

The Misconceptions  
of  
Institutionalized Dance

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## Table of Contents

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Introduction.....	3
Background.....	4
Technical Requirements	
Techniques	
Sample Size of Universities	
Case Study One: Juilliard School.....	6
Case Study Two: State University of New York at Purchase.....	9
Case Study Three: Fordham University.....	13
Case Study Four: New York University, Tisch School.....	16
Curriculum Charts.....	18
Indiana University	
University of Southern California, Maria Kaufman School of Dance	
Boston Conservatory at Berklee College	
University of North Carolina School for the Arts	
Conclusion.....	22

## Introduction

While a majority of young dancers aspire to professionally perform as a contracted company member – many feel the pressure to obtain a degree or some form of higher education to conform with societal norms. These are the circumstances in which it is incredible to have conservatory-based dance programs embedded in university teachings. Conservatory-based learning is typically described as a school or training program specializing in the fine arts, a Bachelors in Fine Arts (BFA) combines the rigor of a conservatory-based learning with a college education. Students in a conservatory-based curriculum can expect to gain in-depth knowledge on dance history, music, choreography, as well as general educational classes. While this kind of training initially appears to be essential for those looking to pursue dance in the field – it is not a requisite for a professional career. Most dance programs in the United States are marketed as a place to explore, grow as an artist and a stepping stone to a professional career. Throughout this paper we are looking at various conservatories in the United States and the misconceptions that draw in their student base. Conservatories market themselves as an environment of growth and possibility, however there is scarcely any room in the curriculum to do so. Most Bachelor of Fine Arts dance programs are overloaded with codified technique classes scattered throughout the day leaving students exhausted and with little availability for exploration. Through this research we will examine the history of these programs, codified techniques, and job probability post-graduation in order to provide statistical evidence on the role a conservatory-based program plays in preparing students for a professional career.

## Background

An average Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in the United States consists of two-thirds studying in the fine arts and one-third of studying in general liberal studies. Students studying in BFA programs often require a level of expertise in the given field prior to attending the university. In addition to applying to the college, students have to apply to the school in which they are trying to attend with either an audition or a portfolio. While there are various ways schools can get accredited to implement dance and arts programs, some notable mentions include the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) and the National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD). The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) was founded in 1944 and is attributed to accrediting or certifying Colleges and Universities with Bachelors of Fine Arts programs for those colleges that are members. The National Associate of Schools of Dance (NASD) was founded in 1981 and provides accreditation specifically for private studio schools, conservatories, universities and colleges that feature a dance program. Currently, the NASD has accredited approximately 83 institutions including those listed as examples in this research paper. The NASD Handbook for accrediting institutions reads, “The first purpose of the accreditation process is to provide a mechanism that assists institutions and programs to analyze their operations, work, and aspirations. The results encourage artistic and educational improvements. The review is placed in the context of nationally-developed standards and facilitated by using consistent procedures that ensure fairness and objectivity. NASD’s focus is service and assistance.” (NASD Arts) NASD uses the same accreditation process for each institution seeking approval— similar to that of the Middle States Accreditation Program; another voluntary, non-governmental, membership association that promotes educational excellence across institutions with diverse missions.

One of the most frequently asked questions is: what is the difference between a college dance program and a conservatory? Owner and director of Ivy College Prep LLC, Ralph Becker, said it best, “A conservatory program is preparing students to dance professionally upon graduation. The academics, in such a program, are distinctly secondary to the dance curriculum and performances. For example, at the conservatory program at SUNY Purchase, it awards a BFA in dance which consists of 90 credits for dance, and 30 credits for liberal arts and sciences (and 8 of these credits can be for a history of dance course).” (Becker) While this is an example, it is important to note that SUNY Purchase is a part of the greater State University of New York system and it does not operate in isolation. Although all conservatory programs have some level of academic rigor, not all follow this same structure. That being said, the intention of these programs is for the student to further progress into a company job or some sort of dance/artistic profession.

