

# Creating Meaningful Social Connections-Virtually!

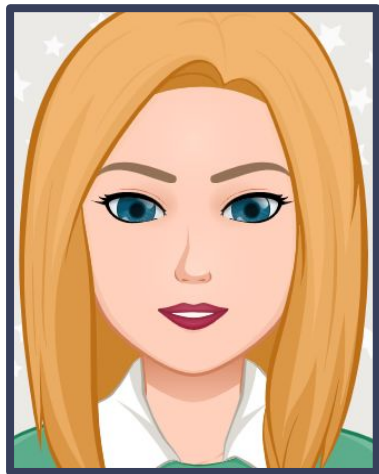
StudentAffairs.com  
2021 Virtual Case Study



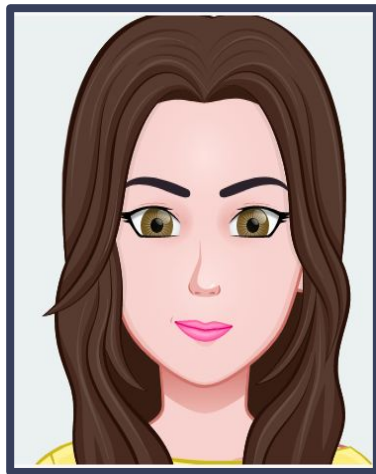
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(Team Leader)  
Dale Markowski,  
Samantha  
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Caroline Toth

# Meet Our Committee!



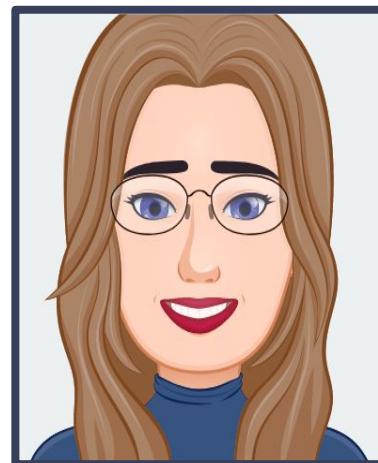
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# Welcome to Crown Institute of Technology!



5,000  
undergraduate  
students

Residential  
campus. But, since  
the start of the  
pandemic, 60% of  
student population  
is remote.

Most popular  
majors are  
**technology  
related.**

Crown Institute's  
Information  
Technology Club is  
our most popular  
club, with over 60  
**members!**

Fortunate to have several  
involved **alumni** connected  
with **large technology  
corporations.** 2 have reached  
out as interested in supporting  
**this program!**

Located in a  
semi-metropolitan  
area with **strong  
technology  
infrastructure.**

Colors: Blue and  
Gold  
Mascot: The  
Mighty Lion



## PART 1: Why Are Meaningful Social Interactions in the Virtual Format So Important? How Do We Do It Right?

- Why do meaningful social interactions matter to Student Affairs? What are our goals?
- Chickering's Theory of Identity Development
- Social Interactions and Marginalized Identities
- Mental Health and Overall Success
- Virtual Reality and Game Theory
- To do this right, we learned from the literature that we should....



## PART 2: THE PROPOSAL-CASTLE Virtual Campus

- Outline
- Features
- Promotion & Rewards System
- Overview of Campus Centers
- Logistics for Implementation

***PART 1:*** Why Are Meaningful  
Social Interactions in the  
Virtual Format So Important?  
How Do We Do This Right?



## Why do meaningful social interactions matter to Student Affairs?

- We have a duty to promote the identity development of students
- **Meaningful social interactions...**
  - ◆ Promote the identity development of all students
  - ◆ Promote the identity development of specifically students with marginalized identities
  - ◆ Supports mental health
  - ◆ And boosts overall success in college
- Meaningful social interactions contribute to a **sense of belonging** and the overall "**college experience**".



