Rationale for revising SUNY general education

The SUNY General Education Working Group proposes that general education must empower students to become citizens in a globalized society and prepare them for advanced study and eventually successful employment. Ultimately, SUNY general education empowers SUNY graduates to meet the challenges of 21st century global citizenship whether they are from New York State, the United States, or abroad.

A recent report produced by The Chronicle of Education, entitled “Reforming Gen Ed,” asks,

What comes to mind when you hear the term “general education”? A menu of random courses? A way to fill seats in a department? Requirements disconnected from the major? Somebody else’s responsibility? ….. a waste of time?

However, the report does not suggest that the concept of a general education curriculum should be eliminated from the undergraduate degree. Instead it argues that

a well-planned general-education program can prepare students for an increasingly complex world. Designed thoughtfully, a coherent core can enable students to think broadly and deeply, hone their communication skills, and address the tough and timeless questions embedded in every discipline. (4)

The Chronicle’s report draws largely on research conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) for its data and conclusions, but much of the anecdotal evidence is limited to general education reforms instituted by baccalaureate-degree granting institutions. Little reference is made to university systems or technology and community colleges. Yet the SUNY General Education Work Group believes much can be learned and adapted from this research to guide us as we strive to meet the needs of the State University of New York, its students, its individual institutions, and the general public.

In the Chronicle’s report, “General education” refers to the part of the undergraduate curriculum that is required of all students seeking a liberal education.

At most colleges, general education, the report continues to say, is delivered through the use of a distribution model similar to the SUNY General Education framework currently in place. Such a model “allows students to pick from approved courses within certain required areas of focus, including social sciences, sciences, humanities, and the arts” (7) Many academic leaders, however, worry that at a time when skepticism about the value of college is rising, rather than serving a useful purpose, general
education requirements too often “feel obligatory, lack coherence, fail to teach higher-order skills, or don’t connect with a student’s major in a meaningful way” (7).

In the last five years, efforts to reform general education have been motivated by:

- Questions about purpose
- Concerns about student success
- Accreditation policies and state regulations
- Employer demands
- Polarized politics

Indeed, SUNY conversations about undergraduate education reinforce these conclusions. Our institutions have been focusing on student retention, persistence and completion, complying with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education changing accreditation demands, developing curriculum to help students meet employer demands, and making a nod toward “incorporating learning outcomes that include elements like ethical reasoning, applied problem solving, and diverse perspectives so that undergraduates can better understand the world and their role in it (8).

As stated in SUNY General Education policy, while offering an academically rigorous and comprehensive core General Education curriculum, SUNY is committed to

- continue to ensure that Associate of Arts, Associate of Science and baccalaureate degree recipients have breadth of study in multiple subject areas;
- provide students more flexibility in selecting courses that satisfy the general education requirement as well as other degree requirements;
- give AA, AS and baccalaureate degree candidates more opportunity for in-depth study in a general education subject area;
- facilitate transfer to baccalaureate programs for Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree holders; and support timely degree completion for baccalaureate degree candidates, regardless of where they begin their study.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education in its current Standard III states that accredited undergraduate institutions possess a general education program that

- offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field;
- offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspective.

While it is possible under the current paradigm for SUNY campuses to meet Middle States requirements, the requirements are not completely aligned. In other words, meeting SUNY’s general education requirements does not guarantee that a campus will meet the Middle States requirements.
Therefore, given the lack of alignment between Middle States and SUNY’s general education requirements, the national conversation surrounding higher education in general, the general education reform movement, and the fact that the SUNY General Education framework has been in place for 20 years despite the SUNY requirement that all programs should be reviewed every five to seven years, it may be time to review the framework with an eye toward these 21st century realities.

As noted by Christopher P. Long, editor of the *Journal of General Education*,

General education affords us an amazing opportunity to articulate how and why higher education is of transformative importance to the public good. The issues of civic deliberation, the capacity to understand positions from a variety of different standpoints, the capacity to bring multiple ways of thinking to bear on intractable problems — these are ways you can explain why higher education is important. (8)

The SUNY General Education Working Group believes that SUNY can build on its existing general education policy to create a framework for campuses to develop innovative, integrative, and relevant general education curricula while maintaining our students’ ability to seamlessly transfer among our institutions. However, we must be thoughtful and deliberative moving through such a review.

Reformers argue, according to the *Chronicle’s* report,

that developing a meaningful general education curriculum requires several elements: All faculty members must feel vested in the core; they should be rewarded for rethinking core courses; and they should be encouraged to integrate this coursework better into the undergraduate experience, rather than cordon it off from the major. (9)

Therefore, faculty who are responsible for developing the curriculum and teaching courses must be involved in all review processes and procedures for program review and revision. Local institutions must be allowed to conduct these processes within SUNY policy.

When talking about a 21st century general education framework, the *Chronicle* reports a few common themes: (See Section 2, Pages 14-15)

- Coherent and continuous. Rather than a collection of disparate courses taken in the first two years of college, the new general education is designed to develop skills and knowledge that prepare students for more complex coursework, and includes curricular and co-curricular experiences that culminate in the use of higher-order skills.

