
UPCEA
Predictions 2025
Insights for Online & Professional Education

# Contents


Introduction 1

Leadership in Online Learning 2

Professional & Continuing Education 8

Technological Advances & Data 15

Innovative Credentials & Workforce Initiatives 18

Conclusion 25

Contributors 26

UPCEA – The Go-To Community for Those Who Are Reinventing Higher Education 27

INTRODUCTION

# A Year Likely to Reward Adaptability & Decisive Action

As we look toward 2025, the landscape of higher education is poised for significant transformation driven by technological advancements, shifting demographics, and evolving economic realities. This series of predictions from UPCEA's team of experts highlights key trends that will shape institutions and student experiences alike. From the increased alignment of degrees with workforce needs to the increasing demand for microcredentials and the integration of AI in academic programs, these trends reflect a broader movement towards flexibility, efficiency, and a focus on outcomes. As institutions adapt to meet the diverse needs of learners, they must navigate the challenges posed by a shifting policy environment and increased market competition, while also embracing innovative models that prioritize skill development and accessibility. Moreover, the anticipated transition from emergency remote teaching to a more integrated approach to online learning will require institutions to enhance their technological capacities and respond effectively to the growing expectations of students for greater flexibility.

*In the pages that follow, explore what 2025 has in store for online and professional education, and use the 23 expert insights to gain an understanding of what it means for you and your organization.*



PREDICTION

# C-Suite Outsourcing May Increase Over the Next Decade as an Efficiency and Excellence Measure

*By Stacy Chiaramonte, Senior Vice President, Strategy and Operations for Research and Consulting, UPCEA*

Institutions facing revenue challenges due to shifting enrollment trends may adopt new funding and staffing models, including outsourcing, to manage expenses more sustainably. Smaller institutions, particularly those seeking to innovate in areas like online degrees or microcredentials, might outsource senior positions such as technology, finance, or marketing officers to intermediaries. These shared leaders would work for both the institution and the intermediary, providing expertise without the need for full-time employment or relocation costs.

In addition to being more fiscally efficient, there could be additional benefits such as cross-institutional knowledge sharing, enhanced innovation, and access to a broader professional network. Larger, better resourced institutions are likely to have staff that are up to date with standards and market developments. This newer, shared model has greater potential for the rural or smaller institution to hire best-in-class resources and tap into talent pools that might otherwise be inaccessible due to budget or geographic constraints. This shared individual would be remote, but accessible daily, working with campus-based and remote employees, and would also travel to the institution as needed.

PREDICTION

# Regulatory Whiplash, Less Oversight, More Scrutiny, and Opportunities for Online and Professional Education in a Trump Presidency and Republican-led Congress

*By Jordan Dimaggio, Vice President, Policy & Digital Strategy, UPCEA*

A shift in political leadership often brings regulatory whiplash for institutions. For online and professional continuing education units and their institutions, this will certainly be the case. The Trump administration and a Republican-led Congress will likely dismantle regulations like Gainful Employment (GE), Financial Value Transparency (FVT), and Biden-era proposals on distance education, state authorization, and third-party servicers are expected to go by the wayside. Federal education oversight may erode, yet scrutiny on specific institutional policies, such as DEI initiatives, free speech, and antisemitism, will likely intensify. Signals from the first Trump presidency and 2024 campaign promises suggest additional policy changes to watch for. Potential policy shifts include broadening the definition of education providers, easing accreditation requirements, and targeting universities with large endowments through taxation or restricted financial aid. Additional measures may include limiting international student numbers and potential deportations, including for DACA students. There's even a remote possibility of dissolving (yet a more real possibility of fracturing) the Department of Education or privatizing federal financial aid systems.

Amid these uncertainties, online and professional continuing education units have unique opportunities that may present themselves in future legislation and regulations. These opportunities could include: greater support for short-term programs; less regulations and more room for innovative models; less bias against distance education; a focus on skills-based learning and workforce collaboration (e.g. credit for prior learning/competency-based education, apprenticeships, vocational training, etc). At their core, our institutions and the students they serve showcase the best of what innovative models in higher education have to offer. They are uniquely positioned to reshape policies and public perception, bridging the gap between society's aspirations for higher education and the criticisms often directed at traditional models. While the political winds may feel like they are shifting to work against higher education, be on the lookout for those which may help carry your sails.

