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## The Happy Professor: Optimizing Faculty Fit in Counselor Education

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# The Happy Professor: Optimizing Faculty Fit in Counselor Education

## **Abstract**

Counselor education can be rewarding and challenging, and as such finding a complementary fit with a university is crucial to personal success and satisfaction. New faculty entering academia often experience reality shock when faced with the unexpected personal and professional demands of the job. This article is intended for those considering doctoral work in counselor education, as well as individuals pursuing academic positions following graduation from a counselor education doctoral program. The author reviews the faculty responsibilities within higher education and the importance of person-environment fit in the workplace, and offers suggestions for applicants seeking positions as counselor educators.

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## **Keywords**

higher education, counselor education, fit

Academia can be daunting – especially for new faculty. Today, universities are running more like businesses, with public and economic forces influencing decisions and changing expectations in higher education (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007). As a result, new faculty may experience what Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin (2000) identified as a type of reality shock wherein “what early-career faculty *hoped for* and *need* from their work life do not fully match what they actually experience over time” (p. 6). That gap between the expected nature and the reality of academic life can result in greater stress and negative outcomes such as burnout, reduced productivity, job dissatisfaction, and leaving a college/university or academia in general (Gappa et al., 2007; Lackritz, 2004). For those considering doctoral work or doctoral graduates seeking employment in counselor education, acquiring a more thorough understanding of the life of a faculty member before accepting their first teaching position could substantially mitigate the aforementioned reality shock. The purpose of this manuscript is to offer an outline of the structure and function of counselor education programs in higher education and the roles of scholarship, teaching, and service at various types of institutions. Finally, the importance of occupational wellness and goodness of fit between professor and institution is considered, with suggestions for creating a good fit.

### **Structure and function of Counselor Education programs**

Counselor education programs prepare master’s level professionals to work in schools, the community, and higher education (Vacc, 1991). Some programs also prepare doctoral students for work in higher education or for leadership positions within the profession (West, Bubenzer, Brooks, & Hackney, 1995). Unlike clinical psychology programs that require practitioners to complete a doctorate to practice independently (Norcross, Sayette, Mayne, Karg, & Turkson, 1998), master’s level graduates from counseling programs can achieve independent practice status

generally after two to three years and several thousand hours of supervised practice (American Counseling Association, 2016). Therefore, doctoral training for counselor educators focuses more on supervision, research and professional scholarship, leadership, and teaching (Altekruse, 1991; West et al., 1995; Zimpher, Cox, West, Bubenzer, & Brooks, 1997). Graduates earn a doctorate of philosophy (Ph.D.) or doctorate of education (Ed.D.) in Counselor Education and Supervision (Goodrich, Shin, & Smith, 2011), and, following graduation, students can seek employment as faculty members in counselor education programs.

Faculty responsibilities vary among universities, but most usually emphasize varying amounts of scholarship, teaching, and service (Davis, Heller Levitt, McGlothlin, & Hill, 2006). The emphasis on quantity of scholarship differs between programs and among universities. Some universities have strong research identities, whereas others place greater emphasis on teaching. Faculty in some counselor education programs may teach only graduate students; in other programs, faculty may teach undergraduate human services courses as well as graduate counseling courses. Service tends to be less highly valued in terms of promotion and tenure criteria; however, individuals may place higher value on service depending on their own professional identities. Fulfilling scholarship, teaching, and service expectations can be both challenging and rewarding depending on the expectations of the university and the interests of the individual.

Beyond the traditional expectations, counselor educators also serve as leaders in professional counseling organizations, consult professionally within the counseling community, participate in and lead community engagement projects, and provide clinical supervision. Counselor educators also advise and mentor others at various points in their career paths, such as bachelors-level students engaging in career exploration, master's students considering specialization or doctoral-level work, novice counselors learning the ropes of the profession,

doctoral students seeking employment, and new faculty members navigating work-life balance. Some of this variety reflects faculty members' autonomy to choose work they find meaningful.

