



PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Student Employment Engagement Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 4 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment* Research Series

September 2020



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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Based in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education, Health & Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the mission of the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is to identify, conduct, and coordinate research on initiatives and ideas designed to enhance higher education at the institution, state, and national levels to enhance policy and practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had monumental impacts on higher education institutions and the ways in which colleges and universities operate. Notably, there have been major shifts in how student affairs professionals facilitate meaningful student engagement in a time when in-person experiences are not possible. To date, the primary focus of most institutions has been on shifting instruction. Yet, researchers consistently have demonstrated that instructional practices alone are not sufficient to engage and ultimately retain students. The study aims to address the following question: **How is student engagement practiced in the midst of a global crisis?**

How student engagement is practiced varies when examining the many functional areas that work to promote student engagement on a campus. One such area is student employment, which engages students through campus-based jobs in a variety of departments and offices. Not only does student employment provide financial support for students, these opportunities also provide meaningful experiences for student development and career preparation.

This brief will provide research insights for student employment engagement plans and practices for fall 2020. Three key themes emerged from the data:

1. A large portion of institutions have not announced engagement plans for student employment or do not have information publicly available online.
2. Hybrid models of engagement are the most prominent form of engagement for student employment.
3. Career development professionals are also adapting services and programming to help students develop knowledge and skills for internships and life after graduation.

The brief concludes with a “Emerging Practices” section that focuses on programming, philosophies, strategies, and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and engaging student employment experiences.

For more details, read the full report available at perc.utk.edu/covid-19.

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. INTRODUCTION 6

Student Employment Engagement 7

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT 8

III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS 8

Governance 9

Size 10

V. EMERGING PRACTICES 11

REFERENCES 14

APPENDIX A 15

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, COVID-19 began to spread quickly through the United States. With many dangerous side effects and threats to health and safety, the spread of COVID-19 necessitated pause and/or adaptation in strategies for postsecondary education. By late March 2020, most institutions had ceased in-person campus operations and transitioned classes to online settings for the remainder of the term. As faculty transitioned academic and support services online, student affairs practitioners worked to maintain core engagement functions supporting student extracurricular and co-curricular experiences.

In June 2020, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, embarked on a study of institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding plans for programming, services, and initiatives that occur beyond the classroom and aim to promote and facilitate student engagement.

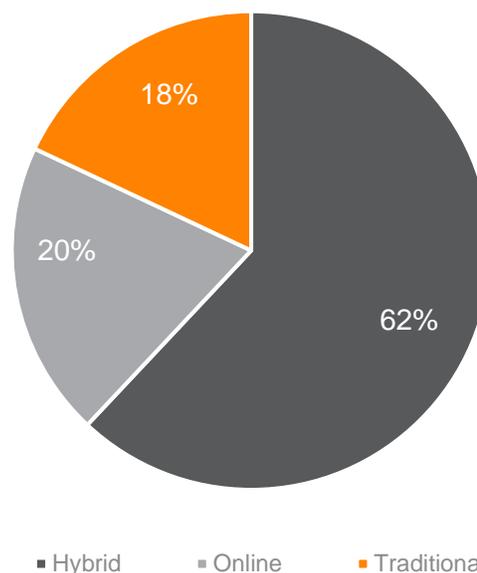
The purpose of this project is to understand and inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement (Appendix A):

Traditional: Delivered on-campus, typically through in-person or face-to-face experiences

Online: Delivered through fully online, virtual, or digital strategies

Hybrid: Delivered through a combination of traditional in-person or face-to-face experiences and online or digital experiences.

Figure 1. Institution-Wide Fall Engagement Plans



At the time of data collection for this brief, nearly two-thirds of colleges and universities in the sample (62%) planned to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall (Figure 1). Just 18% reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models and 20% of institutions had plans for a fully online fall semester. Institution-wide engagement plans critically influenced each functional area and served as the foundation to address the primary study question:

How is student engagement practiced in the midst of a global crisis?

