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## Creative Group Strategies for Interviewing Applicants for Counselor Education Programs

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# Creative Group Strategies for Interviewing Applicants for Counselor Education Programs

## **Abstract**

Counselor educators have the challenging task of screening applicants for their programs. This process involves assessing applicants' academic potential, as well as their dispositions and behaviors. This manuscript focuses on the use of creative group strategies to assess the personal characteristics of applicants in gatekeeping for the counseling profession. The authors present several creative strategies to assist counselor educators in screening applicants.

## **Keywords**

counselor education, gatekeeping, admission, interviews

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Jacqueline M. Swank & Sondra Smith-Adcock

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Counselor educators have the challenging task of screening applicants for their programs. This process involves assessing applicants' academic potential, as well as their dispositions and behaviors. This manuscript focuses on the use of creative group strategies to assess the personal characteristics of applicants in gatekeeping for the counseling profession. The authors present several creative strategies to assist counselor educators in screening applicants.

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The counselor education admissions process is a challenging, time-consuming experience for applicants and counselor educators. Generally, the admissions process involves a large amount of paperwork, including the submission and review of test scores and supporting documents (e.g., letters of recommendation). Additionally, the selection process may involve interviews. In face-to-face interviews, applicants attempt to present themselves in a positive manner, in order to accomplish their goal of being accepted into the counselor training program. During the screening process, counselor educators work diligently to identify individuals who possess qualities that are linked with counselor effectiveness (Leverette-Main, 2004; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002). Therefore, careful planning is essential to facilitate experiences within the interview process, in addition to the other screening procedures, that will assist counselor educators with selecting quality applicants who will become effective counseling professionals.

Counselor educators have the ethical and legal responsibility to be gatekeepers for the counseling profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009). A comprehensive gatekeeping process begins during the screening of applicants (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010) and continues throughout the counselor preparation program. Due to the challenging, complex process of dismissing counseling students with deficiencies, it becomes essential to carefully screen applicants and to deny admission to individuals who demonstrate behaviors and dispositions that might be contradictory to the qualities of effective counselors (e.g., emotional maturity, empathy, ability to give and receive feedback). Thus, a need exists for clarity regarding the qualities that counseling selection committees are seeking in applicants and the identification of screening procedures and strategies that will assist counselor educators with recognizing these characteristics in applicants.

Group interviews are useful during the admissions screening process to address time constraints and provide opportunities for counselor educators to observe and assess applicants' qualities that may not be evidenced in individual interviews (e.g., leadership potential and interpersonal skills). Thus, a need exists for the development of creative interview strategies to

integrate within the screening process. This manuscript (a) addresses the need for gatekeeping procedures during the admission process, (b) identifies applicants' characteristics to examine within group interactions, (c) presents creative group approaches to evaluate applicants' qualities, and (d) discusses the implications for counselor education and supervision.

### **Why Gatekeep during the Admission Process?**

Counseling researchers have reported that approximately 5% of counseling trainees lack the psychological well-being and competence to work with clients. However, this approximation likely underestimates the number of students with deficiencies in counselor preparation programs because it focuses only on students who receive remediation (Guabatz & Vera 2002). When counseling faculty estimate the number of students identified as incompetent or impaired, but not receiving remediation, the number may rise to as high as 10% (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002, 2006). Thus, effective screening procedures are needed to assist with selecting quality applicants, and therefore striving to reduce the number of counseling students with impairments.

Researchers have developed and examined a variety of assessments to measure students' counseling competencies, assessing skills such as verbal response modes, nonverbal behaviors, and facilitative conditions in counseling (e.g., *Counseling Skills Scale* [CSS], Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003; *Skilled Counseling Scale* [SCS], Urbani et al., 2002), and comprehensive measures that include counseling skills, dispositions, and behaviors (e.g., *Counseling Competencies Scale*; Swank, Lambie & Witta, 2012). However, counselor educators have used these assessments solely to measure the performance of counseling students after they are enrolled in preparation programs, instead of also integrating them within the admissions process.

