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ABSTRACT

This paper explores community perceptions of students and faculty involved in service learning and campus outreach initiatives, examining how communities and campuses engage in service activities; how the service mission of higher education is perceived; whether service learning students help or hinder community agencies; and how partnerships between campuses and their communities can be enhanced. In the first part of the two-phase study, 65 directors of community service agencies in four towns in a rural Northwestern state were surveyed; questions covered general background information, overall perceptions of the campus, and questions related to student service providers. In the second phase, follow-up interviews were conducted with 30 agency personnel from a single community. The study found that communities generally have positive perceptions of campuses in their area; that there are challenges and benefits in working with service learning students; and that agency personnel want more coordination and communication with campus counterparts. Some concluding recommendations are offered: (1) communication lines need to be opened; (2) campuses need to open their doors to community partners; (3) campuses and communities need to jointly approach issues associated with recruitment, training, and retention of service providers; and (4) the purpose and expectations of campus-based service initiatives need to be clearly defined. (Contains approximately 35 references.) (CH)

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Community Perspectives on Student Volunteerism and Service Learning

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Community Perspectives on Student Volunteerism and Service Learning

Introduction

Research and information pertaining to service learning continue to expand as higher education institutions look to service learning as a means to enhance their service role and student learning. Existing literature makes clear that service learning engages students in meaningful service and provides learning experiences to enhance classroom teaching (Astin & Sax, 1998). Research on student impacts also points out that service learning enhances students' psychosocial and moral reasoning abilities (Boss, 1994; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994). Faculty also benefit from involvement in service learning through the application of theory and knowledge to local problem solving (Lynton, 1995). What is less clear, however, is the community's perspective on campus-based service learning initiatives.

Service learning typically has a twofold goal: to meet community needs and to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. Further, it is a way for campuses to enliven their public service missions and to become engaged in the life of the local community. Successful service learning collaborations between campuses and communities rely on equitable partnerships between both parties to meet the above goals (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996).

Hollander (1998) elaborates on the "engaged campus" as a place that blurs boundaries between campus and community and knowledge and practice: "The engaged campus is not just located in a community; it is intimately connected to the public purposes and aspirations of community life itself" (Hollander, p. 3). Service learning is a means to authentically engage campuses in community life. A recent review of the current literature on service learning, however, reveals a general lack of attention to the community partner in service learning (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997). Communities are an implied beneficiary of service efforts, but outcomes and benefits are absent in the

service learning literature. If the community continues to be overlooked in service learning research, then service learning may be another example of an “ivory tower” approach to community “partnerships” where the community is a laboratory for colleges and universities and not a true partner (Holland & Gelman, 1998).

Service learning originally sought to develop a win-win-win relationship between the faculty, student, and recipients of service because principles underlying service learning are deeply rooted in *both* the campus and community perspectives (Sigmon, 1979). Yet the research that emanates from the recent interest in service learning tends to emphasize impacts related to student learning and pedagogical issues rather than the community. This is not to suggest that service learning arrangements exploit community partners; however, a review of the literature does suggest that community partners are overlooked in research related to service learning (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997).

The purpose of research is to guide effective practice. Thus, the research on service learning needs to reflect both the original goals of *service* and *learning*. If we, as researchers of issues related to service learning, continue to give limited attention to the community perspective, then we simply perpetuate the hierarchical relationships between campuses and their surrounding communities that service learning seeks to remediate. By failing to look at communities as active partners, those involved in service learning risk maintaining the status quo.

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the community’s perceptions of students and faculty involved in service learning and campus outreach initiatives. In addition, the paper provides specific recommendations for making service learning an endeavor that is marked by reciprocity and collaboration. The research questions that direct this inquiry are as follows: (1) How do communities and campuses come together to engage in service activities? (2) How do communities perceive the service mission of higher education as manifested in relations with faculty, administrators, students, and campuses as a whole? (3) Are service learning students a help or hindrance to community

agencies? (4) How can partnerships between campuses and their communities be enhanced?

Before addressing these questions, we review the service learning literature to demonstrate the need for research on community perceptions of service learning. We then provide an overview of the research design used to complete the study, the study's findings and, finally, offer recommendations for future service learning policy and practice.

