MSCA Massachusetts State College Association

Perspective

MSCA Newsletter NEA/MTA/MSCA

SPECIAL ISSUE FOR STATE UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND LIBRARIANS UNDERGOING PERSONNEL ACTION

This issue of the MSCA *Perspective* is designed for use by state university faculty and librarians who are preparing to undergo evaluation for reappointment, tenure, promotion and post-tenure review. Three articles, all reprints or excerpts from articles published previously in the MSCA *Perspective*, are offered for your benefit. A list of MSCA officers and chapter presidents (as of October 2011) can be found on page 4. We hope that you will find this special issue helpful.

— Pat Markunas, former editor, MSCA Perspective, *and*
Donna Siritus, Consultant, MTA Division of Higher Education

Reviewers Cautioned on Use of SIR-II Student Evaluation Results

Pat Markunas, former editor, MSCA Perspective

MSCA is pursuing three consolidated grievances alleging procedural violations in the post-tenure review process. A major component of those grievances relates to misuse and inconsistent use of SIR-II student evaluation forms.

These issues are not unique to PTR but are pertinent for faculty members undergoing personnel action, members of contractual evaluation committees and department chairs, and have been conveyed to representatives of management.

The Student Instructional Report II (SIR-II), published by the Educational Testing Service, was adopted in July 2000 to conduct student evaluations of classroom and laboratory teaching. The ETS website **<www.ets.org>** contains substantial information about appropriate use of SIR-II and its results.

John A. Centra, Ph.D., the major researcher in the development of SIR-II, has published an "issues paper" on the ETS website that forms the basis for this article. Also important is the explanation page (page 4 of "Interpreting SIR-II") of the reports that faculty members receive with SIR-II results for their classes.

Purposes of SIR-II

The explanation page cites three purposes for which SIR-II was designed: 1) identify areas of strength and/or areas for improvement; 2) provide information on new teaching methods or techniques used in class; and 3) provide feedback from students about their courses. These are pedagogical, not summative, purposes.

The ETS website lists other purposes but recommends that university administrators "*rely more on global ratings than other items for personnel decisions.*" That is, Item I-40 ("Overall Evaluation") is more appropriately used for personnel decisions and remaining items are to be used more for the individual instructor's benefit.

SIR-II results are not intended to be the sole determinant of teaching effectiveness. Course materials, classroom observations by one's professional peers and self-evaluations are equally important components.

Comparison Group of Four-year Institutions

SIR-II reports for individual faculty members include a comparison of their results to average results (comparative means) obtained from faculty members at other four-year institutions. The explanation page in the most recent SIR-II reports indicates that the comparative means cited in the reports are based on "19 four-year institutions," whose identities are not published.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, there are 2,474 four-year institutions in the United States. SIR-II comparative means are based on 19 of those institutions, a sample of only 0.77%. ETS acknowledges on the report's explanation page, "*… the selected comparison group is not necessarily the most appropriate comparison group for a particular class or institution.*"

MSCA has maintained that the SIR-II comparison group is misrepresented in personnel decisions whenever it is described as "peers," "peer institutions," "national peers," "comparable institutions," "comparable group of institutions," "similar institutions," "like institutions" and "comparable four-year institutions." The SIR-II comparison group is composed of 19 four-year institutions that may be substantially different from the nine state universities in Massachusetts.

Comparative versus Normative Means

Dr. Centra's issues paper on the ETS website includes this important statement: "*Because the sample of institutions does not proportionally represent all of the various types of colleges and universities in the country, the data represent comparative rather than normative information.*"

Comparative does not mean comparable. SIR-II comparative means are not norms and must not be used as such. MSCA has asserted that the following descriptors in personnel decisions ("norms," "national norms," "national comparative means," "comparative national means," "national means," "top 10% nationally," "top 10% of our national peers" and "top quartile of national peers") represent a misuse of SIR-II results for individual faculty members.

Measures of Central Tendency

SIR-II results use the arithmetic mean of student responses to its items based on a Likert scale (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree) that generates subjective evaluations of classroom teaching effectiveness on the part of students.

Scores that arise from such a scale constitute at best an ordinal scale and thus, mean scores may not be appropriate for reporting the central tendency for responses to individual items. The median score (the middle-most response) or the modal score (the most frequently selected response) may be better indicators of central tendency for SIR-II responses.

