Latino Student Persistence Strategies in Transferring from Community College to Tier 1 Universities: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: This study is a departure from discussions on why community college students do not transfer in large numbers, but instead, provides an analysis of Latino students from community college who have successfully transferred to Tier 1 universities. The conceptual framework included student engagement theory (Kuh, 2003), the support for student autonomy (Koestner et al., 2015), and the importance of students studying to mastery (Sarwat & Irshad, 2012). These theories were applied to the central research question, 'What strategies do Latino students from a community college use to create a successful transition from community college to Tier 1 colleges and universities?' The researcher generated six themes on how Latino students experienced successful transfer: institutional support, student transfer experiences, strategies to adapt, financial support, studying to mastery, and family support as major factors for academic success. These findings would be significant to student development specialists in community colleges. Further, such findings can be used to support Latino community college students as they sought transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

Keywords: *Latino student retention, higher education, transfer shock, Tier 1 university.*

Introduction

Community colleges are typically labeled as schools that cannot graduate a majority of their students (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Only 33% of students starting at a community college transfer to a four-year college or university; only 14% complete a baccalaureate within six years of initial enrollment at the community college (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Further, community colleges serve disproportionate percentages of students of color. The American Association of Community Colleges reported that for the fall of 2014, community colleges enrolled 57% Hispanic, 52% black, and 43% of Asian/Pacific college-going students (AACC, 2016). In turn, underrepresented populations attended schools that were least likely to lead to a four-year baccalaureate degree. Further, while 58% of white community college students earned an associate's degree, only 17% of Latino students earned an associate's degree (AACC, 2016).

Nunez, Crisp, and Elizondo (2014) documented that more than half, or 54%, of all Hispanic-serving institutions are community colleges; with more Latinos seeking college degrees, even more community colleges are emerging as Hispanic-serving institutions (Torres & Zerquera, 2012). Such community colleges often started as predominantly white institutions which transitioned to Hispanic-serving institutions as they were located in areas where the demographics shifted; consequently, the United States should anticipate more Hispanic-serving institutions emerging as the population continues to change (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015).

Given the increased demand for services and education, the burgeoning Latino population has often been referred to as a "sleeping giant...a term applied throughout the 1980s and 1990s to depict a community that had not yet realized its political potential...now that long predicted Latino population boom is here and extends past Southwestern states" (Contreras, 2011, p. 43). Nonetheless, Latino student graduation rates, despite gains in college admissions, remained disproportionately below whites (Aud et al., 2012; Pyne & Means, 2013).

Therefore, while the United States struggles to maintain its global footing regarding academic achievement (Hollis, 2016), it cannot overlook a growing sector of the population that needs equal access to educational opportunity for the nation as a whole to achieve. Gandara and Contreras (2009), and Hollis (2016b) reflected that education is the pathway

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to the middle class. However, without access to education and the subsequent access to economic prosperity that accompanies education, the Latino youth can be relegated to a "permanent underclass without the hope of integrating into a mainstream or realizing the potential to contribute to American society" (pp. 13–14).

Despite these trends, a community college honors program in the southeast United States, referred to with the pseudonym Fortitude County College (FCC) for the purpose of this study, had proved to not only graduate students but also successfully facilitated transfer to Tier 1 universities in the United States. Tier 1 institutions in the United States are seen as the top 50 colleges or universities in the country (Owings, Madigan, & Daniel, 1998). Such schools had the toughest admissions standards, attracted the most academically prepared student populations, and typically were not as receptive to transfer students. Through a two-year honors program that strengthened students' study skills and expectations for academic success, many of these two-year college graduates transferred and continued academic success at schools such as Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University, the University of Michigan, and Emory University. Student retention specialists may point to the entering GPA, SAT scores, or other standards required for admissions to this program, yet this phenomenological study examined how Latinos felt about entering a community college, what supported their matriculation, and how they prospered at their respective Tier 1 universities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study considered in tandem the importance of student goal setting through support for student autonomy and student engagement. As community college students typically do not transition well from two-year to four-year institutions (Gilroy, 2012), the successful transfer students must fortify themselves with a determination to join junior-level students native to the four-year institutions while simultaneously adjusting to being away from their home community. The transition for two-year transfer students then was not just in adjusting to tougher classes with four-year students who had previously established social networks at the four-year university, but transfer students were often adjusting to climate changes, having a new roommate, and different eating patterns. Nonetheless, FCC honors graduates not only made the transition, but also were persisting at Tier 1 universities with As and Bs through tough majors in the health, science, and business fields.

