Turning the Corner: Tennessee College Access and Success Conference White Paper
Special thanks to:

[Logos of Lipscomb University, Niswonger Foundation, Drive to 55, Tennessee FIRST to the Top, SAS, and ACT]
Executive Summary

It is time for Tennessee to “turn the corner” on its college access and success efforts. Years of local, regional, and statewide effort and investment have made Tennessee a focal point for college access and success work nationally.

With many programs struggling with reduced funding or loss of funding, however, the imperative for seeking sustainable models and tracking systemic impact is clear. We must move beyond a piecemeal approach.

One critical component of “turning the corner” is establishing a set of Common Measures for college access and success. Everyone working in the field in Tennessee should know 1. What to measure, 2. How to measure it, and 3. Where to get the data they need. Without this level of data alignment, we are inhibited in our learning across programs, bound to local impact and reporting, and unable to discern the most promising practices achieving the greatest results.

Currently, we do not share a common definition/calculation of either enrollment or retention rates. We struggle with accessing and using the critical data we need and thus are overly reliant on self-reported data. And, finally, we are not communicating our work broadly enough and with consistent measures.

Based on the insights of TCASN members from two surveys and conference plenary participation, we recommend the following:

Recommendation #1: Establish Common Measures for college access and success in Tennessee.

Recommendation #2: Increase the accessibility and usability of data to support a set of Common Measures.

Recommendation #3: Engage broader stakeholders with better data and better communication.

“It's critical that in measuring any particular data point that there's an accompanying commitment to positively improve it.”
  - Greg Darnieder, conference keynote, Senior Advisor on the College Access Initiative, U.S. Department of Education
Introduction: Data-Driven in Tennessee

Data increasingly dominates any conversation in the current education reform climate. Schools, organizations, and programs are required to devote more resources to the collection, analysis, and reporting of data while also adapting practices to meet scrutiny. Captured reliably, reported consistently, and applied strategically, data presents opportunities for local program improvement, sharing of best-practices across programs, and developing and assessing the effects of statewide strategies.

Despite the prevalence of the data discussions in education, the college access and success community in Tennessee has not yet taken such a critical eye to our collective work. Even as we celebrate a nationally recognized college access and success network and numerous programs considered national best-practices, we have never asked what metrics matter most nor clarified how we measure them consistently.

Tennessee is fortunate to have a Governor who has made college access and success a priority. Under Governor Haslam’s Drive to 55 initiative, Tennessee aims to increase the percentage of college degrees or certifications in the state from 32 percent to 55 percent by the year 2025. To reach this goal, Tennessee will need to increase the number of graduates from all postsecondary programs, Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology, two-year and four-year institutions. We will also have to reach communities from all geographic regions of the state. Our challenge is not about urban or rural Tennessee, it is about all of Tennessee.

Meeting this challenge will require a systematic investment and alignment among secondary, postsecondary, and community-based efforts as never before. Among other specific investments, we must reduce financial barriers to postsecondary education, train advisors to mentor students through college-going and completion processes, reduce the need for remedial coursework, increase opportunities for students to access pre-dual and dual enrollment courses, and enhance programs proven to increase graduation rates.

But, we will also have to do more with less to meet our goals. Drive to 55’s implementation is occurring at a time when state agencies, K-12 and higher education systems, and many community-based college access and success programs are facing decreased or terminated funding. As a result, it is more important than ever to be able to communicate through data the impact of our programs/initiatives and to do so based on a common set of measures.

We will have to do more with less to meet our goals...As a result, it is more important than ever to be able to communicate through data the impact of our programs/initiatives and to do so based on a common set of measures.
To spur this effort, the 2013 Tennessee College Access and Success Conference took a special look at the current metrics captured by our college access and success programs: what they measure and how they measure it. We shared and discussed the outcomes of two surveys of our members focused on data tracking, access to data, and data use. Additionally, during the working plenary, 300 educators, college access and success professionals, community and business leaders lent their expertise to draft a set of Common Measures of college access and success in Tennessee.

2013 Pre-Conference Data-Focused Survey Findings

In preparation for a working plenary session on Common Measures at the annual Tennessee College Access and Success Conference, TCASN created two surveys: a deep dive on metrics for 11 leading programs in Tennessee and a survey for all attendees examining perceptions of the availability and use of data. Over 40 percent of conference registrants completed the at-large survey. Here are the key findings:

Key Finding 1: There is wide variance in who is being tracked so success measures are almost impossible to compare across programs.

