

Increasing College Knowledge: The Role of School Counselors

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Abstract

Members of a prominent school counseling organization were surveyed to measure their perceived responsibility, self-efficacy, and performance related to increasing students' college knowledge. The purposes of this study were to: (a) understand what level do school counselors believe they bear the responsibility to increase students' college knowledge, (b) determine how efficacious do counselors feel in providing college knowledge to students, and (c) determine the level that school counselors are providing students college knowledge information. There were significant differences across those domains. With the professional expectation that a school counselor's role is to facilitate the increase of college knowledge for students, there are discrepancies between the expectation and the view of the school counselor. Based on the results of our study, we concluded that additional support and guidance for school counselors facilitating college knowledge would be beneficial to staff and students.

Keywords: school counselor, college knowledge, first-generation student, college readiness

1. Introduction

Society puts significant pressure on all students to perform well in high school, make educated decisions regarding post-secondary pathways, and be college and career ready after high school. Although there is an emphasis on students being successful in these areas, this can be a daunting task for students, especially students with minoritized identities who tend to have less access to resources. This is especially challenging for first-generation college students (FGCSs) whose parents did not attend a higher education institution and, often, do not have the resources to support students in their college and career readiness journey. With that, expectations that students create and execute their plans, after high school graduation and, thus, ensure their own college and career readiness is crucial to the future success of all students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 College Readiness

College and career readiness is one crucial area in which schools prepare students to assist them in creating a better future for themselves. Conley (2012) defined the college-and-career ready student as one who "can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career-pathway oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (p. 1). Utilizing the term *college-and-career readiness*, instead of college readiness, is inclusive of students who do not choose to attend higher education and enter a career after graduation.

College-and-career readiness skills existing in a school environment increase the likelihood that the American society might deem students successful because that society tends to expect people to accrue money through work. Making a livable wage often requires a college degree, which highlights the importance of college and career readiness. For our study, we wanted to focus on college readiness and, in particular, how students gain college readiness skills. College readiness is more than just high academic achievement. Hooker and Brand (2010) argued that college readiness alone does not fully encompass the preliminary process for students to graduate high school and experience success with enrolling in college, performing well in courses, and graduating from a postsecondary institution. Examining ways to prepare future FGCSs to be college-ready is important.

2.2 College Knowledge

Under the umbrella term of college readiness is the term *college knowledge*. College knowledge is defined in multiple ways in the literature. Poynton et al. (2019) defined college knowledge as “the discrete, factual knowledge students need to effectively [*sic*] aspire to plan for and enroll in college” (p. 1). St. John et al. (2015) stated that college knowledge is a form of “cultural capital” (p. 100) as students gain additional information on educational options available to them after high school. Hooker and Brand (2010) defined college knowledge as the understanding of the college admissions process, financial options to pay for college, the requirements for college-level academic work, and the differences in culture between high school and college. They argued that to attain college knowledge, students must obtain college information and develop a “college-going identity” (p. 78) through further exposure to higher education (Hooker & Brand, 2010). To encourage student preparation for educated decision-making regarding their post-secondary path, adequate college knowledge is an important part of making informed decisions about students’ futures.

Future first-generation college students can make educated decisions regarding their future college (and eventual career) when they have the support of college knowledge. This includes the expectations, planning, and action steps needed to take to attend college or to begin a career post-graduation. For this study, college knowledge is defined as fact-based knowledge that is necessary for students to understand how to plan for, apply to, enroll in, and have a better understanding of how to navigate through a higher education setting. College knowledge is a form of capital that gives students leverage in preparing and being informed regarding their options after high school graduation.

2.3 First-Generation College Students

Future first-generation college students need additional support and resources when it comes to increasing college and career readiness. Historically, first-generation college students have shown lower enrollment rates than continuing generation college students (Johnson & Duncan, 2019), and one explanation could be that first-generation college students lack resources compared to continuing generation college students. Hooker and Brand (2010) noted that many first-generation college students face barriers when applying, enrolling, and persisting in a higher education setting.