Students with specific goals and aspirations were more likely to find success in their academic pursuits (Bailey et al., 2007). Further, when a student's support system inspired a student's autonomy and independence, the student experienced growth, more so than with support systems that offered prescribed and directed support (Hollis, 2016c). In other words, when students were encouraged to solve their problems and seek their own solutions, they strengthened their ability to create and maintain goals. In fact, Koestner et al. (2015) concluded that student autonomy supported long-term goals, transcending multiple academic terms.

Regarding learning and achievement, Sarwat and Irshad (2012) confirmed a relationship between a mastery of goals and student persistence. Those who mastered course material emerged from the course with a "deep understanding" (Sarwat & Irshad, 2012, p. 43). The ability to find this "deep understanding" was critical for those community college students matriculating to Tier 1 four-year schools, because studying for difficult subjects meant not only passing the class but learning the complex material which was the foundation for their more difficult courses within a specified major.

This Fortitude County College honors program was similar to other community college honors programs that inspired students to transfer to Tier 1 schools. "The honors model of small, student-centered classes lends itself well to the community college setting as it provides students with a strong network from which to get multilevel support: peer, faculty, and alumni" (Mellow, 2015, p. 68). Similar to the FCC program, the LaGuardia Community College honors program discussed in Mellow's (2015) writing, created a solid community with an extended network of alumni while also addressing students' financial obstacles.

Other issues that possibly affected Latino students transferring from community college was the potential perception that they may not fit into the four-year university culture. "Minority students who attend traditionally white colleges are less likely than other students to feel that they are a part of the campus environment and are more likely to be unsatisfied with their college experience" (Baker & Robnett, 2012, p. 327). Transfer students commonly experienced alienation, isolation, transfer shock, and adjustment issues when transferring to four-year colleges and universities (Gilroy, 2012). For students from diverse backgrounds, this dynamic can be exacerbated when faced with fitting into a predominantly white-majority campus culture (Hollis & McCalla, 2013).

The aforementioned elements of studying to mastery and support for students' autonomy fostered the student engagement discussed by Kuh (2003). Institutional resources were a key factor in developing an environment and support system for community colleges students striving for associate's degree completion and subsequent matriculation to a four-year university. When institutions had personnel and facilities dedicated to student learning and contributing to student satisfaction, students were more likely to engage in their academic studies. However, Kuh

(2003) noted, "Despite putting forth about the same amount of effort, African American students report lower grades. White students generally get the highest grades, followed by Asian and multiracial students, and Latino and Native American students" (p. 27). While researchers considered engagement, support, and autonomy, a question remained how students of color cultivated mastery of content comparable to their white counterparts.

Problem Statement and Research Question

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), Latinos were the fastest growing community college student population with 22% of community college enrollments and 17% of associate degrees awarded, while whites and Asian/Pacific Islander earned 58% and 6% completions respectively. The numbers diminished further as community college graduates, regardless of race, transferred to four-year colleges, where only 33% of students starting at a community college transferred to a four-year school, and only 14% completed a baccalaureate within six years of initial enrollment at the community college (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). However, IPEDS reported that 35% of Fortitude County College students graduated with a two-year degree while 90% of its honors college students graduated with a two-year degree. Therefore, while the problem for analysis was the general population of community college students graduate at a much lower rate than FCC honors graduates, this phenomenological study addressed the problem by looking at the FCC model of success instead of examining the deficiencies facing community college education.

Central Research Question

While many students who attended community college did not transfer to any four-year college or university to complete a degree, the Fortitude County College's honors program graduated 90% of the students from its program. Therefore, the central research question for this phenomenological study was: *What strategies do Latino students from a community college use to create a successful transition from community college to Tier 1 colleges and universities?*

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand what elements supported Latino students emerging from a community college (Fortitude County College / FCC) as they transitioned to their baccalaureate programs at Tier 1 universities. The national data showed that many students, especially students of color, were unsuccessful in completing an associate's degree then transferring to a four-year university. This phenomenological study highlighted elements that lead to academic success for two-year students transferring to four-year colleges and universities.

