RESEARCH BRIEF

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What Do Dual Enrollment Students Want? Elevating the Voices of Historically Underserved Students to Guide Reforms

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Nearly 2.5 million students in the United States are taking college courses in high school through dual enrollment (DE) (Fink, 2024). Research suggests DE participation increases the likelihood of attending college and obtaining a degree, creating a significant opportunity for historically marginalized communities to gain access to higher education (Fink & Jenkins, 2023b; Rhine, 2022). Yet, exclusionary policies, practices, and perspectives—such as state policies that limit funding for DE and create cost burdens to families, insufficient institutional outreach to underserved communities, and assumptions about whom DE is intended for—have led to an underrepresentation of low-income, American Indian, Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and multiracial students (Fink & Jenkins, 2023b; Taylor et al., 2022). Encouragingly, educators, policymakers, and others have begun to prioritize equity in DE. Increasingly, they are calling on researchers to investigate inequitable DE policies and practices (Taylor et al., 2022), and they are promoting promising reforms such as those described in the *Dual Enrollment* Playbook (Mehl et al., 2020) and the dual enrollment equity pathways (DEEP) framework (Fink et al., 2023), which aim to redesign DE to increase access and supports for underserved students.

For any DE reform to be effective, educators must acknowledge and understand the diverse experiences of all DE students, especially those from historically underrepresented populations (Fink & Jenkins, 2023a). DE students' experiences are complex, in part because students must manage both high school and college expectations. This complexity is amplified for many students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds who may balance familial responsibilities and part-time work while taking DE courses and who may be less familiar with college generally. Efforts to improve DE should take account of the experiences of underserved students to ensure that DE programming meets their needs and the needs of all students.

Educators, policymakers, and others have begun to prioritize equity in dual enrollment: They are calling on researchers to examine practices, and they are promoting reforms aimed at increasing access and supports for underserved students.

As part of CCRC's DEEP research, in this brief I investigate the experiences of students historically underserved in DE to understand what these students want from their DE programs and the educators who lead them. An analysis of focus group interviews with 97 predominantly Black, Hispanic, and low-income students uncovered six themes that I have framed as students' wants:

- 1. Students want to know about DE options earlier.
- 2. Students want well-informed DE advisors who empower them.
- Students want their DE courses to be aligned with career and academic pathways in their fields of interest.
- 4. Students want engaging learning experiences in their online courses.
- 5. Students want to know how to balance the high school experience and DE coursetaking.
- 6. Students want to know how to find scholarships and manage debt to help them attend college after high school.

For each of these six wants, I present the students' perspectives and share research-based strategies educators can use to support DE students in the realization of these wants. In the Appendix, I outline questions educators can ask their students to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

What Is DEEP?

Dual enrollment equity pathways (DEEP) is a research-based framework for broadening the benefits of DE to underserved students and communities by addressing inequities in DE access and strengthening alignment of DE course offerings to postsecondary opportunities (Fink & Jenkins, 2023a). DEEP draws on decades of prior student success research on guided pathways reforms, early college high school (ECHS) models, and effective and equitable DE practices, as well as field research on effective practices of community colleges and their Title I high school partners that have broadened access and achieved strong outcomes for lower income, Black, and Hispanic DE students in Florida and Texas (Fink et al., 2023). DEEP consists of four practice areas:

- **1. Outreach:** Reaching out to underserved students and families to encourage and support participation in DE
- **2. Alignment:** Aligning DE course offerings to bachelor's and career-technical associate degree and apprenticeship programs in high-opportunity fields
- **3. Advising:** Helping every DE student with career and academic exploration, advising, and planning
- **4. Support:** Delivering high-quality instruction with proactive supports to build DE students' confidence as college learners

Research Methods

In the 2022-23 school year, CCRC researchers conducted field research at six community colleges and their twelve high school DE partners in Florida and Texas. These sites were selected based on above-average DE participation and successful early college outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (Fink et al., 2023). Serving as liaisons, DE advisors at the high school or college selected current DE students in grades 9–12 for our study. We conducted 18 semi-structured focus group interviews and obtained responses from 97 students—predominantly Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, some of whom identify as first-generation. Our study focused on traditional high schools (not ECHSs), and the students in the sample experienced a range of DE instructional modes—taking DE courses at the high school, at the college, and online—and a variety of levels of DE course enrollment, from taking single courses to completing a credential in high school.

