Community expectancy and college going decisions among Asian American college students

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Abstract

The study sought to explore and describe the informal, perceived actors who influence the postsecondary behaviors of first generation Asian American college students. The study employed phenomenological qualitative methods consisting of narrative journaling with 12 first-year, second-semester college students. Findings supported the theory of Community Expectancy as four primary actors were identified as expressing influence over the participants behaviors, including parents, peers, informal adult relationships, and religious organization participants with knowledge of the individual. These thematic identifications varied in their strength of influence, but represented the perception that the students believed that these individuals and groups to some extent determined their choices and behaviors in college. The study concluded that further research needs to be conducted in an attempt to measure the strength of these perceived relationships and that further study of Asian American students, in particular, needs to provide for greater distinction between nationalities and socio-economic strata.

Keywords: college matriculation, asian american students, community expectancy, identity formation, postsecondary enrollment

Introduction

Students decide to attend college for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from dreams of high-paying jobs to simply escaping a childhood home. These decisions have been documented in a number of studies, and a consistent finding is that family background plays an important role in the decision to attend college. Beyond providing financial support, many family dynamics steer individuals into a decision to attend college, and in some instances, even which college to attend [1].

Understanding the Asian American population is complex, as federal data on college students includes primary groups of Chinese, Filipinio, Japanese, and Korean. South Asian and Southeastern Asian nationalities are also represented in US federal data. South Asian populations include Asian Indian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Nepalese, and Pakistani. Southeast Asian populations include Burmese, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese. For the current study the focus is on those Asian Americans with backgrounds in China, Japan, and Korea. Overall, for all Asian American subgroups age 18-24, there a 67% college going rate [2].

Overall, the college participation for Asian Americans between 18-24 years olds is 67%, with 78% of Chinese Asian American, and 70% participation for Japanese and Korean Asian Americans. This means, that on average, an Asian American with a background in one of these three countries, 7 out of every 10 are enrolled in college.

Familial influences have been identified as at least one of the variables influencing Asian American enrollment in higher education, mostly in relation to attention to time and effort exerted on academics. As noted by Hsin and Xie [3], Asian American youth are more likely to have higher grades in high school, complete and graduate from high school, and attend college, particularly elite colleges. Hsin and Xie explored cultural differences in their study, comparing Asian Americans with White students, and identified the importance of attention to academic effort as a key to predicting Asian American student success.

Although time and effort devoted to academic matters has been identified as important to the Asian American student success, little is known about where this motivation for work comes from. There are ideas that immigrant behavior may play a role [4], consistent with other arguments about immigrant work efforts where the individual is highly motivated to prove individual success in a new environment [5]. Yet, there may be other, external variables that influence an individual's life decisions including the personal decision for attention to and effort in academic work [6].

Derden's [7] research explored the influence of a community around an individual and how that community exerts influence on an individual's behaviors. The community includes family and family-like structures, including biological parents and siblings as well as extended family members or guardians. An important departure in the description of Community Expectancy is that other agencies and individuals outside of a family structure can impact and influence an individual's behavior. These might include formal agencies in a community as well as informal relationships and encounters [8]. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to describe the perceived community expectations placed on, Asian American college students related to their decisions to enroll in post

secondary education.

Study findings are important for multiple reasons and to multiple stakeholders. First, study findings are important, broadly, to families to understand how young adults form and frame their opinions, ideas, realities, and expectations for themselves. This in turn has implications for not only formal organizations such as schools, but the informal alliances that are experienced by young people. Further, findings can have implications for civic policy and how intentional interactions are structured for a community's youth.

Background of the study

Asian American college students

There is a considerable diversity related within the college student subpopulation of Asian American college student. The term can capture the immigration and enrollment patterns of a wide number of Asian countries and can incorporate very different sets of expectations and historical patterns of community integration. Lee's [9] historical analysis of Asian and Asian American college student participation patterns, highlighted by the enrollment of Yu Wing, from China, at Yale in 1847. Her historical analysis indicates that there were over 107,000 Asian American college students in the US by 1970 with the majority of them being of Chinese descent. Lee notes that there has historically been strong messages and practices of discrimination involving Asian students, and often these individuals are cast within a mythology of consistent and persistent strong and high academic achievement. Her analysis indicates that this mythology is inaccurate and does not provide a good sense of the struggles that Asian American students encounter in contemporary education or society.

