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2019

## Demonstrating the Value of Honors: What Next?

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## Demonstrating the Value of Honors: What Next?

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Our professional organization, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), has provided a good general definition of honors education while at the same time recognizing the “diversity of honors experiences across many institutions of higher learning.” Here’s how the definition reads, in part, from the NCHC website:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extra-curricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. (NCHC 2013)

Of crucial concern to the researchers in this collection is the qualifier that honors education incorporates practices that are *measurably* superior. And as Smith (2019) points out, “With more than 1,500 honors programs currently in operation and hundreds of millions of dollars being spent throughout American institutions, external pressure is building for accountability in honors programs” (p. 27). (See also Scott and Smith 2016.) In response to the need for

accountability, our contributors have developed research to substantiate in measurable ways the claims made on behalf of honors education and the application of what are frequently referred to as high-impact practices. No matter how convinced we may be personally that honors adds value, it is essential to ourselves as honors educators, to our students, and to the constituencies we serve, both inside and outside our institutions, that we can support what we say with data, as Savage (2019) suggests in her contribution to this collection:

Honors education is known nationally and internationally for leadership in high-quality undergraduate programs. Honors faculty enjoy the opportunity to create unique and innovative learning environments, with academically talented undergraduate students as the immediate beneficiaries. Institutions benefit from recruitment of ambitious, motivated students who typically have higher retention and graduation rates when compared to those in the traditional student population. Yet despite these obvious institutional benefits, questions persist regarding the value that honors adds and how precisely that value is to be measured. (pp. 13–14)

That is where the scholars and researchers in our volume contribute to the discourse—asking questions about the best practices for measuring “the value that honors adds” and the most effective means of representing these findings. Research in honors plays a vital role—that is how we justify our existence, it is how we learn from our mistakes and build on our successes, it is how we enlist students into becoming active participants in their own education—by demonstrating measurably and communicating effectively the value of what we do.

To build on important work already done and to take account critically of the variables that will define honors research as we move forward, the contributors to this volume have undertaken a range of studies at institutions that differ in type from large research universities to liberal arts colleges to two-year colleges. And what

becomes clear is a consistent agreement about honors adding value, about the strategies and programs that work, and about the need for doing additional research to learn more.

What is called for, then, and what our contributors have set out to provide, is a set of well-designed retrospective studies that assess students' success quantitatively as they progress toward graduating, comparing those who have participated in honors to those who have not. This research is not easily done because of the complexity involved in making sure we are comparing students who have the same level of preparation and motivation and who share other defining characteristics—comparing apples to apples as the cliché goes. Equally important is that we understand how students' experiences are being changed qualitatively as well. Are the same practices and strategies equally effective and appropriate for everyone? Does one size fit all? Can practices be fine-tuned for different constituencies, whether defined by major or demographics or some other factors? The contributors to this monograph have set out to move the discussion of these important questions forward and also to speculate creatively as to what comes next. And what is also of critical importance is that they have undertaken to evaluate the best methods for creating and analyzing data, as well as the best means to communicate the significance of their findings.

When it comes to quantitative measures, we might start with GPA and ACT/SAT scores, but honors educators generally agree that these figures are not providing all the data necessary when making decisions about who is admitted into honors and who is not. (These parameters often become the basis for group comparisons as well after students have matriculated.) At Michigan Technological University, for example, in response to the perceived inadequacy of such measures, the Pavlis Honors College disregards traditional metrics altogether by making admission open to any student. What the Michigan Tech investigators found is that GPA was not telling them what they needed to know about measuring student performance. Their experience underscores the reasons for questioning traditional means of selecting students to join honors. What is called for, then, is perhaps a more creative way of thinking

about admissions criteria. An issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (14.2, 2013) was devoted partially to that very topic. But if we are not all going to follow the lead of the Pavlis Honors College, is there a better way of using GPA and ACT scores?

