What Today's Academic Librarians Can Tell Us About Recruiting and Retaining the Library Workforce of Tomorrow: Lessons Learned from the WILIS 1 Study

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The inexorable march of time ensures that there will soon be substantial turnover among librarians now working in academic libraries. Though the exact timing of the retirements cannot be predicted especially in light of current economic uncertainties, inevitably the retirement of baby boomers will change the face of academic librarianship because baby boomers constitute the majority of librarians now working in academic libraries. Indeed, with the oldest members of that cohort of workers now reaching retirement age, academic librarianship faces a looming workforce shortage. This vast wave of retirements will have greater impact in librarianship than in most other fields because librarians, especially academic librarians, are older than other professionals. To continue to flourish in the future academic libraries will need to both attract new professionals to take the place of those retiring and to retain workers who may be considering leaving the field or moving to positions in other types of libraries. As the workforce shrinks and the number of new master's graduates is not sufficient to replace those leaving academic librarianship due to retirement, libraries may also need to consider ways in which they can retain older librarians on a full or part-time basis beyond the time they would normally have retired.

Despite the fact that recruitment and retention will be key issues for the future of academic librarianship, little information is available about important factors that play a role in shaping career patterns for librarians. Unlike most other professions, librarianship has never systematically tracked the careers of practitioners, thus we know little about why individuals choose the profession, what causes them to remain or leave the field, how long they plan to work before retirement and what factors lead to career growth and satisfaction. Little systematic research has been done to characterize the library workforce as a whole or to develop data collection models that can be used to track this workforce on an ongoing basis. Lack of

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such research means that employers do not have the information they need to manage their workforce effectively or to plan for recruiting new librarians to replace those who leave the field because of retirement or other reasons.

In response to the critical workforce issues facing the field, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded a study designed to systematically track the long-term career patterns of a large cohort of librarians. Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science 1 (WILIS 1) is a multi-year (2005-2009) research project designed to study the career patterns of all graduates from 1964 to 2005 of the six LIS programs in North Carolina. Although WILIS 1 studied only LIS graduates from North Carolina programs, the results are of wider significance because of the diversity of educational opportunities located within that state. Five of the institutions offer master's degrees in librarianship; three are ALA accredited, two are not. One of the master's programs is in a historically black university allowing for data analysis related to the career choices and progression of minority librarians. In addition, one program is located in a community college and prepares library technicians. The inclusion of a variety of full-time, part-time, and distance programs also contributes to the broader relevance of the findings to the overall LIS workforce picture. The diversity of programs and the students they attract provides information about the career choices and progression of a wide variety of librarians. Although all of the respondents to the survey received their library science degree from a school in North Carolina, since graduation they have spread across the US and the world and are now working in hundreds of widely varying types of institutions. Responses were received from graduates in all 50 states and 14 countries. It is likely that the respondents to the WILIS survey are largely representative of the workforce in today's libraries.

Background

The workforce in academic libraries represents a significant proportion of the overall workforce in all types of libraries, and these libraries are facing the prospect of a shortage of qualified librarians. The academic library sector has been aware of the looming shortfall for a number of years. Both the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the two most important academic library professional organizations, have actively addressed the problem. ACRL has produced recruitment materials including a recruitment brochure and a video designed to interest college students and others in academic librarianship. Its website features a Recruiting and Retention Wiki designed to provide useful materials for both employers and employees. Many conference programs have been devoted to recruitment and retention issues. A major study issued in 2002 summarized the labor gap facing academic libraries and discussed strategies for dealing with recruitment and retention.[1] The importance of recruiting and retention is a recurring theme in ACRL's strategic plan, "Charting our Future."[2]