Literature Review

Given the increased interest and awareness in service learning on many college campuses throughout the country, research related to service learning abounds. In recent years, books and edited volumes have been published about community service (Rhoads, 1997), service-oriented faculty development (Howard, 1993), service learning concepts and practices (Jacoby, 1996), and the history of service learning (Stanton, Giles & Cruz, 1999). In addition, there are several journals that are dedicated to service learning (e.g., *The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*) or that regularly devote issues to service learning (e.g., *Education and Urban Society*, *American Behavioral Scientist*).

A review of the literature recently completed by Ward and Wolf-Wendel (in press) identifies four distinct categories of published work regarding service learning: (1) Schema, principles, and theories; (2) "how to" and campus project profiles; (3) motivations for getting involved in service learning; and (4) effects of service learning.

Publications within the realm of the first category, *schema, principles, and theories of service learning*, include works that define the essentials of service learning, provide a framework for good practice, and ground actions in theory (Jacoby, 1996; Gugerty & Swezey, 1996; Cotton & Stanton, 1990; and Howard, 1993). In addition to outlining principles of effective service learning, literature from this category points out the need for community voice and a reciprocal relationship between campus and

community. Community service is recognized as a means for advocating social change and students as active change agents.

Literature published within the *“how to” and campus project profiles* category focuses on how to do service learning and provides examples of campuses and classes that have established programs. Generally, the literature in this category concentrates on individual campuses with existing programs serving as models for new or expanding programs. This area of literature has grown steadily with the increasing interest in service learning on campuses (Galura, Meiland, Ross, Callan & Smith, 1993; Galura, Howard, Waterhouse, & Ross, 1995; Howard, 1993; Kraft & Swadener, 1994; Sigmon, 1996).

Typically, these articles place an emphasis on describing service learning from the campus perspective. This narrow view prohibits the campus, faculty, and students from moving beyond a campus-centered approach that utilizes communities as laboratories instead of engaging the values supported by the principles of service learning, which include:

1. Those being served control the service(s) provided;
2. Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions;
3. Those who receive service are also learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned (Sigmon, 1979).

The third category of the literature examines *motivations to participate in community service*. Publications in this category offer useful frameworks for examining the relationship between student service-learners and those who are the recipients of service (Morton, 1995; Rhoads, 1997; Serow, 1991; Radest, 1993). For example, Morton offers three different paradigms of service -- charity, project, and social change. The charity paradigm focuses on the provider and identifies “the deficits of those served” (p.21). The project paradigm emphasizes needs, problems, and solutions through service.

The social change paradigm is rooted in processes -- “building relationships among or within stakeholder groups and creating a learning environment that continually peels away the layers of the onion to reveal ‘root causes’” (p. 22). The social change model focuses on empowerment and emphasizes “doing with” rather than “doing for.”

Morton’s model emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the perspectives of the recipients of the service provided and using this approach to move students from a “feel good” service frame of mind to viewing service as a means for social change.

In the fourth category of literature, *effects of community service*, students are the central focus. While service learning benefits institutions of higher education, the students, and the faculty members involved, members of the community also stand to benefit from service efforts. The voices of community members, however, are almost completely absent from the discourse on the effects of community service.

Overwhelmingly, the studies related to student impacts report that community service and service learning lead to positive outcomes for students. Involvement in service learning can enhance career goals, social responsibility, personal efficacy, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, as well as help students link theory and practice (Astin & Sax, 1998; Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Ehrlich, 1995; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Harkavy, 1992; Hesser, 1995; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Miller, 1994; Serow, 1991; Weschsler & Fogel, 1995).

With the exception of a select number of publications within these categories, the importance of community representation is noted, yet the community voice in terms of how communities benefit from student involvement in service is overwhelmingly absent. Even though successful service learning requires effective collaboration and equal partnerships between campuses and communities for success, the research tends to ignore the community’s perspective on service learning (Egart, 1998; Lisman, 1998). In the following section we describe a research project that offers a community perspective on service learning.

