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Critical Inquiry and Collaborative Action: Transforming a College of Education to Recruit and Retain Underrepresented Populations to Teacher Education

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Abstract

This documentary account describes how a task force comprised of college of education faculty and university admissions staff from a medium sized comprehensive university engaged in a critical inquiry process to address the issue of recruiting and retaining underrepresented students in teacher education (i.e., men and culturally and linguistically diverse students). The group examined the issues and challenges associated with an education college's recruitment, application, selection and retention processes. The paper suggests how critical inquiry groups of higher education faculty and staff may support the transformation of policies, practices and relationships needed to increase the number of teacher candidates from non-dominant communities.

The purpose of this documentary account is to describe how a task force comprised of college of education faculty and university admissions staff from a medium sized comprehensive university engaged in a critical inquiry process (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002) to address the issue of recruiting and retaining underrepresented students in teacher education (i.e., culturally and linguistically diverse students and men in elementary education). The critical inquiry process engaged key stakeholders from October 2009 to May 2010 in monthly meetings focused on the sharing of theoretical and empirical research in a collaborative task force, the investigation and analysis of demographic and program data, and the development of collectively warranted recommendations (Carroll, 2006). The document produced out of this collaboration was endorsed by college leadership and faculty and lead to the implementation of programmatic and professional development action steps to address critical issues. This account illustrates a promising approach to multi-level institutional change through the development of "critical communities" of colleagues (French, Chu and Yasui, 2010) engaged in "cultural praxis" (Goto, French, Timmons Flores & Lawrence, 2011). This account involves a large teacher education program contending with the nation-wide dilemma of how to achieve a better match between the demographics of the teaching force and that of the P-12 student population.

A key charge of the task force was to embody the promise of the college's mission to "foster community relationships and a culture of learning that advance knowledge, embrace diversity and promote social justice." Over the previous five years, college wide application and enrollment data for teacher candidates of color ranged from 6-15%, in a state with over 37% of the P-12 school enrollment identifying as students of color (OSPI, 2010). A "demographic urgency" became apparent as data were analyzed, revealing a striking mismatch between the population of teacher candidates and the P-12 population (Sleeter & Milner, 2011). While this is a nation-wide problem, Washington State ranks next to last among all states in the mis-match between the demographics of its teachers and students (OSPI, 2010, Peterson & Nadle, 2009).

Since 1971-72, when the percentage of non-white students in P-12 schools was only 7.5%, there has been a dramatic change. The following figure illustrates the contrast in Washington between the fast-changing demographics of the student population and the relatively unchanging demographics of the teacher population.