For example, when asked who is considered part of your program’s data, responses included that students have to:

- “graduate from one of the high schools we serve”
- “have meaningful conversations with a mentor”
- “fill out an application”
- “meet deadlines, maintain a minimum GPA…and attend mandatory meetings.”

Given this broad range of “starting points” for who we are capturing data, there is simply no way to have a meaningful cross-program conversation about effective practice. For example, the percent of students who successfully enroll in a postsecondary institution will vary widely depending on if the calculation is based on 2000 students across multiple high schools or 200 students who applied to a given program. Neither is wrong, but the results are not comparable, so learning from them is difficult. Instead, we only know what success looks like locally for a given program year-to-year based on their particular collection and interpretation of the data.

Key Finding 2: There is no consensus on how to measure key college access and success indicators.

A major baseline for understanding and calculating college retention and completion rates is the number of college-goers. Of the 11 leading programs we surveyed, there was wide variation on the point at which students were considered enrolled in college as well as when they were deemed retained. See Figures 1-2.
Figure 1: Calculating College-Going Rate: When is a student enrolled in college?

- A student who has applied to and been accepted to college (9%)
- A student who has accepted an offer of admission to a postsecondary institution (9%)
- A student who is enrolled in classes after the first 30 days of the semester (9%)
- My program uses school or county-wide data and does not calculate college-going on a student-by-student basis (9%)
- A student who enrolls in college classes (27%)
- I’m not sure how our college-going rate is calculated; I use an external information source (27%)

Figure 2: Calculating Retention Rates: When is a student considered retained?

- Percent of students who return for a second year (18%)
- Percent of students who return for a second semester (9%)
- My program does not track student persistence and retention (9%)
- Both the students who return for a second semester and the students who return for a second year (9%)
- Other (55%)
Key Finding 3: Practitioners lack easy access to critical data.

Member responses indicated that the largest issues for them around data were lack of access to the data they need and time to capture and analyze it. On the other end of the spectrum, some felt overwhelmed and unsure how to edit and prioritize the abundance of data they already have. Clearly, more user-friendly data in support of explicitly defined metrics is a critical need for practitioners on either end of the spectrum. Member comments included:

- “Tracking students after high school poses a large obstacle.”
- “The data is raw and I have to combine databases in excel to make them useful. The systems are useless for my purposes unless they are integrated. I am doing it manually.”
- “Some of the postsecondary institutions have been reluctant to share data or don’t have it.”

Leading programs across the state also reported:
- Less than 30% have easy access to data that identifies students as first generation.
- Less than 50% have easy access to college-going rates.
- Less than 20% have easy access to college persistence rates.
- Less than 40% have easy access to college attainment rates.

Even though 99% of survey responders said data was either IMPORTANT or VERY IMPORTANT to their work, less than 60% said the data they need is easily available.

What is your number one challenge with using data?

1. Don’t have time to access/use the data.
2. Data unavailable within the timeframe needed.
3. Don’t have access to the data.
4. Difficulty understanding the data.

(ranked by response rate)
Key Finding 4: There is an over-reliance on self-reported data within the field.

When asked what sources of data were used to calculate college enrollment, the two most common responses were self-reported from both students and staff. See Figure 3. In other words, many practitioners are not using externally validated data. It seems clear that this has to do with the challenges of finding, understanding, and applying data discussed in Key Finding 3 above. The result of over-reliance on self-reported data also leads to the discrepancies in how key data points are measured (See Key Finding 2).

Figure 3: Data sources used for calculating college enrollment rate
**Key Finding 5: Data is primarily used internally, which means it’s challenging to use data to inform wider conversations with external stakeholders.**

Responders overwhelming indicated that their data is used internally, and very few share data with funders, school board members, or local and state elected officials. See Figure 4. So, without comparable data and in the absence of broader communications, programs remain relatively isolated and the effect of their work and their learning is limited to their direct reach. For statewide strategies to develop, communication will be critical.

**Figure 4: Who do organizations share college access and success data with?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff for internal or programmatic purposes</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students and families</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Directors</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funders</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School board</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Elected Officials</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Elected Officials</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voices from the Field

“Recent funding cuts have jeopardized our tracking efforts… This year we have many "homegrown" tracking tools and obtaining key metrics data is challenging and more reactive than responsive than we would like."

“We have yet to receive any program specific college-going data from THEC for the duration of our grant. We also have a difficult time receiving student data from individual schools.”