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to learn more about community perceptions of campuses involved in service learning and other service based initiatives. This research is directed by the following questions: How do communities and campuses come together to engage in service activities? How do communities perceive the service mission of higher education as manifested in relations with faculty, administrators, students, and campuses as a whole? Are service learning students a help or hindrance to community agencies? How can partnerships between campuses and their communities be enhanced? To address these questions, we utilized a two-phase research design that considers community perspectives both in breadth and depth.

The first phase of the study utilized a survey¹ of 65 directors of community service agencies in four towns of a rural northwestern state. The criteria for selection for these four communities were based on the presence of a college or university in the community and an established relationship with the community service/service learning/volunteer office on the campus. The survey included general background questions (e.g., How many students are in your agency? What types of activities do students engage in during their service with you?), questions related to overall perceptions of the campus (e.g., Does your agency have a positive perception of the college or university in your community? Do you see higher education as a partner in solving problems your agency faces?), and more direct questions related to student service providers (e.g., Are you satisfied with the work that students do with your agency? How effective are student volunteers in helping your agency meet its goals?). The survey included 16 questions that were both open-ended and Likert-like scales. Data from the Likert items on the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. The content analysis process calls upon researchers to read and re-read the data, identify categories in the data, and then collapse these categories into overall themes (Patton, 1980).

The second phase of the study included follow-up interviews with 30 agency personnel from one community. The purpose of this second phase was to provide a more in-depth community perspective. The interviews were semi-structured and were guided by the use of an interview protocol. The interview guide included specific questions (e.g., How would you describe the student service providers in your agency? What suggestions do you have to improve upon the relationship you have with college/university personnel?), in addition to more open-ended questions (e.g., How would you define service learning? Describe the relationship your agency has with the university?). Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using content analysis to identify common themes. The data for each phase of the study were analyzed separately but yielded common themes as discussed in the following section.

The Findings

The themes that emerge from the data are as follows: (1) Communities overwhelmingly have positive perceptions of campuses in their area; (2) there are both challenges and benefits to working with service learning students; and (3) agency personnel seek more coordination and communication with those with whom they work with from campus.

Communities overwhelmingly have positive perceptions of campuses in their area. This finding is supported by data from both the surveys and interviews. Ninety-two percent of those surveyed have a positive perception of the college or university in their community. In addition, 87 percent agree or strongly agree that the college or university is perceived positively by members of the community.

The content analysis of both the interviews and the open-ended survey items also revealed that community agency personnel who work with students involved in service have positive perceptions of the campus in their area. For example, one respondent noted, “I see higher education as a bridge between our organization and solving the

hunger problems in our community.” Another expounded upon the nature of these perceptions by adding, “We see them [the university] as a partner and a great source for ideas, people, and resources.” When asked to describe the relationship the agencies have with the college or university in their area, many said it is a positive one, as indicated by the statement below.

We are becoming more widely known to the professors due to our contact with the service learning office. This has been most helpful to our program. Having university students has been a positive experience all the way around. It has restored our faith in the future generation.

Another respondent stated, “We are proud to live in a community with such a wonderful university that is so dedicated to helping its community.” Others indicated the relationship with the colleges and universities they work with as more fragmented. They only work with specific departments such as the service learning/volunteer centers and the departments of education and social work.

There are both benefits and challenges to working student service providers.

Several variables from the survey were included to measure the impact and effectiveness of college student service providers. Of the 65 agency directors who responded to the survey, 46 percent indicated they worked with one to 15 college student service-learners in the previous two years, 31 percent worked with 16 to 50, 11 percent worked with 50 to 100, and eight percent worked with more than 100 students. The students primarily engaged in service to help meet the needs of youth, elderly, and people with disabilities.

