



WALKING THE TALK:

**How University Communities Can
Foster Higher Education Opportunities
for Refugee Students & Scholars**

A Case Profile Series by the University Alliance
for Refugees & At-Risk Migrants (UARRM)
and
The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education
and Immigration (PAHEI)

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In response to record numbers of refugees around the world, a network of researchers, students, and policymakers officially launched the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM) in 2018, with the overarching goal of leveraging the higher education community to support and protect refugees¹ and at-risk migrants² within and outside of the United States.

As a part of an ongoing effort to scope what the higher education community is doing to address refugee and migration issues, UARRM conducted a series of case profiles, based on semi-structured interviews with champions for refugees at various higher education institutions and partner organizations in the U.S. These cases can inspire more universities, colleges, and their partners to become champions on their own campuses, replicate promising models, and take further institutional and national action.

A series of brainstorming sessions at the State University of New York (SUNY) Global Center in New York City and Rutgers University in New Jersey in 2017-2018 revealed that universities and colleges can and are harnessing their resources across six broad, yet interconnected action areas by:

1. Offering **safe, legal pathways** to entry into the U.S. and other countries for work, study, and vocational training;
2. Expanding **higher education opportunities** for students from refugee and migrant backgrounds and for threatened scholars;
3. **Providing support and assistance** to integrate and empower students and scholars from refugee and migrant backgrounds on campuses, as well as broader refugee and at-risk migrant populations in local communities and overseas;
4. **Speaking out** against actions that would reduce the number of international students and scholars from crisis countries;
5. **Conducting research** to support evidence-based policies and practices; and,
6. **Reshaping narratives** by improving public understanding and generating intercultural dialogue through innovative curriculum, media, and communication initiatives.

Expanding Higher Education Opportunities for Refugees:

The UARRM's areas of work concentrate on the following "Actions Areas":



Legal pathways



Overcoming Barriers



On-Campus Support



Advocacy & Awareness



Research & Publications



Media & Communication

Case Profiles

The following cases highlight initiatives specifically seeking to **alleviate barriers to higher education** for varying target populations:

- Prospective/admitted university students who have been resettled in the U.S. through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program.
- Prospective/admitted university students who are seeking asylum in the U.S. or have obtained asylee status or temporary protection.
- Students whose higher education has been disrupted by war, conflict, or humanitarian crisis, and seek to continue their studies at a U.S. university or college.
- Threatened or persecuted scholars.³
- Conflict-affected communities with limited access to tertiary education or employment opportunities.

Higher education barriers are multidimensional and complex and depend primarily on protection status and benefits already available to the student. Protection status intersects with other factors, such as age, gender, language proficiency, prior education credentials, and financial background. Cultural, social, and psychological factors also play a significant role.



CALIFORNIA



Case Studies

University Of California-Davis

Article 26 Backpack: Technology That Helps Secure the Educational Identity of The World's Vulnerable Youth

Article 26 Backpack can be best described as a universal human rights tool for academic mobility. Launched in Summer 2018 and supported by the Ford Foundation, the Backpack combines digital technology, face-to-face counseling, and cloud-based credential assessment to help the world's vulnerable youth store and share their documents with universities, employers, and scholarship agencies. The device is designed mainly for university students from refugee backgrounds to secure their credentials and have access to them whenever and wherever the need arises. Due to massive displacements by conflicts in the world today, the need for the Backpack has never been greater.

As the name suggests, the idea comes from Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which terms education as a universal human right for all. The Backpack is the brainchild of a joint effort of Professor Keith David Watenpaugh of the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and the American University of Beirut (AUB)

in 2016. The tool provides an excellent opportunity for young people to foster and share their educational identity beyond the traditional documentary methods.

The Backpack is a safe electronic device for which the security protocols are the same as those for UC Davis, where all the information is stored. This information is entirely private, and no one other than the person can access it. The students can upload documents and even create a curriculum vitae. Through its unique feature My Story, My Future, the Backpack provides students the opportunity to develop "vlogs" about their lives and goals. Through the Backpack, young people get a chance to self-assess and identify their educational and employment goals.

