CYNDI Good morning! Welcome to the session on Practicing Inclusive Archival Description. I’m Cyndi Shein. I’ll be presenting today with my colleagues, Noah Geraci and Lee Hanover. We’d like to begin by respectfully acknowledging that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the Tongva People.
CYNDI - In the archives profession, we often hear presentations that emphasize the importance of inclusion and diversity. We are frequently inspired by our colleagues—such as the plenary speakers we’ve heard here at this conference. During this session, we hope to provide a forum for you to begin transforming that inspiration into an action plan. We’ll share our efforts to create more inclusive description and we’ll all ask ourselves, what can we do bigger and better?
Session outline

• Introduction to inclusive description
  – Submit topics for breakout discussions

• Brief talks on challenges & solutions
  – Native American name authorities
  – Systems & standards
  – Digital collections description at scale

• Collaborative brainstorming
  – Breakout tables by theme/topic

• Share ideas with all attendees
  – Reconvene and share out

CYNDI We want this session to be relevant to you. The session structure is designed to focus on what you want to discuss and learn more about. We’ll set the stage with a brief intro to inclusion. Then we’ll ask you all to provide discussion topics. Then Lee, Noah and I will give brief examples of challenges and solutions from our experiences. We’ll break out into smaller groups based on common areas of interest. We’ll brainstorm ways we can create more inclusive description and then share our ideas with the larger group.
Hello, my name is Lee Hanover, I am a current PhD student in the History Department at UCR. I was invited to speak today about a project I worked on with Cyndi Shein at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. But, first I want to introduce the larger themes and issues surrounding our presentation, as well as provide a working definition for inclusion in archival descriptions and collections management.
Inclusion

• Common Definition in Archival Description

“[A]ction aimed at the removal of barriers to individuals’ participation in whatever group, activity, or service [that] interests them.”
—Helen Wong Smith

• Facilitating and providing space for diverse:
  • Epistemologies
  • Voices
  • Opinions
  • Individuals

LEE - The basic component of inclusive archival practice is Helen Wong Smith’s definition from the Introduction to a Special Edition of the Journal of Western Archives, that focused on diversity and inclusion.

https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol10/iss1/1/

Archives unintentionally privilege certain groups and institutions over other diverse individuals and communities and often indirectly prevent communities from telling their own stories or making them comfortable in archives that don’t feel meant for them. Thus, the inclusion of diverse opinions, peoples, epistemologies, and voices is the cornerstone on which our presentation has drawn its inspiration and attempts to provide models for thinking through inclusion at the university and archival levels, as well as recognizing power imbalances of access and operability of archival stories that create and sustain community memories of the past.
Power dynamics of naming

• Archives contain the residues of colonial description and acquisition practices that need to be updated. Part of this process requires revisions and solutions to naming and describing collections and records.

• Problem Terms:
  – “pioneer”
  – “development”
  – “local heroes”
  – “progress”
  – “the Mrs. … collection”

• What follows are our case studies of success, failure, and future possibilities:

LEE- Our panel draws from our own personal and collective experiences around describing and naming archival records; such as agent records, collection titles, and the identifiers of primary sources. Often, we retain collections within our home institutions that contain the residues of colonial descriptive processes or have historical notes from a past generation of archivists who deployed politically incorrect language, or privileged the memories of the class, race, and society that marginalized ethnic communities.

This language has often described these privileged colonial agents as “pioneers,” “developers,” and “local heroes,” as well as misidentifying gender identities of queer donors, racial slurs represented within labels of historic photographs, collections described in English that are predominantly non-English language records, the representation of indigenous communities and collections under exonyms instead of their autonyms, or gendered biases of representing specific women’s collections under their husband’s surname.

These current instances of disrespectful descriptive or identifying labels from the past can be corrected through working with diverse communities, academics, or student workers who might have subject expertise regarding collection materials. The power to name, rename, or erase names is part of a colonial discourse related to controlling historical narratives, and we should attempt to make access and the navigation of our archives more inclusive to the communities subjected to historical trauma. This should not be considered an aspect of decolonization, but instead
should be viewed through the lens of respect and inclusive practice.

