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Reflecting Metropolitan-Based Missions in Performance Indicator Reporting

"Boilerplate" performance indicators that are devised with the college-town institution for traditional students in mind lack relevance for metropolitan universities, which are characterized by diverse, nontraditional, and commuter student populations. One metropolitan university, Wichita State University, has recently undergone an extensive and conceptually demanding process with the goal of arriving at a set of performance indicators that are meaningful to the institution itself and to the plurality of constituents it serves. This article outlines the process used to achieve appropriate mission-driven urban indicators, presents the results of their application in an actual setting, and gives academicians useful information about a number of considerations and techniques that should be taken into account when developing a set of appropriately metropolitan-based indicators.

The role of the metropolitan university was once a relatively minor topic in American higher education. Most early colleges were purposefully located away from the noise, confusion, and problems of the city. Pastoral settings were preferred locations because it was believed that scholarship would be better pursued away from the distractions of the urban environment.

However, although clamor and hurry presumably run contrary to the aims of scholarship, it was the excitement, the resources, and the competition of the city environment that spawned metropolitan universities. Park Kolbe's *Urban Influences in Higher Education in England and the United States,* published in 1928, and J. Martin Klotsche's *The Urban University and the Future of Our Cities*, published in 1966, stand out among the first noteworthy attempts to define a mission for metropolitan universities distinct from those at more traditional academic settings. Recently, two urban uni-

versity presidents, Charles P. Ruch and Eugene P. Trani, provided an insightful rationale for this alternative institutional mold:

> As an institution of the city, the metropolitan university, by design and conscious action, seeks to draw upon the rich tapestry and fabric of the community in strengthening its programs of instruction, research, and public service. Conversely, the institution plans and delivers programs and activities that contribute to the improvement of the urban environment in which it resides. Through its many interactions with the community, the metropolitan university seeks to contribute to and ultimately improve the quality of life in the metropolitan area while enhancing its primary mission of knowledge generation and dissemination.

The past quarter of a century has seen an infusion of scholarly works describing the symbiotic threads interweaving the purposes of metropolitan universities (Nash, 1973; Berube, 1978; Rudnick, 1983; Gappert, 1987; Grobman, 1988; Zeigler, 1991; Mulhollan, 1995). Creation of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) Division of Urban Affairs, *Metropolitan Universities* journal, and the Association for Institutional Research Metropolitan Universities Group further reflect a central theme of issues among urban universities.

This article describes the processes and results of a set of meaningful urban-based performance indicators in use at one Midwestern metropolitan university focusing particularly on two kinds of indicators:

- *Core Indicators.* These measures have been approved for common reporting by the six universities in the state system and address key issues of public interest.
- *Campus Specific Indicators.* A set of indicators—including their development and reporting—addressing institutional performance in key mission-related areas specific to each individual campus and the constituents served.

The reporting of core indicators and the development of campus-specific indicators occurred at Wichita State University (WSU) from 1995 through 1997. The campus-specific indicators continue to be refined and operationally established at the time of writing, and likely will be a process that unfolds over the course of the next several years.

Setting

WSU is a medium-sized Doctoral II university (Carnegie classification) that has served students from Kansas, the nation, and around the globe for a century. Today, WSU's student population of 14,300 comes from every state and 93 countries. The university offers 56 bachelors degrees in 150 concentrations, 41 masters degrees, and 10 doctoral degrees.

WSU is also a major economic force in the area, employing over 3,000 people. The university is the scholarly hub and educational resource powerhouse of southern Kansas, with 63 buildings on over 330 acres and an annual operating budget exceeding $118 million, and is a member of NASULGC and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

The home campus is located in northeast Wichita, the largest city in Kansas with over 310,000 inhabitants. Originally founded as Fairmount College in 1895 to spread the New England Congregationalist gospel to Kansas, the college eventually grew into the first municipal university west of the Mississippi River. In 1926 it was renamed the University of Wichita. Upon entering the Kansas state university system in 1964, the name was changed again to Wichita State University.

With state incorporation came funding through legislative appropriations to help defray personal cost for individual students, thereby attracting a growing number of students wanting to obtain higher education in southcentral Kansas. The last president of the University of Wichita, Harry F. Corbin, once said, "The children of the agricultural workers in this country need not all become farmers." In today's climate of increasing corporate ownership of farmlands and the concomitant decline of family-owned farms, the WSU mission has become ever more vital to the citizens of the heartland.

