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To cite this article: Catherine T. Flaga (2006) The Process of Transition for Community College Transfer Students, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 30:1, 3-19, DOI: 10.1080/10668920500248845

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920500248845>



Published online: 01 Sep 2006.



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THE PROCESS OF TRANSITION FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS

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Our understanding of transfer students' transition from the community college to the 4-year university has recently expanded. The following presents research on community college transfer students, as well as potential implications based on a recent study on the process of transition for community college transfer students (Flaga, 2002). From a study that tracked students throughout their first year at a 4-year university emerged Flaga's dimensions of transition: Learning Resources, Connecting, Familiarity, Negotiating, and Integrating. The implementations discussed will assist academic and student affairs professionals with developing programs or enhancing current academic advising and programmatic efforts for future transfer students.

TRANSFER SHOCK

Historically, the bulk of the transfer student literature has dealt with “transfer shock” (Hills, 1965), which is defined as a drop in grade-point average at the new 4-year institution. Researchers have found results consistent with transfer shock theory (e.g., Bulkley, 1974; Diaz, 1992; Watt & Touton, 1930).

While many scholars agree with Hills' theory, other researchers found results inconsistent with—and have harsh criticism for—transfer shock theory. Siemans (1943) found comparable grading standards at the community college, and that the grade-point

Paper presented at the 46th annual conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Minneapolis, MN, April 23–24, 2004.

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averages for the transfer students he studied did not drop. Nickens (1972) disregards transfer shock and states, "In the absence of evidence indicating that 'transfer shock' is caused by transfer, it seems inappropriate to assume that such a relationship exists" (p. 1).

The transfer shock literature does not tell the full story of transfer student transition. Academic performance is an important part of students' experiences, but grades are the result of a complex set of processes that occur throughout the semester.

Community College Adjustment Studies

A few researchers have explored questions that move beyond the study of transfer shock. The work of Barbara Townsend (1995) further explains academic adjustment by capturing students' perceptions of the academic environment, as well as the transfer process. In a qualitative study, Townsend interviewed community college transfer students on their experiences at the 4-year university, and with the transfer process. Students tended to seek out informal resources, such as friends and family, as opposed to formal systems. In terms of their academic experiences, community college transfer students reported experiencing much higher academic standards at their new 4-year institution, including faster-paced courses and a heavier emphasis on writing (Townsend, 1995).

While Townsend (1995) focused primarily on academics, Frankie Laanan's (1996, 1998) research addressed social components as well. His quantitative study looked at academic, social, and psychological factors that impact adjustment. These included how involved the students were at the community college and the 4-year university, and their quality of effort, which impacts educational outcomes. Laanan found that traditional and nontraditional-age students have different experiences, yet their adjustment process was similar. More profound differences were found between White and nonWhite students. The findings suggest that significant involvement and quality of effort variables contribute to students' positive adjustment processes.

The work of Townsend (1995) and Laanan (1998) illuminates some of the factors that impact transfer student success; yet Laanan suggests further research be conducted that is qualitative and longitudinal. Although many transfer shock studies occurred over time, they were very narrow in focus. What is missing from the literature is a comprehensive look at community college transfer student transition over time.

Current Transfer Transition Research: Flaga's Dimensions of Transition

The desire to better understand community college transfer student transition led to the development of a qualitative research study (Flaga, 2002) that asked the following questions: (a) What is the nature of transition for community college transfer students during their first semester at a large, 4-year university? and (b) How do transfer students' experiences change between their first and second semester at the four-year university? Using a qualitative research design with two data collection points, Flaga studied how a group of community college transfer students proceeded through their first year at a 4-year university. King Beach's (1999) Consequential Transitions was used as a theoretical framework for the study, and helped to provide a broad lens for viewing the developing relationship between the students and their new environments while assessing the data.

METHODS

A total of 35 community college transfer students were interviewed in January, 2001, during their second semester at Michigan State University (MSU), about their community college experiences and their first semester at MSU. In late March or early April of this same term, 30 students returned to recount their second semester's experiences, to reflectively compare their time at the community college to their time at MSU, and to compare their first and second semesters at MSU. Their stories led to the development of the five dimensions of transition: Learning Resources, Connecting, Familiarity, Negotiating, and Integrating. In addition, students in the study offered advice to future transfer students. Suggestions made by those in the study included having prior contact with the 4-year university, visiting the campus, forming a relationship with an advisor, getting transfer course equivalency information, living on campus, understanding the parking system, and becoming involved on campus.

