

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 9 | Number 9

Article 4

2010

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Recommended Citation

Morris, Jason; Barnard, Mimi; Morris, Greg; and Williamson, Julie (2010) "A Qualitative Exploration of Student Spiritual Development in a Living-Learning Community," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 9 : No. 9 , Article 4.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol9/iss9/4

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A Qualitative Exploration of Student Spiritual Development in a Living-Learning Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the spiritual development of eight participants in a living-learning community at Abilene Christian University. Using a qualitative methodology, this study attempted to capture the voices of participants as they concluded a year together in a Barrett Hall living-learning community (LCC). Data were collected over a period of 2-3 weeks through individual semi-structured interviews, as well as one focus group comprised of all eight community members. Data were analyzed to capture meaningful themes and categories. Implications for practice are discussed.

Introduction

Interest in spirituality in the broader landscape of higher education has experienced a recent resurgence. In 2003, UCLA researchers at the Higher Education Research Institute launched a national longitudinal study on the spiritual life of college students that has become a seminal study on student spirituality. In addition, several other recent major works address college student spirituality (Astin, 2004; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Dalton, 2003; Dalton, 2006; Johnson, Kristellar, & Sheets, 2004; Love & Talbott, 1999; Ma, 2003). Despite this rebirth of interest in student spirituality, continued research needs to be done in this area. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) state, “The rigorous research methods and analytic frameworks we use to understand other critical social, psychological, and cultural issues need to be applied to helping us professionals understand students’ spiritual experiences and their development of values and personal beliefs” (p. 105).

One ideal setting to explore student spiritual growth is within intentionally constructed residential learning environments. Often referred to as a living-learning community, or LLC, these purposeful groups are gaining popularity on campuses throughout the nation. Past research has linked numerous positive outcomes to living-learning communities (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt & Leonard, 2007; Pike, 1999); however, student spiritual development has not yet been examined in a living-learning community. Due to their communal nature, living-learning communities appear to be ideal settings for the spiritual development of students.

As the need for ongoing exploration of student spiritual development continues, the authors of this article believe that faith-based institutions are ideally positioned to contribute to the growing dialogue concerning spiritual development. This study attempts to add to that dialogue as it endeavors to look at spiritual development in the

context of a living-learning community at a faith-based institution of higher education. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine the spiritual development of eight male participants in a living-learning community at Abilene Christian University. Using a qualitative methodology, this study attempts to capture the voices of participants as they conclude a year together in Barrett Living-Learning Hall.

Conceptual Frameworks

Spirituality is a difficult concept to define. In our attempt to gain perspective on the practice of spiritual development, we have used a definition of traditional Christian spiritual formation from Ma (1999) and spiritual development frameworks from Love and Talbot (1999) and from Fowler (1995). These three perspectives provided us a broad lens through which to view student spiritual development. Ma (1999) defines Christian spiritual formation as follows:

Spiritual formation is defined as the process of becoming conformed to the image of Christ, for the purpose of fellowship with God and the community of believers. The process involves a personal relationship with God the Father, through a person's dynamic faith and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The process involves all aspects of a person: heart, mind and spirit and develops mature Christian character in a Christian believer over the course of a lifetime. Spiritual formation involves integrative and restorative growth in relationships; namely, relationships with God, ourselves and others. Mature Christian character involves integration and growth in all aspects of human development: the cognitive, affective, volitional, and spiritual domains (p. 99).

In their article, *Defining Spiritual Development: A Missing Consideration for Student Affairs*, Love and Talbot (1999) propose that spiritual development involves the following:

1. An internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development;
2. The process of continually transcending one's current locus of centrality;
3. Developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community;
4. Deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life; and
5. An increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing.

