

Civic Engagement and the Emergence of a Metropolitan Identity: The Politics of Mobilizing An Institution to Meet Metropolitan Needs

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Abstract

This paper describes Widener University's strategic transformation into a metropolitan university from the perspective of two academic administrators who were members of the university's Strategic Planning Committee. As part of its new strategic plan, Widener adopted a mission that emphasizes creating a learning environment featuring civic engagement. The authors explore how this call for an agenda of engagement met with resistance on campus and describe the efforts that have been mounted to overcome that opposition.

Shortly after his inauguration as president of Widener University on October 4, 2002, Dr. James T. Harris, III, launched a formal strategic planning process at the university. Although President Harris stressed in his announcement of the appointment of the Strategic Planning Committee that the planning process would examine every aspect of the institution and that there was no pre-determined blueprint for the plan, he had already made it clear during the interview process and in his inaugural address that he expected to make the university's commitment to civic engagement a cornerstone of his presidential administration.

In his inaugural address, President Harris (2002) suggested that Widener commit itself to the following four promises:

- To produce citizens trained for competency and character.
- To prepare citizens who truly understand collaboration and possess community-building skills.
- To produce citizens who will embrace the multicultural nature of our democratic society.
- To produce good citizens by modeling good citizenship on and off campus.

In proposing these promises, President Harris (2002, p. 3) made the following observations about Widener's urban location:

I know of very few places in the country where a university is located in the middle of such a fertile and promising environment as here in Chester. I have

had people say to me, “Oh, Jim, it is a shame that Widener isn’t located in a ‘better’ community.” I couldn’t disagree more. We are located precisely in a vibrant community with a myriad of opportunities for scholarship, teaching, and service. Where better than right here and right now to develop a model 21st century university: A university committed to the ideals of all great universities – teaching, scholarship, and service – but also a dynamic 21st century metropolitan university that views its focus as preparing students to be responsible citizens.

This explicit call for Widener to embrace its surrounding community and to make partnerships with the community an integral part of the educational experience of Widener students represented a major shift in institutional focus. Chester is a distressed city of 36,000 residents located just 12 miles from center city Philadelphia. Forty-one percent of its adult population is outside the labor force. Chester has a poverty rate of 27 percent and the lowest ranking school district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. At the time of President Harris’ arrival, Chester was widely seen on campus as a major liability for the university. President Harris’ predecessor had occupied the presidency for 20 years and had used an entrepreneurial style of leadership to continue the transformation of the institution from a baccalaureate military school into a comprehensive institution with significant involvement in graduate education. While this former president had worked to establish close ties with Chester’s political leaders, his frustration and impatience with a city bureaucracy built on years of one-party domination of city government limited his enthusiasm for any major joint project with Chester. This negative view of the city, coupled with security concerns, contributed to the development of a fortress mentality on the campus – a mentality perhaps best symbolized by the daily closing and locking at dusk of a pedestrian walkway over the freeway that separates the Widener campus from adjacent parts of the city.

To reinforce his commitment to breaking down this fortress mentality and to re-positioning Widener as a metropolitan university, President Harris authorized in his first year in office Widener’s becoming a member of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, and he created a new position of Special Assistant to the President for Community Engagement. In supporting membership in CUMU, President Harris committed himself and members of his senior leadership team to establishing a visible presence in that organization. In establishing the Office of Community Engagement, with its director reporting directly to him, President Harris signaled the importance of community partnerships to his administration.

The Strategic Planning Process

As President Harris was pursuing this agenda of engagement, he launched the first formal strategic planning process in the history of the university. From the mid-1970’s through President Harris’s arrival, Widener had evolved from a predominantly undergraduate, former military college consisting of a number of professional schools serviced by a growing College of Arts and Sciences to a comprehensive, multi-campus

institution with major involvement in graduate professional education. At the time the strategic planning process was launched, Widener consisted of eight schools and colleges, with enrollments of approximately 2,300 traditional-aged undergraduates, 870 part-time, non-traditional undergraduates, 1,900 graduate students, and 1,700 law students. The Law School is housed on campuses in Wilmington, Del., and Harrisburg, Pa., with almost all of the other programs based on the university's main campus in Chester, Pa. In 2002, the university offered approximately 150 programs of study, with degree programs ranging from the associate level to the doctoral level.

