

The Quest to Increase Diversity at the University of Oxford

Jeffery L. Wilson

Virginia Commonwealth University, United States

Corresponding author: Email: jlwilson4@vcu.edu

ABSTRACT

In this paper, an understanding of how an elite institution pursues diversity initiatives is explored. Research afforded a better understanding of strategies adopted for recruitment and retention whereby positive results were reported after implementation. Removing barriers that may prevent marginalized populations from enrolling were critical towards these efforts. Oxford has taken steps to increase diversity, and it appears they are having modest success. One method that has been an asset is to invite students to spend time on campus through residential programs. Additional efforts underway to increase diversity include an intensive urban recruitment initiative and securing school/parent/community buy-in. Venturing into private partnerships with non-profits and fostering better community relationships with inner-city London neighborhoods are a few of the steps being taken to increase representation from first-generation, minority, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. This new approach to diversity will hopefully lead to more students applying and ultimately enrolling into the prestigious institution.

Keywords: abroad, diversity, recruitment, United Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary institutions are seeing a more diverse student population than in previous years. Creating an environment that embraces such diversity has been of importance lately as higher education officials have sought to adopt policies and enact programs that reflect and communicate their institution's commitment to equity and inclusion. For example, many institutions have responded by forming a committee comprised of various constituencies to address diversity needs, developing and implementing an action plan to achieve improvements in diversity, or adopting a specific goal for more diverse student enrollments or faculty.

Diversity can be defined as being varying forms of human difference with distinct characteristics (Smith, 2015). Because diversity encompasses a broad context to include race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, to name a few, it is necessary to narrow the definition in the context to what the higher education authority in the United Kingdom, the Office of Students, uses. In this instance, diversity is referred to as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, age maturity, disability, and care leaver (Office of Students, 2018).

Incidents related to diversity have been a fixture in the news. At the University of Oklahoma, former president James Gallogly was embroiled in what seemed to be a never-ending episode of racial insensitivity that ultimately contributed to his early departure. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the students protested, removed, and insisted that the Confederate affiliated statue "Silent Sam", not be returned to campus. These events only underscore the need for diversity to be included in institutional policy and have academic leaders who will take charge and ensure diversity initiatives are implemented throughout the organization.

The purpose of this paper was to explore institutional efforts to increase diversity at an elite institution in the United Kingdom (U.K.). Examining how this institution pursues diversity initiatives afforded a better understanding of strategies adopted for recruitment and retention. For the researcher, exposure to institutional diversity efforts has been limited to the United States. Prior travels abroad only consisted of Calgary, Canada and research narrowly focused on diversity at American institutions. The experience of visiting another country and spending time on campus collecting data on diversity-related planning efforts was invaluable as if allowed for cross-country collaboration with colleagues internationally.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Pierre Bourdieu (1973) draws attention to the intergenerational inequality resulting from educational systems through his theory of social reproduction centered on three tenets that have implications for upward mobility; economic, cultural, and social. If higher education is to be more equitable in the distribution of social, cultural, and human capital, it must lend itself to internal structural changes that include amended admission practices, targeted recruitment, and financial assistance (Bourdieu, 1977; Rubin, 2011). Increasing the college participation rate from underserved populations has been on the front lines of social justice (Delors, 1996).

In the U.K., the focus became a major policy priority in the early 21st century (David, 2012). In recent decades, the U.K. enacted widening participation efforts such as the Higher Education Act of 2004 and creating the Office for Fair Access (David, 2012). "Disparities in student demographic profiles persist between institutional types for several mutually reinforcing reasons" (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p. 10). "Disadvantaged students both self-select and are selected out of elite institutions, undermining social mobility" (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p. 10).

LITERATURE REVIEW

College students who hail from non-traditional backgrounds are often perceived by institutions and state funding entities alike as being high risk (Leatherwood & O'Connell, 2003; Hinton-Smith, 2012). Crawford, Dearden, Micklewright, and Vignoles (2016) suggest that when it comes to expanding access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, "universities should be incentivized to adopt contextualized admissions policies" (p. 153).