In his work entitled *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Fowler (1995) reveals his "Stages of Faith" theory. This theoretical understanding of faith development was created by building on other developmental theories. Fowler's theory is comprised of six stages of development including:

1. Intuitive-Projective Faith—Child's discovery of language, imagination, and self-awareness. Begins to understand meaning of sex and death.
2. Mythical-Literal Faith—Stage where the person has acquired operational

thinking skills and makes distinctions between fantasy and reality. In this stage, stories are given more importance and one's sense of morality is based upon mutual fairness and justice.

3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith—Individual is utilizing more formal operational thought, however, lacks individual perspective and therefore conforms to the beliefs of a group they belong to.
4. Individualized-Reflective Faith—Stage where an individual develops their personal identity and worldview.
5. Conjunctive Faith—Individual is comfortable with their faith and acquired knowledge, however continues to seek for deeper wisdom and contrasting ways of thinking.
6. Universalizing Faith—People in this stage of spiritual development actively seek ways to pursue their “calling.”

Research Questions

The basic information we hope to glean from our conversations with the residents can be summarized by the following questions:

1. How do college-age men residing in a campus-based living-learning community describe their experience over the course of an academic year?
2. How do college-age men residing in a campus-based living-learning community describe their spiritual development over the course of an academic year?
3. How do college-age men residing in a campus-based living-learning community perceive the impact of the living-learning environment on their spiritual development?

Literature

To provide a backdrop for our current research, the following literature review consists of brief overviews of literature in two main areas: student spiritual development and living-learning communities. Before we discuss the literature on these two topics, we want to point out the natural connection between community/social interaction and spiritual formation. Dalton (2003) states:

It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the forms of spiritual search that are popular today with college students are social in nature. Most popular forms of contemporary spirituality activities reported on college campuses revolve around groups and activities designed to facilitate spiritual exploration in a social context (p. 10).

Student Spiritual Development Literature

A landmark work in student affairs literature is Chickering's (1969) *Education and Identity*, which outlines his now famous seven vectors of human development. A second edition of *Education and Identity* was published in 1993 with Linda Reisser incorporating new findings from the ensuing 25 years. Building on this work,

Chickering recently published a new book with co-authors Jon Dalton and Lisa Stamm (2006) entitled *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. This book expands the human development conversation further by overtly advocating spirituality as a necessary aspect of student development. As previously mentioned, researchers at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) have commenced a multi-year research project examining the spiritual development of undergraduate students. Initially, this study indicates that college students have a high level of interest in spirituality and involvement (Executive Summary obtained January 3, 2008, from www.spirituality.ucla.edu). Jennifer Lindholm, Director of the Spirituality in Higher Education Research Project, has published her own material pertaining to spiritual development in higher education. In Lindholm's (2003) work, *Spirituality and the Academy: Perspectives and Possibilities*, she relates some of the findings that have surfaced thus far in the national multi-year HERI study, *Spirituality in Higher Education*. She cites this data in the article to further advance the argument that student spiritual development has a place in the educational arena. A final piece of significant literature pertaining to this research study is a project by Ma (2003). In Ma's research, the development of spirituality of students attending faith-based institutions was examined. Results indicate that these students perceived nonacademic activities and peer relationships as more spiritually formative than planned academic activities.

Living-Learning Community Literature

One pedagogical method has emerged as an efficient and effective paradigm for improving undergraduate education: the resurgence of learning communities within the academy. Influenced by the educational philosopher John Dewey, learning community pedagogy can be traced back to the early curricular reforms of Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin and can be seen again in the work of Joseph Tussman at the University of California at Berkeley. Research suggests this paradigm for learning has the ability to improve student learning and development, as well as enhance retention and overall college satisfaction (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Heller, 1998). Though various models of learning communities exist, most can be categorized into one of four approaches: paired or clustered courses, cohorts in large courses or FIGS (freshman interest groups), team-taught programs, and residence-based learning communities, also known as living-learning communities.