After examining information from numerous institutions and dance conservatory programs, the application criteria is as follows: formal application to college, written application to dance program which includes providing a headshot, curriculum vitae (CV or resumé), photographs of first arabesque, tendu, and contemporary/modern photo of choice, a video application including both ballet and modern technique, in-person technique class, interview and solo repertory. While these criteria seem extensive, it also provides the dancer insight as to what the conservatory or school of dance will expect in the future. “Codified” is the idea that a dance technique or study has a set of rules or obligations needed to be upheld in order to complete the movement to the full extent. These universally studied codified techniques include Ballet (Balanchine, Vaganova, and Cecchetti), Graham, Dunham, Cunningham, Limón, and Horton. These techniques are also coupled with composition classes progressing into choreography and

repertory classes where students begin to create and explore their own work and repertory works that have been performed professionally. In addition, students will most likely be required to take somatics courses (pilates, yoga, meditation, alexander, etc.), music theory, percussion, dance history, anatomy and general education courses required by the college. Although each conservatory varies in curriculum structure, these are the courses one expects to take when applying to said universities. No matter the structure of the curriculum, these courses are oftentimes marketed as essential requirements to close the gap between pre-profession and professional. When examining the similarities between various dance BFA programs in the US, it is apparent that their mission statements do not always coincide with their curriculum structure.

While there are hundreds of dance programs in the country – for the purpose of this research we will only be looking at select institutions; their curriculums, mission statements, and alumni ratio in order to understand where the dance bachelor programs fall as a whole in the United States. After comparing lists from Pointe Magazine, Onstage Dance, College Guide, Backstage, and College Gazette – below is a list of diverse and accredited dance programs and conservatories in the United States: The Juilliard School, New York University Tisch School for the Arts, State University of New York at Purchase College, Fordham University, Indiana University, University of Southern California, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, and University of North Carolina School for the Arts. While this is not every dance school in the United States, it is a list that provides a well-rounded sense of how institutionalized dance operates here in this country.

## Case Study One: The Juilliard School

The Juilliard School is a private non-profit university for the arts based in New York City established in 1905. Students at The Juilliard School study conservatory training in areas including; dance, music, and drama. It is important to note that Juilliard was initially founded as a classical music school, however, the dance program was later established by Martha Hill. For the purpose of our research we will only be examining the dance division in regards to The Juilliard School. When entering the dance division section of the Juilliard website a quote from Alicia Graf Mack, the director of the department, is the first thing a prospective student will see, “Juilliard dancers speak the language of movement fluently, are grounded in classical ballet and modern techniques, and have structure and discipline in their bodies. They are also creative thought leaders who can deconstruct those techniques and develop their own original artistic voices to answer challenging questions through music and movement exploration.” (Graf Mack) Below Graf Mack’s quote the mission statement then follows, “At Juilliard, you will be encouraged to become a versatile and nuanced performer through the exploration of ballet, modern and contemporary techniques.” (Juilliard) While The Juilliard School is clear in their depiction of how dancers will become well-rounded and versatile through the application of different dance techniques, they also discuss the way in which their artistic voices will be found.

Graf Mack stating, ‘They are also creative thought leaders who can deconstruct those techniques and develop their own original artistic voices’ speaks to the idea that there is space in their curriculum for their students to be able to explore their bodies and artistic voices, with the absence of technique while still being technically trained. When looking at their class requirements for all four years at the school, each student is required to take a minimum of seven

dance technique classes a semester, a dance history class, composition, acting, partnering and music for dancers. A breakdown of requirements is as follows:

1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
Ballet	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet
Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique
Modern I - Limon	Modern II - Graham	Modern III - Cunningham	Modern IV - Horton
Modern I - Graham	Modern II - Taylor	Modern III - Limon	Partnering IV
Partnering I	Modern II - Horton	Partnering III	Topics in Dance Guests
First Year Seminar	Partnering II	Topics in Dance	Topics in Dance
Hip Hop Foundations	World Dance	Topics in Dance - Floorwork	Selfcare
Repertory	Dance History I	Topics in Dance Guests	Repertory
Alexander Technique	Dance History II	Repertory	Senior Production
Pilates Mat	Repertory II	Stagecraft	Pedagogy
Dance Composition	Dance Composition II	Anatomy/ Kinesiology	Seminar for Seniors
Elements of Performing	Music Studies for Dancers		

