Beyond the Barricade: A Holistic View of Veteran Students at an Urban University

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As veteran students return to campus following their service, colleges and universities are establishing various resources in an attempt to assist them. For this study, a group veteran and military participants at an urban university were interviewed to determine the extent to which current campus conditions foster a sense of belonging for veteran students. The study found that veteran students at this university identify with their older peers because of their maturity and life experiences. Their veteran identity is viewed as secondary, if considered influential at all. These findings suggest that universities should focus on providing services for the larger non-traditional student population in order to meet the needs of veteran students.

As a result of the 2008 G.I. Bill revision and increasing numbers of troops returning from conflicts overseas, veteran students are enrolling in colleges and universities at an increased rate (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). The newest waves of veterans are returning primarily from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan: Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), respectively. Students are enrolling in college with life experiences that are misunderstood or difficult to relate to for a majority of their peers and faculty (DiRamio et al., 2008). Moreover, veteran students have special requirements and guidelines for using their benefits, and managing finances through this new set of complexities can be challenging (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

These circumstances create issues in the transition to the campus culture and influence veteran students' *sense of belonging* on campus, which is a critical factor in determining persistence and success (Freeman, Anderson, & Jenson, 2007). Sense of belonging refers to a feeling of acceptance and connection with the university community (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002). In light of these unique needs, special consideration must be taken to understand how to best support veterans throughout their college experience.

Creating an inclusive and supportive community for all students is an important part of fostering an environment in which students are likely to succeed (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2006). Furthermore, student success can be greatly affected by students' experiences in their first semester (Hunter, 2006). Therefore, creating an intentional and impactful opportunity to support veteran students' connection to their university and peers in the first semester is vitally important to the successful transition for this student population.

To address the intersections of the aforementioned issues, this paper will first examine the current literature regarding the concept of one's sense of belonging and the factors that influence and encourage this feeling for individuals in a given environment. Included literature will also present discussions on the new generation of veteran students enrolling in colleges and universities across the country, as well as the transitional issues they face upon their return from military commitments. Second, this paper will describe the context of the study and the methods used to gather the subsequent data. After presenting the findings of the study, this discussion will

revolve around how this study both reinforces current literature and offers new insights into the unique needs and characteristics of our veteran student population.

Literature Review

Current literature on sense of belonging for college students and the needs of veteran students was reviewed. The review of literature covers both a discussion of sense of belonging as it affects students' success as well as issues regarding veteran students' transition to college life.

Sense of Belonging

The unique experiences that impact veteran students' transitions often pose challenges to establishing a sense of community on campus (Hoffman , Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Within a higher education context, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) define sense of belonging as a "sense of affiliation and identification with the university" (p. 228). Sense of belonging is an important part of new students' transition to higher education and their continued success and persistence (Freeman, Anderman, Jenson, 2007). This feeling allows individuals to identify themselves as an integral part of the campus community (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). Sense of belonging is a vital piece of collegiate success and can lead to increased motivation in the classroom and retention (Freeman et al., 2007). When analyzing a students' sense of belonging, social support, faculty interactions, and classroom culture become key elements (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002).

With further research, there is more support that shows that sense of belonging to the university is associated with positive adjustment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Students who have a positive sense of belonging during their first year were shown to have positive self-perceptions in areas such as academic competence and self-worth (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Additionally, sense of belonging influences the physical and mental health of college students, which can be particularly relevant to the veteran student population due to the nature of their experiences (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005). Throughout the literature, one consistent component in supporting students in establishing a positive sense of belonging is providing opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with peers and faculty members in a safe environment (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Tinto, 1993).

Sense of belonging can be especially difficult for students who do not feel as though they belong to the majority group on a campus (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010). As described by Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born (2010),

> The similarity of shared backgrounds, aspirations, and attitudes among students who constitute the dominant majority on campus probably makes it easier for these students to adapt to campus life, whereas adaptation is likely to be more difficult for those who come from different backgrounds (p. 532).

Moreover, the article goes on to discuss the impact of institutional culture, as explained in Meeuwisse et al.'s conclusion that if students feel that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate.