DIMENSIONS OF TRANSITION WITHIN THREE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS

The five dimensions of transition that emerged from the data are Learning Resources, Connecting, Familiarity, Negotiating, and Integrating. The dimensions come together as a comprehensive picture of the issues facing the students in the study during their transition to MSU. They were assessed within three different

environments: academic, social, and physical. The academic environment included interactions in class, with faculty (both in and out of the classroom), with study groups, advisors, and seeking information on career opportunities. The social environment included formal and informal interactions with other students outside of the classroom through student organizations, parties, residence halls, apartment complexes, common areas on campus, and other contacts. The physical environment encompasses not only the bricks and mortar of the university, but also the structure in which campus services and departments are organized, campus logistics, overall campus culture, student finances, and parking.

Learning resources, the first dimension, are defined as the variety of tools that the students utilized in order to gain information and learn about the campus environment and academic system. Three types of learning resources emerged from the data. *Formal* learning resources were a part of the official structure of MSU, and included orientation, faculty, student affairs professionals, and advisors. *Informal* learning resources included individuals who knew a great deal about MSU, such as friends and alumni. *Initiative*, or the gathering of information on their own, was pivotal to students' overall success. One student blended his use of learning resources to find out about campus services.

I didn't know about any [campus services] before I came here. Most of the ones I've learned about now have been through the clubs, mostly. That's been a way for me to talk to people who've been here for a couple of years. They've shown me a lot of the things I needed to know. Then just through my classes, my instructors telling me different places to go. Then through that, it's made me kind of explore other options and find out what I know.

Connecting, the second dimension, was concerned with the development of relationships with others in the academic, social, and physical environments. Academic connecting includes formal structures such as group projects, faculty walk-in hours, getting to know instructors in class, and class discussions. Social connecting with friends who were already MSU students was one way for new transfer students to expand their social circles and activities.

I have a good friend who is a mentor at Hubbard and he's been telling me to go to this and that and hang out over there and meet a lot of

people and I have a really good friend that's in a band and they're all like from MSU so I've been going to see them. And meeting people in the band and other bands has been fun.

Students connected to the physical environment by visiting and spending time on campus before and after starting classes.

When I was at the community college I came up for one day for an overnight visit and . . . that's when I just fell in love with the campus; it's such a beautiful campus.

The third dimension, familiarity, developed as students internalized the information they gathered and felt more comfortable with their new environments. Eventually, the 4-year university becomes what the students know, and is at the forefront of their minds. One student's experience demonstrates how familiarity develops over time. During the first interview, this student compared MSU academically to the community college.

I have to say that it was nice having the smaller classes . . . at the community college. . . It's harder here because a lot of the teachers are research based and that's their main focus. And to find a teacher who is just as interested in teaching as they are at the community college level is hard. And I've had a lot of teachers here where you could tell that here that they were just doing research and they had to teach instead of just doing teaching because they wanted to, so that was kind of the nicer thing about being at the community college. But I mean the classes here are good classes. Its the same workload but it's harder to get an A here than it was at the community college.

During the second interview, when the same student was asked to compare MSU to the community college, she replied:

I don't know. It's pretty much the same old, same old . . . it's hard to say now because I'm so used to being here and it's been almost a year since I've been at the community college to really remember everything. . . There's pretty much not that much of a difference but it's just on a much, much larger scale here in every way.

This student developed familiarity over time and became much more comfortable with MSU's academic environment by the time of the second interview.

Negotiating, the fourth dimension, occurred when students adjusted their behavior and surroundings as necessary in order to be successful within the academic, social, and physical environments. One example of negotiating shows how the classroom can be an important place for students' social transition. Informal classroom conversations were especially valuable for one student who commuted and had a very difficult time meeting people initially. During the second interview, when asked what has impacted her the most throughout her time at MSU, she reported:

Probably class sizes I would say. Learning how to cope when there are 200 people in your class instead of 20. That's probably been the hardest part, the biggest difference. I've learned to sit in the same spot in class every day because then you meet the people around you, instead of sitting by strangers all the time like I did last semester.

