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ABSTRACT

The wide variety of management approaches (zero-based budgeting, decision support systems, etc.) that have emerged in recent decades are reviewed. The questions of whether strategic management is simply another fad, and whether it can work in colleges and universities, are discussed. The development of strategic management is traced, both in theory and in practice, in the corporate setting and in higher education. One university's movement toward strategic management is described, and the emergent literature on the experience of other institutions in this area is reviewed. Such evidence, analyzed on the basis of theories about organizational decision-making and effectiveness, suggests that strategic management, properly conceived and applied, can and does succeed in colleges and universities. Contains 29 references. (Author/KM)

Can Strategic Management Work in Colleges and Universities?

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Teresa Karolewski
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
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Can Strategic Management Work

in Colleges and Universities?

Abstract

This paper begins by reviewing the wide variety of management approaches (zero based budgeting, decision support systems, and so on) which have emerged in recent decades. Is strategic management simply another fad? Can it work in colleges and universities?

We trace the development of strategic management, both in theory and in practice, in the corporate setting and within higher education. The paper describes in some detail one university's movement toward strategic management, and also reviews the emergent literature on the experience of other institutions with this relatively new concept. Such evidence, analyzed on the basis of theories about organizational decision-making and effectiveness, suggests that strategic management--properly conceived and applied--can and does succeed in colleges and universities.

Can Strategic Management Work

in Colleges and Universities?

Management and Strategic Management

Theory versus Reality

How is a college or university managed? As is any organization--by people making and implementing decisions. Classical theorists such as John Dewey saw this as an orderly process: defining a problem, describing alternatives, relating means to ends, and making a calculated choice among alternatives. But while such classical models have value (they can, for example, help structure our thinking about managerial decision-making), they can hardly cope with the confusion, turbulence, ambiguity, misinformation, and other complexities which mark real-world managerial problems (McCall and Kaplan 1985).

More recent theorists, recognizing the limitations of classical theories of organizational decision-making, have given us now-popular analogies such as garbage cans and anarchies (March and Olsen 1976), turbulent streams (Burns 1978) and patterns in streams (Mintzberg 1978), and mazes (Simon 1979). Why do we find such contemporary formulations more acceptable than classical assumptions about rationality? Probably because they sound a note of reality, a recognition that organizational decision-making seldom involves clear choices, logical analysis, and discrete actions. Important decisions typically are marked by competing goals, uncertain means-ends relationships, personal and political conflicts, incomplete knowledge, time pressures, standard operating procedures, miscommunication, prejudice and preconceptions, a changing environment, and so on.

Perhaps rationality is more usefully thought of as a goal than as a description of organizational decision-making. That is, in principle we all may endorse "consistent, value maximizing choice within specified constraints" (Allison 1971, p. 30) or "deciding what is correct behavior by relating consequences systematically to objectives" (March 1976, p. 70). But we also recognize (as Allison and March make clear) that the requirements of theoretically conceived rationality are requirements which managers in many situations are unable to meet. In fact, institutions of higher education are often cited as prime examples of organizations which have difficulty making decisions rationally (Cyert and March 1963; Chaffee 1983). Simply put, the problem for colleges and universities thus becomes one of making decisions, allocating resources, and working toward goals in a theoretically imperfect world.

Alphabet Soup

That problem has been addressed by any number of techniques which have been promoted to assist managers make and implement decisions which can lead to established, desirable outcomes. Over the past three to four decades, these have included Theory Z (based on Japanese management methods such as quality circles), intrapreneuring (encouraging entrepreneurial activities within organizations), MBO (management by objectives), the one minute manager, managing by walking around, zero-based budgeting, T-groups (encounter-type seminars and sensitivity training), transactional leadership and Theory Y (both built on the idea of employee participation), and the Boston Consulting Group's portfolio matrix (cows, stars, dogs, and question marks). We have also witnessed a host of management science tools such as PERT (program evaluation review technique), PPBS (planning, programming and budgeting systems), Gantt charts, critical path methods, decision support systems, and the like.