Research Methods

Research Sample

The sample for this phenomenological study incorporated eight students who had successfully transferred from a community college to a Tier 1 university. Participants all attended an honors program in their community college and successfully transferred to a Tier 1 university, often with a scholarship. All participants were third and fourth year students at a Tier 1 university ranging in age from 20 to 23. Institutional Review Board approval was secured to collect the qualitative perceptions.

Several qualitative researchers have reflected on the appropriate sample size for data collection. Researchers Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) claimed that a qualitative study should have fewer than 50 participants. Creswell (1998) has written that a qualitative study should have at a minimum of five participants, yet Morse (1994) claimed that at least six participants comprise a viable sample. Within the discussion of reasonable sample sizes for qualitative studies, the sample size was viable with eight participants. The researcher did achieve saturation of data within this sample size.

Limitations

The study was limited to the connections of students who attended a community college honors program in the southeastern region of the United States. Despite being enrolled at their respective four-year universities at the time of the study, the students knew each other from their previous FCC community college experiences. Their agreement to participate blossomed from their trust of the first person interviewed, who then was a critical factor in the snowballing recruiting efforts.

Further, the students in this study were part of an honors college. They had honors classes and had to maintain a 3.5 grade point average to remain in the community college honors program. Unlike other community college students, this sample did not experience developmental education as part of their pathway to the associate's degree.

Methodology

Past research and professional experience informed the researcher's knowledge that many students do not graduate from community college (Jenkins & Fink, 2015); of these graduates, precious few transferred successfully to Tier 1 universities. Therefore, to better understand these matriculation patterns, this study was developed to investigate the how and why of these students' experiences (Merriam, 2002).

Data Collection

The researcher designed this phenomenological study method that explored the academic and transfer experiences of eight community college students who attended a community college, Fortitude County College (FCC). The initial participant introduced each subsequent participant to the researcher via e-mail. The researcher established phone appointments after an initial e-mail from the first participant introduced the study to the other student participants in the sample.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016, the end of their first academic year at their respective Tier 1 universities. The duration of the interviews was from 35 minutes to 60 minutes with the average interview time spanning 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

These audiotapes were reviewed and then transcribed word for word, eliminating personally identifiable information. The transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo 11.3.1. Each transcript was coded for commonly occurring words. From this coding procedure, six themes became evident. To support the qualitative data, three book chapters and a review of the website also corroborated the eight participants' experiences.

Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to answer the central research question: *What strategies do Latino students from a community college use to create a successful transition from community college to Tier 1 colleges and universities?* Six themes emerged that assisted students matriculating from a community college to Tier 1 universities. All eight participants discussed these six elements. The emerging themes were represented in the order of the frequency with which they were discussed.

Demographics

Fortitude County College (FCC) served students primarily from the public schools from the county it served, with 73% of its students coming from public school districts. The honors college had 89% minority student enrollment, and 58% came from homes where English was not the native language. The study participants included three males and five females. Half were in the first generation of their family to attend any college. See table 1.

Table 1. FCC Study Participants

Gender	Age	First Generation College	Four-Year Major
Male	21	N	Engineering
Female	21	N	Nursing
Female	21	Y	Journalism
Female	22	N	Biology
Female	20	Y	Public Relations
Male	20	Y	Hospitality
Female	20	Y	Pre-Med
Male	22	N	Engineering

All of the participants commented that they were unable to gain admission to their first choice of colleges when graduating high school. Many considered local four-year state schools. All of them credited their experiences with the honors college to help them prepare for their "dream schools," which included Cornell University, Johns Hopkins, Emory University, University of Michigan, University of Florida, and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. At the time of the interviews, all students had successfully completed at least two academic terms at their respective Tier 1 institutions and were on track to graduate within three additional academic terms.

