



Measures of Quality for Community College Bachelor's Degree Programs: A Literature Review



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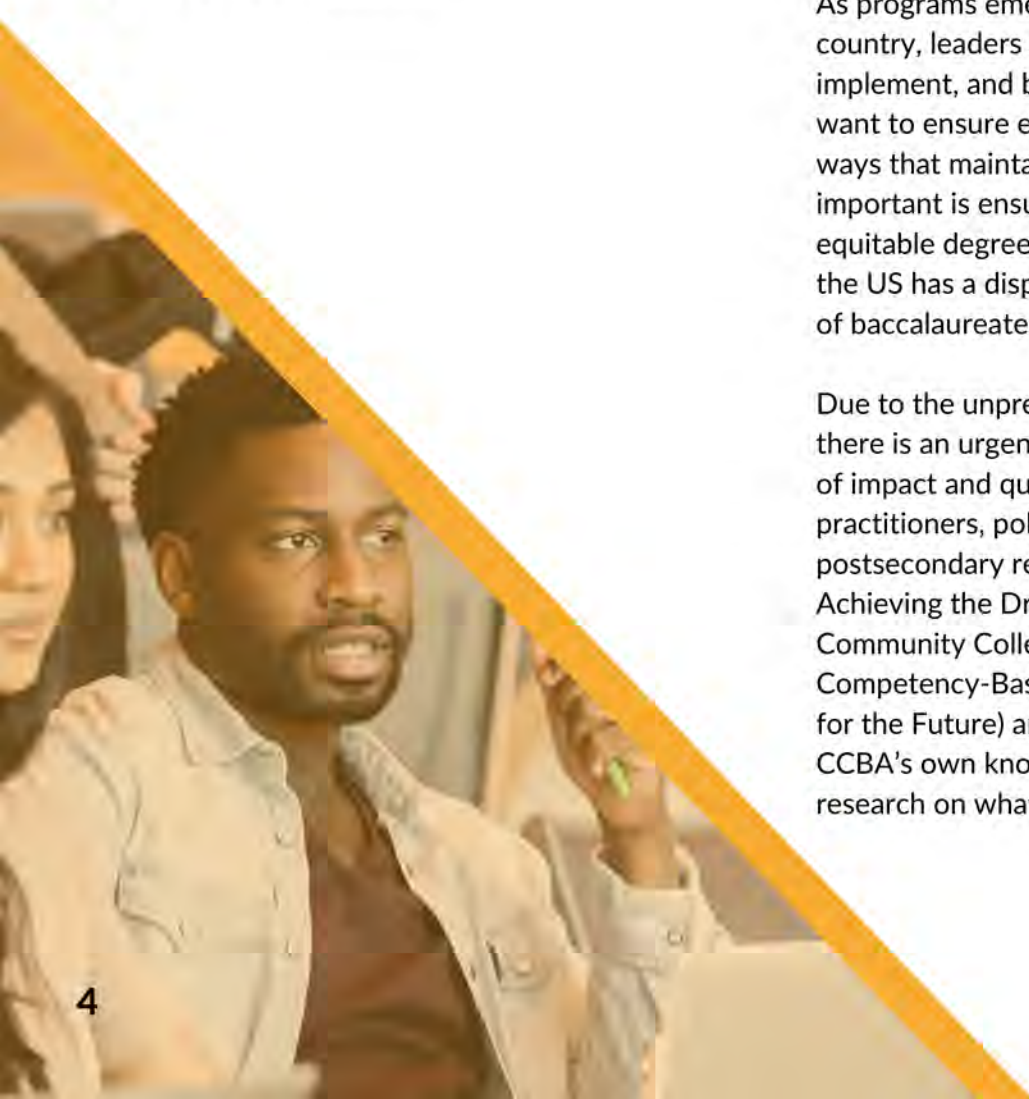
Introduction

Community college bachelor's degree programs (CCBs) seek to contribute to career success for individuals, prosperity for families, and economic development of communities because of their direct connections to employment opportunities. The Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) strives to provide support and resources to community colleges that build and sustain high-value, career-focused baccalaureate degrees that maximize opportunities for learners to achieve family-sustaining careers. Outcomes for CCBs, particularly completion rates, demographic data, placements, and salary outcomes, have been promising, and CCBA is committed to continually improving CCBs across the country.