“Much of the data described is difficult for us to obtain, and at the same time we do not have the capacity to try to find it.”
Tennessee needs a systemic approach to using data
Analysis of the key findings above should be understood as more systemic in nature than as a list of independent variables or isolated issues. In other words, the findings are best understood as the foundation of a college access and success strategy rather than a to-do list for improving our data. These findings represent interrelated and interdependent elements that serve as current barriers but also as sources for potential solutions in the future (see Recommendations below). These elements include:

1. Establishing common language, metrics and tracking;
2. Increasing access to and usability of data that supports the metrics and tracking defined above in a consumable format;
3. Communicating results based on the above to reach a broader audience of stakeholders with more comparable and discernible information.

Language, Metrics, and Tracking
Clearly, by the nature of this report and the exploration being undertaken by TCASN and Network partners, Tennessee currently lacks common measures of college access and success. As a by-product then, it also lacks clear and consistent definition of terms, milestones, and tracking processes. Even as TCASN is seen as a model network and several network members are national models of local programs, we still lack the ability to aggregate and understand results across communities and programs. As a result, local program strategies are difficult to scale and their results are difficult to extrapolate for a statewide context.

The National College Access Network has created a list of Common Measures through its own analysis and research that provides a great starting point for Tennessee. TCASN included reflections on NCAN’s Common Measures in its survey of leading programs, specifically as it relates to what programs are already tracking. Results can be seen in Appendix 1-3.

Data Access and Usability
Lack of common language, metrics, and tracking across programs is likely attributable in part to the inconsistency of access to data and the challenges of consuming and using that data in a timely fashion. In the absence of consistent, usable data,
programs will report on what data they have and know they can track given the constraints of their program model.

Self-reported data is the easiest data to access for most of our programs. We have relationships with students and institutions so we just ask when we need to know something. While this data provides critical insights and often has the benefit of being more real-time, it is clearly incomplete in and of itself. For example, depending on when we ask, a student may say he is enrolled but never actually show up for his classes. Or, if a student has developed a strong relationship with a mentor, she may feel ashamed to admit she never returned for her second semester.

Additionally, the process of gathering self-reported data becomes in some ways more of a determining factor of the outcomes than the actual numeric result that is derived. For example, if we use emails and phone calls to share information with our students, we may lose contact due to changed addresses and phone numbers. So, the resulting feedback is biased on the side of those students who have maintained a consistent communication channel.

We want to emphasize that the data we need to support Common Metrics exists. It simply needs to be made a priority, and be organized, and be delivered effectively.

**Communicating Our Impact**

In order to collectively increase college access and success in our state, we need to be able to communicate our work and our results with some consistency and with some common understanding. Without common metrics and tracking and without consistent access to usable data, doing so is exceedingly difficult.

Increasing the number of Tennesseans with a college credential requires more than an accumulation of programs. It requires a cultural shift, and a cultural shift requires communication with and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, most of whom live and work outside of our current programs.
Recommendation #1: Establish Common Measures for college access and success in Tennessee.

Tennessee should establish Common Measures for college access and success to guide its work, assess progress within the state, and ensure the ability to learn from and compare efforts across programs and communities. Table 1 shows the recommended measures generated and prioritized by over 300 TCASN members at the 2013 Conference and includes guidance from both NCAN and the Michigan College Access Network’s Common Measures efforts.

To implement these Common Measures effectively will first require a collective effort to further define how each should be calculated and the identification of the appropriate data and data sources. We recommend the creation of a short-term Task Force that includes TCASN members and staff along with representatives from TDOE, THEC and the Governor’s Office to finalize this work.

It will also require direct support and training around the Common Measures as well as access, use, and reporting of related data. It will be critical for groups both formally and informally to share best-practices as well as common challenges across the state to help ensure quality and fidelity of the Common Measures.