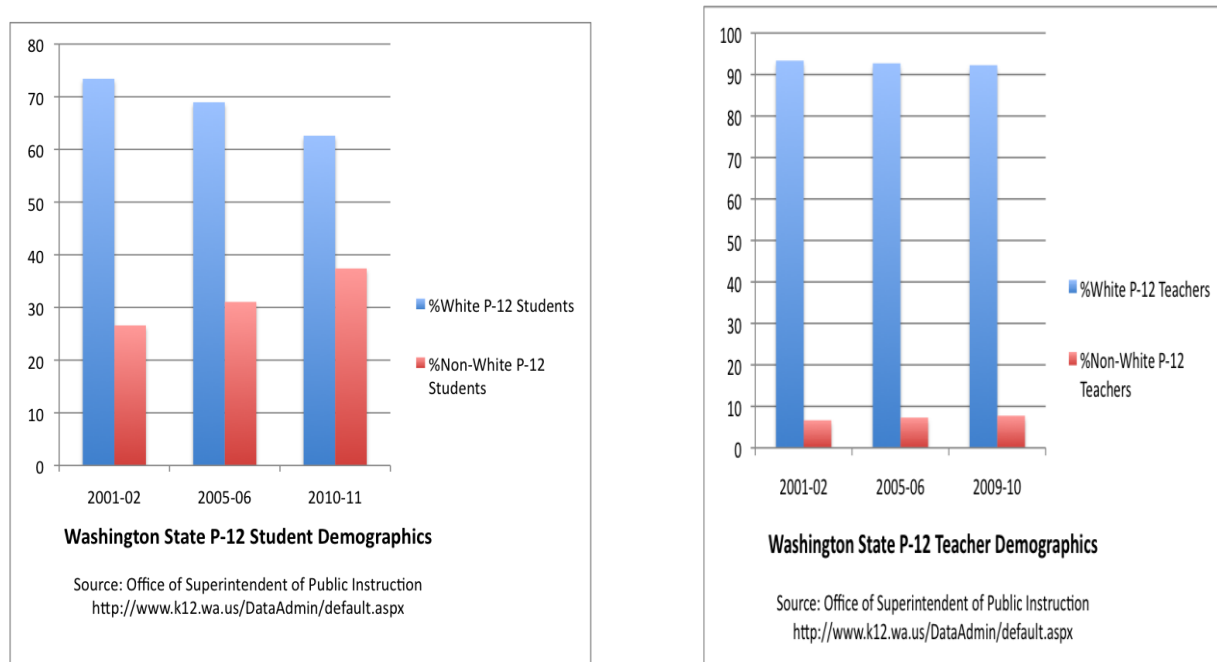


Figure 1. P-12 Student and Teacher Demographics, 2001-02 to 2010-11

The task force was influenced especially by the data indicating the population of non-white, low income students continues to grow and the majority of our teachers are white, middle-class, monolingual, women who have little experience with cultures different than their own (Nieto & Body, 2008). For those who participated in this learning community, the motivation to diversify the teaching profession was based on a commitment to educational equity and the potential for diverse teachers to make a difference for the learning of their students but also for their colleagues and faculty. The purpose of the task force was to review the literature, gather and analyze varied data sources uncover promising practices within the college and elsewhere, and recommend new approaches to increase access to the teacher preparation program for students from non-dominant communities.

Early in the process, task force members collaborated to clarify their shared values and beliefs to define the principles that influenced their interpretations and recommendations. Critical multicultural teacher education (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Timmons Flores, 2007) with its emphasis on equity and on multiculturalism /multilingualism as critical strengths needed for all future teachers to be successful teaching all P-12 students emerged as a common foundation for task force members to begin their work (Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 2009). The group shared James Bank's view of multicultural education that its "...major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups have an equal chance to achieve academically in school (Banks & Banks, 2007, p.1)". Members embraced social justice

as both a process and a goal to ensure "...full and equal participation of all groups in society..." (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007) and they adopted equitable participation as central to any recruitment and retention reform agenda. Finally, Nieto and Bode's (2008) emphasis on the issue of power (e.g., who has it, how it is used, who benefits from this power) was another primary consideration of not only multicultural education in general, but the work of this task force. As noted in the task force report, in addressing the charge to re-imagine the college mission related to diversity and social justice, group members became committed to move collectively beyond a past history of individual heroic efforts and self-assuring rhetoric, to tangible action steps that would result in shifts in institutional culture and practices, ultimately resulting in a change in the demographics of teacher candidates in the college (Chu & Carroll, 2010).

When the task force members looked across the state and nation to identify promising practices, elements of some programs emerged to guide the group's subsequent work. "Pipeline" programs such as the University of Southern California's *Latino and Language Minority Teacher Projects* emphasized recruiting paraprofessionals from specific communities through support from foundations such as the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's Pathways to Teaching Careers program. The program began in the mid-1990's and certified hundreds of bilingual teachers through an emphasis on student cohorts, on site faculty mentors and seminars with internships in their own schools (Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Zeichner, 2009; Genzuk & Baca, 1998). The elements of successful "pipeline" models resonated for a number of task force members who had been involved at other institutions with efforts supporting bilingual high school graduates and paraeducators to gain access to higher education, complete their degrees and address challenges around recruitment and retention of underrepresented candidates (Chu, Martinez-Griego, Cronin, 2010; Whitebook, et. al, in press).