In reading other instances of inclusive description and archival practice, it is apparent that we often idealize or suggest inclusion without representing methods or case studies of success, partial success, or even failures. This panel aims to provide case studies of our own challenges in identifying colonial frameworks, and the ways we as individuals and organizations chose to approach contextual problems. We also aim to provide a collaborative space today that allows for open discussions to identify the struggles and strategies of your own work and home institutions.
**Common concerns**

| Does this mean censoring/erasing historical context? | • Description is a living organism  
  • Revising description ≠ altering collection itself  
  • Many means of documenting changes |
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<td>Language is always changing—there’s no one, permanent right answer.</td>
<td>• That’s okay! We see reflecting that and dealing with those challenges as part of the work.</td>
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NOAH - As we get started, we’d like to acknowledge some of the concerns we’ve heard from colleagues about pursuing work in this area.

First, we’ve sometimes heard concerns that revising existing archival description with an eye toward inclusivity amounts to a form of censorship or erasure of the historical record. To be clear, we are specifically discussing description here, such as finding aids and digital collections metadata: the ways that archivists and organizations choose to document and describe materials. Nothing we discuss in this context pertains to altering historic/collection materials or deaccessioning a collection itself. Additionally, we believe that even in the absence of efforts toward inclusivity like the ones we’ll discuss today, description is a living organism. We make changes when we migrate a finding aid from Archivists Toolkit to ArchivesSpace or from EAD 1 to 2; when we transform an inventory spreadsheet into descriptive metadata for a digital collection, when we catch a misspelling, an incorrect box number, or a clunky phrasing. And we have many ways to document such changes and preserve information about previous description, such as EAD revision notes, version control tools like Git, or the myriad ways we practice documentation in general within our organizations.

Second, there’s the concern that the work is never done, that there’s no “right
answer.” Language continually shifts over time: the terms a community prefers today may be seen as dated and offensive in the future. Additionally, there’s frequently no single, universally preferred term: political, generational, or other divides within a community are often reflected in internal conflicts about language and terminology. I think to us, these are less discouragements or fatal flaws than they are part and parcel of the work: language and culture are constantly evolving, so how can our description reflect that? Language and communities are laden with complex power relationships, so what strategies do we use around employing multiple terms and navigating intra-community politics with care? How do we engage all of this complexity and contradiction to make the best and most thoughtful choices we can with the information we have at a given point in time?
NOAH - There are many aspects to inclusive archival description. Before we present a few examples of challenges from our experiences, we'd like to know what's on your minds? In about 15 minutes we'll break into smaller groups to discuss challenges and ways we might meet those challenges. We'd like those discussions to be focused on the issues of greatest interest to you.
Please grab an index card (or two) and take a minute to write down a potential discussion topic. If you think of more than one topic, that’s great! But use a separate card for each topic. We’ll give you a few minutes, then we’ll come to each table to collect your cards. Don’t worry if your idea isn’t perfect or fully formed. It can be general or specific. This is just a starting point—we’ll roughly sort the cards into themes to get the conversations started.
Practicing inclusive archival description

Native American Names and Authority Records

Lee Hanover
PhD Student
Department of History
University of California, Riverside
Lee - I am discussing my personal involvement in researching the autonyms (or self-identifying culturally based names) of indigenous nations identified within UNLV Special Collections and Archives’ Katherine A. Spilde Papers on Native American Gaming.

The collection primarily contains documents concerning Native American gaming concerns from the 1970s to 2010, and contains relevant materials on economic gains and losses, political power and sovereignty, as well as cultural revival and social relationships sustained by casino gaming projects. I originally worked with the collection as an undergraduate researcher taking a course on Native American Gaming, which required use of the collection to track the gaming history of a specific nation. The collection at this point was only roughly organized and had only a skeletal finding aid. My resulting term paper was read by our panel organizer, Cyndi, who invited me to participate in an NHPRC grant project to process the collection and increase discoverability and access for wider networks of researchers.
Arrangement and description

Arrangement & description:
• Regional Files
• Professional Files
• General Subject Files

Exonyms vs Autonyms:
• Discourse of Power
• Practicing Inclusion through Respecting Autonyms

LEE - Through the item level sort we conducted, we realized that collection’s arrangement and description did not reflect the cultural names of tribes mentioned in the documents, but instead reflected the names assigned by outsiders (exonyms). How people identify themselves as a group in contrast to other groups is part of how we make sense of our world. Thus, the power to name, rename, or erase names is part of a colonial discourse related to controlling or manicuring indigenous histories.