Given that these are two data points we know about a great many of our students and that there is high probability that those scores will continue to be used, is there anything of value to be learned from them? Both are retrospective at the point of a student's admission, so the question arises as to what predictive value they might have when it comes to future performance, and how the one, GPA, is related to the other, ACT/SAT. Some students' high school GPA results reflect performance above what might be expected based on ACT/SAT scores; other students perform below expectation. So, what can the relation of these two data points tell us about students once they arrive? Would it be possible to combine the two scores to produce a composite figure that might have greater predictive value of student performance over time than either score on its own? And further, might our analysis be applied proactively to predict points at which a student with a given profile will likely encounter academic difficulty, and what kinds of intervention could we make before problems occur? And since most programs and colleges use additional measures, such as essays and interviews, in making admissions decisions and when awarding merit-based scholarships, is it possible to integrate all these different metrics, and if so, how? And what role might other factors play, such as leadership experience, extracurricular activities, or athletics, in helping us understand the likelihood of a student's succeeding in honors? Clearly, there is more that we need to know.

As to what—if any—use is to be made of standardized scores, that will depend on statistical analysis of honors students and their performance, which gets at the important matter of expertise. In order to conduct the kind of evaluations proposed in this volume, somebody would need to be versed in multivariate statistical techniques, and Bottoms and McCloud (2019) point out a potential difficulty in their study:

honors administrators, especially deans and associate deans, . . . often come from disciplines unfamiliar with multivariate statistical techniques. . . . People who are new to statistics or use them infrequently might not understand how to answer various questions using the proper analysis or the proper statistical controls. (pp. 52–53)

Given the ubiquity and—perhaps mistaken—primacy traditionally accorded to college entrance tests and GPA as measures, as well as the bragging rights attached to both by administrators when it comes to demonstrating the rigor or the quality of an honors program or college to prospective students, it is probably worth devoting some careful attention and statistical rigor to thinking through the ways these measures are to be used and of course why and how. And it is also worth giving some serious thought to explaining why such measures are lacking individually and what is to take their place. Or, for that matter, whether GPA is a useful measure at all, on its own, of students' success once they enter an honors program or college, which is a question that Meadows, Hollister, Raber, and Fiss (2019) raise in their study, proposing that “college GPA remains a limited measure of a certain type of success and that this measure is not necessarily predictive of success in postgraduate endeavors” (p. 117).

The question of which measures to use and why returns things to the matter of multivariate statistical analysis and the need for it, which is a point that Diaz, Farruggia, Wellman, and Bottoms (2019) make:

Considerable research to date on the impact of honors education lacks the appropriate controls to account for alternative explanations for the differences often observed in the success of honors versus non-honors students. (p. 60)

The consequence is that evaluative findings suffer from serious limitations, as Cognard-Black (2019) suggests:

Thus, the evidence most often used to demonstrate the impact of honors programs is limited because it usually

does not account for the differences that exist between honors and non-honors students at the moment of matriculation or point of entry into honors programs. That reality makes it difficult to establish a causal connection between the honors experience and student change. . . . (p. 5)

What we want to know is the *measurable* difference made by honors programming; we want to determine which specific practices contribute to differences in the performance of comparable honors versus non-honors students, eliminating as many alternate explanations as possible. Otherwise we will find ourselves without a compelling answer to the objections that honors students are simply good students to begin with and that they would do well no matter what, honors or no honors, which makes justifying our existence at budget time a great deal harder. The contributors to this collection offer clear demonstrations of what rigorous value added analyses will require and how they can be accomplished.

The work of Spisak, Kirby, and Johnson (2019) is critical to this enterprise. They set out to address a gap in current research by evaluating the effect on academic performance of honors housing and a pre-semester elective class taken by entering honors students at the University of Iowa:

As with first-year seminars, much scholarship exists on the effects of residence halls and living-learning communities on the success of students. . . . Little comprehensive data have been collected, however, specifically on the effects of the honors residence hall experience on students' academic outcomes. . . . (p. 153)

Based on the Iowa investigators' positive results, knowing if other, similar community-building activities might also play a role in students' academic success and whether the same results would follow at other kinds of institutions would be important.

