



REVIEW ARTICLES

# Non-Traditional Adult Learners After COVID-19: Applying National Standards for Online Teaching in Human Service Education

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Keywords: Non-traditional adult learners, human service education, distance learning, Quality Online Teaching, COVID-19

<https://doi.org/10.52678/001c.91200>

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Journal of Human Services

Vol. 42, Issue 2, 2023

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After the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of higher education increased its attention on quality distance learning for traditional and non-traditional adult learners. While the world saw an increase in online education enrollment as a result of the pandemic, non-traditional adult learners have historically relied on this method of education delivery to support their success in the collegiate setting. As the field of human service education supports the offering of distance learning instruction, it is vital for human service educators to consider the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching when educating adult learners. The authors of this article provide an overview of the needs of non-traditional adult learners post COVID-19; and suggest that the National Standards for Quality Online teaching be considered when delivering human service education in CSHSE accredited classrooms to this population.

## Applying National Standards for Online Teaching in Human Service Education

Since COVID-19 the field of post-secondary education has seen an increase in distance learning education, with many colleges and universities recognizing the benefit of asynchronous courses to increase enrollment, retention, and educational access for all students, especially for non-traditional adult learners [NALs] (DeMartino, 2021). Non-traditional adult learners are defined as students who are age 25 and older, have one or more characteristics of adult responsibilities such as full-time employment, being financially independent, and having dependents other than their spouse (Singh et al., 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] in the fall of 2021, there were a total of 19,036,612 non-traditional adult learners enrolled in over 5,831 post-secondary institutions (2022). Research describes this population as having statistically higher rates of part-time enrollment when compared to full time students under 25 years of age, with NALs making up 32% of post-secondary enrollment (NCES,

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2022; Singh et al., 2021). Within the next six to seven years, it is projected that 3.3 million additional students will fall into the non-traditional adult learner group (J. C. Chen, 2017).

Despite the growth of this student population, many non-traditional adult learners have lower degree completion rates when compared to traditional students (Jusas et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). Research suggests this finding can be attributed to the youth-centric environment of brick-and-mortar academic institutions, competing obligations between work and school, availability of course offerings, and overall confusion and difficulty navigating the school setting (Rabourn et al., 2018). These challenges were heightened with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many NAL students found themselves homeschooling their children, working from home, caring for elderly and other dependents while facing the alienation and isolation of social distancing, loss of employment and other challenges specific to the pandemic (Jusas et al., 2021).

Considering these challenges and student characteristics, research supports a positive relationship between teacher preparation to deliver quality online teaching and engagement and student success in adult centered online environments (Çakiroğlu & Atabay, 2022). Given the research supported history of NAL students to have lower completion rates when compared to traditional students, academic institutions are encouraged to support this population through e-learning course rooms focused on evidence-based quality instruction and teacher engagement (Puspitasari & Oetoyo, 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019). The authors aim to discuss the needs of NAL in distance learning settings with implications for best practice as it relates to applying the national standards for quality online education within human service classrooms.

### **The Educational Needs of Non-Traditional Adult Learners**

For several decades, online education and distance learning had not received the implementation and attention at the university level that was required to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang & Chen, 2023). While online education has been offered at virtual only universities and distance teaching universities that were already offering online education, most brick-and-mortar universities primarily offered face to face instruction (Zhang & Chen, 2023). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created an immediate need for higher education institutions to create distance learning models to facilitate quality education to all students due to the restrictions placed on traditional face to face classrooms (DeMartino, 2021; Jusas et al., 2021). While the field of higher education was thrust immediately into the realm of distance learning, research suggests that NAL have historically engaged in this learning format in lieu of traditional classrooms due to the work-life balance and other benefits supporting their personal and professional responsibilities (Rabourn et al., 2018). The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for more research and support for NALs in e-learning settings, specifically for human service degree granting

institutions who may not have adopted a fully asynchronous educational program prior to the pandemic (Jusas et al., 2021). For human service education programs to meet the needs of NAL students, it is imperative that instructors have knowledge and training to effectively teach them based on nationally recognized standards of online quality instruction. As NALs have different experiences and needs than traditional college age students, it is vital that online human service educators adopt an andragogical framework to employ effective instruction when educating this population.

