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Promoting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Community Colleges

Insights from Two Learning Communities

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The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a powerful vehicle for professional development. Faculty make their teaching public as they investigate phenomena in their classes. This process encourages sustained discussions of teaching. In conducting SoTL, community college faculty face substantial hurdles: heavy workloads, few institutional supports, no employment rewards, perceived irrelevance, and weak peer networks. Can these challenges be overcome within existing institutional structures? This chapter explores this question by examining how SoTL is pursued in two learning communities. Evidence from these institutional case studies suggests that SoTL programs are viable in community colleges, despite major challenges.

To what extent should community colleges encourage faculty to conduct scholarship? We pose this question, not to challenge the institutional focus on teaching and learning, but rather to explore ways of supporting it. Too often in community college education, scholarship and teaching are viewed in oppositional terms, as if one necessarily distracts from the other. Without a doubt, faculty have their hands full with teaching and administrative work. Few

instructors have extra room for a new category of job responsibilities. But what if scholarship could be integrated into one's ongoing professional development? What if there were a substantial overlap between scholarly activities and instructional improvement? In such circumstances, scholarship would be an asset to teaching rather than a distraction. The idea of teaching-related scholarship is gaining traction in community colleges. American Association of Community Colleges president George Boggs (1995–96) and other leaders have called on community colleges to take scholarly approaches to teaching. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of colleges are supporting faculty projects in SoTL (Levinson, 2003; Palmer, 1991).

This chapter analyzes conditions that are likely to promote and sustain teaching-related scholarship in community colleges. We consider commonly articulated challenges to scholarly inquiry, and we identify institutional conditions that help faculty overcome these challenges. Our discussion is informed by a review of research on scholarly practices and professional development activities among community college faculty. Drawing on this body of work, we examine SoTL programs at two colleges: Mesa Community College (MCC) in Arizona and North Seattle Community College (NSCC) in Washington. Not coincidentally, these colleges also have strong learning communities (Cox & Richlin, 2004; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). These programs illustrate that learning communities can provide a viable infrastructure for SoTL. By identifying structural features that contribute to successful learning communities, one can predict programmatic elements that are likely to support SoTL in community colleges.

Changing Views of Scholarship and Teaching

There are deep historical roots to the assumption that teaching and research are antithetical. Some observers (Block, 1991) suggest that the community college's early ties with secondary schools tended to produce faculties with little desire or training to conduct original scholarship. Another factor is the institution's emphasis on community connections and applied instruction, which has inadvertently fostered ambivalence toward scholarship.

In the late 1940s, the President's Commission on Higher Education affirmed that public two-year colleges should be known as "community colleges" to emphasize how the institution serves local needs (Boggs, 2001). This was a bold departure from the missions of other postsecondary institutions. Research universities focused on basic research which, by definition, was not necessarily tied to particular applications or industries. Liberal arts colleges, like their medieval counterparts in Europe, were devoted to liberal studies that generated knowledge that was not specific to any particular area. It was considered normal, even desirable, for these institutions to maintain some degree of separation from their geographic settings, even if this generated "town and gown" tensions. Community colleges took a much difference stance, deliberately encouraging ties with local constituencies. According to the President's Commission, instruction should prepare community members to lead "a rich and satisfying life, part of which involves earning a living" (1947, p. 6).

The President's Commission left open the possibility that community colleges could engage in research that might enhance instruction. Indeed, the institution was expected to make "frequent surveys of its community so that it can adapt its programs to the educational needs of its full-time students" (p. 6). But this form of needs assessment was considered an administrative function, not a scholarly activity to be conducted by faculty. The role of faculty was to instruct in ways that supported the college's mandate to serve the immediate region.

One presumed implication was that community college instructors should not engage extensively in the types of nonapplied, nonlocalized scholarship found in research universities or liberal arts colleges. This assumption solidified into an unwritten generalization that community college faculty should not engage extensively in original scholarship of any kind. In this way, community colleges came to embrace the term *teaching institution*, which has come to suggest not only that excellent instruction is a top institutional priority (O'Banion, 1997) but also that a commitment to instruction involves a distancing from scholarly pursuits.

