Individuals with credentials beyond a high school diploma are generally more successful in the workforce, working and earning more than those with no postsecondary education and training. Higher education is seen as a productive path to a good job, but earning a four-year degree isn't always necessary. Community colleges offer training for in-demand jobs through programs of study that take two years or less to complete. Recent federal investments in community colleges support the development of education and training programs that meet adult learners’ needs to gain skills and credentials that employers seek. In this brief, part of the Beyond High School initiative (box 1), we first provide an overview of community colleges and the challenges they face in providing workforce education and training programs. Then we describe some of the workforce innovations community colleges are developing to build their capacity and better serve students. Finally, we discuss the federal grants that invest in community colleges’ workforce education and training efforts and what can be learned from these experiences to shape future workforce and community college policy and practice.¹

BOX 1

Beyond High School: Education and Training

Beyond High School is an Urban Institute initiative that examines ways for individuals, especially disadvantaged adults and youth and nontraditional students, to get the skills they need to survive and thrive. The need for postsecondary education and training has been growing for several decades. Our researchers study community college innovations; apprenticeship and other workforce development approaches; supports for parents who pursue postsecondary education and training; and higher education access, affordability, and success. Through this initiative, we contribute to today’s policy discussions and inform implementation of postsecondary approaches through rigorous research on education and training issues and evaluation of postsecondary strategies. We also use briefs, blog posts, websites, and convenings to translate the evidence for many audiences.
Workforce Education and Training at Community Colleges

More than 900 community colleges were established between 1950 and 2006, and now nearly every US county has a community college campus (Mellow and Heelan 2008). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), over 12 million students enroll in community colleges every year seeking education and training. Many students enter community college to gain skills and credentials needed to succeed in the current job market. They may enroll in and complete programs lasting two years or less (if attending full-time) and go directly into the labor market; others continue to a four-year institution to earn a four-year degree.

Many students start at community colleges because they pose fewer barriers to entry: they offer less costly tuition, remedial support, and a potentially shorter time frame for training that helps them get a job (Bailey and Morest 2006; Mellow and Heelan 2008). In 2014, community college students earning an associate’s degree could expect nearly $9,000 more in median annual earnings than high school graduates without college experience, and nearly $20,000 more in median annual earnings than those who did not complete high school.²

Some recent studies have shown that positive employment and earnings effects come from enrolling in and completing programs at community colleges that teach technical skills that directly lead to a job (Bailey and Belfield 2012; Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 2005; Jepsen, Troske, and Coomes 2014; Stevens, Kurlaender, and Grosz 2015). In addition, some evidence suggests that programs that award certificates also have positive employment outcomes, although the findings for short-term certificates are mixed (Jepsen, Troske and Coomes 2014; Xu and Trimble 2014).

Community colleges have been a major training provider for the public workforce system since long before the emergence of the federal investments discussed in this brief. When Congress passed federal legislation for the first iteration of today’s public workforce system in the 1960s, community colleges were already growing in number and responding to the rising demand for workforce education and training (Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Mellow and Heelan 2008). Now, training dollars allocated to states from the $3.3 billion Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) annual appropriation often go to community colleges through individual training vouchers, contracts, and grants.³ The public workforce system serves as a revenue source for community colleges, and many colleges have further expanded their roles as training providers in response (Jacobson et al. 2011).⁴

Despite an expanding role in workforce education and training, community colleges often lack the capacity to successfully serve students. Community colleges serve a disproportionate number of disadvantaged students who are underprepared for college, contributing to low completion rates (Bailey and Morest 2006; Bragg and Durham 2012; Holzer and Baum, forthcoming; Jacobs and Grubb 2006; Mellow and Heelan 2008). Decreases in government funding since the Great Recession and state financing structures that discourage providing more expensive career and technical programs of study exacerbate community colleges’ challenge to sustain and scale workforce education and training.
(Foster, Klein, and Elliott 2014; State Higher Education Executive Officers 2016). Further, community colleges are often criticized for not aligning the skills taught and the credentials earned with employers' workforce needs and for not being nimble enough to respond to technological advances and industry shifts that affect occupational requirements (Dougherty 1994; MacAllum and Yoder 2004; Zeidenberg and Bailey 2010).