On the one hand, we can applaud the development of those diverse technologies as an expansion of the ways in which managers think and act. On the other hand, these techniques can be and have been subjected to stinging criticisms rooted both in theory and in practice. From a contemporary theoretical point of view, most of these management decision-making tools are flawed because by and large they are based upon, and reinforce, overly simplistic assumptions about goals and choices. For example, most are built on the implicit assumption that organizations have a set of known, consistent goals, and that goal development and choice occur separately (March 1976). From a more pragmatic point of view, managers have deprecated these techniques as "fads," "hollow symbols," "gimmicks," "monkey see monkey do," "goofy," and even "stupid" (Byrne 1986). There is a powerful perception that in many cases such management fads should not be taken too seriously. Two years after the publication of In Search of Excellence (Peters and Waterman 1982), a review of the 43 corporations heralded in that wildly popular book as America's best-run companies found at least 14 to have stumbled badly (Business Week 1984).

To what extent is strategic management another quick fix, subject to the same criticisms as other fads? The remainder of this paper considers that question, and attempts to show not that strategic management always works, but why we believe that it can succeed.

Strategic Management: Concept and Context

The concept of strategic management emerged from the business literature in the 1970s; it has been defined as a "management process or system...that links strategic planning and decision-making with the day-to-day business of operational management" (Gluck, Kaufman and Walleck 1982, p. 10). The relative immaturity of strategic management as a concept is reflected in the four paradigm shifts which policy-making has undergone since the turn of the century (Hofer et al. 1980). These four stages have been labeled policy-making, policy and planning, strategy, and strategic management.

The transition from "mom and pop" shops in which just one or two individuals oversaw all functional areas of a firm to an era of expanded, multiple product lines and distribution systems required the development of "policies" to guide functional managers. Policy making, though typically performed in an ad hoc fashion, became regarded as management's principal task. Through the 1930s and 1940s, dramatic environmental forces, including the depression and World War II, technological changes, swings in consumer demand, and early signs of growing international competition, required a shift from ad hoc, reactive policy making to planned policy formulation. The third stage in the evolution of the strategic management paradigm is the introduction of strategy to policy and planning -- the dynamic coordination of all functional areas with the capacity to focus on altering core perceptions about a business and its relationship to the environment. Finally, the strategic management paradigm represents the intersection of the strategic planning process -- mission determination, goal formulation, identification of alternatives, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategic control and evaluation -- and general administrative functions -- coordination of functional area activities, development of operating decisions, external relations and negotiations.

Drawing heavily upon work in other disciplines as well as earlier experiences with formal planning, the idea of strategic management in higher education gained popularity in the early 1980s--most notably with the publication of Keller's 1983 volume on academic strategy. But strategic management in both corporate and higher education settings has been the target of a number of criticisms. In the business arena it has been argued that an obsession with strategy can make corporations insensitive to important, but sometimes hard to identify, changes in consumer tastes, technology, or competition. Pascale (1982) cites instances such as Honda's entry into the American motorcycle market and Yamaha's entry into the musical instrument market as decisions which would have made little sense in terms of typical strategic management criteria (i.e., both companies entered mature markets against apparently well-established competitors) but which nonetheless have been solid successes. Similar instances can be found in higher education. For example, even though surveys have consistently shown that returning adult students are interested in traditional classroom courses, it was the creation of alternative forms of adult education over the past two decades which led to a phenomenal explosion in participation in lifelong learning (Cross 1988). One could argue that this change, which Cross credits largely to imaginative, grass-roots educational entrepreneurs, is in many ways the antithesis of adherence to a guiding strategic vision.

Also, a recent review of planning experiences at a sample of institutions across the United States (Schmidtlein and Milton 1988) concluded that there is a considerable gap between the current literature's often optimistic prescriptions about formal planning processes and the cynicism, resistance, and confusion which oftimes accompany campus planning.

Assessing Effectiveness

Such observations suggest that if we are to evaluate the success of strategic management, we must have the ability to evaluate effectiveness. However, it is difficult to assess objectively the efficacy of any management technique in either the corporate world or in academe. Methodologically, it is virtually impossible to control for situational factors, such as changing technologies or the entry of new competitors, which can in specific cases have a greater influence than particular management methods upon organizational performance. In terms of values, it is difficult to develop standards which balance internal considerations (how well is a firm doing for itself?) with the interests of external constituencies (how well is a firm serving society?).

