

STUDENT AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS FOR COLLEGE FRESHMEN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

SHEILA GRAHAM SMITH, Ed.D

RON ENGLISH, M.Div.

DAE VASEK, Ms. Ed.

Baylor University

For several decades now, universities have become keenly interested in improving student recruitment and retention, resulting in a heightened interest in identifying elements that contribute to success in college during the freshman experience. In this study, the question asked is, "did the procedure of the National Longitudinal Study (NELS) of High School and Beyond (HS & B) accurately illicit definitions of the Meoretiral valuables of student and parent involvement in the transition process for students with learning disabilities?" The subjects were college students with Learning Disabilities enrolled at Baylor University requesting services in 2000-2001 from the on campus disability support office. The research design was quantitative with surveys. The survey used was HS & B from the NELS, part 3 and 4, program of The National Center for Education Statistics. A significant portion, 22 out of 61 participants felt like they were "no good." Also, 25 out of 61 felt "useless at times." This type of negative self talk is not indicative of a confident self-advocate. Thirty eight percent of the parents were still helping their children select courses and 39% were having input in selection of school activities. Poignant, pro-active training needs to be implemented in high school and during the freshman year of college for parents to let go of advocacy responsibilities and Learning Disability students to become their own competent advocates.

Transitioning

For several decades now, universities have become keenly interested in improving student recruitment and retention, resulting in a heightened interest in the transition process from high school to college. Scholars began defining the freshman experience by exploring the transition needs of entering students and identifying elements that contributed to success in college (Garner & Van der Veer, 1997).

Literature on transition to the college

experience indicates that higher education should involve a series of changes and transitions that influence student growth beginning in the freshman year and continuing through to graduation (Chickering, 1969). Schlossberg agrees with Chickering in his definition of transition as being "a change in one's behaviors or relationships in response to the occurrence of an event or non-event that affects one's beliefs about oneself or the world" (Schlossberg, 1981). As students transition to post-sec-

ondary education, changes occur in their lives. They must deal with major frustrations as they end one phase of life, high school, and begin another, college.

Chickering describes the high school senior year as being fraught with upsetting changes, with a specific high level of instability during the semester prior to high school graduation (Chickering, 1969). As Gardner states, special emphasis needs to be put on assisting students to cope with forthcoming changes, become cognizant of how all aspects of their lives have contributed to their development as learners, and identify connections between their academic experience and future academic experiences (Gardner, 1997). The high school senior needs to be prepared for the college environment which will be promoting individual growth by providing challenges and supports necessary to learn and create knowledge and acquire new skills, behaviors, and attitudes. The high school senior year can be isolated as a particular point of transition involving the apex of all the knowledge and skills learned through experiences with peers, teachers, and staff.

Transitioning with Learning Disabilities

As challenging as the transition process is for all graduating high school students, it is more so for students with learning disabilities (Eaton & Coull, 1998). It is important that students with learning disabilities develop a thorough understanding of the difficulties as they transfer from high school to college. Once aware of these difficulties, it is up to the students to develop social and academic aims and strategies to accomplish the goals that will make the

transition easier and more successful. Research has identified ten top difficulties faced by students with learning disabilities as they begin their freshman year of college. They are:

- Being unprepared for responsibility;
- Managing free time;
- Being overwhelmed by work load;
- Learning time management skills;
- Making new friends;
- Missing academic support of parents;
- Telling others of disability;
- Failing classes;
- Being distracted and not being able to focus; and

Being realistic about how the disability affects goals and ambitions (Eaton & Coull, 1997).

In addition, many of the stresses encountered by students with learning disabilities are exacerbated by university staff and faculty lacking the knowledge about and interest in the special needs of learning disabled scholars. The problem is also compounded by the students' inadequacies as independent learners and self advocates. This thought is echoed by the disability counselors and college admission officers. They concur that "the key is for counselors to know what the high schools have prepared their students for. Transition is all about communication between the high school and college" (McGuire & Williams, 1998). Communication between secondary and post secondary staff is essential; yet the communication must also be with the students. "These students are not academically prepared because we, in the high school, haven't taught them self advocacy skills" (McGuire & Williams, 1998). At the post

secondary level, the emphasis is on the adult, and that adult is the student (Cuyjet, 1997).