We designed our protocol to be semi-structured so that students' responses could guide the conversation in places and we could delve into specific aspects of the DE student experience. Student responses were analyzed qualitatively using Dedoose. We consulted with other CCRC researchers to review our preliminary interpretations of the findings, and we shared provisional suggestions for reform with practitioners to get feedback on our recommendations for practice.

Findings From Student Focus Groups

Six themes, or wants about DE, were widely represented among the historically underrepresented DE students we interviewed. In examining each of the identified wants, I describe some relevant student responses from the focus groups. This discussion is supplemented by examples from CCRC's DEEP field research and guided pathways research that illustrate how practitioners have successfully supported some aspects of each identified want in real-world contexts. Table 1 summarizes these practices, which may be useful to DE partnerships that want to improve their programming. In addition, the Appendix of this brief presents questions educators can ask their DE students to better understand their experiences.

A Former DE Student Interviews Current DE Students

A member of the DEEP research team at CCRC and the author of this brief. I am also a former DE student. I led 9 out of 18 focus group interviews conducted for this study. I began each interview by introducing the study and informing the participants of my background as a former DE student from a historically underrepresented community. Following this, the DEEP team and I encouraged students to ask questions about the study and about the researchers' experiences with DE. Post-interview conversations between the students and researchers suggest that sharing information about my positionality helped the students feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences, challenges, and questions about DE.

Table 1.

What Historically Underserved DE Students Want and How College and K-12 Partners Can Support Them: A Summary of Themes and Recommendations

WHAT DE STUDENTS WANT	HOW TO SUPPORT DE STUDENTS
1. Students want to know about DE options earlier.	 Inform students of DE options through outreach to elementary and middle schools. Advertise DE in local media outlets, community organizations, and social media outlets. Set a standard of what information about DE should be known to the local community. Dedicate a school day to academic and career advising for prospective and current DE students.
2. Students want well-informed DE advisors who empower them.	 Inform students of the rigor of their DE courses without discouraging students (e.g., telling a student a course may be too hard for them). Improve DE staff training (with discussions of the potential of DE to benefit a broad range of students) to help shift mindsets toward more inclusive approaches to DE. Ensure students know that DE is not only for good test-takers by providing test prep, re-testing options, and/or alternatives to placement testing for eligibility.
3. Students want their DE courses to be aligned with career and academic pathways in their fields of interest.	 Work with students to create college program plans aligned to their academic and career goals. Inform students of their options for transferring DE credits at the baccalaureate level and beyond. Regularly update program maps with DE partner institutions to ensure DE courses align with degree programs at local community colleges and universities. Offer DE courses applicable to various majors.
4. Students want engaging learning experiences in their online courses.	 Ask students about their experiences in online DE courses to inform professional development activities for DE faculty. Dedicate classroom time for DE students to receive extra support. Raise awareness of office hours and tutoring resources that are available online or in person at the high school or the college.
5. Students want to know how to balance the high school experience and DE coursetaking.	 Be transparent with students and families about the trade-offs of participating in DE. Create clubs or student-led organizations at the high school where DE students can share their experiences. Advertise extracurricular activities that DE students can participate in at the college. Provide transportation to events at the college.
6. Students want to know how to find scholarships and manage debt to help them attend college after high school.	 Inform students of costs associated with transferring credits in state versus out of state and to public versus private institutions. Establish an online repository that informs students of various scholarship opportunities, including local offerings and those tailored to high school seniors and transfer students. Create dedicated classroom time to discuss financial aid, grants, scholarships, and other opportunities for students to reduce the cost of attending college after DE. Encourage students to choose debt-free options after high school.