At the same time, critical dialogue focused the group's awareness on a type of "professional racism," a view that assumes the P-12 achievement gap would be reduced and culturally competent pedagogy would automatically increase if teachers of color increased in numbers (Gay, 2010). The group recognized that the task was not only to increase the number of future teachers whose backgrounds better matched the student population but to better prepare all teacher candidates to teach effectively across cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences. However, it was also recognized, as Sleeter and Milner (2011, p. 84), state, "...the research on the value of diversifying the teaching force is too compelling to ignore the potential benefits for students of color and all students". The benefits they describe include that teachers of color can serve as role-models for a greater diversity of students, shift white students' perceptions about the capacities of persons of color, provide appropriate culturally or linguistically-based teaching approaches, and expand the views held within a school's teaching force. Therefore, while a central measure of the group's effectiveness would be an increase in the numbers of candidates of color applying to programs, attention remained focused on change factors that would create a program and culture in the college to support all candidates to teach all children with culturally relevant practices.

Perspectives, Problem Posing and Shared Understandings

The theoretical perspectives that emerged in the work of the task force were informed by the recognition that the teacher education programs operated under an unspoken paradigm by which the college enrolled highly academically qualified candidates and then attempted to increase the sociocultural consciousness of a mostly white student group through experiences,

curricula, and pedagogy associated with their education courses. The task force concluded that it was time to challenge that paradigm by exerting deliberate effort to recruit and retain candidates from underrepresented populations who had both academic and cultural capital that would better equip them with the depth of understanding and a critical consciousness needed to expand the knowledge base of their future students (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Task force members chose to frame the work as moving beyond the rhetoric to engage the often unseen and unacknowledged challenging realities of marginalized college and P-12 students (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2003). Members of the task force shared a concern that too often critical multicultural education theory and practice taught in teacher preparation colleges remained at an intellectual level and was not enacted.

The task force members convened to co-construct a shared understanding based on a review of research and empirical data from the college. The need to use “social imaginations” to “invent visions of what should be and what might be” moved the task force from rhetoric to planning for action (Greene, 1995, p.5). They chose to address the demographic and social justice imperatives of preparing a more diverse group of future teachers for a state in which many P-12 students would rarely or never be taught by someone who was like them in terms of cultural, racial or linguistic background. Institutional data sources, including application, enrollment, and graduation statistics were examined. The data revealed an overwhelmingly white student body that pushed the group to engage with what Cochran-Smith (2003) called the problem of “the recruitment and selection question.”

Various key informants were invited by the committee to share their perspectives and experiences. Representatives of two college programs that did show an exemplary record of recruiting and retaining underrepresented students were invited to make presentations to the group. University student services professionals and admissions officers known for working successfully with underrepresented students also contributed. Task force members gathered additional data and perspectives by interviewing various stakeholders, including students of color who were both enrolled in the college and those who had expressed interest upon admission to the university but never applied. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of various student groups on campus to gather perceptions about the college and its practices. Task force members shared their expertise and contributed reflective narratives throughout the process.

Data from these various sources as well as narrative notes from task force meetings, were analyzed using grounded theory in a constant comparison method (Glaser, 1995, Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and narrative analysis (Mischler, 1991, Chase, 2008, Pushor & Clandinin, 2009). Grounded theory uses cycle of analysis to identify themes that emerge in the data, and with each cycle of analysis, key ideas are tested, refined and new questions are raised. Each presentation or interview was viewed through a narrative lens in an attempt to understand the speaker’s perspectives and experiences through their words. This approach assumes that narrative is essentially a meaning making activity. As individuals narrate their views they select and sequence events, characterize people and institutions, and position themselves and others to tell stories that convey intentional meanings. The task force meetings and focus groups were designed to create safe spaces for faculty, staff and students to share their experiences and perspectives with a respect for multiple perspectives (Goltz, 2009).

Task Force Critical Inquiry as a Transformational Force

As the transformative implications of the work emerged more and more clearly, task force members also deliberately explored theoretical perspectives on institutional change and the formation of multicultural organizations (Fullan, 2001; Jackson & Holvino, 1988). The members of the inquiry group noted implications of organizational development being “fundamentally about increasing institutional capacity for effecting change” (Latta, 2009, p. 32) and were guided by research on learning in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and in collaborative study groups (Carroll, 2005, 2006).

