Ready for Equity? A Cross-Cultural Organizational Framework to Scale Access to Learning-Ready Classrooms That Support Student Success

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Abstract: There is a national urgency in higher education to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minorities, and classroom environments are integral to the student learning experience. The authors propose shifting learning-space discussions away from building an historically small number of active-learning spaces toward a larger number of what they term "learning-ready classrooms," which apply universal design principles to support the multiple teaching identities, perspectives, and philosophies of faculty and the physiological, cultural, and cognitive needs of all students. Equitable access to learning-ready classrooms means they must be built at scale, so it is imperative to earn campus-wide commitment to this goal by honoring the multiple perspectives, priorities, and cultures of the academy. The authors propose a cross-cultural organizational framework, embodied in the example of a Classroom Readiness Committee charter, that unites and aligns the different organizational perspectives and efforts of its members through clearly articulated mission, vision, function, and belief statements. This case study suggests that institutions can engage and mobilize multiple stakeholders to address the common goal of providing equitable access to learning-ready classrooms as long as the goal aligns with the core values and priorities of the institution, is clearly articulated and communicated, and honors the cultures of the academy.

Keywords: accessibility, classroom, equity, organizational change, organizational culture, student success, universal design

Problem Statement: The National Urgency to Address Student Success

There is a national urgency in higher education to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minorities, and classroom environments are integral to the student learning experience. The proven advantages to earning a baccalaureate degree are clear, since it is the most important indicator of financial success and prepares the graduate to perceptively navigate the complex social, political, and cultural contexts of modern society as a working professional. These cognitive, social, and economic benefits are passed on to future generations and positively contribute to building healthy families, strong economies, and socially just societies (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Although the majority of students graduating from high school begin postsecondary studies with the intention of completing a bachelor's degree, most are presented with multiple personal, professional, and academic challenges and distractions that can deter or delay their graduation. These disappointing time-to-completion and graduation rates call into question the current ability of

institutions of higher education to provide a sufficient number of college-educated working professionals to sustain local state and national economies (Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2015).

Whereas the 1960 California master plan for higher education set forth a tripartite system of community colleges, state teaching colleges, and research universities that ensured its citizens equitable access to public postsecondary education and a path to financial stability upon completion (Holy, 1961), this access and quality of education have been threatened over recent decades by systematic reductions in funding, increased student enrollments, and changes in student demographics.

The California State University (CSU) system, situated in the master plan between the community colleges and research universities, is strategically positioned to prepare its graduates to meet the workforce demands of the state. With 23 campuses serving 500,000 students, it is the largest, most diverse university system in the country and is committed to decreasing time-to-degree and increasing graduation rates for all students. In particular, through the Student Success and Graduation Initiative (SSGI) 2025, the CSU system is determined to close the equity gap for students who are the first in their family to attend college, come from underserved communities, lack college readiness, or face economic and financial challenges (California State University, 2018).

San Francisco State University (SF State) is one of the largest CSU campuses, with 30,000 students and 1,600 faculty. An urban comprehensive university, its history harkens back to an era of political activism that led to the longest student strike in U.S. history in 1968, which produced the first and only College of Ethnic Studies in the country. SF State's primary mission focuses on social justice, with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion, and its localized SSGI plan aims to promote success for historically underrepresented populations through improved course availability, strategic advising, student support systems, first-year experiences, and faculty development programs (San Francisco State University, 2017).

We propose an additional area of improvement to support student success at SF State: coordinating campus efforts and resources to enhance the often-neglected general classrooms, to ensure instructors and students receive broad and equitable access to physical learning spaces that meet their fundamental needs. Due to chronic underfunding over the years, many of its 400 instructional spaces have suffered from deferred maintenance and their furniture and audiovisual equipment have not always kept pace with current teaching approaches. The poor condition of these rooms and the knowledge that environmental factors can have a significant impact on feelings of inclusion, belonging, and general well-being (Couper, 2019; Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012) have prompted an urgent need for cross-functional collaboration within and between units and campus cultures.