1. Students want to know about their DE options earlier.

When asked about their introduction to DE, many students mentioned first hearing about the opportunity in middle school or at the start of high school, primarily from family members or former DE students who visited their schools. Some students learned about DE from college staff. However, research shows that widespread gaps in access to DE by race/ethnicity and income are in part due to a lack of outreach to low-income students' families and communities of color (Fink et al., 2023). Several students in the present study said that they discovered DE later in high school, and one 12th-grade student said that earlier awareness could have influenced them to choose courses so that they could complete an associate degree in high school:

I heard [about DE] through my guidance counselors in 10th grade. [The counselors] pulled probably the whole 10th grade and were like, "You have an opportunity to dual enroll at [name of community college]," and I decided to do that. I mean, I didn't know you could dual enroll in 9th or maybe even lower than 9th grade. ... After this semester, I'll have 51 credit hours [completed], and you need, like, 60 for an associate degree. I wish I would have known by 9th grade because, by the time I would've graduated, I would've had my associate degree.

Like traditional college students, DE students have various postsecondary goals and reasons for pursuing college. While one student mentioned wanting to learn about DE earlier to complete a credential in high school, others commented that knowing about DE earlier could have helped them take more advantage of the financial benefits of DE. Moreover, research indicates that earlier exposure to DE, especially for students from families with no college background or from underserved communities, can assist in familiarizing students with navigating college processes and build confidence in their ability to succeed in college (Fink et al., 2023).

Educators can promote early awareness of DE through three strategies: outreach in elementary and middle schools (e.g., informational events and field trips to a local community college), targeted advertising in local media and community organizations (e.g., local newspapers, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA), and agreeing on what DE information should be shared with local communities (e.g., what students should know about DE by a certain grade level and what parents should know about DE when a student moves from elementary to middle to high school). Additionally, K-12–college partnerships could dedicate a school day to academic and career advising for prospective and current DE students. These early-outreach strategies were implemented successfully in Title I school partnerships with several Miami-Dade College campuses (Fink et al., 2023).

Earlier exposure to DE can help familiarize students with college processes and build their confidence as learners.

2. Students want well-informed DE advisors who empower them.

While most students we interviewed had positive experiences with their DE advisors at both the college and high school, some voiced concerns. For example, one student felt discouraged by their advisor from choosing a course because of the advisor's perception of the academic ability of DE students. The student explained,

I had to find [what DE courses to take] on my own. I was told, "You can go and dual enroll," but they didn't say, "Here are the classes you should [take]." They would advise you to take theater appreciation and art appreciation, but they would never say, "You should take these other classes." I remember when I was going to take Spanish, they were trying to tell me not to take it because it was such a difficult class for prior [DE students]. But I was like, I was going to take it regardless.

Another student shared a similar experience:

I want to be an ultrasound tech, and there are prerequisites that I am able to take, but [my high school DE advisor] will not let me take them because they say the courses are too hard or something like that. I wanted to take certain courses, and [my advisor] would tell me, "No, you should take this course because I've had people in the past take this course," and I told them, "Well, it's not on my degree plan. I'm not going to take something that's not on my degree plan. There's no point of it." I still took [the course] I wanted to take, but I just don't like how they tell you that.

In both instances, advisors disempowered their students by providing information about courses based on other students' experiences and not on students' individual skill sets and goals. DE advisors can instead inform students of the rigor of DE courses without discouraging them, and they can facilitate discussions with current and former DE students to get feedback on their advising experiences. In our DEEP research in Texas, we witnessed several Title I high school and community college partnerships coordinating information sharing and joint professional development activities to ensure students were receiving accurate and consistent guidance from their high school and college advisors (Fink et al., 2023). Additionally, DE staff should recognize the potential of DE to benefit a broad range of students and ensure that DE is presented as an option for all students—not just high achievers and good test takers—by providing test prep, retesting options, and alternatives to placement tests for eligibility.

Students in our focus groups also shared advice for how DE advisors can better address student experiences:

Student A: I would say, honestly, just give the student the resources needed. The availability and the advice to know, "Okay, you are going on to a college campus, but you can do this if you do this and this." ... I would say don't scare them and say, "Oh, you're going to college now. It's so different." Just guide them in the right direction instead of trying to make it seem like it's so hard. Just let them know that you just have to be focused, and it is rigorous, but you can do it.

Student B: I'd say ... a better dual credit advisor [is one] that could help the [students] coming up that never took dual credit before to understand what's to come and to really prepare you, so it's not just a knock in the face when you start doing it.