Results from a study by Fitzpatrick (2019), in which Fitzpatrick examined social capital, highlighted that students with lower social capital have lower levels of college access than their peers. For underserved students, there were deficits in the submission of the FAFSA, college enrollment rates, and opportunities provided based on environmental and social factors. In addition to this gap in resources for future first-generation college students, there are also external factors in students’ lives that can impact a student’s level of college-going culture.

Some external and uncontrollable factors Conley (2012) highlighted included family support, the influence of peers, and financial situation. With an increasingly diverse student body, all these factors need to be accounted for. To meet the needs of students, school personnel need to utilize an anti-deficit framework in finding ways education systems can support the attainment of college knowledge by all students, despite external factors uncontrollable by the student.

When supporting underserved populations, frameworks are a valuable tool to guide the creation of additional support and resources. Shamsuddin’s (2016) research highlighted that a strong academic contextual framework needs to be conveyed to students for them to understand the factual college knowledge being provided to them. An understanding of the context of higher education is needed for students to create meaning-making around the college knowledge being shared with them to avoid barriers and mixed signals. Shamsuddin argued that three ways to develop the conceptual framework include: through curriculum, counseling, and the school. These three areas, required to develop the bigger picture for students, necessitate all school personnel to display a commitment to increasing levels of college and career readiness. Although this would require multiple school personnel and administrators, for the purpose of our study, the focus was on the apparent discrepancy between the expected role of school counselors in providing college knowledge information to students and the perception of school counselors in fulfilling that role.

2.4 School Counselors

Parents or guardians can support their child when facing a knowledge gap regarding the college transition process; however, when guardians lack knowledge of post-secondary experiences, students might turn to their school counselor for assistance. One of the roles of the school counselors is to prepare students for college (ASCA, 2017), which includes increasing students’ college knowledge. The work school counselors perform,

related to college and career readiness, foreshadows student success in their transition into their post-secondary endeavors (Poynton et al., 2019).

High school counselors are key players when it comes to increasing first-generation college students' college knowledge. The American School Counselors Association (ASCA) defines the roles of school counselors and the organization's stance on varying topics through the ASCA Position Statement document. This position document is meant to guide the creation and implementation of school counseling programs. The *Academic Development* position statement sets the framework for school counselors indicating that counselors equally impact students in the areas of academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2017). The *Career Development* position statement includes that career education is evident when students have knowledge regarding their post-secondary options and are prepared to enroll and succeed in any post-secondary experience (ASCA, 2017). An additional aspect of the school counselor's role is for counselors to create a program that includes educational and career planning activities for all students to help them develop in core areas (ASCA, 2017).

ASCA holds a position on equity for all students, which includes future first-generation college students. ASCA recognizes that students of varying minority identities aspire to go to college, but there are obstacles in their way to attaining that goal. ASCA expects school counselors to develop programs that support access for minoritized student identities to be successful in school leading up to their college or career pathway. Last, ASCA emphasizes that post-secondary recruitment be present within the school counseling role. The role of the counselor is to assist students and families in making informed decisions based on college knowledge; thus, school counselors will partner with outside entities that can bring a richer level of college knowledge and opportunities to the students (ASCA, 2017).

1) ASCA Expectations

The ASCA (2017) position statement indicates that one of the functions of a school counselor is to provide individual student planning for college preparation. Further, the ASCA position statement indicates school counselors are to "ensure all students have the opportunity to design a rigorous and relevant academic and career program preparing them to be college and career ready" (p. 46). The ASCA position statements provide clear identification of both the role and the responsibility of school counselors as to how those relate to preparing students for college. However, some counselors might not perceive the importance or responsibility of this role or might not possess the self-efficacy to provide college knowledge information.

2) School Counselor Self-efficacy

Parikh et al. (2020) conducted a study involving 2,047 ASCA-affiliated school counselors who took a survey measuring counselors' self-efficacy related to executing tasks supporting students' career and college readiness. Results indicated that counselors believed they had inadequate skills in this area of post-secondary planning. Additionally, 67% of counselors reported facing challenges regarding career and college planning for students (Parikh et al., 2020). Various literature highlights the role of school counselors in facilitating college exploration, such as motivating students to enroll in college preparation courses (Royster et al., 2015; Paolini, 2019), facilitating extracurricular services that assist students in the area of college readiness (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013; Paolini, 2019; Royster et al., 2015), connecting students to college readiness programs (Royster et al., 2015; Paolini, 2019), integrating college on-campus experiences (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013; Paolini, 2019), and college and career exploration (Paolini, 2019).