In other words, there is much that we do not know—yet. And this same gap applies not only to quantitative analysis, but to qualitative measures as well. As Spisak, Kirby, and Johnson (2019) point out:

It could be that orientation-like experiences benefit students in ways that are not normally tracked, such as their effect on alleviating the anxiety associated with transitioning into the university. . . . Such benefits may not always show themselves through GPAs, engagement in the program, and persistence, and yet they may well be valuable to students in other ways. . . . (p. 174)

Finally, it is not all a matter of multivariate, quantitative data. As Smith (2019) points out, a comprehensive assessment of student learning and honors value added will require “the use of both quantitative measures, such as student grades or credit hours earned, and qualitative measures, such as the review of a portfolio or capstone project” (p. 31). We have much to learn about the other ways in which honors is adding value—ways not necessarily subject to quantifiable analytics.

Meadows, Hollister, Raber, and Fiss (2019) raise this point as well in their application of the theory of “self-authorship,” described by Baxter Magolda (2008) as “the internal capacity for an individual to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations” (quoted in Meadows et al. p. 119). Their investigation offers

insight into the potential for a written reflection protocol to be used as an assessment for self-authorship. While more work is needed, the results shown here suggest that focusing our honors college on specific learning goals and using these as measures of success other than GPA provide a framework for our curriculum and assessment and also create an environment in which students may find a deeper connection between their self-defined future and their coursework such that GPA becomes a product of engagement with the honors college rather than a measure of potential for success. (p. 143)

Particularly suggestive here, relative to the kinds of investigations that might come next, is the connection between quantitative and qualitative outcomes, and how the one, such as GPA, might become



a product of the other, rather than being a stand-alone measure in itself. The question is what precisely the GPA is measuring and whether there might be alternative, more comprehensive means of evaluating students' performance.

Clearly, we do not know nearly as much about qualitative value added as we know about quantitative measures. For instance, it would be useful to have data showing how individual students are changed as they move through an honors curriculum, not in relation to non-honors students, but in relation to their own starting points—changes such as those suggested by the investigation of self-authorship. The study done by Smeaton and Walsh makes a valuable contribution here, relative to qualitative value added and the work they have undertaken to understand high-impact educational practices (HIPs) for undergraduates at a public liberal arts college: “through qualitative analysis of program documents, [the study] examined honors program curriculum and instructional practices that may contribute to retention and student engagement” (p. 233). Particularly valuable is their use of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data in conducting their study: “Honors and comparison group differences in response frequencies for NSSE items provide some evidence that honors program participation may increase student involvement in HIPs” (p. 241).

In this connection, the Research Committee of NCHC has proposed a step forward in partnership with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)—a partnership that allows for the addition of questions to the NSSE surveys distributed on participating campuses. A similar project is currently in development in conjunction with the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The prospect of such results leads one to wonder additionally about the post-baccalaureate lives of our students and whether honors graduates become critical thinkers, find job satisfaction, or engage in lifelong learning. Are our graduates more likely to become active members of their communities? Such questions are important, as Diaz, Farruggia, Wellman, and Bottoms (2019) suggest (p. 86). But these are factors about which we know comparatively little, and, admittedly, it would be no easy matter to

develop data to answer those questions. But our mandate to make a measurable difference in students' lives surely suggests that we ought to try.

Regardless of how much good data we collect, another problem needs to be solved: how to report results in an appropriate and persuasive form. Here, we might take a lesson from English Composition 101: the usual instruction to students is that they need to know their audience if they are going to write an effective essay, particularly one that is intended to persuade. When it comes to honors and value added, not all audiences are the same; some need more complex, data-driven explanations than others. But it is probably safe to assume that starting with something simple and understandable is the best way to proceed. To that end, there are the questions of why students choose one college or university as opposed to another, and whether honors had anything to do with that choice. Simply asking what role honors has played in decision-making is easy; Bottoms and McCloud (2019) report that the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) asked this question of their first-year students: “Would you have come to UIC had it not been for the Honors College?” (p. 43). Their results prove persuasive and easy to communicate: “Fully 65 percent of all honors students and 75 percent of our most prestigious diversity scholarship students said ‘no’” (p. 43). That students would not have chosen to attend a particular institution had it not been for honors is certainly strong and compelling evidence of value added. Brown, Winburn, and Sullivan-González (2019) undertake a similar analysis, and with similarly positive results at the University of Mississippi relative to the value honors adds in recruitment.