Annetta Stroud, the Associate Director for Training and Program Development at AACRAO, has played a critical role in the Backpack's development. She adds, "The Backpack is considerably unique not only as a storing device but for providing alternative narratives about refugees to people in the United States and elsewhere."

The Backpack has some limitations, however. Access to the internet is one. Students need to have access to the internet and a device to upload and store information.

The other limitation is power shortages in countries where the infrastructure is weak. Another challenge is establishing trust with prospective “Backpackers.” To address this, the team trains local Lebanese students to serve as “Backpack Guides,” who teach

refugee youth to open and use the tool. This peer-to-peer conversation makes it a lot easier to network with local communities.

Although the organization started out working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, its scope is global. Stroud hopes one day the impact of their work reaches other vulnerable corners of the world where its need is equally important.

Population Served: Vulnerable youth outside the U.S.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Encourage the use of the Backpack for vulnerable students within and outside the U.S. so their records can be safely stored.

For more information: <https://article26backpack.ucdavis.edu>

Stanford University

Stanford Refugee Research Project

The [Stanford Refugee Research Project \(SRRP\)](#) was founded in September 2017 at Stanford University by [Laila Soudi](#), a Stanford employee who had been working on the front lines of the refugee mental health crisis. According to Laila, the project's mission is to “convene and engage a cross-campus community of students, faculty, and staff to address innovatively and sustainably the global challenge presented by the displacement crisis.” Its framework sits at the intersection of refugee needs, Stanford capabilities and activities, and the Stanford mandate and interest in getting involved. SRRP identifies how Stanford can use faculty and staff to get more involved in the refugee crisis, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable Syrian refugees living on the border of Syria and Lebanon. For example, SRRP works in partnership with NGOs to provide Syrian refugees without access to employment and education, skills in coding and a pathway to employment.

According to its website, SRRP has three broad goals. First, it mobilizes faculty, staff and students across Stanford's seven schools to participate in refugee-assistance activities and identifies key organizations involved in or committed to helping refugees. Second, it conducts needs assessments among Syrian refugees populations in Lebanon and Jordan, and identifies key players providing assistance. Third, SRRP carries out projects that address needs and provides Stanford's resources to better refugee situations in the Middle East. SRRP has about 50 Syrian students who are being taught how to code in partnership with NGOs. 99% of this student cohort has been able to obtain employment within 6 months. Laila said, “We have 27 college advisors at Stanford University in service and each one works with 2 Syrian students to leave Syria and pursue higher education at universities like Stanford and MIT that are willing to give financial aid.”

Population Served: Conflict-affected communities in the MENA region.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Identify and mobilize interested students, faculty, and staff on your campus to conduct research and assess refugee community needs in partnership with local refugee organizations.

For more information on the initiative, please visit: <http://refugeeresearchproject.stanford.edu/>

Sana Relief

Founded in 2017, [SANA \(radiance or hope in Arabic\) RELIEF](#) “is a project-based out of Stanford University School of Medicine in response to the worsening global conflict and mass displacement crisis facing our children.” At its core, the [model recognizes](#) the shortage of available physicians and, in response, aims to elevate community-based resources to deliver mental healthcare. By expanding education and training opportunities to women from conflict-affected areas, SANA empowers vulnerable communities to respond directly to the most prevalent mental health needs.

The model works in four phases. First, it enlists local women as “community mental health workers.” Second, SANA Relief trains community workers in evidence-based clinical counseling to address post-traumatic stress in under-resourced communities. In the third phase, certified mental health clinicians supervise the community mental health workers to provide counseling to children. Lastly, children diagnosed with acute mental health conditions are referred to specialists. [Laila Soudi](#), Director of SANA RELIEF, said, “The ultimate goal is to train them so that they could provide therapy, which will provide more training for them so they expand this model in the country.”

Population Served: Conflict-affected communities in the MENA region.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Follow the Sana Relief model to expand education and training opportunities in conflict-affected communities. Elevate community-based resources to deliver healthcare and other essential services.