Lee's historical review reinforced earlier writings about the Asian American community and their educational prowess in particular. Shih [10] described that as Asian American students were described as 'whiz kids' and had higher participation in elite private higher education, these students still struggled with career decisions, family relations, and in a variety of academic subjects. Zhao and Qiu [11] described in a similar way some of the myths surrounding Asian American students. They particularly noted the wide disparity of what "Asian American" might mean, describing students from some East Asian backgrounds to be in much stronger financial situations. They also noted that in those families that did place an exceedingly strong emphasis on academic performance, many had very high opportunity costs, meaning high academic achievement in several areas came at the cost of the lack or low participation in other activities.

Dobson [12] notes that for those Asian Americans from high performing backgrounds that there has been at least some discussion of a backlash and discrimination for falling within the over-achieving mythology. This backlash has extended to the point where some admissions decisions do not "want any more Asian-American students" (p. 55) and that in several instances applicants have been encouraged to hide their identity. Conchas *et al* [13] identified reinforcing evidence at their case study exploration of racial inequalities, finding that the personal views of racial integration and inequality of treatment impact how Asian Americans feel their belonging on campus. Racial inequality experiences of Asian Americans have also been explored from the perspective of microaggressions, finding that Asian American students report such aggressions in relation to confusion over their identity (Asian American vs. international student), and that this treatment can have long-term, lingering effects on future academic performance [14].

Not all Asian American students are treated similarly and the setting of their enrollment and life can influence how they are accepted and treated. And nationally, data on Asian American students from certain East Asian countries (China, Korea, and Japan) continues to show high levels of participation and completion. And although NCES [15] data show that individuals from these three East Asian countries out-perform all other higher education groups, Song and Glick [16] had found in their national study that despite racial backgrounds and identities, there are few differences in the overall major selection and success of Asian American students and White students.

The conclusion to be drawn from this literature is that Asian American students from certain lineages continue to thrive in higher education in the US. These familial backgrounds often place tremendous pressure to perform on their students, and although many measures suggest that these pressures result in high levels of attainment, they have historically also resulted in ability discrimination [17] as well as mental health challenges [18].

Community expectancy

Community expectancy is an emerging theory of identity formation whereby community agencies and actors influence the development of an individual, particularly a younger individual who has not yet reached identity foreclosure. Early studies explored the role of formal agencies, specifically community colleges, in shaping how a community defined itself. In these studies, the power of organizations brought community members from different backgrounds together to share a common interest. In several studies, the unifying element was a local community college's sport teams [19, 20]. In those studies, the collective enthusiasm for the sport team carried over beyond events, eg, football games, and became an identifying element of the town, whereby individuals showed their support and created expectations for others to similarly support the team throughout the year.

Sport teams at both the collegiate and high school levels have been shown to create enthusiasm among community members that create common bonds across socio-economic classes and occupations, and similarly, other community agencies and bodies have had similar effects. Deggs and Miller [21, 22] identified organization such as formal education bodies, religious organizations, civic bodies, an individual's home life, and informal associations as elements that have the potential to create an expectation for a member of the community. Derden[23] included those elements identified by Deggs and Miller [24, 25] but also added libraries, the strength of religious adherence, and community driving employment practices and bodies as influencers on a community.

These studies provide the contention that a community can have a belief system or set of values that can be expressed on individuals living in that community. Subsequently, the community can impose a cultural expectation on an individual. In the case of much of the existing research, this expectation is around the idea of employment and education, and what it means to be educated. Additionally, a community's expectation can encourage a practice of attending postsecondary education or conversely, devaluing and diminishing the thought that further education is good or relevant to an individual.

There are multiple variables that become intertwined in creating a community's expectation for its participants. These include the tightness of the community's boundaries, meaning the compliant nature of citizens, how a community incorporates is history [26], as well as the time in history and world events that can influence a community's interpretative worldview [27]. Community expectancy is not an entirely closed system, as individuals have the personal power to break out of and not comply with these expectations. One such example of this behavior has been described by Sarroub [28]. In her work, she studied Arabic immigrant women who challenged conventional, reinforcing expectations and women who encounter cultural variations that empower them to break with tradition and behavior in a different manner.