Leading student engagement scholar, Dr. John Braxton weighs in on the importance of student engagement:

“Student engagement constitutes an important vehicle for college student success. Engagement and involvement are interchangeable terms (Tinto, 2012) that both pertain to the amount of physical and psychological energy students put into their college experience (Astin, 1984). Academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular stand as some of the forms of the college student experience in which student involvement takes place (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Interpersonal involvement includes faculty and student interactions and peer interactions (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

Student involvement fosters such aspects of college student success as first year persistence (Braxton, et al, 2014) and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Without persistence and or graduation, student attainment of other forms of success unlikely occur. These other forms of student success include cognitive growth, career development and a wide array of types of personal development. For the types of student development, readers should consult *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3* by (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 Pandemic places major constraints on the various forms of student involvement in general and those in the form of face-to-face interaction in

particular. The pandemic will likely result in some students not returning to their college for the fall 2020 semester. Put differently, institutional student persistence rates at some colleges and universities will decrease. Perhaps, some of the lessons learned from extensive use of remote teaching during the 2020 spring semester may suggest ways in which colleges and universities can offer alternative approaches to student engagement during the fall 2020 semester and beyond as we continue to cope with the enormous challenges of the pandemic.”

Student Employment Engagement

Student employees play an integral role in the success of an institution, and student employment provides students with the opportunity to engage with their campus community while gaining financial benefits and career-related skills. Students who work in on-campus positions are more involved with their institution (Pike, 2008), and those who work up to twenty hours on campus are more connected with their campus, achieve higher academic success, and are more prepared to successfully enter their career field than their counterparts (Burnside, 2018). Not only do student employment opportunities promote student engagement and retention, but many students depend on campus employment as a means of a stable financial source (Markowitz, 2020).

Institutions are rapidly working to adapt all functional areas of student affairs to provide safe and socially distant services while maintaining the same high standards of quality student engagement. Given the positive impact student employment can

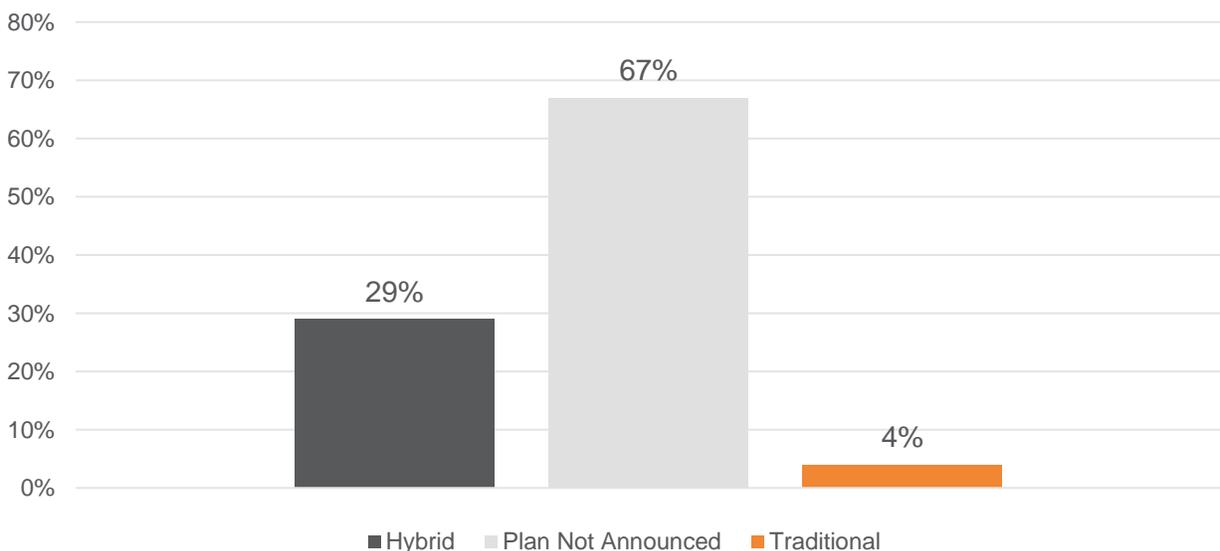
have on student life and engagement, institutions will need to intentionally adapt to the changing operations and procedures of campus while responding to COVID-19 to continue to facilitate the positive outcomes associated with student employment.