Early screening helps to minimize challenges that arise when counselor educators attempt to address student deficiencies after counseling students have advanced academically in the program and are engaged in the clinical experiences component of training (practicum or internship). At this late stage in the program, faculty members may experience difficulty intervening with counseling students with impairments due to concern about receiving poor teaching evaluations, which may result in fear of job security. Faculty may also experience fear of legal ramifications (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). Therefore, a need exists for comprehensively screening applicants through the use of procedures that assess academic potential and personal characteristics and dispositions prior to acceptance into a counselor training program.

The CACREP (2009) *Standards* and the ACA (2005) *Code of Ethics* identify the ethical and legal responsibility that counselor educators have to gatekeep in regards to the admissions process. The CACREP *Standards* specify that the selection committee should consider three things in the selection of candidates: (a) "potential success in forming effective and culturally relevant interpersonal relationships in individual and small group contexts, (b) aptitude for graduate-level study, and (c) career goals and their relevance to the program" (p. 4). In addition to the general admissions consideration, the CACREP *Standards* specify that the selection committee should consider five additional areas for selecting doctoral students: (a) "academic aptitude for doctoral-level study, (b) previous professional experience, (c) fitness for the profession..., (d) oral and written communication skills, and (e) potential for scholarship, professional leadership, and advocacy" (p. 53). Additionally, the ACA *Code of Ethics* emphasizes counselor educators' responsibility to be gatekeepers for the counseling profession, which includes the screening of applicants. Thus, the call to address deficiencies in counseling students, along with the acknowledgement of gatekeeping within the CACREP *Standards* and

the ACA *Code of Ethics* establish a need for gatekeeping procedures during the admissions process.

### **Screening Applicants**

Counselor education programs have the challenging task of recruiting and selecting applicants who have the ability to excel in a graduate-level learning environment. Additionally, programs seek applicants who possess the personal characteristics that are associated with effective counselors, including interpersonal skills. Therefore, it is important to review group-based screening methods used by counselor education programs, while also identifying the characteristics that these methods are designed to assess during the admission process.

### **Screening Methods**

Counselor education programs utilize a variety of methods to screen applicants. Grade point average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) scores are the most common screening methods utilized by programs (Leverette-Main, 2004). However, GRE scores do not consistently predict the success of counseling and psychology students (Leverette-Main, 2004; Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, & Packman, 2005; Sternberg & Williams, 1997). Specifically, Smaby and colleagues (2005) found that counseling students' ( $N = 80$ ) GRE and GPA may predict knowledge attained and effort needed to develop counseling skills. However, these academic requirements are not strong predictors of personal development. Additionally, Sternberg and Williams (1997) found that GRE scores were a modest predictor of grades among graduate students in psychology ( $N = 167$ ). However, this was only during the first year and it was not a predictor of other aspects of success (i.e., creativity, research). Therefore, in considering the triarchic theory of human intelligence (Sternberg, 1985, 1988), GRE scores may help predict students' academic-analytical abilities, but not their synthetic-creative and practical-contextual abilities (Sternberg & Williams, 1997). This is a concern because synthetic-creative and practical-contextual abilities are essential in counseling and are required in counselor training (i.e., experiential activities within classes, practicum and internship experiences). Thus, relying on GPA and GRE scores to screen applicants appears to be problematic in fulfilling counselor educators' gatekeeping responsibilities during the admissions process.

Counselor education programs may use additional strategies to assist with screening applicants in regards to academic potential, as well as personal characteristics. Perusse, Goodnough, and Noel (2001) surveyed school counseling programs ( $N = 189$ ) and found that programs preferred the following methods for screening applicants: (a) GPA, 98.4%, (b) statement of purpose (76.3%), (c) interview (69.4%), (d) entrance exam (64%), (e) group experience (15.1%), and (f) portfolios (5.4%). Additionally, Walfish and Moreira (2005) examined admission criteria within marriage and family counseling programs ( $N = 25$ ) and found the following factors considered, which are ranked from highest to least in importance: (a) interviews performance, (b) GPA over 3.2, (c) personal statement, (d) clinical experience, (e) letters of recommendation, (f) GRE over 1100, (g) GPA last two years, (h) research experience, and (i) courses taken. Furthermore, Bradey and Post (1991) surveyed counselor education programs ( $N = 133$ ) and found the following criteria considered by selection committees: (a) standardized tests (100%), (b) GPA (94%), (c) letters of recommendation (81%), (d) interviews (57%), (e) writing samples (47%), (f) other (i.e., autobiography, personal statement, work

experience, or experiential exercises) [33%], and (g) work samples (8%). Thus, there appears to be some consensus regarding the admission screening materials utilized by counselor education programs.