- Focused on ways of thinking. This sometimes subtle shift in approach moves general education away from a collection of survey courses designed as an introduction to the major. Instead, greater emphasis is placed on core skills that enable students to approach a subject, or a problem, from the perspective of an expert in the discipline.

- Flexible.
Concerned that cumbersome, and sometimes arbitrary, requirements are creating problem with retention and time-to-degree, some colleges are adding flexibility into the program.

- **Interdisciplinary.**
  As with the rest of higher education, general education is becoming increasingly multidisciplinary, with core courses oriented around big questions or problems that bridge departmental divides.

- **Scaffolded.**
  This refers to the process of weaving general education throughout the undergraduate experience.

- **Includes civic engagement and professional development.**

- **Incorporates high-impact practices.**
  These time-tested teaching and learning practices have proved particularly beneficial for students from historically underserved groups. They include first-year experiences, internships, capstone courses, learning communities, diversity and global learning, writing-intensive courses and e-portfolios.

- **Focused on learning outcomes.**
  Defining and measuring outcomes is the biggest shift in general education design. Questions to consider when designing a general education curriculum include:
  1. How does this reflect your mission?
  2. What are your goals for your general-education curriculum?
  3. How do you know whether you are accomplishing your goals?
  4. How does general education connect to the rest of your activities, so you can make sure you’re offering degrees with quality?”

- **Enhances advising.**
  As general education requirements grow, so does the need to help students choose their courses wisely.

It is clear from the *Chronicle’s* report and from SUNY’s 20 years of experience that curriculum development and innovation must happen at the campus level in order for it to maintain its rigor and its relevance. While each institution should have the flexibility to develop a general education curriculum in keeping with its mission and goals, SUNY can provide a general education framework that offers an overall SUNY mission in keeping with its responsibilities as a public system of higher education to which campuses can map. Seamless transfer, therefore, remains consistent with mission because all SUNY institutions must align their mission with SUNY’s. While SUNY’s general education policy lacks a current unifying mission, as a public system of higher education, it seems likely that such a mission for our general education framework would encourage our students to be thoughtful, ethical, and active global citizens within their lives, their disciplines and their communities, while engaging in a 21st century global economy. Additionally, SUNY’s general education framework can
continue to assist institutions in meeting their compliance demands and facilitate transfer across the system while meeting the needs of our students and their employers.

SUNY System revisions to general education should enable SUNY institutions to pursue the flexibility they need to create new and innovative general education programs that will serve as models for colleges and universities throughout the country while preserving our students’ transfer rights as stated in current policy and complying with accreditation requirements. Many campuses are already engaged in this important work.

**General Education and Transferability**

Transferability is a core principle of the SUNY system. In fact, references to supporting transfer students can be found as far back as the 1940’s. SUNY Boards have since passed at least six resolutions affirming and re-affirming various principles of ‘seamless transfer.’ The most recent policy framework, passed in December of 2012 and implemented for students entering academic programs in fall 2015, includes limits on credit requirements, specifications for lower division content in the major (‘Transfer Paths’), and requires the completion of the SUNY general education requirements in associate of arts, associate of science, and the first two years of baccalaureate degrees. These general education requirements build from two iterations of previous policies. In December 1998, the SUNY Board of Trustees established the university wide general education framework, requiring a minimum of 30 credits in 10 content areas for baccalaureate degrees. In 2010, the policy was modified to be more flexible, with 30 credits in 7 of 10 content areas required, including Basic Communication and Mathematics for all baccalaureate degrees. This more flexible framework is reflected in the current Seamless Transfer policy.

Across all iterations of the SUNY general education policies, though, transfer remained a key consideration. Specifically, if a SUNY-GER category is deemed satisfied at one SUNY campus, it is deemed satisfied at all other SUNY campuses following transfer. In addition, if a course is completed with a grade of ‘C’ or better, that course credit is guaranteed for transfer as well, unless native students in the same academic program are held to a higher grading standard for that particular course. In this case, transfer students can be held to a higher grading standard, as long as native and transfer students are held to the same standard. To facilitate the efficient transfer of SUNY-GER categories and credits, a standardized nomenclature (the General Education Transcript Addendum, or ‘GETA’) was developed by the SUNY campus registrars for transcripting purposes. In any considerations of general education revision, these practices that are reinforced by policy should remain in place.

While supporting transfer students has always been a core element of the SUNY mission, it is perhaps more important than ever, considering the high degree of mobility of the current student population. Simply put, there are large numbers of transfer students and they tend to move between institutions in complex patterns. Consider that, during academic year 2016-17, 48% of all baccalaureate degrees were awarded to transfer students, and 30% of associate degrees.
And while transfer is most often discussed in terms of a ‘vertical’ pattern (i.e. students transferring between community colleges to four year campuses), students tend to transfer between all sectors. As shown in figure 1, during academic year 2016-17, 54,482 students transferred to SUNY campuses, split fairly evenly between non-SUNY to SUNY transfers (26,752) and SUNY to SUNY transfers (27,730). Of the SUNY to SUNY transfers, 54% were vertical transfers between community colleges and four year campuses. An additional 30% transferred to community colleges, split evenly between 2 year to 2 year transfers and 4 year to 2 year transfers. The remaining 16% transferred between 4 year campuses. Therefore, nearly every SUNY campus is potentially both a sending and receiving institution.