The more college staff can get the student to feel he/she matters (that is, commands the attention of others, feels important and appreciated, and believes that others need him/her as a vital part of the community), the more involved and attached he/she becomes to an institution. The more attached and involved that student feels to the institution, the more likely he/she is to persist, get a degree, and be prepared for a career (Cuyjet, 1997).

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study

Limited information and training is available to help service providers to collect, understand, and apply psychoeducational assessment information in order to plan appropriate support services for qualified college students with learning disabilities (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993). These federally mandated transition tools begin in high school and are carried through into the college setting. Transition tools include coordinated services designed for an outcome which promotes post secondary education and training (Cannon, 1994).

What are the assumptions concerning self-advocacy and the role of parents of college students with learning disabilities as they transition from high school to college? The authors will report through the eyes of students with learning disabilities requesting accommodations from Baylor University's disability support office. The significance of these experiences impacts disability support offices at universities in

theory, policy, and practice.

Transition Theory, Policies, and Practice Introduction

If universities are accepting students with learning disabilities, then adequate accommodations must be made to facilitate success at the post secondary level (Barbaro, 1982). There are many adjustments to be made by any student going from high school to the university setting, and most universities have some kind of orientation program for their incoming population. However, though adequate for the majority of students, this limited support is not sufficient for students with learning disabilities since adjusting to new situations is especially difficult for them (Lenz, Ellis, & Scanlon, 1995).

Significance of Transition Theory

A comprehensive Individual Transition Plan (ITP) can be adapted to alleviate some of the inadequacies that the student with learning disabilities feels when beginning college. Some of these inadequacies include poor organization skills, poor time management skills, test taking anxieties, low self-concepts, and a lack of assertiveness in being a self-advocate. This sense of inadequacy is amplified by the move from an environment wherein students are carefully guided by school staff and individually taught by specialized teachers to an environment wherein they are expected to achieve on their own (Dalke & Schmitt, 1987). Therefore, since waiting until the student is enrolled and taking classes at college is too late to assist in the transition process, the ITP is needed to facilitate the change before the student is

overwhelmed by the university system's demands. A well planned ITP that begins well before graduation from high school can ensure that the college bound student with learning disabilities will have educational, residential, and other services in place before he/she makes the move to college which will help reduce the fear associated with leaving the protected home environment (Transition, 1986).

Significance of Transition Policy

In October 1990, President Bush signed into law the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There are specific regulations within this act that pertain to transition services for students receiving special education and related services (Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments, 1989). The coordinated set of activities of the ITP are based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account his/her preferences and interests. These activities include instruction, community services, and the development of post-secondary training, education, and living arrangements. The IDEA requires that transition services are outcome oriented and promote movement from school to post-secondary activities (Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments, 1989). In order to implement these goals, the ITP team needs to identify first the post-secondary school outcomes that are anticipated for the student. Whatever goals are set, the ITP team must ensure that the Individual Education Plan (IEP) properly documents the considerations for transition services as required by the IDEA (Education of the

Handicapped Act Amendments, 1989).

Although universities have not been allowed to discriminate on the basis of disabilities since Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) extended its scope of jurisdiction to encompass more entities (Rothstein, 1998). Section 504 covered only those institutions receiving federal financial assistance, but the ADA extends to organizations that administer standardized admissions tests, including the ACT and SAT, which are commonly used as college entrance criteria. Therefore, an individual with a learning disability is now afforded academic accommodations during the college admissions process, as a college student, and while transitioning into a profession. Recent rulings have helped universities to understand the legal implications of learning disabilities at the post secondary level (Rothstein, 1998). These recent rulings have also forced universities to hone their definitions of the fundamental requirements and goals for their educational programs.

Significance of Transition Practice

Disclosure and self-advocacy skills are paramount to presenting the need for accommodation at the post secondary level and are the first steps of transition practice. The implementation of strategies for self-advocacy can be helped by counselors who are well versed in disability law and learning style at both the high school and post secondary level. The ITP can identify and plan for the implementing of strategies for effective skills in communicating needs. Effective disclosure principles are essential whether the student is taking class or

applying for a job. Competent disclosure and advocacy skills require shared information concerning disability-related needs; efficacious recommendations for accommodations; reciprocal open communication to evaluate the accommodations; and coordinated procedures to facilitate making changes when efforts are not working (Satcher, 1993).