Counseling researchers have also explored the perceived effectiveness of various methods used to screen applicants. When surveying program directors ( $N = 216$ ), Leverette-Main (2004) found that personal interviews were viewed as the most effective screening method and GRE scores and letters of recommendation were viewed as the least effective measures for screening applicants. In addition, a small number of respondents ( $n = 10$ ) suggested considering prior experience, faculty assessment, and student products during the admissions process.

### **Characteristics to Assess When Screening Applicants**

In screening applicants, it is important to assess both academic potential and personal characteristics identified as being crucial to counselor effectiveness. Integrating assessment strategies within the admissions process requires the identification of specific areas to measure. Assessing the academic aptitude of applicants may involve a variety of criteria: (a) GPA, (b) standardized test score, (c) letters of recommendation, (d) personal statement, and (e) experience (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Examining personal characteristics involves a clear understanding of what qualities are important to measure, and then determining methods that demonstrate reliability and validity for assessing the qualities. Counseling researchers have examined qualities contributing to counselor effectiveness that are crucial to consider when screening applicants during the admissions process. In analyzing responses from counselor educators ( $N = 9$ ), Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) identified 10 qualities in three areas that counselor educators assess applicants for during admissions interviews. The three areas included professional attributes, personal qualities, and interpersonal skills. Within professional attributes, the counselor educators identified four characteristics: (a) goal appropriateness, (b) motivational appropriateness, (c) professional preparedness, and (d) academic preparedness. In the area of personal attributes, three characteristics were discussed: (a) personal maturity, (b) flexibility, and (c) emotional maturity. Finally, three interpersonal skills were recognized: (a) presence, (b) social appropriateness, and (c) verbal skills. The three areas identified by Nagpal and Ritchie are similar to counselor educators' responses ( $N = 30$ ) identified by Duba, Paez, and Kindsvatter (2010), which include professionalism, personality, and interpersonal interactions.

Pope and Kline (1999) also explored characteristics crucial for counselor effectiveness, as identified by counselor educators ( $N = 10$ ). A list of 22 characteristics was identified through the literature and counselor educators ranked them according to importance and responsiveness to training. The top 10 characteristics listed in order of most critical for assessing during interviews were (a) acceptance, (b) emotional stability, (c) open-mindedness, (d) empathy, (e) genuineness, (f) flexibility, (g) interest in people, (h) confidence, (i) sensitivity, and (j) fairness. Additionally, Wheeler (2000) examined characteristics to assess during the screening process and found seven crucial areas identified by counselor educators ( $N = 27$ ): (a) personable-alloof, (b) open-closed, (c) secure-insecure, (d) self aware-unaware, (e) intelligent-unintelligent, (f) professionally skilled-not skilled, and (g) committed-not committed. Furthermore, Halinski (2010) examined 47 sources within the counseling literature to identify the most commonly recognized counselor traits for measuring counselor effectiveness. The top five characteristics were (a) warm and

accepting, (b) empathic, (c) flexible, (d) self-aware, and (e) genuine. Thus, counselor educators have identified crucial qualities to assess applicants for during the admissions process.

### **Creative Group-Based Interview Strategies**

Interviews may provide information (i.e., interpersonal skills, personal characteristics) about applicants that is not assessed through other admissions screening procedures (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). This may involve the integration of various activities (i.e., questions, role-play vignettes, and informal discussions) within the interview process (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). The creative group interventions discussed in this section focus on assessing seven counseling characteristics and dispositions emphasized in the counseling literature. Five of the characteristics are those identified in the analysis of counseling sources conducted by Halinski (2010), which include (a) warmth and acceptance, (b) empathy, (c) flexibility, (d) self-awareness, (e) genuineness. Two additional areas that are emphasized by counseling researchers (Duba et al., 2010; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Pope & Kline, 1999; Swank et al., 2012) are emotional stability and open mindedness.

