A CONFLICT OF CULTURES

Governance at Liberal Arts Colleges

The way private liberal arts colleges choose to answer the question, "How shall we govern ourselves in the 21st century?" has a great impact on what kinds of institutions that they can and will become. The urgency of this issue is apparent in public criticism, in governance disputes on many college campuses, and in recent publications on governance and the presidency. Criticism of governance is ubiquitous. And not surprisingly, the critics of current governance systems come from all quarters and constituencies.

Higher education reports, media criticisms, and exposés from those within and beyond the academy have enumerated the shortcomings of governance in colleges and universities for the past two decades. Off-campus critics (including many trustees) frequently claim that the cumbersome nature of college governance has resulted in the inability of colleges to adapt quickly to external challenges or to make decisions untainted by the veto power of the vested interests of a few. Inefficient or ineffective decision-making is often the result.

On-campus critics (including faculty, students, and administrators) meanwhile complain that they are left out of essential decision-making processes, or that their participation in governance is not only too demanding but diverts scarce attention from their primary work. Many of these critics attribute the weaknesses of campus decision-making to the highly participatory and time-intensive "shared governance" systems that are prevalent at small colleges. Thus, governance discussions, debates, and concerns have escalated in their intensity over the past decade.

Most of the contemporary literature on governance focuses on the particular concerns of public and research universities (such as faculty unions or state and federal politics). Thus, the role of "shared governance" as practiced at most liberal arts colleges receives little formal attention. This article focuses on governance at the country's some 500 to 600 liberal arts colleges, which may vary in their religious/secular focus, the academic aspirations and accomplishments of their faculties, their status among prospective students, and their blend of liberal arts and pre-professional studies.

Such institutions do share independent/private status, and tend to have small residential campuses ranging from 1,000 to 2,500 students where faculty members, administrators, and staff know each other by face if not by name. Their academic cultures are shaped by a primary focus on undergraduate teaching so that even faculty research is often conducted with students.

Their small size and liberal arts heritage (regardless of their current curriculum) means that most faculty teach beyond their disciplinary specializations and take some responsibility for the general education of students. Faculty and staff often work and socialize beyond their home departments and thus some level of intimacy marks the nature of their academic communities. Finally, it is the board of trustees (and not the state) who are the legal "owners" of these private colleges.

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I argue here that strong reliance on outdated and unexamined governance assumptions and practices makes shared governance a captive of opposing constituency cultures that cripple many liberal arts colleges’ capacity to address urgent challenges. In the context of actual cases, I discuss the particular shortcomings of frequently proposed governance solutions in such settings and offer instead an approach to shared governance that is vision-oriented, collaborative, and effective.

**THREE CURRENT CONSTITUENCY MODELS INSUFFICIENT**

Three current “solutions” for the governance malaise on small college campuses reflected in today’s higher education literature include trustee activism, heightened roles for faculty in shared governance, and the assertion of presidential authority. The case of Alpha College (a pseudonym for an actual institution) illuminates the complexity of the contemporary governance challenges faced by small private colleges and the limitations of any one of these three current strategies as effective solutions in themselves (see “Alpha College” on page 21).

The first solution—trustee activism—is sometimes necessary as the recent examples of Eckard and Bennington Colleges reveal (see Coleman and Pulley in Resources). Trustees do have an established legal and fiduciary responsibility for all aspects of a college’s mission and activities, as is made clear by the “AGB Statement on Institutional Governance.”

The Alpha College case shows just how much governance power trustees can legitimately exercise when they choose to do so. But Alpha College’s trustees stepped beyond the line between creating policy and managerial administration when they tried to dictate curricular and educational content. Indeed, the 23 “guiding tenets” established by the Alpha College trustees reveal the significant limitation in most college board members’ knowledge about complex academic issues, and their naiveté about how effective change occurs on college campuses.

Many faculty members claim that the second solution of “shared governance,” led by faculty, is the proper answer. The Alpha College faculty’s response reveals this tendency. The first Alpha College trustee tenet states that the primary “authority and responsibility for governance” lies with trustees, and that the president’s role should be confined to “implementing the board’s policies, strategic plans, and directives.”