By sitting in the same seat, she was negotiating the academic environment; but, more significant, was the impact upon her social situation, since it allowed her to meet people and develop relationships with fellow students. Other students also pointed out that sitting in the same spot in a large class helped to give it a small class feel. This also shows the creativity of transfer students; something as simple as sitting in the same seat made a great difference.

Finally, Integrating occurred for some students—a developmental change resulting from the students' relation to the three environments. This is similar to Tinto's (1987) theory of freshmen integration, but Flaga's (2002) study also includes the physical environment. Recognizing the physical environment enhances the existing literature and our understanding of transition. Integrating often included a shift in perception or identity.

FUNCTIONALITY OF THE DIMENSIONS

The dimensions generally move from a basic to a more comprehensive, internalized sense of the academic, social, and physical environments of the 4-year university. Movement through the five dimensions may be in parallel. Additionally, this movement may not be entirely linear, especially since students are moving through three different environments.

The following is a schema that shows how students move across all the environments and through the various dimensions. At the most fundamental level, learning resources are vital for collecting basic information. After initial contact with individuals who may have served as learning resources, it is possible to develop deeper relationships with them and, thereby, move to connecting. It is essential to have this basic information in order to effectively negotiate the environment. Negotiating the environment enables students to actively and intentionally change their behaviors or surroundings in order to be more successful. Familiarity is a stronger sense than merely knowing the information that learning resources provide; it is being comfortable with the information. Familiarity can foster a sense of being a part of the 4-year university community. Finally, integrating can only occur after familiarity has been reached. It is only then that experiences can be further reflected on, which can lead to a shift in perception or identity. While each dimension is individually important to the transition of community college transfer students, their collective impact should be considered as well.

ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS IMPLICATIONS BASED ON THE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSITION

The lived experiences of the students in Flaga's (2002) study provide a framework for thinking more complexly about transfer and the transitions that these students face. This framework can provide a better understanding of the process and, thus, promote the development of appropriate interventions. The dimensions are also useful in illustrating a set of skills that may be helpful to students in transition.

There are three key stakeholders of the results of this study: transfer students, community colleges, and 4-year universities. Transfer student transition is a collaborative process among the three, working together to assist with the transition. Therefore, specific suggestions for the three groups are woven into the discussion areas below.

These suggestions are intended to help the developmental transition process begin sooner for students, thus ending the feeling of being a newcomer to the environments earlier. Students can feel a sense of membership, thus freeing up energy to pursue their goals at the 4-year university.

Community College and 4-year University Advising Implications

The results of Flaga's (2002) study have widespread implications for academic advising. These include collaborative efforts between

community college and 4-year university advisors, and the application of the dimensions to advising practice.

Collaboration between Community College and 4-year University Academic Advisors

Many of the students in the study suggested that further communication between the community college and the 4-year university would have been helpful. They purport that increased knowledge and information about university programs and transfer credits would help community college advising to be more productive. Augmented institutional linkages to address these transfer concerns could be implemented in a variety of ways. For example, 4-year universities could sponsor programming at community colleges such as information fairs, meetings with community college advisors, and a pretransfer orientation course taught at the community college for students planning to transfer to the 4-year university the following semester.

Communication between community college and 4-year university advisors is also critical to providing information relevant to student transfer. Programming and structures should be in place to help facilitate the establishment and maintenance of relationships among advisors. For example, at present MSU holds information sessions with community college advisors that help facilitate communication. These could be expanded to include increased opportunities for advisors from all institutions to share admissions and academic program information. The students' perceptions were that more needed to be done to communicate transfer information. Therefore, increasing community college advisor attendance at university information meetings would be helpful. A culture needs to be established in which community college advisors feel comfortable calling university advisors for specific information when working with students. Therefore, knowledge of exactly who to contact is critical. Development of such a culture can be assisted through advisor interactions at information meetings and fairs held at both the community college and the 4-year university.