TCASN is uniquely positioned to support this effort. Over the past three years, the Network has built a college access and success community of over 150 organizations, supported 50 grantees, and implemented more than 30 professional development opportunities at the state and local level. An independent evaluation of their work by the University of Tennessee Center Institute for Assessment and Evaluation also revealed the desire from members that the Network take a more strategic role in statewide efforts with a specific emphasis on data.
Table 1: Tennessee College Access and Success Common Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Measures for Access</th>
<th>Common Measures for Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness Indicators</strong></td>
<td><strong>Summer Melt Indicator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students exposed to college</td>
<td>Percent of students participating in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>options (TCATs, two-year and four-year</td>
<td>orientation or summer bridge programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>institutions) including campus visits,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>college fairs and other experiences.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of students who have sustained</td>
<td><strong>Academic Indicators</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions with a caring adult about</td>
<td>Percent of students requiring remedial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college options.</td>
<td>coursework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Readiness Indicators</strong></td>
<td>Percent of students who maintain financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students able to prove</td>
<td>aid and scholarship eligibility year-to-year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>competency in financial literacy with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an emphasis on college finances.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students completing pre-college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>training on topics like self-advocacy,</td>
<td><strong>Financial Aid Indicator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goal setting, and networking.</td>
<td>Percent of students completing FAFSA renewal on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Indicators</strong></td>
<td>time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students taking and completing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a rigorous college-prep curriculum in</td>
<td><strong>Persistence Indicator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school.</td>
<td>Year-to-year retention (benchmark twice a year).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average high school GPA.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students taking college-level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>courses and receiving college credit</td>
<td><strong>Social Indicators</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>via AP, dual enrollment, or other dual</td>
<td>Percent of students accessing student support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>credit options.</td>
<td>services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students scoring college-ready</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on a college entrance exam by the end of</td>
<td>Percent of students involved in some sort of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school. (ex: ACT, SAT, GED, Compass)</td>
<td>extracurricular opportunity connected to the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Aid Indicator</strong></td>
<td>school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students completing their FAFSA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on time.</td>
<td><strong>Post-Graduation Readiness Indicator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admissions Indicator</strong></td>
<td>Percent of students graduating on time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students who complete and</td>
<td>Percent of students who have established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>submit college applications by</td>
<td>post-graduation and career goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate deadlines.</td>
<td>Percent of students who have completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrollment Indicator</strong></td>
<td>internships or other job experiences related to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students enrolling in a</td>
<td>their field of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college by institution type.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
While they are more difficult to measure and track consistently, Network members repeatedly emphasized personal attributes like grit, perseverance, and resilience as critical on the college access and success pathway. So, while not represented in the Common Measures, instilling these attributes should be seen as critical to our overall success.

Recommendation #2: Increase the accessibility and usability of data.
Every Common Measure should have a directly correlated source for data. While data sources for each of these measures are technically available to someone, they are not equally accessible to those who use and report on it. At the risk of being prescriptive, we feel it is important to define accessibility and usability of data with the same intentionality of the Common Measures.

**Accessibility**
1. Data is available to school or program leadership when they need it.
2. Data is available in a format that does not require unique database extraction or transcription skills.
3. Relevant data is prioritized and organized rather than buried in databases or spreadsheets for each to program to track down, sort, and report individually.

**Usability**
1. Data is up to date with the most recent available numbers.
2. Data is available by geography, school/institution, and demographic indicators.
3. Support and training is available for data use related to the Common Measures.

Recommendation #3: Engage broader stakeholders with better data and better communication.
Getting on the same page is critical for strengthening existing work around the state and ensuring it has the greatest impact possible. But, innovative schools and college access and success programs in relative isolation cannot meet our state goals. We need more people who understand the issue, more voices advocating locally and statewide, more local funders investing, and more volunteers expanding the reach of staff and financially constrained programs.

Figure 5 is an illustration from the Michigan College Access Network that helps visualize our direction in Tennessee as we consider how we “turn the corner.” Over the past few years, Tennessee has dedicated much effort to aligning practice and policy issues at both the local and statewide levels. We have diligently worked to achieve Organizational Alignment (left side of Figure 5). Our next effort must be focused on marshaling Collaborative Action (right side). We need to help partners identify where they can add the most value. We need to organize our strategies to
leverage the resources that share our interest in college access and success. This sort of marshaling of resources was a specific point of emphasis of conference keynote Greg Darnieder in referencing work happening in San Antonio, Texas and is captured in the box below.

"it's critical that in measuring any particular data point that there's an accompanying commitment to positively improve it. Data allows college access professionals and school counselors to work smarter utilizing community resources. San Antonio ISD's lead counselor annually recruits 500 volunteers assigning 5 or 6 students to each while setting a targeted deadline for completing the FAFSA form. University financial aid staff are utilized to answer and help complete more complicated student applications. The result was a single year increase of 36 percentage points to an overall 68 percent rate of FAFSA forms completed for the Class of 2012 over the Class of 2011."
Conclusion

Tennessee is already seen as a national leader for its college access and success efforts. Higher education is a priority for Governor Haslam. Our ongoing higher education reforms, the success of TCASN’s and THEC’s support of local practices statewide, and our range of national models of urban and rural programming demonstrate our statewide investment and commitment. But, as the 2013 conference title suggests, it is time for us to “turn the corner.”