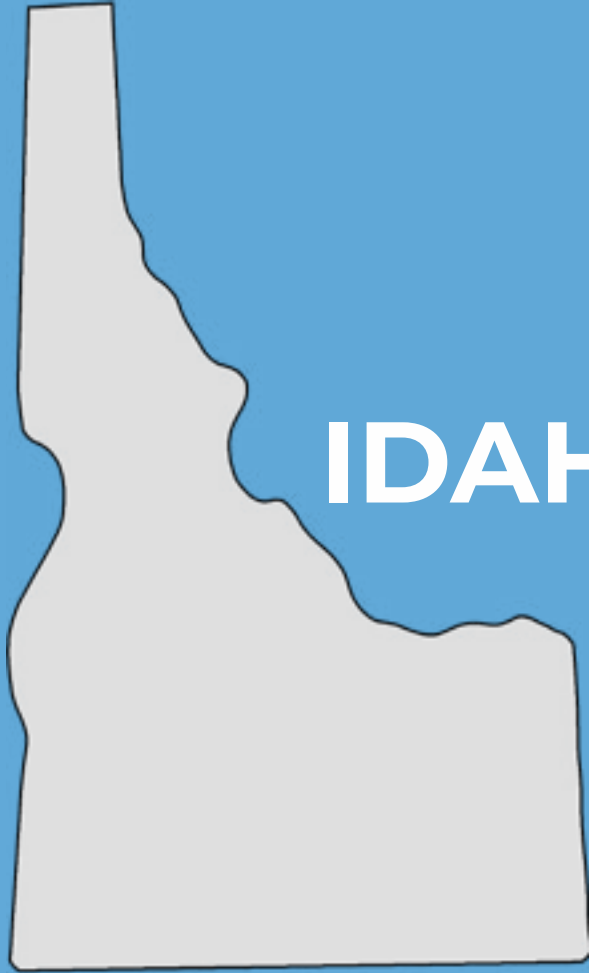
For more information on SANA RELIEF, [please visit: https://sanarelief.stanford.edu/need](https://sanarelief.stanford.edu/need)







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IDAHO

Boise State University

Boise State Refugee Alliance: A Bridge To Higher Education And Integration For Resettled Refugees In Boise.

The Boise State Refugee Alliance (BSRA) was founded by two former refugees from Bosnia, [Belma Sadikovic](#) and [Refik Sadikovic](#) in Fall 2013 at Boise State University (BSU). BSRA helps prospective and admitted college students from refugee backgrounds to navigate BSU admissions, registration, financial aid systems and campus culture. It also supports resettled refugee children and youth to bridge into college, by visiting high schools to help them map out their educational career paths.

As an educator and refugee studies scholar, Belma says one of the major challenges in the refugee discourse is the lack of focus on the integration of refugees. Resettlement, she says, is the beginning, not the end of the process of full refugee settlement. Language and cultural barriers present serious challenges to the integration of refugees. Students from these backgrounds, for instance,

sometimes lack the skills or computer literacy necessary to navigate high tech, bureaucratic higher education systems, preventing them not only from accessing but also thriving in campus life. To counter these challenges, BSRA functions as a liaison between the university and high schools and between the university and the community.

Belma emphasizes that some of these challenges can be addressed when higher education policymakers involve members of refugee communities in the decision-making process. She says that when those with lived experiences go unheard, neglect and exclusion become the norm in policy circles. Without their voices, politically-charged myths about refugees and immigrants are also perpetuated. Due to the rise of nationalism, refugees are perceived as a threat to the safety and cultural homogeneity in western countries.

Population Served: Prospective/admitted university students who have been resettled in Idaho through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Support the establishment of initiatives similar to BSRA and involve members of refugee communities in the decision-making and program development.