However, to date, there is no unified set of quality standards for community colleges seeking to confer baccalaureate degrees. Filling this void is critical now due to the rapid expansion of CCB programs in the United States. This trend is bound to continue given the passage of AB 927 in California (signed September 2021) and new or expanded policy in eight more states over the last several years, including Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Wyoming. Further, CCB conferring colleges need to demonstrate how these new pathways produce more equitable baccalaureate attainment outcomes for all student groups.

As programs emerge quickly across the country, leaders and practitioners who design, implement, and believe in these programs want to ensure expansion is being done in ways that maintain quality. Especially important is ensuring student success through equitable degree attainment, particularly since the US has a disparate and inequitable history of baccalaureate completion.

Due to the unprecedented growth of CCBs, there is an urgent need to crosswalk measures of impact and quality used broadly by practitioners, policymakers, and postsecondary reform communities (e.g., Achieving the Dream, American Association of Community Colleges, Aspen Institute, Competency-Based Education Network, Jobs for the Future) and integrate them with CCBA's own knowledge and affiliated research on what is considered high quality.



Introduction, cont.

History

Scholars and practitioners have written about the emergence and potential for CCBs for nearly 30 years. The vision of some of these individuals to see CCBs extend bachelor's degrees to historically underserved populations was met with skepticism, while authors lauded these new credentials. Exemplars of writings exploring the impact of CCB degrees on community college mission and access include Dougherty (1994); Floyd, Skolnik, and Walker (2005); Hanson (2009); and Levin (2004).

Among these authors, Walker (2001) was one of the earliest and most adamant supporters of CCB degrees as a means of expanding the roles and responsibilities that community colleges play in meeting the postsecondary needs of their regions. Following this work, research and writing by Floyd (2006), Remington and Remington (2013), Russell (2010), and Townsend et al. (2007) documented early developments around CCB degree program implementation in the US. Though this paper is not intended to be comprehensive of the historical development of CCBs, we have drawn upon these writings to provide a foundation for the work of CCBA and its task force. This paper is intended to understand measures of quality for CCB programs that are used in the field for community colleges seeking to confer baccalaureate degrees.

Research Question

To better understand measures of quality used in the field that are relevant to CCB programs, CCBA conducted a comprehensive literature review to answer the research question:

What measures of quality for CCB programs are used in the field for community colleges seeking to confer baccalaureate degrees?

This literature review draws on over 50 sources, including scholarly publications, articles, reports, doctoral dissertations, and academic professional associations' research specifically regarding quality components and CCB degrees. It also includes literature from other areas, such as work-based learning and guided pathways, that aligns with programmatic elements identified in CCBs.

Introduction, cont.

Findings Overview

In reviewing the relevant literature, findings relating to CCB quality coalesced around the following areas:

1. *Design elements and components of CCB degrees*
2. *The assessment of industry needs and labor market alignments of CCB programs*
3. *Equitable student access and outcomes associated with CCB programs*
4. *Criteria for states and systems to use in approving CCB programs*

Each of these four areas is described within the following sections, including relevant findings supported by the literature and notable gaps or limitations of each.

This literature review will be paired with data from ongoing national conversations with postsecondary and workforce stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, industry partners, association members, reform groups, students, graduates, and others, culminating in a thought paper to be disseminated nationally to existing and potential stakeholders in the CCB space. The thought paper will synthesize information gathered through the national conversations, this literature review, and CCBA's existing knowledge to identify the broad design elements and practices of CCB programs.

1 Design Elements & Components of CCB Degrees

Findings

Across the literature, studies found that CCB programs incorporate elements that recognize student needs, student goals, and prepare students for industry-specific work. These programs should **maintain baccalaureate-level learning** and **offer the flexibility that learners need** to be successful. Programs can prioritize key design elements to promote student success throughout the CCB journey. These design elements include **work-based learning opportunities** and **curriculum alignment with industry needs**.