### **Andragogy and Non-Traditional Adult Learners**

Andragogy is a learner-centered and directed model developed by Malcolm Knowles to create student centered learning environments that would maximize the learning experience of adult learners who are then better equipped to translate this knowledge into practice (Ho & Lim, 2020). Ho and Kim (2020) discuss an andragogical model to teaching occurs when the instructor considers the characteristics of adult learners and aims to integrate them into the instructional framework based on the following assumptions: *(1) Adult learners have a fully developed self-concept and assume full responsibility over their lives; (2) Adult learners enter the learning environment with a wealth of life experience (3) Adult learners' are motivated to learn when it's clear how the learning is applicable to their life; (4) Adult learners are motivated to learn through problem solving (5) Adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn; (6) Adult learners want to know the why behind their learning and how it will benefit them.*

From an andragogical framework, the role of the adult learner is self-directed and life experience is the foundation on which to build knowledge. They want to understand how their learning will apply to their professional and personal roles as they incorporate their experience and a sense of agency into their learning environment (Ferreira & Maclean, 2017; Ho & Lim, 2020). Given the trends of NALs and online education, the implementation of andragogical principles is needed to meet the needs of these learners. The national standards for online quality teaching provide a framework for online service delivery that in conjunction with andragogy principles can increase accessibility and reduce many of the challenges commonly experienced by NALs (Almufarreh et al., 2023; Stone & Springer, 2019)

### **Challenges of Non-Traditional Adult Learners in Online Courses**

While distance learning increases accessibility to NAL, it also poses challenges (Bok, 2021). Unlike traditional classroom environments where faculty and students have consistent face to face interactions in which to build a sense of connection, online learning can pose challenges with engagement (Jackson, 2019; Puspitasari & Oetoyo, 2018). Distance learners are at increased risk of feeling isolated as they are typically completing work on their own without the sense of accountability to peers and faculty that occurs when participating in a traditional classroom setting. The autonomy and flexibility of online learning is attractive to NAL; however, the autonomy

of an online course also requires a high level of self-discipline and time management (Puspitasari & Oetoyo, 2018). These factors in addition to a sense of isolation can contribute to high attrition rates (Kara et al., 2019; Puspitasari & Oetoyo, 2018). Faculty efforts to build and enhance engagement in an online course is critical to increasing student motivation and overall student satisfaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

In addition to their education, research describes many NAL as having full-time employment, children and/or other care taking responsibilities for their families or other obligations that may conflict with the requirements of attending courses in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Rabourn et al., 2018). These responsibilities in conjunction with the demands of coursework can lead to burn out and feeling overwhelmed (Rabourn et al., 2018). NAL, particularly female learners, may struggle to balance online coursework with the demands of family, which may contribute to high drop-out rates for NAL in online programs (Fensie et al., 2023; Kara et al., 2019; Rabourn et al., 2018). These difficulties were exacerbated by COVID due to the closures of childcare and/or remote school experienced by many parents. In addition to family responsibilities, NAL are often balancing the demands of employment, high workload, unpredictable work schedules, lack of employer support, and financial strain all of which increases the risk of drop out for NAL (Bok, 2021; Kara et al., 2019). Additionally, challenges in navigating the learning management system can also hinder the NAL as students are learning new course content while also learning to navigate new technology which may result in increased anxiety and frustration (Kara et al., 2019). Low levels of computer self-efficacy and limited resources to assist with orienting students can hinder learning and contribute to students dropping out (Kara et al., 2019).