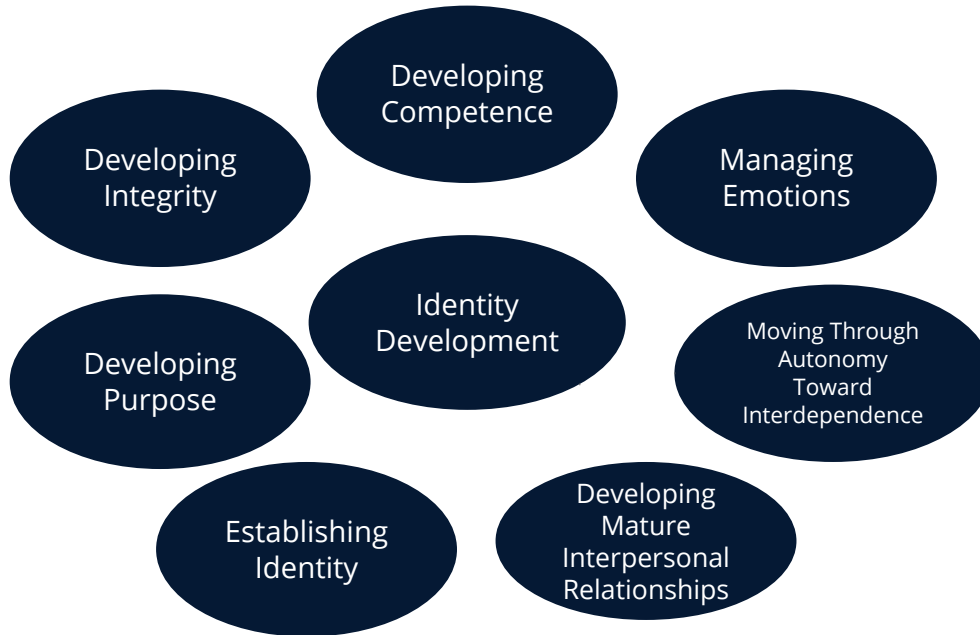
## What are our goals?

- Increase student's sense of belonging to the Crown Campus Community (particularly incoming students)
- Imitate the "college experience" in the virtual setting
- Increase attendance and participation in campus events and involvement in student organizations
- How to **measure** these goals:
  - Student, Faculty, Staff Surveys
  - Open feedback forms available for students, faculty, and staff
  - Usage reports
  - Bi-Annual Assessment Meetings (more information on **Slide 24**)

# Meaningful Social Interactions are Essential to Identity Development



## Chickering's Theory of Identity Development



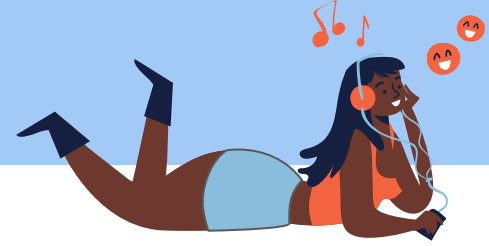
This theory reveals how many students develop their identity while in college. A **lack** of social interaction can jeopardize a student's ability to develop their identity in all stages, including:

- Interdependence
  - ◆ Long term effects- poor problem-solving and sense of belonging
- Mature, interpersonal relationships
  - ◆ Long term effect- lack of cross- cultural tolerance
- Purpose
  - ◆ Long term effect- inability to choose life vocation

Meaningful social interactions are **necessary** for healthy identity development in college students.

(Chickering, 1979, as cited in Torres et al., 2009)

# Meaningful Social Interactions are Essential to the Identity Development of Students of Marginalized Identities



For example, literature reveals:

- Identity development in **students with disabilities** depends on “fitting in, acceptance, and **support from a group or community**” (Vaccaro et al., 2015)
- “Affirmative practices and institutional efforts must include **intentional relationships and community building** in order for **Black women** to thrive (and for some to survive) their collegiate environments” (Porter et al., 2020)
- “**Black men** need to be around other Black men” and build connections to succeed in college (Brooms et al., 2020)
- “**Building a sense of community** enables **Latin(x) students** to create academic and social spaces, which “foster [their] learning at the university and nurture a supportive environment where [their] experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge” (Muñoz, 2013)
- **Asian American students**, especially those who have experienced oppression as a result of their identity, tend to “**seek safe spaces** where they can feel welcome and **find a sense of community**” (Museus et al., 2015)
- “When [**student veterans**] participate in a **cohort program**, we see a positive effect on sense of belonging in the program and the larger campus community, particularly among students of color” (Durdella et al., 2012)
- “It is important that **Native American students** develop **strong relationships** during their first year of college. Student affairs administrators and faculty can ensure professional trusting relationships exist by reaching out to students, attending cultural events, and connecting students with resources, such as Native American student organizations or other common interest groups” (Schooler, 2014)





# Meaningful Social Interactions Support Mental Health and Overall Success in College



## Mental Health

One study showed...