PREDICTION

# Institutions That Meet Students Where They Are Will Emerge as Winners in 2025

*By Vickie Cook, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment & Retention Management, University of Illinois Springfield*

In 2025, key issues including demographic shifts, affordability, workforce alignment, and closing equity gaps for underrepresented and non-traditional students will remain central in higher education discussions. The institutions that will emerge as winners in 2025 are those that recognize and respond to the evolving landscape of higher education. By prioritizing flexibility, affordability, workforce alignment, equity, and community engagement, they will meet students where they are and prepare them for future challenges in an increasingly complex world.

PREDICTION

# Institutions Shift to Academic Continuity with Technology; Hybridity Continues

*By Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online & Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA*

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is not confined to pandemics. Institutions have pivoted to emergency remote teaching due to weather events, facility issues, financial woes, campus protests, campus threats, and even one notable instance of eclipse totality.

Today's learners have come to expect flexibility in learning environments. Many students have elected to take more online courses, even as they have returned to campuses, nationwide. Further, the demand for digital access to resources and services has grown post-pandemic as more students, faculty, and administrators expect to conduct more "academic business" online than ever before, mirroring a similar shift in society. We can no longer provide allowances for ill-prepared shifts to "online remote" or with apologies couched in promises to "return to normal" when the need for flexibility is, in fact, the new norm. With planning, campuses can navigate the new expectations of our campus communities.

Institutional leaders will shift their mindset from ERT to a constant state of readiness, toward Academic Continuity with Technology (ACT) and the field of higher education will encourage them to do so. This planned readiness moves institutions from place-based to meeting stakeholders more flexibly and is required as part of digital transformation.

PREDICTION

# Legislative Oversight May Hamper Solutions to Higher Ed's Biggest Challenges

*By Vickie Cook, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment & Retention Management, University of Illinois Springfield*

The legislative landscape in 2025 will likely present a mix of opportunities and challenges for higher education institutions. While some regulations may be well-intentioned and aimed at improving access and quality, the unintended consequences of unfunded mandates, compliance burdens, and restrictions on diversity initiatives could hinder progress. Regional public and small liberal arts colleges, in particular, may struggle to adapt to these changes, raising concerns about their long-term sustainability and the broader implications for the higher education ecosystem. As such, careful consideration of the potential impacts of legislative oversight will be crucial in shaping a responsive and equitable higher education system.

PREDICTION

# Online Learning: ‘In-housing’ Continues

*By Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online and Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA*

2025 is shaping up to be a turbulent continuation of 2024, with regulatory changes and uncertainty looming large for online learning professionals and higher education overall. Potential changes in federal regulations around third-party servicers and attendance requirements for R2T4 are poised to impact overarching institutional online learning strategies and day-to-day operations of online enterprises. Combined with declining public support and unsustainable business models, these shifts could intensify challenges for institutions already navigating a difficult landscape.

At the same time, many institutions will reassess their partnerships with Online Program Managers (OPMs), moving away from long-term agreements and opting for shorter, more flexible contracts that pair better with their internal capacity. We are likely to see a decline in notable, broadly announced partnerships with OPMs, as schools aim to reduce their reliance on external partners. Look for institutional leaders to distance themselves from OPM “partners” and reframe these entities as “enablement vendors”. 2025 will be the year many of us have waited for, where postsecondary leaders will renegotiate terms to protect their institutions’ interests, ensuring that contract extensions include options for adjustment and clauses imbued with accountability measures influenced by the regulatory landscape. Institutions will sharpen their contract management practices and renegotiate terms, discarding the boilerplate contract terms of old, to better protect our institutions and learners in this evolving landscape.

PREDICTION

# The Three-Year Undergraduate Degree Will Proliferate to Meet Specific Needs

*By Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA*

As college costs increase, accrediting bodies will be increasingly more willing to support pilot projects, like those of Thomas Edison State University and University of Minnesota Morris, that explore undergraduate degrees in focused fields that are less than 120-credit hours. Specifically, growth in three-year degree models will increase in fields where elective courses often are not perceived to prepare learners with skills employers seek, such as IT and applied health care, permitting graduates to find meaningful work faster and with less debt.