Theme #1: Institutional Support

Support from the honors program faculty and staff was the most salient theme, based on the participants' remarks. All of the participants commented that they received academic support and were inspired to pursue transfer to Tier 1 institutions. They all credited the honors program that helped them to establish and maintain expectations for matriculating to a Tier 1 university. Discussion on transferring to Tier 1 schools was a daily occurrence. The culture constantly reinforced the probable reality for students to transfer to some of the best four-year schools in the country. See table 2.

Table 2. Theme#1 Institutional Support

>P1 We had a point person who looked after us. Really helped us to consider our essays and how to transfer. She was like the auntie who pushes you, but she doesn't cuddle you. She encouraged us to go for the big schools. She encouraged us not to settle.

>P2 At the first day they asked us which big school we want to transfer to. Not a small school but a really big elite school. One student stood up and said, I'm going to Stanford. I'm going to Harvard. Now we are talking about big institutions. He set the tone. Everybody was thinking about where to go. Georgia Tech, MIT, Cornell. After that, we were thinking of any possibility. People are more than happy to write you letters of recommendation to help you get there.

>P3 The program overall treats you special. They encourage you and expect you to transfer to a really big university. It was announced every week that [someone] was going to a wonderful school. They want everybody to say where you want to transfer from the very first day. People named great universities like Stanford and Cornell.

> P4 I was not just a number, my professors knew me. It was easy for them to know my name. It's good to go into class, and the teachers know my first name, and they understand how you like to learn the subject.

Theme #2: Transfer Experiences

The second emerging theme addressed the difficulty many community college students faced when transferring to four-year colleges and universities. The literature on community colleges documented a transfer shock that students experienced when moving from their native two-year school to a more intense four-year experience (Gilroy, 2012). In regard to the sample, five of eight participants moved from their community college in a sunny state to environments in which they saw snow for the first time. In addition to the weather, many were adjusting to the study habits and the competitive nature of the respective student populations. See table 3.

Table 3. Theme #2 Transfer Experiences

>P5 It was a big culture shock, especially the weather coming from [the southeast].

>P6 Tough to prepare two-year students to go to an Ivy League school like Cornell.

>P1 I am close to where they treated the Ebola patients with one of best hospitals in the country. A great experience here. Unobtainable experiences anywhere else.

>P8 Family is very important to me, and I am homesick. I wish I could be there, but I'm in school. It is upsetting every time I have to leave, but school is important. I have as much of a social life as I can as a student.

>P7 I only get settled, and then it'll be time to leave. It's better [now]. It was really hard last semester; that is, my first semester. But now I feel little better; first semester is very, very, very, very, very rough.

>P4 So I'm only taking classes in my major. It would be easier if I could spread my major route along with my other classes. But as a transfer student all my major courses are taken together.

Study participants remarked on how they felt a transfer shock and reflected on how their FCC faculty trained them to persist at the Tier 1 schools. Further, persistence was not just about studying, but also asking for help, or as one student commented, "it can be overwhelming to transfer. Don't be scared, be ready to face anything you have."

Theme #3: Strategies for Persistence
Fortitude County College helped students develop strategies to transfer to Tier 1 schools and persistence once they arrived. They were coached to pursue academic support and to push through anxiety and shyness about entering a new environment. All of the participants were confident in their abilities to navigate their new four-year environments, despite the difficulty they admittedly faced.

Table 4. Theme #3 Strategies for persistence

>P8 They pushed us a lot. Don't be afraid to ask questions. I can step up and ask a stranger for help.

>P6 I just kept my passion and kept working. I'm really confident. I know I need to struggle to get what I want.

>P1 I am not the smartest person in the room. But I know how to ask for help. Pride is a fleeting thing. Grades are forever. You need to step up to the plate and ask for help. Don't sit at home and feel sorry for yourself and fail the class.

>P3 I had a list. I was focusing on the best engineering programs in the country. I applied to 8 out of the 10 schools in the country.

Theme #4: Money/ Financial Issues

Financial constraints were a concern to the sample. They appreciated the stipend from Fortitude County College and also maintained concerns about student debt when transferring to four-year schools. While FCC did not encourage students to work, three of the eight had a job while at FCC to save for the four-year tuition. See table 5.