This notion of community expectation provides the framework for the study, noting the power of the Asian American community to express expectations on its membership, particularly in the variables of postsecondary attendance. If the Asian American community is or can be isolating, its power to effect individual behaviors (college going in the current study) may be stronger than if the community influence has been dissipated over time. These findings then have the dual importance of exploring and reinforcing the developing theory of community expectancy, but also the ability to better understand the college going decisions of the Asian American community in the US.

Research materials and methods

In an effort to explore the identity formation of Asian American college students as well as the role that community expectancy might play in this formation; a qualitative, narrative approach was selected for the research design. A narrative research design allows for data collection to be specifically framed on the voices of the individuals in the study. Narrative inquiry specifically works to tell the personal stories of individuals included in the study, relying on their own words to provide data. Daiute referred to the idea of dynamic narrating, whereby the research process allows for storytelling intertwined with historical and contextual referencing. The process can therefore be non-linear and incorporate a variety of experiences as the subject interprets the relevance of each to the personal storytelling.

A major concern of the study was the creation of trust between the sources of data (participants) and those collecting and analyzing the data. The participants in the study were 12 first generation Asian American college students enrolled in their first year of college at a midwestern research university. The sample participants were recruited through a snowballing technique, with the first 3 participants being identified through the university's multicultural center. The common characteristics of the initial 3 participants were: high academic achieving with a 3.75 or higher cumulative grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) for their first semester, participating as a peer tutor, and their willingness to participate in the study.

Each of the 3 participants were recruited in-person and provided a $50 gift card for their participation. Each participant also provided four names of fellow first-generation Asian American students who were in turn contacted and requested to participate in the study. A total of 12 participants were included in the study and all were provided a gift card upon completion of their part of the data collection.

Data were collected by asking each of the participants to keep a bi-weekly journal over a 4-month (16 week) period of time (the Spring 2023 academic semester) for a total of 8 journal entries. One intent of the timing was for the participants to reflect on their first semester of college and consider their relationships both on campus and what they considered 'at home.' Although they were not provided specific question prompts to write about, they were asked to write at least 2 pages (typed) and consider the following "word" prompts: (1) at home, someone is thinking about me; (2) today, I am thinking about my future; (3) how did I become who I am?; (4) the greatest pressure I feel is; and (5) who has influenced me. Participants were instructed that they did not have to write about each of the prompts or could write about whatever they felt was impacting their behaviors. Journal entries were collected after the first 4 entries, and then after the last entry.

The average entry length was 6 pages, with a range of two to 11 pages. The narratives were first standardized in terms of formatting, font size, chronology, etc. and initially reviewed. The formatted narratives were returned to each participant to review for accuracy, and once each had approved what was submitted, the narratives were included in data analysis using a constant comparison method of thematic and topical identification.

As a note on the positionality of the authors, one is a first-generation Asian American with children whom she encouraged to attend college. Education was an expectation in her family growing up and she was encouraged to attend college in the US due to the perceived prestige in attending an American institution. The other author is also a parent of a college graduate with another child in college. He does not identify as Asian but did live in Southeast Asia as a youth. The research was conducted at an institution where neither faculty member is or has been employed.

Results

The writing of the participants in the sample ranged in style and format from notes and bullets, to full-sentences, and paragraphs. One student in the sample wrote long-hand, while the other 11 composed their narrative using their computers. The student who wrote long-hand gave herself the name Sophie and included frequent designs, sketches, and small drawings in her materials. Some of these were idealized drawings, although

two were menacing depictions of adults. Narratives were first coded using the tenets of Community Expectancy theory, and a second reading allowed for the creation of open codes. Each code was confirmed independently with each author and then two additional peer reviews were used to confirm coding.

The primary areas that were identified in coding and were represented in all or at least the majority of narratives fell into the categories of parental expectations, peer pressure, informal adult expectation, and religious body expressions.