To benefit a broader range of students, DE staff can provide test prep, retesting options, and alternatives to placement tests for eligibility. Student C: Especially [when] you're a first-time dual credit student, you have no idea what you're doing. We use a platform called Canvas. It would be really beneficial for new coming students to get a tour of how to work Canvas—and not a day before you're starting the class because then you don't have an understanding of how to work it.... Like, over time you should learn how to do it. Giving the preparation to the students before they start would be beneficial.

3. Students want their DE courses to be aligned with career and academic pathways in their fields of interest.

When asked, "What recommendations do you have for practitioners aiming to improve the outcomes of DE programs for future students?," many students we interviewed emphasized the need for educators to align their DE courses to students' academic and career interests after high school. This suggestion was underscored by students aiming to earn a credential, such as an associate degree through DE, with plans to transfer their credits into a 2+2 program or other similar pathway at a future college. One student suggested, "Make sure that, for any student, all of their options are known and available. That way they know what they're able to do: what classes to take or what classes you probably shouldn't take yet." In response, other students in the focus group stressed the importance of practitioners discussing which DE courses will transfer and how many credits will apply to their academic programs after high school.

To address this issue, educators can inform students about their options to transfer credits to a bachelor's degree program or use them in career-technical pathways. Using this information, students and practitioners can work together to create a college education plan (see Fink et al., 2023) that outlines how their DE courses connect to postsecondary paths after high school and to identify key milestones during and after DE when students should check in with their academic advisors about such matters as career advising or internships. Individual student plans should be informed by regularly updated program maps that outline how DE courses apply to local community college and university degree programs. Depending on available resources, DE programs could also provide students with a diverse selection of DE courses applicable to various majors that would allow students to explore their academic and career interests in high school. In our DEEP field research, we observed several high schools that require DE students to take a student success course to help them explore different degree options, determine where to locate campus resources, and learn how to manage finances after DE. In one such course, students were required to present a career portfolio in which they interview someone working in their desired field and outline a path to that field, including educational requirements, and opportunities for career growth.

Students in our focus groups stressed the importance of knowing which DE courses will transfer and how many credits will apply to their academic programs.

4. Students want engaging learning experiences in their online courses.

At some rural high schools in Florida and Texas, students' options for DE were exclusively online due to limited qualified DE instructors at the high school and lack of transportation, outside of students taking their personal vehicle, to and from their local community college, which can be as far as 60 miles away from the high school. As a result, all students were taking classes online synchronously (i.e., courses live streamed from the community college classroom) and/or asynchronously (i.e., courses without live instruction in which students complete coursework on their own schedule). We asked students about their experiences in the two online options. One student shared,

When professors [teach live streamed, synchronous courses], they don't follow what they've written down or their [exact planned presentation]—they always add more tidbits of information that could potentially help you. When you [take asynchronous courses], you're just reading a piece of paper of what they want you to learn.

In response, another student offered advice to instructors teaching synchronous courses that were live streamed with students in attendance physically and virtually:

Just [be] more verbal with [students] who are not actually in the classroom with you. [Students] who are in the classroom ... are getting a better understanding—they can hear your tone of voice, what you're looking for, what you're not looking for in an assignment. I feel like that'll be more helpful to the [online] dual enrollment students if they do the exact same thing for us.

We also interviewed students who were taking DE courses that shifted from in person to online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few students shared negative experiences about this transition. In the words of one student,

Before COVID, [DE] was a really life-changing experience. I feel like in online [DE courses], I'm not able to be hands-on and really gain the knowledge that I really want to. [When taking DE courses] in person, I feel like I can ask questions and be more open-minded.

Similarly, two students enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) DE courses, which shifted from in person to online during the pandemic, compared their experiences with the transition. One student explained, "What I like most about [CTE DE courses is that] it's not just paperwork like the other classes or just writing down notes; it's more hands-on when you're in the shop in person." In response, another student shared,

It all just depends on which course you're taking.... I feel that our CTE course is better to [take] in person because you get more hands-on experience and you get your contact hours with college that way versus if you were doing it online.