Living-learning communities, the focus of this study, play an integral role in the academic and social development of college students (Kennedy, 2002). Several recent studies have linked living-learning communities with positive outcomes. Inkelas and Weisman (2003) examined three different types of living-learning programs and compared them with a control group. These researchers found that living-learning students demonstrated higher levels of engagement in college activities and had stronger academic outcomes. Inkelas, Daver, Vogt and Leonard (2007) analyzed data from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs and found first-generation college students in living-learning programs reported a more successful academic and social transition to college than their first-generation counterparts who lived in a traditional residence hall. Finally, Pike (1999) collected student data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire and found students in residential learning communities had "... significantly higher levels of involvement, interaction, integration, and gains in learning and intellectual development than did students in traditional residence halls" (p. 1).

Procedures

Rationale for Qualitative Study

The following qualitative methodological assumptions (Merriam, 1998) strengthen the choice of a qualitative research design:

1. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning—how people make sense of their lives, their experiences, and their structures of the world.
2. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
3. Qualitative research usually involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site, or institution to observe or record behavior in its natural setting.
4. The product of qualitative research is descriptive. The researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures.

Type of Design Used

The type of design used for this study is a basic or generic qualitative design. A basic design incorporates many of the previously mentioned characteristics of qualitative research. Merriam (1998) states, “Rather, researchers who conduct these studies, which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, of the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (p. 11).

The Role of the Researchers

Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is typical for researchers to identify biases, values, and personal interests about their research topic and process (Creswell, 2003). Two of the four researchers conducting this study are employed at the university being examined. The other two researchers are students enrolled at the institution being studied. The researchers’ perceptions of student life and student spiritual growth on this campus have been shaped by many experiences with students. The researchers have been involved with various programming specifically designed to enhance students’ spirituality. It is the researchers’ belief that as educators they are responsible for educating and nurturing the whole student: mind, body, and soul.

Context and Population

The residence hall, Barret Living-Learning Hall, is on the campus of Abilene Christian University (ACU). ACU is a selective, private, residential, master’s level university affiliated with the Churches of Christ and is located in Abilene, Texas. ACU is a member of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In the Fall of 2006, the total undergraduate population at the university was approximately 4145. The number of entering first-year students for Fall 2006 was 964. Students are significantly engaged inside and outside the classroom in ethical leadership, social justice, and responsible service, both locally and globally, including humanitarian and mission internships around the world, as well as involvement with local social service agencies as coordinated through ACU’s Volunteer and Service-Learning Center. Approximately 25% of students study abroad, 40% of freshmen participate in learning communities, and 25% of sophomores participate in living-learning communities. With a freshman and

sophomore on-campus residency requirement, 2,000 students live in 10 residence halls, and 600 junior, senior and graduate students live in on-campus apartments.

Barret Living Learning Hall is the newest residential facility on the campus of Abilene Christian University. Barret was designed to promote community among students. This 172-bed, state-of-the-art facility houses sophomores in 22 themed communities; women live in pods A and B, and men live in pods C and D. A sophisticated surveillance system and wireless connectivity are attractive amenities for millennial students and their parents. Each pod has a separate entrance and contains four double-rooms with private baths; the rooms open into a 15x18 community space that has a fully upholstered couch and chair, occasional tables, a study table and chairs, and a 32" television with DVD player.

Residents are assigned through a competitive process that is ranked by a faculty committee; students organize themselves into groups of eight, secure a faculty sponsor, and complete a written proposal describing their co-curricular, year-long theme and project. The proposals are blinded and submitted for review to a committee, comprised of a faculty member from the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Education and Human Services, the College of Business Administration, the College of Biblical Studies, and members of the Student Life professional staff. The committee ranks each proposal, considering the quality of the project and its relationship to a curricular initiative and the university's mission.

Living-learning community themes have included the "Bluestockings," a group of women students who are studying women's development and are mentored by two Honors professors; they volunteer in the community shelter for battered women and their children. Mentored by a Bible professor, a group of physics majors chose to read C. S. Lewis' *The Problem with Pain*. Another living-learning community is working on a film project that will document Barret co-curricular experiences. The themes are as varied as the students who participate.