For more on The Boise State Refugee Alliance, please see: <https://boisestaterefugeealliance.wordpress.com/>



Brigham Young University-Idaho

Project R

Project R was started in 2016 by Lok Darjee, a physics student at Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-Idaho). Darjee came to the U.S. as a refugee in 2011 when Bhutan began expelling people of Nepalese origin in the 1990s. Project R, a volunteer group of BYU-Idaho students, primarily serves to bridge the gap between high school and college but does so in a holistic way, through friendship. 39 refugee students have gone to college because Project R volunteers helped them with their homework and encouraged them to succeed.

As a young student club, Project R does not have funding but Darjee said, “I don’t believe money is a solution to the world’s problems. We can still have an impact if we have generous people who are committed to the cause.” Project R’s work is based on a self-activation model, as it mentors refugee students to succeed in their high school by providing them with resources and encouragement. Darjee’s dream is that someday people will feel obligated to reach out to others in need as human beings. Out of 70 million refugees worldwide, only three percent have access to higher education. Darjee dreams to see this figure grow to a double-digit.

Population Served: Prospective/admitted university students who have been resettled in Utah and Idaho through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Support the development of holistic, peer-to-peer mentorship approaches similar to Project R to encourage young people to pursue higher education.

“ I don’t believe money is a solution to the world’s problems. We can still have an impact if we have generous people who are committed to the cause. ”

Lok Darjee, Project R





NEW YORK

Bard College

Bard College Offers Students From Crisis Contexts Alternative Pathways For Entry Into Higher Education

Bard College's international branch campus, [Bard College Berlin](#) in Germany, offers pathways to reduce barriers to higher education, by providing full tuition, room and board, health insurance, a public transportation ticket, in Berlin and pocket and book money. Kerry Bystrom, currently Acting Dean of the College, noted, "We offer scholarships based on academic performance but also commitment to social change, civic engagement and financial need." Bard College Berlin provides 70 percent of the tuition funding and raises the remaining 30 percent of tuition and all other costs with the support of individual donors or partner organizations. She said, "We don't want to overstate our impact, but we are really happy with what we manage to do: More than 10 percent of our 300 population are displaced students right now, which has been amazing."

Most importantly, the branch campus in Germany has provided an alternative safe, legal pathway around the travel ban that prevented displaced students whose education has been disrupted by war from getting into Bard in the U.S. Other U.S. universities/colleges could utilize their international branch campuses to open

alternative pathways for entry into safe countries.

Universities can also learn from Bard College Berlin's curriculum, psychosocial support and other costs they consider besides tuition. Funding, Bystrom said, should be institutionalized, ideally with German state support, so that they would not have to spend much time on fundraising to keep that number, but use their energy on supporting students. Germany's support of a number of threatened scholars each year through the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation provides one model for such institutionalization.

Population Served: Students outside the U.S. whose higher education has been disrupted by war, conflict, or humanitarian crisis.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Utilize international branch campuses or partners to open alternative pathways for students to continue their studies in safe countries. Institutionalize funding to focus on costs beyond tuition, such as psychosocial support.

For more on Bard College Berlin, please visit: <https://berlin.bard.edu/about-us/>

Columbia University

Columbia University Scholarships for Displaced Students

The Columbia University Scholarship for Displaced Students (CUSDS) is a project launched to combat the global refugee crisis by supporting displaced students to pursue higher education at Columbia University. According to their website, CUSDS was piloted in 2016 by the Columbia Business School's Tamer Center for Social Enterprise, and is currently directed by Columbia Global Centers. The scholarship provides students whose higher education has been disrupted by conflict or other humanitarian emergencies an opportunity to continue their studies.

Foreign nationals, including refugees, asylum seekers, or those in the U.S. on Temporary Protected Status (TPS), pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees are eligible to apply. Students' full cost of attendance (including tuition, accommodation, and living expenses) is covered by the scholarship. CUSDS, Columbia's first university-wide scholarship, seeks to provide up to \$6 million to target and support 30 students annually. The scholarship, with the assistance of schools and Columbia student organizations, will also offer support.

Population Served: Displaced students, including foreign nationals who are refugees, asylum seekers, or in the U.S. on Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Adapt a program similar to CUSDS at your institution by tailoring a vision to your university's global mission and leveraging campus-wide resources and partnerships.

