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FROM BEGINNING TO BEGINNING: FOSTERING VULNERABILITY AS A FORCE FOR DISMANTLING TEACHING & LEARNING HIERARCHIES

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One of the beauties of the academic calendar is that each semester, we begin again. There is a cyclical rhythm to our work at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring that repeats this return to the beginning after doing and reflecting. Certainly in the Student Pedagogical Consultant (SPC) program at Arcadia University, the processes of pedagogical partnership and faculty-student co-creation follow this cycle of engagement, reflection, and re-engagement. In this essay, we describe how embracing vulnerability again and again in an effort to dismantle the teaching and learning hierarchies that surround us generates an aliveness in learning that is transformative and worth sustaining. In an attempt to simulate the collaborative and sometimes messy nature of how we do this work at Arcadia, we have divided the essay into three sections, each of which centers one of our voices and our position. Rather than provide a strictly chronological history of the program, we have each tried to narrate our unique relationship to it and how we've tried to embody the theories and values that undergird it. The result, like the work we do, is nonhierarchical, recursive, and somewhat difficult to describe.

Describing Describing (Daniel Pieczkolon)

As the Faculty Administrative Fellow for the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring (CTLM), I find that a good deal of my work is in imagining and then trying to describe our programming to others. This is particularly difficult when it comes to our Student Pedagogical Consultant (SPC) program. It is, admittedly, not nearly as difficult as the work that our faculty and student pairs are engaging in—trying to dismantle the hierarchy of the classroom in search of a co-constructed pedagogy that can not only “meet students where they are,” but also help them begin to move toward where they want and need to be—but I do struggle sometimes to describe this work to others. Here is the description we provide faculty and students when soliciting participants:

Arcadia's Student Pedagogical Consulting Program (SPC) offers the opportunity for a student and a faculty member to collaborate as partners, reflecting on and revising pedagogies for a specific class. The SPC program has allowed students and faculty from departments across campus the opportunity to collaborate in new & exciting ways. Here are some types of work that students & faculty have engaged in in this program:

- *Implementing anti-racist policies, practices, and approaches.*
- *Piloting inclusive additions to syllabi.*
- *Practicing in-the-moment self-reflection and course revision.*

- *Fostering open & honest classroom discussions.*
- *Developing discipline-specific student learning resources.*
- *Empowering student voices through student-led feedback sessions.*
- *Improving student engagement & retention—both within disciplines and the university at large.*

On its surface, Arcadia’s program looks like so many other programs and partnerships that are more common in higher education, perhaps most notably the professor/teaching assistant relationship. It is meaningfully different, though—in both its value proposition and its structure. And now that I’ve backed myself into the corner of trying to describe what it’s like to try to describe this program, I think the only way out—or at least the only way I know out—may be an obscure metaphor.

[Are you familiar with the way that AI image generators often struggle to produce “realistic” images of hands?](#) There are a number of fascinating reasons for this phenomenon that I won’t go into here, but I really like the explanation that the computer scientist Peter Bentley has for lay people: “They’ve got the hang of the general idea of a hand. It has a palm, fingers and nails but none of these models actually understand what the full thing is.” This is precisely how so many people (mis)understand the SPC program. They are familiar with its component parts—faculty, students, “consultants” or “assistants”—but, in an attempt to understand them, they apply a hierarchical framework. They presume that the consultant is there to “assist” the faculty member in achieving their goals. This presumption limits and distorts the possibilities of the partnership. It assembles the constituent elements into something that looks like a hand, but is not, in fact, a hand.

In *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*, Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten offer a foundational definition of student-faculty partnership that many programs (including ours) are still working toward today: “A collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7). When presenting this theoretical framework to faculty members and students participating in the program, we try to emphasize that a student’s position is, in and of itself, a form of expertise. The average student at Arcadia University will engage in four different classes each week that stretch across departments, programs, curriculums, pedagogies, and personalities. These experiences in so many different learning environments form a repository from which a student pedagogical consultant and their faculty member can mine, synthesize, and refine to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment in this particular course. In some of our pairings in chemistry and physics, students have drawn upon their experiences in more seminar style humanities courses to help professors imagine ways in which they can incorporate elements of discussion and active learning in their classrooms. In some of our pairings in English courses, students have brought their experience with non-traditional, non-canonical texts to help professors expand how we think and talk about literature in the 21st century.