The task force functioned as a critical inquiry group and inspired and supported faculty and staff members as they engaged in the social justice work of diversifying the student body of a college of education. Group members functioned as “critical colleagues,” (Lord, 1994), contributing from their diverse perspectives, stretching each other’s viewpoints, and engaging in the negotiation of meaning as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Facilitators and guest speakers encouraged members to reflect on their individual roles in the university and how that did or did not seem to involve responsibility for recruiting and retaining a diverse group of students.

Teacher education faculty and college admissions staff who participated in the year-long critical inquiry group during 2009-2010 reported on the impact of their experiences through a survey the following winter, ranking it from “limited” to “somewhat” to “very” involved. In describing how their thinking and actions were influenced by their involvement in actions to support the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students to teacher education, their highest involvement was reported as follows (N=11; 6 - Euro-American, 5 - faculty or staff of color):

1. Efforts aimed at increasing the applicant pool by investing in efforts at recruiting, supporting and graduating students who represent communities of color (7 of 11 were *very involved*).
2. Community building among faculty, staff and students (6 of 11 were *very involved*).
3. Developing or participating in professional development related to issues of diversity for faculty or staff (6 of 11 were *very involved*).
4. Partnering with offices across campus such as Student Services or University Admissions (9 of 11 were *somewhat to very involved*).

A focus group conducted in Winter 2011 for these same 11 participants in the critical inquiry group, offered more clarity about how the collaborative inquiry process had impacted these participants and influenced their actions related to recruitment and retention of underrepresented students. Five primary themes emerged from an analysis of the focus group conversations.

Reconceptualizing

Participants variously described “reconceptualizing”, or “having a “new lens” or using what they already knew with “increased interest” and credited this to being involved in revisiting ideas from many perspectives each month. Recommendations were made not through voting or pushing through one agenda but through “eventual consensus”.

Movement and Action

The second theme noted a feeling that “movement and action” was to be an outcome rather than only rhetoric. One faculty member stated, “We put things on the table and invited perspectives.” Another noted that “talking lead to coalescing around purposeful action.” A third faculty member felt that the need to make recommendations for change came out of a sense that “creativity flourishes in a place where there is motion and action.”

Interconnections

A third thread in the focus group conversations centered on the “interconnections” among the important work of admissions, outreach, teaching, scholarship and service as it relates to recruiting and retaining underrepresented students. A university admissions staff member said, “The fact that we had these conversations...as I talk to future students, I am thinking who can I connect them to, especially with diverse students....We are educators and not just admissions people.” A tenured faculty member replied, “The reverse has happened for me. I am more of an admissions person now. I think about how I can assist in that effort...I am more willing to devote time to this (recruitment and retention). I am more willing to be in this territory. It has gotten in my blood. I am more willing to meet with new students.”

Developing Allies

Finding support and trusted colleagues who restored faith in “getting to see social justice in action”, and seeing “purposeful action” was the fourth theme. One faculty member of color came to see the task force meetings as “hybrid space” that “changed my persona and ended my silence”. Others noted the group was unusual in that it was making recommendations for change by thinking from all sides of the problems that were “top down with grass roots bottom up work.” Many faculty noted positive influences on their scholarship work by their involvement in critical inquiry and the feeling they could more easily make a rationale for using their time to recruit as “engaged scholarship”.

Moral Dilemma

Finally about half of the group felt a “moral dilemma” about working hard to bring students of color to an institution where they wondered if these students would be retained due to “certain things not being in place”, and to a lack of relevant diversity in “institutional policies”. These faculty members identified the need to create “goals for ourselves” and to set aside time to “reflect on ways to address existing faculty biases”.

To illustrate the work of the task force, the authors of this paper drew upon a framework for considering the nature of interactive talk and its relationship to professional learning and the joint construction of ideas about practice (Carroll, 2005). By engaging in various forms of interactive talk featuring a variety of “re-voicing moves,” (O’Conner & Michaels, 1993; Carroll, 2005) whereby participants clarified, extended and extrapolated upon each others’ ideas, the group gradually generated collectively warranted joint perspectives on issues of recruitment and retention. Having engaged in this extended process, the group’s description of its process and its

final report presented a convincing argument that was unanimously endorsed by the college of education's leadership council.