Learning

Curriculum and learning outcomes in CCB programs must demonstrate baccalaureate-level learning (Morman, 2020; Washington State Board, 2016). The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Baccalaureate Leadership Council stated that general education in CCBs must meet the “breadth and depth” of baccalaureate requirements (Washington State Board, 2016). Some researchers have referred to this as “rigor,” although the use of this word is debated among scholars for its exclusionary connotation and history. Some specialized accrediting agencies, such as the Higher Learning Commission, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), and ABET, have standards for rigor, but these are not used uniformly across CCBs. While “rigor” remains variously defined, Carol Morman (2020) found that rigor in CCB programs should include a high level of problem solving; opportunities to apply learning, such as through project-based learning; and a deep level of engagement in critical thinking that is assessed.

Flexibility

Flexibility is key for students, particularly adult learners, who are one of the primary learner groups CCB programs tend to enroll (Meza & Love, 2023). In their review of California’s CCBs, Rios-Aguilar and colleagues (2023) found flexibility in multiple areas to be crucial for student success and for closing racial equity gaps. Such flexibility includes more flexible scheduling, more affordable pathways, reduced transfer barriers, and additional student services (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2023). Students pursuing a CCB thrive in flexible learning environments that foster collaboration over competition while embedding social support, including using cohort models (Bragg et al., 2022; Fino, 2020).



1 Design Elements & Components of CCB Degrees, cont.

Flexibility also includes courses with multiple modes of delivery (e.g., hybrid courses, online courses, competency-based models) (Floyd et al., 2005). Wetzstein and colleagues (2022) found that some students, especially working students, preferred the flexibility offered by online and hybrid/blended options, often opting for a hybrid approach that paired with night or weekend class options. Other types of course flexibility include completing technical or job-related coursework first so that students can secure employment while they continue to complete their other academic coursework (Floyd et al., 2003). Flexible modes allow students to meet their immediate financial need through gainful employment while maintaining the ability to complete their studies (Floyd et al., 2003).

There should also be flexibility in remediation with embedded academic support services. Multiple approaches to remediation coursework help students stay on track toward program goals (Cuellar & Gandara, 2021). Some CCBs have adopted “co-curricular programming” to support student success and remediation when needed (Cuellar et al., 2021).

Wetzstein and colleagues (2022) study of adult learners and graduates of CCB programs concluded CCBs should include: (1) opportunities for learners to maintain employment while in the program; (2) the ability to pause and restart the program as needed; and (3) affordability as a key – and often most important – consideration.

Work-Based Learning and Curriculum Aligned to Industry Needs

Work-based learning, which involves real-world projects in coursework, helps students combine academic knowledge with necessary career skills in a safe environment (Gallagher et al., 2020). Soler and Bragg (2015) share that work-based or work-aligned experiences in CCB programming leads to increased workforce preparedness and relevance. They also found that experiential learning increases the workforce relevance of curriculum, which improves student and employer perceptions of CCB programs.

In their chapter of *13 Ideas that are Transforming the Community College World*, Floyd and Skolnik (2019) share that CCB programs “make extensive use of hands-on learning, learning by doing, and work-integrated learning” (p. 103). Work-based learning should include opportunities at each level in a pathway and should be embedded into the program design.

1 Design Elements & Components of CCB Degrees, cont.

Gaps and Limitations

Measuring learning: More research is needed on measuring learning and outcomes. This is sometimes, and perhaps problematically, referred to as “rigor.” The field lacks a shared understanding or definition of rigor as it relates to CCBs. Moreover, there is considerable debate about whether rigor should be a central tenet of CCB programming, given the priority of these degrees to ensure more equitable access and outcomes than has been present in baccalaureate attainment historically in the US. Still, defining what quality means remains a key concern for CCBs. More research is needed to strengthen the importance of applied and active learning that leads to outcomes.

Delivery modes: Research is lacking as it relates to modes of instruction. Whereas some students thrive in hybrid or online models, others express a preference for in-person community college degree options (Wetzstein et al., 2022). While it is known that students, particularly working learners, need flexibility, more research is needed to better understand delivery format, scheduling, and pacing of courses and course load, which relates to credit attainment toward CCBs.



2 The Assessment of Industry Needs and Labor Market Alignments of CCB Programs

Findings

CCB programs are responsive to industry, workforce, and community demands and student employment needs. In order to align with market demands, **CCBs should be related to local, regional, and national workforce needs** and **engage external partners** to maintain connection with industry and community leaders.