Solution: Learning-Ready Spaces Foster Faculty and Student Success

To address this shortfall in available funding to meet the needs of classrooms requiring modernization, we suggest shifting the focus of learning-space discussions away from creating an historically small number of resource-intensive active-learning spaces and toward a larger number of "learning-ready classrooms" (Beers & Summers, 2018), which apply universal design principles to support the multiple teaching identities and philosophies of faculty and the physiological, cultural, and cognitive needs of all students.

Learning-ready classrooms embrace the complexity of teacher identities, perspectives, and philosophies by providing flexibility to support a wide range of faculty throughout their careers. Teacher identity is a framework for instructors to construct their own ideas of how to be, how to act, and how to understand their work and their place in society (Olsen, 2008). Teacher identity can serve as a frame through which to examine teaching, with the understanding that teacher identity is an ongoing process that involves both a person and a context. This identity shifts as instructors advance in their professions and gain experience, and instructors can also possess, and develop, multiple

subidentities over time as they exert agency over their professional development and career choices (Sachs, 2005).

Teaching perspectives are philosophical orientations to knowledge, learning, and the role and responsibility of being a teacher, based on a teacher's unique blend of beliefs, intentions, and actions (Pratt, 2002). Pratt has identified multiple teaching perspectives, which include an emphasis on transmission, apprenticeship, development, nurturing, and promoting social reform, and has concluded that individuals highly identify with one perspective, but rarely more than two. Successful teaching and learning experiences occur when instructors' beliefs, intentions, and actions are aligned during the act of teaching. Therefore, instructors who are assigned to a classroom that has been designed with an incompatible pedagogical bias will face difficulty when aligning their actions with their beliefs, leading to an unsatisfactory experience for instructors and students alike.

Similarly, instructors hold a variety of teaching philosophies that can be categorized according to student-centered philosophies that encourage hands-on experimentation, teacher-centered philosophies that focus on the study of provable fact and development of core skills, and society-centered philosophies that are interested in social progress and responding to societal norms through beneficial stimuli (Gutek, 2014). Rather than focusing on their pedagogical differences, it is important to recognize that each of these educational philosophies has the potential to foster learning, when expertly facilitated, with the appropriate group of students in a classroom that supports its corresponding teaching activities.

The consideration of teaching identities, perspectives, and philosophies illuminates the act of teaching as a complex and nuanced activity, to which instructors bring a lifetime of personal and professional experiences. A classroom design needs to facilitate, not impede, the effective learning and development of identity that takes place among an instructor and students. The learning space should foster the multiplicity of teaching perspectives within the university, as well as the variance of student experiences and needs.

Student needs and classroom interactions are complex and should be considered from multiple angles when designing learning-ready classrooms. Students often come to institutions of higher learning with a variety of challenges ranging from food and housing insecurity to learning differences to family responsibilities. Citing a report generated by the Center for First-Generation Student Success that suggests institutions would do well to shift from focusing on whether a student is "college ready" to addressing whether the institution is "student ready," Whitford (2018) encouraged college leadership to reflect on and change policies and procedures that might inhibit student success.

This call for institutions to become student ready speaks to the argument posited in this article for institutional learning spaces to be learning ready in ways that promote well-being and inclusiveness for both the students and instructors. Learning-ready spaces that meet human cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs in ways that lead to inclusiveness and increased well-being can become environments that welcome students and facilitate teaching, the achievement of learning outcomes, and persistence toward a degree.

The eight universal design goals developed by the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University of Buffalo provide a useful framework with which to begin to address the cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs of the diverse students in learning-ready classrooms. Building on the concept of universal design, first introduced by architect Ronal Mace (North Carolina State University Center for Universal Design, 1997), the eight universal design goals embrace the act of intentional environmental design for diversity as a form of social justice. The first four goals (body fit, comfort, awareness, and understanding) are related to human performance, and the last three goals (social integration, personalization, and cultural appropriateness) address social participation outcomes. The fifth goal (wellness) bridges the two dimensions (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012).