In September of 2002, shortly before his inauguration, President Harris appointed the Strategic Planning Committee. This came after extensive consultations with members of the university community. President Harris had asked for recommendations for planning committee members who were widely respected on campus for their ability to adopt a broad perspective on university issues. The committee had 15 members. Senior administrators on the committee included the president, the provost, and the vice president for administration and finance, who served as the chairperson of the committee. Other academic administrators included two deans and two associate/vice deans. Faculty representation included the current chairperson of the university faculty, two past presidents of the university faculty, the current chairperson of the university Faculty Affairs Committee, and a faculty member with special interest in diversity issues. Of the remaining three members, two were non-academic administrators, and the third was the executive assistant to the president.

The first four months of the committee's existence were devoted to process issues, creating a cohesive team, and establishing the timeline for the process, with a mandate from President Harris to complete the process by the end of the 2004 spring semester. In February 2003, the committee created 11 task forces to address the following topics: academic programs; administrative programs; competitive forces; core values; economic, social, and demographic forces; financial resources; human resources; image, culture, and climate; physical resources; political, legal, governmental, and educational forces, and technological issues. Each task force was given a specific charge by the committee and was asked to complete its work by the end of the semester. Committee members chaired three of the task forces. Each task force included a member of the Strategic Planning Committee who served as liaison to the committee. The number of members on the task forces ranged from six to 10, and the membership included faculty, administrators, staff members, and students. In May of 2003, the committee held a retreat that included the chairpersons of the task forces to consider the task force reports and their major findings. During the following summer, additional information, especially related to best practices at other universities, was collected as a follow-up to the task force reports.

In October of 2003, the Strategic Planning Committee held a "Visioning Conference" on campus. More than 60 participants attended, including invited faculty members, administrators, staff members, alumni, community leaders, and members of the Widener Board of Trustees. Information from the task force reports was shared with participants, and participants were divided into small groups to review the challenges

and opportunities facing the university and to identify aspirations for the university for the next 10 years. Concurrent with the Visioning Conference, small discussion groups of faculty, staff members, and administrators were conducted to review and discuss the task force reports. Using the task force reports, recommendations from the small group discussions and the Visioning Conference, President Harris led a subcommittee of the Strategic Planning Committee and a small number of representatives from the Board of Trustees in drafting vision and mission statements and goals. These drafts were then discussed and modified by the Strategic Planning Committee before being presented to the university community for a two-week comment period in late November. Based on the feedback, President Harris finalized the vision, mission, and goals for presentation to the Board of Trustees at its December meeting, during which they were unanimously and enthusiastically approved.

In mid-December 2003, Goals and Objectives (GO) teams were formed to draft objectives and associated action steps for each of the 12 approved goals. The Strategic Planning Committee served as one of the GO teams. A committee member chaired each of the other GO teams. Various campus constituencies were represented on the GO teams and membership on most teams ranged from seven to nine members. The timeframe for the GO teamwork was tight, with reports due to the Strategic Planning Committee in mid-February. Originally, the timeframe called for the Strategic Planning Committee to finalize its draft of the plan, based on the GO team recommendations, in time to have it reviewed by Faculty Council committees prior to presentation to the Board of Trustees at its regular March meeting

However, synthesizing and integrating the GO team reports into non-duplicative objectives and action steps turned out to be a huge task, and the timeline was revised to allow for a more careful drafting of the plan and a more reasonable amount of time for Faculty Council to consider and react to the plan. Board action was postponed to May. Even with this delay, Faculty Council committees had only three weeks to prepare feedback on the draft. While Faculty Council was considering the draft, other members of the university community also had opportunities in the context of small group meetings to make suggestions for refinement of the plan. Once feedback from Faculty Council and others on campus was received, the Strategic Planning Committee undertook a days-long painstaking final revision of the plan that included numerous changes based on the feedback. Finally, on May 13, 2004, the Board of Trustees approved Widener's first formal strategic plan.