The Alpha College faculty responded, “The faculty has had for some decades an elaborate, autonomous governance system... which is not wholly susceptible to the ‘leadership and management’ of the president.” The basic affront to the faculty was that the trustees developed the 23 tenets without faculty participation, and that many of them established new formal policies in areas that faculty had always assumed was their domain—alone—to decide.

As a 1998 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* put it, “The concept of professors playing a role in running their institution is a cherished idea, but it is under siege, threatened by overreaching trustees, ineffectual presidents, and professors themselves” (see Leatherman in Resources). This is partly because current notions of faculty participation in “shared governance” often have an embedded “only on our terms” assumption. And, not surprisingly, the president and top administrators are usually viewed as part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Many observers, however, do call on the president to resolve the governance impasse, and this constitutes the third commonly advocated solution to the governance challenge. In 1996, for example, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) issued a report entitled “Renewing the Academic Presidency: Stronger Leadership for Tougher Times.” It begins by expressing the concern that colleges are “neither as nimble nor as adaptable as the times require.” Why? Because, says the report, the academic presidency has become weak. What is the remedy?

First, the president is encouraged to use the authority she or he already has. Second, the president is seen as the primary initiator of solutions to an institution’s ills, including problems in shared governance. Third, the report encourages trustees to look for presidents who are “change agents and risk takers,” and who can formulate a vision for the college. These qualities, says the report, may require looking for candidates beyond the academic community to the business and public affairs communities.

Larry Gerber, an Auburn University professor, argues that the AGB’s 1996 statement on the presidency supports the trend to make presidents more like corporate CEOs. The case of Alpha College seems to support that assumption as well. But the crisis at Alpha College also reveals the extent to which a college president’s capacity to lead can be undercut by conflicting trustee and faculty cultures and the assumptions that lie behind them.

Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, says, “In a crisis we tend to look for the wrong kind of leadership. We call for someone with answers, decisions, strength, and a map of the future... in short, someone who can make hard problems simple” (see Chait in Resources). Instead, Heifetz argues that we need leaders with subtle skills to frame issues, focus attention, and address conflicts.

What the case of Alpha College perhaps most clearly reveals is that none of these popular strategies to address governance is sufficient by itself. None of the three constituencies has a sufficient base of knowledge, experience, and perspective to guide strategic direction-setting for a complex private...
**Alpha College: A Case Study**

Alpha College (a pseudonym for an actual institution) is an elite liberal arts college that also has strong professional programs. In the top echelon of national liberal arts colleges, Alpha College’s academic programs are diverse and respected, its faculty is composed of strong teachers/scholars, and its admissions program is flourishing. It has also been known historically for committed, long-term administrators.

The Board of Trustees is overwhelmingly composed of alumni who are both committed and involved in the life of the college. In the early 1990s, Alpha College completed a strategic plan that produced a new general studies program and fund-raising goals to support it. The college then developed a strategic financial plan to realize key institutional goals. All of these important initiatives were accomplished with shared governance procedures that included faculty, administrators, and trustees.

However, Alpha College also has a history of occasional squabbles between the faculty and trustees. In November of 1999, at a time when the college was devoid of crises the trustees chose to assert their primary leadership. The details of this case expose the limitations of current shared governance assumptions and constituency cultures.

Early in 1999, the chair and a small group of Alpha College trustees met alone off-campus to develop a set of “guiding strategic tenets.” No administrator—not even the president—was invited to the meeting, neither were any faculty members nor other campus staff. None of the standing trustee or campus planning committees or shared governance procedures was used. Early in summer of 1999, the president resigned in protest.

In November, the chair of the board officially distributed “The Board of Trustees’ Guiding Strategic Tenets” to the faculty and key administrative leaders. The board’s letter said that the tenets set forth what the trustees understood to be Alpha College’s essential “character” that would “guide the board’s operational and philosophical decisions concerning the future direction of [the college].” The contents of this document ranged across virtually all of the college’s activities from residential life, admissions, and facilities to curriculum, faculty responsibilities, and other academic matters.

In early December after several emotionally charged meetings, the faculty sent a measured letter of response protesting both the non-collaborative process and the content of some of the key tenets. Administrative and staff governing groups supported the faculty letter and expressed their dismay that a document of such wide-reaching significance would be presented by the trustees with no prior consultation with anyone on campus. Faculty members were also concerned with tenets that clearly abridged common areas of faculty decision-making (such as the curriculum) and that challenged academic freedom.