Most of the literature fails to address the sense of belonging of veterans, leaving this integral aspect of the higher education experience underexplored. Students must feel a part of the majority to have a sense of belonging, and current research suggests that veterans struggle to identify with the

majority of students (DiRamio et al., 2008; Hassen, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe & Sanders, 2010).

Veteran Student Transitions

In many respects, veteran students are much like their civilian peers, but military service has left many of them struggling with matters other than the usual academic challenges (DiRamio et al., 2008). Some of the unique needs identified in existing literature include health issues, financial aid problems, discomfort in large crowds, and a feeling of anger or resentment toward others who do not understand their experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008; Hassen et al., 2010). Additionally, veteran students often demonstrate a higher level of maturity due to the experiences they have endured in wartime service (DiRamio et al., 2008). Also, The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE, 2010) found that returning veterans, especially combat veterans, spend more time working and caring for dependents than their non-veteran counterparts.

These differences and unique needs can sometimes cause irritation or frustration when relating to peers on-campus (DiRamio et al., 2008). However, several veteran students expressed an interest in connecting with other veterans on campus, and many were interested in a student organization of veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008). The literature on student veterans suggests that this desire for the opportunity to associate with others who share in the veteran experience extends beyond faculty and staff to their peers. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) reiterated that "student veterans frequently seek contacts with other veterans and military personnel as ways to validate their experiences and aid in successfully making the transition to college" (p. 30). A subsequent work by Rumann and Hamrick (2010) identified similar feelings, supported by their findings that veteran students who

were able to attend college with members of their unit mentioned their feeling of ease and comfort in the social aspect of the transition. In this way, the current research seems to suggest that not only are student veterans seeking out others who have similar experiences in order to feel more comfortable, but they also find the transition to higher education easier when they are able to connect with peers who understand their unique situations and transitional concerns. Also, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) noted that several participants in their study described feeling like an outsider at times because other students did not know how to approach veterans. On a larger scale, NSSE (2010) found that veterans reported lower levels of support from their institutions and were generally less engaged than their nonveteran peers. From these results, NSSE concluded that institutions should find ways to engage more veteran students and create a successful environment for them.

Herrmann (2008) identified that another key element related to the veteran students' transition from soldier to student is academic advising and the availability of resources for students. DiRamio et al. (2008) assert that while mandating professional development for university faculty and staff regarding veteran students may be difficult, opportunities should be available. They believe participation should be highly encouraged in order to help educate those who will be critical in meeting the unique needs of veteran students and easing the transition into the classroom (DiRamio et al., 2008). To this effect, DiRamio et al. found, "Of the sixteen themes identified in the study...a consistent message from the participants was that they hoped faculty members would acknowledge their veteran status and attempt to understand them as a student population" (p. 89). Rumann and Hamrick (2009) agreed with the significance of knowledgeable and caring faculty and

staff. They reported that student veterans in their study emphasized the importance of having faculty that share an understanding of their experiences.

On many campuses, the issue of how to accommodate this unique and growing population of students is a concern for college administrators (Lokken, Donald, McAuly, & Strong, 2009). However, the amount of scholarly literature focused on veteran students is insufficient. Primarily, there is a great need to update the literature for the current cohort of veteran students: those having served in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, previous research has focused mostly on the mental health of veterans, with less attention given to the importance of transition (DiRamio et al., 2008). While research has shown that student success is enhanced when campuses provide environments that are both inclusive and supportive, a gap exists in the research to connect those findings to what an inclusive and supportive environment might look like for veteran students (Herrmann, 2008). Therefore, higher education institutions have the responsibility to provide a supportive environment for veteran students that allows them to develop a sense of belonging.

The purpose of this study is to inform and improve practice at the selected institution as well as serve as a foundation of research of best practices. The conceptual framework of sense of belonging, as defined earlier, guides the analysis by examining the extent to which veteran students feel comfortable on the college campus. The following questions guide this study: To what extent do veteran students have a sense of belonging at the urban campus of study, and how is sense of belonging developed in veteran students at an urban institution?