Barret faculty sponsors meet with each living-learning community at least once a month to mentor students and ensure accountability. At the conclusion of the academic year, each living-learning community presents its project at a "capstone" event. Barret faculty sponsors teach in the smart classroom, adjacent to The Den, Aramark's coffee shop that includes a fireplace, a 50" plasma television, and an Internet bar.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In May 2007, the students were contacted through their Resident Assistant and Resident Director. The students agreed to participate in individual 45-minute interviews with researchers as well as one focus group session. An interview was also conducted with the Resident Assistant. These interviews were completed during the last week of school prior to final examinations, so the students would be able to reflect back on a full academic year of experience. Interviews were captured by audio recording, transcribed, and reduced to meaningful themes with narrative added afterward. To ensure the accuracy of our findings, we have utilized two strategies as proposed by John Creswell (2003) which include member checking and peer debriefing.

Results

Four prominent themes emerged as the interviews were analyzed. Looking back to the theoretical framework for this project, a large degree of overlap exists between the definition of spiritual formation and the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

A discussion of these themes follows:

Worldview Diversity

Actively engaging diversity means creating formal and informal opportunities in the living-learning environments of college life for students to encounter and learn from each other. The purpose of such learning is not only to understand each other's differences but also to search together for common ground, for common truths, for shared beliefs and meaning that create the possibility of a new kind of community that embraces diversity (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 100).

The pod members recognized a significant number of differences among themselves. A. A. observed:

I really learned a lot from my pod mates because [it] seems they are more diverse in background than where I come from. I noticed the different interpretations of some Bible verses and I've seen things from different ways—even within the group because we are all different majors. We have [a] physics major and art major [and] other majors around. [These] different perspectives impacted the way [I] read certain things in the Bible.

This and other statements of perceived differences stemmed more from their varied spiritual backgrounds than from other areas. T. L.'s statement, "it's been good, also, to get the different perspectives, 'cause we definitely—some of the rest of the pod—we definitely don't agree on everything... about God and about theology and things like that" serves to support this idea.

Respondents seemed to view these perceived diversities as a beneficial phenomenon rather than a negative influence for their group. A. Y. stated:

I think we have been able to discuss different perspectives on several issues involving spirituality and our beliefs in Christianity and God, and that's been healthy for us to have different views but bring them to the table peaceably and to discuss them and still say there's differences—to go into depth on issues that you might have perspectives on or even the same ones that we had—[It was] really helpful to me to have those long talks.

Chickering and Reiser (1993) further highlight the importance of differences in the following statement: "Encounters with others who have diverse backgrounds and strongly held opinions create the context for increased tolerance and integrity. Growth can be tangible when bonds are formed with those of different backgrounds, lifestyles, and values" (p. 392).

Authenticity and Connectedness

The experience of belonging, of feeling that one is part of the community, is not only important from the standpoint of students' psychosocial development but also a critical element in students' satisfaction, learning and achievement in college (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 173).

Barret, LLCs, or "pods," were designed to influence student relationships and create community, understanding that out-of-the-classroom experiences can and do impact

students' educational development. Connections between and among students, constrained and formed by close proximity, empower a deeper level of relationship, one grounded in authenticity and truthfulness; these relationships, both negative and positive, become living laboratories for learning to communicate, empathize, argue, and reflect.

The theme of authenticity and connectedness was evident in several student responses. A. A. stated:

One of the main things I have noticed is dealing truthfully with others... at times I might just say [something callously]—but most of the time I would consider the way people would feel before saying something, that might not be the truth—like flatter them. But being around these guys—they tell you that they want the truth no matter how much it hurts them. And since [they have] these attitudes—I have been able to just come out and deal with them truthfully and not flatter them.