Recent Innovations at Community Colleges

To address these issues, community colleges have been testing new ways to increase student success and to increase their capacity to provide more effective workforce education and training. These approaches may involve instructional design, credentialing, and student supports for workforce education and training; they may also involve developing new partnerships within and outside the college to better align programs with employer needs and to help support student success in college and the workforce.

One overarching reform of workforce education and training at community colleges is the advent of the career pathways model. Although the model has many definitions, it is generally thought of as a framework for developing systems and programs that help adults and youth gain skills and credentials along an articulated pathway within a particular occupation or industry that 1) are in demand by employers and 2) can be continually built upon for educational and career advancement (Center for Law and Social Policy 2014; Clagett and Uhalde 2012; Fein 2012; Manhattan Strategy Group 2016; Werner et al. 2013). The model has gained such traction that WIOA requires that states develop and implement career pathways as a part of their state and local workforce systems. (Box 2 provides a detailed definition of career pathways under WIOA.) Many community college systems and individual colleges have been piloting career pathways and changing their workforce education and training programs to reflect the key elements of the model (Anderson et al. 2016; Center for Law and Social Policy 2014).

BOX 2

Career Pathways Definition from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014

The term "career pathway" means a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that

- aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the state or regional economy involved;
- prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships registered under the Act of August 16, 1937;
- includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual's education and career goals;
includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;

organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;

enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and

helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.


In addition to and sometimes as a part of career pathways, community college innovations include a range of reform efforts that build colleges’ capacity to prepare youth and adults for the workforce. A few examples are as follows:

- **Competency-based education:** Unlike the traditional credit-hour model, students demonstrate a mastery of academic and technical content, and coursework is self-paced and modularized to ensure flexibility and allows students to accelerate progress. Institutions may confirm content mastery through examinations or projects reviewed by instructors. Strategies as a part of competency-based education may include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early-college high schools, and project-based and community-based learning.

- **Contextualized instruction:** This type of instruction integrates traditional academic content (e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics) with instruction teaching general workplace or occupational skills (such as nursing or manufacturing technology). Instruction is designed to help students who may need additional assistance to successfully complete a workforce education and training program. Contextualized instruction can reduce the need for developmental courses, which require additional time and expense for students to complete.

- **Credit for prior learning or work experience:** Credit is awarded by an institution of higher education based on an assessment of prior learning and work experience. This approach can help individuals save time and money by reducing the number of courses they need to complete a program of study (Manhattan Strategy Group 2016). For example, veterans may receive credit for the training they received while serving in the military, and students in college-sponsored noncredit programs may retroactively receive credit upon completion of an industry-recognized credential.

- **Career navigation:** This supportive service provides career counseling and assessment to help students both gain the skills and credentials they need for the workforce and find and retain a job after completing a program of study. Career navigation can be self-guided (often through
online tools) or provided by a professional. Strong career navigation is tailored to the local labor market demand and students’ goals and needs, and navigation is often accomplished through partnerships with colleges, employers, and the workforce system.  

- **Sector or industry partnership:** A group of industry, education, workforce, and other stakeholders create a public-private partnership to develop strategies that address the workforce needs of a particular industry sector. State or local workforce development boards often serve as a convener (Manhattan Strategy Group 2016). These efforts may produce new industry-recognized credentials, increased availability or changes to education and training programs to address industry needs, or public-private collaborations to seek external funding for strategies.

Community colleges are implementing and participating in these and many other strategies as a part of federally funded grants. These initiatives are discussed next.