As stated in a recent self-study prepared for the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools:

> WSU's urban mission has shaped the development of degrees, ranging from the associate degree to the doctorate. It has been the basis for the long-standing commitment to the part-time commuter students, as well as the traditional full-time, residential undergraduate student. The university has emphasized educational opportunities for students from the diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds represented within the community. A close interdependent relationship exists between the university and the citizens, the cultural activities, the businesses, and the industries of Wichita, Sedgwick County, and surrounding

> counties. WSU's urban mission is unique in the Kansas Regents System and sets WSU apart from the two traditional research universities and the three regional universities in Kansas (WSU Self-Study, 1997).

The Metropolitan Advantage

A key feature of WSU's urban mission is popularized as *"The Metropolitan Advantage,"* a credo that distinguishes it from the other institutions in the Regents System. Components of the *Metropolitan Advantage* include the Cooperative Education and Career Network Experience Programs, which are committed to complementing student education with practical experience in a real working environment. Current WSU President, Eugene M. Hughes, expresses the crux of this key mission-related area this way:

> The idea that education precedes work in the normal life pattern is being replaced by the realization that the two are interspersed throughout life. No longer does education take place in one location and work in another; they occur simultaneously. The notion that learning occurs only with academic credits and work results only in financial compensation is no longer valid. Today, learning may bring compensation, and work may provide academic credit for experiential learning.

In 1995-96 WSU's *Metropolitan Advantage* placed over 1,200 students in internship and cooperative education positions in which students earned over $3 million in compensation. Since 1926, in testimony to the strong links between the university and its community, the citizens of Wichita have provided a property tax through a mill-levy to help support WSU. Assistance of over $3 million was received last year with local scholarships, and other programs of particular interest to this urban setting, including academic programs in public administration and social work, were among the primary beneficiaries of these funds.

Summary of the Process

The rise of performance indicator reporting in the State of Kansas mirrors methods for evaluating higher education being adopted throughout the United States and Europe (Borden and Bottrill, 1994). Impetus for establishing performance indicators for the state universities evolved through a strategic planning process called *VISION 2020: Transforming The Kansas Regents Universities for the 21st Century.* Context for the process centered on providing high quality, accessible programs in the light of economic, social, and technological change.

The current situation and the foreseeable future are characterized by fiscal constraint, heightened competition for state resources, shifting demands in services, keeping educational programs current with significant technical and social changes, and meeting growing public expectations for accountability. This wellspring of external change challenges the planning and indicator-setting participants to use new thinking about what demonstrates institutional effectiveness and proactive adaptation in a refashioned American society of the post twentieth-century era.

A formal set of indicators was mandated by the governor and legislature during the 1996 session, and beginning with the Fiscal Year 1998 budget, requests for state universities are required to include them. Along the same lines as *VISION 2020* process, core indicators include enrollment, progression, retention and graduation rates, employment placement and graduation school admission rates, measures of faculty (such as contributions to the quality of the instructional experience), and budget allocations (including administrative costs).

A set of core performance indicators were refined by the universities and approved by the Regents in early 1996 for use in the legislative request. There are no incentive grants or additional funds awarded to institutions that demonstrate good performance.

Core Indicators

Each state university is required by the Board of Regents to report performance within six identified areas:

- undergraduate student retention and graduation rates;
- undergraduate student credit hours by ranked faculty;
- general use expenditures (appropriation and tuition) by major program category (instruction, research, public service, academic support, student services, institutional support, physical plant, utilities, and scholarships and fellowships);
- placement during six months after graduation;
- satisfaction with the undergraduate experience; and
- utilization of instructional building space.

Each indicator area has four components: (1) a description of the policy priorities addressed by the indicator; (2) performance data, including quantified measures of historical performance over three years and goals for years 2000 and 2002; (3) a campus commentary; and (4) an explanation of the sources of information.

Fundamental institutional differences ran through all six of the core indicator areas for all six reporting universities. For WSU, the campus commentary proved

invaluable in making understandable a metropolitan-based mission, in contrast to that of the five other nonurban universities of more traditional makeup. The areas of student retention and graduation rates are singled out as cases in point.