Pressure to Increase Diversity

In England, there has been public criticism of the lack of diversity at elite postsecondary institutions, namely Oxford and Cambridge. Public outcry over a perceived diversity shortage hit a fever pitch when it was reported by a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) newfeed that in 2009 only one Black student was admitted to Oxford. Commenting on the news, then British Prime Minister David Cameron blasted the dismal enrollment number by stating, “I think that is disgraceful, we have got to do better than that” (Vasagar, 2011). It was later reported by the university that the one student enrollment figure pertained to Black Caribbean student enrollment and that there were a total of 27 Black students admitted that year (Vasagar, 2011).

Things weren’t any better for Cambridge as Black students spoke with the BBC about their negative experiences at the esteemed institution. These revelations about failures in diversity recruiting and institutional climate led to a public rebuke from a prominent politician. Speaking to the news publication, *Eastern Eye*, British Parliament member David Lammy stated Oxford was a “bastion of white, middle class, Southern privilege” and did a poor job when it came to diversity (Codling, 2018). He likened the impact of the dismissal admission percentages of Black students as “you don’t get in, then none of the other kids apply the following year” (Codling, 2018). Member of Parliament (MP) Lammy was among over 100 MPs who called for leaders of both Oxford and Cambridge universities to increase efforts to diversify its campuses (Bulman 2017). Of particular concern to MP. Lammy was the dismal 1.5% acceptance offers from Oxford and Cambridge universities that went to Blacks of British origin and held A-level status in 2015 (O’Sullivan & Winters, 2017). This public criticism led both institutions to step up their diversity recruitment efforts.

Since the airing of low Black student enrollment at Oxford in 2009, the university has taken steps to bolster its diversity through a series of initiatives endorsed by the Office of Students (University of Oxford News, 2019). For example, there has been an increase in applications from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students with the highest admission coming in 2018 at 18%. Additionally, admission of undergraduate students from state schools rose to an all-time high of 61% (University of Oxford News, 2019).

Effective Recruitment Strategies

There is a need for college recruitment strategies to include equity-minded and inclusive comprehension regarding diversity (Hakkola, 2019). Oftentimes, college admission strategies fail to account for the diverse characteristics of those seeking admission into the institution (Pippert, Essenburg, & Matchett, 2013). When it comes to college enrollment, those students from low-income and/or minority high schools tend to be more likely to pursue higher education when given access to programs that relay information about college entry (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2010). It is important that this information is presented to them repeatedly as they finish out their secondary level enrollment (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2010). For colleges and universities, the emphasis on diversity is critical for successful recruitment (Ihme et. al., 2016). To have an effective recruitment plan that targets diverse students, institutions should:

1. Create a diverse recruitment team
2. Establish relationships with community members in the state
3. Establish buy in with community members on campus
4. Rethink your campus dialogue
5. Host multicultural events
6. Provide financial and student support (Stark-Magana, Garrett, & Sanders, 2019).

Oftentimes, strategies used to increase successful transition from high school to college have been target recruitment, financial incentives, bridge opportunities, and a comprehensive application review. High school content, academic counseling, college outreach, and other programming need to reflect the rigor of college study so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college (Venezia & Jaeger, 2003).

The Office of Students for the U.K. Education division has listed as its strategy for diversity “We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers” (Office of Students, 2018). Key objectives for the strategy include the following:

- **Objective 1: Participation**
All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.
- **Objective 2: Experience**
All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.
- **Objective 3: Outcomes**
All students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives, and their qualifications hold their value over time.
- **Objective 4: Value for money**
All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money (Office of Students, 2018).

Those groups identified as being underrepresented where gaps in equality exists include:

- Those living in areas of low higher education participation or from lower household income or socioeconomic status backgrounds
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic students disaggregated by individual ethnic groups
- Mature students
- Disabled students (those in receipt of DSA and those who have declared a disability but are not in receipt of DSA) disaggregated into disability type
- Care leavers (Office of Students 2018).