Over the years, observers have justifiably questioned the bifurcation of teaching and scholarship (Cross & Angelo, 1989; Cross & Steadman, 1996). In his study of community college faculty,

Seidman argues that this dichotomy is “false and value laden” (1985, p. 254). George Vaughan elaborates: “By accepting the premise that teaching and research are mutually exclusive activities, too many community college faculty members have failed to ask how they should define themselves as scholars as well as teachers, a relationship that is symbiotic for the outstanding teacher” (1991, p. 4).

One approach to bridge this gap has been to broaden the definition of scholarship. Here, Vaughan (1989) and others make a useful distinction between research and scholarship. Research involves inquiry that builds on existing scholarly work and produces empirically verifiable knowledge. Scholarship, on the other hand, more broadly describes the systematic study of a topic, involving precise observation and public dissemination. It’s a stretch to imagine community college faculty regularly engaging in research in the university tradition, but it’s not unrealistic to imagine them engaging in scholarship, broadly defined. SoTL is built on a variety of activities that instructors regularly pursue: synthesizing literature in one’s field, evaluating one’s teaching, preparing a conference presentation, analyzing student outcomes, documenting administrative practices, to name a few. This is not to say that teaching-related scholarship is synonymous with effective teaching. Hutchings and Shulman (1999) explain that scholarship of teaching “requires a kind of ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning . . . and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advance practice beyond it” (p. 13).

New categories of institutional inquiry have emerged from broadened notions of scholarship. A report from the American Association for Community and Junior Colleges Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (1988) argues that our understanding of scholarship must include the investigation of knowledge in curriculum development, service, and teaching. Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation (1990) refined these distinctions, differentiating among scholarship of discovery (generating new areas of knowledge), scholarship of integration (synthesizing knowledge across disciplines), scholarship of application (putting knowledge into action), and scholarship of teaching (analyzing how knowledge is constructed or conveyed in classrooms).

Drawing on this framework, Boggs (2001) challenges community colleges to become “centers for scholarship”:

[T]he work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others. Further, good teachers must be engaged in scholarship of learning. They must continually learn how to better promote the learning of their students. It is in this form of scholarship that community college faculty excel, reflecting a unique creativeness and innovative spirit. (p. 25)

Challenges to Overcome

Although educators increasingly recognize the value of scholarship in community colleges, they are well aware of considerable obstacles to widespread institutionalization. Commonly articulated challenges include heavy workload, few institutional supports, no employment rewards, perceived irrelevance, and weak peer networks.

Heavy Workload

This is perhaps the most frequently cited barrier to scholarship in community colleges. A survey conducted by the Carnegie Foundation found that, on average, full-time faculty in community colleges spend almost fifteen hours per week engaged in classroom instruction, compared with approximately six hours per week of undergraduate instruction for faculty in research institutions (Huber, 1998). In addition, community college faculty spend four hours per week advising and assisting students. Program structure also influences the administrative load. Compared to universities, community colleges tend to offer a greater diversity of programs. Consequently, there are proportionally more small programs, which increase the proportion of faculty who are engaged in program administration. The administrative load is even greater if programs are self-supporting.

Few Institutional Supports

Another major challenge is a lack of resources. As one dean put it, “Heavy workload with little assistance leaves little time for

scholarship” (quoted in Vaughan, 1991, p. 12). This is especially true for part-timers, who often lack the basic tools, such as desk space. Even when funding is available for scholarly activities, faculty still might have difficulty securing that support. It is common for professional development monies to be awarded on a competitive basis, requiring faculty to submit proposals. Typically, colleges give priority to activities that directly benefit an instructor’s teaching or subject area knowledge. Proposals for SoTL-related activities may be at a disadvantage in relation to other proposals that provide more direct and immediate benefits.

No Employment Rewards

Presumably, community college faculty spend most of their time working on their teaching, program administration, and professional service. These activities are recognized by the college for purposes of promotion, tenure, or contract renewal. Scholarship is rarely considered as part of the reward system (Vaughan, 1991). Consequently, instructors have little extrinsic incentive to engage in such time-consuming activities.