Effectiveness is an especially tricky concept in higher education, which is in many ways a non-market sector. First, competitive measures of performance such as sales and return on investment which are built in for market organizations are much weaker for non-market services such as education or health care. Second, in the absence of market indicators, there may be substantial disagreement about what, in socially-oriented organizations, we should be trying to measure. For example, should it be what an organization does (how many students are taught or how many patients are treated) or the quality of its performance (how much students learn or how much patients' health improves)? After reviewing the literature on effectiveness, Scott (1981) concludes that generalizable criteria for explaining organizational effectiveness are not available, and that we must be careful to reach conclusions which are supported by the measures that we choose. Similar suggestions in the higher education literature (especially Cameron 1978, and a special 1985 issue of the Review of Higher Education) indicate that caution is particularly applicable to the assessment of effectiveness in colleges and universities. Scott (1981, p. 337) states that "The criteria for evaluating organizational effectiveness...are always normative and often controversial, and they are as varied as the theoretical models used." With such caveats in mind, consider the following model as a framework for analyzing and evaluating strategic management in higher education.

A Model for Analyzing Strategic Management

Gluck, Kaufman, and Walleck (1980) have proffered a four-phase conceptual model which assists in the evaluation of an organization's planning maturity and effectiveness. According to the model, as an organization moves away from phase I and toward phase IV it increases its decision-making effectiveness. In phase I -- basic financial planning -- formal planning equates to the development of an annual budget. Typically, no explicitly articulated strategy exists except, perhaps, in the mind of the organization's top executives. Under forecast based planning (phase II), planning becomes multi-year in orientation and incorporates modeling techniques for extrapolating the future from current trends. Although limited by the predictability of such models, forecast based planning does expand the planning horizon and can lead to the strengthening of an organization's competitive position through more effective long-term resource allocation. However, constrained by perceptions of static resources and current capabilities, forecast based planning can become deterministic and routine.

Gluck, Kaufman, and Walleck contend that phase III -- externally oriented planning -- provides a quantum improvement in effectiveness. "The most significant way in which Phase III differs from Phase II is that...planners are expected to offer a number of alternatives to top management" (p. 158). Resource acquisition and allocation are dynamic, as the organization is able to improve its "fit" between opportunities and strengths. While promoting an organization that "thinks strategically," the phase III organization also encourages making decisions about basic, competitive directions deep within the organization, often without top level participation. In phase IV, an organization combines strategic planning and operational decision making into a single process, as it strives to create the future. Cutting across organizational boundaries, strategic management reinforces individual unit commitment to broader organization strategy. "Instead of marginal improvements...managers [faculty, department heads, deans] set for themselves ambitious goals that if accomplished will lead to a sustainable competitive advantage for their company" (p. 161). In the following sections, we trace one institution's movement toward strategic management over the past two decades. To provide some context for the case, we begin by briefly reviewing broader directions suggested in the higher education literature for the same period.

Higher Education and Stringency: Three Phases of Response

Higher education in the United States has flourished for the past two centuries in an essentially nurturing environment. Historically, this environment has encouraged nearly uninterrupted and unchallenged growth. That abruptly changed in the early 1970s--what Chaffee (1984) calls a "shift point" for higher education--when economic, demographic, and political forces combined to suddenly alter the comfortable and hospitable circumstances which most colleges and universities had previously enjoyed. Beginning around 1970, higher education heard a chorus of newly strident voices clamoring about retrenchment, stringency, uncertainty, reduction, and decline.

Referencing an extensive literature, Dooris and Mortimer (forthcoming) characterize the responses of higher education in the United States to the environmental stringency of the past two decades into three phases: horizontal reduction; vertical reallocation; and strategy and choice. It was around 1970 that many campuses moved from a perspective of managing growth to one of managing, at best, stability. The predominant theme for campus response was the management of decline, and the initial response of many institutions was an attempt to hold the line or reduce expenditures horizontally.

Around 1975, the focus of campus responses broadened to include a greater future orientation and the enhancement of institutional flexibility. Vertical reallocation--holding down expenditure growth while making selective choices about institutions and programs--became the foundation of differentially applied budget reallocations.