Today’s college campuses are lightning rods for campus unrest and bigotry such as pro-white stances and demonstrations, as well as anti-religious tolerance towards persons of Muslim and Jewish faith (Chun & Feagin, 2020). Much of the turmoil can be linked to the changes in demographics within the student body appearing on college doorsteps (Chun and Feagin 2020). A demographic whereby newly admitted traditional age college students are considered to be “the most racially diverse generation” (Chun & Feagin, 2020; Geiger, 2018, p. 17).

The University of Oxford has listed within its strategic plan that they seek to “To attract and admit student from all backgrounds with outstanding academic potential and the ability to benefit from an Oxford education” (Oxford Strategic Plan, 2018). Accordingly, the institution is putting forth initiatives to increase diversity. Bourdieu (1977) theoretical lens of social, cultural, and human capital to generational upward mobility casts a shadow on higher education as equitable access is hindered by affordability, admissions criteria, and residencies. This paper reports on some of those initiatives and the progress made thus far in increasing diversity.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how an elite institution in the U.K. was implementing efforts to increase diversity. A case study approach was utilized to understand the impact and perceptions about diversity. Merriam (1998) noted that it is appropriate to utilize the case method as a result of the “uniqueness for what it can reveal about a phenomenon” (p. 35). To ensure triangulation (Patton 1990), data was collected utilizing interviews, observation, institutional website review, archival data, and examining program recruitment and admission literature.

Participant Selection

The interview sample included three current employees of the institution who worked directly on Oxford's diversity initiatives, including a senior director, admission's office recruiting representative, and a diversity outreach specialist (see Table 1). These individuals were chosen through an institutional website search of diversity offices because of their ability to provide historical and ongoing efforts by the institution to increase diversity.

Table 1

Data Collection Breakdown

Interviews	Document Analysis	Archival Data	Observation
Admissions Rep.	Office for Students Access & Participation Plan	Oxford Archives	Recruitment Days
Director of diversity office	Oxford Strategic Plan	News Archives	Target Oxbridge residential program
Outreach specialist	Oxford Enrollment Data		Admissions session
Informal student input and feedback			Campus life

After sending an introductory email and invitation to participate, a suitable date and time for the interviews were arranged.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants included an admissions representative, director of a diversity office, and a diversity outreach specialist who were able to offer insight into the planning and operational aspect of diversity initiatives. Pseudonyms were assigned for the participants. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded, and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes in length, depending on each interviewee's depth of responses to questions. The research questions that guided the interviews were:

- What does diversity look like at Oxford?
- What strategies are in place to promote diversity?
- What are perceptions and attitudes towards diversity at Oxford?

A constant comparative method was utilized for the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews were then transcribed, analyzed, and open coded, whereby a set of themes were uncovered to report the data. Specific quotes to institutional activity, climate, and attitudes related to diversity were categorized and grouped into themes in accordance to deductive coding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In addition to the interviews, a series of documents were analyzed, including institutional recruitment literature, diversity statements, and programming literature provided by the participants. In addition, the Oxford University website was reviewed for diversity related materials such as strategic plans utilizing the search box found on the main site and typing in the keyword diversity. Materials obtained from the website were reviewed with participants for trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

FINDINGS

In this paper, two themes that emerged as key findings are highlighted: barriers and programs having an impact. The findings reveal an intense push to increase diversity.

Barriers

Removing barriers that may prevent marginalized populations from enrolling at the University of Oxford was a resounding revelation. In identifying those who may be considered excluded from Oxford, Joan is an admissions representative who would define diversity at Oxford as being:

Anyone from a sort of non-traditional background, so any underrepresented groups. That can include BME students, or black or minority ethnicity, people who come from schools that don't have good results, people who come from postcodes that don't have high progression rates to higher education.