### **Human Service Distance Education and NAL**

Given the learning characteristics and challenges commonly experienced by NALs, e-learning is a viable option for pursuing post-secondary education for this population due to its flexibility and accessibility when compared to traditional face to face classrooms (Neves & Henriques, 2020; Puspitasari & Oetoyo, 2018). As more institutions offer online options, it is important that andragogical principles are considered in the design and implementation of online courses as failing to do so may contribute to high attrition rates for NAL students (Ferreira & Maclean, 2017). In human service focused classrooms, instructors and instructional designers are encouraged to incorporate principles of andragogy into their online courses and use e-tools to facilitate discussions and learning activities that teach the standards for best practice, ethics, and other areas for competency for human service practice while considering the characteristics of adult learners (Ferreira & Maclean, 2017; Neves & Henriques, 2020). Considering these principles of adult learning within distance learning classrooms, the human service educator would be required to shift from the primary role of knowledge transmitter to a more facilitative role that increases peer to peer learning, incorporates

the use of technology to foster the development of human service skills, maintains teacher presence and engagement, as well as develops the human service student into an ethically competent practitioner.

### **Faculty Engagement and Distance Learning**

Engagement is an important factor in mitigating the challenges that NALs may face in an online learning environment. Student engagement in online courses has been shown to increase student's course satisfaction, improve student motivation, and increase overall student performance (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Redmond et al., 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Student engagement is developed through interaction which can include learner-to-learner interaction, learner-to-instructor interaction, and learner-to-content interaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Learner-to-learner engagement which increases a student's sense of connection and community in the course can be done with asynchronous discussion board forums or synchronous videoconferencing that facilitates interaction among peers. Learner-to-instructor engagement is highly valued by students and can be achieved by building a sense of rapport with the instructor and receiving consistent and frequent instructor feedback. Learner-to-content engagement refers to how the learner engages with the course content with more variety of learning activities contributing to higher levels of student engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

While all types of engagement are important, learner-to-instructor engagement is key to providing a supportive learning environment and providing opportunities for frequent and quality instructor-student interactions is an important factor in mitigating the isolation and disconnection some students experience in online learning (Jackson, 2019; Richardson et al., 2017).

The Community of Inquiry framework (COI), which provides a framework for establishing engagement and community in online learning, highlights three domains (cognitive, teaching and social) for creating an effective online learning environment (Garrison et al., 2000; Richardson et al., 2017; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Building on the COI framework, teaching presence (how the instructor is present in the course) and social presence (a sense of community in the course) are important factors that impact student engagement (Jackson, 2019). An instructor's ability to establish a social presence in the online learning environment is an integral part of increasing engagement in the course and has a positive impact on student motivation, student learning, and student satisfaction in online courses (Jackson, 2019; Richardson et al., 2017). Instructors can establish their social presence from the onset of the course by providing opportunities for students to connect with the instructor as a person. This may be done by posting a picture and biographical information or posting videos introducing students to the instructor and to the course (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Consistent and frequent communication is another component of establishing this presence and can be achieved by posting frequent course announcements and by providing timely feedback to student assignments and questions. Given that nonverbal communication and tone are not present as they would be in a face-to-face interaction, instructors should be cognizant of responding with words that convey warmth and regard for the student (Jackson, 2019). Instructors may consider holding virtual office hours and providing multiple ways for students to interact and ask questions using both asynchronous and synchronous forms of communication. Students in online courses value the feedback and communication with their instructor and want to know that someone is listening and invested in their growth and learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). By being intentional about establishing opportunities for engagement, Human Service educators can create more effective online learning environments for NALs.

### **Distance Learning Human Service Education and CSHSE Accreditation**

The Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE) provides an organization of standards for the Associate, Baccalaureate, and Master's degree levels of human services education grounded in research and relationships to service providers and their communities (2019). Though they do not directly define quality instruction, these standards provide implications for human services educators as bolstered by NOHS Ethical Standards.