Overall, increased communication and collaboration between community colleges and 4-year universities, especially in advising, would greatly assist in smoothing transitions. This would lead to increased satisfaction and retention of community college transfer students.

Application of the Dimensions to Advising Practice

The data from this study can assist academic advisors in offering strategies to students that will help transfer students prepare and

transition to the university. The five dimensions of transition encompass potential issues that advisors can discuss with their students. Such discussion would help to emphasize that there is not one right way to approach and navigate transition. The students in this study all had experiences related to the dimensions, yet they approached them in very different ways. Negotiating is an especially poignant example. All of the students negotiated in one way or another, but the variety of ways this occurred was quite extensive: from sitting in the same seat in class each day in order to meet people; to changing majors in order to avoid taking laboratory courses; and to taking the bus in order to avoid dealing with parking on campus. There is no single best way to transition to the 4-year university. However, having an understanding of these dimensions allows practitioners to convey this information to students in a broad way, emphasizing that they can be utilized to fit each student's unique transition experience, and to help facilitate that process. The academic advisor can play a key role in conveying the broad-based skills that emerged from this study. The advisor can also help students think about and prepare for the potential transition issues that may arise.

Advisors serve as guides for students within their campus environments. If community college advisors have an understanding of both campus environments, they can help students to prepare for the differences they may encounter at the 4-year university. It is also important for 4-year university advisors to talk to students about their previous experiences at the community college, and tailor their assistance accordingly.

Advisors can use the dimensions within their advising practices, not only with transfer students, but also native students. Advisors help their students to seek out formal and informal learning resources, and to be proactive and take initiative. Advisors also help students connect through the advising relationship, as well as through other relationships that students develop as a result of seeking out learning resources. Learning resources have the potential to lead to developing relationships. Therefore, advisors can assist all students by having an understanding of the transition issues relayed in this study.

Benefits of Academic Advising for Students

Meeting with an academic advisor prior to transferring is of special importance. Many of the students who were not in touch with advisors ahead of time were very disappointed with how their courses transferred. Many students were also disappointed that it was going to take additional time or a number of summer courses to graduate

on time. Prior contact with an academic advisor would help to clear up these transfer-credit issues. Armed with this information, the students can then negotiate their environment to optimize reaching their academic goals in a timely fashion. One example of such negotiation prior to actually arriving at the university would be a student's decision to change courses during the last semester at the community college to more appropriately fit academic course planning goals and articulation agreements at the university. Meeting with a university advisor before transferring will help to confirm or deny a student's interest in a major. If students find they are not interested in a major, they can negotiate the environment by changing their major sooner—which will assist in a timely graduation. Overall, the more information students have, the easier the transition will be.

Dissemination of knowledge is another area where advisors can be especially helpful to students. Although the campus structure of the 4-year university is often fragmented, academic advisors can serve as guides to help put the pieces together. Students often looked for advisors to give specific advice, which assisted in moving students to familiarity. While students must experience campus life for themselves in order to move through their transition, advisors can provide information to get them on the right path more quickly.

Traditional Institutionally-based Transition Programming

Based on Flaga's (2002) study, the following are specific suggestions of how student transition programming could be implemented or improved upon within community colleges and 4-year universities.

Transfer Admissions and Campus Visits

It is imperative that the admission process take place in a timely fashion that allows students to visit campus ahead of time, and attend the regularly scheduled transfer orientation. Enrollment pressures may sometimes cause 4-year universities to admit students very late in order to meet yield, but this practice puts transfer students at a disadvantage.

Before, during, and after transfer, 4-year universities need to take an active role in interacting with community college transfer students. For example, admissions trips to community colleges could be expanded to include academic advisors as well as admissions officers. If students met an advisor at an information fair on their own campus, they would likely be more comfortable setting up a campus visit to the 4-year university to talk to the advisor in greater depth.

Students in the study strongly suggested visiting campus and meeting with an advisor ahead of time as a means of eliminating unpleasant surprises, increasing awareness of campus services, and beginning a relationship with an academic advisor. Universities could more directly encourage prospective transfer students to visit campus. Widespread programming for freshmen campus visits is commonplace, but the same effort may not be made for transfer students. Customized programming could facilitate early connecting to the academic, social, and physical environments. It would also provide students with opportunities to seek out housing information and peer mentoring resources, and to get a sense of campus life.