### **Questions**

Questions are a standard component of an interview and some questions may be well suited for group interviews. Therefore, the types of questions and the manner in which they are asked may assist counselor educators in assessing the personal characteristics and dispositions of applicants. Conducting group interviews might be particularly helpful with assessing dispositions such as self-awareness, flexibility, and open-mindedness.

When selecting questions for interviews, counselor educators may consider wording that will provide information about the past, present, and future in regards to both personal and professional growth and development. The authors have found that simple questions (e.g., “What experiences led you to seek a degree in counseling and how might those experiences influence your graduate work and your counseling career?”), when used in a group format, allow interviewers and interviewees the opportunity to demonstrate collegiality and cohesion. If an applicant responds with a general or vague response, interviewers may also pose a scenario to assess how the applicant would respond to the situation. For example, providing a scenario about a cross-cultural counseling experience and asking students to address conceptualization, clinical impressions, and treatment will often yield insight into self-awareness and multicultural dispositions. Scenarios may require applicants to provide more personal and specific information that allows counselor educators the opportunity to assess the applicant’s character and dispositions. In a group format, these discussions often yield more insight than in an individual interview because the applied scenarios may evoke emotions that allow interviewers to assess the applicant’s emotional regulation and stability. These group interviews, or go-arounds, can also provide a warm-up for more intensive group interactions.

Counselor educators may also provide documents (e.g., *ACA Code of Ethics*, journal articles) to applicants prior to the interview to have them review and be prepared to discuss during the interview. This strategy exposes applicants to the counseling literature and facilitates a discussion about various topics (e.g., counseling ethics, multiculturalism). Applicants are also introduced to the expectations for engagement, reflection, and critical thinking integrated throughout the counseling program. This may assist applicants in deciding if the program is a

good fit for them. This group activity is also beneficial to interviewers in learning about applicants' beliefs and values and evaluating their critical thinking skills. Additionally, interviewers assess how applicants respond to others, especially when differences are expressed regarding beliefs, values, or ideas. Hence, counselor educators may utilize various strategies (e.g., scenarios, documents) to provide greater depth to interview questions and discussions.

### **Group Experiential Activities**

Experiential exercises may provide opportunities to assess applicants' characteristics and dispositions because the individuals are engaged in activities that assess these qualities through doing, instead of talking about them. These activities facilitate self-awareness (Achenbach & Arthur, 2002) and provide an opportunity for applicants to experience the type of learning they will engage in throughout the counselor training program. This is important because applicants may have limited experience engaging in experiential activities alongside their peers during their undergraduate experiences, which are crucial within a counselor preparation program. Thus, we present the following examples of group experiential activities that counselor education programs may want to consider integrating within the admissions screening process.

**Miniature introductions.** Applicants are asked to select a miniature or small object from a variety of items available that is appealing to them. The first author has used items from her sandtray collection for this activity that include a variety of categories (e.g., people, cartoon characters, vehicles, animals, religious symbols, objects). The applicants then talk about the object they have selected and what it means to them. Interviewers may also integrate additional prompts within the discussion about the miniatures (e.g., What quality does the miniature represent in you that may contribute to you being an effective counselor or counselor educator [doctoral interview]?). This activity may prompt applicants to discuss things that they might not otherwise share about themselves because the miniature chosen reminds the person of something. This provides an opportunity to assess appropriate self-disclosure. Additionally, it offers a creative way to facilitate introductions, which may lower anxiety associated with the interview process. Furthermore, the activity fosters group interactions and may facilitate discussions among applicants in a more natural context.