To some degree, faculty have the independence to choose work congruent with personal and professional goals. The sense of meaning experienced in the workplace by faculty is enhanced when there is a good fit between the person and the environment and the duties in which they are engaged (Lindholm, 2003; Siegall & McDonald, 2004). In a study of faculty physicians, individuals who spent at least 20% of their time engaged in work they found meaningful had half the rate of burnout of those who spent less time on meaningful activities (Shanafelt et al., 2009). Further, Siegall and McDonald (2004) found that university faculty whose values conflicted with those of their university setting had higher burnout scores, spent less time on work activities, and reported greater intention to leave their positions.

Academia differs from other educational settings in many ways, including domains of assessment, work-related sources of stress, and flexibility of focus. Instructors in higher education are evaluated based on a combination of teaching, scholarship, and service (Davis et al., 2006), whereas teachers in kindergarten through high school environments (K-12) are evaluated primarily on student achievement (Farber, 2000). Student attitudes and behavior, student discipline problems, and parental expectations are significant stressors for K-12 teachers; however, university faculty ranked these factors lower or not at all (Byrne, 1991). Multiple studies suggest that the most frequently indicated work-related stresses in higher education are related to workload, time constraints, and balancing multiple roles (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Doyle & Hind, 1998; Gmelch et al., 1984; Hogan, Carlson, & Dua, 2002). Finally, unlike K-12 teachers, faculty members tend to have a high degree of flexibility in how they spend their time, both in

terms of number of hours worked and amount of time allotted to their job responsibilities – scholarship, teaching, and service (Siegall & McDonald, 2004).

## **Scholarship**

Scholarship is a defining activity for pursuing doctoral work; however, it is also ranked as one of the largest sources of stress (Abouserie, 1996; Byrne, 1991). Scholarship is the vehicle for sharing theoretical and empirical information with those inside and outside the profession. In higher education, research productivity is often measured by the number and type of publications (Townsend & Rosser, 2007). Depending on the institution, scholarship can include publication in peer-reviewed journals, publication of books and book chapters, presenting at conferences, providing workshops and trainings, offering consultation, participating in other speaking engagements, grant writing, creating online materials, and reviewing other materials or agencies (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). In addition to career advancement expectations involving research, the counseling profession recognizes the need for counselor educators to be proficient researchers so that they can design counseling and education strategies that are maximally effective (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008; ACA, 2014).

The admonition to “publish or perish” is increasingly prevalent in many universities. The pressure to publish may encompass a variety of stressors, such as a lack of control over the publication process (in comparison to control one has in teaching and service; Davis et al., 2006), anxiety about and/or dislike for statistics and research (Perepiczka, Chandler, & Becerr, 2011), and pressure from the university (Byrne, 1991). These diverse stressors produce a level of anxiety and pressure to publish that, for some faculty, may be counterproductive to productivity (Magnuson, 2002). Although the pressure to publish and associated stress can be overwhelming

for some, developing and disseminating evidence-based practice for use by the helping professions is emphasized in counselor education.

## **Teaching**

Although scholarship is often discussed as a priority at many universities, teaching tends to be where most faculty spend most of their energy – especially new faculty. Faculty members can be expected to teach anywhere from one to four classes per semester, depending on type of university (e.g., research-intensive or teaching) and other job-related responsibilities (e.g., course reassign time for serving as director of a program or clinical placement coordinator). Teaching can be time-intensive, especially for those who are new, mainly due to the time required to create or redesign courses (Magnuson, 2002). In a study of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) liaisons (i.e., faculty members responsible for interactions between their counseling program and CACREP), time spent engaged in teaching activities did not vary statistically among assistant, associate, and full professors; however, assistant faculty did spend considerably more time on teaching than on research and service (Davis et al., 2006).

At some universities, teaching competence is considered less valuable in terms of tenure and promotion than scholarship. As a result, the expectations regarding the minimum quality of teaching for maintaining one's job can be ambiguous. It has been stated, you will “never get tenure for being a good teacher, but you won't get tenure without it” (Price & Cotton, 2006, p. 9). In other words, the importance of teaching relative to professional advancement can vary widely depending on the institutional mission.