It was important to us that we better represent Native American naming practices when describing this collection that strongly reflects sovereignty and colonialism. For this reason we decided to carve out time from our project’s tight time line to research and create a way to incorporate and preference Native American autonyms in our cataloging system.
LEE - The research we conducted focused on three main resources. The first centered on reviewing the Library of Congress names and authority (LCNAF) records to identify how institutions across the U.S. have catalogued Native American collections under prescribed exonyms. The second was accessing Native American tribal websites that often contain historical pages as well as the description of their own national or cultural naming affiliations. We then accessed an Encyclopedia of Native American tribes that provided brief historical notes, geographic reference areas, and economic and political information related to their present histories. What resulted was a spreadsheet cross-referencing the prescribed U.S. exonyms to indigenous nations, the nation’s autonym or self-identifier, an historical note explaining the geographic location with brief sketches of complicated histories, and lastly the citations for the resources we consulted.

We conducted this multi-level research because out of recognition that most U.S. citizens and college researchers identify tribal collections by associated exonyms, which is also reflective of the meta-narratives of the United States history and its cataloging legacy within the LCNAF records more specifically. Thus, we attempted to create a system that both kept the exonyms for discoverability, but brought in the indigenous names for a more inclusive methodology.

For instance, the U.S. inherited lexical descriptions of indigenous nations from European outsiders or created alliances with indigenous nations at war with other
powerful indigenous peoples. An example is how the name “Sioux” has been inscribed within not only the meta-narrative of U.S. expansion, but the cataloging system involved with salvage anthropology and its organization and recording practices initiated without indigenous community voices or affiliations. For instance, in Algonquian, the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota nations were referred to as “Sioux,” or “little rattle,” a snake that was to be feared, a name which was enshrined within U.S. treaty law with these communities. This naming practice, along with the similar representation of Navajo by their exonym instead of their autonym Dine’, led to our discussion on how to improve discoverability while attempting to do this respectfully.
Conclusions

• Success:
  – Self-identifying names

• Shortcoming:
  – Did not collaborate with indigenous communities

• Attempt:
  – Avoiding the legacy of colonial naming practices

LEE - I will close by explaining that this project was a partial success, mostly because the project’s time frame did not provide sufficient means to contact the 178 tribal nations mentioned or represented within this collection.

Our project was not one of decolonization, it was primarily meant to assist researchers while recognizing that naming has power, and the associative violence that naming can represent within an archive. This was an attempt to not perpetuate this historical violence.
CYNDI – Hello again. As Lee mentioned, I worked with him on this project at UNLV. He pointed out some of the challenges we faced in our efforts to determine inclusive respectful names to use in our descriptions. I’m going to talk about the next step. Once we identified the names we thought we should use, what could we do about it?
Advocate for change

Advocate for revision of names and subjects in controlled vocabularies

*Systemic change takes time*

(E.g. ALA resolution to change the LCSH term “Illegal alien”
March, 2016 – LC agreed, but term is not yet changed)

CYNDI – We know that ultimately, we need to advocate for systemic changes at the national level, but even when controlled vocabulary terms are recognized as outdated or harmful, change takes time.

Meanwhile... what can we do?

- Continue to use authorized name and subject headings to ensure interoperability of metadata within established systems and structures.

Supplement authorized vocabularies

- Create access points for multiple names and terms (authorized and unauthorized) to optimize discovery.

CYNDI – Meanwhile... as we work to revise our shared systems and standards as a profession, what local actions can we take to improve things? At UNLV, to ensure the interoperability of our descriptive metadata, we continue to use names and subjects authorized by NACO, SACO and the Library of Congress. We then supplement the authorized headings by creating additional access points for more inclusive names and terms.
Working within our existing standards and systems, what can we do to give inclusive words weight in searches?