In 2025, look to pilots that encourage universities to design and build academic programs that deliver faster, less expensive, and potentially more-focused degrees, signaling saliency and career-readiness to employers.

PREDICTION

# We Will See More Empirical Evidence on Occupational Success Factors

*By Emily West, Market Research Analyst, UPCEA*

AI will start guiding institutions to new metrics for occupational excellence. With occupational performance data becoming more abundant at the individual level, artificial intelligence will create more bridges in understanding what exact skills, credentials, experiences and personas make for a successful profession. For example, a 120-credit Bachelor's degree in accounting with five years of experience may not be the sole predictor of a successful accountant. The marriage of AI with labor statistics, course curriculum, industry expectations and individual career and educational histories has the potential to unlock stronger profile and performance criteria at the occupational level. AI will also play a greater role in shaping what noncredit experiences will have credit relevance toward success and performance criteria in specific careers. As it stands today, noncredit to credit evaluation is largely done by humans with inherent biases and inconsistent standards.

This shift aligns with the growing trend of skills-based hiring, where demonstration of competencies takes precedence over the degree you hold. AI has the potential to level the playing field by removing subjective barriers and bias, ensuring that individuals from diverse backgrounds have equal opportunities to thrive in their chosen field.

PREDICTION

# Institutions Will Pivot from Transcripts to Learning and Employment Records (LERs)

*By Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA*

IIn an effort to build more equitable skills-based hiring ecosystems, institutions will build systems of LERs that capture education and employment, that more accurately describe individuals' skills and knowledge, enabling more learners and workers to access quality education and career opportunities. The use of LERs can help employers efficiently match skills and talent to opportunity, promote economic mobility, and empower learners and earners in order to address urgent direct care and behavioral healthcare and other talent shortages.

In 2025, look for pilot LERs particularly designed to help learners and earners address urgent direct care and behavioral healthcare talent shortages.

PREDICTION

# Disaster and Emergency Management Programs Will Grow in Response to Destructive Storms

*By Robert Bruce, Dean of Susanne M. Glasscock School of Continuing Studies, Rice University*

The recent and devastating hurricane season in the U.S. exposed just how vulnerable we are to the destructive forces of extreme weather. According to the NOAA Office for Coastal Management, more than 40% of the U.S. population lives in coastal counties, and 22% of these individuals are classified as vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters and hazards.

The year 2025 and beyond will continue to see a rise in destructive storms, and universities, states and cities will respond with increased research, online preparedness, and disaster and emergency management programs. University departments will focus on interdisciplinary sustainability research, leading to the creation of new schools, institutes and centers. Higher education institutions will seek online leadership expertise and update their emergency response plans, enabling a swift transition to completely digital courses and virtual environments. Additionally, we will see a significant increase in emergency management certificate and licensure programs as organizations plan for a future of extreme weather events.

PREDICTION

# Our Processes Will Become Less Institutionally Designed and More Student-/Prospect-Focused

*By Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer, UPCEA*

The previous two years have seen greater acceptance of microcredentials. In 2025 and the immediate years that follow, we can expect an era of greater stackability and value creation that is more focused on the needs of the learner and employer. As enrollments tighten for traditional student enrollments, processes, systems, curriculum and communication will change to be more student- and employer-focused and less institutionally focused. This is a result of more power shifting toward the consumer. We will see more institutions improve their enrollment management and marketing systems and processes, as they create more stackable credentials, all with the goal of gaining a competitive advantage to attract future learners.

We will also find institutions working more closely with their continuing and professional education units because the possibility exists that the new generation of adult learners will be younger, while campus-based students become older as they delay their degree-based education in favor of other options, including shorter-form learning and microcredentials or taking gap years over fully committing to an expensive four-year experience. We are also likely to see more high school graduates go directly to an online program – although these numbers are likely to be small, they are expected to increase over the next decade. As a result, some college marketing and communication responsibilities and strategic digital efforts have the potential to blur because many of their students will come from the same Generation Z cohorts.