Looking at these requirements there is not a lot of space in the curriculum for venturing out and ‘discovering one’s body.’ While one could argue that this could happen simultaneously while in technique classes, because of the rigor and structure based around modern and ballet classes it is hard to imagine that this could be possible. Artistry comes from the idea that technique and emotion must coexist but the probability of understanding this without the absence of technique classes is slim. When Bloch, a world renowned dance brand, interviewed several directors and choreographers at professional dance companies on June 13, 2019, they all came to the conclusion, “They won’t remember if the dancer had the nicest feet, the highest legs, or turned the most pirouettes. They’ll remember the moment their breath was taken – probably for

the rest of their lives.” This coincides with the idea that dance companies are looking for artists rather than technicians. So, is conservatory-based training preparing students for this in the real world?

As part of the criteria when collecting research on the several different programs and their preparation for the world of dance, interviews were conducted with previous graduates from these schools. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 and its impact it has had on the dance community and current job opening, in order to ensure fair analysis of the dance world in a normal scenario, these interviews were done with those that graduated years prior and had experience in the field prior to the pandemic. A graduate of The Juilliard School’s 2018 dance class assisted me in getting ahold of her peers and having them fill out a short survey. Of the 20 dancers in The Juilliard School’s 2018 graduating class, three of them are still currently dancers and pursued a career of two years or longer in the field. That would be 15% dancing post college (if we consider dance post college to be two or more years).

## **Case Study Two: State University of New York at Purchase**

State University of New York at Purchase College is a state university located in Purchase, New York, Westchester County. Purchase College has an extensive dance conservatory and was noted in the New York Times, “SUNY Purchase, home to one of the country’s most highly regarded dance conservatories...” and by The Dance Enthusiast, “The State University of New York at Purchase is home to one of the most prestigious dance programs in the country, offering a rigorous college dance education at a significantly lower cost than most private universities. The SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Dance (COD) students are on par with what one might expect to see in the professional dance world.” While Purchase has been deemed an extremely reputable university for creating professional dancers, they too seem to not necessarily project the priorities of their study to prospective students in the way that they play out based on their curriculum. On their website their mission statement is as follows, “The program emphasizes both performance and choreography, providing students with a broad artistic foundation through the four-year composition program and studies of music, dance history, dance production, anatomy, core curriculum courses, and a wide variety of electives.” This program highlights conservatory style training, internationally distinguished faculty who strive to bring out the very best in technique, artistry, and creativity in each student, numerous performing opportunities and much more. Throughout the website, student handbook and director’s comments, you see the topic of artistry listed several times. When taking a look at the classes required you do not see many opportunities for these students to grow in an artistic way, in other words, you do not see many opportunities for these students to grow as well-rounded dancers able to explore dance outside of codified techniques.

1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
Ballet Technique I	Ballet Technique II	Ballet Technique III	Ballet Technique IV
Modern Technique I	Modern Technique II	Modern Technique III	Modern Technique IV
Our Community in Dialogue	Western Dance History	20th and 21st Century Dance History	Senior Seminar
Special Ballet	Special Ballet	Special Ballet/ Partnering	Special Ballet/ Partnering
Special Modern	Special Modern	Special Modern/Partnering	Special Modern/ Partnering
Composition I	Composition II	Composition III	Composition IV
Freshman Seminar	Contact Improvisation	Junior Project	Music IV
Anatomy for Dancers	Music II	Music III	Senior Project
Music I	Somatic	Somatic	Somatic
Production			
Somatic			

Unlike The Juilliard School, Purchase College being a part of the State University of New York system also has several academic requirements not depicted in this chart. These general education requirements include; Math, Science, English, Language and Social Science classes. As one can see these requirements are more than enough for your average student and leave little time in the day for exploration. It also is important to note that exploration (students gathering for outside work and performances) outside of the classroom should not be accounted for when deciding if the institution does or does not contribute to a student's creative and artistic progression. This progression should be determined by active efforts taken inside the classroom to explore this type of work. One should note, State University of New York at Purchase College does offer Contact Improvisation which The Juilliard School does not. This would meet that outside of basic partnering classes, students are able to find creative ways to lift, move, and assist one another while dancing.