Programs and Curriculum Aligned to Workforce Needs

Many states require colleges to substantiate labor market demand prior to CCB program approval (Floyd et al., 2005) to ensure relevant, industry-recognized CCB programs. CCB programs in states like Washington and Florida align with local and regional labor market demands (Meza & Love, 2023). Aligning programs to local and regional needs is critical, as it contributes to learners' self-sufficiency, career mobility and advancement, and economic mobility (Bragg & Harmon, 2022). It also "improve[s] career and economic capital of individuals' families and communities, especially for minority students" (Meza & Love, 2023).

Further, aligning programs to local needs empowers learners to advance their education without leaving their communities. It ensures work in their field of study is available locally or regionally, which is often where they are already employed and seek to advance in careers (Floyd & Skolnik, 2019). Bragg and Soler (2017) also found Applied Baccalaureate (AB) graduates are likely to remain in their communities and support local economic growth, stating:

The narrative of employers also suggests that AB degree graduates tend to be retained as citizens in their communities more than students who leave their communities to attend universities. By attaining baccalaureate credentials by attending college in their communities, AB degrees build local talent that sustains the economic vitality of localities. (p. 139)

When aligning to local and regional workforce needs, stakeholders should consider: (1) a statement of need supported by workforce data; (2) employer demand for program and industry support; (3) employer preferences for skills, knowledge, and competencies more readily available through baccalaureate degree offerings; (4) evidence of job placement; (5) evidence that program completion leads to higher wage opportunities; and (6) consultation with regional employers and workforce boards (CCC, 2022).

2 The Assessment of Industry Needs, cont.

In a recent study using supply and demand analysis to support the adoption of new CCB degree programs, Bragg and Harmon (2022) suggest using multiple measures of workforce analysis and data to determine labor market gaps and specific workforce needs within regions or states to create relevant CCB degree programs.

Aligning CCBs to local labor markets also impacts the community beyond jobs (Aguilar et al., 2022; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2023). Rios-Aguilar and colleagues (2023) share that “CCB programs strategically designed for both technical training and the development of the student as a citizen, family member, information consumer, and human may do even more to enhance the well-being of the student and their surrounding community” (p. 62). In their review, Aguilar and colleagues (2022) state: “In addition to economic benefits, college degrees can also lead to non-monetary benefits including more frequent voting and improved health outcomes” (p. 1).

External Partners

Community colleges and employer, industry, and community leaders must have a close, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial relationship to be successful and responsive to each stakeholder’s needs (Floyd et al., 2005). Collaboration with external partners, including employers, economic development entities, and workforce boards, ensures coursework is aligned with work-based skills necessary for success in learners’ chosen field of study (Bragg et al., 2022; Bragg & Harmon, 2022).

While not directly aligned to CCBs, quality frameworks for competency-based education provide some guidance related to external partners. For example, in their quality framework, C-BEN stresses the importance of external partnerships that provide real-life learning, training, assessment, internships, and employment opportunities (Bushway et al., 2017). Stakeholders, chosen based on their alignment to the program purpose and industry, should regularly meet and communicate about program performance, need, and alignment (Bushway, 2017).



2 The Assessment of Industry Needs, cont.

Gaps and Limitations

Perceptions of CCBs: External and industry perceptions of CCBs is unclear. Though limited research has been done to measure labor market outcomes of CCB graduates, including Bragg and colleagues' (2022) examination of whether CCB programs qualify learners for the same wage and employment opportunities as universities, the research base is still emerging. That said, there is evidence that workforce relevancy, built through strong partnerships with employers, may improve perceptions of CCB quality among students, employers, and communities (Morman, 2020). More research is needed to bridge the gap between the perception and reality of CCB quality, particularly among employers.



3 Equitable Student Access and Outcomes

Findings

A commitment to equitable student access and outcomes is a fixture of CCB program success. In their report on closing racial equity gaps in California's community colleges, Rios-Aguilar and colleagues (2023) found that "the community college baccalaureate presents a new opportunity to concretely provide more accessible, affordable [...] bachelor's degrees to advantage social mobility for racial and ethnically diverse students, and to meet local workforce demands" (p. 25).

