Conversations Among Teachers on Student Writing: WAC/Secondary Education Partnerships at BSU

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Abstract: The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) create new common ground for high school – college collaborations through emphasis on expository writing in English language arts (ELA) and writing in content areas across the curriculum. This article, written collaboratively by a composition-rhetoric scholar and a secondary education leadership scholar who together directed Bridgewater State University's WAC program, further explores the CCSS in relation to WAC, discusses why WAC programs in higher education should seek to create venues for conversation among secondary teachers and college faculty, and shares several programs facilitated by the WAC program at Bridgewater State University that seek to open and sustain such conversations.

Steve Parks & Eli Goldblatt (2000) have argued that Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs should think beyond the walls of the university to partner with colleagues in K-12 in a focus that moves beyond discipline-specific writing to a broader emphasis on literacy. The time is right for such partnerships. The National Association of Secondary School Principals and other members of a national literacy coalition submitted joint proposals to the Department of Education requesting that literacy be an explicit priority in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, referred to as No Child Left Behind (NewsLeader, 2011). The resulting Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia. The architects of these standards, the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, drafted the standards to better prepare K-12 students for college work (Common Core State Standards, 2012, homepage). In her column, "High School-College Collaborations: Making Them Work," Pamela Childers (2007) argues, "In order to get an idea of how to work with our colleagues who teach at other academic levels, we need to consider what we have in common as well as what already works before we think about possibilities for the future." The CCSS create new common ground for high school-college collaborations through emphasis on expository writing in English language arts (ELA) and writing across the curriculum. In this article, we[1]further explore the CCSS in relation to WAC, discuss why WAC programs in higher education should seek to create venues for conversation among secondary teachers and college faculty, and share several programs facilitated by the WAC program at Bridgewater State University that seek to open and sustain such conversations. Our goals are to inform WAC program directors and scholars of the new emphasis on writing across the curriculum in K-12 and share models of collaboration with secondary education developed at our institution that may be adapted for other institutional settings.

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and WAC

At the time of this writing, standards have been developed for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, and though the full standards for history and science have yet to be developed, literacy standards for these subjects as well as technical subjects (such as music and art) have been developed. With the CCSS, writing in English, history, science and math now share many characteristics with writing in these disciplines at the college level. The new standards for ELA emphasize expository (rather than literary) reading and writing, highlighting persuasive writing, inquiry, and rhetorical awareness.[2] By the senior year of high school, 70% of a student's reading and writing tasks will be focused on nonfiction texts (National Assessment, 2008). The CCSS includes literacy standards for history and science, with focus on discipline-specific and inquiry-driven writing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010).[3] In mathematics, writing is integrated through a focus on writing-to-learn and writing-to-communicate (Common Core State Standards, 2012, Key Points). Across the disciplines, there is new emphasis on writing as a process, guided research, writing in a wide range of genres, and writing for a wide range of purposes and audiences.

While CCSS details the types of writing and purposes of writing in different disciplines, it falls short of telling schools how to engage faculty across the curriculum with student writing (Gonsalves, 2012). It creates a mandate for schools to include more writing across the curriculum, but doesn't engage with the other pieces of a WAC program that would lead to a school-wide or district-wide culture of writing. There are at least three components necessary for successful WAC programs:

- Curriculum: WAC programs have a systematic approach for ensuring that students write throughout their academic program in different disciplines.
- Pedagogy: WAC programs emphasize a rhetorical view of writing, and promote writing as a process, writing-to-learn activities, and writing-to-communicate assignments.
- Faculty development: WAC programs offer faculty development related to writing pedagogy that promotes community among faculty across disciplines by creating venues for teachers to share writing pedagogy and create writing curricula.

Many colleges and universities use writing-intensive (WI) requirements to create a systematic approach to integrating writing across a student's academic career. For instance, at BSU, students take two semesters of first-year composition, a WI first-year seminar (thematic courses taught by faculty across the curriculum), a WI or speaking-intensive second-year seminar (similar to first-year seminars but with more emphasis on disciplinary thinking and writing/speaking), a WI distribution-area course, and an upper-level WI course in the major. Other universities, such as the University of Minnesota, use a writing-enriched model, where the WAC program works closely with departments "in creating, implementing, and assessing discipline-relevant Writing Plans" (Flash, 2012). These programs do not have a strict definition of "writing-intensive" but instead work with departments to integrate writing across a major in ways that make sense for that discipline.