Concerns about the New Vision and Mission

Despite the unequivocal signs of President Harris's intention of emphasizing civic engagement and the metropolitan nature of the university, there was strong criticism from some faculty circles of the extent to which these elements are featured in the following vision and mission statements that emerged from the strategic planning process:

Vision Statement – Widener aspires to be the nation's preeminent metropolitan university recognized for an unparalleled academic environment,

innovative approaches to learning, active scholarship, and the preparation of students for responsible citizenship in a global society.

Mission Statement – As a leading metropolitan university, we achieve our mission at Widener by creating a learning environment where curricula are connected to societal issues through civic engagement. We lead by providing a unique combination of liberal arts and professional education in a challenging, scholarly, and culturally diverse academic community. We engage our students through dynamic teaching, active scholarship, personal attention, and experiential learning. We inspire our students to be citizens of character who demonstrate professional and civic leadership. We contribute to the vitality and well-being of the communities we serve. (Widener University, 2004, pp. 1-2).

The opposition to this agenda for engagement was expressed in two major concerns. The first of these concerns focused on service learning and the issue of faculty control of the curriculum. Some faculty read the mission statement as a dictate to faculty across all curricula to convert traditional courses into service-learning courses. Therefore, they viewed this statement as signaling an inappropriate administrative intrusion into the faculty's purview over curriculum. There was speculation that units and departments that resisted this perceived call would be punished through the withholding of resources.

The second major concern voiced about the vision and mission statements was that Widener, as a private, tuition-driven institution, would be unable to distinguish itself among larger public metropolitan universities. It was noted that most of Widener's traditional competitors in recruiting undergraduate students do not identify themselves as metropolitan universities and that Widener's doing so could lead to the institution's being inaccurately perceived as an urban, commuter school. This, it was argued, could adversely affect recruitment, as the majority of Widener's undergraduates live on campus and are drawn predominantly from suburban areas in the greater Philadelphia region. In addition, the greater resources of public metropolitan universities, especially in relation to infrastructure to support research, would make it impossible for Widener to compete successfully in the scholarship arena.

Responses to the Concerns

To address the concern about service learning and control of the curriculum, President Harris and the members of the Strategic Planning Committee pursued multiple strategies. One has been to use President Harris' regular "town hall" meetings with faculty and staff and formal meetings of the faculty to address the misperceptions that service learning courses are the only means to promote civic engagement and that all faculty must adopt service learning pedagogical approaches. The president has explicitly stated on several occasions that service learning is only one of a vast array of pedagogical approaches for encouraging civic engagement. He also stated that service learning would not be appropriate methodology in many courses and that he anticipated that far fewer than half of all faculty would ever be involved in service learning.

Another strategy being used to address this concern about service learning was to provide support for faculty who wanted to become involved in service learning. In 2004, the university launched a faculty development program focused specifically on service learning and based on a program developed at Eastern Michigan University. This program provided a one course release for each of two successive semesters to those selected for the program. The faculty member's department is provided with funding to cover the cost of replacement adjunct faculty. In the first semester, academic service-learning fellows participated in weekly seminars designed to introduce them to concepts and issues associated with academic service-learning and to help them in the design of an academic service-learning course to be offered the following semester. Support for the design of the course came from the Office for Community Engagement, which assisted in identifying a community partner for the course. In the second semester, the faculty fellows offered for the first time their academic service-learning course. The response from faculty to this program has been very positive. In the initial round of applications, there were 22 applications for the eight available fellowships. Significantly, several applications were from faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences, from which came the strongest objections to the strategic planning process. In addition to this new faculty development program, the university also doubled the budget for two other faculty development programs, either of which helps support faculty's involvement in service learning.

A third way in which the Strategic Planning Committee addressed the concern about control of curriculum was to provide specific objectives and action steps in the strategic plan that affirmed the faculty's direct involvement in the review and revision of curriculum. For example, a major goal was added to the plan that reads as follows: "Ensure academic excellence by maintaining the university's commitment to academic freedom and by upholding faculty governance, especially in matters pertaining to pedagogy, curriculum and scholarship." (Widener University, 2004, p. 121.) Another goal stated: "Achieve an unparalleled academic environment by promoting rigorous educational programs, productive scholarship and lifelong learning," (p. 21). Objectives and action steps were included that call on each academic unit to establish goals for academic excellence in the areas of curriculum and faculty and student accomplishments, and to propose where appropriate adjustments and revisions of promotion and tenure guidelines in relation to the goals for academic excellence. Thus, the plan explicitly and specifically identified the faculty as the primary agent for curriculum revision and all that flows from revision of the curriculum.