For further details on CUSDS visit: <https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/CUSDS>



TEXAS

Rice University

Partnership for the Advancement & Immersion of Refugees

Founded in 2006 at Rice University, the Partnership of the Advancement & Immersion of Refugees (PAIR) empowers refugee youth to thrive, pursue their dreams, and become successful in their communities. PAIR offers educational mentoring programs to Houston's refugee youth, so that they can grow into confident, independent, and active members of society. After arrival in the U.S., most refugee students face the challenge of overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers but also have opportunities to go to college. In order to adjust to a new culture, complete high school and continue higher education, PAIR offers mentorship to refugee youth, which empowers them to become successful individuals.

PAIR's programs include Global Learners, Summer PAIR, Global Leaders, and Global Scholars. These programs equip students to gain a better understanding of their emotional well-being, American culture, English language skills, leadership skills, and acquire knowledge of middle and high school graduation requirements and the requirements and necessary skills for transitioning into higher education. PAIR provides individual mentorship opportunities, which provide additional social skill development for newcomers before school. Mentors meet with students one-on-one creating relationships, building English skills, and supporting social emotional learning. PAIR Houston students have gone on to graduate from Allen Community College, Akron University, University of Houston, Texas A&M University, San Jacinto College and more. PAIR Houston proves investment in refugees is not just for the moment but for life.

Population Served: Prospective college students who have been resettled in Texas through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Utilize the PAIR mentorship model to help refugee youth gain critical language and social-emotional skills for transitioning into higher education.

For more information on PAIR Houston; please visit : <https://www.pairhouston.org/>



NATIONAL



Scholars at Risk (SAR)

New York University (National)

Presently housed at New York University, Scholars at Risk (SAR) was founded in 2000 at the University of Chicago to support academics and public intellectuals whose lives are threatened by authorities in their home countries. SAR partners with foundations, individual donors, non-governmental organizations and universities to temporarily host threatened scholars on university campuses as professors, researchers, lecturers, visiting scholars, post-docs, graduate fellows or students. [Chelsea Blackburn Cohen](#), a Senior Program Officer at the Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network, says these positions represent nearly \$4.8 million contributed by host campuses and partners that directly support at-risk scholars and their families.

Dr. Kathryn Libal of the University of Connecticut says its [Human Rights Institute](#) has hosted SAR scholars with support from university administration since 2010. Libal noted that, “over time we learned that being able to provide at least one year of support with the option to renew for a second year allowed the scholar time to adapt to the new context and begin building networks critical

to securing a position that draws on the scholars’ talents in their new host country.” She explained, “threatened and displaced scholars face unique challenges in adjusting to a new culture, workplace, language and norms of research production. Universities must go beyond the basic task of providing these scholars work opportunity and living space.” Thus, after a decade of hosting at risk scholars, Libal and colleagues rely upon a steering committee to plan how best to work with targeted scholars, aiming to make their stays as meaningful as possible and to prepare them for the next step beyond the one to two-year residencies at the University of Connecticut.

SAR has provided critical support to university programs such as the one at University of Connecticut, in part through connecting new member universities who aim to host scholars with other universities that have experience with the process. These horizontal connections are critical to capacity within the U.S. university system and through other networks. It shows lessons can be shared, even as new partners to host scholars are identified.

Population Served: Threatened and displaced scholars.

Key Recommendation for Practitioners: Urge your institution to host scholars through the SAR network. Aim to make their stays meaningful and prepare them for the next steps beyond their one to two-year residencies. Connect with other universities that have experience with the process.

For more on the Scholars at Risk network, please visit: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>

SCHOLARS AT RISK

NETWORK



protection



advocacy



learning



The Institute of International Education's Student Emergency Initiatives (IIE-SEI)

The Institute of International Education's Student Emergency Initiatives (IIE SEI) manages different programs such as the Platform for Education in Emergencies Response (PEER), the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, the IIE Emergency Student Fund, and the Julia Stasch-IIE Scholarship for Refugees.