**Group consensus.** A group consensus activity assesses applicants' ability to interact with others. Specifically, it assesses their leadership skills and their ability to compromise. Applicants are asked to create an individual list related to a specific topic (i.e., qualities of effective counselors/counselor educators, keys to success in graduate school). Then as a group, the applicants are asked to identify the three most important things related to the topic, which requires them to share their ideas and compromise to create a consensus among the group. During this process, interviewers have the opportunity to observe how the applicants interact with each other. The interviewers may also facilitate a discussion about the list of qualities that applicants developed during the exercise asking applicants which qualities they acknowledge as being their strengths and what areas they identify for growth, which assesses self-awareness.

A variation of this group activity may involve applicants working together to accomplish a specific task. For example, interviewers may ask applicants to create something (i.e., a structure) using a selection of items (i.e., newspaper, tape, paper clips, cardboard) given to the group. Alternatively, applicants might be asked to work together to solve a problem, answer a list



of questions, etc. Specifically, counselor educators may facilitate group activities that promote teamwork and problem-solving and then engage applicants in processing the group activity, allowing applicants to give and receive peer feedback. Throughout this activity, the focus remains on assessing the applicants' interpersonal skills. Furthermore, counselor educators may introduce a counseling scenario and have applicants work together to identify the key issues within the case. The expectations will vary depending for master's and doctoral interviews. Doctoral level applicants would be asked to critically analyze the counseling scenario.

**Psychodrama.** Interviewers can use group activities based in Psychodrama (Moreno, 1993) to facilitate self-expression (Gladding, 2010). The Affective Seating Chart, discussed by Scholl and Smith-Adcock (2007), can be modified for use in admissions interviews. In this activity, students take turns sitting in a chair and describing feelings they have about their counseling relationships. Interviewers modify this activity for admissions interviews by having applicants take turns sitting in the chair and talking about different feelings they have about becoming a counselor or counselor educator. The use of Psychodrama activities invites others in the group to respond to their peers. Process questions can expand the emotional expression of the activity (e.g., "What hopes and aspirations do you have for your counseling future?" "What scares you the most about becoming a counselor?") Interviewers can also use process questions to encourage group process (e.g., "Who else has a similar feeling?"). This activity may foster students' self-expression and invite them to demonstrate empathy, warmth, and acceptance.

### **Informal Interactions**

During the group interview, counselor educators may allow time for applicants to engage in more informal group interactions with each other, current students, and faculty (e.g., panel discussion, lunch, reception). During these interactions, applicants have the opportunity to ask questions about the program and to get to know the faculty better. Additionally, the faculty may observe the interactions of the applicants with each other and with students and faculty. Engagement in informal interactions may assist faculty and prospective students with determining if the program and the prospective student are a good match. Furthermore, having a relaxed setting may promote a more natural display of behaviors and dispositions that will provide additional insight during the screening process.

### **Peer Assessment**

Peer assessment, described by Halinski (2010), is another group interview technique. This activity is used at the end of the group interview process. Applicants receive an evaluation form and are asked to rate themselves and the other applicants in their group regarding their ability to express themselves, understand others, care about others, act genuinely, and their potential to become an effective counselor. A modified version of this activity involves applicants providing verbal feedback to each other at the end of the group interview experience. Interviewers facilitate this process by asking applicants to give one feedback statement to the person sitting next to them. This activity provides interviewers with the opportunity to obtain information from the applicants regarding their insight about themselves and others and to observe the applicants' behaviors and responses to the activity.

## **Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision**

Gatekeeping for the counseling profession starts before an applicant is admitted to a training program (Ziomek-Daigle & Christenson, 2010). However, limited literature exists in regards to discussing gatekeeping procedures during the admissions process. This is perhaps attributable to the difficulties inherent in observing and assessing applicants' fit for the counseling profession in brief interview sessions and limited interactions. Therefore, counselor educators have suggested that multiple interactions and opportunities for personal contact are crucial to gatekeeping at pre-admission (Ziomek-Daigle & Christenson, 2010) and many programs are now using group interviews to quickly and intensively examine students' interpersonal qualities.