Likewise, the disparate foci of each counselor education program (i.e., whether it offers a single track, such as clinical mental health counseling, or a number of specialization areas, such as

school counseling, couples and family counseling, etc.) can complicate a faculty member's responsibilities. Given that counselor education programs train professional counselors to work in a variety of settings, the field often requires faculty to stretch themselves to accommodate the needs of students with great variability in career aspirations. Faculty members may simultaneously find themselves teaching assorted skill-building and content-specific courses, providing supervision to students in practicum and/or internship, and offering advising and mentoring (Lanning, 1990) – sometimes across multiple specialization tracks. As a result, new faculty may feel particularly pressured to address the immediate and time-sensitive concerns of teaching and, consequently, struggle to give sufficient attention to the long-term demands of research (Hill, 2004).

In addition to the variety of teaching demands, faculty in counselor education programs can expect to teach a diverse student body with varying levels of experience in the helping field. Undergraduate human services degrees exist at some universities, but admission to many counselor education programs simply requires a baccalaureate degree (Schweiger, Henderson, & Clawson, 2008). Programs accept students with degrees from a variety of helping professions (e.g., psychology, social work), but also students with undergraduate degrees and experiences within other disciplines such as business, accounting, and computer science.

Overall, faculty can experience considerable anxiety related to the interpersonal experience of teaching. Handling disruptive behavior, sufficiently answering students' questions, and managing and addressing feedback in teaching evaluations can be quite overwhelming (Gardner & Leak, 1994; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004). However, many faculty report the experience of teaching to be one of the most rewarding aspects of their job (Magnuson, 2002). Faculty often receive little feedback in other areas of their academic career (Hill, 2004), so

witnessing the growth and development of students into counseling professionals can be immensely satisfying (Magnuson, 2002).

## **Service**

Compared to teaching, which – in counselor education – is considered a central part of a faculty member's role, level of involvement in service is more likely to be a function of personal preference on the part of the individual faculty member. The level of engagement and type of service activities in which a faculty member is involved is often influenced by their professional identity (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Service in academia entails serving on departmental, college, and/or university committees or in task groups (Price & Cotton, 2006), as well as activities in the counseling field ranging from service on licensure or agency boards to leadership in professional organizations (Gibson, Dollarhide, & McClallan, 2010). Additionally, faculty may collaborate with local community members to bring about change in the neighborhoods and regions serviced by the university (Lopez-Baez & Paylo, 2009).

However, in terms of tenure and promotion, universities often place minimal value on service. According to Boyer (1990), institutions of higher education have “rejected service as serious scholarship, partly because its meaning is so vague and often disconnected from serious intellectual work” (p. 22). Regardless, some faculty report highly valuing service as part of their academic careers. As faculty achieve promotion and tenure, personal values may actually increase participation in service activities (Davis et al., 2006). The emphasis and value of service can be dependent on modeling by faculty and professional mentors. In a study of non-tenured individuals who had served as American Counseling Association (ACA) division presidents or president-elects, participants reported that their mentors prompted their involvement and that professional service was valuable in shaping their professional career (Gibson et al., 2010).

In summary, the professional responsibilities of faculty vary depending on the institution and the individual. In counselor education programs, beyond scholarship, teaching, and service, faculty serve in a variety of functions unique to the profession. Despite many administrative tasks, counselor educators also interact as educators, mentors, supervisors, and consultants to counselors-in-training and counselors in the field. Faculty also serve as role models to others early in the profession, which is why it is exceptionally important for faculty to practice self-care and advocate for changes within the work environment to improve occupational well-being when possible.

### **Occupational Wellness in Counselor Education**

Like others in higher education, counselor education faculty work to balance the demands of their various personal and professional roles. Unlike many others in academia, counselor educators also serve as role models to others new to the profession regarding personal wellness and self-care (Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). This can be a significant challenge for faculty. Counseling emphasizes the relationship as critical in a counselor's effectiveness at bringing about change for the clients, and this dynamic is mirrored in the relationship between faculty members and counseling students (Lambie, 2006). Counselor education emphasizes the importance of wellness, and it is crucial for faculty to exhibit wellness strategies in their own lives as a model for students, which carries over into their work with clients (Hill, 2004). Therefore, learning to navigate the stresses and demands is both a personal and a professional imperative.