A large portion of institutions in the research sample have not announced official engagement plans or have not made revised plans easily and publicly accessible. The lack of available information is a potential barrier for incoming and current students as they navigate this upcoming school year during COVID-19. Institutions and campus offices rely on student employment for general operations and projects. While campus operations may look differently this fall, student employees still have a vital role in the success of the institution on campus and through virtual projects and positions.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

At the time of data collection, 30 out of the 45 institutions in the sample had not officially announced plans or changes to the model of engagement for student employment (Figure 2). While reviewing institutions' student employment or career services websites, it was notable that many had not been updated since early March. After a comprehensive search of institutions' COVID-19 resource sites, student employment pages, and career services sites and social media, little information has been explicitly stated or shared about student employment changes due to COVID-19. Some institutions in the sample that have not announced plans of engagement have directed students to speak to their direct supervisors for concerns regarding their student employment during the semester. While this may be effective guidance for current and returning students, it leaves gaps of information for incoming new students who may be making plans for their employment during the semester.

Figure 2. Student Employment Engagement Models



Of the institutions that have announced engagement plans for student employment, the majority (86%) of institutions plan for a hybrid model of engagement. Institutions implementing a hybrid model of student employment are creating modified work schedules to allow for a mixture of on-campus and remote work to provide in-person or remote shifts. A commonly used hybrid practice for student employment is encouraging offices and supervisors to be creative with remote student employment work. Institutions encourage supervisors to consider projects like assessment, research, virtual office hours, and planning virtual programming. When institutions employ a hybrid model of engagement for student employees, they are also working to balance the workspace projects and tasks while following CDC-specific social distancing guidelines. Offices are responsible for determining if it is essential for student employees to physically work in the office. Additionally, if student employees within an office or department are considered essential and needed to work in-person, supervisors and department leaders must determine if the workspace can be effectively modified for proper distancing and if staggering work schedules to limit exposure and contact with others is possible.

Two institutions within the sample, Clarion University and University of Minnesota-Morris, who have shared their student employment engagement plans specifically noted a traditional model of engagement for student employment, allowing returning student employees who wish to work on campus the opportunity to continue with their position, but neither provided alternatives to working in-person. Both institutions planning to implement traditional models of engagement emphasized that coming back to campus to work had to be voluntary and required all returning student employees to reapply to their positions. No institutions have announced plans for

student employees to transition to fully remote positions, even though a number of institutions have started to pivot to fully remote instruction for the Fall 2020 semester.