Joan noted the “massive pressure from the media, from the government, from everywhere”. Oxford has had some success increasing the diversity of its incoming classes between the periods of 2014-2018. For example, the proportion from state schools rose from 56.3% to 60.5% (University of Oxford Annual Admissions Statistical Report 2019). In addition, the proportion identifying as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) rose from 13.6% to 18.3% (see Table 2) during that same period (University of Oxford Annual Admissions Statistical Report, 2019).

Table 2

BME Enrollment 2014-2018

Year	Applications	Offers	Admitted
2018	3,097	551	457
2017	2,899	519	446
2016	2,547	492	411
2015	2,332	407	367
2014	2,131	395	345

The proportion from socio-economically disadvantaged areas rose from 9.3% to 11.3% as shown in Table 3 (University of Oxford Annual Admissions Statistical Report, 2019).

Table 3*Socio-economically Disadvantaged Enrollment 2014-2018*

Year	Applications	Offers	Admitted
2018	1,872	379	289
2017	1,660	349	269
2016	1,351	272	216
2015	1,351	252	221
2014	1,286	288	241

The proportion from areas of low progression to higher education rose from 10.3% to 13.1%, while the proportion declaring a disability rose from 6.0% to 9.2%. In 2017 and 2018, more women were admitted than men (University of Oxford Annual Admissions Statistical Report, 2019).

Part of the reason Oxford has had limited enrollment from diverse populations is that students simply do not apply in the first place. Another reason is they do not have the needed grades or test scores for entrance. This is particularly unique for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and schools, which makes it harder to get the grades needed, thus giving the need to implement admissions flags to identify those who may fall into this category but demonstrates potential in other areas. In this case, the university may admit a student who meets certain criteria for a Foundation Year which adds a year to the degree, however, with the right intensive education, foundation students can catch up. To increase diversity in the recruitment process, Joan commented:

...what we do look at is, you get flags if you've got any of these disadvantages. If you've grown up in care or spent up to three months in care, if you come from a school that has bad GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results, ... if you come from a postcode which is an area which is considered financially stretched, if you come from a school that has below average A-level results, so that's your school leaving qualification. If you come from a postcode where the residential postcode has low rates of people going off to university.

There does exist within the public a perception that Oxford is this elite "Ivory Tower" and unwelcoming towards those who do not meet certain standards. Joan noted "We're in this really beautiful, privileged place, and you might forget what it's like in the outside world". Joan added "...some schools just aren't that interested...the sort of schools we want to target are the ones who don't really send people to Oxford or Cambridge or even to higher education".

In a needs assessment to determine appropriate intervention for increasing diversity, Oxford conducted focus groups and administered a survey. Key findings included (1) Prospective students thought it would be academically challenging; (2) Misconceptions about not having people of their background; (3) They wouldn't fit in; (4) The environment would be too much to adjust. Katrina is Director of a diversity office at Oxford and noted:

We did a survey with students from African Caribbean heritage. They had the academic potential to apply to Oxford, but they didn't. And we did a focus group with them and some of the reasons for not applying to Oxford where they thought academically, it would be too challenging. So these were some misconceptions and they thought there wouldn't be people of their background at Oxford and they just wouldn't fit in. And they thought the environment would be too much for them to make that adjustment.

Programs Having an Impact

Oxford has taken steps to increase diversity, and it appears they are having modest success. One method that has been an asset is to invite students to spend time on campus through residential programs. Joan stated:

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are invited up to Oxford for a week or so, and they would have classes here and they would meet students, and just experience a bit of Oxford life. That has been really successful so in the past that's been something that's very proven to improve statistics of applications, but also success rates when they apply.

Joan noted, "I think getting them here and then spending time here seems to work". She added "The withdrawal rate at Oxford is lower than at any other university, so once they get here, they pretty much, there's no problem with keeping people on the course and getting them through".

One such initiative is Target Oxbridge, a five-year University/private partnership that the university has with a private non-profit to booster its diversity. Katrina described the partnership as the following:

Target Oxbridge is a program that we run with an organization that is part of a company that's called Rare Recruitment. And Rare Recruitment's primary function is getting undergraduates from African and Caribbean heritage into the professions like law, banking, finance, etc.