The troubling notion that good design is only available to those who can afford it prompted the development of these goals and the encouragement that they be used to support access to education, as well as other social resources, for groups that have been historically excluded from full participation. To support diversity and inclusion, the learning-ready classroom applies the eight universal design goals in the following ways:

1. *Body fit.* Classroom desks support left- and right-handed users, accommodate a wide a range of body sizes and abilities, and include additional tables that can be raised and lowered to the appropriate height;
2. *Comfort.* Desks, tables, and chairs are on wheels so they can be easily moved and require less than 5 pounds of pressure to raise or lower;
3. *Awareness.* Phones are provided in each classroom, and contact information and instructions indicate how to get support for technical, facility, or security issues;
4. *Understanding.* Audiovisual controls are intuitive and consistent across classrooms, and instructors can preview classroom setups prior to using them;
5. *Wellness.* Furniture is ergonomic, aesthetics are clean, colors span warm and cool tones, and air, light, and temperature levels are easily controlled;
6. *Social integration.* Furniture and room layout support good-quality communication by allowing for appropriate social interaction distances to maintain a sense of respect and dignity, whether working individually, in groups, or in a lecture setting;
7. *Personalization.* Individual desks with wheels, movable tabletops, and space for personal belongings let students enjoy a sense of personal space, place themselves in different parts of the room, and determine social distance, based on individual preference;
8. *Cultural appropriateness.* Natural elements, such as wood, images from nature, and views of the outside world reinforce shared cultural values across humanity; and universally accessible furniture, technology, and aesthetic elements that welcome and support positive and productive social interactions among diverse individuals, regardless of ability, cultural identity, educational experience, or socioeconomic level, contribute to feelings of inclusion and belonging.

Although the active-learning spaces that have become so popular in recent years typically support multiple teaching approaches and address many of these student needs, often because they invest a great deal of human and material resources in ensuring the success of those using them, there is often a gap between the vast majority of general-purpose classrooms and the handful of innovative active-learning spaces on most campuses. The large number of outdated general-purpose classrooms that exist on an underresourced campus, such as the one in this case study, warrant attention since their design and condition often neglect the cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs of the diverse group of students the campus serves.

Figure 1. Learning-Ready Classroom Prototype Side-by-side photos show the same classroom prior to renovation and in its completed state.

Strategy: Engaging and Aligning the Six Cultures of the Academy

Equitable access to learning-ready classrooms means they must be built at scale, so it is imperative to earn campus-wide commitment to this goal by honoring the multiple perspectives and priorities of all members of the institution to align efforts and resources. Bergquist (1992) and Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) provided a valuable framework for understanding academic culture, enabling institutions to recognize the multiplicity of identities within higher education and embrace this variety of constituent values when enacting organizational development. They identified six cultures (collegial, managerial, developmental, advocacy, tangible, and virtual) that constitute the context of higher education. Each culture is defined by the beliefs, work processes, and language that its members share.

These cultures and one's membership within are fluid, in that differences can occur both within and across the cultures. However, each culture has emerged from the need to define itself in direct contrast to its natural counterpart. For example, the collegial culture highly values faculty autonomy while the managerial culture favors identification and achievement of institutional outcomes; the advocacy culture argues for free and equitable access to opportunities and resources while the developmental culture values and expects continuous personal and professional improvement; and the tangible culture primarily values face-to-face exchanges in a physical space while the virtual culture seeks flexible, open, and collaborative educational environments and distributed access to global learning networks. The learning-ready classroom supports the ideals of each of the six cultures, and the creation of these classrooms enables each culture to achieve its expected outcomes within its institutional role, although these outcomes may at times appear to be in opposition.

Collegial and Managerial Cultures

The collegial culture favors faculty autonomy and academic freedom, and it sees the role of the academy to be the creation and dissemination of knowledge, so the learning-ready classroom provides flexible and mobile furniture, expansive writing surfaces, and intuitive audiovisual systems to allow the faculty members to align their teaching beliefs, intentions, and actions with their individual teaching perspective. The managerial culture focuses on organizing, implementing, and measuring outcomes with the goal of enabling students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to become successful citizens, so the learning-ready classroom is a fiscally responsible, long-term investment to

support student success and provide maximum seating capacity to maintain enrollments; it is efficiently scheduled and maintained to support a variety of activities.

