and Karabel:

...fearing that they would be “overrun” by hordes of unqualified students and yet recognizing the powerful political pressures for more open access to universities in a society emphasizing upward mobility through education, the elite universities saw the junior college as an essential safety valve that would satisfy the demands for access while protecting their own institutions... they saw the two-year institutions as existing less to offer new opportunities to obtain a bachelor's degree to excluded segments of the population than to divert them away from four-year colleges and universities. (1989, 208)

Brint and Karabel (1989) call this the “diversion” function of community colleges and conclude that junior colleges have been successful in this “assigned” diversion function.

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, the junior colleges maintained an emphasis on successful university transfer and engagement in the civic and social issues of the communities they served. In 1922, the first revision to the statement of purpose in the constitution of the American Association of Junior Colleges¹ asserted: “The junior college may, and is likely to, develop a different type of curriculum, suited to the larger and ever changing civic, social and vocational needs of the entire community in which the college is located” (Gleazer 1994, viii–ix).

According to Brint and Karabel (1989), by the mid-1920s, “a counter movement stressing the role of the junior college as a provider of terminal education began to gather momentum. The junior college's main task was not as providing a platform for transfer for a minority but rather as offering vocational programs leading to marketable skills for the vast majority” (205–206).

Fourteen years later Byron S. Hollinshead reasserted the role of the junior college. He emphasized that “the junior college should be a community college, meeting community needs; that it should serve to promote a greater social and civic intelligence in the community...that the work of the community college should be closely integrated with the work of the high school and the work of other community institutions” (1936, 111–116).

In 1947, the Truman Commission further encouraged development in this direction for America’s community colleges: “The Community college seeks to become a center of learning for the entire community with or without the restrictions that surround formal course work in traditional institutions of higher education. It gears its programs and services to the needs and wishes of the people it serves” (President’s Commission 1947, 69–70). The Truman Commission called for public education to be “made available, tuition-free, to all Americans able and willing to receive it, regardless of race, creed, color, sex, or economic and social status” (Gleazer 1994, xi). With millions of former service personnel returning from the European and Pacific theaters of World War II, pressure to extend educational opportunities resulted in the passage of the GI Bill in 1944 and soaring enrollments in community colleges through 1948. According to Witt et al. (1994, 126), “By the fall of 1946 nearly 43 percent of all junior college students were veterans.” Concerned about enrollment declines as a result of the Korean War, community colleges turned to advertising and public relations to reach a vast but largely untapped population of adult learners.

In the 1950s, the veterans of both World War II and the Korean War and their generation contributed to a sustained baby boom, and this combined with economic and technological growth led to an explosion in demand for higher education in the 1960s (Calhoun 1999). Throughout the 1950s, state plans for community colleges emphasized the need for campuses “within commuting distance of a majority of the population in the state” (Calhoun 1999, xiii). Rapid enrollment growth in cities with existing universities provided evidence that these “opportunity colleges” were reaching new populations. By 1965, the Coordinating Council for Higher Education emphasized that “The junior colleges are particularly charged with providing services and programs not offered by the other institutions and to educate a more heterogeneous student body” (Calhoun 1999, xiii).

Throughout the 1960s, America built “nearly one community college per week” and by fall 1970 there were approximately 1,000 community colleges, located in every state in the union, and enrollments had quadrupled to nearly 2.5 million students (Witt et al. 1994, 185). By the end of the 1960s, the vast majority of Americans had an “open door” community college with lenient entrance requirements and free or low-cost tuition within commuting distance of their homes and jobs. Gleazer (1994, xi) powerfully summarized his decades of discussion with community college and civic leaders. “Community colleges should reach out. Go to unserved people. Give priority to those who need the education they did not get at an earlier age. Serve the student with roots in the community. Give those who need it a second chance. Bring people into the mainstream. Serve people hindered by problems of cost and transportation.”

By the 1960s, community colleges found themselves “in communities caught in the throes of change” (Gleazer 1994, xi) and substantial ethnic, racial, and political unrest (Huther 1971, 24–27). Colleges and communities were “interfusing both spatially and functionally” with housing organizations, community centers, welfare departments, and a host of other community-based organizations (Gleazer 1994, xi). By the 1970s, however, community-college leaders were increasingly taking a “marketing approach,” struggling to meet the needs of all the community’s citizens and reflecting on whether their primary role was in “university transfer” or as “hub of a network of community educative agencies and organizations” (Gleazer 1994, xi).