It was clear to all campus groups that the trustees’ secretive action was intended to assert their authority as “owners” and “managers” of the college. But the “guiding tenets” seemed to go even further than this intent by making the trustees the primary, if not the sole, “governance” constituency of the college because they essentially cast aside the collegial governance principles and practices by which the college normally operated.

Given the strength of the trustees’ assertion of their singular authority, it is not surprising that the president resigned or that the trustees sought a new president who would act as a “Chief Operating Officer (COO).” However, it was not really clear from subsequent practice who the “Chief Executive” really was at Alpha College—was it the board chair, the Executive Committee of the Board, or the board as a whole?

What was completely clear to outside observers—and many within Alpha College as well—is that with the promulgation of the “guiding tenets,” governance at Alpha College took a radical turn from the collaborative traditions of its past. The case of Alpha College raises significant questions. What role should shared governance play in an independent college community? What is the proper role of the various constituencies? What are the best strategies for effective governance under such circumstances?
Sources of Conflict: Multiple Structures and Competing Cultures

The governance system of any college essentially allocates decision-making authority within a set of formal and informal structures that determine who gets to decide what. Ideally, trustees set broad policies, delegate core leadership responsibilities to administrators, and allocate most academic matters to campus bodies that include both faculty and administrators. Yet on-campus shared governance processes frequently initiate policies in such areas as academic standards or rules for residence life that trustees then approve and administrators carry out.

Therefore, as one of my former faculty colleagues once put it, “It is the faculty’s role to set policies and for you administrators to carry them out.” So strong is the assumption that the faculty’s collegial governance system is the governance system that a chart of one current college’s faculty committee structure is entitled “The Big Picture.”

Most shared governance systems at liberal arts colleges have three underlying—and often unstated—assumptions. First, it is assumed that all important institutional policies will be formulated through the shared governance process. Second, it is usually held that all college faculty are eligible to participate in campus governance, and the faculty meets as a whole to make important curricular and policy decisions. Third, it is assumed there is a strong tendency to structure most important governance committees to include a balanced representation of basic campus constituency groupings (for example, by race, gender, or academic division).

It is precisely the strength of these assumptions that made the process, not the content of the Alpha College trustees’ imposition of “guiding tenets” the primary issue for faculty. But these assumptions about the role and scope of collegial governance have led to unintended consequences when either the faculty or trustees believe that they alone should decide all major policy issues. Such misunderstandings have led, in some cases, to cynicism and mistrust when it is not made clear beforehand exactly who gets to decide what.

Most liberal arts colleges also have a mixture of two dominant decision-making systems: a collegial governance system led by faculty (often including some administrators and students) that is made up of committees, councils, and faculty meetings; and an administrative governance system led by senior administrators who, as “officers” of the corporation, have duties that are legally transmitted to them by the trustees through the institution’s bylaws.

Overarching these campus systems and structures is the trustees’ own committee-based governance structure. Even when the trustees delegate curricular or managerial decision-making to faculty and administrators, they retain ultimate responsibility for their outcomes. This multifaceted, three-constituency system in its entirety is the “big picture” of a college’s institutional governance structure.

Another clarification that can help colleges address lingering governance issues is to recognize the key role of governance cultures, independent of governance structures. Most governance discussions are focused on the observable mechanics that appear to determine who decides what, instead of on the underlying assumptions and values of the quite different constituencies in which such decisions are embedded.

Faculty culture, for instance, typically promotes individual and collective autonomy, disciplinary or departmental concerns, and deliberative participation processes. Administrative culture is usually concerned with collective equity, institutional controls, bridging diverse constituencies, and timely and effective decision-making. Trustee culture, in turn, often reflects business models where efficiency, authority, and “bottom-line” thinking prevail.

Colleges can easily become places where these diverse and competing expectations, processes, and discourses be-
come unspoken barriers to effective decision-making. Thus there may be no greater obstacle to shared governance than the “us versus them” world view of faculty and administrators (or faculty and trustees) that derives from fundamental disagreements about the nature of autonomy and control, or about the appropriate trade-offs between individual “rights” and the common good.