Literature Review

Introduction

Positive classroom experiences, whether in high school or college, are critical to successful inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the campus community. Faculty relationships are known to have a pivotal effect on whether marginal students, like students with learning disabilities, are embraced in the college environment (Chickering, 1969). "The goal is to develop and use classroom teaching strategies that allow all students a place where they can safely express their personal experiences, examine differences among students from various backgrounds and social strata, and explore the particular issues relevant to their own cultural identity—in short, a nurturing place for all students" (Cuyjet, 1997).

Students must feel comfortable within the community. Grade performance is influenced by a student's level of comfort and satisfaction with the environment. Institutional responsibility should facilitate the collaboration of universities, high schools, and organizations to provide outreach and support aimed at meeting the transitional needs of the student with learning disabilities. This population will reciprocate by complementing institution-

al initiatives when persevering and completing their degrees.

Transitional Plan

A transition plan begins in the high school years and follows the student with learning disabilities into college. The goals of the plan are to be specified in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) beginning at age sixteen. The Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) is part of the IEP process and can be outlined as a separate document in the IEP. In order to make this plan as comprehensive as possible, not only are the guidance counselor and special education coordinator involved, but also regular education personnel, speech and language specialist, and other specialists as the need attests. In addition, the student and parents must be involved in the ITP process giving input with options based on the student's interests, skills, and abilities, not just the disabilities. Even though the ultimate responsibility for implementation of the plan belongs to the local education agency, appropriate outside agencies can be called in, like personnel from institutions of higher education. For example, if a student is considering attending a specific university, he/she may access that institution's disability office to receive information of policy and procedure for incoming students with disabilities (Canon, 1994).

An ITP, when implemented appropriately can increase the type and number of options available to students with learning disabilities. By using an ITP early on in the student's high school career, the team of educators, parents, counselors, and specialists can cooperate to insure that the

school experiences of the student with disabilities successfully propel the student towards academic and social maturity.

Self-advocacy, the Role of the Student

The student with a learning disability on the university campus is his/her own self-advocate. No longer are parents and school counselors making sure that accommodations are taken care of. The academic support office for students with disabilities has as a priority the injunction to encourage self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is carried out by the student taking the primary active role of identifying him/herself as having a disability, requesting specific and appropriate accommodations, and participating in providing those accommodations.

The role of the advocate belongs to the student. Self-advocacy "means that the student understands his/her disability, is as aware of the strengths as of the weaknesses resulting from the functional limitation imposed by the disability, and is able to articulate reasonable need for academic or physical accommodations" (Hartman, 1993, p. 40). Students are responsible for clarifying the need for classroom accommodations to professors after they have given the appropriate documentation concerning assessment and diagnosis to the support service office for disabilities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Therefore, it is important that the students with disabilities be aware of what services are reasonable in regard to their specific disability. Some accommodations will be carried out by the students so they must be prepared to self-accommodate without

faculty or counselor involvement. Nevertheless, even when the student is practicing good self-advocacy skills, it does not necessarily increase acceptance by the university community. Most often, nonacceptance is the result of confrontationally seeking accommodations or when a difficulty is brought to the professor's attention without accommodation suggestions.

Disclosure and self-advocacy skills are paramount to presenting the need for accommodation at the post-secondary level. The implementation of strategies for self-advocacy can be helped by counselors who are well versed in disability law and learning styles at both the high school and post-secondary level (Purcell, 1993). The ITP can identify and plan for the implementing of strategies for effective skills in communicating needs. Competent disclosure and advocacy skills require shared information concerning disability-related needs; efficacious recommendations for accommodations; reciprocal open communication to evaluate the accommodations; and coordinated procedures to alleviate making changes when efforts are not working (Lynch, 1996).