New faculty are expected to fulfill their professional roles as defined by the university to achieve tenure and promotion; however, many experience frustration regarding convoluted expectations for reaching this goal (Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000). A lack of clarity in expectations can result in role overload for new faculty (Davis et al., 2006; Hill, 2004). Strain can also arise from managing the interaction between home and work roles (Lease, 1999). Female

faculty in higher education report overall lower levels of job satisfaction, perceive greater inequities in treatment than male faculty, are often paid less, and less frequently gain promotion and tenure than their male counterparts (Hagedorn, 1996; Hill et al., 2005; Seifert & Umbach, 2008). Despite that, Hill and colleagues' (2005) study suggested that, at that time, an overall high level of current and long-term well-being existed for female counselor educators.

Many studies in higher education literature have found minority faculty report lower levels of job satisfaction (Laden & Hagehorn, 2000; Niemann & Dovidio, 1998; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). In a study of African American counselor educators, participants reported satisfaction at work; however, this was significantly related to their perception of the departments' racial climate (Holcomb-McCoy & Brandley, 2005). In counselor education, minority faculty have and continue to be underrepresented (Baggerly, Tan, Pichotta, & Warner, 2017; Haizlip, 2012, Holcomb-McCoy & Bradley, 2003), despite the profession's stated commitment to diversity in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and encouragement from CACREP (2016) standards to recruit and retain ethnic minority faculty. CACREP's Annual Report began providing the racial/ethnic demographic for full-time faculty in 2013, and since that time, minority faculty representation appears to hover between 25 and 26% of all full-time faculty teaching in CACREP-accredited programs (CACREP, 2013, 2016). The CACREP student population reflects the diversity present in the general population in the United States; however, the representation of minority faculty in counselor education does not (Baggerly et al., 2017). This data mirrors the state of underrepresentation in higher education in general. Despite increasing numbers of minorities achieving advanced degrees, minority faculty remain underrepresented (American Federation of Teachers, 2010). According to National Center for Education Statistics, in the fall of 2015, approximately 23% of faculty were faculty of color (McFarland et al., 2017). Much has been written about the problem

of underrepresentation of faculty of color in higher education and systemic changes are necessary; however, mentoring is a critical factor linked with success in faculty of color (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008).

Although there has been an increase in minority faculty in counselor education (Baggerly, 2017), continued underrepresentation increases the demands for more senior minority faculty to meet the needs of minority students and junior faculty (Bradley, 2005). Minority female faculty may also experience difficulties due to being both female and members of an ethnic minority. In Bradley and Halcomb-McCoy's (2004) study of African American counselor educators, participants reported stress associated with research and publication, which is typical for most faculty members; however, female African American participants reported greater stress resulting from sexism by colleagues and students, as well as from the tenure and promotion process. Beyond gender and ethnicity, other factors also play a role in satisfaction in the workplace. Therefore, applicants should work to seek the right fit for themselves in the academic environment.

### **Importance of Fit**

Person-environment fit plays an important role in recruiting and retaining faculty, as one will be most satisfied with a position in which he or she finds a satisfactory person-environment fit, although the particulars for a good fit will differ among individuals (Lindholm, 2003). Human behavior is a function of the interaction between the person and his or her environment, and individuals derive meaning from the interactions that form the lens through which the world is viewed (Conyne & Cook, 2004). When considering person-environment fit in the workplace, the individual's perception of this fit as viewed through his or her own cultural lens will impact their satisfaction and commitment. Fit depends both on demographic factors and the subjective

assessment of congruence between the individual and institutions' values and goals (Olsen, Maple, & Stage, 1995). When individuals feel that they do not "fit" in their workplace, the likelihood for burnout and eventual turnover is greater (Lackritz, 2004; Lindholm, 2003; Reybold; 2005; Rosser, 2004). When universities offer a contract to a new faculty member, this commitment is a significant financial undertaking for the university considering salary, benefits, and tenure. Support and fit have been found to decrease the chances of turnover in faculty (Ryan, Healy, & Sullivan, 2012).