Parental expectations

Every student in the study indicated that their parents played an important role in their decisions about where to attend college, what to study, and what to consider as a profession. Comments such as "my mother went to school here at [X University] and there was not much I could do about it. She made up her mind. The only thing I could really control was how quickly I got here and how quickly I can get out." Another referenced her father noting that "He believes that [X University] is the best, and he wants the best for me, so of course this is where I am." Other comments ranged from simply noting a desire to see their children do well in life to stressing certain beliefs about academic majors. One student wrote:

> To be honest, I've always loved art, and I think I'm actually pretty good at. But art is not something that my family would really let me think about majoring in. My Mom and Dad, and even my brother, think that art is something fun to do on the weekend and not necessarily something that you can make a professional life out of. I'm majoring in Kinesiology as a pre-med student and I'm sure I'll get into med school somewhere and I won't be unhappy about it. But I don't think that I ever really had much of a choice or much of a chance to think about any other major.

Another student wrote that his parents and grandparents were very involved in his decision to go to college and what to study. He wrote that "they even want to pick out my girlfriend," and that "I know they want what is best for me, but they see it as a joint decision, not my decision." Similar sentiments were conveyed by other students, ranging from "my mom actually filled out my college application" to "I talk to them [my parents] maybe two or three times a week and they ask me things about how I'm doing and what I'm doing. They don't come out and say 'do this' or 'do that,' but you can tell by their asking what they think I should be doing."

Peer pressure

All of the students mentioned their friends and their social support networks as being supportive and challenging, both once in college and prior to their enrollment. Some of these relationships and experiences were written about as being supportive and caring, while others were motivating, challenging, and at times, threatening.

The most common set of observations identified had to do with peers pushing these students to do well in classes, to be engaged on campus, and to be themselves. One student, for example noted that "Anne [pseudonym] keeps telling me that she wants to go to this RSO [registered student organization] fair next week. I don't know if it is worth it. It's not like I'm going to suddenly find my people at the Chemistry club table there." Another student wrote "Ken [pseudonym] keeps wanting me to go with him to some club thing about how to get involved over in the Union," and "I know they [my friends] all want to go out tomorrow night, but I just want to stay in an get some of my homework finished. I have a mid-term, but they keep telling me to blow off steam." In terms of supportive relationships, several comments, each from different students, included:

> Ken and I are in a study group that was supposed to meet once a week, but we are meeting three times a week. He is really good with anatomy and I feel like it is good to study with him.
>
> We started a study group, but it has gotten competitive. We were supposed to get together to work on problems, but we are now all finishing the problems before we meet. There is one girl who didn't, even though the rest of us now have this unwritten rule to do them ahead of time, and you could just tell that she just wanted to die.
>
> We've started calling our group 'The A Team' because we are the only ones in Chemistry who have perfect grades. We're studying a lot, but not really together. I feel like we are pushing each other to see who will be the first to not get 100 on a test.
>
> My roommate doesn't study too much. She joined a sorority and she seems to be very caught up in what she is wearing every day. I think she is going to flunk out. But I've been meeting Anne every day in the study lounge down on the first floor to just keep all of my to-do lists straight. Anne is pretty smart and she is holding me accountable for my studies, which is good.

Other comments focused on how students and their peers helped them cope with the challenges of being in college and pressures of being a young adult. Comments included "we all just wanted to get out and went down to the little Korean restaurant downtown. We need to get out more to survive this, and everyone agrees." Another was "we're all going to dinner together tonight, which we haven't done in a while. I don't want to spend too long in the cafeteria because I need to study, but they all think we should take more down time together." And, "we're going out on Saturday night! I don't know where, but none of us are 21, so it won't be any bars. It will be great to just get out and have some fun. This place is stressful!"

Finally, several comments related back to when the students were in high school, thinking about where to go to college. The narratives all suggested that they compared themselves to others and that they felt pressure from the other students in their class to have good fellowships and since they were going to a state school, to make it sound prestigious. One comment in particular captured this idea:

> There was a group of six of us who are going to a state school. Such a disappointment, or at least that's the way it feels. I wish I was going to Tulane or Tufts, but I just didn't get the money and we couldn't afford it. I think I felt a little better knowing I was coming here because I had some friends who 'failed' too. So, we are all in the

> honors program here and live in the honors dorm, and that helps, but really, it feels like we were working for something we didn't get. Now, we are trying to make the best of it that we can and that means being sure that we do well and don't lose our fellowships and that we get some additional scholarship money. Plus, it would be great to do a study abroad, but honestly, those are kind of silly and for the kids who aren't serious about graduate school – I think they are all English majors!