Considering those expectations, though, Villares and Brigman (2019) asserted that "evidence-based, manualized interventions that can be implemented through the school counseling core curriculum are limited" (p. 6). Research indicates that school counselors' level of self-efficacy can hinder the promotion of high school students' college knowledge. School counselors would benefit from additional college readiness counseling training because it is such a crucial aspect of the school counselor's role and is not emphasized in counseling programs (Gilfillan, 2018).

A discrepancy is prevalent between the professional organization's expectations for school counselors (ASCA, 2017) and the amount of time and confidence school counselors have in performing their specific duties related to college knowledge. If school counselors do not feel confident in their abilities to promote college knowledge to future FGCS, students will not believe they are adequately prepared to make decisions regarding their postsecondary path. In a survey that included 19,193 high school, middle, and junior high school counselors, results indicated they have a higher level of self-efficacy when increasing students' college knowledge, overall, but have a lower self-efficacy level when working with marginalized populations, which includes first-generation college students (Nice et al., 2020). Therefore, this hesitancy is leaving future FGCS with a

deficit of college knowledge that is inadequate for making confident decisions regarding post-secondary endeavors. Closing the college knowledge gap of future first-generation college students should be a priority with college education being more crucial now than it has ever been (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011). School counselors can be intentional about lessening that gap with how they increase college knowledge for high school students.

3) ASCA Model Expectations

As discussed in previous sections, the ASCA model contains a clear outline of the roles and responsibilities of a counselor in relation to increasing college knowledge. Although the ASCA model is meant to guide school counselors in their work, the self-efficacy level is not as high when it comes to working with specific populations (Nice et al., 2020). With that, Dockery and McKelvey (2013) noted several concerns school counselors had related to their training and preparation in working with high school students in enrolling and being successful at higher education institutions. Based on existing literature, there seems to be a discrepancy between the roles and responsibilities outlined for school counselors in the ASCA position statement and how school counselors perceive their role. Additionally, there might be a varying level of self-efficacy among school counselors in relationship to increasing college knowledge for high school students. Having an inconsistency in perceptions of the school counselor role and confidence in the ability to increase college knowledge could be doing students of marginalized identities a disservice when it comes to decision-making about college.

3. Research Problem, Purpose, and Question

Based on the literature, marginalized students are not as prepared for college as non-marginalized students, and they could use better structural support during their years leading up to high school graduation (Fitzpatrick, 2019). Little exists in the ASCA position statements, or elsewhere, that provides precise structures as to how school counselors are to fulfill their role in supporting students in gaining college knowledge.

In addition, there is an expectation for school counselors to promote and educate students regarding college and career readiness, but there is limited knowledge regarding how counselors perceive their role in relation to college knowledge. In their research, Poynton et al. (2019) administered the *College Admissions Knowledge Evaluation (CAKE)* to 12th-grade students ($n = 519$). Results indicated that 51% of students responded correctly to inventory questions that outlined college knowledge information students should know. These inventory questions were based on college norms and culture, the college application and decision process, and financial aid information relevant to the recent literature (Poynton et al., 2019). This indicates almost one-half of students are departing high school having inadequate levels of college knowledge to make informed post-secondary decisions for themselves. As outlined in the ASCA (2017) position statement, “school counselors are advocates for the equitable treatment of all students and in the community” (p. 28). Based on this position statement, future FGCS need to be just as prepared as future continuing generation college students when it comes to planning for higher education and the attainment of college knowledge.

We used the following research questions to guide our research:

- To what level do school counselors believe they bear the responsibility to increase students’ college knowledge?
- How efficacious do counselors feel in providing college knowledge to students?
- To what level are school counselors providing students college knowledge information?