There are several strategies DE staff and instructors can use to create more effective, engaging online course experiences. To start, DE instructors should ask current and former DE students questions about their online course experiences (see the Appendix for sample questions) and use this information to guide professional development activities. There are also specific practices that can be undertaken to support online learning. In our field research in Texas, we observed that DE staff created dedicated classroom space at the high school to allow DE students to complete their online coursework with assistance from a staff member in the classroom (Fink et al., 2023). To help students attending via live stream participate in class discussions with in-person and online students, instructors can use technology such as handheld microphones or 360-degree cameras and strive to regularly speak with students attending virtually; they can also advertise resources such as virtual tutoring and office hours.

5. Students want to know how to balance the high school experience and DE coursetaking.

At a young age, DE students must manage the expectations of their high school and college courses. These expectations can be intensified if a student is taking DE courses at the college and providing transportation for themselves, taking a large course load of high school and college courses simultaneously, or attempting to complete an associate degree in high school. In our focus groups, one student explained, "It's been a lot of nights, I'm just like, 'Oh my God.' ... I'm still a high school student, so it's like you have to juggle a lot, but it will be worth it. It's going to be worth it." Other students mentioned considerations they had in choosing to participate in DE, such as how it would impact their college experience after high school:

That is a downside of this program: You graduate earlier, and so you lose out on real-world experience. You're not going to have that 18-, 19-year-old college [experience].... You kind of skip that and [are] already having it in high school. I'll graduate, if I don't take any minors or anything, at 19 from college. That's still very young. And I want to go to law school, so it's like, do I do something else in the middle just to have that experience, or do I go straight in as a 20-year-old?

Such responses led to discussion among students we interviewed on the value of graduating from high school with an associate degree and on the meaning of extracurricular activities. We heard from one student that because of the sacrifice required to participate in early admissions (a type of DE program offered in Florida that allows students to take college classes at a college on a full-time basis in their last two years of high school), they chose instead to take DE classes at their high school:

I was going to do [an early admissions program], actually. I was going to start junior year, but I remembered not only that I want to experience those four years in college, I also want to Dual enrollment students are interested in extracurricular activities at both their high school and college. experience my high school experience that I'm not going to be able to get back. I was thinking about maybe leaving school early [to take classes at the community college for] this program. And then I was like, "But I have a ton of friends that I'm not going to see again once I graduate. And I have a bunch of activities that I want to do now that I may miss out on because of this program, and clubs ... that I won't be able to be super involved in if I'm in this program." ... That's why I picked taking dual enrollment classes in school rather than out of it at [name of community college].

Conversely, another student commented on how they wanted to spend more time at their local community college to participate in extracurricular activities at the college but were unaware of options available to them as a DE student: "One thing that I was really sad about is you can't join some of the clubs [on the college campus]. ... I don't feel like going home, I like staying there and [going] out. But it is what it is."

To assist with decision-making about these kinds of experiences, during onboarding practitioners could inform students and their families about the trade-offs of accelerating the college experience in high school and discuss whether pursuing an associate degree or attending classes at the college is right for them. While the cost savings of DE are appealing, students and families should also be aware of the academic rigor of college-level coursework, the possibility that DE may limit participation in extracurricular activities, and the risk of accumulating excess credits if a student changes their intended major after earning an associate degree in high school (Moreno, 2023). Once students are informed of their options, DE staff can help create student-led organizations for DE students to share their experiences. Moreover, DE staff can advertise high school extracurricular activities that work around DE students' schedules and those available on the college campus if a student wishes to be more involved at the college. In our field research, we observed some colleges offering transportation for DE students to go to the college campus (Fink et al., 2023); this could be extended to campus events such as concerts, plays, sports games, and club meetings.

6. Students want to know how to find scholarships and manage debt to help them attend college after high school.

To conclude the interviews, students were invited to ask the researchers about the project or our experiences with DE and DE research. One student responded, "I have a little bit of a personal question. You guys can totally say no, but is anyone in any debt from their major?" Although our interview protocol was not designed to address managing costs for post-DE education, many students inquired about finding scholarships and navigating student debt in college. Another student mentioned that the cost savings of DE changed their perspective on attending college: "The financials we've talked about [are important]. . . . It's like, now there's an opportunity to go to schools that you didn't think you could go to because you can pay for them."