Moreover, as Cook-Sather et al.(2014) note, the effects of engaging in this type of partnership are not limited to the discreet faculty-student consulting pairs and their time together either. Many faculty members who have participated have noted that this reconsidering of hierarchy and power in the construction of a course has bled into their other courses. They come away from the experience eager to investigate the assumptions that their pedagogy is built upon and how those assumptions are communicated to students (through syllabi, assignment sheets, assessment methods, the physical classroom construction, etc.). Similarly, students—who are paid to think about learning in the context of a class where they aren’t receiving a grade—come away with a framework to more actively engage their own education (and career goals).

Building upon the work of Cook-Sather, Bovill, Felten, and so many others, at Arcadia, we’ve tried to approach our leadership of the program with the same values and attitudes we hope to instill in its participants. Our SPC program was initially conceived in the Summer of 2020 by then-CTLTM Faculty Fellow Jonathan Church. After Jonathan cycled off the CTLTM, it was shepherded by Katherine Moore and Prash Naidu. I was brought onto the project after Katherine and Prash left the CTLTM, and the idea was that I—as a Faculty Fellow—would take over their leadership roles. I felt inadequate, though. I had only seen (and admired) the program from afar and never directly participated in it. As an undergraduate, Leigh Ferrier had served as an SPC multiple times, though, and she had just decided to stay on at Arcadia for her MA/MFA in English & Creative Writing (and at the CTLTM as a Graduate Student Fellow). It felt natural to me—and our Director, Ellen Skilton, agreed—that Leigh should lead the project. She had the experience. She had done the research. She was best-equipped to understand what the project needed to grow, evolve, and mature—in much the same way that students often have the best sense of what they need to learn successfully. Leigh’s leadership of the program is one way in which we can embody the values that the program is seeking to impart. In other words, we can’t use old notions of hierarchy to dismantle smaller instances of that hierarchy.

The work that I do with Leigh now is primarily administrative. We write calls to go out to [students](#) and [faculty](#) who may be interested in participating in the program. We review and organize (and beg for funding for) the pairs as best we can. We reflect upon and revise [the SPC Orientation Packet](#) that we provide pairs at the beginning of each semester. We schedule ongoing check-in meetings so that we can understand and [document](#) just what it is that they’re doing in the classroom. We collect [feedback](#) and [advice](#) from each semester’s participants at the end of the semester. This all sounds very unsexy—and it is—but it’s also provided me the opportunity to bear witness to what can happen when a hierarchy has been destabilized. I routinely watch Leigh and our student pedagogical consultants command meeting spaces with faculty and staff with a confidence and composure that would have been impossible for me as an undergraduate student. I now look at my own syllabi and assignment sheets searching for where I’ve left some vestige of hierarchy unexamined or where I’ve assumed something about my students and their learning without seeking their input. And I imagine this—students feeling more empowered and faculty feeling more inclined to reflect and self-examine—is true to some regard for everyone who passes through this program.

There is still so much work for us to do, and we’re clumsily navigating how to expand the program in scope and ambition, but I think there’s a lot to learn from what we’ve already done to

arrive at this place where we have a student-led program about centering students in their own learning.

Learning to Lead and Leading by Learning (Leigh Ferrier)

When I first received the email inviting me to apply to the Student Pedagogical Consultant Program, I was excited because I was eagerly waiting for something like this to come my way, I just didn't know it yet. At the stage in my life where this opportunity came to me, I was saying "yes" to a lot of things. I'd returned to school after a huge gap, transferred to Arcadia, and decided that I was going to be open to any opportunity that came my way because I needed to start transitioning from person-who-had-held-many-different-jobs to dedicated academic. When I read the description for the position, it checked boxes—it seemed like an experience that would provide invaluable insight into my intended career, a boost to my resume, and allow me to work with a professor whose pedagogy I'd already begun to admire. I was saying yes to opportunities that I thought could boost my resume, provide experience, or offer me some new insight, but this role really stood out as something different. I didn't even know I was interested in this kind of work until I was invited to apply—I just didn't know it existed.