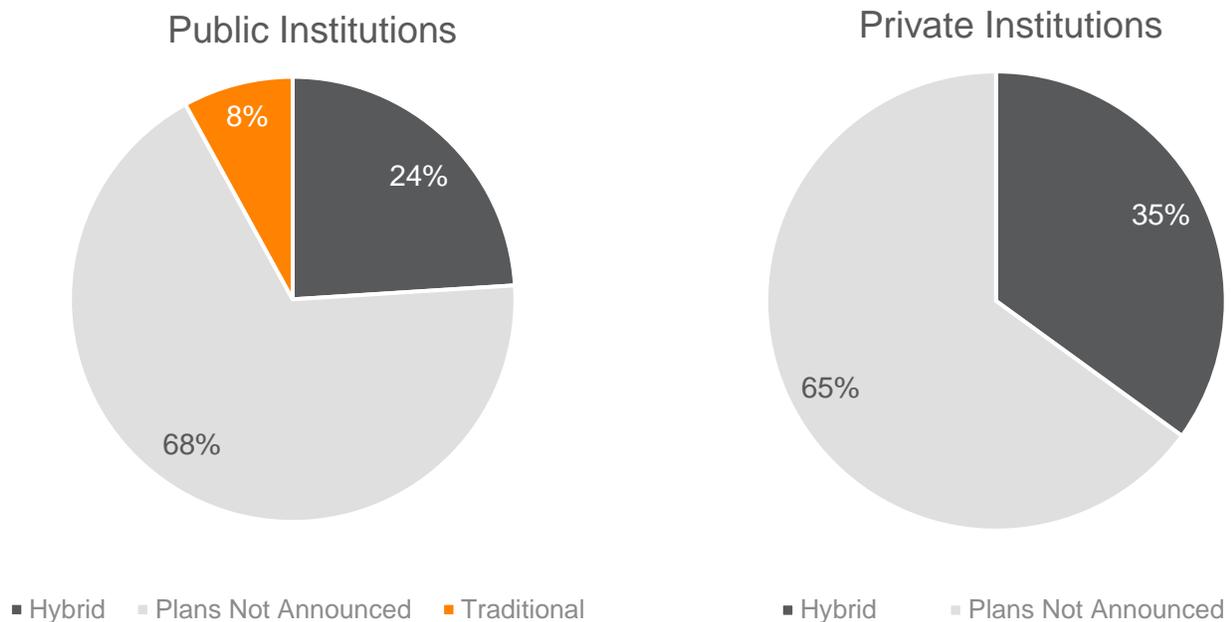
III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Institutions have varying plans, policies, and procedures for students and employees returning to campus that are linked to the number of students they serve and the governing entity that provides guidance to the institutions. The institution-wide practices and plans for re-opening directly influence planned models of engagement for student employees. Therefore, there seems to be small, but notable differences in models of engagement for student employment based on size and governance.

Governance

Among private institutions, nearly one third (35%) have announced plans for a hybrid model of engagement for student employment, which includes a variety of work schedules and projects that adhere to CDC recommendations for an on-campus or remote setting (Figure 3). The rest of the private institutions in the study sample (65%) have not officially announced a plan of engagement for student employment. At the time of collection, no private institution in the sample had announced plans for traditional models of engagement for student employment. As more institutions finalize and share plans, the number of institutions engaging in hybrid, traditional, and online models for student employment is likely to change.

Figure 3. Student Employment Engagement Models, by Governance Type



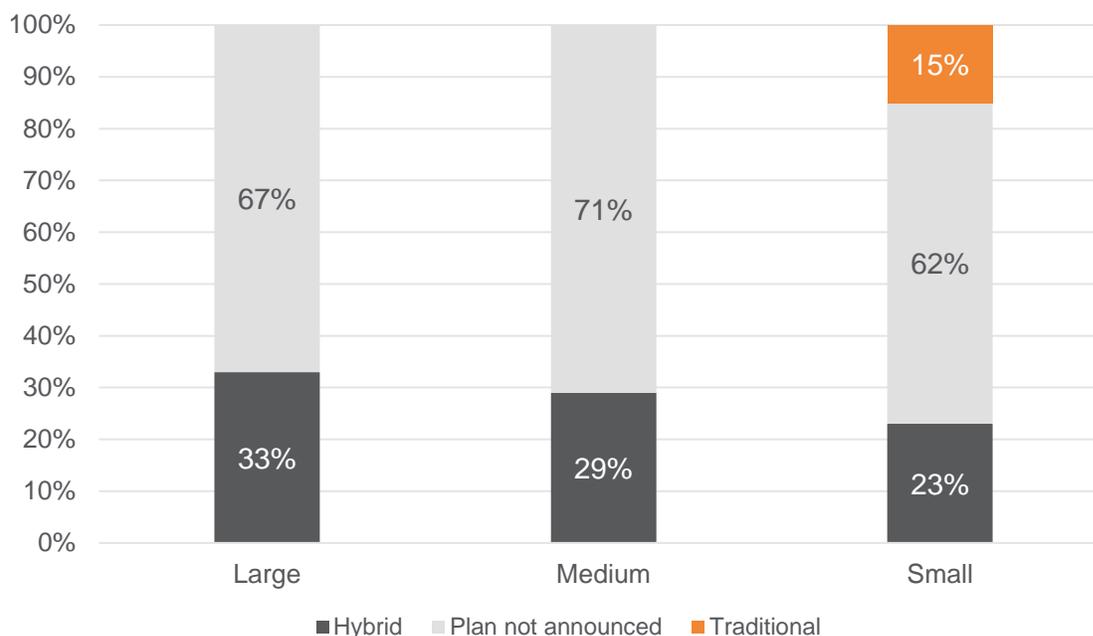
Among public institutions, over two-thirds (68%) have not announced any plans of engagement for student employment. Approximately 25% of public institutions have announced a hybrid model of engagement and two public institutions plan for a traditional model of engagement (Figure 3).