Table 5. *Theme #4 Money/Financial Issues*

>P1 The Cooke Foundation helped me. They are paying for my tuition.
>P6 I looked at two schools: University of Michigan and University of North Carolina. My school had the best financial aid.
> P8 We did have scholarships. Courses were paid for. We were given a grant that helped with textbooks. This was really helpful.
>P3 I have friends already $40,000 in debt. I don't want all those loans.
>P2 [Tier 1 University] was out of our family's budget. I was looking at [a state school] but then I got into FCC. Money was an issue.

Theme #5: Studying

The participants were particularly concerned about maintaining the same academic success they had earned at Fortitude County College. However, they all admitted that academically, they experienced a shock in competing with students who already knew what to expect at a Tier 1 university. Most students commented that the academics were particularly hard, yet such comments were not complaints. Instead, they were stating a fact that they considered while studying.

Table 6. *Theme #5 Study skills*

>P5 I thought I knew how to study until I got here. I'm still learning how to study. Time management is OK. The studying part is still tough for me.
>P6 I really had to learn how to study here. I had to learn how to plan. I had to learn time management.
>P8 Exams here are presented in the more advanced and complex way. A lot of issues. The longer I am here the more I know how to handle questions and what's expected.
>P1 Nursing school is a whole other whirlwind. What I used to know about studying went out the window. I have to learn how to study differently. It's all application questions. I have to change my study style. It is ridiculously hard.
>P2 It's different. It's more demanding. I need to take more time to study the same material. For example, financial accounting [at FCC] I might have one homework. It takes me 30 minutes and then a quiz. Here homework takes an hour, an hour and a half.

Theme #6: Family/Community Support

The family was a major form of support for all students. Even when parents did not know the importance of the Tier 1 education, students felt loved and supported, although it meant moving hours away from home. Family support included the broad community, immediate family, friends, and FCC alum. These students relied heavily on this network while attending the community college and for emotional support once they reached the four-year institutions. Three of the eight remarked that a family member driving them to a campus visit before they applied to transfer. These campus visits influenced their choices for choosing a Tier 1 university. See table 7.

Table 7. *Theme #6 Family/Community Support*

>P5 My family helped me with the paperwork.
>P6 My parents really helped me, definitely. My parents are super supportive. They told me to explore the world. Some kids in the program had parents who didn't want them to leave.
>P8 My mom always helped me. She always pushed me to pursue my dreams. I asked how are we going to pay for it. She says we'll figure it out but get into the school; go after your dreams. My mother always pushed me.
>P2 My mom saw the actions of other people when she told them I was going to an Ivy League school. And Mom came back and asked me what made [the Ivy League] so special. She was so proud. She told all her friends at work. They were so proud of me.
>P3 My mom and my dad always pushed me to be the best I could be. They encouraged me to push my limits. They always encourage me to shoot for the highest.

Discussion

Participants in this study had crystallized goals regarding post-baccalaureate plans that included medical school, graduate school in community health, nursing, entrepreneurship, and traveling abroad. Aligning with the conceptual framework that emphasized the importance of supporting student autonomy, these students' behaviors were a product of the support they received from family and the community college personnel. The students had developed a confidence to persist through their honors program. Their confidence also helped them to leave home and strategically pursue the academic networks they needed to be successful at the four-year college.

Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) stated that academic efficacy was the key to students' academic success. The students from this study commented on small classes, and supportive college personnel at FCC to help them envision enrollment in Tier 1 schools. Opportunities for success and connecting with academic role models who helped develop academic strategies were key elements. Further, constant encouragement, which lead to students' academic content mastery, was a critical part of the participants' experiences. Krumrei-Mancuso et al.'s (2013) remarks coincided with Hallett (2013) and Eckles and Stradley (2012), who commented that social networks were critical to student success and retention. Such peer social networks granted access to information for all students and provided support for students who may not have strong institutional relationships with the college and university officials (Hallett, 2013). The student participants mostly agreed that they found support at their community college. Their social network that they maintained after community college graduation supported them at the four-year institutions. This alum support was evident even when those social networks were outside the parameters of their baccalaureate-granting institution.