### **Suggestions for Finding a Good Fit**

Applicants should seek clarification on university expectations for new hires, considering congruencies and incongruences between those expectations and the applicant's career ambitions. Prospective faculty members should note, however, that their fit with a university may change over time for a variety of reasons, such as altered expectations for faculty job performance because of university financial pressures or changes in a faculty member's priorities. Mismatches between the person and their work environment in the following six areas of worklife: (a) community, (b) control, (c) fairness, (d) reward, (e) workload, and (f) values (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) can result in burnout. Consequently, higher levels of burnout are associated with turnover intention (Leiter & Maslach, 2009), and faculty members dissatisfied with their university have the option to leave. Xu (2008) stated, "With transferable teaching and research skills, they seek to have an environment that best fits personal values and professional needs" (p. 59).

For doctoral students or recent graduates seeking work in counselor education, the importance of being true to one's own values, goals, academic philosophies, and desires regarding work priorities is critical. Doctoral training programs can assist doctoral students in building self-awareness and developing and implementing self-care practices; creating opportunities to be

involved in research, teaching and service; as well as educating students about the political nature of academia and expectations beyond teaching, scholarship, and professional service. Further, training programs should keep abreast of trends in hiring, beneficial supplemental experiences, and the current career outlook as it has changed over time (Bodenhorn et al, 2014; Isaacs & Sabella, 2013). When on the job search, Magnuson and colleagues (2009) recommended interviewees explore topics such as “workload, expectations for scholarship and service, support for research, requirements for tenure and promotion, camaraderie among counselor educators, potential for effective mentoring, and program philosophies” (p. 68). With such information, applicants can make informed decisions regarding their potential fit within the academic environment.

**Type of university.** Graduates seeking work in higher education can benefit from examining their own needs and seeking an environment consistent with their personal workplace desires. As faculty research and scholarship interests grow and evolve over time, it can be particularly important for faculty to find a university setting that values their scholarly undertakings. At some universities, scholarship can be more narrowly defined and focus tenure and promotion standards on certain types of activities and not others (Diamond & Adam, 2004). For example, some universities prize community engagement and action research endeavors that may take time to reach fruition, whereas other universities may place significant emphasis on the number of journal articles and related impact scores. Universities seeking to change their designation on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's (2015) classification system may have greater expectations for scholarly activity (e.g., research, publications, grant writing) than their current classification may indicate. Hagedorn (1996) sums it up well in saying, “Generally, faculty members have tended to be comfortable when the institution’s mission closely

matched their own personal proclivities” (p. 572). Therefore, it’s particularly important to have an idea of one’s research agenda and career goals when beginning the job search.

**Autonomy in the workplace.** One characteristic faculty value is the high degree of autonomy typical of a position in higher education (Hamilton, 2007). This sense of autonomy can range from academic freedom within the creation and implementation of courses to the time faculty members arrive at work. Each department operates differently, with some having faculty clock in for office hours and others placing a strong emphasis on navigating the demands of balancing different life roles. Further, how faculty spend their time at work can have implications for increased work satisfaction. When faculty are engaged in activities they find meaningful, it reduces the potential level of burnout in the workplace (Shanafelt et al., 2007). Similarly, faculty who perceive that work has taken over their life or that they have insufficient time to give to important tasks is predictive of turnover intention (Barnes et al., 1998). The meaningfulness of tasks and work-life balance calculation is unique for each faculty member. Applicants should ask existing faculty (both pre-tenured and tenured) about how they spend their time throughout the course of the week.

**Academic culture.** Support in the workplace can be a crucial factor in job satisfaction, but can be achieved in multiple ways depending on the individual needs of the faculty member. Social support has been found to act as a “shield” for faculty against symptoms of burnout (Otero López, Santiago, & Castro, 2008). Mentoring, formal or informal, can be particularly helpful especially for women and women of color. Mentoring can assist faculty who are struggling with various aspects of their new career (Borders, Young, Wester, Murray, Villaba, Lewis, & Mobley, 2011). For new faculty, mentoring can increase satisfaction (Magnuson, Norem, & Haberstroh, 2001), ameliorate stress, especially in minority faculty (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004;