PREDICTION

# A Competitive Market Leads to the Rise of Inter-Institutional Cooperatives and Specialized Online Programs

*By Bettyjo Bouchey, Chief Professional & Continuing Education Officer, University of Vermont*

As we continue to see the largest online education providers solidify their place in the institutional ecosystem with significant marketing dollars meant to secure those positions, I believe we will see more inter-institutional cooperatives begin to form, as well as highly differentiated boutique online programs being launched and catching fire. Both predictions stem from the congestion in the market, but also those bigger players dominating the landscape. We may see interesting combinations of both strategies where courses that are not differentiated to an institution's brand or expertise are sourced from other peer institutions, and other highly specialized, brand-defining courses come from the home college or university. In this way, learners could benefit from reduced costs for cooperative courses. More specialized courses could merit a premium tuition rate. In the end, we might see that programs consist of multiple institutional players bringing their "best expertise forward" to the benefit of the learner both from a content and affordability perspective, and with an added advantage of driving the cost of online education down at each institution in the cooperative as well.

PREDICTION

# The Line Between Online and On-Campus Learners Will Continue to Blur

*By Kim Siegenthaler, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Innovation at The City University of New York*

The dichotomy of online and on-campus learners will increasingly blur as more learners of all demographics enroll across the various modalities offered by their colleges and universities. These modalities allow students to move between online and in-person formats based on their needs, accommodating a growing demographic that includes working adults, parents, and international students. Technology-enhanced classrooms and real-time participation tools further blur the lines between online and face-to-face experiences.

Ultimately, the growing integration of online and on-campus education is creating a more accessible, flexible, and inclusive system. Of necessity, institutions will give more attention to ensuring quality wrap-around virtual student support services. By prioritizing high-quality virtual student services, universities can meet the evolving needs of a diverse and global student population.

PREDICTION

# Portfolios of AI Skills Featured in Most Successful Professional Online Certificate Programs

*By Ray Schroeder, Senior Fellow, UPCEA and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois Springfield*

The year of 2025 will see a rapid increase in student-generated portfolios demonstrating their use of Artificial Intelligence skills in problem solving and unique project generation. Many of these will include AI-generated simulations and digital twin generation to demonstrate feasibility and advantages of the solutions the students created with the assistance of AI technologies. These will be in response to business, industry and government employing AI, as well as individuals using AI to attend to middle management and other white-collar tasks in their operations. Human resources departments will not only use AI to screen applications (as they began to do in 2024), they will seek AI skills among new hires. Note that recent research indicates nearly 70% of executives say they will not hire workers without AI experience and nearly all executives (96%) feel an urgency to incorporate AI into their business operations. It will be important for colleges, universities and other microcredential providers to include AI components in learning outcomes for their programs. A key performance indicator for the learner can be the portfolio of work that includes demonstration of AI skills.

https://www.cnbc.com/2024/06/18/ai-skills-can-help-you-land-a-job-or-promotion-faster-says-new-research-.html

PREDICTION

# Institutions Will Increase Use of Predictive Analytics for Enrollment Management

*By Bruce Etter, Senior Director of Research & Consulting, UPCEA*

Institutions will increasingly adopt AI-driven predictive analytics to better understand student behaviors, optimize marketing strategies, and improve enrollment outcomes. UPCEA and Education Dynamics' Emerging Technology Benchmarking Report revealed marketing and enrollment specialists see the most opportunity for integrating emerging technologies. The most common responses included improving the student journey from marketing to enrolled student status (80%), improving enrollment conversion rates (67%), and personalized student experiences (62%). Predictive analytics will allow institutions to identify at-risk students earlier, personalize recruitment efforts, and enhance retention strategies by analyzing large sets of data in real time.

https://insights.educationdynamics.com/upcea-emerging-technology-report.html

PREDICTION

# Autonomous Artificial Agents Will Proliferate in 2025

*By Ray Schroeder, Senior Fellow, UPCEA and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois Springfield*