ARL has addressed recruitment and retention issues through a number of initiatives. Most notably, ARL has actively tried to recruit new librarians from underrepresented groups to increase the diversity in the profession and has a program officer devoted to this mission. ARL publishes numerous statistics about its member libraries each year. Stanley Wilder has used the data gathered by ARL to provide the most relevant and up-to-date information about the library workforce in the largest academic libraries. He has reported that as a group academic librarians are significantly older than most other professionals. Relative to comparable professions, academic librarianship contains one third the number of individuals aged 35 and under and almost 75 percent more individuals aged 45 and older.[3] This age distribution is a result of many factors, but the large number of academic librarians hired in the 1960s when higher education expanded rapidly is the principal cause. The age distribution of academic librarians is also pushed upward by the fact that for many people librarianship is a second profession so that even "new" librarians tend to be older than most new professionals. Wilder provided more current data in 2003 in his monograph, *Demographic Change in Academic Librarianship.* Here he updated the age profile of ARL librarians and looked specifically at the connection between the aging of the profession and new entries to the field. His prediction that approximately half of the librarians employed in ARL libraries will have left the field by the year 2020 is a sobering one.[4]

There is no doubt that academic librarianship faces a serious challenge in trying to recruit and retain the librarians necessary to work in the academic libraries of tomorrow. Overall workforce planning for

the profession and succession planning in individual libraries are both topics that require attention. The findings from the WILIS 1 study provide information that will make this task easier.

Methodology

The primary goal of WILIS 1 was to build a comprehensive understanding of the educational, workplace, career, recruitment and retention issues facing LIS graduates. The web-based survey administered from September to December of 2007 used complex skip patterns to move the respondent through the survey to specific sections, depending upon the number of different jobs indicated and the category or categories into which each job fell. The ability to compare careers was increased by asking each respondent to describe five jobs: 1) their job before entering their LIS program; 2) their job after graduating from the LIS program; 3) their longest job; 4) their highest achieving job; and 5) their current job. Depending on career length, the survey took respondents approximately 30 to 60 minutes to complete. An initial pilot survey of 750 randomly selected graduates was used to test the study protocol and survey instrument. Approximately one third of the graduates responded to the pilot survey. Subsequently, a non-response study that employed an intensive series of mail, e-mail and telephone follow up was used to gather basic data from the non-respondents. The follow up study established that the characteristics of the non-respondent group did not differ substantially from the respondent group. Thus it is likely that results of the study for the full survey which followed the pilot are representative of the entire population of graduates between 1964 and 2007.

Results

The response rate for the full WILIS 1 career study was 35% (n=2627). Of the respondents currently working in libraries, 31% (n=467) are employed in academic libraries. This paper discusses only the academic librarian subset of the WILIS 1 respondents. These respondents were primarily female (73%) with a median age of 48. By comparison, the median age of the US labor force in 2000 was 39.3. The LIS graduates earned a mean salary of $53,532 and a median salary of $49,500. The respondents were highly educated. Eighteen of them (4%) had a Ph.D, a J.D. or some other type of doctorate before entering the MLS program; 29 (6%) earned such a degree subsequent to receiving the MLS degree. One hundred and sixty-three (35%) of the respondents held a second master's degree.

The academic library respondents to the WILIS1 survey displayed some demographic characteristics that distinguished them from the respondents working in other types of libraries. As can be seen in Table 1 they were more likely to be male, to be slightly younger and to be more racially diverse than respondents working in other types of libraries. Their median salary was slightly higher than librarians working in public or school libraries, but lagged the median salaries in special libraries or non-library settings.

Current Job

Although the main focus of this paper is on factors relating to recruitment and retention, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the current jobs being held by the academic librarians surveyed. Ninety-two percent of the respondents worked full time; 72% supervised others. They worked in a wide variety of positions within academic libraries with 45% of them reporting that they were administrators. Almost all (90%) were employed on a permanent basis; 7% had a fixed term appointment, and 2 % were employed on a temporary basis. Overall the respondents were a satisfied group: 90% were satisfied with their current job and 95% were satisfied with librarianship as a career. On the whole, they report that they had a great deal of job autonomy. Ninety-two percent reported that it was basically their own responsibility to decide how their jobs get done. The respondents reported that they have employer support for their career development (76%); co-worker support (90%); and sufficient

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of WILIS 1 Respondents

	Academic Library	Public Library	School Library	Special Library	Non-Library Setting
% Female	73%	81%	96%	77%	74%
% Non-White	12%	7%	8%	11%	14%
Median Age	48	49	51	47	51
Median Salary	$49,500	$46,000	$48,000	$57,835	$62,400

opportunities for promotion (73%). Over half (51%) reported that they had complete or a great deal of control in scheduling their work hours, and another 37% had some control. Only 12% had no control over their work schedule.