Perceived Irrelevance

For the most part, community college instructors do not favor increased recognition of scholarship by their institutions. A large majority (82 percent) believe that teaching effectiveness should be the primary criterion for faculty promotion (Huber, 1998). Faculty tend to be favorable (or at least neutral) toward traditional measures of teaching such as peer observations and student evaluations, but, in general, they do not see research output as a valid indicator of good teaching. Huber concludes that most do not want scholarship to be counted for purposes of promotion or retention.

Perceptions of scholarship vary from one discipline to another. Block (1991) notes that instructors who come from professional areas outside universities may view scholarship as unnecessary or disconnected from classroom realities. This is particularly true in vocational or professional and technical fields, where a program’s credibility depends on faculty connections with employers. In the

eyes of employers, teaching-related scholarship is likely to be seen as a distraction from the central project of preparing students for work. In academic fields, instructors who are trained in research universities are apt to favor discipline-based research as the most valuable form of academic inquiry. Presumably, the study of teaching or program administration would have less cachet in their eyes; consequently, they would be less likely to pursue activities that are not valued in the discipline. Palmer (1991) echoes this concern, noting that community colleges must find a balanced approach to encouraging discipline-based scholarship, as well as pan-disciplinary scholarship of teaching.

Weak Peer Network

A foundational principle of scholarship, as articulated by Boyer (1990) and others, is that inquiry must be made public for critical review by one's peers. This assumes that faculty have regular contact with their colleagues within and across departments and, second, that there is a collective desire to talk about issues of teaching and learning. Multiple studies (Grubb & Associates, 1999; Seidman, 1985) point to pervasive patterns of isolation in community colleges, where instructors oftentimes feel cut off intellectually not only from peers in their department but also from peers in other departments and institutions (Tagg, 2003).

Current Grassroots Interest in Scholarship

Although these challenges seem daunting, studies suggest that scholarship is not uncommon in community colleges. A national survey found that, on average, community college faculty spend over six hours per week on research or comparable scholarly activities (Huber, 1998). More than one-third said they were engaged in a scholarly project that would lead to a publication, exhibit, or performance, and 20 percent reported receiving funding for research in the last three years. A review of faculty curricula vitae found almost half listing at least one publication (Vaughan, 1991). About one-third of sampled instructors published articles in national or regional journals.

Participation in scholarly activities is even greater when judged by a wider definition of scholarship. A strong majority of community college faculty (78 percent) report working with organizations outside their college (for example, industry, educational institutions, government) for purposes of professional service, program administration, or outreach (Huber, 1998). This work sometimes leads instructors to produce technical reports, newspaper articles, or other forms of documentation (Vaughan, 1991). One might infer that those who forge ahead with their own scholarship are strongly motivated by extra-institutional factors such as personal interest, civic engagement, professional pride, or desire for self-betterment. For these individuals, the institutional reward system is not the primary force shaping their scholarly pursuits. The combination of applying and disseminating knowledge clearly fits Boyer's notion of applied scholarship (1990).

These findings illustrate an apparent paradox: On the one hand, instructors generally believe that conducting original research has little relevance to the central project of teaching at a community college (Block, 1991). On the other hand, more than an incidental number of faculty are engaged in scholarly pursuits. What are we to make of this? It is clear that instructors are not categorically opposed to scholarly inquiry. What they oppose, we would argue, are institutional requirements for specific *types* of research. More specifically, they do not want to emulate the university model of "publish or perish." As long as scholarship is not limited to academic publication and not required for promotion or retention, instructors are often quite willing to engage in scholarly activities for personal development or professional service. Indeed, this is common, despite systemic challenges such as heavy workload and lack of employment rewards.

Even the vexing issue of institutional support may be more encouraging than previously assumed. Although community colleges rarely offer direct support for research, they commonly support various forms of professional development that relate (at least potentially) to scholarship. A survey of Southern community colleges found that 69 percent of colleges offer some financial support for presenting papers at conferences—a traditionally recognized form of scholarship (Murray, 2001). In the area of instructional development, almost all surveyed colleges offer workshops conducted by instructors. Workshops on teaching are

similar to conference presentations in that they involve systematically generating, synthesizing, and presenting knowledge—activities that Shulman (2000) identifies as hallmarks of scholarship. Community colleges frequently support other forms of faculty development that can be linked to SoTL. For instance, it is relatively common for colleges to provide release time for teaching improvement projects and tuition support for taking university classes (Grant & Keim, 2002; Murray, 1999). These activities, in themselves, do not constitute scholarship, but they can be useful vehicles for pursuing scholarly inquiry. It would be fair to say that many colleges already have at least a basic infrastructure that could support teaching-related scholarship.