Overwhelmingly, agency directors had positive perceptions of the students and indicated that students were very effective in meeting their public service mission. Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that students were very effective or effective in helping the agency meet its goals while 13 percent said they were somewhat effective, and three percent believed they were not effective. Eighty-two percent of

respondents were generally satisfied with the work that college students provided. These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Note: *Percentages do not equal 100 due to missing responses

<i># of Service learning students agencies work with</i>	<i>Agency perceptions of effectiveness of students</i>	<i>Agency level of satisfaction with students</i>
46% 1 to 15 students	35% Very Effective	34% Very Satisfied
31% 16 to 50 students	42% Effective	48% Satisfied
11% 50 to 100 students	13% Somewhat Effective	11% Somewhat Satisfied
8 % 100 +	3% Not Effective	2 % Dissatisfied

In describing the advantages of having college student service-learners at their agencies, respondents said the students' enthusiasm, energy, and new ideas/perspectives, as well as their ability to get more done, were positive attributes. Other respondents believed the real-world experience provided valuable learning opportunities for the students, and the students were good role models for youth. Written responses indicate the students' "enthusiasm for life is contagious." Others cited the students' "enthusiastic energy" and declared that "they [the students] bring passion to the job." One respondent explained, "[service learning students] filled a program gap; we couldn't afford all the people that we need to provide individualized services." A director of a nursing home also referred to the one-to-one attention that her clients receive: "The elderly residents in the nursing home just love it when college students come to visit. It's attention the residents would do without if we didn't have the students." With regard to the real-life benefits of service learning, one respondent explained:

They [students] may think of service learning as a valuable service, but I also think it is practical experience. So it's not just getting feel-good strokes because you went and read to some homeless kids; it is because you are getting practical real-life experience. This is why I think it is very important for many disciplines at the university to be involved in service learning.

When asked to characterize the service learning students, agencies described both positive and negative attributes. On the survey, in rank order, agencies described the students as enthusiastic, reliable, skilled, needing supervision, unprepared, and inconsistent. Agencies consistently identified three challenges they face in working with students -- student schedules and short-term commitment, as well as the amount of training students require. With regard to student schedules, one respondent indicated, "Their schedules change all the time" due to school breaks, class schedules, and homework loads. Another added: "A challenge can be the university schedule versus our schedule. Some students will work within the school's schedule, and others have the day off, or a test, or it's a break. Sometimes, those things don't jive, that makes it difficult." Scheduling conflicts were an issue for another respondent who shared, "Many students work, are going to school, have families, and scheduling them for a time that works for them and for us is a challenge." Clearly, the semester schedule presents a challenge as do the increasingly busy schedules of college students for service agencies looking to utilize college students. Students' lack of long-term commitment to the agency added another challenge. For instance, one agency director explained:

Most of the things I would like to use students for are longer than the service requirement. We are always looking for someone who will start in September and stay for the whole year so the service learning requirement in some classes is limiting for what we need.

Another added, "Some of the more immature students don't realize the level of commitment we need and sometimes flake out on their responsibilities." One also shared, "We need a regular commitment from all of our community service providers, and that is tough for everyone."

The training required to prepare students to do their service also created a hardship for the agencies. One responded, "It takes time, energy, and money to train them [student volunteers], all of which are limited at nonprofits, but we can't survive without them." Another said, "We put a lot of time and money into their training,

supervision, and administration.” When scheduling problems and lack of commitment cause students to vacate their service positions, the agencies’ investment of time and resources in training and money is lost.

The agencies’ responses provide valuable insights regarding their perception of the benefits they receive from working with college student service-learners as well as the challenges and frustrations they encounter when working with students

Agency personnel seek more coordination and communication with those they work with from campus. When asked to provide suggestions for ways in which the campus can better meet the needs of the agency and the community, the majority of responses suggested that communication needs to be increased so that the campus is more aware of the agency’s needs and student skills can be better matched with these needs. One obstacle to effective communication, according to one respondent is the perceived lack of commitment of campus volunteer and service center administrators:

Colleges need to find dedicated, responsible leaders to work as contacts between our agency and the campus. We have found that at times the contacts in place seem to be as if they are not truly dedicated to the position they have and just float for a year.

Other respondents indicated their desire to be invited on campus to present to classes, to encourage more community service, and to promote their agencies to the students. For example, one respondent wanted the campus to “provide more chances for agencies who utilize college student service providers to speak to groups or classes on campus to help recruit.” Another respondent shared the same concern, “I would like to see more opportunity for agencies to speak on campus and work more closely with classes.” Community service fairs were recognized by the agencies as being an effective means to get the word out to students.