The question, then, is how to make best use of what we measurably know. The answer might be thought of in terms of value added factors, which could refer to a whole range of potential points of special pride. Imagine being able to tell prospective students and parents that an undergraduate honors student's time to degree, or cumulative GPA, or likelihood of gaining admission to graduate or professional school, or job placement is improved by a specific multiplier or value added factor. That would be a clear way

of communicating a possibly complex data analysis. Or imagine being able to tell a college or university president or the head of the development office that a positive value added factor for honors graduates can predict those who are more likely to become donors to an institution by a certain percentage. Those bits of information would all be persuasive for any honors dean or director to marshal. But like many things that may seem easy, they require a good deal of thinking ahead and planning useful assessment strategies before the occasion arises when we are called on to demonstrate the value that honors adds.

Another possibility, related to the survey of students' likelihood of choosing a particular school, is what might be called the "halo effect." As the two studies just referred to have shown, there is a halo effect relative to honors; Brown, Winburn, and Sullivan-González (2019) write: "Our data reveal the honors college to be a significant component in the decisions of Mississippi's highest-achieving students to attend the [University of Mississippi]. One significant additional consequence is that attracting outstanding students from other states has a strong impact on the diversity of the university student body" (p. 190). Those results are suggestive of what more we have to learn and whether similar instances of the honors halo effect might exist on other campuses. The better we understand the appeal of honors—the halo effect—the better able we will be when it comes to targeting recruitment efforts to specific student populations, quoting again from Brown, Winburn, and Sullivan-González (2019):

Students who apply to the honors college may well possess traits that differentiate them from their academically similar counterparts who do not apply, and these traits may be related to retention. At the same time, however, it is also likely that the honors environment that attracts these students in the first place is also successful in providing them with an academic experience that fosters the intellectual and personal growth that they seek and that the honors environment and experiences translate into increased academic success and retention. (p. 198)

As this conclusion suggests, we need to know more about the students who choose honors and their motivations for making that decision as well as more about how they compare with students not in honors.

The halo effect might well extend to those other, non-honors students as well. For example, does the existence of a high-profile honors program or college demonstrably contribute to an institution's overall prestige and recruitment potential? Given the remarkable growth in honors education, particularly the growth in the number of honors colleges (Scott and Smith 2016), is there a correlation between the inception of an honors college at a particular institution and positive changes in the demographics of applicants overall? Even if a student does not choose honors, does the existence of a high-profile honors program influence student decision-making generally? That would be interesting to know. And is there a halo effect when it comes to establishing a critical mass of engaged honors students, which is a question suggested by the work of Spisak, Kirby, and Johnson (2019) in their study of residence halls and pre-college experiences? At what point, and in what measurable ways, might the presence of a specific population—a critical mass—of engaged honors students begin to produce added value above and outside of the programmatic elements that bring them together? How many students are needed to constitute a critical mass, and is it the same for all types of institutions? And do all students benefit equally, STEM students versus humanities majors, for instance? Do our practices benefit students equally regardless of their level of preparation and motivation? And is the honors offer equally attractive across differences of demographics? And if not, how do we make up for the deficits?

Of particular interest here is the student invited into honors who declines the invitation; Honeycutt (2019) points out:

Honors programs would benefit from future research studies designed to discover why the majority of students eligible for community college honors choose not to participate, particularly given the potential benefit to at-risk students. Specifically, a comparative analysis of honors participants

and honors-eligible non-participants across income and parental education levels would improve our understanding of why some students choose to take the honors challenge and why others decline. (p. 220)

Do similar patterns exist across the board at different kinds of institutions? And are all students who decline the invitation the same? Or are there differences with respect to demography, academic major, and STEM versus non-STEM, and what about measures such as academic preparation and motivation? Is there any relation between a student's likelihood of declining and the potential benefit of the program? In other words, are students who stand to benefit the most possibly the most likely to decline honors? That information would be important to know. How do we understand their decision-making, and how do we use evidence relative to retention, academic performance, and graduation to persuade those students of the value of honors?