I've developed the ability to enter things without creating expectations for myself, so when I first stepped into this role, I did as I usually do and left expectations at the door and went in with an open mind. I knew I'd be "working" with a professor in their course and sitting in and observing, but I didn't know what that really meant or how large of a role I'd be able to play, and I didn't know that I'd also assist in helping my faculty partner address his own pedagogy and that we would both have these moments of metacognition where we both had the opportunity to think about the ways in which we teach and learn—faculty and student. There were guidelines for the role and expectations, sure, but the idea of genuine collaboration alongside a faculty member in *their* course was difficult to imagine before I was actually involved.

Throughout these partnerships, in different ways, I learned how reflective pedagogy can be, and that came as kind of a surprise. I'd been invited "behind the scenes" and into a space that a lot of students don't have access to. There is vulnerability in this space, transparency, and an opportunity for the student to understand what really goes into a course, while also offering an opportunity for the professor to not only explain their choices but also question and evaluate them. This access and this work also helped me to shed some of my own preconceived notions and stereotypes about academia. When I was younger, I really felt that being in a college environment would stifle me. I consider myself a sort of unconventional or free-spirited person, and I didn't think the rigidity of a classroom suited me. Now, as a graduate student, I've found that my experience in higher education has contributed significantly to my personal growth, and it's allowed more flexibility than I previously thought possible. A university is still an institution, so there are obviously some things in place that are less flexible than course content. However, before taking on this role, I didn't realize that flexibility and the college classroom could be complementary at all.

It can be kind of a scary and vulnerable thing for a faculty member to admit that something wasn't working or to reflect on an aspect of the course that they once viewed as sacred or

untouchable. I didn't expect to see this kind of transparency or vulnerability as a student until I re-enrolled in college and saw some of those professors who were willing to challenge the hierarchy a bit through partnerships like these, and it really was refreshing. I think seeing this vulnerability in my professors has allowed me to be a little more vulnerable myself. I'm an introvert, and I can be an extroverted-introvert, but I'm not a sharer—I don't typically divulge information without being prompted, but there were times when I felt inspired to share something about my own unique journey with my classmates or with a professor because I saw that it has the power and potential to help someone else.

During my work as a Student Pedagogical Consultant, I had the opportunity to work in three different courses with Matt Heitzman, some courses multiple times, over two years. I also had the opportunity to work in a first-year writing course with Rachel Collins. The courses with Matt were all sophomore-, junior-, and senior-level courses and were all English literature. A first-year writing course will often have a large enrollment since it's a required course for all undergraduate students. Still, because these students are new and they often haven't had the opportunity to build a close-knit community yet, and combined with the varying majors, these courses offer their own unique challenges. Building community was a huge focus of our work together. It was important for the students to have a space where they could feel comfortable participating in class and discussing ideas or topics related to social justice.

When I was in this course, an entirely new first-year writing curriculum was also being piloted, and one of the new additions to the syllabus was the use of contract grading instead of a traditional grading system. This form of grading requires students to engage in discussion with the professor about their class-wide collaborative contract, allowing them to make decisions about how their own work will be graded. This was new to me as well as the students, but when I observed the exchange, I saw how much vulnerability and transparency it takes to be successful with this kind of grading or any kind of alternative grading. Rachel Collins included the students in a massive part of the class, inviting them on a journey that may involve failure—utilizing a new system or technique in class does not guarantee success—and in turn, letting them see a little bit of what goes into the grading process.

In my work with Rachel, we discussed course-specific concerns like the nuances between a B and a B+ or what to do when a student misses a large portion of class due to unexpected circumstances. At the same time, we tried to navigate how the new grading system worked with the goals of destabilizing hierarchy and racial inequity in the classroom, and we worked on brainstorming alternative participation and community building, including how and where to scale back on reading material to make room for these things. Rachel was much more versed in the theories and applications of contract grading, but I still felt like I had valuable input as someone new to the conversation. Even just as an observer of the day-to-day in class, I continually felt like I was learning about the ways pedagogy could feel progressive.