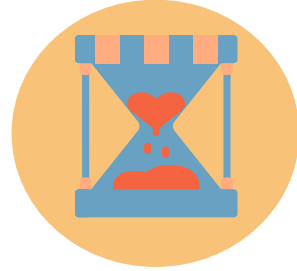
**86%** of students had “decreased social interactions” and thought this was affecting their mental health

**71%** students reported increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak

**44%** of students mentioned experiencing some depressive thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic

**8%** stated that the pandemic has led to some suicidal thoughts

(Son et al., 2020)



## Overall Success

“[After COVID-19], university students... felt less motivated and reported spending fewer hours on their studies.... **A lack of social interaction** was a large factor in dissatisfaction with online education”

(Meeter et al., 2020)

# Virtual Reality and Game Theory helps students create meaningful social connections...*sometimes more than in the real world!*

"Playing [virtual reality] games... has the potential to... ***promote empathy*** in a learning process, allow for the discovery of ***purpose and meaning*** as intrinsic motivation..., ***strengthen collaborative skills***, and ***build appreciation*** for the talents of others" (Arnab et al., 2019)

"Gaming has been reported as a ***new way of satisfying basic human needs*** within the constraints of current modern society" (Balhara et al., 2020)

***This project is worth the time and investment, and will be useful, even after the pandemic!***

"The real world doesn't offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the ***powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments***. Reality doesn't motivate us as effectively. Reality isn't engineered to ***maximize our potential***. Reality wasn't designed from the bottom up to make us happy" (McGonigal, 2011)

"A student who is reluctant to comment or ask questions...***might feel more comfortable*** doing so in a virtual world" (Baker et al., 2009)