Such measures are popularly regarded as identifiable gauges of institutional effectiveness that progress in a logical, linear manner to a quantifiable desired outcome; i.e., graduation from college with a bachelor's degree. It is therefore no surprise that Kansas joined a number of other states in adopting these or similar measures.

However, in order to assign relevance to the outcome measures, they must be described within WSU's urban context. Sensitivity to and understanding of its bimodal population of traditional and nontraditional students are critical in interpreting the persistence rates. Today the bimodal composition runs to the core of the university's institutional culture.

WSU's Nontraditional Population

Not unlike other metropolitan universities, WSU's student population is heavily nontraditional. Over 40% of undergraduates attend part-time (less than 12 hours per academic term). The average age of undergraduates is 26. The demands of work and family are realities faced by a large proportion of students, who manage classroom and homework time along with their other commitments. Therefore, a tendency for full-time degree-seeking students to revert to part-time status, or to "stopout" for several semesters, is not uncommon. A study of all degree-seeking undergraduates enrolled in fall 1992 found only 23% of students who did not work, and nearly one-third were employed for 30 or more hours per week.

Special attention to enhancing the success of this large, nontraditional group of students was given throughout the university. Flexible and alternative course offerings, evening hours for adult support programs, weekend course registration, evening access to admissions/financial aid/business offices, and child care services were a few of the many efforts made to help these students deal with demands in their lives and to assist in their successful degree completion.

Simultaneously, the more traditional 30% to 60% of the student population requires a largely different set of services and programs. Facilitating success for this group calls for service and service levels geared to a 24-hour/day residential living/learning environment.

The Kansas Regents System is the last bastion of an open admissions policy, by which any high school graduate is granted admission into any of the six state universities. It is general knowledge that a number of high school students may not prepare for college as well as they might if more selective criteria for entrance were in place. This policy, along with that of admitting students who stand little chance of

graduating, has had a direct bearing on the less than impressive graduation rates reported by the universities. In acknowledgment of the realities, in 1996 the legislature introduced modest requirements for admission. These standards will not be in place for several more years (2001), but feedback received from high school counselors and teachers increasingly indicates that students are becoming better prepared for the academic rigors of college-level study.

Graduation/Retention Rates

All six state universities in Kansas shared a common policy of open admissions, yet WSU traditionally reported lower persistence and graduation rates. Among the first-time, full-time freshmen at WSU in fall 1994, 36.3% did not return in fall 1995, while the other Kansas public universities experienced attrition rates from 24% to 33%. Likewise, WSU reported a six-year graduation rate of only 25.3% for a cohort that entered in fall 1989, compared to the other universities' six-year rate of 42% and 57% (Kansas Board of Regents, 1997).

Nevertheless, WSU retained the largest proportion of students *after* six years, and thus reported a significantly higher overall institutional graduation rate of 35.2% two years later. Perhaps the students at WSU took a longer time to graduate than those at more traditional universities because, at least in part, of its metropolitan setting.

On the surface, comparison of simple attrition and graduation rates could mean that WSU did not do as good a job at retaining and graduating students as the other institutions. However, there are a considerable number of well-developed, bimodal programs specifically aimed at bolstering retention. Institutional attributes, including a student-to-faculty ratio of 13 to 1, suggest that institutional causes were not the main root of the disparity. Inclusion of persistence and graduation rate information on the core performance indicators required additional institutional efforts to gain a clearer understanding of student persistence at WSU.

The Fiscal Year 1998 Budget Request included Core Performance Indicators on first year retention, and four-year through six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time freshmen. In addition to providing a total rate, subtotals were arranged by scores on the ACT: (a) no ACT; (b) less than 19; (c) 19 and 20; (d) 21 through 35; and (e) 26 and higher. This finer breakdown by ACT score provided a better understanding of how well freshmen with differences in precollege scholastic attributes survived to graduation, and how each range of ACT scores contributed to the overall rate. The results for WSU are presented in Table 1, and were included as part of the formal budget request sent to the governor and legislature.