It is important to recognize that racial disparities in university bachelor's programs still exist, and CCBs may offer more accessible options to underrepresented students without the difficulty of university transfer (Wetzstein et al., 2022). CCB programs need goals specific to racially underserved students, rather than general equity related to socio-economic factors (Cueller & Gandara, 2021). In states like Washington and Florida, CCB programs have worked to address racial equity by "improv[ing] and simplify[ing] [the] postsecondary education ecosystem," ensuring accessibility and affordability for underserved student populations and allowing options for working or part-time students to advance or change their careers (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2023).

CCB programs can prioritize equitable student access and outcomes for learners, including students of color, underserved students, adult working learners, and learners of low socio-economic status by offering varied **on ramps; flexibility in pace, course offerings, and delivery; data** collection and monitoring; and centering **cultural competency**.

On Ramps

Adult learners in CCB programs tend to seek out more accessible and affordable program options, highlighting the importance of accessible on ramps into CCBs. While related to guided pathways and not CCBs, a quality framework for guided career pathways authored by Freeman & McDonough (2022) suggests that high-performing programs have multiple entry points to allow for more equitable access, particularly for adult learners. This finding would seem to apply to quality programming for CCB degrees as well. As part of the on ramp, community colleges should have streamlined admission processes that remove bias (Powers, 2022) and assess students' prior learning, previous credentials, existing college credits, and work experience, providing credit for it when possible (Freeman & McDonough, 2022).

3 Equitable Student Access and Outcomes cont.

Flexibility in Pace, Course Offerings, and Delivery

Institutions should ensure accessibility and inclusion in learning environments, content, and communications, including culturally relevant curriculum and delivery (Nider, 2022). This includes varied learning experiences to promote engagement, with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery. CCBs with a commitment to equity also boast smaller classes, a less rigid structure, better scheduling options, and more flexible delivery models (Floyd et al., 2005).

Data

Collecting the right data can help in identifying, measuring, and analyzing equity and understanding related outcomes. Community colleges should monitor demographic data to ensure equitable access and outcomes, making programmatic adjustments as necessary (Potter, 2022). Cueller and Gandara (2021) share that CCBs need consistent data collection, disaggregation, and analysis to help measure and reduce equity gaps.

Cultural Competence

A focus on the social, cultural, and relational dimensions of learning in CCBs is critical. This includes anti-bias approaches and cultural competency.

For example, in North Seattle College, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) BAS program “emphasizes anti-bias educational practices in its curriculum to advance cultural responsiveness and social justice in the early childhood education system” (Nider, 2022, p. 31). A survey is administered at the beginning and end of the program to measure the efficacy of the anti-bias curriculum. The authors share:

The driving theory of change behind this pre-post assessment is that the anti-bias teaching coursework students complete in the ECE BAS program should: (1) increase knowledge about systemic inequities; (2) improve cultural responsiveness and enhance an anti-bias approach to education; and (3) increase educator confidence in implementing culturally responsive and anti-bias teaching practices. (Nider, 2022, p. 31)

Embedding cultural competency benefits not only CCB learners but also those whom they go on to interact with in the workplace, community, and home.

3 Equitable Student Access and Outcomes cont.

Gaps and Limitations

Missing or inadequate data: Data can be key in measuring and improving equity. However, many gaps exist in data collection, including incomplete or missing data to assess learning outcomes and missing or insufficient data post-completion. While states like Florida and California have made strides in data on salary and placement rates, there is more work to do in collecting and analyzing data on where CCB learners find employment post completion, if it is in their field of study, and if they are earning a family-sustaining wage.

Student support services: Additional research should focus on how support services enhance equitable student success. Learners are likely more successful when CCBs take a holistic approach to teaching and learning, including student supports. Some CCBs, like West LA College, have found success in faculty mentors and peer mentors for students (Bragg et al., 2022). Others, such as MiraCosta College, have hired Student Success Specialists to “serve as an advocate, career coach, and advisor to first generation, low income, and racially minoritized students [in order to] connect students to campus resources [and] serve as a liaison between the academic world and that of the home and workplace” (Fino & Gomez, 2022, p. 57). Still, more research is needed on what holistic approaches look like for CCB programs, especially for racially underrepresented learners, adult working learners, or students who have limited resources to attend college.