Holcomb-McCoy, 2003), and can be critical for earning tenure and promotion (Bradley & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Hill et al., 2005). Specific research-related mentorship relationships can be particularly effective in reducing anxiety related to tenure and promotion (Atieno Okech, Astramovich, Johnson, Hoskins, & Rubel, 2006; Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008). Further, relationships with colleagues and supervisors, and relationships within the community at large, can influence satisfaction and reduce likelihood of turnover (Barnes et al., 1998). For example, a single, young, extrovert in a rural college town may feel isolated in a department with few colleagues within 20 years of his or her age. Involvement with professional colleagues at workshops, national conferences, and interest networks can help create a sense of connection outside the university, while maintaining connections with mentors from graduate school can be helpful if moving into a small department, or a department with few senior faculty. Finally, remembering to participate in self-care activities and leisure outside of the workplace is crucial for balance. When looking for an academic home, consider the environment in which the university is housed and the leisure opportunities it affords. If the variety and attractions of a big city excite you, a rural campus may not be a good long-term fit.

### **Questions for the Interview**

The faculty interview can be nerve-racking and exhausting as most faculty interviews tend to be at least a day long, with some faculty candidates spending multiple days on campus interviewing for a position. There are many typical interview questions that can be asked when meeting with faculty, staff, students, and administration (see Warnke, Bethany, & Hedstrom, 1999). In addition to those questions, the following questions may be helpful in ascertaining fit while in the interview process:

- What are relationships like among faculty in the program/department? To what extent do faculty spend time together outside of work?
- To what degree do faculty collaborate on projects or research? To what degree do faculty work as a team or independently on programmatic endeavors?
- What are the goals, mission, and vision for the program, and to what degree do these comprise a shared vision within the program/department?
- How does the program/department handle conflict or differences?
- To what degree do faculty members feel supported by their colleagues and administration?
- What are relationships like among faculty across departments/colleges throughout the university? How often do faculty interact, teach, or collaborate on projects or research with faculty from other parts of the university?
- In terms of racial or ethnic diversity, what is the make-up of the program/department and university? Are diverse faculty proportionally distributed through the ranks from adjunct to full professor, as well as in administration and in leadership positions? Does the university have associations for minority faculty and staff? What are the university efforts to recruit and maintain diverse faculty?
- In terms of other factors of diversity, how supportive is the university of sexual orientation or gender identity minority faculty? How supportive is the university of faculty with physical or mental health disabilities?
- What is the demographic make-up area in which the university is situated?
- How much growth has the program/department experienced over the last five years? What factors contributed to this growth?

- How much turnover has the program/department experienced over the last five years?  
What factors contributed to faculty leaving?
- Is there a formal mentoring program, or how are new faculty mentored within the program/department?
- What do faculty schedules look like for individual faculty? When do faculty tend to come in and leave? What expectations exist in terms of time spent in the office, as opposed to working from home?
- How are decisions regarding student admissions, gatekeeping issues, curriculum changes, teaching assignments, or other kinds of programmatic decisions made?
- How are resources (e.g., research funds, graduate assistant time, technology, etc.) distributed within the program/department?
- What are the financial priorities within the program/department, college, and/or university?
- What is the distribution of workload like within the program/department related to programmatic duties (e.g., student interviews, recruitment efforts, enrollment management, etc.)?
- What is the reputation of program/department within the local community? To what degree do faculty collaborate with stakeholders in the community?

These questions provide a starting point for faculty to determine whether or not a position is a good fit in conjunction to other data collected during the interview process.

### **Conclusion**

Counselor education is a multifaceted profession and each program exists within a unique university environment. The experience of a faculty member in counselor education can be both rewarding and stressful, and therefore applicants should seek environments in which they are most

likely to be personally satisfied and successful. For doctoral students or recent graduates seeking work in counselor education, being true to one's own values, goals, academic philosophies, and desires regarding work priorities is critical. Applicants should look beyond more readily apparent university differences (e.g., research-intensive versus teaching-focused) and seek to understand the culture of the program and university in regards to philosophy, expectations, and avenues for support as indicators of fit. A good fit with appropriate support is most likely to produce a happy professor.

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