4. Methods

After gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we sent a solicitation email via a state-specific school counselor association listserv. Access to the association listserv was available through the fourth author, who was a member of a state-based association. Solicitation involved an email to association members, which outlined the study and included a link to the survey. The survey included questions measuring counselors’ self-efficacy and their perceived responsibilities in their role when educating students on college knowledge. In addition, the survey included demographic questions. For the self-efficacy construct, we utilized the 11-statement *School Counselor Self-Efficacy for Enhancing Student College and Career Readiness Scale (SCSES)*; Baker et al., 2012). For each statement listed, survey participants indicated their response on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*). For this section, each numerical weight indicated and totaled could range from 11 to 55. Scoring a 55 would indicate a high level of perceived readiness to assist in college and career readiness, and 11 would indicate a low level of perceived readiness. Baker et al. (2012) tested the SCSES for construct validity and content validity by doing a factor analysis and matching survey items with those factors. Content validity ranged from 71% to 85%. The three factors in this instrument include financial

help, positive self-efficacy help, and academic competence help. Reliability estimates were .50, .85, and .80, respectively. The total scale internal consistency reliability measure was .85.

In addition to the SCSES, participants completed 11 items related to their perceived responsibility for enhancing the college and career readiness of students. With acknowledgment from Baker et al. (2012), we adapted the survey to a three-factor structure of responsibility, self-efficacy, and performance. We used the same SCSES items, all of which included a replacement of wording to capture each of the factors, the first being responsibility. For example, the first item on the SCSES read, *I believe I can help students understand the post-high school education application process*. We amended that statement to read, *I believe I **bear responsibility** to help students understand the post-high school education application process*.

Participants also completed 11 items related to their performance for enhancing the college and career readiness of students. With acknowledgment from Baker et al. (2012), we used the same SCSES items, all of which included a replacement of wording to capture performance. For example, the first item on the SCSES read, *I believe I can help students understand the post-high school education application process*. We amended that statement to read, *I **regularly** help students understand the post-high school education application process*.

Finally, we collected demographic information, including race, gender, years as a counselor, school level, student-to-counselor ratio, and time spent on administrative tasks. For the school level demographic, we split the groups into elementary, middle school, and high school, and included mixed group counselors for those who provide counseling across grade levels.

4.1 Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, we engaged in survey analysis to assess and evaluate the data. There were multiple groups within the sample which included the varying school level counselors. We ran descriptive statistics, including the mean score, standard deviation, and range of the data, on both the SCSES and the perceived responsibility items to summarize school counselors' self-efficacy. Next, we conducted a series of comparative analyses across demographics. The dependent variables were self-efficacy and perceived responsibility, respectively, and the independent variables were race, gender, and school type. Any independent variable with more than two groups required a single factor ANOVA. Finally, we conducted correlation analyses between the three factors (i.e., self-efficacy, responsibility, performance) and years of experience as a school counselor.

Upon closing the survey, 112 people had participated. We had a final count of 83 participants after the data-cleaning process. Sixty-one of the 83 responses completed 70 percent or more of the survey. The gender breakdown of participants included 58 who identified as women (70%), one who identified as a man (1%), and 24 participants (29%) who chose not to respond. For race demographics, 50 participants identified as White (60.7%), six participants identified as Black or African American (7.1%), one (1.2%) preferred not to indicate, and 26 (31%) did not respond.

4.2 Results

1) Cronbach Alpha

We conducted Cronbach alphas to assess the reliability and internal consistency of the three scales. The alpha scores were all above .82, which indicated strong internal consistency for all scales (see Table 1). The skewness of all three factors was within the normal distribution range.

Table 1. Cronbach alpha statistics for responsibility, self-efficacy, and performance constructs

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
Responsibility	.851	.855	11
Self-Efficacy	.861	.867	11
Performance	.829	.823	11

2) Pearson R Correlation

Hours on Admin Tasks. To investigate whether there was a statistically significant association between hours counselors spend on administrative tasks and each of the three constructs (i.e., performance, self-efficacy, and responsibility), we computed a correlation. None of the construct variables were significantly correlated with the number of administrative hours, which are demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Responsibility, self-efficacy, and performance construct score correlations to hours counselors spent on administrative tasks

Constructs	N	Hours Spent on Administrative Tasks	Responsibility	Self-Efficacy	Performance
Hour Spent on Administrative Tasks	54	1	-.137	-.069	-.202
Responsibility	82		1	.686**	.500**
Self-Efficacy	82			1	-.623**
Performance	82				1

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Years of Experience. To investigate whether there was a statistically significant association between years as a counselor and the responsibility construct score, we computed a Pearson Correlation statistic, which was calculated as $r(54) = -.279, p = .037$. The direction of this statistically significant correlation was negative, which means that counselors with more years of experience perceived less responsibility to facilitate college knowledge with students. This represents a small effect size. There was not a statistically significant correlation between a counselor's years of experience and the self-efficacy construct score nor with the performance construct score.