We are on the cusp of a massive influx of artificial agents in our workforce. Autonomous artificial agents are the next step beyond the AI chatbots and search tools of today. Models have been developed at scale this year; 2025 will be the year of widespread integration of AI tools with extensive level 2 intelligence that has been described as being able to “Imitate Human Intelligence: By incorporating reasoning processes, AI systems can mimic human thought processes, understand causality, and handle dynamic situations with a degree of rationality and context-awareness.” These tools have been researched, prototyped, and are now ready for rapid proliferation across business, industry, and governmental and non-governmental agencies to efficiently and effectively accomplish multi-step, complex and changing tasks. Fully multi-modal, these agents will recognize and create images and videos, audio, multiple languages, and voices. Some of these autonomous agents will be embodied in incredibly strong, agile, smooth robotic bodies that will powerfully conduct physical tasks as assigned. They will become our physical colleagues working shoulder to shoulder with administrators, educators and students in our universities.

https://www.almabetter.com/bytes/tutorials/artificial-intelligence/forward-and-backward-reasoning-in-ai

PREDICTION

# Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials in Lieu of All-or-Nothing Degree Completion

*By Amy Heitzman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Chief Learning Officer, UPCEA*

As the Some College, No Credential (SCNC) population increases to over 41 million in the coming year, I predict that institutional approaches can and must shift away from a one-solution-fits-all to a multiple arrows in the quiver approach. Specifically, institutions will begin to move away from an all or nothing degree completion tactic as the sole solution to the SCNC phenomenon, to a more nuanced, multiple option strategy, wherein they help learners aggregate learning and experience such that their paths can lead to a meaningful sub-baccalaureate credential, not only toward an oft-unattainable degree.

In 2025, look for tools like credit aggregators, which help learners bring together prior learning experiences and assess their potential for degree completion, as well as stackable, credit course bundles which count toward degree completion as well as provide gap-filling, industry-verified credentials to help match labor supply and demand.

PREDICTION

# More Calls for Non-Degree Credential Data Will Produce Action

*By Julie Uranis, Senior Vice President, Online & Strategic Initiatives, UPCEA*

The urgency to address non-degree credential data has never been more critical. This year is pivotal for moving past barriers that hinder learners' progress. With the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the modernization of Carnegie Classifications by ACE to include non-degree credentials, and the rise of performance-based funding (PBF) models, there's a pressing need to standardize data for certificates and other short-term learning opportunities.

In 2025, look for movement on non-degree credential data. Whether led by the National Student Clearinghouse, federal initiatives, or a coalition of repositories related to Comprehensive Learning Records (CLRs) or Learning and Employment Records (LERs) efforts, we will see some developments on this front. Particularly from postsecondary leaders hoping to leverage Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding or creating proof-of-concepts for short-term Pell data practices, select institutions/regions/projects will make advances on non-degree credential data.

https://core.upcea.edu/viewdocument/demographic-data-of-noncredit-learn?CommunityKey=82a51688-4da7-42af-9cee-7de58d6f6eef&tab=librarydocuments

PREDICTION

# The ‘Some College, No Credential’ Market May Finally Slow Down Due to Value Creation Through Stackability

*By Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer, UPCEA*

Over the past decade, the number of learners in the U.S. with Some College, No Credential (SCNC) has continued to increase. It is my sincere hope that this growth will plateau over the next two years, redirecting learners back to their previous or new institutional homes. However, these adults are not reconnecting, often due to individual personal or economic challenges. As it stands, this individual may very well see120-credits as a bridge too far, given that they might have 30-40 college credits without anything to show to employers for their efforts. However, if they are able to earn credit certificates along the way, they will see greater value and less risk to ultimately gain that 120-credit degree. Additionally, embedding additional layers of value will help to combat declining confidence in higher education knowing that they can store their certificates, credit courses completed, or noncredit certifications in a digital wallet of some sort. Creating and communicating this superior value equation should improve a willingness to re-engage higher education. Generation Z has been conditioned in many facets of life to be rewarded in this manner.