To better understand these variables, Honeycutt's study (2019) uses propensity score analysis as a useful analytical tool: "The propensity score signified the probability that an honors eligible student will enroll in honors based on . . . 13 observable covariates, which represented the predictors" (p. 213). The 13 covariates include such data points as high school GPA, dual enrollment status, ACT scores, income level, first-generation status, age, and gender (pp. 210, 213). Honeycutt offers the following practical conclusion relative to the use of positive benefit factors that might persuade a student to choose honors:

Students often hesitate to take the honors challenge, perhaps because they do not possess accurate information about the benefits of honors. . . . In particular, high-achieving at-risk students should be carefully informed of the benefits: higher course grades, higher GPAs, and higher graduation rates, even when controlling for baseline differences between honors and eligible non-honors students. When honors program directors request a list of eligible students, that list could include more comprehensive data

on eligible students, such as socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and veteran and disability status. With this additional information, honors directors can develop a more nuanced outreach. (pp. 218–19)

We might reasonably ask what qualitative data we could bring to bear relative to a student's experience and how honors makes that experience more satisfying and worth pursuing across a range of differences that characterize our students, including veterans and students with disabilities.

Implicit here is a highly suggestive point about honors and diversity. As Brown, Winburn, and Sullivan-González (2019) have shown, honors helped achieve geographic diversity at their institution. And Honeycutt's study suggests a strong, positive role that honors might play in strategically recruiting and graduating at-risk students. Diaz, Farruggia, Wellman, and Bottoms (2019) make a similar point with respect to underrepresented students:

this study shows that honors education has a statistically significant positive effect on student success above and beyond all other background characteristics studied. . . . Furthermore, and of great importance in a nation where a significant gap in the success of underrepresented students versus others exists, we found that the positive effects of honors college membership were more pronounced for African American and Latino/a students for some indicators of success. (p. 79)

Not only does honors work, with measurable positive benefits, it works particularly well for certain populations of students.

Thus, when it comes to promoting diversity, honors is anything but an extravagance or an elitist enterprise. On the contrary, honors is a driver for achieving positive results, and the more students who take part, the greater the benefit. That insight leads to the quite reasonable conclusion proposed by Patton, Coleman, and Kay (2019):

The data collected here [from Eastern Kentucky University] show honors students outperforming the comparable

non-honors group in measures of second-year retention and four- and five-year graduation, regardless of pre-college academic preparation. . . . The impact on a university's retention and graduation rates would be profound if more students were exposed to the honors program environment. In an era of public scrutiny and with the proliferation of performance-based funding . . . [,] making the case to high-level university administration that honors education positively impacts these metrics [such as retention and graduation rates] for its students is extremely beneficial for honors deans and directors. (pp. 110–111)

In this context honors clearly becomes a laboratory for testing best practices, finding out what works and what does not work, and then sharing results to promote better outcomes for all our students.

Relative to their program and the application of lessons learned beyond the honors population, Smeaton and Walsh (2019) point out that “the honors program has become a model for the entire campus” (p. 248). There is much to be said for making friends by sharing rather than hoarding successful high-impact practices and thus countering the frequent objection that honors is an elitist undertaking not relevant to the experience of most students or faculty. Not every student is going to be in honors, or want to be, and the same holds true for faculty, but what can we do, what practices can we share, to make life better for everyone? Although the pieces in this collection concentrate on student success, it will be important for future work to ask questions about the value that honors adds for faculty development and retention and the role honors programs and colleges can play in promoting curriculum development and helping to achieve institution-wide learning outcomes. In other words, measuring the value that honors might add needs to happen in a variety of areas and contexts.

When it comes to institution-wide benefits, some honors practices are labor-intensive and expensive, relatively speaking, but others are less so. For example, living and learning communities can be created by mobilizing existing resources and following honors models to deliver a positive benefit to a larger population.