Teaching-Related Scholarship in Two Institutions

It is likely that, given at least minimal support, some community college faculty will voluntarily pursue scholarly work, despite the added burden. Consider a hypothetical scenario. An instructor wishes to conduct a workshop at a regional conference on college teaching. The workshop will showcase an innovative curriculum that the instructor has developed for her introductory class. She has tenure, so this work has little if any bearing on her employment status. The only support from the college is reimbursement for registration and travel expenses. Still, the instructor is enthusiastic about this opportunity. She is proud of her curriculum and eager to share it with colleagues who have similar interests. We see two likely factors that would motivate an instructor to pursue this type of teaching-related scholarship. One is that the work is self-determined. Even though there are few institutionally bestowed benefits attached to this project, there are no institutionally imposed expectations or requirements either. Given the freedom to choose topic and purpose, instructors are inclined to focus on things that they find most immediate and interesting in their work. This automatically overcomes the problem of perceived irrelevance of scholarship.

The second factor is that scholarly inquiry often creates opportunities for intellectual exchange with colleagues. Although instructors often work in relative isolation, they generally appreciate opportunities to interface with colleagues (Grubb et al., 1999). It is likely that faculty who conduct teaching-related scholarship are

motivated, not only by the prospect of creating a product for dissemination, but also by the opportunity to engage in a collaborative process that stimulates discussions about teaching.

We believe that further development of teaching-related scholarship in community colleges requires the promotion of peer networks and the preservation of self-determined inquiry. Currently, scholarly activities among community college faculty tend to be entrepreneurial, typically with individual faculty designing their own projects and building their own networks, often with peers outside the college. If colleges hope to institutionalize teaching-related scholarship, they must build peer networks within the institution. Specifically, colleges must provide ways for instructors to work with colleagues across disciplines in exploring issues of teaching and learning. We do not wish to imply that community colleges should impose formal requirements or guidelines for scholarship. This undoubtedly would be poisonous to the intrinsic motivation that currently drives scholarly work among community college faculty. The challenge is for colleges to encourage voluntary, self-determined scholarship without creating a new category of work or a new set of employment requirements for instructors.

To illustrate how this can be achieved in community colleges, we look to an established form of faculty development—learning communities. Community colleges have a decades-long history of student learning communities in which multiple courses are linked together and taught collaboratively (Levinson, 2003). Observers (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) note that student learning communities have the potential, not only to enrich the learning experience of students, but also to stimulate ongoing professional development among faculty. Some community colleges have gone a step further in formalizing this objective, offering faculty learning communities in which groups of instructors participate in professional development activities guided by a formal curriculum (Cox & Richlin, 2004). Both types of learning community foster conditions that are conducive to SoTL. For instance, both create cross-disciplinary networks for faculty to talk to each other about classroom practice. Moreover, both encourage faculty to question their assumptions about teaching. In their study of community college teaching, Grubb and colleagues (1999) found that the

promise of immersive professional enrichment was a powerful motivator among faculty participating in learning communities. As one instructor explained:

It's very, very enriching to see other teachers work, teachers who are already quite adept, quite experienced, veteran teachers with enormous reserves of technique. . . . So there's an enormous kind of fertilization, different sorts of ideas, and also you get a chance to run things up the flagpole, and so there's that kind of enrichment that would never be possible in the normal traditional venue. (p. 265)

As with those conducting SoTL, faculty who facilitate and participate in learning communities are willing to accept a certain amount of additional work if they believe they will gain deep insight into teaching-related issues that they deem important.

Is this potential payoff sufficient to counteract other challenges such as a lack of institutional supports or rewards? Let us consider two colleges that support SoTL, either directly or indirectly, through learning communities. Although they have different administrative configurations, both colleges foster a vibrant institutional culture of scholarly teaching. Our intention is not to advocate one model over another but rather to illustrate that there is more than one way to foster teaching-related scholarship in community colleges.