*Small steps at UNLV…*

- Leverage ArchivesSpace’s Agent Module to display preferred (unauthorized) names
- Use inclusive language wherever possible -- titles, abstracts, and notes (free text fields)

CYNDI – We’ve identified two ways we can do this:

1. We can leverage the ArchivesSpace Agent Module to display preferred names.
2. We can give weight to inclusive language by using it predominantly in free text fields, such notes, abstracts, and titles.
Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation

Three Affiliated Tribes

“It is important to be mindful that the [Arikara] people call themselves Saahnish, which means, ‘the original people from whom all other tribes sprang.’”

https://www.mhanation.com/history

CYNDI – This is an example of an autonym that differs from the NACO name. This Native American nation calls itself the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation. The nation's website also mentions in several places that, within this nation, the Arikara people call themselves Saahnish.
CYNDI – The authorized NACO name for this nation is: Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota. The NACO record is lengthy and includes 11 helpful variant names for the nation...including the name the nation uses for itself.
Sahnish, the Arikara people’s name for themselves, is not one of the variant names.

However, Sahnish, the Arikara people’s name for themselves, is NOT one of the variant names in the NACo record.
CYNDI – Here is how we handled this locally. This is the Agent record viewed through the staff interface of ArchivesSpace. At the top of the record you see displayed the name the nation uses for itself, rather than the NACO name. How did we do that?
**Authorized name:** NACO heading with URI from Library of Congress Linked Data Service

CYNDI – First we entered the authorized NACO name, which includes the URI from LC’s Linked Data Service. We designated the NACO Name Form as the Authorized name. We then added a Name Form …
**Display name:** the name the nation calls itself (autonym)

CYNDI – In the added Name Form, we entered the variant name from the NACO record that reflects what the nation calls itself. We designated this Name Form as the Display Name to ensure that the name the nation prefers will appear most prominently in our system.
Local name: **Sahnish** added to include autonym for part of nation that self-identifies using this name

**CYNDI** – Finally, we added a local Name Form (which is NOT in the NACO record) so that the Sahnish name will be included in our local authority record.

This ensures that all desired forms of the name will be discoverable in our local system.
CYNDI – VIDEO DEMO  In ArchivesSpace’s standard Public User Interface, when a user enters the search term Sahnish, the system retrieves records related to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara nation. The nation’s agent record appears at the top of the search results, even though the name Sanish is not part of the display name or the authorized name. This is the power of the variant name form at work behind the scenes. If a researcher clicks on the agent record, the organizational history appears and the variant names are listed.
CYNDI – At UNLV we generate PDFs from ArchivesSpace and post the PDFs online. You can see that the Name Form we chose as the display name in the Agent Record, is the name that appears in the controlled headings in the PDF.
In addition to including variant names in the Agent Record, we also included variant names throughout the archival description. We prioritized the groups’ names for themselves and included the NACO name in parentheses.
Researchers can find every mention of the nation, regardless of which name they use to conduct their search.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>North Dakota: Mandan, Hiranacá (Hidatsa), and Sauilsh (Arikara) (Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota) newspaper articles on topics such as infrastructure, farming, crime, preserving culture, and land use; and special issue of the &quot;North Star Dakotah&quot; newspaper on first encounters between Native Americans and fur traders, approximately 1994-2002</th>
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<tr>
<td>North Dakota: Mandan, Hiranacá (Hidatsa), and Sauilsh (Arikara) (Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota): photographs and negatives of casino and reservation locations from site visits, approximately 1997-2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Dakota: Mandan, Hiranacá (Hidatsa), and Sauilsh (Arikara) (Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation, North Dakota): historical articles on Reunion Point, the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, and the Four Bears Bridge; and promotional materials, approximately 1997-2001</td>
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CYNDI – Including variant names at the component level is admittedly redundant and makes for some very long folder titles, but it enables researchers to find all the materials related to a group, regardless of which name they use to conduct their search. Is this perfect? No. But until we move to a new digital asset management system that will enable us to use linked data to show relationships between variant names, this is our work-around at UNLV.
NOAH - I’m going to switch gears a bit now and talk about inclusive description in the context of digital collections. The kinds of research and creative technical strategies that Lee and Cyndi have discussed are core here as well, but there are some additional challenges specific to the context and scale of digital collections.
Core challenges