CCSS leaves school districts with the problem of figuring out how to create a systematic approach to curriculum. Historically, school districts have purchased literacy programs that offer this systematic approach; programs popular in Massachusetts include EmPOWER™, 6+1 Trait Writing®, and the Collins Writing Program[4]. These programs are expensive and often promise school districts a consistent language, pedagogy, and assessment program for writing instruction that works across levels, demographics, and disciplines. Such programs often come with prepackaged lesson plans, readings, worksheets, writing prompts, writing assignments, and rubrics, as well as prepackaged faculty development workshops, which are offered on- or off-site. As such, these programs are often

top-down, disempower teachers, and fail to draw on expertise developed within a school district. They also are often aimed at ELA teachers, thus failing to create and foster community among teachers, a common element of college and university WAC programs. From our conversations with local teachers, these programs often stand in for WAC programs at secondary schools in Massachusetts.

School districts have also turned to the National Writing Project (NWP), a program that has been transforming writing instruction in K-12 since its inception in 1974 (National Writing Project, History, 2012). Using a teachers-teaching-teachers model, the NWP hosts institutes and workshops that not only focus on approaches to writing instruction, but also engage teachers with the act of writing. With over 200 NWP sites with locations in all 50 states, the NWP provides school districts with access to rich faculty development related to writing pedagogy and builds teacher expertise, which can be shared locally within schools (National Writing Project, About, 2012). Thus, the NWP can support schools in helping teachers develop pedagogical approaches needed for meeting CCSS. However, the NWP does not provide schools with the other two pieces of WAC programs: a systematic approach to curriculum and on-site cross-curricular faculty development.

Connecting College and University WAC Programs with Local School Districts

College and university WAC programs are uniquely positioned to offer local school districts support in developing and sustaining WAC programs. With our 30 year plus history as a field, we have developed numerous approaches to creating systematic approaches to curriculum, writing pedagogy, and faculty development. Though the context of secondary education differs greatly from the context of higher education, with differing constraints on and processes for curriculum development, faculty development, program development, and funding, there is still much that can be shared across levels. Teachers and administrators from local school districts can be invited to college and university WAC events to learn more about specific approaches to curricular structures, pedagogy, and faculty development. WAC programs can also facilitate conversation among secondary school teachers and college faculty. While teaching with writing may be a new responsibility for secondary math, science, and history teachers, this approach to pedagogy is well developed among university math, science, and history faculty who teach WI courses. WAC programs can also be instrumental in connecting ELA teachers with instructors of first-year college composition. Though the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that English Education candidates "demonstrate knowledge of different composing processes" (Standard 3.4), many English education programs focus more heavily on reading and writing about literature than teaching expository writing (National Council, 2012). Thus first-year composition instructors trained in composition-rhetoric and teaching in programs that focus on rhetoric and expository writing (as encouraged by the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*), have knowledge that would be welcomed by secondary ELA teachers (Council of Writing, 2008).

The benefits of connecting college and university WAC programs with local school districts will not only be experienced by the schools but also by WAC programs. In order to create effective programming, we need to know more about the kinds of experiences with writing students have had before arriving on campus. Further, such collaborations will mean that students coming from participating school districts will be less surprised to encounter writing in college-level courses across the disciplines and better prepared to engage in WI or writing-enriched courses across the curriculum. One of the main areas of focus of the CCSS is, after all, college readiness. Perhaps most important, college faculty have much to learn about the teaching of writing from colleagues in

secondary education. Generally speaking, secondary teachers have more experience with juggling high teaching loads, more training in teaching, and more experience working with a wide range of students, all of which affects how they teach writing.