To address the concerns about the metropolitan university identity, President Harris moved to significantly increase resources devoted to the Office of University Advancement. Some of these resources have been used to develop an infrastructure to encourage and support applications for external grants and awards. Already the university has experienced a major increase in project-specific grant funding. Many of these projects were directly tied to the institution's new mission. For example, grants

to Widener's Center for Education funded a technology-infusion project in a K-5 school with which the center has a professional development school relationship, and a major new reading intervention project. That project for at-risk elementary and middle school students is in partnership with the Chester school district, a major non-profit community organization focused on improving education, and Widener's own Social Work Consultation Services. A separate grant enabled the university to expand the Social Work Consultation Services to include interns from Widener's doctoral program in clinical psychology and expand services available to individuals, families, and agencies in the community. All of these projects were designed to document student-learning outcomes associated with service in these programs and to provide participating faculty with opportunities to integrate their research agendas with service in the programs.

Other resources provided to University Advancement are being used to fund a new branding campaign for the university and to conduct studies of how Widener is perceived by alumni, current students, prospective applicants, and other residents of the region. The intent of this campaign is to shape Widener's new metropolitan image in a way that will communicate to the university's traditional applicant pool the educationally enriching experiences that Widener's metropolitan nature affords at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Simultaneously, the Office of Enrollment Management, in conjunction with a number of other offices on campus, is pursuing another objective in the strategic plan that calls for the university to "recruit, enroll, retain, and graduate a student body whose diversity more closely reflects the populations of the metropolitan areas we serve." (Widener University, 2004, pp. 17-19). Emphasizing the metropolitan character of the university is seen as one means of achieving a larger and more diverse applicant pool. To help build a corps of students who can model and promote the university's new commitment to civic engagement and its expanded metropolitan role, the university initiated a "Service Scholars" program for entering freshmen. This program provides major scholarship funding for students who express an interest in committing themselves to significant community service throughout their college career.

To the extent that the university's metropolitan identity alters expectations for faculty scholarly productivity and to the extent that faculty involvement in community work needs to be explicitly reflected in the university's reward system, there is a mechanism included in the strategic plan to address these issues. Specifically, there is an objective that calls on all faculty groups to "reassess and adjust where appropriate" (Widener University, 2004, pp. 35-36) standards for promotion, tenure, retention and merit-based salary increase in light of new goals for academic excellence relating to teaching, research, or program development. Therefore, all faculty members will have the opportunity to help ensure that expectations for faculty performance are consistent with the university's new mission and the resource infrastructure that is being built to support that mission.

Lessons Learned

Many of the lessons learned from the University's strategic planning process have to do with not sufficiently anticipating the political dynamics inherent in introducing change to an institution that had experienced relatively stable and static senior leadership for 20 years. These lessons are described below.

Power Shift

For the previous 20 years, the governance structure of the university had been relatively static. The former president, who served in the role for 20 years, had a leadership style that was hierarchical and non-transparent. For the last 17 of those 20 years, he managed the academic side of the university through a provost whose initial faculty appointment following graduate school was at Widener and who rose to the position of provost after a brief tenure as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The power that was vested in the faculty was clearly exercised through Faculty Council, the university's formal faculty governance structure. Faculty Council's leadership had largely been dominated by a narrow segment of the faculty, and was not generally representative of some of the smaller schools and programs within the university, particularly those with significant community involvement. The composition of the Strategic Planning Committee represented a broader representation of campus constituents and clearly threatened the hegemony of those who had traditionally wielded the power in Faculty Council. This threatened power shift immediately raised the suspicions and concerns of those who were the traditional faculty power brokers on campus. Morriss (2000) and others (e.g., Leatherman, 1998; Dolence and Norris, 1995; Harvey, 1997) have argued that the organizational culture of an institution is critically important in planning for strategic change. When that culture does not include a history of broad-based participation in strategic planning, those leading the strategic change will need to invest time and energy in promoting a planning culture on campus.