Dooris and Mortimer describe the third phase as one in which higher education is today making the transition from a closed system, internal perspective to an open system, external perspective. This third stage, strategic management, is also more proactive than the earlier decremental approaches, and relies upon concepts such as definition of mission, environmental monitoring, and assessment of internal strengths and weaknesses to establish an institution's direction and guide its decision processes.

Case History

This case describes how, from 1970 through 1988, a single institution-- The Pennsylvania State University--adapted the decision-making processes it used for planning and resource allocation [1].

Environmental Turbulence

1970 saw the end of an era for Penn State. During a single presidential administration, from 1956 to 1970, the university experienced rapid overall growth--the student population nearly tripled in size (from 17,000 to 48,000), the faculty nearly doubled in size (from 1,600 to 3,000) and the total annual budget quintupled (from $34 million to $177 million). This growth was supported with generous increases in state appropriations; increases for 1965-66 through 1969-70 were 21 percent, 31 percent, 22 percent, 22 percent, and 17 percent.

However, the 1970s brought the beginning of a general economic recession which hit Pennsylvania hard, and the state went from record budget surpluses to near-bankruptcy. By the late 1970s, Penn State was receiving minimal increases in its state appropriation; for 1976-77 through 1980-81 annual increases were four percent, zero, five percent, seven percent, and eight percent. In addition, since 1970 Penn State had also been trying to cope with rapid enrollment increases. From 1970-71 through 1988-89 Penn State's enrollments climbed by 50.4 percent. The significant externally-based stringency facing the institution has been exacerbated by difficult fundamental shifts within the university as well. For example, from 1971 through 1988, enrollments in business more than doubled and enrollments in engineering rose by over 50 percent, while enrollments in education were nearly cut in half.

Horizontal Reduction

The initial response of Penn State, like many institutions, to the stringency of the early 1970s was to attempt to reduce or hold the line on expenditures horizontally. From 1971 through 1976, the university utilized annual across-the-board budget reductions for all units, looking for savings through position freezes, the collapse of vacant positions, and decremental budgeting. While horizontal reduction can be an effective short-term tactic, Penn State's administrators realized that at some point it would become unsound and irresponsible to continue proportional budget cuts for, say, both the College of Education and the College of Engineering.

Vertical Reallocation

In 1977, the university implemented a tactical approach to holding down expenditure growth while making selective choices about individual units and programs. The university adopted a rolling 5-year budget planning process geared toward differentially applied internal reallocations.. From 1977 through 1982, the average budget cut for all academic units was 4.7 percent, but budget decisions ranged from increases of over 20 percent to a cut of 12.5 percent. The focus of the process, as described by Lozier and Althouse (1983), was on reallocation through "careful medium range planning." This approach was characteristic of the state of the art of how campuses were responding to stringency--through vertical reallocation--in the mid-seventies to early eighties.

Strategic Planning

In 1983, Penn State moved to the third phase of institutional response, implementing a comprehensive program of strategic planning. The program retained from earlier processes the concept of selectively reallocating resources internally. However, strategic planning has been more externally-oriented; more explicit about the university's long-range aspirations; more aggressive about building upon strengths; and more committed to a participatory process for addressing cross-organizational issues.

In initiating this program, the Board of Trustees stated that it would be driven by the need to set "priorities...likely to propel The Pennsylvania State University to a place among the best comprehensive, public universities of the nation" (The Pennsylvania State University, 1984). Compare this to the essentially defensive nature--primarily geared toward minimizing the erosion of important programs and units--of the earlier phases of recycling and reduction. The strategic planning program also took an external, open systems perspective, and it was very much based on the theme of building upon existing strengths. Both Penn State as a whole and each of the respective planning units (for example, each college within the university) initiated and have continued a systematic and ongoing evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Specially appointed strategic study groups, with heavy representation of faculty, have been used to address planning issues which cross organizational boundaries (for example, looking at disciplinary issues involving departments in two or more colleges). The university has a single annual process for both planning and budgeting, so strategic planning priorities are directly linked to resource allocation decisions.