**Investing in Community Colleges: Grants to Build Capacity for Workforce Education and Training**

Several federal investments in workforce education and training have focused on building community colleges' capacity to train individuals for careers in high-growth industries. Capacity building is defined as “strategies designed to expand the number and quality of training and education programs for workers and to increase the capacity of the workforce in occupations in the targeted sectors” (Eyster et al. 2010). Capacity-building activities often include

- developing curricula and other instructional materials for new or enhanced programs of study;
- creating career pathways programs;
- working with industry representatives to design credentials that would be formally recognized by employers in an industry;
- negotiating articulation agreements from noncredit to for-credit programs or from two-year to four-year institutions;
- purchasing new equipment or building training facilities;
- using technology for training (e.g., distance learning or simulation laboratories);
- improving student support services to address academic, career, and personal needs; and
- building partnerships within and outside the college to support students and align programs with industry needs.
A key goal of these capacity-building efforts for community colleges is to then scale and sustain the activities that are successful, including newly developed or enhanced programs of study, supportive services, and partnerships.

In the 2000s, federal agencies, particularly the US Department of Labor (DOL), invested in workforce education and training program development that provided skills and credentials for in-demand jobs, especially programs at community colleges. The federal government provided investments in capacity building for improving workforce education and training primarily through competitive grant mechanisms as opposed to permanent funding streams. To receive grant funding, community colleges and other eligible institutions and agencies submitted applications describing proposed grant activities and agreed to comply with reporting and evaluation requirements. Box summarizes major federal grant investments to date.

**BOX 3**

Summary of Federal Grant Investments Supporting Community Colleges

**HIGH GROWTH JOB TRAINING INITIATIVE**

Sponsoring agency: US Department of Labor  
Target population: Adults and youth  
Award years: 2001–08  
Length of grants: 6 months to 5 years  
Total funding: $300 million  
Number of grants: 172  
Grant recipients: Industry groups or associations, community colleges, nonprofit training providers, and state workforce agencies  
Purpose: To provide industry-focused training and capacity-building models and approaches to expand the skilled workforce needed by high-growth and high-demand economic industries

**COMMUNITY-BASED JOB TRAINING GRANTS**

Sponsoring agency: US Department of Labor  
Target population: Adults and youth  
Award years: 2005–10  
Length of grants: 3 years  
Total funding: $622 million  
Number of grants: 320  
Grant recipients: Community colleges, technical colleges, state community college systems and districts, workforce investment boards, local workforce agencies, and “one-stop” career centers  
Purpose: To address a critical capacity shortage at community and technical colleges to train workers for high-growth occupations and to help strengthen an industry’s regional competitiveness

**HEALTH PROFESSION OPPORTUNITY GRANTS**

Sponsoring agency: US Department of Health and Human Services  
Target population: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families participants and low-income adults  
Award year: 2010 and 2015 (two rounds)  
Length of grants: 5 years
Total funding: $125 million
Number of grants: 64
Grant recipients: States, Indian tribes or tribal organizations, institutions of higher education, local workforce investment boards, and community-based organizations
Purpose: To provide training programs in high-demand health care professions to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families recipients and other low-income individuals and to expand opportunities for economically disadvantaged individuals to obtain health care jobs while meeting growing employer demand for skilled health care workers

TRADE ADJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND CAREER TRAINING GRANT PROGRAM
Sponsoring agency: US Department of Labor
Target population: Trade Adjustment Assistance–eligible workers and other adults needing skills training
Award years: 2011–2014 (four rounds)
Length of grants: 3 to 4 years
Total funding: $2 billion
Number of grants: 256
Grant recipients: Institutions of higher education eligible for funding under the Higher Education Act (mainly community colleges and technical colleges)
Purpose: To provide eligible institutions of higher education with funds to expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career training programs of two years or less