Methods

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the veteran students' experiences, a qualitative method was selected. Semi-structured interviews, which encourage participants to discuss their experiences and communicate their ideas from their own unique perspectives, were chosen because they create an environment for participants to discuss their time at the university as well as challenges and potentially difficult memories that may be too complex to understand in other qualitative methods such as observation (Merriam, 1998).

Context

The research site was a public, urban, research, non-residential, 4-year undergraduate university that also houses a medical and law school (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2010). The institution has an approximate enrollment of 30,000 students, two-thirds of whom are undergraduate students and one-third are graduate and professional students. Additionally, the total enrollment is composed of 19,000 full-time students and 10,000 part-time students with 13,000 students being over the age of 25; therefore 45% of the population is considered non-traditionally aged. The site has a newly established office dedicated exclusively to serving veteran students on campus, demonstrating the increased interest in learning about the needs of this growing population of students.

Participants

Participants were selected for the study through a short survey. The survey was initially administered in order to use purposeful sampling, specifically maximum variation, to ensure a wide range of experiences to document (Patton, 2002). To implement this method, an initial survey was distributed through a listserv of veteran and

military students to try to collect demographic information and to construct a diverse sample of participants. Access to the listserv was facilitated through cooperation with staff who work to support veteran students on this campus. However, due to the specificity of requested sample, this approach proved to be limiting in terms of the number of respondents produced; therefore, the purposeful sampling technique, criterion sampling, was revised to open the sample to include all veteran students who responded to the survey (Patton, 2002). The change in method provided the opportunity to gather the needed qualitative data within the necessary time constraint. Through criterion sampling, seven participants were selected, of whom five were males and two were females. After completion of the survey, potential participants were contacted by a member of the research team and were asked to set up an interview appointment. The participants were diverse in age, military experience, and branch of service; however, they had all been on active duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and/or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in an intimate, one-on-one setting and generally lasted between ten and twenty minutes. The veteran students were read an opening statement that ensured them confidentiality of the interview and described the purpose of the interview and study. Participants were provided with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study in advance, but specific interview questions were not revealed prior to being asked. In addition, due to the semi-structured format, unplanned questions arose based on participants' responses and experiences. Veteran students were then asked to respond to a series of questions based upon their development of sense of belonging at the institution; the interviews

were recorded and later transcribed. These open-ended questions, developed through the concepts presented in the questionnaire developed by Hoffman et al. (2002), allowed participants to describe their experiences at the urban university of study. Some of the topics the students were asked about included: interaction with faculty members, interaction with classmates, challenges as a veteran student, and how they define and view their own sense of belonging. The primary purpose of the interviews was to allow veteran students the opportunity to explain who they are and how they have experienced the university, specifically in regards to sense of belonging. Upon completion of interviews, the research team coded data by identifying emergent themes found in interview responses. The following common themes identified throughout the interviews were: 1) primary identity as non-traditional aged students, 2) transition difficulties, 3) interaction with peers and faculty, 4) use of existing campus resources, 5) academic focus, and 6) sense of veteran identity.

Findings

Within the framework of sense of belonging, this study was designed to focus on the aggregate environment, specifically veteran students' experiences as one group within the population of the urban university of study. Emergent data expands on this concept to include a broader picture of veteran students and their needs at an urban institution where they make up a relatively small percentage of the population. In the description of the findings below, the term "veteran students" should be interpreted as being limited solely to the group of veteran students included in this particular sample.

Sense of Belonging

In seeking to further investigate the degree to which veteran students feel they

belong at this particular urban university, several points of interest arose as common themes among all participants. First, interview participants had a clear idea of how they would define the term "sense of belonging". They could readily articulate a meaning for this concept as well as provide an example of where they have a sense of belonging. Interestingly, although the interviewees had a well-developed understanding of this phrase, when asked to describe their sense of belonging at the institution, they often did not relate it to their formal higher education experience but instead to previously established support systems that include high school friends and family members. One veteran student described his sense of belonging, "Well right now it's my family. That's exactly where I belong. I suppose there is sense of belonging with school but I think it's pretty superficial."