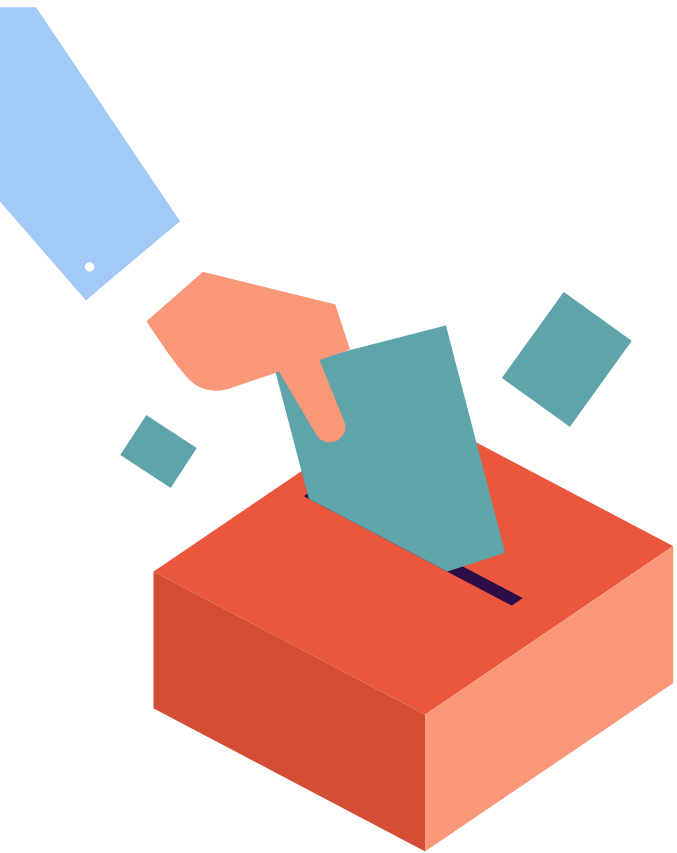


# Overall, we learned from the literature that our program should...



- Have a Plan for **Supporting Students Who Don't Have Reliable Access to Technology and Technical Glitches**
  - For example, literature suggests that “no technology is completely foolproof...communicate your plan to students; this can save them anxiety if things start failing” and some groups of students, particularly Native students, “have varying degrees of access” to technology. To solve this, literature suggests a “process for **Wi-Fi hotspots** to help...students with access”
  - See more about how our program will account for access gaps and technical glitches on **Slide 22**.
- Have **Strong Training** for Students, Faculty, **and** Staff
  - For example, literature suggests that “the impact the induction, [training] process had on [engagement in the virtual platform] was proven to be of vital importance”
  - See more about how our program will include strong training on **Slide 17 and 22**.
- Schedule **Assessment Meetings** to Analyze Data on Program Effectiveness and Look for Factors like Possible Excessive Gaming
  - For example, literature suggests that “a significant proportion of college students engage in gaming behavior excessively”
  - See more about how our program will use assessment tools to see if there is excessive use of the site on **Slide 24**.
- Have **Leadership, Activism, and Community Service Opportunities**
  - For example, literature suggests that to support LGBT students in particular, universities should focus on opportunities for “leadership or activism” and “Black students benefit from leadership engagement in campus-wide, student organizations”.
  - See more about how our program will include opportunities for leadership, activism, and community service on **Slide 19**.
- Have **No Tolerance for Hate Speech or Abusive Language**
  - For example, literature suggests that to support Black male students in particular, universities should focus on “safeguarding students from racialized incidents”, “it is important to remember that there is a real person behind every avatar”, and “make sure students know how to...leave unwanted interactions, and that they know how to interact appropriately in the virtual world”.
  - See more about how our program will safeguard against hate speech on **Slide 24**.





# Part 2: The Proposal

Introducing...

# C.A.S.T.L.E.

## Crown's Alternative Student Technological Learning Experience

The virtual campus will be  
created by the Crown Institute's  
Information Technology Club  
and IT Department, in  
partnership with the Division of  
Student Affairs



# CASTLE Campus Centers & Programs



## Campus Centers:

- New Student Programs & Orientation
- Residence Life
- Student Activities
- Inclusion & Identities Center
- Counseling, Wellness, & Recreation Services
- Accessibility Services & IT Help Center
- Crown Coliseum

CASTLE is virtual campus consisting of **7 interactive centers** corresponding with real campus offices. Students use avatars to tour campus, interact with other students, and attend virtual programs. Each center will host unique events and activities and include virtual meeting spaces for organizations and affinity groups.

Offices are encouraged to utilize student staff and associated student groups to contribute to the development and facilitation of programming.



# CASTLE Features

## Tour Campus

Utilize this all-absorbing virtual experience to step foot on our beautiful campus! Familiarize yourself with campus building locations and interact with other student avatars. *Even if you haven't been on campus yet, you will surely learn your way around now!*



## Avatars

Students will be prompted to create their avatar during orientation from thousands of customization options available. These avatars will be automatically *linked to their student accounts* with the institute in order to monitor students.



## Groups & Messaging

Students will be able to *join groups* based on student organizations, special interests, cultural affiliations, fraternity and sorority life, and more!

*Students can also take on leadership positions* in these organizations in the format-planning group meetings and events. Add students to your friends list, set up direct messages, and invite friends to events within CASTLE



# CASTLE **Promotion** & Rewards System

## Accumulate Points

Based on virtual events attended and total time spent on the website. Each event will have number of points available listed (decided by the Office of Student Activities). Each office will promote their respective CASTLE events on their **social media platforms**.



## E-Gifts

Random events will have “hidden” **e-gift cards** to spend at university stores. Top 100 students will be entered into raffle where 10 students win \$50 e-gift cards.

Every student will create their avatar and learn how to navigate the virtual campus at orientation! More information on [Slide 17!](#)



## Win Tuition?

Once a year, 300 students with the most points will be entered into a raffle where tuition will be covered for an academic year. This will be heavily featured throughout the year on **Social Media** to ensure all students are aware.

Faculty and staff can also accumulate points and e-gifts! Faculty and staff can earn extra points by hosting events and promoting them on social media and to their students!

## The On“LION” Schedule

All students, faculty, and staff will be see and **submit proposals** to add to our virtual schedule of events. These include when campus organizations are meeting, volunteer opportunities (from home!), and fun engagement times! **Students will receive a notification** when events are about to start. This calendar will be regulated by a Graduate Assistant in the Office of Student Activities.