Orientation

Orientation could be enhanced to provide better service to transfer students. For some of the students in this study, connecting with fellow students at orientation laid the foundation for future friendships that carried over to the school year. There is also the opportunity for more in-depth knowledge of the student's major and advisor to be gathered—which enhances the knowledge gained from earlier campus contact and visits. A handout developed from the transfer advice that students gave in the Flaga (2002) study could be distributed. The handout would be used to facilitate discussions with students about the perceived realities of the university, and the strategies for transitioning to the academic, social, and physical environments. One concern some transfer students have about orientation is the name of the program. Since they have already been oriented to college, transfer students may be more receptive to a program called something such as Transfer Day.

Transfer Orientation Seminar Courses

Transfer orientation seminar courses are potential tools for facilitating transfer student transition. A variety of potential models are suggested that can be customized to meet the needs of individual community colleges and 4-year universities.

A pretransfer orientation course taught at the community college could facilitate the understanding and early use of learning resources at the university. The course could help students begin connecting to the academic, social, and physical environments of the university by including detailed information on each, and giving the students hands-on experience through campus tours, visits to various facilities at the 4-year university campus, and making appointments with university advisors. The orientation course would be a formal structure of prior contact and would be an additional way that the community college and the university could collaborate. Such a course would be

held on the community college campus, and would involve community college advisors and transfer center staff. The course goal would be to develop stronger bonds between community college and 4-year university staff.

An alternative approach for feeder schools in close proximity to the 4-year university would be to hold the preorientation seminar course on the university campus. This would allow students to get firsthand experience with parking and campus logistics on a smaller scale than they will experience during their first full-time semester at the 4-year university. Increased exposure to the 4-year university campus community will help students feel a part of things and move to Familiarity sooner.

Another effort that 4-year universities could undertake is development of a transfer orientation seminar. Freshmen orientation seminars have had a great deal of success in assisting freshmen with adjustment to college (Fidler & Fidler, 1991). It is projected that a seminar designed exclusively for transfer students would have comparable results. Such a course would be taken during a transfer student's first semester at the university, and would meet weekly throughout the term—much like freshmen orientation courses. Early use of learning resources, connecting, and familiarity with the university can help facilitate student satisfaction within the new university environment.

The transfer orientation seminar at the 4-year university can take many forms. At smaller institutions, a university-wide course may be appropriate. For larger institutions, there are advantages to offering separate courses for individual colleges or majors. The students in the study reported the value of connecting to students in their major who shared similar interests as well as academic requirements. Therefore, an orientation course offered by major would be appealing. It allows departments to customize the information to be most beneficial to students in their academic major. Departments could also utilize the seminar to introduce the students to the department faculty, who are valuable formal learning resources, thus allowing students to connect to the academic environment in a timely fashion. Also, a major specific seminar enables students to find out about possible research opportunities with faculty, which further enhances their academic connections.

Increased Learning Connections

Students reported that informal learning resources, such as friends who were native university students, were the most highly utilized

resource for learning about the academic, social, and physical environments of the university. This is similar to the findings of Robbins & Tank (1995), who report that college students use informal support networks more than formal support services, such as counseling centers. Therefore, programs providing opportunities for peer interaction may prove beneficial. Student organizations, mentoring programs, and special networking sessions at both the community college and 4-year universities are some examples of informal networking opportunities that may need to be more strongly encouraged, or developed if they are not in place. Some specific examples are given below.

Campus Involvement

Many of the students in the study concurred with Astin's (1984) findings and advocated involvement in campus activities as a way to connect and feel a part of the university. Academically related clubs provide information about internships and career opportunities and serve as resources about the academic field, which help solidify students' interest in the area. As noted by many students in the study, it is also a means of getting to know fellow students. This can be done in both formal and informal ways, through student organizations, sporting events, or establishments in the local community. It is important that students interact with peers outside of the classroom environment in order to develop or solidify quality relationships, which will provide them with informal learning resources, help them with Connecting, and move them towards familiarity.