One troubling result involves gender differences in salaries. Many recent surveys of library salaries have found disparities in the salaries received by male and female librarians.[5] The responses to this survey suggest the same inequity. The males working full time in academic libraries had a median salary of $57,500 (mean = $64,852) while the females had a median salary of $49,000 (mean=$53,385).

Factors Attracting People to the Profession

Librarianship is known as a profession that is often chosen at an older age, and for many entrants to the profession it is a second career. A number of the questions on the survey related to the factors that influence individuals to choose librarianship as a career. It appears that almost all of the respondents to the survey were satisfied with their current job and with librarianship as a profession. Overall, there seems to have been a good match between their aspirations and their careers. In order to attract new librarians to take the place of those retiring, it is helpful to look at the respondents and see what drew them to the profession. The most important of the factors cited by the academic librarians in the study can be seen in Table 2.

Other less frequently cited factors that had a strong influence in choosing to become a librarian were: like working with computers (11%), LIS career fits with family responsibilities (9%), length of training (8%) and volunteered in a library (7%). All other factors were chosen by fewer than 5% of the respondents.

Retention

In addition to the 467 respondents currently working in academic libraries, there were an additional 238 respondents who began their careers in academic libraries but who were no longer working there. It is not enough to attract new entrants to a profession; organizations must make an effort to keep both new entrants and existing staff especially in a time of a contracting workforce. This is not to say that those who are unable to continue to contribute over time should be retained, but that support for professional development and other strategies for helping library staff continue to make positive contributions to the organization, including job enrichment, is part of a "retention of the best" strategy. The responses from the group of individuals (78% female, 22% male) who left academic librarianship provide information about factors that caused them to choose other career options. As can be seen in Table 3, those former academic librarians are now working in a number of other of settings:

The 63% of respondents who had left librarianship completely were now working in a number of types of occupations. The largest numbers were either teach-

TABLE 2
Factors Influencing Decision to Become a Librarian

Factors	Strong Influence	Moderate Influence	Weak Influence	No Influence
Good fit with interests	65%	28%	4%	3%
Worked as assistant in library before entering LIS program	44%	11%	8%	37%
Wanted a job where I could make a difference	34%	32%	24%	10%
Liked working with people	32%	36%	20%	12%
Availability of jobs	19%	39%	19%	22%
Flexible career options	19%	37%	23%	21%
Flexible educational options for working adult	18%	17%	14%	51%
Friend or family member recommended LIS	18%	12%	15%	55%
Friend or family member worked in LIS	16%	12%	13%	59%
Always wanted to be a librarian	13%	13%	25%	495

TABLE 3 Work Settings of Respondents Who Left Academic Librarianship		
Type of institution	Frequency	Percentage
Public Library	19	8%
School Library	26	10.9%
Special Library	44	18.5%
Non-library setting	149	62.6%

ing or employed as administrators in public schools or institutions of higher education. Some had gone into business for themselves and were now working as antiquarian appraisers, bookshop owners, or in computer or web intensive jobs. A few had entered completely new professions and were now employed as attorneys or ministers. The new occupations of the respondents varied widely from licensed massage therapist to rural mail carrier. The reasons they left librarianship were also varied as can be seen in Table 4.

Among the other reasons cited for leaving were downsizing, layoffs, seeking further education or becoming a parent but they were mentioned by very few respondents. It is clear from the responses that the majority of people who left academic librarianship did so to seek better opportunities for career development or for more challenging work. Although 42% did leave seeking better salaries and 33% left because of a geographic relocation, the majority left not for more money but for better and more challenging work opportunities.