Will this type of training prepare students for the real workforce in dance? Much like The Juilliard School, I have gathered information from the State University of New York at Purchase College Alumni of 2018 to gather information about whether or not they did/or are pursuing dance post-graduation. In SUNY Purchase's class of 2018 with an initial 36 dancers, only 7 of them have continued careers in the field for two years or longer. This would equal 19% of the students in this year continuing their passion of dance.

### **Case Study Three: Fordham University**

Fordham University is a private non-profit Jesuit school located in the Bronx, New York. Unlike The Juilliard School or State University of New York at Purchase College Fordham has partnered with The Ailey School to provide training at an outside institution as part of their curriculum. This structure allows students to complete a full academic program and dance simultaneously. This program was founded by Edward Bristow, Ph.D., a Fordham professor of history who was dean of Fordham College at Lincoln Center and Denise Jefferson, director of The Ailey School nearly 24 years ago. While this program is very upfront about their focus on codified techniques their website reads, “The program offers a comprehensive study of several dance techniques, preparing graduates for a variety of jobs in today's diverse dance profession. Our focus on dance technique and performance offers students the opportunity to hone their professional skills and prepare for life as a professional dancer.”

This is very compelling and a strong argument for preparation for the dance world from a technical perspective. However, is this focus on technique what the dance world is looking for? While it is hard to determine without statistics; after looking at criteria from dance companies in search of dancers, one can assume that these work in tandem and a prospective dancer will need to have both, not one or the other. An example of audition criteria from A.I.M. by Kyle Abraham, a dance company based out of New York City is as follows. “A.I.M by Kyle Abraham is seeking dynamic and virtuosic dancers to fill paid full-time and part-time positions for our upcoming performance and touring seasons. Applicants must show an interest in an investigative process that includes an open mind and a willingness to work in a collaborative group environment.” Another example of what dance companies are looking for is the criteria for that of Complexions Dance Company. Their audition statement states, “Passionate Movers that are

unique individuals with a point of view and a strong sense of self are encouraged to apply.”

While these are only two companies, their messages are fairly clear. They are looking for dancers who not only are trained but have a strong voice, that of which is not found through technique but through artistry.

A table of Ailey/Fordham’s classes and requirements is as follows:

<b>1st Year</b>	<b>2nd Year</b>	<b>3rd Year</b>	<b>4th Year</b>
Ballet	Ballet	Ballet	Ballet
Horton	Horton	Horton	Horton
Body Conditioning	Graham Based-Modern	Graham Based-Modern	Graham Based-Modern
Gyrokinesis	Pointe or Men’s Class	Repertory Workshop	Limon, Taylor Or Dunham
Pointe or Men’s Class	Jazz	Composition	Senior Project
Improvisation	Composition	World Dance History	Senior Seminar
Anatomy & Kinesiology	Ballet Partnering	Foreign Language	Dance Methodology
West African	Music for Dancers	Modern Partnering	Senior Project
English Texts & Contexts	Faith and Critical Reason	Performance and Art	Capstone Ethics Seminar
English Composition	Philosophy of Human Nature	Black Traditions in American Dance	Liberal Arts Elective
Social Science	Liberal Arts Electives	Advanced Disciplinary Study	Choreography

Academic classes are included in the list with dance unlike State University of New York at Purchase Colleges’s list, this was done as this is the way the school presents it. With State University of New York at Purchase College their dance conservatory is presented as separate from the University having their own distinct “dance academics” whereas Fordham presents it as a cohesive unit. While this schedule might be just as hectic as the others we’ve viewed thus far – it does contain more academics affiliated with the program.

As far as successfully becoming members of the professional dance community goes; Fordham University has a slightly different set up as several surveys have described them as a “feeder school” for two companies; Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and Ailey II. The idea is that going to this university can be used to gain connections to faculty and directors of the Ailey Companies to eventually become a member of Ailey II, then feeding into Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. This concept has worked fairly well as three of the twelve dancers in Ailey II are from the Ailey/Fordham BFA program and five of the thirty Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Company members attended Ailey/Fordham as well.