Mentor Programs

Informal learning resources, primarily friends, were highly utilized by transfer students. A formal peer mentor program may facilitate the use of informal learning resources, as well as assist with connecting to peers. Student mentors can be native students as well as transfer students who have already made a successful transition to the 4-year university.

On-campus Living

Consistent with Astin's (1993) findings, student experiences in the Flaga (2002) study differed for on- and off-campus students. The advice is clear from the students that were interviewed in the study: live on campus. They indicated that living on campus increased opportunities to integrate into the academic, social, and physical environments, and helped students find their niche faster. Similar to Astin's (1984) results, students in the study who lived on campus were more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities. The

students attributed this to the close proximity of campus events and student organization meetings, as well as encouragement from neighbors in the residence halls to attend the activities. Those that did not live on campus were still strongly advantaged if they lived with other university students. Townsend (1995) relayed that commuter students may have fewer opportunities to integrate into a university's social system. The students in this study concur with Townsend's findings. By comparison, commuter students had to make a greater effort to connect to the social environment.

Living-learning options are an ideal way for transfer students to be introduced to the overall campus and become a virtually instant member of a subset of the campus community. Living-learning options can take many forms, and can be based on any number of special topics pertinent to students at that particular 4-year institution. In general, the way that living-learning options provide student services is closer to that of the centralized service models at community colleges. Similar to Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996/1999) findings, living-learning options would allow out-of-class experiences to influence student learning. Overall, transfer students' transitions would benefit from access to, and participation in, living-learning programs.

The recommendation to live on campus has implications for the 4-year university as well. On-campus housing is not always available for transfer students at every 4-year university. This exclusionary practice by some institutions should be closely examined, as it may put transfer students at a disadvantage. Through advising and transfer admissions counseling, 4-year university and community college officials can share advice regarding beneficial living arrangements with the students.

IDEAS FOR FORTHCOMING RESEARCH

Despite progress in the literature on transfer students (Flaga, 2002; Laanan, 1998; Townsend, 1995), many questions are left unanswered that could be the subjects of future research.

Interviewing students before transfer, as well as very soon after, may produce different results from those of the Flaga study. Having "in the moment" data as opposed to retrospective information may garner different results. Also, having information beyond the second semester may prove useful for evaluating long-term retention and overall success of the transfer student.

It would also be intriguing to study nontraditional-aged students in order to compare their experiences to the more traditional-age

students in this study. A comparative study between native freshmen and transfer students—looking at the similarities and differences in their transition process to the university—would also assist in further understanding both groups. It is still unclear whether the process of transition was related to the developmental place or maturity level of the transfer students. Therefore, comparative studies of transfer students as well as native freshmen and native juniors may offer more information about how general maturity plays a role in transition.

The sample in the Flaga (2002) study was diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender, and was similar to the overall diversity of MSU as a whole. However, no analysis was done to look at similarities or differences of experience or transition based on gender or ethnicity. In addition, no data were gathered in terms of the sexual orientation of the students in the study. Therefore, it will be important for future studies to provide further insight into these areas.

Throughout the Flaga (2002) study, especially with regards to the integrating dimension, an overarching finding was that a shift in identity sometimes occurred during the transition. A more thorough study looking specifically at identity development and identity transformation would be very helpful in order to delve more thoroughly into this topic.

CONCLUSION

The implications of the Flaga (2002) study point to steps community colleges and 4-year universities can take to facilitate transition, as well as how students can help their own transition process. Initiative is a key component. Students in the study were clear that transfer students must seek out and utilize resources on their own. The students in the Flaga study became competent citizens of the 4-year university, well on their way to reaching their long-term goals. They were committed students who took considerable responsibility for their education, including a substantial individual financial investment. If future transfer students follow through with the advice offered by the students in the Flaga study, their overall transition process could benefit greatly.

The process of transfer student transition looks very different in the Flaga (2002) study than in the results of other studies. It does not deal with credits; it does not deal with numerical grade-point averages. Rather, it captures the overall experiences of students over time. In the future, it is important that this process approach be carried further with continuous studies at other 4-year institutions, as

well as studies starting with students while they are still at the community college. This will help to further establish the transition process as a developmental model with identity transformation implications.

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