It is essential for students transitioning to college to understand that the course work in college is considerably different and more demanding than course work in high school. It requires more time and effort to maintain the same grades. As a result, more academic accountability is placed on the student in college. Commitment and time management become crucial ingredients to the formula for success as a student. The individual must be his/her own self-advocate with the backing of the disability support office on campus.

Role of the Parents

Parents can unknowingly contribute to an unsuccessful transition for their child who has a learning disability. As nurturing caretakers, they sometimes fail to prepare adequately the LD child to be his/her own self-advocate, especially in stressful situations. The ITP team needs to guard against perpetuating this image of powerlessness by thoroughly explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the young adult as well as the implications of the disability in different situations. When parents are not available, then the special education coordinator or classroom teacher must take on the role of parent and be an active member of the ITP team (Heath Resource Center, 1985-1986).

A common concern among parents is that once the student has graduated, he/she would be left alone without any support services. Often parents are ignorant of the function and location of support services, whether in the community or in the post-secondary campus of choice. The life cycle stages of adolescence involving the transition into adulthood are fraught with stress and anxiety (Gerber, 1994). This stress is multiplied when the adolescent has a learning disability. Therefore, it is the role of the parent to educate the child concerning career opportunities, post-secondary education, and social skills, and be the initiator in exploring the information available (Purcell, 1993).

Some skills that parents can help teach their adolescent with learning disabilities are those that reinforce disclosure, because often the availability of support services is not enough for students who have a history of being excluded. High school graduates with learning disabilities need

practical instruction to carry through the acceptance into the college process and once enrolled, they need support as they carry out their education (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). These self-disclosure enhancement skills include timing, plan development, assertive communication, self-advocacy, and adult-to-adult cooperation (Siperstein, 1988).

Procrastination can lead to academic disaster. It is imperative that the student with learning disabilities in the post-secondary setting disclose his/her disability at the start of a semester when the professors and support office have ample time to arrange for needed accommodations. The student and support counselor can set a deadline with the professor's input by which the student must have disclosed disability related needs (Siperstein, 1988).

Another skill that enhances the process of disclosure is the development of a plan with predetermined goals and objectives. Such a plan gives the student a tangible tool that can be used for guidance, especially if the student is reluctant to disclose. The plan could be in the form of a written contract between the counselor or parent and the student, itemizing small steps leading to the ultimate goal of effective disclosure (Thierfield, 1985).

Effective self-advocacy techniques include verbal and nonverbal communication. Parents can help their children rehearse skills like:

- expressing thoughts and feelings honestly and directly;
- making eye contact that is firm but not glaring;
- speaking appropriately in an audible voice;
- using a speech pattern that is clear;

emphasizing key words;

using "I" language and not "you" language;

making appointments to raise issues; and being aware of nonverbal presentation using body cues and postures (Thierfield, 1985).

Being aware of communication skills and practicing them will help prime the student with disabilities to become a competent self-advocate. However, self-advocacy also includes the ability to discuss one's weaknesses as well as strengths, because the student must be able to exchange ideas concerning functional limitations in the specific setting of the post-secondary institution. Parents need to emphasize that it is not the support counselor's responsibility, but the student's to self-disclose and arrange for accommodations (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Parents need to keep in mind that once the student with learning disabilities discloses concerns and needs with a professor, an interactive process begins with feedback between the professor and student, not the parent and professor. Unless feedback is a continuing process, the professor might assume that all the needs are being met. Throughout the transition process involving disclosure and the implementation of accommodations, all participants (students, faculty, counselors, and parents) need to avoid confrontation, aggressiveness, and rigidity (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). Parents are only part of the ITP team, yet play a primary role in training their children in disclosure and self-advocacy skills.

Method

Quantitative research design was used in order to depict the major influences on

the phenomena of transitioning of students with learning disabilities from high school to post-secondary education. In quantitative research, validity is measured first by examining face validity. Does the measure appear to measure what it is supposed to measure? This involves a judgment of whether, given the definitions of the variables, the measure actually measured the variables. In this study, the question can be rephrased to ask, "did the procedure of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of High School and Beyond (HS&B) accurately illicit definitions of the theoretical variables of the study?" The theoretical variables of this study that the quantitative survey of NELS and HS&B measured were student and parent involvement in the transition process from high school to college.