### **Application of CSHSE and NOHS Standards**

At each academic level, CSHSE standards outline standards for upholding comprehensive, ethically sound, and purpose-driven human services education. Standards 1 and 2 state that primary program objectives should align with a commitment to developing professionals that can provide a variety of systemic services to individuals, families, groups, and communities with intentional philosophical bases that are attentive to interdisciplinary and sociocultural systems such as addressing barriers, integrating evidence-based practices and theories, and engaging in cultural responsiveness (CSHSE, 2019). These foundational requirements directly align with NOHS (2015) ethical standards 37-38 which indicate that human services educators must practice and model culturally responsive pedagogy and a commitment to access and inclusion. This provides a unique opportunity for human services teachers in online environments to engage fully in quality educational opportunities that identify modalities of service delivery that are attentive to eliminating barriers to quality instruction which then serve as a model for implications for practice. In a time where online provision of services have been revolutionized and identified as necessary through the COVID-19 pandemic, the learning environment can serve as a practical space to reflect on parallel processes in the digital space and implications for future practice (V. Chen et al., 2022; Jusas et al., 2021). For instance, educators may include group reflections and processing regarding the experiences of building

rapport, encouraging engagement, and identifying and utilizing congruent interventions in the digital space and how these experiences may inform future practice and accessibility both in-person and online with clients and agencies.

Quality educational experiences are required by CSHSE standards with intentionality, holistic considerations, and opportunities for developing competencies for practice through integrating knowledge, dispositions, skills, and theories (CSHSE 2019). Ethically, human services educators are required to monitor learners' field experiences to ensure quality of education and practice and support the development of the profession through educational advancement opportunities (NOHS, 2015). Considering these implications in a digital environment, it is critical that educators collaboratively identify and evaluate meaningful opportunities for fieldwork and foster intentional exploratory discussions and considerations. Importantly, it is imperative that educators facilitate reflective spaces that are interactive in synchronous and asynchronous courses through creating requirements that encourage NALs to engage in discussion boards, virtual meetings, peer reviews, or other collaborative activities meaningfully. In an online space, it may be assumed that learners are engaging concurrently from different locations, which opens opportunities for real-time learning about dynamic considerations and experiences beyond the community in which the program is physically situated. Human services educators can take advantage of state-wide, nation-wide, and even global practical experiences and integrate these into necessary practices of multicultural competencies, advancing the field, and advocating for professionals and clients.

Overall, curriculum requirements outlined by CSHSE standards (2020) indicate that every level of education shall include historical development, emerging trends, and understandings of systemic human interactions and perspectives as a necessary foundation for learning and practicing human services theories, skills, and values. Unprecedented times of isolation and redefinitions of connection emerged as focal points and calls-to-action during the historical pandemic; as is the nature of the human services field, the creative systemic solutions and implications that were magnified by the pandemic for our clients are distinctly applicable to NALs and should be reflected in both education and service deliveries.

### **Quality Instruction in Distance Learning Human Service Classrooms**

The National Standards for Quality Online Teaching [NSQ] provide 7 standards of quality that serve as a framework for higher education institutions to provide quality distance learning education (2019). The NSQ identifies the areas of digital pedagogy, community building, student and learner engagement, diverse instruction, assessment and measurement, and digital citizenship as vital areas that create highly individualized learning environments (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). Each

of these standards outline principles of engagement and practice that can be applied to human service education with an andragogical focus to further the competency and development of NAL (2019).

### **Application of NSQ Standards in HMSV**

Within standard A Professional Responsibilities, the online human service educator would be responsible for maintaining their own competency while keeping with best practices for online instruction. This standard expands this principle by presenting the requirement that the online educator have the appropriate level of education and credentials in the field to teach, be a reflective practitioner, and someone who understands the importance of staying up to date in their own discipline (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019; Phelps & Vlachopoulos, 2020). Incorporating this standard into andragogical human service classrooms, the online human service educator should create collaborative learning environments by encouraging peer to peer interaction and recognize each student as a contributor to the learning experience (Purwati et al., 2022). Considering the competency of the human service educator, ongoing engagement in professional development related to the content area in which they are teaching as outlined in standard 39 of the NOHS ethical code (NOHS, 2015). Human service educators demonstrate their application of the NSQ standard A: Professional Responsibilities by demonstrating effective time management in grading and response times to students (Hickey & Harris, 2021; National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019; Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018). Considering the responsibility of the instructor, standard A emphasizes the importance of timely documentation and relevant documentation of all communication with students.