We recommend developing a detailed protocol for implementing group strategies within the admissions process, similar to the system discussed by Halinski (2010). We suggest the use of rating scales, multiple observers, and multiple interactions. Additionally, counselor educators need a rationale for using each group interview strategy, which supports using the activities in a purposeful, intentional manner. Furthermore, drawing on counseling characteristics and dispositions emphasized in the counseling literature (Duba et al., 2010; Halinski, 2010; Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Pope & Kline, 1999; Swank et al., 2012), the observed qualities should be specific (e.g., professionalism, openness to feedback, emotional maturity). Thus, counselor educators are strategic in developing detailed and uniform procedures that are helpful if faculty are challenged about an admission decision from the applicant or the administration.

The integration of creative group interview activities is useful to counselor educators in screening applications for training program. Additionally, the group interview experience is useful for the applicants. As discussed previously, the applicants have the opportunity to learn about the expectations of the counselor preparation program, beyond simply being told about them through their participation in the experiential activities. Experiential exercises and involvement in group activities are central components within the counselor education program curriculum and applicants may use their experiences in the group activities to help them determine if the counselor preparation program is a good fit for them. Furthermore, applicants may personally benefit from the group interview experience by increasing their self-awareness. Thus, the group interview process is mutually beneficial for counselor educators and applicants.

Lastly, the use of creative group processes during screening and selection of counseling students has clinical implications. When applicants are engaged in experiential activities, they can become emotionally charged. Though these group activities are suggested as a way to elevate process and emotional expression, the process can leave applicants exhausted, emotionally vulnerable, and confused about faculty's expectations. Therefore, applicants should be informed in advance of the interview that they will be asked to engage in various activities that will involve them sharing personal information. Additionally, faculty should be mindful of ethical and legal considerations (e.g., disclosure of personal information that requires further processing or a referral for counseling) when implementing experiential activities. In considering this, counselor educators structure activities to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of experiential work. Furthermore, faculty should facilitate activities and process the experience in a way that reflects on the intent of the process, examines personal meanings, and provides cohesion and closure.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Research regarding the use of group interview processes appears to be sparse. Additionally, most of the research on gatekeeping at pre-admission is limited to academic ability (e.g., use of GRE scores) and counselor characteristics (e.g., Wheeler, 2000). Only a few studies (Halinski, 2010; Nagpal, & Ritchie, 2002) have examined the admissions process and specific approaches for interviewing applicants. However, with a greater emphasis on admissions' procedures that extend beyond commonly used methods (e.g., standardized tests [GRE] and academic records [GPA]), a need for research exists to explore the effectiveness of creative group interview strategies.

Researchers have a variety of areas to study with the integration of creative group interview strategies. Key research questions may include: (a) How effective are these approaches at helping counselor education faculty screen applicants at pre-admission? (b) How congruent are specific activities with desired counselor characteristics? (c) How do these activities prepare incoming students for counselor training? (d) How does group process work to highlight specific counselor qualities that prospective students model when engaged in experiential activities? (e) Do these admissions activities predict student success in counselor preparation?

Counselor educators have developed several assessments to measure counseling competencies (e.g., *Counseling Skills Scale* [CSS], Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003; *Skilled Counseling Scale* [SCS], Urbani et al., 2002; *Counseling Competencies Scale* [CCS], Swank, et al., 2012). However, these instruments have not been used to screen applicants. Future studies might examine whether these assessment or variations of the instruments can be used to identify basic counseling competencies, as demonstrated in group-based admissions processes.

Identifying students who are not well suited for the counseling profession is a complex and daunting task for counselor educators. Although most counselor educators view gatekeeping during pre-admission as important, a paucity of literature is provided about how to facilitate this process. In this article, we proposed several creative ways to use group activities during the admissions screening process. We advanced the idea that group activities are a natural fit for identifying some of the core characteristics of effective counselors. Although the integration of group interview activities requires examination regarding their effectiveness, these strategies allow for a two-pronged approach that helps to screen applicants and also to initiate students into the world of counselor education. Thus, counselor education programs are encouraged to consider the integration of creative group interview strategies within their admissions processes to enhance the screening of applicants and uphold their ethical and legal responsibilities to gatekeep for the counseling profession.

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#### Author Note

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