Further, veteran students not only gave examples unrelated to their college experience to express sense of belonging, but they also specifically mentioned *not* seeking social connections through their college experience. As one participant explained, "I'm older and I have all the friends that I think I will essentially have the rest of my life. It's a feeling that I don't need that social interaction and most of the students I would be interacting with would be much younger than me...I don't think we would make great friends." When asked to discuss sense of belonging as it relates specifically to their college peers, several interviewees mentioned connecting with other students close to their own age to feel accepted and understood. In contrast, study participants were largely uninterested in establishing a sense of belonging among their younger peers, suggesting that the younger population of students could not relate to their experiences at a level that made them feel as though they truly belong.

Personal Identity

While existing literature focuses very specifically on students' veteran identity, findings suggest that such a narrow focus considers only one facet of a complex identity that must be viewed more holistically. All of the veteran students interviewed self-identified primarily as non-traditionally aged students, citing differences in age and other life experiences that separated them from what they considered traditional students (non-veterans, directly from high school, ages 18-24, no children or spouse). Such distinctions were exemplified by one participant when he said, "I'm an older student, you know, with wife and kids and so it's just different, you know? Most of the students here are obviously younger, single, it's just a compatibility issue." The students noted their ability to choose to disclose their veteran identity to others, but identified their age as a constant visible identity marker. Many reiterated the concept of the veteran identity's invisibility with comments such as, "You would not know that I am a veteran from walking around the campus, unless I tell you." In this way, the veteran students interviewed discussed their identity primarily in terms of being a non-traditional aged student, because they felt they were rarely acknowledged as a veteran student unless they made the conscious choice to display that facet of their identity.

Several students went so far as to say that their veteran identity status, as a small piece of their personal identity as a whole, had no impact on their time at this urban research institution other than using G.I. Bill benefits to finance their education. One respondent emphasized the separation between his student identity and his veteran identity by making a clear distinction between the two: "It [veteran identity] hasn't influenced it measurably. I pretty much put it behind me. I mean, I used the G.I. Bill, and in that sense it helped out, made things easier

financially, but other than that, I don't think it has really." The findings suggest that several veteran students see their veteran status as an invisible aspect of a complex identity, as well as an aspect they often do not share because they feel as though others may not understand. These students feel the impact of their visible identity as older students and then primarily identify with this broader aspect of their identity.

Related to this primary identity, veteran students tended to answer any broad question such as "tell me about your time here at [this institution] so far" or "do you have anything else you would like to add" with a focus on academics. One interviewee stated that his only goal was to finish and move on, "I want to get it done and over with and go back to working." Academically-focused responses emerged as a theme suggesting that the students interviewed have a very specific, academic purpose for their time at college. Furthermore, when discussing the ways in which they were actively engaging on-campus, veteran students noted obstacles such as full-time jobs or families that kept them from being part of a student organization or attending campus events. Most participants quickly returned to their specific academic purpose when asked about extracurricular involvement and then went on to discuss their engagement in a more academic sense. Almost all of the veteran students mentioned active involvement in the classroom through tutoring other students, an especially intense interest in an academic topic, or a well-articulated practical application of knowledge learned. In his or her own way, every veteran student interviewed expressed engagement with the institution in an academic sense.

Environment

In order to fully investigate sense of belonging, veteran students were asked about their perceptions of the environment on this particular campus for those who identify as veterans. Participants' responses identified peer interactions, relationships with faculty, and the on-campus resources as factors influential to their perception of the environment.

As Strange and Banning (2001) posited, environmental fit is based on the extent to which a group perceives an environment to be congruent with their needs, values, and interests. The greater congruence a group feels with the environment, the more likely they are to be successful within that setting. Veteran students' congruence with the environment may depend largely on the people who make up their immediate surroundings. Several veteran students discussed feeling comfortable at the urban institution studied because they had peers who were close to their age. Since the institution is an urban setting and a large percentage of students are over the age of 25, veteran students seem to feel more comfortable. One interviewee said, "There's a lot of older students here on this campus, so I feel like I belong very much so."
Another respondent described relationships with older students:

> And in my one group most of the group members are a little older. There are two members that are older, one who is the same age, and one that is younger. They all work full time and are non-traditional students, and they are very understanding of my situation and we communicate a lot between emails. Those few students that I do work the [most] closely with are very understanding and [it] has been a very positive experience.