One junior faculty member whom I know re-analyzes her SIR-II results to include both median and modal scores for all SIR-II items when she prepares her annual evaluation portfolios. Inclusion of these three measures of central tendency may provide a more complete picture of SIR-II responses than using just the mean score.

Measuring "Teaching Effectiveness"

The original SIR used qualitative terms ("excellent," "good," "neutral," "weak," "poor"), but those terms were dropped in favor of the current five-point scale on "effectiveness." Personnel decisions for faculty members must include consideration of "teaching effectiveness." Remarking that SIR-II results indicate a faculty member's teaching effectiveness to be "excellent," "very good," "good," "average," "moderate," "low" and the like, terms rejected by the SIR-II designers themselves, is a misuse and misrepresentation of SIR-II results.

The mid-point (3) on SIR-II scales is "moderately effective," which may be low enough to be below the 10th percentile on some comparative means. This does not mean that the faculty member's teaching is ineffective; it means that the faculty member's teaching is "moderately effective." Persons involved in personnel decisions must understand this point to use SIR-II results appropriately.

Continued on page 4

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If You Need a Luggage Carrier to Submit Your Portfolio, It's Too Big!

A Guide to the Selection and Organization of Evaluation Materials

Pat Markunas, former editor, MSCA Perspective

I served as chair of the 2009-10 Salem State committee on tenure, which evaluated 21 faculty members — a record. Every candidate received a positive recommendation for tenure from the committee. I was impressed and humbled by the quality of the work of the faculty we reviewed, regardless of department or length of higher education service.

That said, the volume of material provided by the candidates threatened to overwhelm the process by making it nearly impossible to do an appropriate review of each portfolio. **In no instance did the volume or complexity of material enhance a candidate's chances for tenure or deter the committee from reviewing all materials**. However, portfolios stuffed with irrelevant and non-significant material detracted from the overall quality of a candidate's record and occasionally caused us to question their judgment.

As we approach the change in the contractual tenure probation period from five to six years, it is time to stop the portfolio arms race among candidates concerning the size and weight of their materials. **The quality of work, not the quantity of documents, is what counts in the tenure and promotion evaluation process**.

Candidates thanked us for our time and energy in reviewing their materials and meeting with them. Candidates for future personnel actions could express respect and appreciation for the work of evaluators by presenting evaluation materials of "quality, significance and relevance" (Article VIII) that can be read easily and handled efficiently. These recommendations are offered in that spirit.

General Principles of Organization for Evaluation

- **Required goes before optional.**
- **Greater significance goes before lesser significance.**
- **Recent goes before past (reverse chronological order).**

Organization of Evaluation Materials

General Comment: Use the outline of required contractual criteria and materials in Article VIII (Sections A.1 and D.1 for faculty and Sections A.3 and D.3 for librarians) as your organization guide.

Teaching Effectiveness. The best organizational scheme I saw for the section on teaching effectiveness was based on individual courses, with a subsection devoted to each course taught during the review period. If you taught the same course in different formats (e.g., online, hybrid), consider each format as a separate course.

The courses taught during the review period should be listed at the beginning of this section. A **single syllabus**, plus a sample of course materials, classroom observations and SIR-II results for each course, is an excellent way to organize the required materials and convey effectiveness.

If your teaching effectiveness has been criticized or suggestions have been made to improve it, be sure to address these points within the context of the specific course(s). Include documentation of changes you made to the course(s), the syllabus or your teaching to address criticisms or suggestions.

Include documentation of activities that you undertook to improve teaching effectiveness. A **single document** (e.g., certificate of completion, letter of completion, or a program in the absence of a certificate or letter) per activity is sufficient. If you use your own student evaluations in addition to SIR-II, include a summary of the results and explain how you used them to improve your teaching.

A few well-written, detailed, **signed** letters of support from students could document teaching effectiveness. Student letters should be requested only after grades are submitted and not linked to student requests for recommendations.

Academic Advising. A narrative about your advising activities (defined broadly if you wish) is sufficient to document academic advising. Anything creative or unique about your advising could be included. Documentation of 30 or more advisees can be included under contributions to the growth and development of the university community.