Informal adult expectations

A central component of Community Expectancy are the informal actors have some influence on an individual's decision-making. In many situations, what another person, known or unknown to a young adult, can have an impact on what is seen as desirable, fashionable, appropriate, and inappropriate. The narrative developed by the Asian American students in the study indicated that these informal adult expectations and exposures did indeed play a role in their decision-making about going to college, what they decided to study, and how they approached their collegiate experiences.

In terms of college-going decisions, 9 of the 12 included some recognition of parental friendships influencing their decision-making. These notes were as simple as "Mr. X, my dad's good friend, went here and helped to really sell me on coming here and living in this dorm." Another wrote "X is a good friend of my mom's and she was a pain in my butt. She kept talking about how good the Mechanical Engineering program is here, or so she said, and I guess some of that rubbed off on me and I decided to come here in part because she wouldn't be quiet." Other comments were less direct but similarly recognized the role of informal associations. A female student wrote:

> I really think I wanted to go somewhere else, somewhere further from home and further from all of the people I knew in high school, but the money here – the financial aid package – was just too good. Our neighbor, too, had this big sports flag that he would fly. And he had a bumper sticker on his car, and he would wear this logo shirt and have football parties. I don't think I ever cared one way or the other what he thought about this school, but it was at least very present in my mind. I think there is a part of me that considered the college simply because I saw it every day of my high school career as I headed out of our driveway.

Parental relationships also provided an entry for other adults thinking to be present in the minds of participants. For 8 of the students, there was some indication that the selection of an appropriate major was in part discussed, if not influenced, by other adults. One student wrote:

> I kind of wanted to study English and I really like Haruki Murakami, but my parents would never let me do that. And, my dad's a doctor and all of his friends are doctors, so there was pressure for me to say that I will study to be a doctor, too.

Another student wrote, "everyone in my family is an Engineer and my parent's friends are, too. So, I don't think there was ever any doubt that is what I would major in as well." And another wrote, "there was this man who lived down the street from my parents and he drove a Lexus and had someone take care of his yard. His house was incredible. Great design. He was an architect, and I knew that I wanted to live like that, so I chose to major in architecture."

These same kinds of expectations were developed and expressed onto the students regarding their academic performance. A student wrote "When I went home for Christmas vacation all anyone asked about was what are your grades. They didn't care if I was happy or sad or made the right decision about where to go, it was just, what are your grades." This academic emphasis was expressed by all 12 students, suggesting that academic performance for them was a critical part of their identity. One student wrote "When I was home in December and we went to church, we go to a Korean Presbyterian church, all anybody asked me was if I got straight As. Kind of a stereotype or a bad movie, but it was real."

Religious body expressions

The third area that suggested external influence on the behaviors of the participating college students was the role of parental acquaintances affiliated with religious bodies. These churches represented communities of individuals rather than a theological set of assumptions being expressed on the participants. One student wrote "my parents have a lot of friends from their church who write me and send me gift cards asking how I'm doing. I know they care about me, but I feel like they are really just being nosey." Another wrote "I got an email from the pastor at my parent's church asking me how I was doing today. I don't even know the guy very well, but he seemed friendly and said that he was going to pray for me to do well academically. Not like that's any pressure or anything!"

Some of the students suggested in their writings that parental friends and acquaintances from church or their religious participation served as group to encourage their academic work.

> My parents are pretty popular in the Sarang church back home, and I think they have me on a prayer list. That's fine. I'm not sure what I believe or don't believe, but they keep me in their thoughts which is sweet of them. But I sometimes feel like it's not just out of respect for my parents that they write me or send me birthday cards and stuff, but it's that want me as a Korean American do to well and show well on them. I mean they send me Starbucks and Domino's gift cards, but if I stood in front of them, I don't think they would know who I am. I appreciate it, but I feel like they want me to do well so that they look good so yea, it's a kind of pressure I feel every time I hear from them.

Religion as an organization by which collegiate support was shown was also expressed through church officials by two other students. One wrote "Pastor Phil wrote me an email and sent me an Amazon gift card from my church back home. He said he just was writing to all of the college students from our church, and I think that was a nice gesture." The other student wrote:

> There was a deacon at my church at home, and he sent me a care package last month. I think they did it for everyone who was at college, but he wrote a nice letter also. He said something like 'we hope you are doing well and making us proud' and something like 'we know you will be a straight A student.' Kind of some pressure, but I also felt like kind of support, too.