Retirement

The individuals who remained in academic libraries were overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs and their career. However, a large number of them do not expect to be working in the LIS field in three years. Eleven percent of them expect to have left the field by the year 2010. Of those leaving within the next three years, almost two thirds (63%) are leaving due to retirement. The others who planned to leave gave reasons such as:

- Feel that after 25 plus years on the job I need a change to something that is less stressful, has fewer hours, and yet is still meaningful.
- I'm dissatisfied with my current situation.
- I'm frustrated with the slow pace of change in large organizations and the inability to impact my compensation. I can work really hard or not so hard and I would still get paid the same.
- I would like to enter the Foreign Service in the future.
- Ready for a change. I've accomplished more in the LIS field than I ever imagined and am ready to try new things.
- Salary too low

Respondents were asked how likely they thought it would be that they would be working full time after age 62. Eight percent stated they definitely would not be working after reaching the age of 62, but 30% said they definitely would be working after that age. About one third thought that the chances were 50% that they would be retired by that age. As expected, the numbers expecting to retire increased when asked about working after reaching the age of 65. Seventeen percent said there was no chance they would continue to work after that date. Two thirds of the respondents stated that there was a fifty percent chance that they would not be working. Only 9 percent expected to

TABLE 4 Reasons for Leaving Academic Librarianship			
Reasons	Major reason	Minor reason	Not a reason
Better opportunities for career development or growth	60%	9%	31%
More challenging or interesting projects	51%	14%	35%
Better salary	42%	18%	40%
Moved to another location	33%	7%	60%
Better working environment	25%	18%	57%
Better benefits	20%	16%	64%
Seeking better quality of management	20%	13%	67%
The opportunity to use leading edge technology	19%	16%	65%
Better working hours	12%	15%	73%

work after reaching age 65. It should be noted that these data are based on the respondents' intentions to retire which is a more reliable measure than chronological age or pension eligibility, which are the measures used in most workforce projections. It is perhaps surprising that only 9% definitely expect to work after the age of 65 since for most of today's workers the minimum age to draw full Social Security benefits is age 66 or older. Since the data were gathered in late 2007, it remains to be seen whether the current economic downturn will result in LIS professionals remaining longer in the workforce.

Even among the respondents who planned to retire, there were many who did not want to stop paid work completely. There was considerable interest in reducing working hours (18%), taking phased retirement (10%), changing the kind of work they do (17%) and working for themselves (10%). After they fully retire, many of the respondents plan to stay active. A large proportion (74%) expected to volunteer. Of those planning to volunteer, 58% expected to volunteer in libraries and 75% expected to use their LIS skills regardless of the setting in which they volunteered. This experienced generation of retired librarians represents a tremendous potential resource for libraries and society at large.

Using the WILIS Data to Improve Workforce Planning in Academic Libraries

How can the data derived from the WILIS study be used to help academic library administrators address the challenges of recruiting and retaining the academic librarians of tomorrow? Recruiting is important; individuals have to be attracted to the profession as a whole and then specifically to academic libraries. It is difficult to target recruitment efforts because people make the decision to enter librarianship at so many different points in their lives. Instead librarians need to think about a variety of types and times of recruiting, including the fact that positive everyday interactions with patrons and student assistants often lead to recruitment to the field. While recruitment is most often focused on new graduates, there is a broader range of strategies that could involve recruiting people from other fields and supporting their LIS education or encouraging reentry of librarians who have left the field.

The most common reason that respondents to the WILIS survey provided about what attracted them to LIS was that they believed that the field would be a good match for their values and interests. It would be surprising if anyone knowingly entered a profession thinking it would not be a good match, and libraries would not want to recruit individuals whose interests could not be met by the profession. Fortunately academic libraries can offer interesting positions to librarians with a range of academic backgrounds and degrees. However, several of the other most common reasons that respondents were attracted to the field are ones that academic libraries could utilize to greater success in recruiting. Nearly half of the respondents said that a major influence on their decision to enter librarianship was that they had worked as an assistant in a library before entering an LIS program. Although not all of these were student assistantships in academic libraries, academic libraries have an advantage because almost all have large numbers of undergraduates working there. It is often in that first job as a library assistant that a person decides to consider librarianship as a career or conversely decides that he or she would never be a librarian. Ideally student assistantships would lead a student to conclude that work as a librarian would be stimulating and mentally challenging, but often the work that students are given to do is the dullest in the organization. To attract new entrants to the field, academic libraries should structure these assistantships so that they include at least some tasks that are interesting, challenging, and allow students to gain an understanding of what professional academic librarians do. Although every assistantship is likely to have some tasks that are more mundane, it is important to let students have a perspective on the profession that would encourage them to join it.