# Campus Center 1: New Student Programs & Orientation

*Integrated with Orientation programming, incoming students will be the first to try out CASTLE! This center offers resources for new students as well as first-year and transfer student programming.*

## Social Interaction:

**Orientation group leaders** will walk new students through training to become acclimated with CASTLE virtual campus.

Orientation groups will be pre-determined based on **personality and student interest questionnaires**. Students will automatically be added to their orientation group to encourage friendships and collaboration in learning features. But, students will be able to interact with students from all over the virtual campus.



**Event:** Orientation Scavenger Hunt



**Compete against other orientation groups** to see who can collect and identify certain features throughout CASTLE virtual campus the fastest.

Winning groups will be given bonus rewards points and an exclusive CIT t-shirt for their avatar to show off their Lion pride!

# Campus Center 2: Residence Life

*Feel at home at Crown and find new ways to interact with your residential communities! CASTLE makes residence life accessible to even off-campus students!*

## Social Interaction:

- On-campus students will be automatically added to groups for their building to get to know the people they live with.
- “Open door” feature allows students to let others view their virtual room.
- Option to merge virtual rooms to share with a “roommate”.
- Each building has an open “lounge” for virtual building/floor events or impromptu chats.
- Off-campus students have their own dedicated residence hall.



Image 3. Retrieved from *The Sims Catalog* by Agathe-k

## Event Name: Dorm Decorator Competition

### Social Interaction:

No matter where you live, create a virtual dorm room in CASTLE and show off your decorating skills! Throughout the semester, students can unlock new decorations when they hit certain point milestones. All decor is customizable with colors.

Submit your dorm to be voted on at the end of each semester to receive bonus points and prizes!

# Campus Center 3: Student Activities Center

*The Student Activities Center is your home for student organizations, leadership development, and service-learning opportunities!*

## **Social Interaction:** Ongoing Student Organizations & Leadership Fair

- At any time, access lists of current student organizations, when they meet, and if/when they're recruiting new members!
- Register for upcoming *Lions Lead* leadership development workshops.



## **Event Name:** Community Engagement Week!

### **Social Interaction:**

- Sign up as an individual or with a group to complete community service activities from wherever you are!
- For activities involving creating items, pre-registration is required and supplies will be mailed to your address.
- Chat with other students in the virtual service lounge while you make a difference!

# Campus Center 4 :Inclusion/Identities Center



*This Inclusion/Identities Center serves as a space for multicultural, international, and LGBTQ+ students to promote inclusion and identity development. In this office, affinity spaces can found amongst the various identities.*

**Event Name:** Recipes Around the World Competition

**Social Interaction:**

- Share a recipe, favorite dish, or must-have treat from around the world! Attend the affinity space with your avatar to view recipes/vote for peers!
- Participants: Present your:
  - Ingredients
  - Assembly
  - Recipe Origin
  - And more...
- Win points in areas like:
  - Plating design
  - Video creativity
  - Ease of dorm-friendly cooking
- The recipe with the most points/peer votes wins!



**Event Name:** LGBTQ+ Presents: Crafts and Conversations (Making Household Items “Pop!”)

**Social Interaction:**

- While your avatar attends the virtual “hangout” session in the LGBTQ+ affinity space:
- Follow along a craft construction with household items including
  - Popcorn
  - Pop-cans (soda cans)
  - Pop Rocks!
- Register your avatar ahead of time to reserve your space
- Utilize your previously earned points for a gift card toward a local craft store
- Converse about experiences and aspects of identity development in a safe space

# Campus Center 5: Counseling, Wellness, Recreation

*This office serves students' mental and physical health and wellness. Mental health counselors and members from the Rec center will promote group events for a healthy mind, healthy body amidst the virtual world.*

## **Event Name:** Mindful Meditation

### **Social Interaction:**

- Attend *Mindful Meditation* sessions with peers
- Reflect in journal prompts, thoughts, and experiences during sessions in the *Wellness Journal*
- Respond to peer experiences to earn bonus points in addition to session attendance points

### **Relevant Research:**

- Mindfulness promotes mental health and well-being
- Recent studies are exploring ways in which mindfulness meditation can, "...improve organism fitness by enhancing immune defenses that protect **against viral and bacterial infection**" (Black et al., 2016).