The open-door policy of community colleges provided the promise of higher education for a population “unprecedented” in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, and national origin. In some cities during the 1960s and 1970s, “the first genuine interaction among racial and cultural groups” took place at community colleges (Gleazer 1994, xi). Community colleges continue to cut “across ethnic lines, socioeconomic classes, educational interests, geographical boundaries and generations and bring people together so that not only their differences, but also their common interest and needs can be acknowledged and valued” (Gleazer 1994, xv). Since the 1970s, community colleges have played an important role in providing higher educational opportunities for women. Today, more than 60 percent of the national community-college enrollment is female (Witt et al. 1994, 240–242).

Brint and Karabel (1989, 211) emphasize that by the 1970s “the community college vocationalizers. . . were finally having an impact” and that “[f]aced with a barrage of media images of Ph.D.s driving taxis and college graduates waiting in long lines in unemployment offices, community college students began to view the college transfer programs not as way stations on the road to success but as gateways to nowhere.”

Further Brint and Karabel argue, the assigned “diversion” function of community colleges was reasserted in the 1970s:

The university, from the era of Harper and Jordan to that of Conant and Kerr consistently saw the junior college as a crucial buffer between itself and a populace clamoring for access to college, was delighted at a policy that promised to strengthen the junior college’s sorting function. . . . The state, perennially concerned about budgets and in later years frightened by the prospect of masses of “overeducated” workers, saw terminal vocational training as a means of limiting enrollment and providing students with practical skills that could be harnessed to larger state economic development strategies. (1989, 213)

In the 1970s, junior colleges, with their prior mission of university transfer, transformed into community colleges, with an increasing emphasis on terminal vocational education.

By the 1980s, American communities and their colleges were confronting a new tidal wave of social problems: racial conflict, economic conversion, environmental conflicts, rising disputes and claims across ethnic, geographic, gender, political and economic lines, and a mounting number of homeless and hungry. Gleazer (1994) concludes his discussion on the important relationship between the college and the community by restating Alexis Lange’s call for community colleges to instill “the will to participate vigorously, militantly, if need be, in advancing community welfare” (qtd. in Bogue 1950, 337).

Brint and Karabel (1989) argue that by the late 1980s legislators remained under substantial pressure to expand opportunities for access to higher education. The community college was still viewed by the public as a “stepping stone” to a four-year institution, and any attempts to abolish transfer programs at community colleges were doomed to failure. The community college continued to be viewed as a “low cost means of extending opportunities” (1989, 216).

By the 1990s, community colleges had matured into a major piece in the American higher education puzzle. In 1972, 48 percent of U.S. students attended a public four-year college or university, 22 percent attended a private four-year college or university, and 28.7 percent attended a public two-year college. By 1992, 40 percent attended a public four-year institution, 20 percent attended a private four-year institution, and 37 percent attended a public two-year college (Calhoun 1999).

Rediscovering Their Role

After more than a century of growth and transformation as the only open-door institutions in American higher education, the community colleges need to take stock. Community colleges now make up more than 40 percent of all higher education institutions in the United States (Calhoun 1999). Certainly, thousands of students of lower middle, working class, and minority backgrounds have refused to be “cooled out” in terminal vocational programs and have used the community college to transfer and succeed at four-year universities. Thousands more have discovered meaningful careers after completing a technical, vocational, or occupational degree at a two-year college in their community. Further, many students continue to re-engage with the two-year colleges in their communities throughout their lives of work, service, and enrichment. But many challenges still confront America’s democracy colleges (Calhoun 1999):

- 1) Between 1972–92 there was an approximately equal gain in post-secondary enrollment for both high- and low-SES students. But this was recorded almost entirely in different types of institutions.
- 2) Enrollment of low-SES students increased at two-year institutions only, while enrollment of high-SES students increased at four-year institutions.
- 3) Within two years 65 percent of high-SES, 1972-high-school graduates attended four-year colleges, and by 1992 that figure rose to 70 percent.
- 4) From 1972–1992, low-SES graduates continued to attend four-year institutions at the rate of just under 19 percent.
- 5) Over the same period, low-SES enrollment in two-year institutions increased from 11 to 22 percent, and high-SES enrollment in two-year institutions edged up from 15 to 17 percent.
- 6) Low-income, 18–24 year olds attend college at much lower rates than those with higher incomes, and participation gaps are about as wide today as they were in 1972.
- 7) Associate degrees completion rates are in the 20–25 percent range, and this range has changed little over the last 25 years. (Gladieux and Swail 1998, 102–105)

In the period 1972–1992, there was little or no improvement in the percentage of low-SES students attending four-year colleges, although there was a doubling in the percentage of low-SES students attending some college at two-year institutions. Apparently, community colleges have not democratized upper-division higher education, while they have clearly democratized access to general and vocational education. Perhaps, Brint and Karabel (1989) are correct to suggest that community colleges merely mask and reproduce social structural inequalities.