This deep, pervasive, and divisive set of cultural tensions on college campuses is sometimes acknowledged but is seldom constructively engaged and addressed through governance. And these cultural tensions frequently intensify when trustees—who bring multiple talents and diverse governance expectations to college boards from the worlds of business, the professions, and public service—are encouraged to extend their oversight to academic policies and programs (see Morrill in Resources).

A NEW MODEL OF SHARED GOVERNANCE FOR LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

So, how should we govern ourselves on small college campuses in an era of rapid change while taking seriously our enduring and tradition-bound cultural impediments? I argue that the visions of trustee activism, faculty governance, or the president as an authoritative CEO are insufficient models for governance reform. I offer, instead, four suggestions for reform that collectively illustrate a new way to conceive of “shared governance” as the integration of all three constituencies’ interests and abilities:

1) Embrace but redefine “shared governance.” I continue to believe that shared governance is not only a way of life on college campuses but that it is also the best governance solution. But it must be reconceived and practiced differently. This first requires that all parties accept the college faculty’s unique knowledge and perspective, and its central role in the teaching/learning process.

Many observers recognize that colleges are unlike businesses in numerous ways, but the most significant difference between the two is the collective responsibilities assumed by the faculty. Colleges are what some management theorists call “professional bureaucracies” where the “workers” (that is the faculty) on the “production line” (that is, in the classroom and laboratory) are highly educated professionals whose expertise and stature essentially turn traditional top-down management structures upside-down.

As opposed to the frequently heard business metaphors, faculty are free within the limits of their professional knowledge and assigned curricular responsibilities to direct the work of their classroom. Therefore, if college-wide initiatives like the use of technology, internationalization, or general studies goals are to be implemented, the faculty must be voluntarily persuaded of their efficacy. If faculty have had no role in developing these initiatives, most are unlikely to apply them.

Hence there are good pragmatic educational and political reasons to engage faculty with administrators in decision-making regarding policies and programs that they are expected to take a leading role in implementing.

A second feature of effective shared governance is that it must welcome all three core constituencies to the table because, when it does, it leads to better decisions for the institution and more effective implementation of those decisions. The primary argument for inclusive shared governance is that it can—and should—expand the knowledge base and awareness of those involved, and should permit the collective wisdom of the group to supersede the presumed exclusive knowledge of a single person or constituency.

For example, Alpha College’s “guiding tenets,” drafted by only trustees, would have benefited considerably from collaboration with faculty and senior administrators who might have corrected mistaken notions, clarified sticky issues about academic freedom, and found ways to address real disagreements among constituencies. The ultimate beneficiaries of such collaborations are the students and those who teach and support them.

It is clear, however, that even well-intended attempts at shared governance will be undermined unless the “us versus them” culture among faculty and administrators (or among faculty and trustees) is constructively addressed. This will require a fundamental redefinition of participants’ roles. Not only must key issues be viewed in broader terms, but assumptions about what “collaboration” means must also be redefined. For example, Del Favero suggests that, “The new culture will demand greater investment by faculty in the institutional good, and increased investment by administrators in understanding faculty and their work” (see Resources).

This redefinition and sharing of roles will require acceptance of the value of autonomy and collaboration, departmental and institutional perspectives, and faculty and administrator inclusion. Such a shift in perspective and attitudes will require faculty, administrators, and trustees to view each other as what Del Favero calls “essential participants in the governance process.” Until this fundamental cultural tension is addressed, shared governance cannot achieve its full potential as a powerful and collective decision-making process.

2) Look for “whole institution” perspectives and solutions. One of the core arguments for faculty participation in shared governance is that it brings to bear the expert knowledge of their disciplines as well as their direct experience of how well a college’s educational goals are being achieved. But such perspectives are too narrow when they focus only on faculty knowledge and experience and omit what students, administrators, and trustees can bring to such complex discussions.
Dennis O’Brien, for example, effectively explores such educational “half-truths” as “the faculty are the university” or “the students are the university.” He concludes that faculty must be central participants in governing colleges because the contemporary academy is “discipline-driven.” But he also argues that governance decisions in healthy institutions need to be “mission-driven” by faculty, administrators, and trustees who see the “whole institutional picture.” No single constituency alone can provide the fully informed and complex picture that is necessary to make the most effective decisions (see Resources).