However, several others mentioned a lack of interest in interacting with their peers,

especially those younger than them. One veteran student said,

> I'm only thirty years old, but I see your average 19, 20, 21 year old running around doing stuff I used to do back then. I look back on it now and say, 'really, you might not want to do that'…I'm a little more cautious.

In this way, the findings suggest that ease of connection to peers was not impacted by veteran status but rather by age or maturity level. This idea is captured nicely in one participant's quote, "The kids are a lot younger. So I don't think it has anything to do with being a veteran that makes it a difference it's a matter that I am closer to their parents' age."

Overall, participants spoke very positively of the faculty with whom they had interacted. Nearly every respondent had a specific example of the ways in which faculty members had been understanding and supportive when the students needed to make special accommodations related to their veteran status. One interviewee said,

> All of my professors have been very understanding if I need to record lectures or if I am not going to be there this day because of a doctor's appointment. Or, what has happened to me recently, when I take a medication that completely wipes me out so I can't be in class and the professor has been understanding.

Two of the veteran students also explained ways in which faculty had invited them to share their unique experience and knowledge to add value to a class discussion.

Outside of the classroom, the veterans office on-campus is the main resource provided to veteran students. The mission of this office includes assisting veteran students in their transition from military to college life. Findings regarding use and perceptions of the veterans office suggest that while participants regard the veteran office in a positive light, the office is solely utilized for business purposes. One veteran student described his use of the veteran office, saying

> They actually were helpful at the beginning of the year when my G.I. Bill paperwork was all messed up. They were helpful with that. But I think that's the only thing, um, I could have used them for…it would have been nice to talk to someone else to talk about that and work through that.

One veteran articulated his desire for more support on campus, suggesting it would be helpful "to have a class where someone could have sat me down…like a one credit hour class. They could explain what programs are available to me, if I needed help… something more than 'go here, fill out your military paperwork, see you later.'"

Transition

While no specific questions were included in the initial research design to inquire about the extent to which veteran students felt supported in their transition to higher education, a majority of the study participants mentioned struggles with transition. Specifically, one veteran student commented,

> It's hard being away from school and then coming back to the school environment. Actually learning how to study again 'cause it is like a skill, like how to take tests and stuff. It would be nice to be around people going through the same thing.

When discussing his transition back to campus, one participant stated, "I had issues with coming back to a less structured environment where you are more so on your

own." In this way, transition issues were an emergent theme that highlighted the intersection of veteran students' personal identities with the environment in which they were interacting. All participants mentioned difficulty relearning forgotten study skills as well as adjusting to the new structure of college life. Findings also suggested that the veteran students in this study felt that institutional support for transitional issues similar to those they identified was lacking.

Discussion

Using qualitative research methods, the aim of this study was to examine how the environment at an urban university facilitates the transition to college life by providing veteran students with a sense of belonging and connection to the campus community. While there were expected differences between experiences, common themes emerged that point to the need to redefine veteran students as a specific sub-population of a rapidly evolving student body. The results indicate the significance of the non-traditional student identity as the primary identity, with the veteran identity considered secondary or completely separate from the student experience.

In general terms, the results indicate that veteran students find their age and life experiences, including family, maturity level, work, time away from school, and other commitments and responsibilities to be the most significant influences in their experience at the institution. Because veteran status is an invisible identity, disclosure of this identity can be negotiated and prioritized on an individual basis. Some veteran students concluded that revealing this identity can be extraneous, having little to do with their role as a student.