Size

While plans have not been announced across a majority of institutions of all sizes, larger institutions were more likely not to have announced any plans of engagement compared to medium and small institutions (Figure 4). The two institutions planning for a traditional engagement model of student

employment are small institutions, which may mean they are working with a smaller number of student employees, allowing more flexibility and feasibility in managing safe social distancing measures. While there are some minor differences when considering how size of the institution plays a role in student employment engagement plans, there are few notable differences between student employment engagement models for large, medium, and small institutions due to the fact that many institutions have yet to announce their plans for student employment engagement.

Figure 4. Student Employment Engagement Models, by Size Classification



IV. EMERGING PRACTICES

Much like workplaces around the world, student employment opportunities and campus jobs are adapting practices to promote safety and allow employees to continue to work. While many institutions have not publicly announced plans for student employment engagement, the following are some emerging practices that have been announced by institutions in the study sample and help illuminate how student engagement professionals are facilitating student employment opportunities.

Guidance from the Federal Government

Federal Work Study and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act have given direction to institutions of higher education in a time of the unknown. According to statements from Federal Student Aid, an office of the Department of Education, institutions are required to employ federal work study

students so that they may still receive financial aid. Additionally, Federal Work Study guidelines have included extending flexible hours and remote work study options until the end of the Fall 2020 semester. Under [these guidelines](#), “students enrolled and performing federal work study at a campus that must close due to COVID-19” may still receive work study funds if offices provide remote work.

The CARES Act allowed for institutions of higher education to receive federal funds to distribute to students impacted via the Higher Education Emergency Relief (HEER) Fund. Funds were given to students both on financial aid and those who were not on financial aid. Allocation of the 14.25 billion dollars from the Act depended typically on the number of Pell Grant-eligible students attending the institution. Several institutions in the study reported the creation of specific COVID-19 hardship funds or utilized current student hardship fund applications to allow students

to apply for funds. The Act ensured students completing work study received funds no matter the status of the work study position during the pandemic. Institutions such as The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and Emory University gave funds directly to all students via direct deposit from their financial aid offices. While funding and mandating work opportunities for Federal Work Study students was present in federal guidelines, official guidelines regarding how to best address remote working and health measures has not been provided.

Creativity and Flexibility in Remote Working Environments

While many institutions have not made specific student employee recommendations, many institutions have alluded to employee flexibility in terms of work schedules and allowing for telecommuting as much as possible. This shift is particularly important for Federal Work Study students who depend on working a certain number of hours to meet their financial needs, as the alternative of not working is simply not feasible. The University of Northern Illinois released [Remote Work project suggestions](#) for students and their employers with the goal of keeping students on payroll. Projects suggested for employers to give their student employees include facilitating weekly podcasts, writing newsletters, updating directories, creating training, and editing presentations. Additionally, the guide focuses on allowing for student staff development via learning/leadership opportunities and utilizing social media and websites to have their respective offices in communication and connection with the community. Xavier University [released an announcement](#) stating they will allow students to work on campus or remotely, which started in the Spring Semester and will continue into the Fall 2020 Semester. There will also be a remote/virtual employment fair for students and

employers to meet, regardless of student Federal Work Study status. Given that many students receiving financial aid utilize Federal Work Study, these fairs are important for students to meet potential new employers. Even those who are searching for internships and positions that do not fall under Federal Work Study will find these fairs beneficial, as they allow for connections to be made that could previously have been impacted due to social distancing and other COVID-19 related hindrances.