One way that college constituencies can gain the “whole institution” perspective necessary for effective participation is through carefully conceived strategic planning processes. Most colleges have some kind of “long-range” or “strategic” planning committee as part of their organizational arsenal. But few understand the real differences between these two processes.

Strategic planning is better understood as “strategic thinking.” That is, it is a process of considering a college’s mission in the light of its internal and external environments, then establishing a carefully chosen strategic direction for the foreseeable future (a basic institutional compass). Implementation plans for accomplishing the strategic plan are more like the typical “long-range plans” that most institutions periodically generate (a roadmap of the particular destinations toward which the strategic compass points).

The origin of my own thinking for this article can be traced to Berea College’s strategic planning revision process, which began in the fall of 2000. Working groups of the Berea College Strategic Planning Committee (made up of faculty, administrators, students, and staff) identified the issues that most frequently appeared in the higher education literature over the past five years. These work groups discovered that the issues that were most often written about were how to accommodate the new student cohort, faculty concerns about increased workloads or post-tenure review, institutional diversity, educational uses of technology, and collegiate governance.

The Strategic Planning Committee then considered how these particular issues manifested themselves at Berea College and identified other pressing issues that seemed to be emerging on campus. The revised text of the Strategic Plan (written first in 1996) was then distributed in the summer of 2002 to every Berea College employee and student leader. Even a cursory reading informs community members of the broader issues that impinge upon our ability to accomplish our unique mission of learning, labor, and service in Appalachia.

The task of developing policies that are intended to direct the entire mission of an institution really belongs to a fully collaborative conversation that produces whole-institution solutions. This is the new and redefined culture of shared governance where faculty, administrative, and trustee participants are considered essential partners. It will take such a redefinition of what constitutes a “common” culture between faculty and administrators if shared governance is to succeed in the future. Effectiveness in this context will not be gauged by who wins the political battles, but instead by the quality and timeliness of the decisions that shape the fundamental futures of our colleges.

3) Rethink what “participation” and “representation” mean through the use of teams and other alternative structures. In arguing for collaborative leadership across all college constituencies, Jo Ellen Parker says simply, “Formally representative structures cannot be assumed to be collaborative, nor will a successful collaborative group always be representative” (see Resources). If people in a governance group bring the knowledge and experience of their working situations and the openness to learn how institutional and external forces may shape an agenda or issue, “representation” will no longer be understood in narrow disciplinary or political terms.

It is both a narrow and an unrealizable goal to assert that each and every perceivable constituency must be represented on every committee that considers every issue that affects it. Certainly, there are times when formal representation may be helpful—for example, disciplinary representation on a curriculum committee or a tenure review committee. But constructing entire college governance systems around strictly representational parameters imposes an enormous time demand on faculty without ensuring a greater diversity of viewpoints or better decisions. Alternatively, “representation” can mean that minority and multiple perspectives are considered in collaborative decision-making by thoughtful participants—regardless of the constituency from which they are drawn—who are explicitly charged with this responsibility.

Participation, like collaboration, must be reconceived if the current governance conundrums on college campuses are to be addressed. Participation is often defined as personal involvement on the part of every faculty member at each stage of a process—from an idea’s conception to its resolution in a decision. When participation is thus understood as each faculty or staff member acting individually to help formulate an important issue, consider various solutions, and recommend or decide on the major issues that face colleges today, it is no wonder that faculty morale and participation are low. This is simply an unrealizable expectation.

In contrast, participation actually takes three primary forms at most colleges: decision-making, consultation, and information. Every one of us cannot be equally involved in actually making all of the important institutional decisions that affect us. But we must, at minimum, be consulted or be
informed. Communications among multiple constituencies about how their various interests are affected is a difficult task to be sure, but it is a crucial one for a healthy governance climate.

One possible avenue for achieving collaborative ends with revised notions of participation and representation is the use of limited-duration teams. *Ad hoc* teams can facilitate the participation and collaboration of those with voting rights if such groups are required to bring their recommendations to the full faculty and administration for final resolution. At Berea College, small teams have been established by the Strategic Planning Committee, the Executive Council of the faculty, and by administrative officers. These teams are given complex issues to address—for instance, student retention or internationalizing the campus—that usually overlap the charges of several standing committees and administrative offices.