Through SEI, "IIE provides students impacted by armed conflict or natural disaster with an opportunity to start or carry on their higher education to foster economic development, improve public health, and build safer communities in crisis-ridden countries." Nele Feldmann, the Head of IIE's Student Emergency Initiatives, noted, "Many students from conflict zones lack the language skills and other requirements to get into higher education." To bridge this gap, "IIE PEER created a holistic platform that offers a database with educational opportunities and additional resources for displaced and refugee students."

Through the Emergency Student Fund, the IIE has awarded more than 850 grants and \$3 million in financial aid to international students in the United States impacted by natural disasters, political strife or conflict. IIE has also supported more than 500 Syrian students through the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, which is a global network of 80 colleges and universities providing scholarships for Syrian students.

Currently through the Julia Stasch-IIE Scholarship for Refugees, IIE awarded scholarships to 39 students studying at community colleges in Chicago. According to IIE's website, recipients arrived in the U.S. through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program or were granted asylum.

Feldmann adds, "IIE PEER strives to engage with partners to share knowledge and best practices in higher education in emergencies, build capacity within the IIE PEER network and create new opportunities for collaboration." Through the PEER initiative, IIE has established itself as a thought leader and convener in the field of higher education in emergencies. "IIE's work is getting more and more attention internationally; and there is an increased interest among universities, governments and other stakeholders to work in this sphere with IIE SEI," Feldman noted. IIE PEER hosted its first annual Forum in April 2019 gathering approximately 100 attendees from the field of higher education in emergencies.

- **Population Served:** International students impacted by natural disasters, political strife or conflict, and, more recently through the Julia Stasch-IIE Scholarship, students who arrived through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program or have been granted asylum.
- **Key Recommendation for Practitioners:** Encourage your institution to engage and build capacity within the IIE PEER network and create new opportunities for collaboration in the field of higher education in emergencies.

For more information on IIE PEER, please visit: <https://iiepeer.org/>

“Many students from conflict zones lack the language skills and other requirements to get into higher education.”

Nele Feldmann, IIE

Notes

¹ According to Migration Policy Institute (MPI, 2017), refugees are individuals granted international protection due to their inability or unwillingness “to return to their country of origin or nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”

² “At-risk migrant” aligns with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR, 2017a) broad concept of “migrants in vulnerable situations,” which includes all migrants (regardless of status) who “may find themselves in vulnerable situations” due to reasons of a “situational” or “individual” nature. The former “aris[es] from the conditions in which movement takes place, or from conditions in a country of migration,” while the latter “relat[es] to particular individual characteristics or circumstances.”

³ According to the Institute of International Education Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF, 2018), a threatened scholar faces “...persecution or violence due to [his/her] scholarship, identity, or beliefs...intimidation, harassment, repression, censorship, unjust punishment or violence arising out of [his/her] work, and/or exercise of his/her fundamental human rights.” IIE-SRF also considers a scholar to be threatened if she or he “...fac[es] general insecurity, instability, or civil conflict that affects the whole population of a country or region.”

Conclusion

These case studies demonstrate that universities, colleges, and other organizations in the higher education community are taking comprehensive action to facilitate access and success in higher education for a broad range of forcibly displaced student, alumni, and scholar populations. Stakeholders can use this report to inform the creation of similar programs at their universities/colleges by drawing from the above models and recommendations. Champions of higher education in emergencies should employ a “whole-of-institution” approach, by taking stock of campus resources to be leveraged. The above “Action Areas” are a useful framework for identifying institutional assets with potential to jumpstart or scale initiatives. Most importantly, initiatives should be evidence-based, participatory, and inclusive. As shown with Boise State Refugee Alliance (BSRA) and other initiatives above, champions should engage local refugee or migrant communities in decision-making and project development. Drawing from the Stanford Refugee Research Project model, it is critical to partner with organizations who provide services to refugee populations, as they have community connections and deeper understanding of needs. Finally, practitioners should engage with universities and organizations with experience in higher education in emergencies.

If you would like to get involved in our community of activists or want to share an initiative with our network, please reach out to us at info@uarm.org.

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