Another communication issue agencies identified related to distinguishing between the different types of students that provide service. Some students engage in community service as an extra-curricular activity; others are in the agency as part of a service learning class, and still other students are there for a practicum or internship experience. In addition, many service agencies now have students supported by federal work-study. It can be difficult for agency personnel to differentiate among students.

What has happened is that there are so many programs on campus now that sometimes you aren't sure which ones the people are from, and I think it gets very confusing on everybody's side. Coordination is very important, and so I think folks who are at my level [the agency] need to be in on that coordination so that we are not all tripping over one another.

Communication between agencies and professors of service learning classes was another concern mentioned by agency respondents. The director of an adult learning program that uses service learners every semester indicated a lack of understanding of her responsibilities regarding the students. She said:

I would like clarification on what I'm supposed to do. Does she [the professor] want me to inform her? Would she like me to call students in the middle of the semester to see how things are going? Should I follow through a little closer?

In some instances, communication is so poor between the campus and the community that agency directors do not even know that students are needing to fulfill a service learning requirement. For example, one director explained:

Sometimes I get a lot of calls from one certain class, but students call me separately and say they have a requirement, and if I knew ahead of time how many people might be coming over, I could set up a group project instead of individual programs. It would help to know it was a class.

Although the data revealed a generally positive perceived relationship between agencies and campuses, agencies clearly want and need more communication with various departments on campus. The campus-based service learning centers serve as an important initial partner and liaison for the agencies, but this relationship needs to be

enhanced to help clarify different types of service providers and to establish better links between agencies and faculty involved in service learning. In the following section, we discuss the above findings and provide recommendations for improving campus and community partnerships.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that campuses and communities, for the most part, enjoy positive relationships. Relationships, however, need to be enhanced in the areas of communication and collaboration. Campuses and communities involved in service initiatives need to work together in ways that are marked by reciprocity and collaborative partnerships focused on community problem solving. Morton (1995) describes a continuum of service that includes charity, project, and social change paradigms. The charity paradigm focuses on service providers from the campus “fixing” social problems. The project paradigm emphasizes needs, problems, and solutions through service. The social change perspective is focused on establishing collaborative partnerships involving all stakeholders. The purpose of service within a social change model is to identify underlying causes, not just short term solutions. The model focuses on empowerment and a mutual response to problems that affect both campus and community members as citizens. Morton’s continuum describes service learning as an evolutionary process with social change as the end result. This requires campus partners pay attention to the perspectives of the recipients of the service provided in order to move from a helping frame of mind to one where service is a means for mutual engagement in social change.

The findings from the present study support Morton’s model for community service rooted in social change. Community partners seek connections to better meet the needs of their clientele and to look not just at solving short term problems, but also exploring underlying causes and solutions. The study also identifies problems centering around lack of communication and lack of long term student commitment. The findings

point to a lack of clarity regarding the different types of students involved in service. These problems could be addressed through relationships that are more collaborative between the campus and community stakeholders. Service that is done under the guise of helping can lack the investment required to move from more immediate solutions (e.g., stocking shelves at the food bank) to examining underlying causes of social problems (e.g., Why is there a hunger problem in our community?). Certainly, it is important to address both of these needs, but if service learning only focuses on the former, it lacks the intent needed to enact change that permanently addresses underlying causes of the problem.

Respondents to both the survey and interviews call for more collaboration, coordination, and communication in service endeavors. If service learning fails to move toward more of a social change model, then the “movement” is at risk of doing exactly what it has intended not to do; that is, use communities as laboratories where students are sent to serve without reciprocity and personal investment. Hill (1998) predicts that if it occurs the demise of service learning will be at least in part due to the failure of campuses to become equal partners with community agencies. He sees that “partnerships [are] dominated by school people who looked on agencies only as places to send students” and that “community agencies [are] rarely invited to participate or help shape the process” (p. 30). Although Hill’s predictions are only precautionary at this point in time, his perspective substantiates the findings of this study. The success of service learning as a means to not only provide students with meaningful learning experiences, but also to connect campus and community to work collaboratively to remediate social problems, hinges on blurring boundaries and engaging jointly in seeking solutions to issues affecting both campus and community.