Table 1
WSU Retention and Graduation Rate Performance Data

Measure for First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen	Overall Rate	No ACT Score	ACT Score <19	ACT Score 19-20	ACT Score 21-25	ACT Score 26 and >
1. First Year Retention Rate, Entering Cohort Fall 1994	63.7%	49.8%	51.5%	66.1%	80.2%	75.2%
2. Four-Year Graduation Rate, Entering Cohort Fall 1990	7.9%	8.5%	3.3%	8.2%	6.9%	19.2%
3. Six-Year Graduation Rate, Entering Cohort Fall 1988	28.3%	25.4%	19.5%	33.3%	34.7%	52.1%
4. Eight-Year Graduation Rate, Entering Cohort Fall 1986	35.8%	29.7%	26.9%	28.4%	43.3%	64.0%

An eight-year graduation rate measure was not a part of the original approved report format. However, WSU insisted that the true state of the institution's student outcomes would be distorted without it. The measure was therefore added to the report, which further differentiated the indicators of urban and nonurban missions.

The table includes the one-year retention rate and graduation rates after four, five, six, and eight years for students who started as first-time, full-time freshmen. The finer breakdown of these rates by ACT scores provides a platform for comparing WSU to more traditional institutions. Of those students at least marginally prepared for college (ACT score 21-25), the percentage retained after one year is as much as 16.5% above the overall rate. In contrast, those who are minimally prepared (ACT score less than 21) fell 12.2% below the overall rate.

It is evident that students with better ACT scores are retained and graduated at higher rates than those with lower or absent scores. But the student population at WSU with the higher, more desirable ACT scores is not large enough; and additional focus on students marginally prepared for college may prove rewarding for retention efforts at WSU.

Institutionally proposed goals on the performance indicators called for entering freshmen in 1999 to display a 65% first year survival rate (66% for the entering class of 2001). These goals would require 80% of students with at least a 21 on the ACT composite score to continue their second year of study. Institutional goals also called for an annual 1% increase in four through eight-year graduation rates. To place these goal rates within the context of institution, the following WSU narrative explained the data.

> WSU's student population largely reflects the composition of the metropolitan area where it is located. Unlike the other Regent's institutions, WSU serves a large number of nontraditional, as well as traditional, students. This feature is an inherent part of the University's urban-oriented mission. An entering freshmen class perhaps is the single most traditional group of students on any university campus; yet, at WSU, the average new freshmen is 21 years old. Employment and family responsibilities are common among this group. At times, personal demands may keep many of these students from following the

traditional four-year degree attainment pattern. Students who leave and return to WSU take much longer to graduate than those who enroll without interruption. For example, of the freshmen who entered in 1989 and graduated by 1995, less than 9% had missed one or more terms of enrollment. In contrast, over three-quarters of the freshmen from the same entering class who continued to be enrolled in 1995 had "stopped-out" of WSU for at least one semester.

WSU's faculty and staff are aware of the *real-life* pressures students face in completing a degree while juggling simultaneously the demands of family and employment. Our intervention and support efforts are geared to assisting students in meeting competing and, sometimes, conflicting, demands that may interfere with graduation. Personal difficulties counseling, financial assistance, support programs for returning adults, training in college survival skills, and one-to-one academic advising, are among the institutional services at work to keep students progressing toward a degree, while managing all the other important aspects of their lives.

First-time full-time freshmen are the most traditional of college sub-populations. Yet, at WSU the average age for freshmen is 21, not 18. On the whole, this group's additional three years away from college study typically translate into entering full adulthood, along with all its accompanying obligations that go with it (e.g., employment, children). The ability of these students to persist and graduate from college at the rates found for traditional age groups becomes increasingly problematic. Furthermore, the presence of employment opportunities at competitive wages in the metropolitan area often lures students away from full-time college attendance, and dulls the reasonableness of "deferred gratuity," the pontifical maxim that favors the argument for graduating as soon as possible.

Data collected in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study are valuable aids to metropolitan universities serving significant numbers of nontraditional students. One recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1996)

concluded that among bachelor's degree-seeking undergraduates, about one-third (31%) of nontraditional students graduated within five years, while more than one-half (54%) of traditional students graduated in the same period of time. Macro-level findings such as these encourage metropolitan universities and validate that national trends are being mirrored at individual institutions.