A Centralized Model: Mesa Community College

The Faculty and Professional Learning Community (FPLC) program at MCC is the college's most recent and significant effort to promote scholarly teaching (Richlin, 2001). Modeled after Miami University's Faculty Learning Community program (Richlin & Essington, 2004), the FPLC encourages participants to "engage in self-selected activities that promote learning, development, community building, and the scholarship of teaching and learning" (CTL Web site, 2007a). The goals, according to program director W. Bradley Kincaid, are to promote connections among faculty, staff, and students and to promote scholarly reflection, which leads to the improvement of teaching and learning (personal communication, December 8, 2006). Interested instructors

submit an application to join a learning community, ideally consisting of eight to twelve members. These groups meet every other week for a year to pursue community-defined goals and activities, coordinated and motivated by a facilitator. FPLC members are encouraged to pursue projects related to a common topic:

Participants usually select a focus course or project in which to implement an innovation or intervention related to the FPLC topic and collaborate to assess impacts on teaching and learning. Local communication about FPLC outcomes is a critical component of the program leading to enhanced campus community and improved teaching and learning. (CTL Web site, 2007b)

Kincaid cites these features of the FPLC program that support scholarly teaching at MCC (personal communication, December 8, 2006):

- Funding reassigned time or special contracts for the director and all facilitators
- Providing a budget for books, printing, travel to present scholarship at national conferences
- Allowing FPLC members to accumulate Faculty Professional Growth credits, which count toward advancement on the salary scale for faculty without a Ph.D.
- Counting FPLC membership as fulfilling the faculty service requirement
- Promoting FPLC membership alternate to completing the required Faculty Evaluation Plan
- Providing support for classroom research design
- Hosting a Conference on Teaching and Learning (supported by the vice chancellor for academic affairs)

In at least two respects, the FPLC program serves as a centralized vehicle promoting SoTL. First, although scholarly inquiries are conducted independently by faculty, they are supported by the facilitator and director, who provide research design consultation. Second, the inquiries are housed in a dedicated program with its own director and budget.

A Decentralized Model: North Seattle Community College

In 2003, NSCC implemented an initiative to promote SoTL across the college. Recognized as a Core Campus by the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, NSCC encourages faculty to “engag[e] in scholarly discussions and organiz[e] research projects that explore important questions related to improving teaching and learning in classrooms, at the college, and in the broader field of higher education” (TLC Web site, 2007).

This initiative dovetails comfortably with the Coordinated Studies Program, which offers team-taught courses combining two or more fields of study. Since the 1980s, this program has implemented a model of integrated studies developed at the Evergreen State College and promoted by the Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education (Smith, 1993). In these student learning communities, instructors work closely together in planning and administering the course. Also, they observe each other frequently, as they teach together in a common space. There is no formal agenda for professional development within these learning communities, but sustained interaction with colleagues encourages instructors to refine and adapt their teaching methods. This is a fertile environment for teaching-related scholarship. Indeed, some SoTL projects (Lister-Reis, Hamilton, & Nousheen, 2006) have emerged from faculty and student collaboration in Coordinated Studies classes.

These scholarly activities are supported by NSCC’s Teaching and Learning Center. According to faculty member and Carnegie Fellow, James Harnish (personal communication, December 12, 2006), the TLC offers an array of workshops and resources on teaching-related topics, including SoTL. In addition, the center provides various forums (both physical and electronic) for faculty to share ideas about instruction. Although the TLC has enthusiastically embraced integrated studies and SoTL, the center historically has tried to avoid imposing models of instructional innovation from the top down. Instead, the center has sought to facilitate faculty collaboration, allowing instructors to develop and disseminate their own innovations. In this respect, NSCC’s approach to fostering scholarly teaching is decentralized.