Extending beyond the professional role of the distance learning educator, NSQ Standard B: *Digital Pedagogy* emphasizes the importance of instructor presence to support communication, productivity, and collaboration in the online classroom (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). This standard emphasizes the importance of utilizing a variety of teaching tools to nurture the learner relationship with the instructor as well as peers, facilitate basic troubleshooting skills and support safe digital learning spaces (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). In human service andragogical classrooms, distance learning educators should develop meaningful relationships with students via discussion boards, announcements, offering support, web-conferencing, and authentic student engagement to deepen social interaction (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019; Park & Kim, 2020). Research supports the importance of instructor engagement and relationships to the success of NAL with study findings suggesting that instructor relationships increase students' connection to their program as well as motivation for success (Jackson, 2019; Park & Kim, 2020).

For distance learning educators to facilitate digital pedagogy, NSQ standards emphasize the importance of *Standard C: Community Building* and *Standard D: Learner Engagement*, which discusses the importance of facilitating collaboration and meaningful interactions to build a supportive online community. Supportive online communities are outlined in these standards as being linked to more encouraging and active peer to peer as well as instructor-student learning environments with emphasis on the instructor helping students reach content mastery, having access to course resources, and frequent communication from the instructor (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). Within these standards, NSQ emphasizes the importance of the distance learning educator to outline standards for communication, model its implementation and enforce the established requirements. Putting this standard into practice, distance learning human service educators are encouraged to develop an online community that is supportive of diversity and creates opportunities for students to feel a sense of inclusion, care, and control (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). This can be achieved through the development of a commitment to diversity statement, welcome post at the onset of the course as well as purposeful actions related to communication and grading modeled by the human service educator (Jackson, 2019; Woodley et al., 2017).

Meeting the needs of all learners regardless of their cultural background and perspective is a vital component of this standard with emphasis being given to rubrics supporting original thoughts from students, allowing all learners the opportunity to include their voice in online discussions, and modeling a respect for diversity by commenting on a variety of thoughts presented by students (Hydinger et al., 2023; Woodley et al., 2017). Finally, the human service educator can demonstrate their recognition of the diverse learning paces of NAL students by making appropriate adjustments and accommodations for students to encourage active learning through scaffolding assignments, providing simpler explanations and supplemental activities aligned to the students' learning level (Gin et al., 2020; Midun et al., 2020).

Considering the importance of diversity and citizenship in online classrooms, NSQ *Standard E: Digital Citizenship* and *Standard F: Diverse Instruction* provide the expectation for distance learning educators to model, encourage, and guide ethical and safe behavior within the online platform while personalizing the instruction based on learners' diverse academic, social, and emotional needs (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). This standard creates the expectation for human service educators to recommend assistive technologies to meet the needs of students and to have alternative formats of course materials to accommodate students' needs for alternative means of access (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). This standard also emphasizes the requirement for online human service educators to utilize both quantitative and qualitative data to identify students who may require accommodations and to not put this responsibility

onto the student (Hickey & Harris, 2021; National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). When implementing this standard, human service educators are encouraged to maintain appropriate communication with school staff regarding accommodations or necessary modifications to meet learner needs in distance settings (Gin et al., 2020).

NSQ Standard G: Assessment and Measurement outlines the responsibility of online educators to create and implement assessment tools with demonstrated validity and reliability (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). When implementing this standard, the human service educator would be responsible for choosing appropriate assessment tools to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways such as live presentations, videos, student projects and student-created multimedia (V. Chen et al., 2022; National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). The human service educator would also ensure academic integrity and security of NAL assessment data while evaluating learner readiness and progress through formative and summative means (Bin Mubayrik, 2020; Novick et al., 2022; Reynders et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2022). The human service educator is also encouraged to customize instruction to personalize the learning experience based on student performance with opportunities for self-assessment from the student (Flournoy & Bauman, 2021).