Key components of the program include residential and mentoring. Katrina noted, "The organization 'Rare' works closely with the students who are still at school and provides them with almost one-to-one mentoring. Provides them with information, advising, guidance about different courses to study at university". Katrina added:

If they see somebody like them at the place they want to go to, it has an enormous beneficial impact. So if they know somebody from their school has gone to Oxford or somebody who lives down their road or somebody just comes from their community has gone to Oxford, then it just inspires them even more, and they can imagine themselves in these places. So it boosts confidence, academic confidence, as well.

Guidance, advising, and assistance with the application process and course selection are vital to any successful bridge program. Katrina described the relationship with Rare as:

We do lots of work with the organization 'Rare'. We send our academics and our students down to London, which is where the program is. And so they become familiar with people from Oxford. So that's the first step. And then come springtime, roundabout Easter, we do a residential here at Oxford. So the students come here, they stay for about three nights, and they live in undergraduate accommodation. So they live the life of an undergraduate student to Oxford. And again, when they arrive to when they leave, you see a very big change in their confidence and their ability to recognize actually this place is for them.

Beth is a diversity outreach specialist at Oxford. She noted, "The residency permits opportunity to kind of network not only with people here from the university but also their peers." Opportunity Oxford is the latest initiative implemented to increase diversity. Katrina noted:

We've started a new program which is called Opportunity Oxford, which will be a bridging program. So with the brand new program, what happens is students will apply through the normal route. They will be made an offer, but we will look at their backgrounds and if they come from a very poor performing school, if they come from an area, whether it's in poor progression to higher education, what we then will say is part of that offer is we want you to attend this bridging program.

A bonus for participating in this program is prospective students are exposed to current students, particularly members of the student organization Student African and Caribbean Society, who often serve as mentors and relay their experiences with adjusting to Oxford. The experience also dispels the Ivory Tower myth by allowing them to spend ample time on the prestigious campus.

Additional efforts underway to increase diversity include an intensive urban recruitment initiative and securing school/parent/community buy-in. Katrina stated:

We have focused mainly on the students at schools and their teachers. And the next step that we want to sort of roll out is working with parents, guardians, community leaders, and getting to the communities much more so that Oxford becomes normalized through those communities. And we

become part of their conversation and their discussion, and it doesn't, it's not this sort of ivory tower, which sometimes we can be perceived to be.

In identifying challenges the university still faces, Beth stated:

Our biggest challenge is counteracting the myths about the university, a university that is over 800 years old. For some communities in this country, it has a reputation of being elitist and being predominantly white or not wanting to diversify and in the 21st century, in 2019, I can comfortably say that every day I meet colleagues across the collegiate body who want to make a difference. They want to see the best minds here, regardless of background, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of sexuality, regardless of religion, regardless of socioeconomic standing. So what we have to do is to engage in a conversation with communities across the country to say, 'Send us your best young people. We will look after them, we will nurture them, we will invest in them and we will make them ready for a changing global workforce.'

Beth added, "Perception is also key and outside of Oxford, the perception is that Oxford is not welcoming, is not interested, and is not engaged, and that could not be further from the truth." Student outlook on diversity at Oxford is consistent in that there is a lack of it. Joan noted:

Students at Cambridge spoke with the BBC about their experiences and commented "a lot of effort has been made to get them there, but when they're there, the subjects that they want to study aren't necessarily available". "…there weren't very many people there that they could relate to that seemed like them". Looking at Oxford, "I don't think there's very much diversity in the faculty".

When asked what a successful diversity strategy at Oxford would look like, Beth suggested:

Success would look like hitting our target of a quarter of our students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, from diverse backgrounds, by the year, I think it's 2024-25 that the Vice Chancellor (Equality and Diversity) has set. So success would also look like the widening of opportunity for us to have more spaces at undergraduate levels. Right now, we're currently sitting at 3,200 and I think if there were room to expand that. More places mean more opportunity for diverse communities to be here.