Developmental and Advocacy Cultures

The developmental culture values openness and service to others and promotes cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth for students, faculty, and staff, so the learning-ready classroom provides an environment that supports experimentation and innovation, within the individual's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The advocacy culture ensures multiple constituencies are represented in decision making and promotes equitable access to beneficial opportunities and resources, so the learning-ready classroom is scalable to ensure broad availability, universally accessible to include people with disabilities, and pedagogically agnostic to support the multiple teaching perspectives and philosophies of the instructors.

Virtual and Tangible Cultures

The tangible culture highly values the unique traditions of the institution and considers in-person exchanges fundamental to the educational experience, so the learning-ready classroom applies environmental design factors that affect student and faculty well-being, such as good air quality, ergonomic furniture, visual aesthetics, connection to nature, soothing colors, and adjustable lighting (Couper, 2019). The virtual culture values open, collaborative, and flexible educational systems, so the learning-ready classroom supports access to distributed resources and connected learning with global learning networks by providing wireless network access, high-lumen projectors or displays, and inputs for multiple personal devices.

Intercultural Exchange

When working within the academy, it is important to approach strategic decision-making processes with an intentional curiosity to learn and to avoid suppressing or ignoring the different perspectives represented by members of each culture. In its best form, this intercultural exchange can bring about greater understanding of each individual's perspective and interests, and it can ultimately foster greater empathy, appreciation, and alignment toward common ideals.

Case Study: Establishing Mission, Vision, Functions, and Beliefs at Scale

We propose a cross-cultural organizational framework for creating learning-ready classrooms at scale, embodied in the example of a Classroom Readiness Committee (CRC) charter that unites and aligns the different organizational perspectives of its members through clearly articulated mission, vision, function, and belief statements (San Francisco State University, 2018). The CRC is a cross-campus partnership that spans three presidential cabinet divisions. In its previous iteration, this entity was named the Classroom *Renovation* Committee and met infrequently each year to distribute a modest budget to upgrade general classrooms. The members represented the interests of academic affairs, classroom scheduling, facilities and maintenance, audiovisual design and installation, finance and procurement, and universal access for people with disabilities, and its members tended to operate within their own scope of responsibility. Its previous focus on classroom renovation meant that only one or two classrooms were supported each year, which affected the teaching and learning experience of only a small percentage of our faculty and students.

The committee has since replaced the word "renovation" with "readiness" and shifted its focus to maximizing impact through the development of a larger number of learning-ready classrooms, based on evidence-based design principles. The CRC has revised our mission to "promote faculty and student success by equipping and enhancing learning-ready classrooms that support the multiple teaching identities and philosophies of faculty and the physiological, cultural, and cognitive needs of all students" (San Francisco State University, 2018). The focus on building the more attainable learning-ready classrooms at scale has energized committee members, and this alignment with institutional priorities serves as an example of how to effect organizational change by addressing the needs of the six cultures of the academy.

To honor the perspectives of the six cultures of the academy, the CRC first agreed to a common definition of learning-ready classrooms and then articulated the mission, vision, functions, and beliefs of the committee in support of that definition. Its core values target the university's strategic commitment to student success by supporting teaching, learning, equity, and social justice, as well as emphasizing student learning needs, faculty success, and the symbiotic relationship between space, technology, and pedagogy.

To gain campus-wide relevance, the CRC leveraged the catalytic spark that technology initiatives can produce to positively contribute to campus priorities, in particular the student-success initiative. To this aim, the committee developed a charter that articulates the shared mission, which is why the CRC exists; the vision, which is what the CRC strives to achieve; the functions, which describe the activities the CRC engages in; and the beliefs, which highlight the core values that guide and inform the CRC's efforts.

The CRC Charter

Mission: We exist to…

> Promote faculty and student success by equipping and enhancing learning-ready classrooms that support the multiple teaching identities and philosophies of faculty and the physiological, cultural, and cognitive needs of all students.

Vision: We strive to…

- Apply Universal Design principles to ensure classroom equipment, facilities, and furniture are intuitive, ergonomic, and universally accessible;
- Manage campus resources responsibly by ensuring equipment, facilities and furniture choices are affordable, durable, sustainable, and space efficient;
- Apply evidence-based principles to design flexible classrooms that support a variety of effective and inclusive pedagogical practices; and
- Honor the human factors that contribute to a sense of belonging and well-being by ensuring the classroom interior is comfortable, aesthetically pleasing, and culturally sensitive.