One way of helping to build such a planning culture would have been to find a role for Faculty Council at the very beginning of the strategic planning process. Although the chairperson of the Strategic Planning Committee gave repeated assurances that Faculty Council would be involved once a plan was drafted and would be involved in implementing the plan consistent with its traditional charge and jurisdiction, the compressed timeframe for Faculty Council's consideration and response to the draft of the plan and the lack of formal consultation with Faculty Council prior to the adoption of the mission and vision statements that guided the development of the plan gave some Faculty Council leaders a basis for challenging the legitimacy of the process. This criticism was intensified by the announcement that the long-time provost was stepping down and that a search for a new provost would proceed in conjunction with finalizing the strategic plan. Given the role that the departing provost had played in establishing the Faculty Council governance system and his close association with some of the disgruntled Faculty Council leaders, his departure was seen by some faculty as evidence that those who did not enthusiastically support repositioning the university as a metropolitan institution with an emphasis on civic engagement would be eliminated

from positions of power. Had more key faculty leaders been engaged with the drafting of the strategic plan, it might have been possible to cultivate more of them as enthusiastic supporters of the new vision and mission, thereby reducing the probability that they would become leaders of opposition to change. As Morriss (2000) noted, successful strategic planning requires that faculty believe that the planning agenda has not been predetermined and that the leaders have no hidden agendas.

Introducing a Transparent Planning Process

Launching a strategic planning process at the same time the institutional culture is undergoing significant transition can result in disrupted communication and withdrawal of participation. At the beginning of the strategic planning process, President Harris made it very clear that he intended to conduct a transparent planning process based in part on the arguments of organizational theorists (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988; Chan, 1987; Floyd, 1985; Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Sinnot and Johnson, 1996; Yukl, 1994) and writers on strategic planning (e.g., Andrade, 1998-99; Bryson, 1995; Dolence and Norris, 1995; Keller, 1983) that extensive and inclusive participation in planning is crucial to its success. In fact, as discussed above, President Harris held regular town hall meetings and invited on-going input from all constituencies. This transparent style was very unfamiliar to the institution's culture. Ironically, the more the President talked about transparency, the more some groups became convinced of a hidden agenda and withdrew their involvement. As the strategic planning process progressed, town hall meetings were not as well attended. Very few faculty or other constituents responded to invitations by the Strategic Planning Committee and the president to provide input. In other words, even though the intention was to create a climate of inclusion and transparency in the planning process, the result was quite the opposite.

Some process to help university constituents adapt to the new leadership style and to trust the process would perhaps have supported the new and different forms of involvement that a transparent leadership style offered. The transition from behaviors and structures that were adapted to a hierarchical leadership model to behaviors that were more appropriate to a transparent leadership style needed more attention. For example, some faculty may have chosen not to participate in town hall meetings or may have elected not to provide input and reaction through numerous other informal channels provided in the planning process because they were used to a system in which faculty input was channeled through deliberative faculty committee structures. Therefore, it might have been helpful early in the process to make it explicit to faculty that they would be asked to provide input by means other than the traditional deliberative faculty governance process. In orienting faculty to this change, it might have been helpful to explain the need for developing a strategic plan quickly and how the relatively short timeline envisioned by the president meant that waiting for the formal faculty governance processes would put faculty in a reactive as opposed to proactive position with regard to shaping the planning process. It might also have been helpful to engage faculty in dialogue about Morriss' (2000) findings that some participants in university strategic planning saw a highly hierarchical, bureaucratic

organizational structure as an impediment to effective planning. Her respondents suggested that such a hierarchical organizational structure contributed to noninvolvement by large numbers of faculty who saw efforts to engage them in planning as “pseudo-consultation” (p. 61). The Strategic Planning Committee could have used such a discussion as a means of explaining the committee’s use of multiple, informal mechanisms for members of the university community to have input in shaping the strategic plan.

Time Line

A realistic and well-designed time line is essential to the strategic planning process. The Strategic Planning Committee had 18 months to complete its task. A considerable amount of time in the beginning was spent developing the committee’s group process skills. While this was an important component of the effort, it resulted in a compressed time line for refining the strategic plan and for circulating the plan for comment among university constituents and most importantly, through the faculty governance structure. Drafts were circulated that had not been adequately edited, leaving the Strategic Planning Committee vulnerable to considerable criticism regarding the members collective literary and organizational skills. As Morriss (2000) noted, electronic sharing of documents, as was used by Widener’s Strategic Planning Committee, may contribute to information overload and disengagement by faculty who lack an organizational framework for discerning what the focus and priority of their deliberations should be. Fully edited documents were circulated only very late in the process, leaving little time for careful review and reflection by constituents. This further exacerbated the power shift tensions that already existed and the belief that faculty governance was being circumvented and disregarded.