The United States will witness increasing diversity in the next twenty years, and this diversity will likely be knocking at the open door of America’s community colleges. Demographer Reuben Rumbaut at the Center for Immigration Studies provides the following data:

- 1) Of the 26.8 million foreign-born people living in the United States, fully 60 percent arrived since 1980, and an overwhelming 90 percent have immigrated to the U.S. since 1960.
- 2) Of the more than 24 million immigrants in the U.S. today who have arrived since 1960, 40 percent arrived as children under the age of 18. (They are sometimes termed the “1.5 generation” to distinguish them from both the first generation who immigrated as adults and the U.S.-born second generation.) Another 40 percent arrived as young adults between the ages of 18–34.
- 3) The *immigrant stock* population of the U.S. is approximately 55 million people—persons who are either foreign-born (26.8 million) or U.S.-born children of immigrants (27.8 million)—making up one-fifth of the national total.
- 4) Immigrant children and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. child population. They account for nearly 20 percent of all American children. In 1997, there were 3 million foreign-born children under the age of 18 and nearly 11 million U.S.-born children living with at least one foreign-born parent.
- 5) There were 26.3 million immigrants in the U.S. in 1998. No other nation has ever attempted to incorporate over 26 million newcomers into its society. (Rumbaut 1999, 8–9)

Data also suggest that

- Thirty-two million Americans speak a language other than English at home (qtd. in Grinberg and Goldfarb 1998, 131).
- Between 1996–2005, the number of 18–24 year-olds is projected to rise from 24.7 million to 29.1 million. . . (this) can be expected to create “painful transitions in the labor market” (Gladieux and Swail 1998, 112).

This *crossing borders* diversity will increasingly join the *crossing classes* diversity of existing minority populations on American community-college campuses. According to 1995 U.S. Census Bureau projections:

- By 2000, 11.3 percent of the population in this country will be from Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano/a backgrounds; 12.8 percent of the population will be from African-American backgrounds (qtd. in Grinberg and Goldfarb, 1998, 131).
- By 2000, 15.1 percent of the population will live in poverty; 22 percent of children under the age of 18 will live in poverty; 30.6 percent of Hispanic or Latin -origin persons will live in poverty; 33.1 percent of Black persons will live in poverty (Baca-Zinn and Eitzen 1996).

America’s indigenous people continue to live on society’s fringe, believing that education has been used “to erase their heritage, language and religion.” The high-school dropout rate for Native Americans is 17 percent, higher than all other minority groups, and suicide in the 13–19 age group is quadruple the national rate (“Native Americans” 1999, 1).

The demographer Samuel Kipp projects toward the year 2010:

While the pool of high school graduates and college students will increase substantially, the only thing that will be traditional about this growing cohort will be its age. The nation’s college-age population will be even more ethnically diverse than the general population because of differential birthrates and migration patterns. Furthermore, the most rapid growth will occur among groups traditionally more likely to drop out of school, less likely to enroll in college-preparatory course work, less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to enroll in college, and least likely to persist to earn a baccalaureate degree. (qtd. in Gladieux and Swail 1998, 112)

And Gladieux and Swail (1998, 112) conclude,

If demography is destiny colleges have their work cut out for them. . . America is still an ongoing experiment in diversity, and higher education’s part of the social contract has been to extend the possibility of a better life to new groups in society. It will be in the enlightened self-interest of institutions to invest more heavily in partnerships with school systems to expand the potential college-bound—and qualified pool. Reaching out to help motivate and prepare more students for college is a long-term investment that will pay off for higher education and the nation.

Community colleges that want to do more than merely mask and reproduce social structural inequality will need to reassert their original mission as America’s democracy colleges. Community colleges need to define their own future and not have it assigned to them by elite universities. They can do this by taking the following strategic actions:

- Providing more support for K–12 schools
- Developing effective pre-college programs that can prepare students for success in general or for vocational/technical education
- Recommitting to increasing and successful university transfer
- Continuing to provide high-quality training for twenty-first-century careers

- Increasing substantially their commitments to preparing students for lives of engaged citizenship in the world's dominant democracy

Taking Strategic Action: The Role of Service-Learning

Service-learning is a teaching and learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility. Service-learning enhances what is taught in the college by extending student learning beyond the classroom and providing opportunities for students to use newly acquired skill and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities. At the national level, the Corporation for National Service's Learn and Serve America program has been the primary supporter of service-learning in K–16 schools, while Campus Compact has provided both a national- and state-level infrastructure for service-learning in higher education.