There was evidence of some messaging for diversity on the Oxford campus. For example, displayed on a building location signage was the listing of the campus Muslim Prayer Room. Also, on one of the college campuses, Balliol, displayed on a bulletin board at the main gate entrance, was a flyer of the LGBTQ affiliated rainbow color with the statement, "Balliol Chapel, Everyone Welcome. Yes. Really."

Oxford is not without its share of controversy. A few years back, there was a movement called #Rhodesmustfall, which sought to remove any affiliation with South African diamond miner Cecil Rhodes, an Oxford alum, who was believed to be a racist and attributed to harsh working conditions for his African workers and oppressive laws while Prime Minister of the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa. Students at Oxford in 2014 protested for the removal of a statue of Rhodes at his alma mater on the Oriel College campus. They were unsuccessful in their attempts.

DISCUSSION

Diversity remains a hot-button topic in higher education regardless of country. The public and influential politicians called out Oxford to do more to increase diversity. The U.K. educational entity, the Office of Students, quickly responded with a mandate to all institutions to implement diversity initiatives. As a result, Oxford has taken proactive steps to meet this challenge and, by all accounts, is seeing modest results. Nonetheless, they are positive results in that enrollment percentages for BME and socio-economically disadvantaged have steadily increased for the past five years.

Recognizing that they had a problem with diversity enrollment, Oxford took steps to identify areas for improvement. A self-assessment that included a survey and focus groups around campus yielded data about the institutional climate around diversity and public perception about the institution that wasn't so positive. Stark-Magana et. al. (2019) identified essential elements that needed to be in place to have an

effective recruitment strategy. Rather than denying the obvious or playing the blame game, Oxford enacted its own ramped-up diversity recruitment campaign.

One such action was a private partnership with a non-profit to expose first-generation, minority, and socio-economically disadvantaged students from inner-city London to the prestigious institution in hopes that they would consider applying. Establishing an effective relationship within community entities is critical to making inroads with inner-city recruitment efforts (Stark-Magana et. al., 2019). Several years into the partnership, the results speak for themselves. Not only have admission applications from historically marginalized populations increased but so have the acceptances and successful enrollment. This is a testament that when confronted with a mandate to do more on diversity, institutions will respond and can produce results, even the elite institutions.

Oxford has also instituted multicultural recruitment days and on campus living experiences to better acquaint the campus to those who otherwise would not have visited the institution. This is directly related to demystifying the myth that the elite institution is unwelcoming and unattainable.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Efforts made by Oxford to increase diversity are not new, nor will they be the last to face intense public scrutiny. What makes the Oxford case unique is its position within the higher education landscape as a highly regarded and elite learning environment. Such institutions are revered for their aura of high-quality instruction and superb faculty, not to mention high achieving students.

For an institution known for who they keep out rather than who they let in to have to ramp up meaningful diversity, recruitment has implications for higher education in that no institution is above the throne when it comes to equity and access. Diversity is viewed as an asset rather than a burden, and no institution, regardless of history, prestige, and alumni connections, are immune from oversight and critique.

CONCLUSION

The work on diversity is not yet completed for Oxford. They still have to dispel the Ivory Tower perception and build bridges with parents, teachers, and community leaders in urban areas, which is on their agenda. However, given the success of the initiatives already put in place, their potential to be successful with such endeavors is better than previously, given their progress towards diversity. This article provides an overview of current diversity efforts at Oxford. However, there is an opportunity for further study as it is still unknown as to the level of success Oxford is having with increasing diversity based on the various initiatives implored.

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JEFFERY LAMONT WILSON, Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Associate Dean of the Graduate School. He completed his doctoral studies in Higher Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Prior to UNLV, he completed his master's degree in Student Affairs Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and his undergrad at Virginia Commonwealth University. At Nebraska, Dr. Wilson participated extensively in student service projects within the Division of Student Affairs gaining exposure to multiple areas focused on student development such as Student Involvement, Multicultural Programming, and Career Services. Dr. Wilson's research is centered on diversity and leadership in higher education.

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