PREDICTION

# Congress Will Continue to Focus on Short-Term/Workforce Pell Grants

*By Jordan DiMaggio, Vice President, Policy & Digital Strategy, UPCEA*

One of the few bipartisan education policies in the last few years has been supporting the concept of short-term Pell Grants, also referred to as "Workforce Pell". Currently, Pell Grants go to students who meet an income eligibility threshold, and also are enrolled in a training or educational program which is at least 600 clock hours and 15 weeks in length. While many of the congressional proposals around short-term Pell vary, they generally lower that threshold to 8 weeks, so that shorter term non-degree education and training programs could become eligible for students. If short-term Pell Grants pass in the upcoming Congress, if they have not already done so, institutions would be wise to expand non-degree credential offerings, as the demand would likely grow. While there is growing bipartisan appetite for this sort of program, the details of how it is implemented have broken down during negotiations in the increasingly polarized political environment. Issues around how quality and outcomes are assessed, which institutions or program modalities are covered, and how the program is paid for are all part of the legislative speedbumps. However, as increasing numbers of both Democrat and Republican lawmakers recognize the value of short-term high-quality programs, it is clear that short-term financial aid in the form of Pell Grants will continue to be discussed and debated. And if a bill is passed into law, shortly thereafter students will have access to Pell Grants covering short-term non-degree credentials.

PREDICTION

# More Higher Ed Institutions Find a Way to Support Demand for Microcredentials

*By Kim Siegenthaler, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Innovation at The City University of New York*

"Alternative" and microcredentials will continue to gain traction across multiple sectors: higher ed, industry, learners (traditional age as well as adult), and the political arena. While many higher ed institutions will be challenged in development and logistics by their bureaucracies, I think we will see increasing numbers of institutions commit to the work. Relatedly, I think we will see more and improved cross-sector collaborations on microcredential development and delivery.

PREDICTION

# ROI Efforts Will Drive Increased Alignment of Degrees with Workforce Outcomes

*By Kathleen Ives, Chief Business Development Officer & Senior Vice President of Member Engagement, UPCEA*

By 2025, the focus on ROI in higher education will shift toward better aligning educational outcomes with workforce needs. Both institutions and students will increasingly look at ROI as a key factor in decision-making. With the rising cost of higher education, students will seek greater clarity on how their degrees translate into job opportunities, salary growth, and career advancement. In response, institutions will create more advanced, data-driven tools to track post-graduation success, using metrics like job placement rates, average salaries by degree, and long-term career progression.

There will also be a growing emphasis on short-term credential programs and partnerships with industries, offering clearer pathways to the workforce. This approach will expand the concept of ROI from academic achievement alone to include professional outcomes, skill development, and ongoing education. Institutions will face increasing pressure to prove not only the academic worth of a degree but also its tangible professional value.

PREDICTION

# Certificate Programs Will Increasingly Serve as Entry Points to Degree Offerings

*By Bruce Etter, Senior Director of Research & Consulting, UPCEA*

National Student Clearinghouse data shows that undergraduate certificates (13.4%) and graduate certificates (9.9%) each experienced significant growth in completions between Fall of 2021 and Fall of 2023. This trend will continue as learners are eager to obtain more layers of value in their education and desire to display skills and competencies earned outside of or in addition to degree programs. Institutions are also seeing certificate programs as entry-points to degree offerings. UPCEA's February 2024 snap poll found that 58% of institutions that offer online graduate programming see online graduate certificates as on ramps to their online graduate degrees. This concentrated effort from both supply and demand will lead to a continued increase in completions.

https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/

# Conclusion

The predictions for higher education in 2025 presented by UPCEA's team of experts, illustrate a sector undergoing profound change. Institutions that embrace these shifts—by leveraging technology, rethinking credentialing, and prioritizing student-centered approaches—are likely to thrive in a competitive landscape. The focus on microcredentials, flexible learning pathways, and the integration of AI not only enhances educational offerings but also aligns them more closely with workforce demands. Additionally, as the call for improved data on non-degree credentials gains urgency, institutions will need to prioritize the development of comprehensive learning records that support transparency and accountability in education. As institutions navigate these transitions, they must remain vigilant about the implications of legislative changes and the importance of fostering equity and access in their communities. By doing so, they will not only prepare students for the challenges of the future but also contribute to a more resilient and adaptive educational ecosystem.

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# UPCEA – The Go-To Community for Those Who Are Reinventing Higher Education

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