Both these national organizations have encouraged greater interaction between K–12 schools, community colleges, and universities. In recent years there has been some programmatic movement from a direct services approach where college students provide in-class or after-school tutoring and enrichment programs at K–12 schools, to a “collaborative model” where K–16 students partner to plan, develop, and implement service-learning programs addressing identified needs in their own communities.

Clearly one of the greatest needs in nearly every American urban, suburban, and rural community is for school reform, so that all students achieve newly established or evolving content and performance standards. Service-learning can play three specific roles in school reform:

- As pedagogy it can help students learn experientially and achieve specific competencies, such as critical thinking, time management, decision making, problem solving, and interpersonal communication.²
- As curriculum it can help students develop personal character and learn how to behave as better citizens, eager to participate in a truly democratic and equitable school and community.
- As partnership it can kindle the recognition of the intrinsic value of each student and channel student efforts into affective support and academic success for younger students and those at risk of falling behind.

Back on the community-college campus, through well-focused and deep reflection, shared in written form with their instructors or verbally with other students, and combined with a multi-semester commitment to service, students can explore the underlying causes of educational inequality. Further, they can become civically engaged, acquiring the democratic skills to press the citizenry at large and numerous levels of government for educational equality. Through well-structured, school-based service-learning and campus-based reflection and leadership, community-college students from across the ethnic and income spectrums will be actively engaged in creating democratic and equitable schools and will learn how to create a democratic and equitable America.

Thus developing strong service-learning programs can be a very effective learning strategy for community-college students, particularly those planning on teaching careers, while also helping the college support success for all students in K–12 schools. These pre-education students can also play a strong tutoring role in well-developed pre-college preparation programs. Through service-learning, pre-college students can develop general education skills in critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information technology, and “understanding self and community”³ by providing meaningful service to community-based organizations and reflecting on their service both verbally and in writing. (See Figure 1.)

In this model, general education becomes the “landing pad” for K–12 and pre-college students, as well as a “launching pad” for college-ready students as they aspire to university transfer, engaged citizenship, and twenty-first-century careers. As a capstone to K–12 service-learning initiatives, such as those of the Education Commission of the States, a two-year general education curriculum for civic responsibility, for the work of democracy, can be viewed anthropologically as the American *rite de passage* to a life and career of engaged citizenship.

Conclusion

The fact that one out of every two community colleges is developing service-learning programs attests to the willingness of community colleges to try new learning strategies to promote both university transfer and vocational/technical education. Some community colleges are developing multi-semester service-learning programs that explicitly link academic learning, personal growth, career opportunities, and civic responsibility. Others have worked with their primary transfer university to develop service-learning connections between general education and major courses so that students come to expect service-learning across their undergraduate experience. This latter approach is strongly encouraged, for as Brint and Karabel (1989, 228) point out, “the current movement to revitalize transfer programs is more compatible with democratic ideals than is further vocationalism.”

While it is undoubtedly true that university education will likely lead to greater social and economic mobility, it is also important to argue that this is not the true measure of American individualism. Service-learning, at its core, and American higher education in general should prepare students for lives of critical inquiry, active civic participation and leadership as socially responsible members of their diverse communities, locally, nationally, and globally. This learning outcome is surely not solely achieved at American universities. In fact, it might be better achieved by community-college students who have lived the structural inequality and refuse to have it masked any further.

Ultimately, community colleges, in taking stock at the turn of a new century, have to determine their own developmental trajectory. By developing sustainable service-learning partnerships with K–12 schools, community-based organizations, and universities, community colleges can genuinely democratize higher education, the communities they serve, and the students they educate. These students, returning to their own communities, or moving into new ones, will be prepared for lives of critical inquiry and not active participation, refusing to accept the perpetuation and masking of social structural inequality wherever they see and experience it. And most importantly, they will work as civically engaged citizens to help America better fulfill its promise of equal opportunity for all.

Notes

1. The evolution of “junior” to “community” colleges is a long and fascinating story in itself. See Witt, et al., 1994.
2. See report of the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills Standards (SCANS), 1991. Employment & Training Administration. <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/>
3. A General Education Skill Standard at University of Hawaii, Kapi’olani Community College.

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