In the upper-level courses with Matt Heitzman, I was also seeing that progressive pedagogy, but the courses with students who know each other and have relationships with each other act differently and require a different focus. In the first-year writing course, the curriculum is a little more difficult to change in the moment because it's taught by multiple instructors at the same time, and consistency in content has proven to help with retention. Literature classes have a bit

more flexibility and I was able to see that in real time in British Literature when we challenged the English literary canon to make room for diversity in the syllabus. I witnessed Matt offer the class an opportunity to engage directly with the changes being made and be a part of the larger discussion, including having a discussion about an antiracist framework that would eventually become a permanent part of the class and the larger English curriculum. Matt also made space throughout the course for anonymous feedback in what we called “break-out sessions.” Inspired by Zoom “break out” rooms we used so much in 2020, my two fellow consultants and I would lead a discussion after Matt left the room about the course. We would meet beforehand and put together specific questions to ask the class, but we also left space open for comments or suggestions.

Being open to suggestions from your students is a vulnerable act. We were opening the floor for total honesty, yet, what we often found was that the students were very happy. This particular class was a large one for Arcadia, so as a group, we were trying to find alternative ways to get the entire class to participate. We opened the floor up to the class in one of these break-out sessions, and from that we received a suggestion for a Socratic seminar. This was something that none of us as student pedagogical consultants or Matt had experience with, but we tried it out, letting the knowledgeable students in the class lead. In another act of trust, we also put together a class Discord channel to offer students a space to channel their thoughts related and unrelated to course content. We tried to mimic another aspect of Zoom that we all agreed had been helpful for quiet students: the chat. Real life does not have a chat, so we tried creating one, and I saw it used in several different literature courses. The Discord served multiple purposes like acting as another way to build community, encouraging the quiet students to chime in, and working as a discussion board outside of class. Overall, I felt that it was a successful tool, even if some people got distracted or off-topic from time to time. I’ve seen plenty of professors create policies regarding laptop or cell phone usage in class, and Matt not only trusted his students with using their devices appropriately, but he gave them an avenue to pour their thoughts into, which I think did help the flow of conversation in class at times.

One of the biggest questions I get about this work is how it relates to, acts like, or is a Teaching Assistant or Graduate Assistant role. As Daniel has already said, it’s difficult to explain exactly what this work is sometimes because it is ever-changing and fluid, but what I often try to tell people is how collaboration and co-creation separate this program from others. In TA or GA roles, students are working for professors, and that’s to be expected in the typical hierarchy of academia. What is so groundbreaking about this work is the opportunity for students and faculty members to work *with* each other. Again, this is something that requires vulnerability. As a collaborative team, both student and faculty members have to be open to each other’s suggestions and be willing to speak openly and respectfully. I, as a student pedagogical consultant, have to realize that not everything I suggest or come up with will be utilized in class, even if I believe it to be a great idea. I also have to be willing to speak my mind to someone who I previously believed knows more than me regarding absolutely everything English and academia. My faculty partner, on the other hand, has to still be open to those suggestions as well as feedback that we’ve collected, and also be willing to be in constant communication about their course. They have to be willing to kill their darlings sometimes and remove course content they really want to teach to make room for other content that serves the students in perhaps a better

way. That being said, the purpose isn't to remove the joy from teaching, it's about meeting students where they are, and sometimes that requires change.

When I transitioned from a student consultant into the leader of this program, I stepped into a different partnership. Even though I wasn't working directly in the classroom anymore, I was still taking part in co-creation by building this program alongside my colleagues at the CTLM. I call myself the leader of this program, as some other people also generously do, but truthfully, I'm a co-leader—I've consistently been part of a team. I don't do anything on my own, and I think that's worth noting because while I have made some preliminary decisions on my own, there are always people there to back me up and challenge me.

When I stepped into the leadership role, the program had existed for a couple of years, but there weren't any solid foundations in place. The work was continuing to happen on its own, but we found as new students and faculty wanted to participate, we didn't quite have anything to give them yet beyond my attempt at explaining things verbally. With the help of Daniel, Ellen, and other student, staff, and faculty support within the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring, I was able to address the issues that I'd begun to make note of as a participant. I had the insight and support I needed to be an effective leader, even if leading and building a program like this was something I'd never done, and addressing the areas where the program felt like it needed more development didn't feel impossible even if it was new to me.