Continuing Scholarship and Other Professional Activities. The most significant material should be first, with remaining material in decreasing order of significance. If you don't use significance to organize this section, use reverse chronological order. List the relevant projects in order at the beginning of each subsection.

For completed work, include **only** the finished product as documentation. Limit communications to those sent **after the project has been completed** by conference organizers, organizational officers, editors, committee chairs, etc. If a formal evaluation of a presentation was conducted, include the results.

For work in progress, include **only** the most recent documentation (proposal or draft), the current status of the project and a timeline for completion.

For conferences that you attended, documentation of sessions attended, continuing education credits, certificates of attendance, etc. are significant and relevant. Lacking these, include a **single** registration document for the conference.

For those working on a terminal degree, include your most recent transcript, a brief description of completed courses, remaining coursework, the timeline for completion of the dissertation/thesis and a projected graduation date.

For committee/organizational assignments, include a letter of appreciation **after the term of service has been completed** from the committee chair, the organization president, or someone of comparable status. If you produced something of significance, include a copy.

If you are an editor or a member of an editorial board for a series of publications, include **one copy** of the most recent issue.

Awards from the university or outside organizations are significant and relevant. Document the award's criteria and process and what you did to win it.

Letters or documents from individuals outside the university for activities in the larger community or professional organizations are significant and relevant.

Alternative Assignments. Include a list of these assignments, along with the semester(s) and the credit hours that apply, at the beginning of this section. Include your job description, your report on the assignment's completion (if applicable) and the formal evaluation of the assignment. If there was a work product of significance, include a copy.

Questionable Quality, Significance and Relevance

General Comment. If the document isn't written about your work or if you didn't create it, why would you include it in your evaluation materials?

Doing Your Job. You are not required to document that you do your job. The documents below may relate to Workload, Scheduling and Course Assignments (Article XII), not Evaluation (Article VIII). If documents do not relate to a specific evaluation criterion for you, they are of questionable "quality, significance or relevance." Do not include:

- the schedule from your office door, weekly office hours and schedules for academic advising appointments, whether blank or filled in.
- weekly or monthly schedules of appointments and meetings, including search committee materials.
- workload documents from the administration.
- lists, notices, agenda or minutes of meetings that you have attended.
- invitations to or programs from convocation, commencement or other university or social activities that you have attended.
- reappointment letters from the president or the board of trustees.
- proposals for the use of MSCA professional development monies.
- copies of letters of recommendation written for students or others.
- internal communications about committee or departmental work, including email threads discussing issues or meeting mechanics.
- drafts of work for which the final version has been completed.
- brief thank you messages for cooperating with routine requests for information from colleagues and administrators.

Letters of Support. Contrary to popular opinion, letters of support are not required by the contract. Letters are most relevant when they document specific service, presentations and other activities that may not have a concrete work product. General letters of support from colleagues, friends and administrators for your promotion or tenure do not add much quality to your portfolio. If you can't resist including general letters of support, put them at the end of the portfolio.

DGCE Materials and Student Evaluations. You are not required to include DGCE evaluations in your day unit evaluation materials. There could be negative consequences to doing so.

Student Evaluation Printouts. Do not include a separate photocopied page of the "Interpreting SIR-II Results" (page 4) with every SIR-II report you have.

Course Documents. The following documents may add bulk to your portfolio but they may not add quality or significance. Do not include:

- multiple copies of the same syllabus for courses you taught repeatedly.
- multiple copies of exams and quizzes drawn from publisher's test banks.
- articles written by other people about teaching effectiveness or other pedagogical techniques.
- copies of student papers and other student work.
- multiple copies of PowerPoint presentations used in lecture.

Other Materials Supporting Teaching Effectiveness. The following documents add bulk to your portfolio but they may not add quality or significance:

- hand-written notes or brief emails from students ("I just loved your course"), or anonymous or unsigned letters from students.
- originals or copies of self-administered student evaluations.
- routine email correspondence (e.g., application, notice of acceptance, scheduling issues) about participation in workshops to improve teaching.

Student-generated Work. Course assignments submitted to faculty members belong to the students who did them, not to us. I don't think we have a right to cherry-pick student-generated work to use for personal reasons, even if the student's name is removed.