3) One-Way ANOVA

A statistically significant difference was found among the responsibility scale score based on type of students served, $F(3,47) = 4.079, p = .012$. Within the responsibility construct, Post Hoc Tukey tests indicated that the elementary and high school groups differed significantly in the responsibility construct, $p = .019$.

A statistically significant difference was found among the performance scale score based on student type, $F(3,47) = 6.819, p = 0.001$. The Post Hoc Tukey tests indicated multiple school age groups differed in the performance construct. First, the elementary and middle school groups differed significantly in the performance construct $F(3,47) = 0.612, p = .018$, with school counselors working with elementary schools reporting a mean of 3.15 and with middle school mean score of 2.56. This represented a small effect size, $d = 1.177$ score. Next, Post Hoc Tukey tests indicated that the middle and high school groups differed significantly in the performance construct $F(3,47) = -0.740, p = .0001$, with middle school counselors reporting a mean of 2.273 and with high school mean score of 3.012. This represented a large effect size, $d = 2.193$ score. Last, the tests indicated the middle school and mixed school groups differed significantly in the performance construct $F(3,47) = -0.833, p = .001$, with middle school counselors reporting a mean of 2.273 and with mixed school counselors mean score of 3.106. This represented a large effect size, $d = 1.959$ score.

5. Discussion

Exposing students to the cultural capital of college knowledge, St. John et al. (2015) highlighted in their literature is an opportunity to leverage students' future planning for post-secondary pathways. When it comes to school counselors' perceived responsibility to increase students' college knowledge, the results indicated that there is a significant difference between elementary and high school counselors' perceived responsibility in facilitating college knowledge. Having a difference in perceived responsibility can be alarming given that there is not a standardized curriculum for increasing college knowledge among students of all ages (St. John et al., 2015). We know college and career readiness is an important emphasis before high school (ASCA, 2017). The varying responsibility raises questions about when students are being exposed to college knowledge in their school age years. This varying level of perceived responsibility leaves students at varying schools in the same groups being exposed to various levels of college knowledge.

In addition, school counselors with more years of experience felt less of a responsibility to facilitate college knowledge to students, and school counselors with less experience felt a greater responsibility to facilitate this knowledge. These compelling results raise concerns as to why school counselors feel a decreasing responsibility with an increased amount of time in the field. More seasoned counselors perceived less responsibility to facilitate this increase in college knowledge, which directly impacts students' access to resources and opportunities to be educated on college-going procedures and culture. As is clear in the literature, a contextual framework needs to be projected to students for them to understand college knowledge being offered to them (Shamsuddin, 2016). However, if students, such as first-generation college students, have a lack of resources, families are often not able to support them in that process. School counselors are one of the next people in line who bear a

responsibility to supplement that facilitation of college knowledge (ASCA, 2017). With the ASCA position statements outlining counselors' responsibilities to increase college and career readiness, there seems to be an inconsistency between the ASCA expectations and experienced counselors' perceived responsibility. When it comes to counselors' self-efficacy in facilitating college knowledge, there were no significant findings.

In terms of the performance of school counselors facilitating college knowledge, there is a significant difference between counselors working with elementary and middle school students in facilitating college knowledge. Elementary school counselors had a higher average performance score compared to middle school counselors meaning, that on average, elementary school counselors believed they increased college knowledge in the performance of their school counselor role. For middle and high school counselors, there was a difference in performance scores, with high school counselors reporting a higher average performance score, as well as school counselors working mixed school age groups having a higher average performance mean than middle school counselors. Lastly, hours spent on administrative tasks indicated no significant correlation.