Penn State now has five years' experience with strategic planning (1983-84 through 1987-88). A vital outcome of the process has been the strategic enhancement of selected existing programs through differential allocation of resources. In addition to guiding reallocation decisions for existing units, strategic planning has resulted in major initiatives such as the following:

* Creation of a new Biotechnology Institute;
* Creation of a new School of Communications;
* Establishment of a new College of Health and Human Development;
* Initiation of a six year, $300 million fund-raising campaign;
* Discontinuance of specific graduate and undergraduate programs, and of an entire academic department;
* Establishment of a Division of Technology within the feeder system of branch campuses;
* Initiation of a two-year comprehensive study on the status of women at the university and implementation of many of the recommendations;
* Reorganization of numerous other administrative and academic operations (e.g., student services and academic support programs, academic computing, research and the graduate school).

The extent to which strategic management has encompassed the decision-making processes of the university can be seen further in the extension of strategy to facilities planning. Priorities both for internally-funded renovations and for development of the university's capital budget request to the Commonwealth are guided by academic and support unit goal setting.

Also, the university has taken a leading role among the state-related universities in Pennsylvania to explore with the Commonwealth alternative funding approaches for increasing the state's commitment to higher education. While it is not clear how far such alternatives will be pursued, this development is an example of how strategic planning, with its external orientation, has opened up the boundaries of possible management choices.

The Strategic Management Model and Penn State

Penn State's movement from horizontal reduction through vertical reallocation to strategic planning can be assessed in light of the four-phase strategic decision making model proposed by Gluck, Kaufman, and Walleck (1980) outlined above. During the period of horizontal reduction, decisions focused upon annual budgeting and resource shortfall. Through decremental budgeting in most units, fiscal solvency, the university's top priority, was achieved. Although a traditional long-range "academic policy plan" was adopted by the Board of Trustees in 1972, there was no institution-wide sense of strategy.

Beginning in 1977, Penn State moved into phase II of the decision making model. By projecting income and expenditures over a five-year period, the university identified financial gaps and distributed the targeted budget reductions differentially in both academic and administrative support areas. The future that was predicted was one of static resource development which constrained the ability of academic leaders to promote a vision of a "new" or different Penn State. However, during this period several funding mechanisms, including the establishment of a provost's revolving fund and several matching fund programs, were instituted to support qualitative initiatives proposed by the academic units (Lozier and Althouse 1983). Another long-range plan, A Perspective on the '80s, was issued in 1980 which included an "agenda for action" that led to several critical organizational realignments in the university.

The 1983-84 academic year was a period devoted to "planning to plan." During that period a Strategic Planning Guide was developed which set forth a process to be followed university-wide -- all locations, both academic and administrative support areas. The Guide included a comprehensive macro-level external assessment of economic, political, demographic, and competitive trends which provided a rubric for all units to develop more specific micro-level assessments for their individual units. The strategic issues that were addressed over the next four years led to the appointment of a number of strategic study groups and in some cases the reorganizations cited above. These changes were designed to improve the fit between the university's strengths and external funding and program opportunities. A conscious effort was made by university leadership to retain the finest faculty who were receiving offers from other institutions, faculty who would have left Penn State during the 1970s. The Campaign for Penn State has allowed the university to move from just two fully-endowed chairs to over 20. Utilizing such phase III model indicators as "thinking strategically," "evaluating alternatives," "allocating resources dynamically," and "providing planning with an external orientation," Penn State's current decision making approach closely resembles the characteristics of a phase III organization, and to some degree has integrated strategic planning into the operational management of the university (phase IV). Whether Penn State has fully achieved the strategic management level of decision making effectiveness, or ever will, cannot be precisely measured; as Gluck, Kaufman, and Walleck (1980) have pointed out, few organizations have attained that level of decision making (p. 158).

Interpretation

This paper focuses on one institution's experience and assesses that experience based upon a single theoretical model of strategic management (Gluck, Kaufman and Walleck 1980). As in any case study, one must be careful to avoid reaching general conclusions which are not supported by the analysis. However, other institutions have pursued strategic planning or strategic management programs, especially since the publication of Keller's book in 1983, and at least some broader evaluation is possible.

On the one hand, as discussed earlier in this paper, observers have pointed out some of the pitfalls which can accompany strategic management. Schmidtlein and Milton (1988) describe--we believe very accurately and usefully--the dissatisfaction and cynicism which have marked strategic planning programs at some colleges and universities.