Overall, veteran students perceived a discernible difference in age and maturity compared to students who continued to college immediately following high school. They expressed the common belief that the younger students with whom they interact may not understand or appreciate their experiences. Although veteran status can be found in all age groups, this student population did not actively seek these connections with younger students to establish a sense of belonging on campus; rather, they sought to connect with students close to their own age as a social support system. For veteran students, sense of belonging is often found outside of the university setting in previously established support systems that include friends and family members. These trends reveal the need for specially-tailored co-curricular experiences to encourage the development of a support network for veteran students, both inside and outside of the classroom, as an integral part of the larger non-traditional aged student population.

The present findings also illustrate that many veteran students have an academical focus when discussing their experience in college. Veteran students often referenced accommodating interactions with faculty, positive classroom environments, and pursuing clear academic goals as significant features of their experience at the institution. While there were differences in relationships with classmates, veteran students were in agreement that they were not at the institution to make friends. With such intense academic concentration, veteran students have a clear sense of what they want from their time at the university and they have enrolled to meet those specific goals. Considering these findings, the ways in which the institution seeks to engage veteran students should include academic engagement as well as a more broadly integrated recognition of the value of their previous experiences.

Limitations

Although this study presents important findings for effectively serving veteran students, limitations must be considered when understanding how this research can be useful in practice. One limitation of the study is the time constraint in which the data was collected. The findings are a snapshot of the veteran students' perceptions of their experience in college, rather than a comprehensive longitudinal study that analyzes changes in attitudes and/or feelings of belonging. As with any site-specific research, this study is unique to the campus at which it was conducted and findings may not be transferable to another institution due to the differing campus cultures and student populations. Acknowledging these limitations, our findings inform a more holistic view of veteran student needs through the categories of sense of belonging, personal identity, environment, and transition.

Implications

The findings of this study both support existing literature on veteran students and offer new insights into veteran students' needs on campus. While veteran students have unique needs that distinguish them from other populations of students transitioning to higher education, present findings do not attribute the source of these needs as exclusively or even primarily related to their veteran status; rather, their unique needs are attributed to their non-traditional student identity. Based on these findings, it is essential that veteran students are not solely defined by their veteran identity, but that a more holistic view of this population be considered. Student affairs professionals and university administrators must not only focus on the needs of the veteran student, but on the needs of the non-traditional student with whom veteran students primarily identify.

While the veteran's office includes assisting veteran students in their transition from military to college life as part of its espoused mission, participants in this study identified it as an office associated mainly for business matters. They described their interactions with the office and its staff as mostly limited to managing paperwork and closely related to the financial benefits of the current G.I. Bill. Considering the current use of this office, the university must establish a more holistic approach in fostering an environment that encourages a sense of belonging on campus to more effectively serve veteran students. The ways in which administrators attempt to create these types of environments at institutions must be reconsidered and revised to meet changing student populations. Administrators must reevaluate ideas of how to engage today's students and subsequently offer the appropriate support to foster a sense of belonging and promote success for all students. Future research should focus on student perceptions of existing best practices in serving non-traditional students, including the unique needs of veterans, as well as profile the academic and co-curricular needs of this new generation of veteran students. Research is needed to establish standards for engagement that can be implemented and measured to improve the environment of the environment for veteran students.

Conclusion

While much of the current literature on veteran students narrowly focuses on their veteran identity, it is crucial that these students' needs are explored beyond the barricade, integrating a more holistic approach to understanding how to best serve them. The findings of this study suggest that the non-traditional student identity is more

significant and impactful for veterans than their secondary veteran identity. Therefore, veteran student's non-traditional identity should be considered substantially when developing services to meet their needs. Veterans in this study interpreted their experiences on campus as typical for non-traditional aged students and not exclusive to their veteran identity. Given the limitations of this study, these findings cannot be generalized to different campus environments; however, they do raise important issues for higher education administrators.

Before universities can successfully aid this sub-population of non-traditional students, consideration should be given to establish services to better meet the needs of the broader non-traditional student population. Findings also revealed that veteran students are highly focused on their academics; therefore, when administrators are considering how to assist and support these students, they should explore redefining how they are engaging nontraditional students in the campus experience. Through an understanding of the needs of nontraditional students, and veteran students as a sub-population of that group, universities can be more intentional in the resources and support they provide to students, creating a more positive university experience for students.

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