DOL’s first federal investment occurred in 2001 under President George W. Bush. The High Growth Job Training Initiative (HGJTI) provided $300 million in grants to develop training programs that focused on high-demand, high-wage occupations within 14 sectors projected to experience high growth (Eyster et al. 2010). HGJTI did not focus specifically on community colleges, but they were recipients of about 17 percent of the 161 grants awarded from 2001 to 2007, second only to industry associations. In addition, community colleges provided much of the training for participants in HGJTI grant programs (Nightingale et al. 2008). DOL awarded grant funding to support training programs, capacity-building activities, or both training and capacity building. Grantees sought to improve instructional design, which included classroom time (in-person and online) as well as work-based learning opportunities, such as apprenticeships and internships, to support student success. Grantees targeted a range of individuals for training, including entry-level workers, youth, low-income workers, dislocated workers, and incumbent workers. A primary aspect of capacity building was the development of “meaningful and long-term partnerships with the workforce development system, local community colleges and other training institutions, employers, and a range of other organizations within a locality or region” (Eyster et al. 2010). These partnering efforts were precursors to the sector partnerships that are now being developed.
The second major DOL federal workforce investment, the Community-Based Job Training Grant (CBJTG) program, had a similar structure to HGJTI but focused specifically on training and building capacity at community colleges. A small share of grant recipients (less than 5 percent) were public workforce entities, but the remainder of the 320 grantees were institutions of higher education, mainly community colleges (Eyster et al. 2012). DOL awarded over $600 million in three-year grants from 2005 to 2010 to fund community college training and capacity building over a range of industries and target populations similar to those targeted by the HGJTI grants. Grantees focused on building new training facilities with the latest equipment and software, developing curricula that responded directly to employers’ workforce demands, funding and training new instructors, articulating noncredit to for-credit programs, and building partnerships with employers and the public workforce system.

More recent legislation under the Obama administration created two new federal grant programs focusing on workforce education and training: the Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) program and the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program. HPOG, funded under the Affordable Care Act and administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, awarded $67 million in 2010 to 32 grantees, 15 of which were community colleges (Anderson et al. 2014). These five-year grants were designed to train Temporary Assistance for Needy Families participants and other low-income adults for entry- or mid-level health care professions through career pathways. The goals of HPOG were to help participants gain skills and credentials needed for self-sufficiency and improve systems to meet industry demand for new health care workers. Grantees designed programs using innovative strategies that address the needs of disadvantaged students who often had family and work obligations while completing coursework. Community colleges often served as training providers for the HPOG grants even if the community college was not a grantee (Bernstein et al. 2016; Werner et al. 2016). A new round of HPOG grants totaling $58 million was awarded to 32 grantees in September 2015, with 11 community colleges awarded grants.10

The largest federal workforce grant initiative to date is TAACCCT, with a majority of the nation’s community colleges benefiting from the grant funding.11 Funded at $2 billion under the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, TAACCCT grants provide funding for community colleges and other eligible institutions to build their capacity for workforce education and training. TAACCCT grants required that capacity-building activities focus on the development of education and training programs offering degrees or certificates that take two years or less to complete. DOL required TAACCCT grantees to design programs to serve Trade Adjustment Assistance–eligible workers (individuals who lost their jobs because of foreign trade) and other adult learners, such as veterans and the long-term unemployed or underemployed. Grant recipients were required to use an evidence-based approach with a career pathways framework to develop programs of study focused on industries with a labor deficit. They were also asked to collaborate with the public workforce system, employers and industry, education and training providers, and others to ensure programs were meeting local needs and could be sustained after the grant ended. Beginning with the second round of grants, grantees were required to hire a third-party evaluator to study the implementation of the grant activities and estimate the outcomes and impacts of their grant program on participant outcomes, and all rounds of grantees must
participate in activities associated with a national evaluation of the TAACCCT grant effort. The first round of grants was awarded in 2011, the second in 2012, the third in 2013, and the final round in 2014 for a total of 256 grants. Each round of grants includes colleges in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Of the four grant programs discussed here, TAACCCT is the only one that does not allow grant funding to be used for participants’ tuition and fees or other costs of attendance.

The Obama administration has continued to support community colleges, encouraging partnerships that bring together workforce, education, and human service systems with employers and industry. In 2014, Vice President Joe Biden released a report that reviewed America’s job training programs and highlighted community colleges’ role in the workforce system. In this report and the President’s Fiscal Year 2015 budget, the administration proposed the Community College Job-Driven Training Fund, allocating $6 million over four years with one-third of the funds reserved for creating and developing apprenticeships (Biden 2014; US Department of Labor 2014). The goal for these investments was to increase the capacity of local communities to address employers’ workforce challenges, help job seekers train for and find jobs, and provide funding for new or updated education and training programs. The grant funds are geared toward partnerships composed of community colleges, public and nonprofit training entities, industry groups, and employers who want to create new training programs. The grant funding is also meant to facilitate the development of common credentials and skills assessments that will help employers identify qualified workers.