Career Services Preparing Students Remotely

As shifts in online learning and remote working have begun to change the landscape of some careers, Career Centers have been offering several virtual student employment engagement opportunities. Northern Virginia Community College hosted one such event titled “State of the Workforce: COVID-19 and Regional Trends” to ensure students understand what the job and internship market might look like in the near future. Several other universities are also offering continued career development and counseling via online formats. Virtual career fairs seem to have become the standard for many institutions as policies have limited the number of off-campus visitors allowed on campus. Students utilize career services throughout the academic year to prepare for the next steps of their professional or academic career. Due to the uncertain landscape of the job market, students will need additional support and resources to successfully transition into the workforce after graduation.

Frequently Asked Questions Sections

While information is constantly evolving and institutional engagement plans are changing, some universities have not yet updated their public-facing websites to

reflect the most up-to-date information regarding student employment. However, some institutions have created live FAQs on their websites in an attempt to keep up with communication being released and to ensure students are informed on updates. MIT's Financial Aid [website explains](#) how the university is working to fill gaps in employment by developing positions for research, public service, and teaching assistance. To that end, MIT has committed to the goal that every undergraduate student will be guaranteed a paid research or employment opportunity this academic year. This specific FAQ practice stands out as it confirms some form of stability for students who may be concerned about their employment and provides detailed and accessible information. The practice of FAQ sections aids in the dissemination of information by giving a fuller picture of the

status of student employment for the fall. While some institutions may opt to share information internally via email, a publicly accessible FAQ resource regarding employment may be beneficial for incoming students who are working to financially plan for the semester and are seeking out campus employment opportunities.

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APPENDIX A.

Forty-five (45) institutions of higher education were selected to be included in this sample. The following characteristics were considered in selecting institutions to be included in the sample:

- *Governance*: Determination between public or private governance structure
- *Degree Programs*: Determination institutions granting two-year or four-year degrees.
- *Size*: Classification based on total student population as determined and adapted by the Carnegie Classifications on size.
 - *Small*: Institutions serving less than 3,000 students
 - *Medium*: Institutions serving between 3,000 and 9,999 students
 - *Large*: Institutions serving 10,000 or more students
- *Geographic Region*: Classification based on regions comprised of the following states:
 - *Northeast*: MA, MD, ME, NJ, NY, PA, VA, and Washington, D.C.
 - *Southeast*: GA, FL, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN
 - *Midwest*: IA, IL, IN, MN, OH
 - *Southwest*: AZ, TX
 - *West*: CA, CO, ID, OR, WA
- *Minority-Serving Institution Status*: Whether institution has a minority-serving designation.

The following institutions were included in the study sample:

- Adams State University
- Azusa Pacific University
- Clarion University
- Colgate University
- College of William & Mary
- DePauw University
- Dominican University
- East Los Angeles College
- Emory University
- Florida A&M University
- Gonzaga University
- Howard University
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Lone State College
- Miami-Dade College
- Mississippi University for Women
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Murray State University
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Northwestern University
- The Ohio State University
- The Pennsylvania State University
- Princeton University
- Seton Hall University
- Seton Hill University
- Sewanee, the University of the South
- Spelman College
- St. Mary's College of Maryland
- Tennessee State University
- Texas Tech University
- The University of Arizona
- The University of California, Los Angeles
- University of Central Florida
- University of Idaho
- University of Maine
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of Northern Iowa
- University of Southern California
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- University of Texas, Austin
- Valparaiso University
- Vanderbilt University
- Wake Forest University
- Willamette University
- Xavier University of Louisiana



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