If 16% of the company are from the school is it fair to consider it a feeder school? While it is up for debate, it seems the definition of feeder school reads, “colleges that enable a significant percentage of their graduates to move on to specific universities and/or specific job types.” The term ‘significant percentage’ implies that this is a large number, most would not consider 16% a large number. While I was unable to get more specific statistics on graduates and careers at this particular school, The average graduating class at this school contains 35-40 students.

## Case Study Four: New York University, Tisch School

New York University, The Tisch School of Dance is often listed on top 10 lists of dance schools in the country and offers a BFA in dance. The NYU website specifies technique in ballet and contemporary dance with an equal emphasis on performance and choreography. New York University, Tisch School of Dance operates on a different system than any other school referenced in this paper. While most BFA programs operate on a four year schedule, the Tisch School operates on a three year schedule with two summer courses not depicted below.

1st Year	1st Summer	2nd Year	2nd Summer	3rd Year
Ballet Technique I	Two-week Summer Residency	Ballet Technique II	Two-Week Summer Abroad	Second Avenue Dance Company
Contemporary Technique I		Modern Technique II		Creative Research in Dance II
Creative Research in Dance I		Creative Research in Dance II		
Music Theory and Composition		Improvisation		
Kinesthetics of Anatomy		Acting		
Production Crew in Dance		History of Dance		
Art in the World				
The World Through Art				

Summer courses required at NYU Tisch include the first summer Dance Residency and the second summer abroad course. The first summer Dance Residency consists of two two-week long dance programs with guest artists and faculty members. Each residency with guest artists is around 4-5 days where students are taught repertory. The NYU Tisch site reads, “This dance program is based on strong technical training, achieved by concentrating on the healthy and

efficient use of the body to realize each person's physical potential, and the development of the imaginative and creative elements of each individual." Summer two has two different options, a similar summer residency to that of the first year, and a study abroad option not mentioned before. This second summer residency is on the same dates as summer one, however it is titled 'Study with Innovative Contemporary Choreographers' and seems to be geared towards smaller companies looking to hire. The summer abroad option is a three-week contemporary, improvisation and performance intensive in Berlin. The site reads, "You will have the opportunity to explore the city, museums and performances from the world's most prominent dance companies and artists. There is rarely a weekend in Berlin without a performance in one space or another, be it a large theater or a small alternative space."

Other important differences in the curriculum include 'Creative Research in Dance' and 'Second Avenue Dance Company.' Upon further research and talking to colleges this 'Creative Research in Dance' consists of choreography and performance training focused on different topics each year. Year one consists of weekly assignments associated with different problems and artistic elements. Year two consists of the relationship between music and choreography, and the third year seems to be an accumulation of the first two years. 'Second Avenue Dance Company' appears to have modern and ballet technique classes every week— there is no information that differentiates this from Ballet Technique training and Contemporary Technique training.

The NYU Tisch School while varying in approach has a similar outcome when discussing student success rates. With an average graduating class of approximately 20 people, a previous 2018 Graduate Savannah informed me that approximately five of her classmates have company contracts while the rest have moved to different professions, with a success rate of approximately

25%. While this is higher than other universities we have looked at, it can be assumed that this is caused by the students' ability to learn from outside companies and their focus on artistic growth.

## Curriculum Charts

The charts listed below are a series of other accredited dance divisions, departments, and conservatories at various institutions throughout the United States. While all curriculums have slight differences, overall one can see that all universities listed in this research paper follow the same guideline of technique requirements. All universities include some form of technique classes, somatic practices, improvisation and/or composition, dance history and music. While this alone does not prove or disprove the theory that training in this way does not lead to a professional career. It displays that most programs in the United States operate under the same curriculum, teaching students the same techniques. While the statistics listed above do not automatically apply to the universities listed below, one can assume with a similar curriculum over a four year period results will vary within the same range.

### Indiana University (Chart)

<b>1st Year</b>
A Somatic Approach to Contemporary Dance
Dance Practices I
Dance Practices II
Improvisation of Contemporary Dance I
Improvisation of Contemporary Dance II
Contemporary Dance Theater
Contemporary Dance Workshop
Introduction to Dance Studies

\*IU has different “tracks” where you can focus on different specifications or sections of the dance industry (i.e. ballet, cultural, theater dance, musical theater.)