Research and Design

The research design chosen was quantitative with surveys. The survey used was HS&B from the NELS program of the National Center for Education Statistics "established to study the educational, vocational, and personal development of young people...and following them over time..." (High School and Beyond, 2001 <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88/hsb/>). The portions of the HSB used for this study were Part 3—Your Family, and part 4—Your Opinions About Yourself.

Subjects

The subjects were college students with learning disabilities enrolled at Baylor University and requesting services in 2000-2001 from the on-campus disability support office. The students voluntarily filled out the surveys at the time when they

applied for disability support services at Baylor. The number of volunteers (60) was compared to the total number of students with learning disabilities (LD) (115) in the program.

One definition of a learning disability is a thinking, concentrating, or processing mental impairment that substantially limits an individual's major life activity. A post-secondary institution is only required to provide accommodations for identified disabilities (Kincaid, 1995). Therefore, students have the responsibility of notifying the institution of their disability. Also, they need to demonstrate and document how their disability affects a type of delivery process, teaching method, or evaluation criteria as an adult in the setting of the academic institution (Cooke, 1996).

Defining a College Student with LD Eligible for Support Services

According to the above definition, Baylor University does accept learning-disabled students and college admission criteria is the same as for other students. Once the disability is validated by appropriate documentation, the request for accommodation and the disclosure of a disability must be done so that the academic entity has the time to evaluate the documentation and determine eligibility for services under Section 504 or Title II of the ADA (San Jose, 1993).

Services may also be denied when a student fails to demonstrate how the disability affects the ability to learn or to evaluate what he/she has learned (City University of Washington, 1991). A connection needs to be established between an area of deficiency and the expected level

of performance in the academic setting (Kincaid, 1995).

When dealing with colleges and universities, a qualified person with a disability is one who meets the academic and technical standards required for admission and participation in the academic programs. The lower courts have established as necessary "individualized inquiry" to determine whether a student with a disability is "qualified." The principle of individualization is essential as it mandates the institution's examination of the skills and abilities of the individual student in conjunction with the academic program criteria and standards. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that Section 504 does not require academic environments to be accessible, but academic programs to be accessible. In other words, when a program is viewed in its entirety, it must not hinder significantly the participation of students with disabilities (West, Kregel, Getzel, Zhu, Ipsen, & Martin, 1993). The LD students in this study met all the academic and technical standards required for admission to and participation in the academic programs of Baylor University.

Results

The results of the HS&B survey from the NELs program of the National Center for Education Statistics (High School and Beyond, 2001 <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88/hsb/>) quantified the involvement in transitioning from high school to college of students and parents.

Questions 7, 8, 13, and 14 present a description of the 60 Baylor students with LD transitioning as freshmen in the year

2000-2001. Question seven describes the students' ethnicities. Four were African American, two were American Indian, and fifty-four were Caucasian. Question eight tells the number of the students' siblings; two had no siblings, twenty-six had one sibling, twenty-three had two siblings, five had three siblings, and four had four siblings. Question thirteen inquired as to how many students had family members who had served in jail; fifty-two had none, two had one, four had two, and two had five or more. Question fourteen asked whether or not any of the students' family members had died violently; five answered positively and fifty-five answered negatively.

Questions nine, ten, eleven, and twelve dealt with parent involvement. Question nine explores the extent of parent education; three of the students had parents with a high school or GED diploma; five had parents with two years of college, three had parents who attended college but did not finish, four had parents who graduated from college, twenty-six had parents with Master's degrees or equivalent, seventeen had parents with Doctorates, and two students did not know.

Question ten documented recent parent involvement with the students' academics. Six of the students never received help in selecting courses, fifteen received help one or two times, and thirty-eight received help three or more times. Seven of the students never discussed school activities or personal matters with their parents, thirteen had such discussions one or two times since the beginning of the year, and thirty-nine talked with parents three or more times about these topics.

In talking to parents about subjects which they have studied in school, six students never had such discussions, thirteen students did once or twice during the last year, and forty did three or more times since the beginning of the school year.