As the data indicated, there are varying levels of average performance among school counselors at varying school levels. ASCA outlines that school counselors are to make certain students can "design a rigorous and relevant academic and career program preparing them to be college and career ready (ASCA, 2017, p. 46); thus, creating a plan for that program needs to start early for it to be implemented to the students' benefit. This means students need to be introduced to college and career readiness information before high school, indicating this is a shared responsibility among school counselors at all school levels, but having varying levels of performance raises the question of what supports are put in place for school counselors to facilitate that increase in knowledge.

Finally, higher education personnel play a role in making themselves accessible to students and being a resource to assist students in gaining college and career readiness skills (Andrews & Saint Hilaire, 2017). With school counselors having large caseloads and responsibilities, partnerships between higher education and local schools could be beneficial to students. Not only does that take pressure off the school counselor, but students and the counselor have a direct resource who is actively tied to higher education and can continue to paint the picture for students of what higher education is like and whether it is the right choice for students. Although the local college partnering with the school might not admit all students with whom they work in the younger school ages, these efforts would still impact the community in positive ways and give students resources, especially students of marginalized populations who have less access to college knowledge and higher education overall.

5.1 Limitations

Some limitations to this study include promoting this study to counselors in only one state school counselors' association. This means that only counselors who are members of this group were able to participate. Given that this organization has membership fees, the possibility exists that only counselors employed at schools with larger professional development fund budgets were able to participate. Additionally, to be in the organization, a counselor must work in the state where the organization exists, so the results are not generalizable to the broader United States. In addition, most participants in the study were White women and, therefore, the study lacks diversity in race and gender.

5.2 Implications for Practice

In practice, school counselors need to be aware of their perceived responsibility of facilitating college knowledge, even as they spend more years in the field. Newer school counselors feel a greater responsibility to facilitate college knowledge for students, so exploring ways to equalize that feeling of responsibility and increasing it long term would be beneficial to students. With that, counselors serving different age populations have differing perceptions of responsibility for increasing students' college knowledge. This difference in responsibility needs to be addressed to decipher when increasing students' college knowledge begins and how to make sure counselors understand the developmental needs of students to encourage success after elementary school, middle, and high school.

In addition, increasing opportunities to motivate school counselors to build self-efficacy and increase performance is crucial when it comes to facilitating college knowledge with students. From a curriculum perspective, there could be a built-in educational component that allows students to learn about postsecondary options and, thereby, increase their college knowledge to make informed decisions. Having a college and career readiness course would be useful and would encourage students to start envisioning their life after high school. With that, college and career readiness learning could be integrated slowly throughout a student's school experience, not just in high school.

Because school counselors have a variety of other responsibilities, relying solely on them to facilitate college knowledge is unreasonable. However, it is important that counselors feel self-efficacious when it comes to facilitating this knowledge with students, especially for underrepresented student populations who run a high risk of being first-generation college students and who are not getting that support at home. Increasing the amount of professional development training options for school counselors would be useful when it comes to staying up-to-date on the newest information on higher education and the workforce. They also can learn how to facilitate the increase of college knowledge within their role, which would be beneficial to both counselors and their students.

With counselors holding a responsibility to increase college knowledge and the evolving processes of admittance and student success in higher education, counselors staying up-to-date on the current updates in higher education is important. Giving students current and new information increases their social capital and ability for making decisions to fit their life path best. Professional counseling organizations could create an initiative to send newsletter updates to current school counselors to keep them informed and refreshed on current college knowledge. This would be a positive resource for school counselors to stay up to date and will also directly benefit students receiving this information.

5.3 Future Recommendations

A recommendation for future research is to survey school counselors from a larger region. In addition, other school counseling associations can be included in research to reach a more diverse population. Concerning counselors facilitating college knowledge, there needs to be an overall expectation and understanding among school counselors of when facilitating college knowledge should begin. To support that, school counselors need to feel well equipped to facilitate the increase in knowledge in their roles.

Another large area for future research includes investigating why school counselors with more experience feel less of a responsibility to facilitate college knowledge and counselors with less experience feel a higher responsibility. Many areas could be considered, such as burnout, lack of connection and time spent away from higher education, other tasks overpowering their workload, and many other factors that could be considered.

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