Functions: We engage in activities to…

- Develop campus standards for equipment, facilities and furniture that uphold the mission and vision of the university;
- Prioritize campus resources to provide the most positive impact on teaching and learning conditions within the centrally scheduled classroom inventory;

- Collaborate across administrative divisions to achieve the mission and vision of the university;
- Identify products and suppliers that meet the campus standards and effectively manage these relationships;
- Consult and partner with academic constituents to design, equip, and enhance discipline-specific classrooms.

Beliefs: We are guided by the shared beliefs that…
- The University mission and commitment to teaching, learning, equity and social justice can be supported through broad access to learning-ready classrooms that promote faculty and student success;
- Students are more ready to learn when the learning environment meets their human needs; and
- Faculty are more successful when they are able to engage with their students in a learning environment that supports their pedagogical and disciplinary needs.

Technology

A core responsibility of the CRC is to make informed decisions with respect to technologies that contribute to the student and faculty experience, including audiovisual equipment, network connectivity, lighting controls, and air systems. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) indicated that technology can be a catalyst for organizational change, since new applications of technology change the way in which campus constituents work in and relate to the world around them.

Technology is a ubiquitous component of the everyday work and social lives of nearly every member of the institution, so each campus user is a vested stakeholder with personal beliefs about its use and value. However, technology is also its own discipline and culture, and campus technology teams share their own technical language, work processes, and assumptions about how best to implement and support technology for the campus. Technology initiatives can be the nexus of change when leaders seek not only to understand but also to appreciate and honor the perspectives and values of the cultures that interdependently create the academy.

Proof-of-Concept: Developing Learning-Ready Classroom Prototypes

Preliminary observations suggest that institutions can engage and mobilize multiple stakeholders toward the common goal of providing equitable access to learning-ready classrooms as long as the goal aligns with the core values and priorities of the institution, is clearly articulated and communicated, and honors the perspectives of the six cultures of the academy. While multiple forms of technology, including lighting, audiovisual, and network technologies, have provided the impetus for change in the approach to classroom design and equipment, ultimately the CRC addresses the needs and priorities of all of the cultures of the academy to further the development of learning-ready classrooms. The CRC has worked to develop campus standards for equipment, facilities, and furniture that uphold the mission of the university. The CRC has developed a series of learning-ready classroom prototypes, including a baseline general classroom, a discipline-specific classroom, and a video-conference-enabled distance education classroom, all of which employ the newly established campus standards and can be developed at scale. These classrooms, as well as subsequent spaces that build on these prototypes, enact the vision and functions of the CRC charter, which is to ensure universal

accessibility, sustainability, evidence-based support for teaching and learning, and a sense of belonging and well-being among its students and faculty.

For our prototype classroom, we included light paint colors on the walls, with a blue-gray accent wall at the front of the room to provide students with a focal point that minimizes glare, increases visual contrast, and reduces distractions. This also adds to the aesthetics in the room, creating a clean, modern, and minimalist feeling. The finishes of the chairs are also coordinated with the wall colors. Additionally, when possible, we selected wood finishes and natural colors for tables and additional furnishings. Aesthetic components that embody the natural world contribute to a space where people from all backgrounds can connect, which supports cultural inclusivity. A clear line of sight out of the window further connects students to the natural world, enables students to refocus by exercising the depth of field in their eyesight, and provides natural light, which promotes a sense of well-being within the student. Moreover, having furniture that can be moved to suit the needs of the students and faculty provides the potential for a more student-centered layout and pedagogical approach, helps welcome students, and contributes to cultural inclusion. The student-centered emphasis of moveable furniture promotes cultural inclusion by indicating the value placed on student comfort, communication, and collaboration, which may also foreground the cultural identities and experiences students bring with them into the classroom. Including inclusive images, such as murals emphasizing diverse perspectives, is foundational for fostering cultural inclusion within the learning space. Additionally, natural art provides representations that can promote connections across cultures and backgrounds.