At the very least, the student's written permission should be included whenever you use their work as part of your portfolio and the student should decide whether his/her name should be included.

Academic Advising. Appointment schedules and workload documents may not add quality or significance to your portfolio. Hand-written notes and brief emails ("Thanks for helping me with my schedule") may not, either.

Continuing Scholarship and Other Professional Activities. Completed publications, presentations, pedagogy, curriculum contributions, participation in organizations, research, artistic creation, work towards a terminal degree and other continuing scholarship/professional activities provide in themselves the best documentation for work of quality, significance and relevance. You only diminish the quality of your portfolio by including routine correspondence about these activities, including these examples. Do not include:

- documents/emails about the initial submission or acceptance of any activity or project that has been completed.
- draft copies of work that has been completed.
- all scheduling issues; conference registration information or confirmation; and travel arrangements, including travel vouchers, flight arrangements, hotel reservations and the like.
- resumes or publications by collaborators.
- brief emails from friends ("Your presentation was great!").
- consultations among participants/authors as part of the application, writing or creative process.
- inclusion of an entire conference program booklet, when a copy of the cover and the page that includes your name (highlighted) is sufficient.

For completed committee assignments, routine correspondence only diminishes the quality of your portfolio. Do not include:

- your nomination to a committee to which you were appointed.
- committee appointment correspondence or lists from either your chapter or university president.
- copies of the committee's meeting schedule and/or minutes.
- multiple copies of publications for which you served as editor or member of an editorial board.
- copies of announcements or samples of other people's work selected by a committee on which you served or work that you judged as part of a contest.

For public service, including work at the State House or Capitol Hill, background information, such as lists of legislators, State House or Capitol maps, and lists of local restaurants, diminishes the quality of your portfolio.

Alternative Assignments. Inclusion of routine correspondence diminishes the quality of your documentation of a completed alternative assignment. Do not include:

- your application or nomination for the alternative assignment.
- the correspondence granting the assignment or changes in your teaching schedule as a result.
- workload documentation from the administration about the assignment.
- vouchers, travel arrangements and the like about the assignment.
- correspondence about appointment as permanent or temporary chair.

Confidential/Sensitive Material. As part of the portfolio arms race, some candidates included internal communications from search committees, including interview schedules and rejection letters with people's names on them. I was uncomfortable reading the names of unsuccessful candidates for positions. A letter of appreciation from your chair for your service is sufficient.

Personal Information. Think carefully before providing information about your personal life that is not relevant to your discipline or your application: family responsibilities, religious activities, visa status and involvement in partisan politics. Providing a list of financial contributions to the university or other organizations is in bad taste and raises ethical issues.

Making Materials Easy to Read and Handle

General Comment. If you set requirements for student-generated papers, why wouldn't you use the same requirements for your tenure/promotion portfolio?

Proofreading. Proofread your portfolio. Better yet, have someone else proofread it. Fix typographical errors and spell names correctly. Make sure all letters and evaluations are signed. Make sure your name appears on **signed** certificates that document professional development or continuing education credits.

Redundant Materials. Avoid multiple copies of the same information. Don't break up and repeat your self-evaluation in each binder you may submit. Don't repeat your report on a completed alternative assignment verbatim in your self-evaluation. Don't use the same work product in multiple places in your portfolio.

Font Size. It's really hard to read text in fonts that are less than 12 point.

Font Color. Using colored print in your narrative makes it harder to read.

Font Variety. I know that it's a lot of fun to have lots of choices of different fonts. **But it is hard to read a document with lots of different fonts.** THIS IS TRUE FOR YOUR SYLLABI AS WELL. Pick a professional-looking font and stick to it. USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS TO CONVEY INFORMATION LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING AND MAKES IT HARDER TO READ. **USING BOLDFACE ONLY MAKES IT LOOK LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING LOUDER. UNDERLINING A LOT OF TEXT WITH ALL CAPITALS IN BOLDFACE IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO READ.** *Italics are not much better, especially **when they are boldfaced** and **they are worse when underlined AND CAPITALIZED.***

Stick to a professional font in your narrative and other documents. Use bold face and italics for headings, subheadings and occasionally for emphasis. Be careful with borders. Avoid underlining. Minimize back-to-back copies.