Cross-level conversations about teaching and student writing can be eye-opening for both parties. At a recent workshop at BSU, Elizabeth Gonsalves, the English department head at Abington High School in Massachusetts, explained that she and her colleagues left a meeting with BSU English faculty ten years ago shocked that BSU students are not required to take literature courses and that first-year English was focused on rhetoric and writing with sources, not literature (Gonsalves, 2012). Based on that insight, Abington High School switched the focus of senior year English from British literature to writing and rhetoric. At a recent WAC discussion that included middle and high school teachers, BSU faculty were surprised to learn of the many ways technology, particularly blogs and GoogleDocs, is being used to facilitate collaborative learning and writing in secondary schools. Based on this discussion, a high school teacher will now be leading a WAC workshop next semester, entitled "Writing in the Cloud," to share these uses of technology in teaching writing with college faculty from across the disciplines. Without such conversations, high school teachers and college faculty both tend to base their knowledge of what happens with writing in each other's respective levels on their own experiences as students.

WAC-Secondary School Conversations at BSU

Over the past three years, the BSU WAC program has facilitated a number of programs that bring high school and college faculty into conversation about teaching writing. The impetus for creating such programs has come from several directions. As described above, BSU has a bottom-heavy WAC program, in that students take all but one of their WI requirements in their first two years of college. While the WAC program also engages in upper-level WID programming and support of graduate student writing, many WAC workshops focus on first- and second-year writing, and thus exploration into the kinds of experiences students have had with writing before arriving at BSU leads to richer faculty development programming. After learning more about the kinds of literacy programs that often take the place of WAC in secondary schools, Michelle Cox, then BSU's WAC director, designed and offered a graduate course on WAC Theory and Practice in the summer of 2009. High school English teachers from across the region enrolled in the course, and Michelle learned more about writing instruction in secondary schools. After the course ended, one student, an English department head at a local high school, emailed to ask if he could participate in BSU's WAC program so that he could learn more about how WAC programs are run and sustained. Michelle then collaborated with this student to expand the WAC Network program to include representation from local school districts (further described below). A focus on secondary education also arose from the creation of a WAC assistant director position in 2010, through which Phyllis Gimbel, a secondary education leadership professor, was hired. Phyllis's wealth of knowledge as a former secondary school language teacher and middle school principal, as well as connections with local school districts, has been invaluable to connecting our WAC program with secondary education.

The CCSS, though, was the catalyst for creating larger events, such as the Transition from High School to College and the Beg, Borrow, Steal, and Eat events (described below) that bring together secondary and higher education faculty from school districts, colleges, and universities across the region. The new focus on rhetoric and new emphasis on students gaining experience writing in a range of genres for a range of purposes and audiences meant that many teachers in Massachusetts would have to learn new approaches to teaching writing. Since 2003, high school students in Massachusetts have had to pass the English and math portions of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardized exams in order to graduate (Sacchetti, 2007). Writing instruction in MA

schools has been largely driven by MCAS, and has thus focused on the two types of writing called for on MCAS exams: the open response (sometimes referred to as "the short answer") and the long composition. The open response is a paragraph-length response based on a reading, which is assessed based on reading comprehension and form. The long composition is a five-paragraph essay written in response to a prompt and assessed based on topic development and form[5]. The MCAS exam that determines graduation is given in the sophomore year, with re-tests given in junior and senior year. Students in school districts with high MCAS scores tend to move on to a more varied writing curriculum after sophomore year, but students in less-resourced schools with lower MCAS scores continue to experience writing instruction limited to open responses and long compositions until the end of their high school careers (Luna & Turner, 2001). As one high school teacher said when describing writing instruction in an urban school under MCAS, "I find in my class that I'm teaching to the test right now. I'm drilling on five paragraph essays, lots of thesis statements, transitional sentences—talking about things I've always talked about, but now I'm drilling constantly" (Luna & Turner, 2001, p. 83). CCSS does include emphasis on form, but places more weight on writing as a complex act that varies in relation to the rhetorical situation. CCSS thus created a need for faculty development in writing instruction that is more rhetorically focused, a call that BSU was ready to answer. In the next section, we describe three programs BSU's WAC program initiated to answer this call.