In retrospect, this dynamic might have been mitigated to a great degree had the Strategic Planning Committee had a more realistic timeline. Circulating well-edited materials and giving faculty governance bodies and other constituencies adequate time to reflect and review may have better served President Harris’s intention of promoting a highly transparent strategic planning process. Although the Strategic Planning Committee went to great lengths to adapt the strategic plan based on the feedback provided, earlier sustained involvement of formal faculty deliberative bodies might have helped dispel suspicions of hidden agendas.

Inevitability of Resistance

Probably no tweaking of the process could have avoided opposition to major elements of the plan. Widener’s new vision and mission represented fundamentally new directions for the university. Making civic engagement central to the university’s educational programs and emphasizing the university’s metropolitan nature have profound implications for the teaching and research of the faculty and for the work of administrators and staff members.

Recently, Karen Holt (2004), executive director of Project Pericles, spoke on the Widener campus. Project Pericles is an organization founded by Eugene Lang, noted

entrepreneur and philanthropist, for the purpose of encouraging and facilitating commitments by colleges and universities to include education for societal responsibility and participatory citizenship as an essential part of their educational programs. As a result of Widener's new vision and mission and President Harris's commitment to promoting civic engagement, Widener was invited in the summer of 2004 to become one of 19 members of the organization. In welcoming Widener to Project Pericles, Dr. Holt observed that a university's commitment to civic engagement could create a profound sense of disequilibrium within the institution as the various constituencies come to grips with the changes that such a commitment would entail. She noted that relatively complex institutions, such as Widener, face even greater challenges in undertaking a commitment to civic engagement than do single-purpose, traditional liberal arts schools because of the variety of specialized missions and goals that the various segments of a university have evolved.

Similarly, the focus on the metropolitan nature of the institution required all segments of the university to consider how this new emphasis could be reflected in the programs offered. If its metropolitan mission was to distinguish Widener from its competitors, it must be obvious that this mission permeates the curricula and life on campus. For some in the Widener community, this shift from thinking of Widener as a suburban enclave in an "undesirable" urban neighborhood to promoting the university as a leader in engaging its metropolitan communities was profoundly disconcerting. An earlier, more explicit exploration by the Strategic Planning Committee of the resistance that these changes in mission would engender could have been helpful. Such an exploration, for example, might have led to a more focused approach for structuring the dialogue with faculty and other campus constituencies. For example, rather than overwhelm members of the university community with the minutiae of the plan, it might have been more productive to sponsor opportunities for in-depth discussion and debate about the rationale for emphasizing civic engagement and the university's metropolitan leadership possibilities.

Continuing Challenges

Given that Widener's Board of Trustees approved the strategic plan in May 2004, the obvious major challenge ahead is implementation of the plan. There is no reason to expect that resistance to change and tensions over power shifts will have disappeared with the adoption of the plan. Faculty have been reassured that implementation of many of the components of the strategic plan are owned by the traditional faculty governance structure (colleges, schools, departments, Faculty Council, etc.). Faculty can choose to find myriad ways to undermine the implementation of the strategic plan or they can embrace it. How to achieve the latter outcome is the major challenge.

We strongly believe that attention to the transition in the institutional culture will be key to the outcome of the strategic plan implementation. It will be critical to ensure that the traditional governance structures are supported, yet helped to adapt to the more inclusive and transparent style of the new leadership. To ensure that this more inclusive approach becomes a part of the Widener culture, the president, the provost, and other

senior leaders will need to devote themselves to ongoing discussions with faculty and staff about participation in the implementation of the plan. In holding these discussions, it will be important to look for ways in which the formal faculty governance structure can provide a forum for debate of substantive issues that the plan's implementation will raise. One such issue may be the extent to which current faculty governance structures stifle rather than promote open and inclusive dialogue on issues of fundamental change within the institution.

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