Questions eleven and twelve concentrate on parent involvement while the students are still in high school and before they transition to college. Question eleven paints a picture of to what extent parents set guidelines promoting responsible behavior. Fourteen students' parents never checked their homework, six rarely did, eighteen sometimes did, and twenty-two often did. Seven students reported that their parents never required household chores of them, five rarely did, seventeen sometimes did and, thirty always did. Twenty-three students had parents who never limited their TV watching, twelve rarely did, eleven sometimes did, and thirteen often did. Sixteen students had parents who never limited their time with friends, nine rarely did, seventeen sometimes did, and seventeen often did. As far as having supervision at home when the students came home after school, the majority, forty, had a mother or female guardian at home, with the rest almost never having other supervision.

Question fifteen dealt with aspects of self-esteem, which in turn would promote self-advocacy skills. Twenty-two strongly agree that they feel good about themselves, thirty-four agree, two disagree, and one strongly disagrees. Nevertheless, of this same group, none felt like they had any control over the direction their life is taking; twelve agreed somewhat, thirty-three disagreed, and fourteen strongly

disagreed. Three agreed that good work was more important than hard work, thirty disagreed, and twenty-six strongly disagreed. Twenty-five students felt strongly that they were people of worth, thirty-one agreed, and three disagreed. Twenty-three students strongly felt like they could do things as well as other people, thirty agreed, and six disagreed. Fourteen felt like others prevented them from getting ahead, thirty-six disagreed, and ten strongly disagreed. Thirteen students agreed that planning makes them unhappy, twenty-six disagreed, and nineteen strongly disagreed. Sixteen students reported that they strongly agreed that on the whole they are satisfied with themselves, thirty-four agreed, six disagreed, and three strongly disagreed. Two strongly felt useless at times, twenty-three agreed, twenty-two disagreed, and thirteen strongly disagreed. Seventeen students strongly agreed that they could make their plans work, thirty-three agreed, and nine disagreed. Seven felt like they did not have much to be proud of, twenty-eight felt like they did, and twenty-five strongly felt like they did. Ten students thought that chance and luck determined what happened in their life, twenty-nine disagreed and twenty strongly disagreed.

Discussion

As post secondary educators, we expect freshmen to be immediately competent in navigating the responsibilities of college life. We expect students to be able to adjust their behaviors and relationships with old support groups in response to the need to be independent and self-reliant. We want the transitioning student to be prepared for college and its challenges, yet we do not

provide sufficient necessary support for acquiring new skills, behaviors, and attitudes.

Transitioning with learning disabilities piles additional stressors on incoming freshmen. These same freshmen reported in the survey that they felt good about themselves, but were dependent on their parents' input and guidance to stay on track. More needs to be done in disability support offices to ensure adequate transitioning from parent advocacy to student self-advocacy.

A significant portion, 22 out of 61 felt like they were "no good." Also, 25 out of 61 felt "useless at times." This type of negative self talk is not indicative of a confident self-advocate. Even though the parents of these students were educationally prepared, 43% with Masters degrees, to assist in transitioning their children towards independence and self-advocacy, they were not being effective. Thirty-eight percent of the parents were still helping their children select courses and 39% were having input in selection of school activities. Size and ethnicity of family had no apparent role in this transitioning process.

There already exists a functioning tool, Individual Transition Plan (ITP), for students in transition. By using the ITP, parents can help students be successfully prepared in self-advocacy skills. The student must be able to take the active role of identifying him/herself on the college campus as having a disability, request specific and appropriate accommodations, and participate in those accommodations.

Parents on the other hand unknowingly contribute to an unsuccessful transition. They mean to be nurturing caretakers, and in doing so, deprive their child of inde-

pendence. They instead promote this image of powerlessness and dependence on others.

Some specific skills that parents can help teach their transitioning children with learning disabilities are self-disclosure enhancement skills. They can include timing, plan development, assertive communication, adult-to-adult cooperation, and reality based self-awareness. Parents are only a part of the ITP, but if they do not take seriously their role in launching their children towards independence, they are allowing continued dependence which can lead to detrimental transitioning experiences for their children. Poignant, pro-active training needs to be implemented in high school and during the freshman year of college for parents to let go of advocacy responsibilities and students to become their own competent advocates.

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