The WAC Network: A Good Idea that Keeps on Growing

The WAC Network program at BSU started in fall 2007. As the coordinator of a new WAC program, Michelle started this program to bring together those on campus already invested in teaching with writing. In the initial year, 24 faculty members joined the program, and between 15 and 20 new members have joined the program each subsequent year. This program has grown over the years to now have 90 members, with representation from all four colleges, a range of offices on campus (such as Academic Advising, Career Services, and the Office of Institutional Diversity), and four local school districts. While the original mission of the program was to create a cohort of faculty who would mentor colleagues in WAC pedagogy and point the way to WAC resources, the program has grown to the point that the WAC Network members act as an advisory board to the director, voicing campus needs and brainstorming WAC programming. WAC Network members have also become leaders in developing and facilitating WAC Discussion Groups, which are monthly 60-minute workshops focused on topics related to writing pedagogy, such as peer review, scaffolding writing projects, and working with second-language writers.

Part of the motive to include secondary school teachers in the WAC Network was to share a model of WAC that builds teacher expertise in writing pedagogy, creates community among teachers from across the disciplines, and uses a teachers-teaching-teachers model (inspired by the NWP). Further, the WAC Network program doesn't have to cost a thing. At BSU, each Network member received a $250 stipend after completing the first year of the program, which includes a full-day workshop, a meeting to discuss the direction of the WAC program, and a reception, during which new members receive certificates and continuing members receive letters for their reappointment and promotion files. At the reception, many new members say that they had forgotten they were receiving a stipend. In the early years, Michelle brought in outside speakers for the full-day workshop, but in the past couple of years, she has drawn from expertise in the WAC Network. This model of WAC, then, can work effectively without costing a dime, making it a great model for cash-strapped school districts.

Inclusion of secondary school teachers in the Network has enriched the program. Like other Network members, secondary school teachers lead WAC Discussion Groups. One in particular, "Crosstalk among High School and College Teachers on Student Writing," held in spring 2010, focused on

bringing secondary school teachers and college faculty into conversation. Secondary school teachers now act in an advisory capacity for the BSU WAC program, suggesting topics for workshops and ways that BSU can continue outreach efforts to area school districts. In fact, it was during conversations at WAC Network meetings with secondary school teachers that the Transition from High School to College Writing was brainstormed.

Transition from High School to College Writing Panel Discussions

In April 2011, BSU held its first public conversation about writing, the Transition from High School to College Writing Panel Discussion. This panel discussion, which included administrators and teachers from four local school districts, BSU's First Year Writing Program administrator, an English-Education specialist from BSU, and an undergraduate tutor from BSU's writing center, attracted over 100 participants, with representation from at least ten local school districts, three local colleges and universities, BSU faculty and students from across the disciplines, and community members and parents. This event has been televised as well as made available as a podcast, thus becoming accessible to those outside of the local region.

Responses to this event were overwhelmingly positive. In response to a program evaluation survey, teachers reported that they valued the opportunity to hear high school and college teachers in conversation about writing. Respondents also valued the collaborative nature of the event, as articulated in this response: "Inviting public school teachers and *students* to converse as peers – I really love the fact that our university cares about teaching and teachers and doesn't feel they are beneath them." Others valued the chance to think about writing across disciplines, as discussed by this respondent: "I really enjoyed the discussion about literacy and writing across disciplines. As a history teacher, it is very evident to me that expectations differ greatly even between writing done in English class and historical writing." Another respondent commented on his/her surprise about "how much writing across the disciplines is taking place. The idea that I am one small part in the giant educational machine impacted me greatly." Respondents also spoke to how this event broke the sense of isolation that can come with classroom teaching. One stated, "Spending most of my time in a classroom, alone with my students, it's easy to forget how much instruction is impacted by school-wide, state-wide, and nationwide expectations." Another commented, "It was wonderful to hear what goes on in college classes. As a high school English teacher, I never really know if what I'm telling my students is true!" For others, this event pointed to a need for more communication among teachers across levels, as stated in this response: "[What impacted me most was] thinking about how high school teachers and college professors need to communicate more and see what each other is doing."