What we could use more of at this point is a kind of bottom-line thinking and self-representation. If our high-impact practices produce positive results—particularly with respect to such measures as retention, credit hours passed, bounce-back from probation, and time to graduation—is it possible to translate those outcomes into dollars and cents? If we can workshop ideas to improve retention generally, for instance, or to decrease a student’s time to degree, what do these mean with respect to tuition dollars paid back to the institution or savings to students and parents achieved by decreasing the time an undergraduate spends paying for a degree? And what about students who join honors in progress? Often, programs and colleges offer more than a single kind of honors regimen, with tracks that are not mutually exclusive: one, a comprehensive, generalized track that begins in the first year and continues through to graduation; and another, discipline-specific track that leads to honors distinction in a major. Are there value added benefits particular to students who are not enrolled in honors from first year through graduation, and how does their performance compare with other students—those not in honors, or those who complete a full honors curriculum? Are the benefits of honors participation cumulative? The findings of Diaz, Farruggia, Wellman, and Bottoms (2019) are suggestive at this point:

although honors college participation at any point in the students’ college careers led to a higher chance of graduating in four or six years, the more time students spent in this honors college, the more successful they were in terms of the likelihood of graduating. (p. 84)

And what do we need to know about value added and students who matriculate by way of transfer agreements that link two-year to four-year institutions? How are high-impact practices best shared across those institutional boundaries?

As this brief review and the papers assembled here make clear, we know a good deal already. At the same time, we still want to know even more. To that end, the present collection is an invitation to further research rather than a last word. For instance, as Bottoms



and McCloud (2019) point out, even though analyses provide evidence of the effectiveness of honors, a number of questions remain:

even though the analyses support the contention that honors education is effective, they do little to explain why. . . . Further, it is important to identify which practices are best for which students. This information could lead to understanding why the effects of honors experiences are stronger for students of some races/ethnicities compared to others. (pp. 51–52)

Recognizing why honors programs work the way they do, Diaz, Farruggia, Wellman, and Bottoms (2019) provide useful suggestions for further investigation:

Future research could expand the definition of student success to include elements such as lifelong learning, later-life civic engagement, graduate and professional school matriculation and success, or career development, and it could begin to tease apart the various features of the honors experience that contribute most to student success, with qualitative and quantitative methods. Future research should also continue to identify factors that explain student success of both honors and non-honors students. (p. 86)

And it is not just honors students and faculty that we need to study and learn more about; there are honors administrators as well, which is a point that emerges from Smith's study:

only 31 percent [of survey participants] say that outcomes assessment data are actually being used to guide the majority of program changes. This finding demonstrates that honors deans and directors are struggling to apply the skills they have to “close the loop” and effectively apply assessment practices for the process of continuous improvement. (p. 37)

In other words, we have plenty of good and interesting work ahead of us, which will call for creative collaborating and coordinating among colleagues, the Research Committee, and our NCHC office

as we take our next steps. By way of a conclusion, which is really more of an invitation, we offer the following ideas for what to do next, given what we now know and what we want to know.

1. Create an online means for honors researchers to make others aware of ongoing research in order to share results and collect data across institutions.
2. Explore the possibility of creating a web location sponsored by NCHC for working papers that report results and share ideas quickly, with the end goal of formal, peer-reviewed publication.
3. Pursue collaborations with the Center for Postsecondary Research (which administers the NSSE), the Center for Community College Student Engagement (which administers the CCSSE), and other higher education researchers; gather results; and expand qualitative analyses to support quantitative studies.
4. Explore the possibility of an experts-on-demand resource to provide deans and directors who are not experts in multivariate analysis the help they need.
5. Create an online toolkit for honors researchers, particularly those new to their jobs, to provide show-and-tell advice about presenting what we know and how best to communicate results; make a part of that toolkit best-practices applications that can readily be deployed.
6. Make sure that colleagues are aware of NCHC resources for finding and contributing to research: *JNCHC*, *HIP*, and the National Collegiate Honors Council Monograph Series; and share information about accessing NCHC's searchable indices as well as other searchable databases relevant to honors research.
7. Invite fellow researchers to help us learn more about
  - a. GPA and ACT/SAT scores, and what if anything we have to learn from these measures;

- b. Honors completion, and why/when students stop working toward honors graduation requirements;
- c. Honors advising and how we measure success;
- d. Qualitative value that honors adds to students' lives and experiences after they graduate;
- e. Two-year to four-year transfers and how to manage them;
- f. Honors populations we want to know more about, such as veterans, students with disabilities, etc.;
- g. The value that honors adds for faculty relative to retention and faculty development;
- h. Honors as a driver for curriculum development; and
- i. Honors administrators and best-practices.

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