### **Implications for Human Service Education**

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of higher education experienced an increase in awareness and attention to asynchronous and distance learning as a viable resource to deliver quality instruction (Zhang & Chen, 2023). At the onset of COVID-19, the field of online education saw a significant need for quality online education that can be delivered with little to no notice while maintaining the quality of education offered in traditional face to face classrooms (Zhang & Chen, 2023). Unfortunately, given the emergent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities that delivered course instruction solely in traditional face to face formats, were forced to provide emergency remote teaching, often sacrificing the quality of instruction or number of course offerings due to the national restrictions immediately placed on face-to-face instruction (Zhang & Chen, 2023).

Within CSHSE accreditation standards for human service education, distance education is not a required delivery format for human service classrooms, leaving the decision to offer distance education programs or courses solely up to the program and institution. As a result, human service education programs that were not prepared for a distance learning launch due to COVID-19, were at increased risk of experiencing the negative impact in quality created by delivering emergency remote education to students. During the time of the pandemic, traditional and NALs were subjected to distance learning instruction that was highly contingent on what their degree programs could offer within the time constraints that were put in place

because of COVID-19. These constraints ultimately resulted in variations of quality across courses and institutions based on their program readiness for online instruction (Zhang & Chen, 2023). Post COVID-19, many universities and colleges are seeing the benefit of readiness for online delivery of instruction, ultimately benefiting NALs who historically have high enrollment numbers in distance learning classrooms (Sloan et al., 2022). Considering their high attrition rates related to their NAL status, now is the time for human service education to review the quality of online and distance learning education to support the success of this population post COVID-19.

Given the importance of quality instruction to the human service practitioner identity, the National Standards for Ethical Practice in Human Services (2015) outline the responsibility of the instructor to meet this need, while CSHSE standards create a uniform outline for accredited human service programs to follow as it relates to course content and offerings. Within the National Standards for Human Service Professionals (NOHS, 2015) human service educators receive their nationally recognized responsibilities as it relates to ethical teaching and conduct. Concurrently, the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (2019) outlines the required content and standards for national recognized accreditation for human service education programs. Despite these uniform standards, formal adoption of standards of quality within online teaching is missing from human service education.

Current educators of human service distance learning programs are called to consider the learning outcomes presented from COVID-19 as it relates to quality instruction, course delivery, teaching engagement and adult learning and fill this gap by implementing the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (National Standards for Quality Online Learning, 2019). Program faculty are encouraged to consider the standards that focus on teacher engagement, community building, diverse instruction, professional readiness, and digital citizenship within their face to face and distance learning courses to enhance the adult learning experience of all human service students. In addition, the National Organization for Human Services and CSHSE are strongly encouraged to consider the implications a lack of readiness to provide quality distance education would have on accredited human service education programs' commitment to ethical and competent teaching standards.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for quality distance learning education for all higher education institutions under a mandatory stay at home order. While virtual and distance learning only institutions were able to meet this demand, traditional brick and mortar institutions face immediate pressure to meet the needs of their students with limited time to make the transition. As a result, many institutions were at risk for a reduction in quality instruction or course offerings to meet the course delivery restrictions presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Post COVID-19, many institutions

have returned to traditional face to face instruction, creating opportunities for human service education programs to consider the quality of distance learning course offerings to meet the needs of NALs who historically and currently enroll in distance learning instruction. Human service educators are encouraged to consider the learning outcomes presented by the pandemic and evaluate their course offerings focusing on incorporating the National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (2019) within their core human services curriculum. These measures would prepare human service education programs to be better equipped to maintain the quality of instruction that supports and increases NALs success in distance learning classrooms while ensuring that the field maintains its commitment to ethically sound education.

Submitted: May 31, 2023 EST. Accepted: September 17, 2023 EST. Published: December 29, 2023 EST.



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