Table of Contents (TC), Tabs and Dividers. Use a TC based on the materials required in the contract to be submitted. Label the sections of your portfolio in a manner consistent with the TC. Use tabs and dividers that can be printed with labels to describe the material in that section. Avoid post-it type labels, as they can peel off and get lost. Be reasonable with the TC, tabs and dividers: too much detail is as unhelpful as too little. Do not bulk up your portfolio by inserting colored sheets of paper between every document.

Spacing. Your self-evaluation should be double-spaced between paragraphs with appropriate margins. Use headings, subheadings and appropriate cross-references. List items with bullet points rather than stringing them in the text.

Highlighting. Highlight your name in yellow on programs, lists, posters, etc. Avoid pink or green, as they are harder to read and they photocopy as black.

Materials in a Foreign Language. Include a summary or abstract for any article published in a foreign language. Transcripts and letters of support should include translations in English.

Staples and Paper Clips. Put that stapler down and back away from it. Don't touch those paper clips. Materials with staples and paper clips bulk up folders and binders, may have to be removed from materials and so may take more time to read. If you're nervous about documents getting out of order, number the pages.

Landscape Documents. Landscape documents should be "punched" on the top of a document that is inserted into the right hand side of a binder and on the bottom of a document that is inserted into the left hand side. The same point applies with landscape insertions into plastic sleeves, but see the point below.

Plastic Sleeves. Plastic sleeves make portfolios heavier, harder to handle and harder to read because of the glare. They result in over-stuffed binders, too. If you have to use plastic sleeves because that's your discipline's culture, buy light-weight, non-glare ones. Under **no** circumstances should multi-page documents be inserted into a single sleeve.

Over-stuffed Binders. If you flip open the binder and the pages extend beyond the spot when the clasps meet, it's over-stuffed. **Don't do this.** Edit your materials and break them up into smaller, easier-to-handle binders.

Nearly-empty Binders. As part of the portfolio arms race to fill up a crate with binders, some candidates put a handful of materials or small bound publications into three-inch binders. **Don't do this.**

Electronic Media and Portfolios. Existing computer technology and the realities of the committee's technical support make reading hundreds of pages in electronic format difficult. The typical computer screen size may not show an entire readable page at once, which makes scrolling through pages and visuals time-consuming and hard to read. The ease of inclusion of electronic materials onto a CD of practically infinite capacity threatens to make the evaluation process more cumbersome, not less.

The Employee Relations Committee has agreed that all evaluation materials, other than those that cannot be submitted in paper form (e.g., video productions, music, dance performances, artwork, etc.) should be submitted in paper form. An electronic copy (i.e., a CD or DVD) of the evaluation materials may be included at the candidate's choosing, but this shall not supplant the expectation that materials that can be submitted in paper form have been so submitted.

Reviewers Cautioned on Use of SIR-II Student Evaluations

continued from page 1

The "Micrometer Fallacy"

Dr. Centra cautions against the "micrometer fallacy," or making decisions based on small differences. He explains what every student in elementary statistics understands: differences cannot be deemed as significant, meaningful or consistent without consideration of the standard error (equal to half the standard deviation) for the sample of scores in question. Ratings that fall within the standard error on either side of the comparative mean are properly deemed to be of "no difference."

Despite this caution, evaluators frequently magnify minute differences between a faculty member's SIR-II ratings and comparative means without any consideration of the standard error.

Statements such as "at or a little below [or above] the comparative means," "significantly above the comparative means," "below [or above] the comparative means," "consistently below [or above] the comparative means," "very close to the mean," "hover around the mean," "consistently exceeded the means," "ranked well below [or above] the comparative means," "at the means, with a few exceptions slightly below the mean," "consistently near the comparative means," "well beyond the comparative means," etc. are a misuse and misrepresentation of SIR-II results.

Most troubling are interpretations that differences are "significantly below [or above] the comparative means" or that results are in the "bottom [or top] quartile" of comparative means. It is impossible to make these statistical determinations without using the detailed statistical information provided on the ETS website.

Individuals involved in personnel actions should take into account other cautions and qualifiers on the ETS website and the explanation page attached to reports to faculty members. For example, small classes and low responses rates are less reliable and less likely to fall in the 90th percentile or the 10th percentile when compared to the comparative means for any given item.