Nontraditional-age students (21 or older) comprised about 15% of recent cohorts of first-time full-time freshmen at Wichita State. While relatively small in total number, the influence of this group of students does have a significant influence on the university's overall persistence and graduation rates. This difference is noteworthy, because it points out that success in one mission area (serving nontraditional students) probably has a direct bearing on another (improving graduation rates).

Table 2's comparison of persistence and graduation rates is based on the most recent freshmen cohorts, and will be used in the next cycle of performance indicators to give them additional meaning.

Table 2
Comparison of Persistence and Graduation Rates Between Traditional and Nontraditional Age First-Time Full-Time Freshmen

Measure	Traditional	Nontraditional	Total
1 Year Retention	67.3%	50.9%	64.1%
4 Year Graduation	9.2%	8.2%	8.9%
4 Year Still Enrolled	31.2%	30.0%	31.0%
6 Year Graduation	28.7%	23.8%	28.2%
6 Year Still Enrolled	9.6%	3.0%	9.0%
8 Year Graduation	34.2%	25.3%	28.2%
8 Year Still Enrolled	4.4%	1.3%	4.2%

The data in the table suggest that nontraditional-age freshmen have lower persistence and graduation rates than those of traditional age students, in keeping with the results of the NCES study of nontraditional students. Furthermore, the influence of nontraditional-age students is seen in each reported measure.

The pattern of persistence and graduation between the two age groups is obvious. Table 2 indicates that nearly one-half of nontraditional-age students depart before their second year of study, while, in contrast, over two-thirds of traditional students survive past the first year. By the fourth year, however, continuation and graduation rates of the two groups become similar. But a difference between the two groups is apparent yet again when a larger percentage of traditional students graduate or continue progress toward a degree.

Adult students are required to provide evidence of precollege scholastic ability such as ACT or SAT scores, or their high school transcripts. Of the 1995 freshmen cohort, for example, nearly one-half of the nontraditional students failed to provide their high school grade average, and the vast majority, 84%, did not supply ACT or SAT scores. Despite the reality that most will experience difficulty in graduating, the paucity of information about these students continues to stymie efforts to identify those who can benefit from institutional intervention. Past practice reveals that many adult students resent being labeled as "at risk," or even given advice about participating in adult and returning student programs promoting student success.

Campus-Specific Indicators

Additional indicators are being developed at each university to assess the status of, or, where applicable, to state goals for, mission-related topics. Some may simply elaborate core indicators; others may take a different direction altogether. Our course at WSU has been to use campus-specific indicators that generally reflect different aspects of the institution from those covered in the core indicators.

Delphi techniques were used in the formulation of campus-based indicators. Input was and continues to be elicited from a large base of constituents, both internal and external to the institution. The result is a set of concise performance measures highly focused on this metropolitan university. As of this writing, the set of campus-specific indicators in Table 3 have been proposed but are still in draft form and subject to change.

Community Perception Indicators

WSU is taking an approach that is expected to increase objectivity above that found in surveys collected by an institution's central administration. The Elliott School of Communication at WSU will undertake the design and implementation of a study to include community perception indicators, analysis of media coverage, and surveys of regional business and local leaders. The school has a solid background of experience for such an undertaking because it has completed similar projects for media and business.

The community perceptions indicators by and large represent relatively uncharted ground for this, or perhaps any, university. With the exception of campus crime statistics, measurements have yet to be formally operationalized. University officials anticipate that a baseline reflecting a positive campus image will be forthcoming, as will future updates. However, this conclusion is based only on informal feedback and impressions from the community rather than on a formal process of data collection and analysis.

Using community perception indicators adds an element of risk to the reporting process. University officials know that public perceptions are volatile, that a single negative incident occurring within campus boundaries, whether under their control or not, can have grave and lasting consequences for the university's image. Nevertheless, by taking a snapshot of the community's view of the university, officials will gain invaluable information on institutional effectiveness not possible with more traditional measures.