• Digital collections metadata often built on “cleaned” legacy data, imbued with legacy values around race, gender, power.
• Traditional cataloging practice prioritizes direct transcription over contextualization.
• Publishing collections on the web amplifies and disseminates offensive or inaccurate description more widely.

NOAH - First, digital collections metadata is often not created from scratch, but generated through processes of repurposing, mapping and “cleaning” data from varying sources. The legacy inventories and other data deployed for such purposes often carry legacy language and values around race, gender and power. There’s also frequently a one-to-many relationship where one existing box- or folder-level description becomes the description for tens or hundreds of individual items.

Additionally, bibliographic cataloging practices prioritize exact transcription of the text on an item, meaning that title and description fields can often be populated with comments made hundreds of years ago, now presented out of context in a manner that obscures their origin.

And the flip side of all the great work done to improve access and discovery of collections via the open web, is that inaccurate or offensive description is multiplied and disseminated much more broadly.
Data sourcing

• **1890-1940**: Wealthy white man who created the collection labels its contents.
  – (at least, we think the labels came from the creator)

• **circa 1999**: Archives worker transcribes labels to an Access database.

• **2019**: “It already has metadata, let’s digitize it!”

NOAH - To put it a bit more bluntly, in my experience, the data sourcing process often looks like this. Without serious, systematic attention, digital collections workflows are designed for a handwritten racist comment someone made in 1905 to be disseminated across the web without context in 2019.
Legacy description

- Old description: Indian hut

NOAH - Here’s an example of an image from the Avery Field collection at UCR, a photo collection I’ve worked with whose descriptive metadata has followed much the path outlined in the last slide.

With a bit of online research, I was able to find that the place depicted was a fairly well-documented Cahuilla settlement; we actually had an archeology master’s thesis here in the library that covered it in detail. This isn’t perfect; ideally, it would be great to work with our local Cahuilla communities on more complete and accurate description for all the Cahuilla materials in our collections. But being able to go from “Indian hut” to the name of a people and a place is an important step.

But the problem we run into is scale. Even the single collection that example comes from has > 3,000 images. The push is to speed up and “do more with less,” not to slow down for more time for research, outreach, or reflection. This is where I see value in exploring programmatic approaches.
Programmatic approaches

• Programmatic as in:
  – How can we use code to work with these challenges?
  – How can we make it a regular part of our work?

• Focus on identifying possible descriptive “hot spots” in need of human review and revision.

• Natural language processing as key tool

NOAH - By programmatic, I mean both using code to work with these challenges, and making it a regular part of our work. Of course, there is no software that can magically make your metadata less oppressive. But I see potential for using code to identify specific content that merits a closer look and potential revision. Like Terry Cook’s concept of “hot spots” in state archives “where the citizen objects to, or suggests variations from, the official narrative of the state,” I’m starting to think of these as “descriptive hot spots” where the material itself or the current communities related to the material object to or suggest variations from the existing description.

Natural language processing is a key tool here, as we can draw from existing technical work around helping computers understand some of the complexity and context of human language.
Current experiments

• Working on script to flag terms identified as inappropriate in Younging’s *Elements of Indigenous Style*.

• Researching sources for lists of racial slurs to check for in metadata.

• *mrs*, designed to detect names with the structure “Mrs. [male first name] [last name].”
  – “Mrs. Ralph Mayer”, “Mrs. Tomás Rivera.”

NOAH - Currently, I’m exploring this work in a few different avenues. I’ve been reading *Elements of Indigenous Style* by Gregory Younging, an Indigenous editor and educator, which contains a really thoughtful list of inappropriate terminology. I’ve been playing with that list a bit and looking at how I might apply it to flag potentially inappropriate terms in the metadata I’m responsible for.