The learning-ready classroom also demonstrates responsibility in terms of representing choices that are affordable, durable, sustainable, and space efficient. It uses light-harvesting fixtures to save on energy costs, reduce impact on the environment, and replicate natural lighting. We also researched a variety of chairs, tables, desks, and teaching stations to identify options that were mobile, cost efficient, and comfortable. Additionally, the chairs and desks needed to be able to provide flexibility while also maintaining a small footprint to accommodate larger class sizes. We were successful in finding a swivel chair, flip table, self-contained student desk, student table compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and teacher station that met all of our requirements; however, we continue to work with vendors to discuss ways to increase the comfort, functionality, and price points so they can be affordable for all levels of society.

To serve the multiple teaching identities and philosophies of our instructors, the furniture is flexible and mobile so the same room can enable lecture, group, and seminar teaching styles as desired throughout the semester. The furniture and equipment are ADA compliant to support the physical needs of the instructor, since the teaching table and stool are height adjustable and the audiovisual controls are intuitive and universally accessible. A phone is within easy reach to request technical support at any time throughout the day.

Where faculty are concerned, it is important to acknowledge the biases of the people designing the spaces, developing the classrooms, and providing potential faculty professional development workshops on the use of these spaces. The authors consider our own backgrounds that lean heavily toward constructivist pedagogical approaches. We may be tempted to design and develop classrooms based on our own experiences with teaching and considerations of the effectiveness of constructivist pedagogy; however, our goal in creating learning-ready spaces is to design environments that foster success for students and faculty, and faculty come from a variety of pedagogical backgrounds, as well as disciplines, that lend themselves to a range of teaching approaches. These values relate to the six cultures of the academy, and much of the success of the CRC is connected to its inclusion of many cultures, creating a positive environment for collaboration and development for the University.

Discussion: The Future of Learning-Ready Classrooms

This case study sets forth an argument for institutions to focus campus resources on a coordinated effort to develop what we have called learning-ready spaces. As outlined in these pages, the standards and principles of a learning-ready space are informed by critical theories of equity, inclusion, access, universal design, teacher identity, teaching perspectives, and educational philosophies. To ensure broad availability of these classrooms, we have proposed a cultural framework for organizational change that honors and addresses the perspectives, priorities, and needs of all members of the institution, as defined by Bergquist and Pawlak's (2008) six cultures of the academy.

A strong governance structure, as outlined in the clearly articulated and agreed upon mission, vision, functions, and beliefs in the CRC charter, has enabled wider communication of the organizational impact that this cross-functional body can effect if provided appropriate resources and authority. As the CRC continues to develop and scale learning-ready classrooms on campus, it maintains the acknowledgment of the role technology plays as a catalyst for organizational development and change. In the design of learning-ready classrooms, every useful element of the classroom has been incorporated into the high-profile discussion that technology can command, ranging from the high-tech wireless network access, audiovisual displays, and Web-conferencing capabilities, to the mid-tech lighting fixtures, air systems, and user input controls, to the low-tech furniture, whiteboards, and window blinds. This has allowed every individual on the committee to contribute specialized expertise to the development of standards and has empowered each one to advocate for the adherence to these standards from the positionality of their unique roles on campus.

The acknowledgment of the national need to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minorities, as addressed by the CSU system's SSGI 2025, ultimately calls for organizational change in varying and nuanced ways across different institutions. Our institution is making progress toward providing equitable access to learning-ready classrooms by working toward a common goal and honoring the six cultures of the academy.

We also see a larger goal of making learning-ready classrooms more feasible at scale and at additional institutions. To this purpose, we implore our industry partners to provide universally accessible, flexible, and affordable furniture and audiovisual systems. Affordability is a crucial factor in the ability to meet the human needs of faculty and students, at all levels of society, and the furniture and technology industry has a responsibility to meet the needs of their stakeholders. Moreover, we call on campuses to strategically align themselves with the goal of broad and equitable access to learning spaces to support the success of students and faculty. In addition to continuing to create specifically focused active-learning spaces, it is imperative to consider the ways in which broad access to learning-ready spaces can have a significant impact on the success of all students, especially those who have been historically underserved.

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