Another group of respondents reported that they entered the profession because they had been influenced by a librarian. Librarians themselves are the best recruiters to attract others to librarianship. It is in the undergraduate or graduate school years when many students are seeking a career that the influence of librarians may be strongest. If among the students assistants or among the students in general there are some who have the characteristics that would make them successful librarians, their supervisors and other librarians should talk to them about the profession, mentor them, and help them learn more about what being a librarian means. In a similar vein there are often support staff members who would be natural candidates to become

professionals. These are the people who know the work environment of academic librarianship and who feel an affinity towards the work. Some libraries have helped support staff make the progression to the professional ranks by providing some sort of financial assistance or leave time for them to pursue the MLS. These efforts should be continued and expanded. Academic librarians need to be creative and to think of innovative ways to convey the benefits of an academic library career to qualified individuals. If academic libraries want to ensure having the "best and the brightest" professionals for tomorrow, academic librarians will need to begin to compete today, both with other professions and with other segments of librarianship. Libraries can offer not only intellectually stimulating work but also work that is socially meaningful. The importance of this to employees should not be underestimated.

Recommendations for Retention

Beyond recruitment is retention. The good news is that people who continue as academic librarians enjoy their jobs and have high rates of job satisfaction. Those who experience job dissatisfaction tend to move on to other sorts of job, often away from the library as an institution.

It is important to note that not every master's graduate is cut out to succeed as an academic librarian, especially in an environment that is experiencing rapid technological change. Libraries need to better understand what it takes to succeed now and in the future and library education programs need to apply this understanding to their selection decisions and efforts to socialize new librarians. The data from the WILIS survey related to job satisfaction as well as factors causing people to leave the field provide a basis for practices that can lead to greater retention of academic librarians.

Academic libraries should capitalize on the fact that those who are in the profession are generally very satisfied with the work, in spite of dissatisfaction with pay and opportunities for advancement. The results indicate that library administrators seeking to retain employees should look to restructuring jobs to make them more interesting and should put a greater emphasis on career development opportunities within the academic library. Intrinsic job rewards such as participatory management, empowerment, and freedom to create new services are all actions that would be beneficial to retaining workers. Other low-cost, high-benefit efforts include:

- Mentoring programs (particularly because of tenure and promotion requirements that are not always fully addressed in LIS education programs prior to employment)
- Recognition and small rewards
- Support employee efforts to develop new programs, seek grant funding for special projects, attend workshops and training, contribute to local, state, and national professional associations, research, publish, and present, gain subject expertise, and learn other job skills through job rotation.
- Internship opportunities during the master's program and post-master's fellowships to encourage entry and help to provide the experience that will enhance job opportunities.

By maximizing opportunities that enrich the daily work lives of librarians, library administrators may provide some compensation for relatively low salaries and lack of advancement found in many academic libraries. Consideration should also be given to offering more flexible work options such as part time or project work to retain librarians who have family or other types of responsibilities at various points in their careers. Retention and other aspects of workforce planning are enhanced by providing ways for library personnel to grow and develop in personally relevant ways.

To date, most retention efforts have been focused on younger workers employed in libraries; there has been little discussion of encouraging older workers to stay longer. If the projected shortfall in the library labor force does materialize, libraries will need to expand retention efforts to librarians reaching the traditional retirement age. This may be an easier task than it would have been a few years earlier. With the current economic downturn, many librarians will need to revise their retirement plans and extend their years in the workforce. They may need flexible schedules, accommodations for health issues, or fewer hours. Old policies will need to change with the economic and demographic conditions, and library leaders will have to lobby for their staff and human resource requirements. The following strategies can help administrators cope with the challenges associated with continuing employment of older workers:

- Give older workers who still enjoy their work an incentive to stay and contribute. Comp time,

inexpensive rewards, recognition, flexible schedules, and other perks are well within the bailiwick of administrators. Honor and encourage them to create and administer their own projects and programs in the library. Allow and support them in mentoring junior staff.

- Make continuing education a priority for all staff. Providing support for continuing education for intermediate and late-career staff will be one of the most challenging issues facing library administrators in the future. If costs are prohibitive, set up a train the trainer program and encourage individuals to become experts in particular areas or technologies and to share their knowledge with their colleagues.
- Support innovative projects that use the skills of workers of all ages. For example, if a new librarian has better technology skills, have them work with a senior special collections staff member to create a digital library. Cross-train with these types of projects.