Protect yourself  
against COVID-19,  
at-home!



## **Event Name:** Home-Workout Competition

### **Social Interaction:**

- Create a workout plan using equipment you can find at home (water jugs, cans, etc.)
- Promote your routine with:
  - Video demonstrations
  - Equipment use and/or design
  - Ways to track progress
- Have routine(s) approved by Recreation Center/Exercise Science students/instructors for safety and accessibility evaluation.
- Earn points when students use and track your routine, the most points win competition



# Campus Center 6: Accessibility and IT Services



*The Accessibility and IT Services office will be available for technical assistance and accessibility service needs.*



When system glitches, interruptions occur, or maintenance is required, students will receive a notification to their university email detailing what the problem is, how long it will take, and how this will affect the activities calendar, if at all. A dropbox will be located at the IT Services virtual center for users to submit feedback and ideas, report problems, etc.



Talk to your orientation guide to get connected OR

Call, email, or sign your avatar up (if able) for staff office hours where you can:



- Apply for free or reduced cost technology aid/devices, Wifi hotspots, and more
- Access disability, accessibility, and accomodation services (like visual/audio support, anti-blue light glasses, etc)



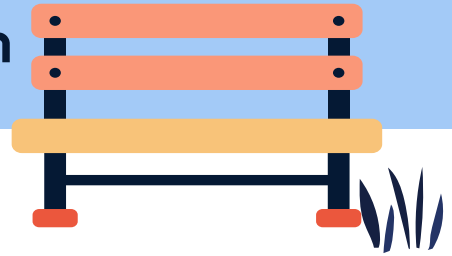
Utilize the 24 hour live-chat with IT for questions/ concerns (staffed by the student workers and IT staff)



Receive links for CASTLE or other technical resources and trainings

# Campus Center 7: “The Coliseum”– Open Auditorium

*The Coliseum will be the “hub” for making connections! Students can hang out, have deep conversations, attend events, and more!*



This auditorium-like space will be open for additional programming and events, utilized as a presentation space for:

- Student Organizations/Clubs
- Campus Offices
- Study Groups
- Music/Art/Entertainment
- Fraternity and Sorority Life
- Athletics



Register your avatar(s) to present and/or attend events like:

- The Comedy Club's: Open Mic Night
- Career Center's: What Your Netflix Watch History Says About You
- Biology Department's: Being a Plant Parent

***Earn points for attending with friends, bonus points for presenting or hosting event activities!***



# Logistics for Implementation

## Soft Roll Out

The site will be rolled out with **incoming students first**. Once any “bugs” are corrected, it will open up to all student affairs units and used in recruitment efforts for CROWN. Also, **live, interactive trainings** will be created for students, faculty, and staff to “take a tour” of the virtual campus, learn how to navigate in the virtual space, find out how to troubleshoot technical glitches, brainstorm how to maximize virtual experience, etc!

If found to be effective and sustainable, **we will continue to use the virtual campus even after the pandemic!**

Alongside our operations, the Admissions team can use this to give live, virtual 3-D tours of campus, and host orientation events for international and out-of-state students. The campus can also be used to engage commuter students, alumni, and more!

## Preventing Abusive Language and Hate Speech

The students and staff building the site will utilize a **coding feature that blocks hate speech or abusive language**. All users will sign an agreement upon entering the virtual space to abide by university policy outlined in the Student Handbook regarding hate speech, which can include **conduct action** if breached.

## Cost

All students will be assessed an annual **\$10** activity fee in order to pay for the virtual campus site construction and future maintenance.



## Assessment

Our committee will meet bi-annually to discuss the **assessment plan** for this program. Throughout the program implementation and maintenance, we will be collecting data on program effectiveness in the form of **student surveys, feedback forms, usage reports**, etc. Users will be required to take a survey at least once a semester, but prompted to take a survey after every usage at the logout screen, if the user chooses to do so.

At future meetings, we will look for patterns, like possible overuse of the program by students and compare this with student GPA data, etc. For example, if a correlation between excessive use of the program and GPA is found, we will reassess our reward structure and team up with Academic Affairs to implement **preventative measures against excessive gaming**.





## Citations

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