Often, administrative and policy issues like the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students are addressed using generic administrative processes. The college-wide initiative led by the task force described here, took a critical inquiry approach to such work. This resulted in both deeper insight into the nature of the issues, and a considerably strengthened and energized commitment by task force members and those they influenced across the college toward taking action. Just as task force members, through their investigation, became aware of the disjuncture between past rhetoric and action, they themselves developed personal commitments to achieving action based upon the report. The next sections of this paper will highlight two arenas of action generated out of the task force's work. The first focuses on changing the culture of the college through professional development; the second on institutional changes in policy and practice.

Professional Development Shifts Perspectives

The report was endorsed by the dean and the college leadership council, which took steps toward a major shift of perspective in the college featuring an ambitious professional development effort which included the following dimensions:

- Recognizing that the kind of restructuring proposed by the task force involved a “re-culturing” process (Fullan, 2001) for the college that would necessitate more culturally responsive teaching, different pedagogical approaches, and more inclusive course content;
- Supporting the time and space needed for faculty and staff to work together across university departments to re-imagine how their commitment to social justice ideals would require them to increase their capacity for understanding the institutional barriers to access for underrepresented populations of students;
- Recognizing that faculty must engage in new work that would require increasing their capacity for helping all students in navigating institutional culture and academic language and literacy;
- Anticipating that retaining increased numbers of underrepresented students would challenge faculty and staff to create more inclusive and caring environments which build community across various dimensions of difference; and
- Valuing, recognizing and supporting faculty in the tenure and promotion process for contributing to the scholarship, teaching and service related to the recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations to teacher education.

Shared Perspectives Lead to Institutional Action

This documentary account articulates the benefits of critical inquiry groups for solving administrative and policy issues in a way that invites new collaborations and strong commitments to action – things that often remain unrealized in institutions of higher education. It details how engaging together through a process of critical inquiry around common commitments to social justice may move faculty and administrators beyond rhetoric and into transformation of policies, practices and relationships. Results to date include implementation of

a series of action steps to guide the task force recommendations. They include:

- A multifaceted recruitment plan targeted at achieving applications from underrepresented students at a level that matches the proportion of such students in the state P-12 school population over the next 5-7 years;
- The revision of the application and recruitment publicity for entrance to teacher education programs to emphasize the values of the college to support P-12 schools to be responsive to all students;
- The revision of admissions criteria to include a broader conception of intellectual and cultural capital for applicants and a more nuanced college transcript analysis;
- New program relationships and increased collaboration with university admissions outreach staff who recruit underrepresented students to the university;
- The appointment of two senior tenured faculty members to lead the development and expansion of programs for freshmen and sophomores from underrepresented populations interested in education but not yet admitted to the college;
- The expansions of existing peer mentoring programs to target cohorts of students from underrepresented populations and first generation college students;
- The development of a professional development plan for both faculty and staff to transform the culture of the college and make it a more culturally relevant and welcoming environment for supporting the learning of underrepresented students;
- A major grant funding initiative to underwrite the expanded commitment of faculty and student support services to meet the need by all students for more academic support (e.g., partnerships with a college writing center, new designs for education-related courses in the first two years of college) and increased financial aid;
- A planned expansion of the existing college *Center for Education, Equity and Diversity* to serve as a safe, comfortable and welcoming place to connect current and future teachers and college students; as a place for faculty to have courageous conversations and honor different ways of knowing and being; and as a place to provide workshops for test preparation and academic support; and
- Future goals include the alignment and strengthening of recruitment efforts with existing pipeline connections to high schools and community colleges that are already investing in the recruitment, support, and preparation of underrepresented populations for college admission and a systematic examination of retention issues to determine needs for additional support for students on the pathway toward becoming teachers.