\*\*Majors also study dance academics including dance pedagogy, history, and dance in the humanities, offering yoga and pilates certifications.

**University of Southern California, Maria Kaufman School (Chart)**

<b>1st Year</b>	<b>2nd Year</b>	<b>3rd Year</b>	<b>4th Year</b>
Dance Technique I	Dance Technique II	Dance Technique II	Advanced performance Studies
Repertory & Performances	Repertory & Performances	Dance Leadership	General Education
Improvisation & Composition I	Improvisation & Composition II	Advanced Writing	Concentration Elective I
Colloquium	Colloquium	Concentration Elective I	Concentration Elective II
Body Conditioning	African American Dance	Concentration Elective II	Concentration Elective III
World Perspective on Dance	Music for Dancers	Free Elective	Free Elective
General Education Seminar	Ballet General Education	Advanced Performance Studies	
Dance Science: Analysis of Dance Movement	Dance for the Camera	Colloquium	
Writing and Critical Reasoning	Free Elective	International and Historical Perspectives	

**Boston Conservatory at Berklee (Chart)**

<b>1st Year</b>	<b>2nd Year</b>	<b>3rd Year</b>	<b>4th Year</b>
Introduction to Dance	Introduction to Dance Pedagogy	Dance History	Professional Seminar
Introduction to Iconic Dance	Alexander Technique	Modern Technique	Modern Technique
Modern Technique	Modern Technique	Dance Composition	Dance Composition
Modern Partnering	Dance Composition	Laban Movement	
Improvisation	Postmodern Approaches		
African Dance	Experimental Anatomy		
Salsa			
Dance Composition			
Gyrokinesis			

Floor Barre			
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**University of North Carolina School for the Arts (Chart)**

<b>1st Year</b>	<b>2nd Year</b>	<b>3rd Year</b>	<b>4th Year</b>
Contemporary Technique & Partnering I	Contemporary Technique & Partnering II	Contemporary Technique III	Contemporary Technique IV
Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique	Ballet Technique
Music for Dancers	Dance Music History	Dance History II	Applied Dance Pedagogy
Dance Perspectives	Dance History I	Career Preparation	Career Preparation
Composition & Improvisation I	Composition & Improvisation II	Foundations of Dance Pedagogy	Contemporary Repertory
Contemporary Repertory	Contemporary Repertory	Composition & Improvisation III	Emerging Choreography & Production
Supplemental Topics in Dance	Supplemental Topics in Dance	Contemporary Repertory	Supplemental Topics in Dance
First Year Seminar	Paths to the Present	Supplemental Topics in Dance	Elective
Writing	General Education	General Education	

## Conclusion

As one can determine from the information provided above – it is more so up to one's own discretion whether or not a BFA in dance will facilitate their growth in the industry. This study has shown that based on the colleges examined, on average 18.75% of BFA dance students end up pursuing dance professionally with a company contract within their first several years out of school. New York University has a slightly higher static with 25% of their students moving on to contracted positions at dance companies. After examining the data above we can safely attribute that to the diversity of training they receive in contemporary dance and residencies provided by outside companies as this is the main differentiator between them and the other universities examined.

The Juilliard School, New York University at Purchase College and Fordham University all have very similar curriculum and this is reflected in the success rate of their students. Educational charts for four other universities were provided here as well to show the similarities in curriculum throughout the United States – assuming that technical training leads to a career we can speculate that with similar schedules their colleges fall similar to the success rates of The Juilliard School, New York University at Purchase College and Fordham University.

Whether this rate is more or less successful than that of a student directly out of high school is hard to determine, however NYU having a three-year program and higher success rate shows that this could be a possibility and definitely something to investigate further. It seems as if it is about time to shy away from technical components and focus more on movement quality. It is important to note that these schools, in their mission statements, marketing material and wording, state an artistic growth throughout the three to four years of attending their institutions.

Based on information and materials examined in this research paper – the growth that occurs is more technical than it is “artistic.” One can see that a mix of techniques and opportunities to interface with professional dance companies through meaningful residencies and direct contact with the students makes a difference in the success rate of their students.

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