Among the attendees at the April 2011 event were graduate students from a hybrid course for new and beginning teachers. These students posted comments on the virtual discussion board in response to the event. Their postings indicate that they will pay heed to literacy in their teaching, and especially to writing. Their comments suggest a desire to foster writing across disciplines, some of which may be attributed to their attendance at the panel discussion. Here are some excerpts from the discussion board[6]:

- "Going into the writing conference on Thursday, I wasn't sure how much I'd take away from it. … I didn't think writing could be worked into math classes much aside from short answer and open responses, but this panel was a real brainstorming event and I now think it's possible to incorporate writing across the curriculum."

- "I really enjoyed the WAC panel discussion. As a History teacher, I use writing almost daily as a means of evaluating student comprehension. However, it did not occur to me before this discussion how much writing standards and expectations vary across the disciplines."
- "After attending the WAC panel discussion, I left thinking about how I can start to incorporate writing into my classroom. The way the principal panelist used the example of the music teacher motivating his students really hit home with me. I will certainly try to find a piece of writing that can possibly give my students a different type of motivation while doing math."
- "In the middle of the panel discussion I thought up an idea for a new project that would involve reading, math, and history. I think with my enrichment classes, I am going to put together a project that involves the students to research and read about different manufacturing levels of war time materials during WW2. They can then compare their findings in a number of different ways. I am still thinking of exactly how and what I will have them do. Collaborating with other teachers to incorporate English in other subjects just seems common sense."
- "As a first year physics teacher, I was surprised at my students' writing proficiency. I couldn't believe their poor sentence structure, incorrect spelling and grammar. At first I thought it may be due to the fact that I was requesting writing in my physics class and the students didn't believe that they needed those skills even when writing about science and then I quickly realized they did not know how to write about science. After listening to the panel discussion I was pleasantly surprised that so many other schools were trying to improve writing across the curriculum. I also found it refreshing that other teachers are realizing that it takes all of us to be on board, the same board for that matter, in order for us to help our students' communication skills."

These responses demonstrate that holding such events benefits not only local high school teachers and college faculty, but also future and novice teachers enrolled in education degrees.

On the evaluation, we also asked participants for ideas for future events. Some of the participants asked for regularly offered opportunities for such conversations, ranging from annual to quarterly events. Some asked for formats that promoted the sharing of materials, such as assignments, syllabi, and sample student writing from different levels, as well as promoted conversations among secondary and college teachers from across the curriculum. Formats ranged from forums that promoted these conversations to workshops on "creating WAC-style assignments." Some asked for a focus on particular topics, such as assessing writing and motivating students to write. Overall, the responses indicated strong interest in continued cross-level conversations on writing.

Based on these responses, we plan to hold the Transition from High School to College Writing annually. In April 2012,the second such event event again featurde a panel of high school and college faculty and administrators, but the topic switched to a focus on CCSS. In addition, the panel was cross-disciplinary, with cross-level representation from mathematics, the sciences, history, and ELA. In response to participants' desire for more time for conversation and exchange of materials, the panel discussion was shorter with time reserved for small group discussions. Our goal for this event was to bring together teachers from across the disciplines to have conversations about what writing looks like in those disciplines across levels. Based on the success of this second Transition event, we are now planning the third annual public panel discussion on writing.

Beg, Borrow, Steal, and Eat

We have also responded to participants' desire to have more regularly offered events that bring together high school and college teachers and faculty. As a result of the Transition event, Michelle and Phyllis were invited to participate in monthly meetings held at BSU for area ELA department heads, a group led by BSU faculty member and English Education specialist, John Kucich. We shared feedback from the Transition event at one of these meetings (at which were many participants from the Transition event) and brainstormed ways to facilitate more regularly offered workshops on writing. We came up with the idea for "Beg, Borrow, Steal, and Eat," a workshop that would be offered each fall at BSU, with the mission of creating a venue for area secondary ELA teachers and college composition faculty to exchange materials. The first of these workshops was held in December 2011. The structure of the event was simple, but powerful. We asked participants to bring three copies of the following: a writing assignment or activity, a rubric for that writing assignment or activity, and a sample of student writing from that assignment or activity. Using the registration list, we arranged cross-level groups, who would talk through and exchange the packets of materials they brought. The event ended with a dinner, which allowed participants to continue the conversation, less formally. This event was free for participants, funded by BSU's new College Readiness Center, led by the Dean of the College of Education and Allied Studies, who has also volunteered to fund the 2012 Transition Event.