Conclusion

Judgments about the meaningfulness of SIR-II results must not go beyond the parameters within which the SIR-II instrument was developed or misinterpret the statistics generated by it.

Faculty involved in personnel actions should be vigilant in reading interpretations attributed to their teaching effectiveness based on SIR II reports and use the opportunity provided in the agreement to respond to misuses and/or misinterpretation by evaluators.

Advice on Filing Grievances

Sandra Faiman-Silva, Chair, MSCA Grievance Committee

All full-time and most part-time faculty, plus all full-time librarians, are covered by ***Collective Bargaining Agreements*** (CBAs), either the MSCA/BHE Day CBA, the Division of Graduate and Continuing Education (DGCE) CBA, or both. ***Grievances are a contractual right*** in both CBAs. The grievance procedures are similar; all citations below refer to the day unit CBA (*Art. XI).* Both CBAs are posted at <**www.mscaunion.org**>.

When members of the bargaining unit believe that a contract provision has been violated, they should consult with the campus ***grievance officer*** or ***chapter president*** (see box to the right) *as soon as possible,* in order to avoid missing the grievance filing deadline. Grievances may be filed on any contract provision that you believe has been violated, ranging from course scheduling and office space to reappointment and tenure.

Initiating the Grievance Process

In some instances it is possible to resolve a disagreement informally without filing a grievance. However, *you have only ten days in which to file a grievance.* Talking with management about resolving a problem does not postpone the ten-day deadline for filing a grievance unless you get a written agreement with management to suspend the filing deadline while you discuss the matter. Missing a deadline can cost you the grievance.

How do you know that your work-related problem is grievable? ***Grievance officers*** and ***chapter presidents*** are familiar with the ***CBAs***, and you should consult them to determine whether your problem is grievable. Our CBAs are long and complicated, and seeking help from your campus union leadership is imperative. Remember, timeliness is important!

Should you file a grievance, even though the issue seems minor? ***Yes, you should!*** If you tolerate management's contract violations, you send two messages. *First,* that the contract provision being violated is not important and may not need to be part of our CBAs. *Second,* that management can violate contract provisions willy-nilly and the MSCA won't care. We must be vigilant in protecting our working conditions and worker rights.

I encourage each faculty member and librarian to consult with your grievance officer immediately if you are concerned that your contract rights have been violated. If your reappointment letter contains misinformation, *you must grieve within ten days* of receipt of that letter. If you receive a teaching schedule from your department chair that you believe is unfair, *you must grieve within ten days* of receipt of the proposed schedule. If your department is not following written committee procedures in establishing department committees, conducting department business, or conducting searches, *you must grieve within ten days.*

Grievances Concerning Personnel Actions

Grievances about reappointment, promotion, tenure, and post-tenure review are common (*Arts. VIII, IX, XX),* including the *Art. XX.C.7* "added consideration" provision, which stipulates that full-time unit members have special rights when they apply for a full-time position within the state university system. *Art. XX.B* allows promotion and tenure candidates to apply for early consideration based on "sound academic reasons."

All reappointment, promotion and tenure personnel actions are based on the exercise of ***academic judgment*** (see *Art. XI.B.5*), the basis for which is defined in *Art. VIII.I.* Management must provide ***clear and convincing*** reasons to support positive recommendations and ***full and complete*** reasons for recommendations against reappointment, promotion, or tenure. If you are not satisfied with any evaluation at any step of the process, ***you must grieve within ten days*** of your receipt of the evaluation.

Grievances filed concerning the evaluation articles face a high threshold to be successful, since the CBAs stipulate that the grievant must demonstrate that the exercise of academic judgment was "arbitrary, capricious" or made in "bad faith" (*Article XI.C.9*). This should not deter you from filing grievances, however. We have found that management's representatives sometimes impose unreasonable expectations, make unsubstantiated claims, and fail to evaluate members fairly. A successful outcome may mean that evaluations are re-done or negative comments are expunged.

Complaints against faculty members cannot be used except as specified in the *Policy on Handling Anonymous Complaints* and *Memorandum of Agreement* (December 3, 1996). State university management, chairs, and colleagues are expressly prohibited from imposing any ***collateral consequences*** of grievance filings, and all grievances are confidential filings.

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