While we had loosely incorporated some systems for feedback within this program, we hadn't fully utilized them yet until the end of the semester when I worked in the first-year writing course Thought & Expression I. Daniel and I agreed that feedback was going to be paramount in moving the program forward. We used Google Forms at the end of each semester to acquire some feedback already, but we began to get more specific with our questions to try and address areas where the program felt lacking. It had been suggested that we develop some sort of orientation, and we did because we agreed that it was a great idea. It was reaffirmed through this feedback that people also wanted some kind of documentation—some sort of explanation of what this program was, examples of work, and something to help further visualize what a partnership with a student consultant would look like. That's when I knew we had to establish something more concrete if we wanted to see sustainability in this program.

In the [SPC Orientation Packet](#), we have several sections including a definition of the program, examples of work in different departments, suggested best practices, and how the program itself relates to the values of the CTLM. One thing that still needs to be added is a section about benefits. It dawned on me as this semester's round of participants wrapped up their work—it's important that people understand the benefits, regardless of the outcome. Work like this is often weighed by certain accomplishments or goals being met, but this is the kind of work that's difficult to evaluate in that way. As someone who has worked in a partnership and has witnessed successful partnerships, the benefits start with just being willing to take on this experience. It's not about what happens at the end of the semester—some work is finished in one but most work is often not—it's about the experience as a whole, and I think that's been one of the most important realizations. Often in academia, we look to statistics, numbers, and results to quantify these kinds of programs and prove that they're worthwhile to continue funding, but the value of this program can't really be measured in that way (we've tried!). While statistics do have their

own value, at its core, the SPC program is about human-to-human interaction and transformation, and these are the elements that really work to destabilize the hierarchy.

Who Gets to Know Things? (Ellen Skilton)

It was the fall of 1983, and I arrived as a scared young woman from the Harrisburg, PA, suburbs at Earlham College as a first-year student. I had come from a traditional public high school, had done “well,” but really only felt connected to school when I was at play practice. In theater, my role as part of an ensemble and the kinds of connections and risks it required were an invitation to being alive. At Earlham, during my first semester, I was selected to be one of the student representatives on the Admissions Committee and found, for the first time, that my student status mattered less than my contributions to the discussion. And my expertise as someone who had just gone through the process myself was valued and seen as an essential part of the work the committee was doing.

During this same initial semester of college, I and all of my peers were in a Humanities course where each student was expected to submit a 3-page paper every Monday on the book for that week. Three things happened that had never happened before: 1) it was expected I would write using “I”, 2) I was required to include connections to my own life and experiences in relation to the ideas in the focal text, and 3) every week, I and 3 other students read and commented on each other’s writing. It was as if we all had meaningful experiences to share as part of our academic work and we all had the capacity to give meaningful feedback. After these kinds of experiences, I couldn’t go back. I drank up the possibility that my ideas and words—and those of all students—mattered to both peers and professors—and maybe even to the world.

If we fast forward to the spring of 2020—37 years after my awakening to the power of teaching and learning across traditional hierarchies—the birth of CTLM and the SPC program were imminent. Arcadia had convened groups of faculty and staff to talk about what a Teaching and Learning Center might make possible on campus. Two things became immediately clear. First, this new center was—according to the then-new Provost—like a Rorschach Test. Everyone envisioned the ways that it could address any number of specific and pedagogical and personal disconnections on campus. Second, one of our goals had to be to connect the dots across campus—wonderful things were happening and there were committed, devoted staff, faculty and students doing them, but only in isolation. They like to say that the cure to addiction isn’t abstinence, it’s connection. For the modern university, connection also seems like one of the most important and least available commodities.

The final meeting to gather input on community dreams for the center was during the first week of March. By March 13th, everything had shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On June 1st of 2020, the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring was born. From the start, we wanted the Center to be a place for students, staff, and faculty and we wanted to create student positions that included what Alison Cook-Sather and others have called “agentive engagement” (Cook-Sather & Reynolds, 2021). That is, we wanted student, staff, and faculty fellows to brainstorm, co-plan, co-create, and implement together. Ironically, the pandemic made that possibility even more available than it would have been if we had been able to be face to face.