Another student (T. L.) referred to his developing ability to discern among the varying levels of relationships stating:

[Living in Barret] has definitely helped me see that I don't treat people the same. I've got my friends and acquaintances that I enjoy being with, and it's helped me see that there are some of my acquaintances that I'm not crazy about. And it's helped me see that I really need to try to love these people and treat them well. It's been a struggle to make it more than treating them well on the outside—because I feel like I can do that, but to actually have it coming from the heart—instead of just being civil with them—it's been one thing that it's opened my eyes to.

The community-building benefits of the community space were often referred to by residents. P. B. stated:

The living room [community space] is the biggest thing—because it causes us to get in each other's face—and it is all our space and so we have to get in each other's way and deal with it. And I think that a big part of spiritual growth is just learning how to be with other people.

R. B. added:

[The community space] really did help all eight of us to get to know each other really well. And to get that personal and spiritual connection to—the friendship where we can talk about these things...proximity was the biggest thing—like I said—just leaving your door open—people come in and out. Or if you're sitting out in the living room—people walk by and you can just talk. Whereas in the dorm it's like—I mean—in a big dorm you leave your room locked because you don't want things to happen.

Living in community also allowed a greater sense of connectedness, of thinking beyond the needs of the individual to the needs of the group. A. A. stated living in a Barret LLC had:

Given [him] a greater view of the way that Christians just should be. Because we all actually live in community. Living in a community—right—and living in a community [sic]—more effective—because we see each other every day and help each other—we do things in [a] group—we do things together... so it's really created so much meaning in life. Wow! That this might be like community life during the times of the apostles and disciples. This is what it might have been [like].

The presence of authenticity and encouragement seems to lead to additional phenomenon being revealed as our conversations continued. R. B. reflected on the LLC, “It really did help all eight of us to get to know each other really well and to get that personal and spiritual connection to the friendship....” A. Y. described intimacy and connection:

You think of a body as being made up of cells and all these tiny structures that function and all these amazing things within them—they're beautiful—ectoplasm or whatever. I haven't taken science in a while. But they can't survive by themselves—it has to have these connections with the other cells to form anything substantial, certainly, and in order to grow.

Identity Formation

Identity development, or “establishing identity” is a chief task of higher education; it involves a “growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 173).

In his epigenetic principle, Erikson (1968) suggests that the individual faces a series of challenges or “crises,” and, as each is resolved (an ongoing process), the ego identity is formed. The eight stages are:

1. trust versus mistrust;
2. autonomy versus shame and doubt;
3. initiative versus guilt;
4. industry versus inferiority;
5. identity versus identity confusion;
6. intimacy versus isolation;
7. generativity versus stagnation; and
8. integrity versus despair (pp. 93-96).

Identity development surfaced as a consistent theme from Barret residents, whether in addressing interpersonal relationships or in self-understanding. P. B. said:

I'd say that I understand myself better, why I do things, you know. My own fears and reservations—all that, I kind of have a better idea of what those are. Also, I think in a lot of ways I've learned to like myself a lot better. Just to come in agreement with what the Lord says about me and who I am and really to just accept that by faith and not have to work and all that striving to be something—before... knowing [that] all my works are just nothing.

Another student (J. X.) referred to the opportunity to discuss his thinking with his community members, about coming to terms with his own motivation and behavior:

Well, it's all about just the godly friends that I have made—you know, people that I could be unhindered [with]—just tell them exactly what I thought about things and all that. Even today I was having a very honest conversation about just stuff that isn't right in me—but I don't understand why I do what I do. And just being able to bring that before my friends and say, 'this is what I'm thinking'—hope you understand why I'm thinking this and what I should do about it, you know. It helps to have somewhat more of an objective source [from his community members].

Personal Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth, increased capacity to love and be loved, strengthened authenticity and identity, emotional resilience and stability, empathy and altruism, character and integrity—these and others, all are critical for satisfying lives and productive citizenship (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 221).