If older librarians are to be successfully retained, there will be a greater need for retraining, improving attitudes towards older workers, looking for ways to build teams that include older and younger workers, providing more flex time options for those who would be willing to stay part-time but not full-time, and improving salaries and job responsibilities for part-time workers. Traditionally many part time library jobs have been both low pay and low status. Part-time jobs and shared-jobs with sufficient pay and challenge will allow libraries to retain older workers who wish to work fewer hours. (Conversely, library administrators also need to consider ways to encourage those workers who do not want to assume the continued responsibilities of holding a job, to either adapt or to move on to retirement.)

One possible way to increase the library workforce even more would be to recruit some retirees to volunteer for special projects or tasks. Fifty-eight percent of the WILIS 1 respondents planning to retire in the next three years expressed a desire to volunteer in a library. Many of them might choose to do that volunteer work in an academic library if the library could find creative ways to use volunteers and give them meaningful work.

Conclusion

With the retirement of the baby boomers, academic libraries, like all other libraries, will face workforce shortages in the upcoming decades. Recruitment and retention efforts will need to be expanded. In the past, academic libraries were able to be relatively passive in terms of attracting applicants. Openings were advertised, and there were usually sufficient qualified applicants to make a satisfactory hire. However, in a time of high demand and low supply this approach will not be sufficient. Academic librarians need to begin to think about instituting more active recruitment efforts that will convey the benefits of an academic library career to qualified individuals. Once those individuals take their first professional positions, it will be important to think about ways that positions can be made more challenging and attractive so that bright entrants want to have a life-long career in academic libraries.

There are many no-cost or low-cost improvements to library careers that can be useful in attracting and retaining workers; many of these approaches have been described above. However, low salaries are a real impediment to attracting and keeping the best employees. Although working in libraries provides many non-monetary benefits, as the respondents to the WILIS 1 survey indicate, many individuals who left the field did so because of low salaries and lack of advancement. Raising salaries is always difficult, but library administrators need to continue to advocate for higher salaries if libraries are going to be competitive in attracting and keeping the workers that will be needed in the future.

In the past, libraries of all types have never paid much attention to succession planning. There has been an assumption that qualified replacements will be available to fill the vacancies that arise because of retirements or other reasons. In the future, the most successful libraries will be those which plan for such vacancies by identifying talented employees and ensuring that they have the appropriate mentoring and training to assume a higher level position.

Librarianship also needs a way to track the careers of librarians on a systematic basis so that the profession has a better idea of its current workforce. For instance, the WILIS study did not find that there were large numbers of librarians who had left the field completely, but new graduates were more likely to have left than older graduates. If the profession is losing more master's degree graduates to other fields now than in the past, this is the type of trend that needs to be identified to enable effective workforce planning. In a follow-up study to WILIS 1, we are developing a

tool that can be used by LIS schools for alumni tracking. An expansion of such a tool and its support by LIS professional organizations such as ACRL, ARL, ALISE, and ALA would be beneficial to the profession as a whole as a way to ensure that employers have the information needed to deal with the workforce needs of the future.

In summary, the WILIS data suggest that it is time to think differently about our workforce practices. We need to take a longer range perspective on workforce planning rather than reacting to short term economic or social changes that can have a long term impact on our workforce (such as the decline in hiring that took place in the 1970's and 1980's). We also need to provide a more flexible, nurturing and supportive work environment for all library staff that involves intellectually stimulating work, opportunities for leadership at all career stages, flexible work options at different periods of the life course, and continuing acknowledgement of the value of libraries and the meaningful contribution that employees are making through their work in libraries. Those of us in the baby boomer cohort have a special opportunity and obligation to make sure that we leave a legacy that will ensure a bright future for the profession.

Overall these are challenging times, marked by the interacting uncertainties of the economy and the unclear timing of employees' and employers' decisions regarding the academic library workforce. There is an opportunity in the midst of budget cutting and hiring freezes to consider how best to nurture future and existing workforces. We hope that WILIS 1 and future broader workforce data collection efforts can support evidence-based practice related to workforce recruitment, retention, and planning in academic libraries

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Notes

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