Ongoing Critical Collaborative Communities

Encouraged but not satisfied with the initial modest increase of applications by underrepresented students, individual teacher education departments engaged in departmental action projects from October 2010 to May 2011 focused on analysis and inquiry into policies or practices which seemed to be successful in fostering access or retention of a diversity of future teachers. During the same period, many of the participants in the departmental projects, also joined together and examined principles and goals of multicultural education, and engaged in critical reflection on the role of culture and identity in their work as teacher educators. Recognizing that some faculty and staff were already immersed in this subject matter, the professional development sessions (held as full day, monthly sessions in Winter Quarter 2011)

Table 1

Education Program Application Percentages from Self-Identified Students of Color

YEAR	OVERALL - COLLEGE OF EDUCATION	SECONDARY & MASTERS IN TEACHING	ELEMENTARY & EARLY CHILDHOOD	SPECIAL EDUCATION & DUAL ENDORSEMENT
2007-08	10.6%	6.3%	11.8%	18.2%
2008-09	11.9%	13.4%	7%	21.4%
2009-10	14.4%	11%	17%	15.9%
Winter Quarter 2011	21.5% (N=36/167)	19% (N=12/63)	21.25% (N=17/80)	29% (N=7/24)
Spring Quarter 2011	18.4% (N=21/114)	9.5% (N=2/21)	27% (N=18/67)	4% (N=1/26)

were promoted as a means to dialogue with other faculty and staff in a mediated environment with outside facilitators. Latta notes that “because cultural knowledge is largely tacit, it often requires the mediation of an outside facilitator to elicit” (2009, p.41). Facilitators from *Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage* (R.E.A.C.H.), a professional development organization with over thirty years of experience working with P-12 schools on issues of diversity, piloted sessions designed for higher education. The goals of these sessions centered in part on supporting faculty to have common conceptual tools to frame and articulate their departmental inquiry findings. Throughout this period, a series of “Courageous Conversations” about race, culture and other issues of diversity and multicultural education were also facilitated for students, faculty and staff by the college’s *Center for Education, Equity and Diversity*.

The departmental inquiry projects from Special Education, Elementary and Secondary Education and Human Services were presented at an all college meeting in May 2011. Each program pursued a unique question and method of gathering and analyzing data. While the results of each inquiry benefited the department from which it originated, presentation across the college offered insights in a way that other departments could benefit from lessons learned. One program developed a new application and interview process, another reviewed program drop out data and developed measures to support students pro-actively, a third program investigated where their graduates taught upon completion and a fourth conducted a student climate survey. The projects were a way to hold “critical departmental communities” accountable for moving closer to the college mission of “embracing diversity and promoting social justice” while also motivating faculty to move from reflection to action. Projects revealed troubling data as well as promising practices and offered new ways for faculty and students to share their knowledge, commitment and assets regarding working with a diversity of children and youth.

Tangible Outcomes

The evaluation of progress toward recruitment and retention goals began in Winter and Spring 2011. Preliminary application data shows significant increases in applications from students of color in the Elementary Education program and in the college of education overall (Table 1). This data is very preliminary and will need to be analyzed over the next several years. However there does appear to be an association between increase in applications of students of color to a specific program and the number of faculty participating in the Teacher Education Recruitment and Retention task force group of 2009-2010. Approximately half of the faculty participating in the critical inquiry group was from the Elementary Education Department which showed the greatest gains in underrepresented student applications. Students admitted to the Elementary Education program for fall quarter 2011 will be over 34% students of color.

Conclusion

The ingredients for shaping the institutional culture to be more supportive of a diversity of students began through the creation of a task force that functioned as a critical inquiry group. The initial task force and subsequent departmental groups became inquiry communities that were able to explore different understandings of the complicated topic of recruiting and retaining a more diverse group of future teachers. The process had an organic and unpredictable nature but has seemed to motivate faculty, as evidenced by focus group narrative evidence, to see recruitment and retention of students as their responsibility. Professional development is often undertaken by university faculty in isolation from the wider college community. This account suggests that creating spaces where faculty can explore different understandings of complicated topics is needed to support critical communities engaged in ongoing cycles of inquiry, reflection and action. The promising application of critical and collaborative inquiry to the re-imagining process of meeting recruitment and retention goals is offered for examination now because of the evidence that this approach to institutional transformation has simultaneously fostered a more nuanced process for inviting applicants to share their “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) and created the parallel conditions among faculty and staff.

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