Arguably, one of the two biggest themes present in our conversations with the members of the Barret Hall LLC was the idea of purposefully pursuing spiritual growth. The members of the pod we examined were certainly aware of the fact that the pod was designed to facilitate this aspect of their lives. This fact is actually one of the major reasons why many of these particular students chose to live in this setting. The group members variously described their own growth, the growth of other members, and the growth of the group in general. M. Y. recounted his year by saying:

I just kind of started realizing what Christ had called me to. I was just freed from a lot of different things. After I kind of got the idea of that, this semester was when I really started changing. [The] first semester was just kind of a build up to that. I used to have a lot of issues that got changed around—changed around my idea of Christianity—totally changed.

T. L. described his spiritual growth as follows:

I think it's definitely been a formative year... largely because of the people in the pod—being around some of these guys—it's been a great influence on me. Being able to develop those relationships and walk 10 or 15 feet and be like 'hey... I'm struggling with this... pray for me.' And just get advice, get thoughts, get prayers. And see that example and try to live out more of a bold Christian life outside of the pod... so it's been good to have that example inside [the pod] and see their lives. And then try to imitate that.

J. X. made the following comment about growing in his prayer life:

Well, I know at least for me—when I first came to ACU I was an atheist. And shortly after I converted. But one thing I always had problems with was group prayer because I always felt really awkward about it and it never really settled right with me. And I think just being in this community and being in an environment with these guys sort of helped me get over that fear a little

bit—not fear but anxiety, I guess you would say. Just being around people from all walks of life and who all have very different goals in mind—it made me—it just sort of allowed me to gain a bond with them enough to where I would feel comfortable in prayer with them... and I think that was really helpful for me.

Implications and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the spiritual development of eight participants in a living-learning community at Abilene Christian University. Although this study was a unique case that produced no generalizable results, several implications for practice have emerged from this study that provide valuable forms of insight for colleges and universities interested in or already facilitating living-learning communities. Specifically, the implications from this study raise an important question for student affairs professionals in a Christian institution setting: “How do we intentionally harness the potential of living-learning communities to maximize their impact on spiritual formation?” The following suggestions will help to advance dialogue concerning this question:

1) As mentioned previously, close-knit community-oriented living arrangements on a college campus create an ideal setting for spiritual growth, especially if that community is committed to growing personally and spiritually. Our first recommendation to student development professionals is simply to advocate for the creation of LLCs on your campus. Part of this advocacy work involves educating key administrators on campus about LLCs. These key decision makers need to see how an LLC can play an important role in the life of a developing student. In educating others on campus, student development professionals can show how other institutions have had success with LLCs.

2) Advocating, however, is only the beginning. Once an LLC is created, the creators must be intentional about ongoing student spiritual development. It is something that needs to be cultivated and nurtured through active steps of engagement. There are many ways to accomplish active student spiritual development. In the case of Barret, each group had a faculty mentor, weekly prayer time, and other accountability groups. These activities were part of the culture and expectations of the community we examined. It is our impression that the purposeful steps put in place to foster ongoing student spiritual development are fundamentally important in shaping and molding a student’s spiritual life.

3) Finally, this study reflects students’ spiritual development in association with a new residence hall that was designed to provide optimal opportunities for students to engage one another. Most existing residence halls are “traditional” in style, comprised of corridor halls with double rooms and community baths. Within these structural constraints it is more difficult to create community, much less implement communities that impact spirituality or living and learning. However, corridor-style structures

can easily be renovated, creating centrally located community spaces; additionally, housing selection and assignments can be made according to student cohort, major, interest, theme, etc. We feel that such structural arrangements lay the foundation for an LLC environment.

Living-learning communities are a relatively new form of communal living that some institutions of higher education are establishing within their selective campuses. This study examined one such LLC at a private Christian university. The data collected through a qualitative research process revealed unique issues that relate to how LLCs impact a student's spiritual development. Future research is needed specifically addressing the spiritual development of female students in a living-learning community.

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