In each of these comments, as well as one by a 6th student participant who noted "I heard from Peter [pseudonym] who started a Group Me account for my confirmation class members from home to keep in touch and support each other," the idea was not that the religious body had a set of beliefs that were expressed onto the student, but rather, that the body and its members formed a kind of support group for the student. The support group idea largely reinforced doing well in college, but this could also be interpreted as expecting the student to do well.

Other codes

There were a variety of additional comments written that were repeated among the narratives, although they varied dramatically in terms of length and description. Some referenced individuals in their hometown, such as their high school teachers who would be "proud of where I am and what I've done so far." This idea of school teachers having pride in the student's accomplishments was repeated in 8 of the 12 student writings. Another repeated idea had to do with where the students had worked before coming to college. These were part-time jobs mentioned by 6 of the 12 students and included comments such as "I think everyone at the Dairy Queen where I worked in high school would not be surprised to see me now. They all supported me and even had a good bye party for me. I think I've done them proud!" And a third code identified in the writings by 5 students had to do with other adults in no particular category in their hometowns. One student wrote "when I was back at winter break, I saw a lot of people around town who just nodded at me and gave me a smile or thumbs up. They knew where I was and they encouraged me, even though they didn't know much about me. It made me feel good."

Discussion

The students who participated in the study offered insights and perceptions that might be typical of many college students regardless of their nationalities or backgrounds. The underlying strength of familial support was particularly noted and reflective of research on college going decision-making broadly that emphasizes the role of the family in deciding to pursue postsecondary education. The findings also suggested that familial values might be based on either national perception of the value of education or immigrant work ethic and value of education, both of which might suggest the processes that the students lived through were of influence to their behaviors rather than their nationality.

Some of the concepts and ideas presented here reference the idea of a stereotypical Asian parent expressing certain desired and acceptable behaviors on their children. This was the primary concern in conflicting literature that stressed that exploring a broad identity, such as Asian Americans, is difficult, at best, to create understanding around. And as a qualitative inquiry, these study findings can at best describe the experiences of these college students. Despite this, one student wrote:

> Sometimes stereotypes are true. I know not for all students, especially students from Taiwanese backgrounds, but the stereotype of the Tiger Mom is very real for me. I like to joke that they call a group of tigers a 'streak,' and I have a streak of Tiger Moms back at home. They never let up. If something would ever happen to my mom, there are about five other moms who would jump right up to keep pushing me.

Another perspective on the study findings is that the themes identified all supported the emerging theory of Community Expectancy. The themes of family, family friends and neighbors, and even random strangers offering support for an individual's performance and welfare are present in previous writings about Community Expectancy. With these identifications, there is a need to be able to try and find ways to generalize these concepts and measure their impact so that predictive models can be constructed to assist those without strong family structures see a world that values education.

These findings also suggest a complex social network in need of better understanding. This network of individuals, known and unknown, represents a possibility for social construction that might influence individual behaviors both intentionally and unintentionally. This construction must also increasingly understand and incorporate technology that has elements of social interaction, and the influence of these variables must be better understood, both due to their positive and negative influences. This might mean that the theory of Community Expectancy also explores and include indoctrination as an element of understanding how individual behaviors are influenced and constructed. And for the college administrator concerned about student success, these same variables need to be aligned with the mission and function of the postsecondary institution, eg, the emphasis placed on student development and maturation. Ultimately, the idea of social institutions influencing individuals has the capacity to strengthen or weaken an individual, and this area of scholarship is in great need of further study.

Conclusion

Study findings largely supported the ideas of Community Expectancy in that individuals external to the student and the student's immediate experiences were identifiable as elements of behavior determination, and very possibly, identity formation. Further research into the role of the actors who come into contact with college students is in needed, as is the exploration of nationality backgrounds, immigrant behavior stages, and academic performance. The current study was limited in that it provided an exploration of one set of Asian American first-generation college students and did identify variables such as friends, parents, and informal associations as making a difference in their decisions to do certain kinds of things. Further study that looks at the role of community and

socialization in other cultures that might be transferred to these students is also appropriate.

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