With a smaller investment than the proposed $6 billion, DOL has created new grant funding for apprenticeships, approaches that support parents in education and training, and innovations to train young people for high-tech jobs that involve community colleges, but they are not the main focus. Subsequent budget requests also included grant programs for workforce education and training, but none directly targeted community colleges (US Department of Labor 2015; US Department of Labor 2016b). Instead, the administration focused on offering free tuition to community college students.

**Learning to Date**

DOL and the US Department of Health and Human Services built in external national evaluations as a key component of the four grant initiatives, and findings from the HGJTI and CBJTG evaluations have been released. National evaluations for HPOG and TAACCCT and local external evaluations for each of grant rounds 2–4 are ongoing, with round 2 evaluations nearing completion.

The Urban Institute conducted implementation studies of both the HGJTI and CBJTG programs. Researchers found that the grant activities had a broad geographic reach and focused on high-growth industries in their regions, especially health care and advanced manufacturing. The grantees provided training for program participants, but many believed their efforts would be successful if they could create new pipelines of workers in their chosen industry over the long run by sustaining their programs. However, many saw challenges to doing so, particularly finding new funding once the grant ended. In developing and running these programs, grantees relied on diverse partnerships. Employer partnerships were particularly important, but in-depth case studies for HGJTI revealed that training providers had
difficulty engaging employers until the employer bought into the idea that the training would be high quality and would meet their needs. Employers were often hesitant to provide monetary resources, but nearly a quarter of CBJTG grantees convinced employers to provide training instructors, which they believed led to higher training completion rates and more success in participants achieving employment goals.

For both HGJTI and CBJTG, grantees implemented various education and training innovations, but they saw the use of online learning technology as particularly important to building their capacity. They also developed new curricula that directly addressed employers’ skills needs and created new credentials that identified individuals that had the required occupational skills. Grantees indicated that they were particularly successful in expanding the number of available training slots, developing new training programs, and attracting future workers to the industry.

The HGJTI evaluation included a nonexperimental analysis measuring the short-term impact of training on participants in five grantee sites. However, the analysis provided few definitive answers because of small sample sizes, a lack of reliable data, and imperfect comparison groups, which are all common challenges in evaluating grant programs. The pre-post data indicated that a positive change in short-run employment and earnings occurred for those that participated in the federally funded training. Descriptive analysis of the CBJTG programs showed that grantees that offered additional assistance, such as child care, personal or family counseling, English as a Second Language classes, and financial counseling, saw higher rates of meeting or being on track to meet their performance goals for student completion.

Evaluations of other federal grant programs are underway, with several reports on the first round of HPOG grants published. The HPOG implementation study for the first round of grants saw a wide range of health care training provided, with many partners such as community colleges involved in program operations (Bernstein et al. 2016; Werner et al. 2016). The study also found that the majority of participants completed their courses and, of those who completed, found jobs in health care (Werner et al. 2016). The participants, who were Temporary Assistance for Needy Families participants and low-income adults, generally received case management and other support services to help them succeed. Although the HPOG programs added capacity to their local area’s or region’s training availability with new or enhanced programming, it will be challenging to sustain these programs without continued funding and a strong partner network (Bernstein et al. 2016). Findings from a multisite randomized controlled trial of the first round of HPOG grants have yet to be released but will shed light on the effectiveness of the various career pathway approaches tested by grantees in the health care sector.

The TAACCCT program has a national evaluation across the grants and third-party evaluations for each grant in rounds 2–4, and most of these evaluation activities are ongoing. The goal of the national evaluation is to document and assess the capacity-building activities across all grants, with a special focus in round 4 on participant outcomes and employer engagement. The national evaluation has no impact study, but it will synthesize the implementation, outcomes, and impact findings from the third-party evaluations to identify trends and patterns that can inform workforce and community college policy and practice. A series of briefs providing an overall picture of the TAACCCT grants, their planned
activities, and early performance will be released in the near future. The first implementation report on rounds 1 and 2 is expected to be released in 2017. Some round 1 and 2 third-party evaluators have released findings, many of them posting reports on SkillsCommons.org. These reports offer implementation lessons, especially on the innovations discussed earlier, and some show positive outcomes and impacts for TAACCCT participants that enrolled in funded activities.¹⁶ Findings from the TAACCCT and other grant evaluations can greatly inform future federal efforts to develop innovative approaches for workforce education and training at community colleges.