4 Criteria States and Systems Use for Approving CCB Programs

Findings

States and approval boards use a wide variety of criteria to approve new CCB programs. Most states require a justification for program need, proof of limited competition with university programs, and high labor market demand for approval (Wright-Kim, 2022). For applied baccalaureates, program development is linked to indicators like increasing baccalaureate completion, prioritizing needs of adult learners, and connecting education and workforce (Bragg & Ruud, 2011). The literature reveals the most common criteria center on **institutional capacity, data, industry demand, policies and status, and students enrolled.**

Institutional Capacity

In order to show institutional capacity, CCB programs need proof of adequate funding; faculty, facilities, and administrative capacity; and relevant accreditation (California Community Colleges, 2022). This includes qualified, engaged faculty and demonstrated student demand for the proposed CCB (Potter, 2020).

Ensuring appropriate, sustained funding is critical to improve the longevity and, importantly, quality of CCBs (Floyd et al., 2005).

Data

Programs should have a clearly defined data plan to ensure collection, analysis, monitoring, and reporting of student and program data (Love & Palmer, 2020). Pilot programs can use and provide program data to inform future legislation and regulation on CCB programs (Love & Palmer 2020). Relevant to data, CCBs should streamline data and reporting systems for CCBs, involve multiple stakeholders in determining metrics to measure, include qualitative data on student experiences, and disaggregate data by race and other identities (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2023). Programs should also be expected to collect, monitor, and report “equitable outcome” data (Washington, 2016).

Industry Demand

CCBs are intended to be an “addition” or extension to the community college role, not a replacement of the original mission, which includes a focus on workforce-related programming (Ferguson, 2022; Floyd & Skolnik, 2019). As such, in most states, approval for CCBs hinges on industry demand for the program. Approval criteria may include curricular alignment with industry skills, program alignment to regional and local workforce needs, evidence of industry partners, and student demand for workforce related programs (California Community Colleges, 2022).

4 Criteria States and Systems Use for Approving CCB Programs cont.

Policies and Status

Most states follow CCB governance prescribed in state legislation (Love & Palmer, 2020). While this criteria varies by state, it often includes:

- A detailed admissions process
- Rigorous courses included in the degree program, commensurate with bachelor's coursework
- Labor market data
- Institutional capacity
- Funding sources
- Accreditation

In order to prevent or reduce direct competition with university programs, some states and approval boards require relevant accreditation and non-duplicative status. As is the case in Washington, systems should ensure that the proposed CCB is not already offered by a four-year institution within the geographic region and that it complies with state community college tuition expectations (Potter, 2020).

Students Enrolled

Some states' program approval guidelines ask for descriptions of students who are targeted to enroll and be served by new CCB programs. For example, California requires, as part of the program approval process, that certain student populations are served through the program, including considerations like income level, local access to higher education, disability status, family educational attainment, work/family responsibilities, veteran status, or refugee status (Harris, 2016). Other states require CCBs to serve students without local access to bachelor's degree offerings, students who are unable to relocate for higher education access, students with low-income status, older students, students of color, and students with "life circumstances" that make flexible options necessary (e.g., work or family commitments) (Fulton, 2018).

Gaps and Limitations

Variation across states: States and approval boards vary considerably in their criteria to approve new CCB programs. While some states have developed approval processes, others do not use a formalized process. More research and development is needed to create greater consistency in approval processes across states.

Conclusion

This literature review sought to answer the research question: ***What measures of quality for CCB programs are used in the field for community colleges seeking to confer baccalaureate degrees?*** Drawing on over 50 sources related to quality measures in CCBs, findings coalesced around: (1) design elements and components of CCB degrees; (2) the assessment of industry needs and labor market alignments of CCB programs; (3) equitable student access and outcomes; and (4) criteria for states and systems to use in approving and evaluating CCB programs.

It is clear that the field **lacks consistency across states and systems in all categories related to quality**, building the case for a unified framework that colleges can align to in the planning, design, implementation, and assessment of CCBs. CCBA is eager to use this base of knowledge to co-construct with its stakeholders a central framework for community colleges, states, and systems to use when conferring CCBs.



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