The use of community-based performance indicators lends credibility to the reporting process and shows an earnestness that translates into good public relations. Asking for feedback from the community in itself demonstrates good will from a university wanting to know what the citizenry thinks. When, in quantifiable terms, a positive public image is evidenced, the symbiotic relationship between the university and community is naturally validated and strengthened. Conversely, if a less than perfect public image is revealed, it can and should still result in an eventual overall positive outcome. In this case, the measures are designed to point directly to the problem area(s) and lead to effective, corrective measures to improve the university and to signal confidence and success to the community it serves. It must be remembered and reported that the ultimate success of the university—rather than simple damage control—is the primary reason for community-based performance indicators. With such success, a university, especially a nontraditional one such as WSU, can go a long way in attracting and retaining good students.

Table 3

Area of Concern	*Measurement/Instrument*	*Goal*
(1) Diversity of undergraduate student population	Percent and number of students who are ethnic miinority, female, or disabled	To increase the percentage of ethnic minority and disabled students, and to demonstrate proportional representation by female students
	Average student age	To demonstrate the dual service population of both traditional and nontraditional age students
(2) Viable service to the community	Number and dollar value of sponsored public service programs	To increase both the number and dollar value of public service programs
	Percent of students enrolled in cooperative education and internship programs	To increase the percent of students in practical learning settings
	Percent of students reporting volunteer work	To increase the proportion of students invilved in beneficial community activities
(3) Community perceptions	Crime statistics benchmarked to peer universities	To keep WSU at or near the top of safe campuses among the urban-based peer group
	Paid attendance at univeristy cultural events	To demonstrate large community interest in events and to increase community interest
	Paid attendance at university athletic events	To demonstrate large community interest in events and to increase community interest

	Community favorable/unfavorable ratio measured by coverage in statewide media and letters to the editor	To demonstrate a heavily weighted positive image about the university as covered by the media and in letters to the editor
	Favorable/unfavorable perception rating by community leaders, legislators, and other elected officials by survey	The goal is to demonstrate that a favorable image of the university held by local leaders
(4) Visible academic support	Average use hours per week of library, classrooms, and teaching laboratories	To demonstrate high hours of use hours in academic facilities
	Number of faculty participating in professional meetings, completing courses in instructional improvement, and memberships in professional associations of professional development.	To demonstrate increasingly high rates of faculty participation in various avenues of professional development
	Amount of scholarship assistance per student FTE	
(5) Visible outreach	Number of students attending instructional sites other than the main campus (separate measures for interactive televisiion, telecourse and video courses)	To demonstrate access to educational opportunities throughout the metropolitan service area, to demonstrate the use of technology to increase educational access, and to increase participation in alternative instruction away from the home campus
	Percent of courses in nonstandard format (8 week, weekend, concentrated)	The goal is to increase course offerings in alternative formats

Summary

Completing the performance indicator reporting at WSU involves much more than filling in blanks on a report form or simply forwarding safe campus-specific measures that would suggest effective performance despite other evidence to the contrary to the regents. Instead, innovative yet sound indicators were sought not only to measure institutional effectiveness but also to serve as vehicles for recognizing public interests, demonstrating public accountability, and pointing clearly to the institution's strengths or weaknesses. With the Kansas Regents and legislature mandating creation of a formal set of performance indicators for state universities, the time was right for WSU to assert its uniqueness.

At first this appeared to be a formidable task. What was envisioned went beyond the scope of traditional performance indicators into uncharted and potentially politically dangerous territory for the institution. Much care was taken to arrive at potent and relevant measures, acceptable to the administration and to the regents, that would tell the truth about WSU's effectiveness in meeting service goals.

The task became less daunting once a few obvious questions were posed. What is WSU's mission? What is the *Metropolitan Advantage* all about? What is the purpose of a nontraditional campus? How do WSU students compare to those at other, more traditional institutions? Studying the WSU mission statement, the NCA self-study, and the institution's statistical reports, as well as specifically obtaining input from internal and external constituents on these questions provided answers and direction.

What emerged was a clear idea that WSU students, by and large, embark upon higher education as a longer-term goal compared to those at more traditional institutions, and that WSU as a metropolitan campus is more functionally linked to and more highly interactive with the community within which it exists than traditional universities. These two observations formed the basis for creating unique performance measures.

Demonstrating the delayed graduation pattern for nontraditional students by employing an eight-year graduation rate and surveying community perceptions of the university, addresses key aspects of WSU's urban-oriented mission that could not be addressed using boilerplate performance indicators. For WSU these measures are powerful tools for improving institutional effectiveness.

Suggested Readings

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