Without the physical structures—buildings, rooms, departments on the other side of campus, students who had multiple summer job possibilities, we were able to use the enforced fluidity of the lockdown to begin working together in a much less hierarchical way—not just because we wanted to but because we had to.

By definition, that early work required cross-unit collaborations. How were we all going to shift to online teaching, learning, and mentoring when so many of us had never done it before? And our audiences necessarily required engagement and commitment from all sectors of campus. Our first SPCs began working in the Biology and Anthropology Departments right away. In the STEM disciplines, there was growing concern about the failure rate in intro courses and how students from minoritized backgrounds were faring less well than others. In Anthropology, we had a faculty member who was also a Faculty Fellow at CTLM who had been part of this kind of student-faculty collaboration previously and was excited to work in partnership with students on his own courses as Biology faculty and students worked to rethink the ways that Biology 101 was taught and learned.

As we created video materials for students about how to navigate online learning, it was only natural that students were co-creating and starring in those videos. Students were talking to students about what worked! At the same time, we were reeling from the murder of George Floyd and were co-designing and implementing a new program called the Living Our Values Experience (LOVE) in which graduate and undergraduate students, staff and faculty were engaged in working to increase our individual capacity and the capacity of the university to do antiracist work. In affinity and non-affinity groups, students were co-leaders and co-facilitators and our planning team included student, staff, and faculty fellows as well. As we worked to implement this program, student experiences and insights were at the center of our work together.

My early college experiences and the specific needs of the university during the pandemic shaped my orientation to being the faculty director of our new Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring (CTLM), but what else had fueled this orientation in the intervening 37 years? In graduate school, I was profoundly influenced by Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith's work (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on viewing teachers as researchers—the idea that research was not solely the purview of scholars in the ivory tower, but also of those who were doing the work in classrooms with students every day. As an adult educator at the time (in adult literacy and immigrant/refugee organizations), I participated in several Practitioner Inquiry Groups in which each of us was investigating a question about our own teaching practices. The inquiry into our own practices was a profound learning experience, but the collaboration and community among the adult educators in the room was even more exciting. Here, we were building knowledge together across the sites in which we taught and honing our capacity to be experts about our own practices—to know that reflection on our own practices was a deep source of knowledge.

In this work and in other opportunities to collaborate with peers not just to consume knowledge but to co-create it, the idea that flattened hierarchies create the most dynamic and relevant knowledge for teaching practice was reinforced. If the roots of my commitment to co-creating were in my role as a student, the clarity and justification I found in practitioner inquiry for

generating contextualized knowledge *with* known others rather than findings for strangers sealed the deal. In traditionally hierarchical university educational contexts, students and teachers can and should be the ultimate knowers of the possibilities in their shared classroom contexts. Contextualized and non-hierarchical knowledge generation—and teaching practice—are at the heart of my experiences and beliefs about how we do meaningful teaching, learning, and professional development.

So many of us who are drawn to this work have experienced the power of pedagogical partnership—and the necessity of vulnerability and conviction in doing and sustaining co-creation in historically and powerfully hierarchical contexts. The question of how we sustain this work is an important one. In one way, the work is self-sustaining in that the energy produced by these partnerships fuels such growth for both faculty and students. On the other hand, so many details have to come together in such alignment, that ongoing attention to how the work is organized and gets done feels vital. For us, it is important not to equate structure with systems that obscure the most important leaders, knowers and creators on campus—students. Leigh’s insistence that we do summer training, create an orientation packet, and document our work has been an essential component of our ability to generate and re-generate enthusiasm. In fact, although it may seem counter-intuitive, our capacity to move from beginning to beginning each semester is predicated on creating equitable structures that, at their core, resist the hierarchies we are trying to dismantle. Nonhierarchical structures that require student expertise and leadership at the center allow for changes beyond any individual person or class and help create and maintain the powerful energy necessary for sustaining real and dynamic learning in higher education.

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