Two Promising Approaches to Teaching-Related Scholarship

There are differences in how the two colleges create scholarly networks across disciplines. At MCC, the locus of scholarly exchange is the faculty learning community—an entity outside the classroom. The ultimate manifestation is the MCC Conference on Teaching and Learning, where faculty present insights into classroom phenomena (Phung, 2006) and instructional best practices (Joshua, 2007). NSCC also holds a campuswide event but, for most of the year, scholarly exchanges happen primarily in their classrooms. This is evident in the administration of Coordinated Studies classes, where faculty often work closely with students. This configuration has influenced NSCC faculty to broaden the definition of peer networks to include students as scholarly partners. In one project, a group of students worked under the supervision of faculty to conduct a survey of student perspectives on the learning environment at NSCC (Allard, Bellomio, Gronbeck, & Wilkin, 2006). We feel that both programmatic configurations (in-class and out-of-class sites) can be fertile environments for teaching-related scholarship. The key, we believe, is for community colleges to institutionalize either or both types and to make them regular components of instruction and professional development.

There is also a difference in levels of funding for SoTL projects at MCC and at NSCC. Mesa's Faculty and Professional Learning Community Program has a larger budget. Participants do not receive direct compensation, but they may be eligible for certain benefits, such as faculty professional growth credit. As a result, the FPLCs attract a larger number of participants (typically about seventy per year). Support for faculty scholarly projects is more limited at North Seattle Community College. Faculty do not receive incentives from the institution to do scholarly projects. Not surprisingly, the number of faculty who pursue teaching-related scholarship is smaller at NSCC. This is not to say that faculty motivation differs categorically between these two programs. Ultimately, at both colleges, faculty report being intrinsically motivated by the opportunity to generate new knowledge while working with colleagues, counteracting the isolation that many feel in a large institution. The difference between the two programs is mainly logistical. Offering faculty supports within a well-funded

and well-organized program is likely to widen opportunities for those who want an enriching experience but who otherwise could not afford to devote the time to an extended project. Ultimately, we believe that, if colleges hope to encourage teaching-related scholarship on a widespread and sustainable basis, they must devote funds to such programs and support faculty participation in them. At the same time, we recognize that there may be a silver lining for small-budget programs. Colleges that offer less support for teaching-related scholarship also tend to impose fewer expectations and guidelines. These conditions tend to encourage the entrepreneurialism that typically drives most scholarly work at community colleges.

Beyond these programmatic differences, there are a number of important similarities between MCC and NSCC. Perhaps most significantly, the importance of scholarly teaching is communicated on at least two levels: institutional and programmatic.

At the institutional level, scholarly inquiry is endorsed by executive administration at both colleges. This is evident in the investment that MCC has made in the FPLC Program. At NSCC, the vice president for instruction introduced a collegewide initiative on SoTL. This communicates clearly to the campus community that teaching-related scholarship has a legitimate place in the community college. It is important to note, however, that executive-level endorsement is not sufficient in and of itself to ensure the institutionalization of teaching-related scholarship. Indeed, faculty are likely to react with extreme skepticism if they believe that SoTL is being promoted by administration as a back-door means of evaluating faculty performance (Goto, Kane, Cheung, Hults, & Davis, 2007). For SoTL to gain widespread acceptance at community colleges, the purposes and uses of scholarly inquiry must remain firmly in faculty control. This is the case at MCC and NSCC. As faculty members with administrative duties, the directors of the FPLC (Mesa) or the TLC (North Seattle) are responsible for promoting teaching-related scholarship at the programmatic level. In communicating the purposes of SoTL, the directors tread diplomatically. They let instructors know that they have the option of using their scholarly projects to enhance their professional portfolios. At the same time, they make it clear that teaching-related scholarship is independent of institutionally mandated assessment.

Conclusion

MCC and NSCC demonstrate that teaching-related scholarship at community colleges is not only feasible but also potentially invigorating for purposes of professional development. Although voluntary SoTL programs will never attract all faculty, they are likely to attract at least some enthusiastic participants, as long as faculty see the relevance of teaching-related scholarship and they retain control of the scholarly agenda. This can happen even with heavy workloads and few institutional incentives. Admittedly, SoTL programs have not been around long enough to determine the extent to which they are sustainable. However, learning communities (both faculty and student) provide a programmatic analog that helps us predict conditions in which SoTL is likely to thrive in the long run. The fact that learning communities have spread and diversified in community colleges over the last several decades gives us reason to hope that teaching-related scholarship will likewise gain a sustainable foothold in community colleges.

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