I’ve also been seeing broader issues come up around racial slurs in metadata, not just in an Indigenous context, and have been exploring what sources might be useful for doing more identification and remediation work in that area. One particular challenge in an archives context is that we’re sometimes dealing with archaic slurs that are no longer used, so not likely to show up on lists designed for purposes like current internet forum moderation.

Finally, a recent previous project I worked on used natural language processing to identify instances where women were identified by their husband’s first name, like “Mrs. Ralph Mayer.” I’d been encountering this a lot in collections such as Avery Field and wanting to add the woman’s own first name where possible. This Python script can be used to identify where and how often these names occur to prioritize them for further research. I definitely don’t have answers to many of the questions that come up in this area, but I believe pretty strongly that at least in digital collections, it’s imperative to move beyond spot-checking and good will to find more systematic approaches, and would love to talk more with anyone else exploring this kind of work.
NOAH - We’ve shared these examples from our work just to get the conversation started. Next comes the fun part. You see we’ve got marking pens and posters and more index cards at all the tables.
Efforts...

**Inclusive naming**

*Now...*
- Research Native American names
- Create cross-reference of variant names
- Prioritize autonym in local system
- Reach out to Native American librarians

Future aspirations...

**Inclusive naming**

*Next...*
- Contribute local name data to larger efforts
- Partner with groups to revise names in wikidata/dbpedia
- Use linked data to show relationships between variant names

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CYNDI - Each table has several posters. You can use them however your group would like. One idea is to identify a common challenge and use one poster to list ways you can address your challenge to some degree now (things that are within your power to accomplish). Then use another poster to envision bigger solutions and record your aspirations for the future.
Be creative…

CYNDI - You may want to express your ideas as a mind map or infographic or bullet points…whatever you’d like.

You might want to use a poster to brainstorm as a group and use the smaller papers to express your final ideas. If you’re not in the mood to talk, that’s okay, too. No one will force you to participate. You can sit there and draw rainbows and unicorns while you listen to the discussion. When we’re done, with your permission, we’ll share photos of the posters online.
Safe Space

Things to keep in mind during discussions...

• Be kind
• Respect one another
• Listen (one mic, one voice)
• Encourage others to speak, but allow silence
• Use welcoming language
• Use constructive language
• Guard confidentiality
• Be an active bystander

LEE - As we begin our discussions, please strive to make the environment at your table a safe space. You might want to designate one person at each table to serve as a facilitator to help keep the conversation respectful and on topic. You might ask for a volunteer to take notes for the group. Each table can decide those things for themselves.
Discussion topics - challenges regarding description related to...

1. Indigenous Peoples
2. Race and ethnicity
3. Multilingual; community terms/slang
4. Organizational challenges; getting buy-in from co-workers and stakeholders
5. Contextualizing description
6. Legacy subject headings
7. Legacy description
8. Gender and identity

All right, let’s see what themes emerged from the suggestions you all submitted on the index cards. Table number 1. Indigenous Peoples…
Conversation starters?

• How is inclusion discussed where you work?
• What successes and failures around inclusive description have you faced in your work?
• How do the software and technical infrastructure you work with help/ hinder/ shape your efforts to practice inclusive description?
• How do the existing standards and controlled vocabularies you work with help/ hinder/ shape your efforts to practice inclusive description?

You might jump right into your topics without preamble, or you might want to use these questions to get the conversation started. We encourage you to go off script if you get inspired by an idea. The only thing we ask is that you focus on action rather than theory.
Practicing inclusive archival description

What efforts have you made? What aspirations do you have for the future?

[The presenters checked in with the group and the participants decided to continue conversations at their tables rather than reporting out.]
Thank you all for participating! Please leave any documentation you are willing to share at your tables. Take with you anything you do not want to share. We’ll upload photos of the documents to a shared Google folder. This folder isn’t exposed to search engines, but it is not private. Anyone with the link can see the contents. We hope you’ll contribute to the communal session notes, share your email if you want to continue the conversation, and post any other helpful info or resources to the folder.
Practicing inclusive archival description
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