Managing college costs after dual enrollment is a key concern for many students. To respond to this want, DE staff can begin by asking DE students about their financial situation for continuing postsecondary education after high school (see Appendix for sample questions) and inform students during course advising about the FAFSA and about the cost differences between in-state public colleges, out-of-state public colleges, and private colleges, encouraging them to consider options that may allow them to graduate debt-free. The variation in admission selectivity and in institutional financial aid that may be available at particular colleges for students in different circumstances makes such conversations more complicated. Yet educators can also provide basic information about state and federal financial aid and share tools such as the Department of Education's College Scorecard. They can also create an online repository of local scholarship options and advise DE students to apply for scholarships for high school seniors and transfer students. Lastly, sharing information about financial aid in an easily accessible way, such as through an institution's learning management system (e.g., Canvas), and encouraging completion of the FAFSA and grant and scholarship applications during dedicated classroom time can help students better understand their financial options after DE.

Conclusion

This brief presents findings from an analysis of responses by focus groups of predominantly underserved DE students participating in Title I high school and community college DE partnerships in Florida and Texas. The aim is to better understand what these students think about their experiences in DE programs. From the interview data, the analysis distinguishes six common themes about what these students want from their DE programs and from the advisors and educators who provide the programming. Discussion of the six identified themes, or student wants, also includes suggestions for how practitioners can address them.

DE is large and is growing in popularity. As the line between high school and college blurs, DE students will continue to make up a significant portion of college enrollments, especially at community colleges. Since DE programs vary widely across state and local contexts, a good way to ensure that policy and reform efforts address the wants of all students—including those of students historically underserved by DE—is to ask students directly about their DE experiences. The Appendix of this brief presents a list of questions practitioners can ask to learn what students want during their time in DE and beyond. Answers to these questions, along with recommendations for practice described throughout this brief, can be useful for K-12–college partnerships that want to improve DE programming for their students.

Appendix: Learning About the Experiences of Your Dual Enrollment Students

Practitioners can use or adapt the questions in the following table to learn more about the experiences of DE students at a college or high school. While the questions are organized by practitioner type, they are relevant to anyone who works with DE students. The responses can be used to gain insights that can inform improvements in DE programming.

Appendix Table A1.

Questions to Ask DE Students

PRACTITIONER	MAIN QUESTION	ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS
College leader Ask in passing, when visiting classrooms, or during one-on-one conversations with students.	How and when did you hear about DE?	 Whom did you first hear about DE from? Do you recall any outreach from your local middle school, high school, and/or college/university?
	Do you feel you will be prepared for college after DE?	 Do you know what college you want to attend and what program of study or career field you want to pursue? Do you understand the costs associated with pursuing a specific education and/or career field? Are you aware of any available scholarships, and do you know how you will pay for your postsecondary education after DE?
	Do you recall the entrance requirements for enrolling in DE courses?	 Were there any testing and/or GPA requirements required for you to be eligible for DE? Did any of the eligibility requirements influence you or your peers' desire to take DE courses? Were you given test-prep materials?
DE advisor Ask during individual or group advising appointments.	How many DE classes have you taken (in person and online)?	What factors were involved in your decision to take DE courses?How was your experience taking these courses?
	How are your current DE courses going?	 Have you taken an online course before? Do you prefer taking courses online or in person? Is there anything you feel you are missing as a result of taking courses online rather than in person or vice versa? Have you experienced any adversity in interacting with other DE students or community college students?
	What are your plans after high school?	 Have you considered: Transferability of DE courses? Field of study, career goals after high school, internships? Type of degree you aspire to earn and the difference between each degree type (e.g., applied versus academically oriented degrees)? Cost of attendance, including cost of living? Scholarships, financial aid, study abroad?
DE instructor Ask in passing, during office hours, or during classroom time.	What are you learning from this class that will apply to your future career interests?	 How are you applying skills learned in the course to your current/future academic or career goals? Do you feel supported in the virtual and/or in-person learning environment?
	What resources are you using to succeed in this course?	Do you know about tutoring, library, and/or any additional academic resources available either online or in person?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO ASK DE STUDENTS

- What is one piece of advice you would give to a practitioner in charge of DE?
- What is one piece of advice you would give to a future DE student attending our institution?

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