Recommendations

Following we provide recommendations to address the issues and problems found through the above research and supported in the literature.

Communication lines need to be opened between different parties involved in identifying service opportunities for students. Increased discussion between agencies and service learning professionals on campus, including faculty, administrators, and service learning coordinators, will allow for goals and objectives of each partner to be identified and agreed upon so that from the start everyone is clear about the expected outcomes of the service learning project. If the standard for open communication is set early on in the partnership, problems and concerns can be more easily addressed and solved, which will help to keep conflicts and disappointments to a minimum for all parties involved.

Campuses need to open their doors to community partners. Campuses must find innovative ways for agencies to come to the institution and interact with students and faculty directly to increase campus awareness of community needs and the various ways in which viable service learning partnerships can be formed to address them. Venues such as community service fairs and class presentations help to increase the community's visibility on campus. Activities such as these should be supported by the campus and service learning professionals must take additional measures to ensure that members of the campus community are made aware of the various opportunities for them to connect curriculum with community service to meet crucial needs. By increasing direct partnerships between faculty and agencies and by fostering collaborative partnerships, service learning will better meet the needs of the agencies, students, faculty, and community.

Campuses and communities need to jointly approach issues associated with recruitment, training, and retention of service providers. In order to address the disadvantages that agencies identified in the survey related to student service-learners, campuses need to more accurately determine appropriate placements for students. Service learning professionals on campus must consider the students' commitment and schedules, as well as training required by the agencies. Again, communication is the key. Faculty must discuss the learning objectives of the class with the agencies and the

agencies must convey their needs, requirements, and resources to help make the project a success. For example, if a faculty member is requiring students to perform 15 hours of community service related to poverty issues, the agency must communicate whether or not it has the resources to accommodate the requirement. Conversely, if the agency has specific training requirements for student service-learners, they must be clearly communicated to faculty members. A stronger emphasis on communication and an increase in agency accessibility on campus are steps toward achieving stronger collaborative service learning relationships that give merit to the community perspective.

Develop guidelines that clearly outline the purpose and expectations of different campus-based service initiatives. Agencies are often host to students involved in a myriad of projects. It is not unusual for a work-study student to engage in tasks similar to those done by interns and service learners. It is important for agencies to be able to distinguish between the different purposes students have for their community involvement. Again, increased communication between the campus and community would help alleviate confusion that exists about who the students are and the roles they are there to fulfill.

Conclusion

Service learning in higher education has typically followed the charity model approach that views service as an "add-on" in the curriculum and has perpetuated a hierarchical, ivory tower approach to social problem solving. As the movement advances, service learning at many campuses has become more project-oriented, and many in higher education are able to recognize the power of partnerships between campus and community. Now is the time for campus service learning programs to take the next step on Morton's (1995) continuum and achieve a social change model in which the campus and community are equal partners and in which students are engaged actors for social justice (Rhoads, 1997).

By inviting the community service agency to have a voice and become an active partner in the academic service learning process, higher education can more fully enliven its public service and outreach mission, attain a social change model for service learning, and achieve the ideals of the engaged campus. The community voice is crucial for those involved in service learning on campus to engage in meaningful community-based problem solving and social change. The community perspective allows those involved in service learning to gain new insights about what it takes for successful and effective outcomes for the students, faculty, and the community.

The literature review and findings from the study support the proposition that a successful service learning experience is one that involves clear communication from all partners and clearly emphasizes proactive measures to ensure community needs are met. Service learning is at a crucial juncture on many campuses and is ready to move forward on the continuum from a charity model to one that utilizes service learning as a means to impact social change. Greater communication between campuses and the communities they serve will help service learning to fulfill its promise and potential as an agent of social change to benefit institutions, students, and communities.

NOTES

¹The survey included questions directed at both service-learners and volunteers. Agencies work with large numbers of students each year, and we did not think it possible to separate out perceptions of each type of service provider. As an initial study, the purpose was to learn more about perceptions in general so our presentation of service in the survey included service-learners and volunteers.

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