Continuing Conversations

The BSU WAC program has come to see (and be seen) as including writing across the secondary curriculum as part of its scope of practice. As a result, the directors of the WAC program have been invited to participate in more events offered through the College of Education and Allied Studies focused on CCSS and writing. As an example, Michelle was invited to present on WAC at a workshop entitled, "ELA Literacy and College Readiness," organized by the Curriculum Leadership Center. At this workshop, which was attended by 52 participants that included ELA secondary teachers, several social studies teachers, ELA department heads, curriculum directors, assistant superintendents, and superintendents, Michelle spoke on approaches to initiating WAC programs and talking to colleagues across the curriculum about writing. The conversations at this workshop were rich and exciting, with ELA teachers trading ideas for suggestions they could make to music, art, and foreign language teachers on integrating writing into their courses and superintendents thinking aloud on how the WAC Network model could be used to empower teachers and foster a culture of writing in their school districts. Three years ago, when the BSU WAC program was trying to find its way into conversations with colleagues in secondary education about WAC and student writing, this kind of reach would not have been possible. By working systematically and in collaboration with secondary teachers, the BSU WAC program has fostered an ongoing conversation about student writing across the curriculum that will enrich classrooms in middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities across the region.

Implications for WAC as a Field

Barbara Walvoord tells us, "Writing is so complex an activity, so closely tied to a person's intellectual development, that it must be nurtured and practiced over all the years of a student's schooling and in every curricular area" (1986, p. 4). This oft-quoted passage is featured on the homepage of many WAC websites, as it is on BSU's WAC website. Perhaps like other program directors, we chose this quote to showcase student writing as an activity that needs to be fostered across the curriculum and across a student's college years, neglecting to notice that Walvoord doesn't restrict her focus to higher education. She conceives of WAC broadly, stretching beyond the boundaries of college programs. It has taken the field of WAC years to catch up with Walvoord's vision. This special issue, focused on WAC and secondary education, is a sign that WAC is ready to look across the entire

curriculum, and see those teaching literacy in K-12 as colleagues, part of the WAC community. The Common Core State Standards provide a catalyst for including K-12 as part of the scope of WAC. School districts across the country are seeking guidance in developing writing programs that engage students with writing across content areas. College and university WAC programs, which have built considerable expertise in writing pedagogy across the curriculum, have much to offer our colleagues in K-12, and even more to gain.

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Notes

[1] This article is written collaboratively by a composition-rhetoric scholar and secondary education leadership scholar who together direct Bridgewater State University's WAC program and facilitate programs that seek to create an ongoing conversation on writing among college faculty and our secondary education colleagues.

[2] For more information about the writing standards for ELA, refer to *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy Standards for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects;* for grades K-5, see pp. 19-21; for grades 6-12, see pp. 42-47.

[3] For more information about the literacy standards for social studies and science, see pp. 59-66 of Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy Standards for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf.

[4] EmPOWER™ is a literacy program offered through Architects for Learning and developed by Bonnie Singer and Anthony Bashir, who received their PhDs in speech-language pathology. To learn more about this program, go to http://www.architectsforlearning.com/empower.html. 6+1 Trait Writing® is offered through Education Northwest, and also sells teaching materials through *Scholastic*. To learn more about this program, go to http://educationnorthwest.org/services/traits. The Collins Writing Program was developed by John Collins, Ed. D., and is offered through Collins Education Associates, founded by John Collins. To learn more about the program, go to http://www.collinseducationassociates.com/cwp.htm.

[5] Here is a sample writing prompt from the 2010 MCAS exam for composition: "From a work of literature you have read in or out of school, select a character whose life is affected by a single act or mistake. In a well-developed composition, identify the character, describe how he or she is affected by a single act or mistake, and explain how the character's experience relates to the work as a whole" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

[6] We received IRB approval and permission from individual students to share these student comments.

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