Conclusions

The federal investments across the four grant programs highlighted in this brief totaled over $3 billion, with a majority of community colleges receiving federal funding for building capacity to provide workforce education and training. These investments, as well as several foundation initiatives, are changing the landscape of community colleges and how they prioritize and provide workforce education and training. Many community colleges are responding to the challenges they face with new approaches to teaching occupational skills, offering industry-recognized credentials, supporting student academic and workforce success, and partnering with industry and the public workforce system. More recent grant efforts have focused explicitly on public-private partnerships and employer engagement to support successful workforce education and training programs. However, the broader effects of these investments on students, college capacity, and regional workforce systems remain to be seen. They may become more apparent as large grant programs end and the more successful innovations are sustained and replicated.

Even with innovations that show evidence of success, however, sustainability can be a challenge, especially when there is not a permanent funding stream. Institutionalization of some of the workforce education and training at community colleges is likely, especially for credit-bearing programs, but ensuring that curricula and training equipment and facilities are updated as technology and industry requirements change are expenses that state funding structures and other revenue sources may not cover. Enhanced student support services are also difficult to sustain after the funding ends. Proposed free-tuition programs for community college students, such as America’s College Promise, would allow states and colleges to use a portion of the funding to improve community college programming but may not fully support sustaining and scaling workforce education and training.¹⁷

The passage of WIOA does offer hope to embed career pathway models and other sector approaches into state and local policy and practice. WIOA requires states to develop four-year plans that encourage state governments to be strategic with coordination between higher education and workforce systems. WIOA also explicitly emphasizes worker participation in career pathways and the attainment of industry-recognized and postsecondary credentials. That emphasis encourages states to facilitate college engagement with workforce structures and ensure effective programming is offered to WIOA participants by training providers such as community colleges. However, WIOA funding for training, as with previous workforce legislation, is extremely limited. Accordingly, the public workforce
system and community colleges need to find ways to partner and leverage other resources to provide workforce education and training. These grant programs encourage community colleges to create structures that allow for better alignment with workforce systems and employer needs on a permanent basis. In the long run, these efforts may help community colleges and the workforce system develop, implement, and sustain programs that give students the skills and credentials they need to succeed in the current labor market.

Notes

1. We do not address free community college tuition proposals or programs that states have started.
2. These numbers are based on authors’ calculations from the US Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Table Creator. Data are for persons ages 25 to 65 in all industries and all occupations.
3. See US Department of Labor (2016a) for more information on the fiscal year 2016 budget appropriations. The dollar amount does not include funding for Job Corps, because it is not a state-administered program.
4. See Eyster et al. (2015) for more information on local workforce systems and how the public workforce system and community colleges contribute to the various functions of the system.
5. Many of these terms can be found in the glossary of the Career Pathway Toolkit published by the US Department of Labor and Manhattan Strategy Group (Manhattan Strategy Group 2016).
8. More information on promising career navigation models can be found in Choitz, Soares, and Pleasants (2010).
9. Some early grants from DOL were not competitively awarded. See US Department of Labor (2007) for more information.
11. Community colleges could directly receive a grant or be part of a consortium of community colleges that received a grant.
12. The Urban Institute will soon release a series of briefs funded under a contract to evaluate the TAACCCT grant program; the briefs will focus on the TAACCCT grants, their planned activities, and their initial performance.
15. Findings from the HGJTI and CBJTG programs reported in this section are from Eyster et al. 2010 and Eyster et al. 2012.
16. See www.SkillsCommons.org for a catalog of reports from TAACCCT evaluators. Evaluators are also posting reports on their own websites.

References


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