The team leader is generally a faculty member who is given some released time to complete the relevant research and to write up the team’s findings. Teams are never given final decision-making authority but are required to bring their proposals to the appropriate faculty or administrative governing bodies. Teams also typically reflect the common goals of faculty and administrators that should be the norm in the larger governance culture. We have found them to be both efficient and effective.

If shared governance structures on college campuses were purposely designed to welcome equally both standing committees and *ad hoc* teams as avenues for decision-making, this would require significant participation in the faculty meetings where final recommendations or decisions are made. The use of integrated teams requires all constituencies to rethink how they define participation and representation, and to be willing to collaborate across decision-making groups and processes.

**4) Welcome senior administrators to the governance table.** Current governance discussions can too often be characterized as faculty and trustees battling for control of who really governs colleges while presidents are invited to referee, mediate between, or “lead” these respective combatants. While this depiction might seem a bit exaggerated, it comes close to depicting the reality at colleges like Bennington or Goddard (see Basinger in Resources)—or, indeed, at Alpha College during the “guiding tenets” debate.

The current literature pays considerable attention to the central role of the president in college governance. Yet faculty often feel uncomfortable inviting the president into the “collegium” for important discussions that they view as their turf. If the president suggests a solution, it frequently becomes lost in a cloud of suspicious questions. Is she just conveying the trustees’ wishes? Does he have an ulterior motive to gain some control? Is she pandering to student consumerism?

Seldom do faculty presume that the president may have as deep a commitment to cherished academic ideals and practices as they do, or that his or her experience offers useful perspectives on key issues. The pres-
ministrators, and trustees will provide a vision for the future that is far more intelligent than any that a single person or constituency can provide.

The shared decision-making processes on college campuses should also recognize the vice presidents’ roles and responsibilities as senior officers of the corporation. Vice presidents are expected a) to carry out established policies in academic affairs, student life, and other core activities; b) to support all critical trustee committees and implement their policies; and c) to carry out the day-to-day administration of curricula, budgets, facilities, and student life.

If “collaborative governance” is to mean anything on small college campuses, then the president and vice presidents must be welcomed, not just tolerated, at the shared governance table so as to benefit from their professional knowledge and experience. This is truly re-visioned wisdom for strategic planning and governance.

These knowledgeable and committed servants of any college have no real political base among the faculty or the trustees. But they are often the glue that holds leaky ships together, and they are usually the unsung heroes of successful college programs and their implementation. If we are to use the full strength of our knowledge base, vice presidents along with presidents should be welcomed by faculty and trustees as essential participants and peers in the shared governance process.

CONCLUSION

The basic impediment to effective shared governance on liberal arts college campuses today is the tension between the interests and cultures of separate constituencies on the one hand, and the common good of the college and its students on the other. While faculty, administrators, and trustees have different interests and often reside in different experiential and professional cultures, I believe that most of them can be challenged by, and will work for, a compelling mission and shared idealistic goals.

Liberal arts colleges tend to have committed faculty, staff, and administrators who work at one college for most of their professional lives. As a result, they are clearly committed to the institution’s mission. They also tend to have trustees who volunteer significant amounts of time for the institution’s welfare. But no one person or constituency alone should be assumed to have sufficient knowledge or experience to lead a college. Clearly, shared governance must be redefined and practiced in new ways if our colleges are to realize their full potential.

Current shared governance systems are frequently lethargic, contentious, and ineffective. They can be time-consuming and people-intensive. Most important, so-called “shared governance” is too often caught up in the cultural conflicts of competing constituencies when they have to deal with institution-threatening challenges and conundrums.

In contrast, reconceived and truly collaborative shared governance can produce well-informed, timely, and effective decisions that emerge from the collective wisdom of committed constituencies. This is the potential that both the trustees and the faculty at Alpha College underestimated when they asserted their uniquely autonomous roles in decision-making. It is also the collaborative planning and policy-making that has been more typical of Alpha College’s governance history, which made that institution the outstanding institution that it is today. Newly conceived, informed, and inclusive shared governance systems have enormous potential both to protect traditional excellence and to chart a new future at independent colleges. It is time—even past time—to use our collective wisdom and shared goals in governing ourselves and charting our future.
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