We must move from a patchwork approach of data use to a systemic one, and we need to establish Common Measures of college access and success to ensure we are capitalizing on best-practices and maximizing learning opportunities across the state. If we are going to meet Governor Haslam’s goal of a 55 percent postsecondary attainment rate, we must collaborate and coordinate our efforts as a state like never before.
Appendix I: NCAN College Access Measures

Essential NCAN College Access Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Percent of students who complete and submit a FAFSA form
- Percent of students taking ACT
- Percent of students completing college admissions applications, by school type
- Percent of students awarded financial aid
- Percent of students on track to/completing common core/rigorous college prep curriculum as defined by Tennessee
- Percent of students taking SAT
- None of the above

Supplemental NCAN College Access Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Average High School GPA
- Amount of total financial aid awarded (total & per student), by aid type
- Percent of students exceeding national ‘college-ready’ benchmark scores
- Percent of on-time high school graduates
- Percent of students accepted into at least one high education institution
- Percent of students enrolled in dual credit courses
- Percent of students that complete supplementary scholarship applications
- Percent of students visiting a college campus applied to
- Average number of applications completed per student
- Percent of students taking PSAT/PLAN
- Percent of students with Algebra II (or higher) mastery
- Percent of eligible students enrolled in AP courses
- Percent of students earning greater than a 3 on AP tests
- None of the above
Appendix II: NCAN College Access Measures

Essential NCAN College Success Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Student enrollment by institution type and status (full time vs. part time)
- Percent of students who enroll within 6 months of high school graduation
- Year to year student persistence
- Percent of students awarded financial aid
- Percent of students placed into remedial courses (English/Math)
- Percent of students who complete and submit renewal FAFSA form
- None of the above

Supplemental NCAN College Success Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Term to Term student persistence (community colleges)
- Percent of eligible students transferring from 2-year to 4-year programs with Associate’s Degree/Not
- Average college GPA
- Percent of courses attempted to courses successfully completed
- Percent of students completing remedial coursework within one academic year
- Percent of students who enroll within 12 months of high school graduation
- Amount of financial aid awarded (total & per student)
- Percent of students completing more than 20 credits in first academic year
- Percent of students participating in summer bridge programs
- Percent of students participating in college orientation programs
- Percent of students completing college level math course
- Percent of students working 20 or more hours per week
- None of the above
Appendix III: NCAN Core Demographics

NCAN College Access Core Demographic Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Free/Reduced Lunch Status
- Gender
- Race
- English Language Learner (ELL) Status
- First Generation College Going
- None of the above

NCAN College Success Core Demographic Indicators
TCASN Member Tracking

- Race
- Gender
- English Language Learner (ELL) Status
- Pell Grant Eligible
- First Generation College Going
- Selected vs. Undecided Majors
- None of the above
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Donnell Goode, Niswonger Foundation
Marilyn Goodman, Milan Special School District
Troy Grant, Tennessee Higher Education Commission
John-Paul Gray, Metro Nashville Public Schools
Lee Gray, Oasis College Connection
Duane Gregg, THEC
Nancy Gregg, Wesleyan College
Sanya Guy, Tennessee Higher Education Commission
Lauren Haley, Public Education Foundation
Angie Hamstead, Project GRAD Knoxville
Lisa Hankins, REDI
Christine Harris, LEAD Academy High School
Sandi Harris, Douglas Cherokee Economic Authority
Jackie Hartmann, tnAchieves
Squia Holmes, UTC Office of Veteran and Military Student Services
Ruth Ann Holt, Columbia State Community College
Dawn Hopkins, Franklin County High School
Ellen Houston, Oasis College Connection
Patti Hunt, Bradley County Schools
Nancy VanReece, Carpe Diem Management
Karla Vazquez, TIRRC/STUDY Foundation
Judy Vinki, Franklin County Schools
Danny Viteri, Next Steps student Vanderbilt University
Pablo Viteri, Family of Presenter
Paolo Viteri, Family of Presenter
Ruth Viteri, Family of Presenter
Beverly Vos, REDI
Candy Ward, Sevier County High School
Kris Ware, Bradley County Schools
Kate Watts, Tennessee Higher Education Commission
Kelly Weber, Bradley County Schools
Keith White, Public Education Foundation
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