On the other hand, there are strong signals, both from theorists such as Gluck and from experiences such as Penn State's, that strategic management must be an ongoing, flexible, long-term process--as opposed to what may be a more typical highly structured, overly rational planning sequence of selecting objectives, defining strategies, and implementing strategies. We suspect that more of the cases examined by Schmidtlein and Milton may have involved one-time strategic planning, narrowly defined, than true ongoing strategic management.

A study comparable to Schmidtlein and Milton's reached somewhat different conclusions about participants' satisfaction with strategic planning at their institutions. Meredith, Lenning and Cope (1988) studied 34 institutions actively engaged in strategic planning. The institutions were classified on the basis of whether their process represented "bona fide" strategic planning (based upon self-reported characteristics of the planning process). The researchers found that respondents (typically vice-presidents or directors of planning) who engaged in bona fide strategic planning reported greater satisfaction with the effort and believed that they were getting better results than counterparts at institutions doing less bona fide planning. They state (Meredith, Lenning and Cope 1988, p. 10): "We believe our results support those administrators (and some faculty activists) who have urged and adopted the strategic planning concept."

The Schmidtlein and Milton results and the Meredith, Lenning and Cope findings suggest that participant satisfaction may depend not as much on <u>whether</u> strategic planning is undertaken, but on <u>how</u>. This is consistent with the following (Gilmore and Lozier 1987, p. 21): "The problems often found with strategic planning applications--over-fragmentation, paper driven, control oriented, mechanistic and modeling dependant, and failure to account for organizational culture and constituency groups--are more the result of how we apply strategic planning principles than with the basic constructs themselves."

Both the Schmidtlein and Milton study and the Meredith, Lenning and Cope study are based primarily upon subjective interpretations. Their methodology reflects the difficulty, noted earlier in this paper, of evaluating the effectiveness of strategic decision-making by objective criteria. One exemplary effort to utilize objective measures is described by Clugston (1988) in a case study of how strategic planning affected resource allocation decisions in a research university. Clugston's regression results showed small but significant effects, in which strategic priorities explained about three percent of the variation in budget allocations to departments. He concluded that strategic planning did make a difference.

It is not surprising that the magnitude of the effect reported by Clugston was basically on the margin, given the relatively small portion of funds which are typically available for discretionary allocation. This does not imply that a shift of three percent is unimportant. We believe that even modest changes are cumulative, and that decisions about discretionary funds, over time, can help an institution in pursuit of a long-term vision.

It can even be argued that such gradualism is not only necessary but desirable. For example, Quinn (1980) combines theory with examples drawn from business and government to make a convincing case for "logical incrementalism." In brief, Quinn argues that successful management is often tentative, gradual, flexible, open to feedback and change, and adaptive. For that reason, Quinn believes that major changes in strategy should be allowed to emerge and evolve over time. Scott (1981, p. 281) makes a similar point about the importance of permitting "experiential learning" -- the idea that while managers start out with broad goals, those goals (along with strategies to achieve them) must be allowed to be shaped and modified in response to environmental feedback. Similarly, Hayes (1985), expanding on an idea of Bricker, notes that a strategic manager is much like a traveler lost in a swamp with a constantly changing topography. In contrast to the traveler going from point A to point B on an interstate highway, the traveler in the swamp is better served by a compass which indicates the general direction to follow, and which allows the traveler to pursue unique opportunities and overcome unexpected obstacles during the course of the journey.

Concluding Comments

Strategic management is a relatively new concept even in the corporate world, and higher education has only moved toward strategic management over the past five to ten years. Relatively few, if any, colleges or universities have as yet had enough experience to permit a conclusive statement about either the success or failure of this concept.

Another decade may be needed to decide the extent to which the goals of strategic management have been realized. But we believe the evidence, in the case study described in this paper and in the emerging literature, indicates that strategic management--when properly conceived and applied--can and does succeed in colleges and universities.

NOTE

1. Penn State in 1988-89 enrolls 69,000 students at a network of 22 campuses across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Approximately 37,000 students are located at the University Park campus; 24,000 at 17 two-year feeder campuses; and the remainder at locations such as the medical school and upper division/graduate campuses. The university has a 1988-89 total operating budget of just over one billion dollars.

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