Scholars specifically reflecting on Latino students confirmed that family involvement was key to Latino student success (Rivera, 2014). The involvement of the family was similar to Mertes (2013), who stated, "Community colleges must recognize the importance of family influences, and look for ways to involve family members in the retention process" (p. 28). By creating a community, a community that included family, committed faculty and staff, and a strong peer social network, FCC community college honors program had forged a viable pathway for its students to Tier 1 universities. Their alumni had a "self love…a positive sense of their classmates…global awareness, critical thinking and a passion for learning" (Ochoa, 2013, p. 4). In turn, the alumni network continued to encourage students once they graduated from FCC.

Further, all of the participants had commented that money was an issue. The stipend and tuition waiver at FCC helped many students save for the four-year college and minimize dependency on loans. Bond, Cason, and Gray (2015) researched the effectiveness and confirm support for a Latino degree completion model, which included "financial support, emotional and moral support, mentoring, professional socialization, academic advising, and technical support" (p. 38). The support students experienced within their community college community and family networks gave them the confidence to progress, even in unfamiliar and highly competitive schools. The financial support gave them the tangible resources to access their dreams.

Recommendations

The participants from Fortitude County College were eager to share their successes about transferring from their community colleges to their Tier 1 universities. They all commented on how their respective social networks of family and previous professors were enthusiastic about their accomplishments. Their confidence, in turn, helped them to develop plans for graduate school, business ownership, and international travel. Community college data typically do not reveal academic success but instead show thousands of students who just did not make the transition through community college to graduate from a four-year college or university. Therefore, the following recommendations are provided to help community college personnel have better insight into how to support and inspire those emerging from community colleges.

1). Hire and train dedicated full-time professors. Participants commented that their professors encouraged them to look into Tier 1 schools. These FCC full-time professors were not saddled with competing interests with assignment at other colleges (Hollis, 2015; House Committee, 2014). They were trained in a special certification program provided by the college and dedicated supporting emerging scholars. While adjunct professors generally had the same educational background and talent as full-time professors, the decentralized work life of adjuncts would compromise their ability to support and encourage students (Hollis, 2015; House Committee, 2014). Full-time professors, dedicated to student learning at one school, were a critical element for community college success. Such professors should be trained to mentor students both in person and online given the community college students' busy schedules (Hollis, 2016a).

2). Academic support to prepare for transfer shock. All of the participants commented that they experienced difficulty academically in their first term at a Tier 1 university. However, they had been trained by their support systems to seek help, to maintain their determination, and to "get on the horse and fix my mistakes" (respondent communication, 2016. In short, they learned to study to mastery and learned how to find help to achieve academic mastery. All of the

participants noted challenges in their first academic term, and often in majors like science or health that relied on a sound foundation to continue success in upper-level classes. These students found in their second and third academic terms that they were earning the As and Bs that they once earned at the community college.

3). Family/parent programs at the community college level. "Helicopter parents" typically elicit a negative response for college personnel when reflecting on students' ability to develop independence outside of their familial structures (Rivera, 2015; Schiffrin et al., 2014). However, these findings revealed that family support, with the close support of friends, was critical for students emerging from community college in the development of their academic confidence. Sandoval-Lucero (2014) found that family and student enthusiasm was a central part of students' perseverance. Family encouraged academic and social confidence, even once learners moved away to the four-year school.

4). Develop and maintain a strong alumni network. Community colleges typically do not boast of strong alumni networks. However, the students from this study relied on honors college alumni as part of their support system at the four-year school. Participants often knew of fellow honors college alumni who were a year ahead of them at the four-year school. Further, this sample relied heavily on each other for support, despite attending different schools. The alumni network helped this student sample maintain strategies about academic success at the students' respective Tier 1 universities.

Conclusion

In a historical moment in which the cost of four-year college education was astronomical (Hollis 2016), community colleges presented a viable option for those seeking a college education without the incredible debt. However, data showed that community college completion was lacking. FCC showed that lower cost of education did not have to equal a lower commitment from the community college to ensure student success. Such a two-year college commitment, complete with dedicated full-time professors and family support, propelled students to Tier 1 educational experiences. The lessons learned did not only relate to academic success, but these students emerged from community college institution had the confidence and strategies to navigate challenges successfully in professional life and graduate school.

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