![Figure 1. SUNY to SUNY transfer patterns between sectors (n=27,730)](image)

The complexity of transfer patterns points to the need to not only guarantee the transfer of categories and credits, but also for some degree of alignment between institutions and sectors. No matter where a student starts and finishes, the goal is to provide an efficient path to completion without adding unnecessary cost and duplication of effort. Considering SUNY’s longstanding commitment to seamless transfer, the extensive policy work that has already been completed, and the increased mobility and complexity of transfer patterns, SUNY must ensure that transferability remains a core principle when considering any revisions to the general education framework now or in the future.

**Recommendations**

The SUNY General Education Working Group is making recommendations, based on our research, to the SUNY Provost who will in turn submit those recommendations to the Provost’s advisory committee on general education. A review of current general education categories and learning outcomes will be undertaken in a process defined by the advisory committee and approved by the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges.
The SUNY General Education Working Group has divided its recommendations into those that are of immediate concern, and those that will require a longer term review and revision. A change in SUNY Board policy and its role in general education is of direct importance, as are revisions in the learning outcomes of the competency known as Information Management and the category title of “Other World Civilizations”.

**Recommendations needing immediate attention**

**SUNY Board Policy**

The need for a vibrant, comprehensive, contemporary, and relevant general education program is virtually universally recognized. As the external expectations by regional accrediting bodies, the New York State Education Department, and others, as well as the internal goals of SUNY, its campuses, and faculty evolve, the SUNY system must be in a position to adapt in a timely manner. The current SUNY General Education program, detailed in Board of Trustees’ policy in 1998, makes it difficult to respond in a timely manner. Additionally, the current general education framework does not allow for adaptation for campus mission or the demands of accreditation. Accordingly, we recommend that the current Board policy with respect to SUNY General Education be modified in the following ways:

1. Establish that there shall be a SUNY General Education program applicable to all campuses of the State University of New York, and

2. Make appropriate exceptions for the statutory units of the University currently run under contract by Cornell University and by Alfred University, and

3. Mandate that the SUNY General Education program shall adapt to the requirements of our regional accreditation agency (Middle States Commission on Higher Education). Specifically, SUNY General Education categories ought to more clearly enable the fulfillment of MSCHE competencies. This will facilitate campus assessment of general education for both SUNY and Middle States, and

4. Mandate that a SUNY General Education requirement deemed to be fulfilled by one SUNY campus shall be respected and accepted by all SUNY campuses, and

5. Mandate that the certification by any SUNY campus that the SUNY General Education program has been completed by a student shall be respected by all SUNY campuses.
The following two recommendations are of critical concern to the General Education Working Group. However, we recognize that implementing any changes to SUNY General Education requirements will result in a significant workload for campus staff, given the number of systems that may be impacted, such as degree audit systems, campus catalogs, course databases, websites, etc. Therefore, we recommend that the implementation group, wherever possible, gives careful thought to streamlining and consolidating revisions in order to ease the workload on campus faculty and staff.

**Information Management Competency**
This existing competency is in need of review and revision in order to exact a higher technological skill level for our students that is appropriate to the 21st century demands of our increasingly technological economy. The current learning outcomes state:

Students will:
1. Perform the basic operations of personal computer use;
2. Understand and use basic research techniques; and
3. Locate, evaluate and synthesize information from a variety of sources.

We recommend that these outcomes are updated as soon as is feasible.

**Other World Civilizations Category**
The title of this existing knowledge category is in urgent need of re-labeling primarily due to its offensive nature that is not respectful of non-western culture or civilization. It could be re-named to ‘global awareness’ or ‘world systems’ in order to convey the non-western classification that it intends. Current learning outcomes state:

Students will demonstrate:
- Knowledge of either a broad outline of world history, or
- The distinctive features of the history, institutions, economy, society, culture, etc. of one non-Western civilization.

We recommend that the title of this category minimally be revised. In the longer term review, the learning outcomes for this category might also be streamlined and updated.

**Recommendations that require longer term consideration**

1. The work group recommends that SUNY general education should be framed in the language of *General education for the 21st century global citizen*.

2. SUNY General Education should more clearly enable the fulfillment of general education competencies as required for Middle States accreditation.

3. SUNY should limit the number of content categories to ten, and maintain the seven category requirement for all SUNY students. Campus feedback has indicated resistance to more than 10 categories. Therefore, if new categories are added to align with Middle States (such as diversity, ethical thinking or frequently suggested ‘information literacy’), then other categories should be collapsed or eliminated to retain no more than 10 knowledge areas. It is also possible to imagine the elimination of all SUNY categories in favor of the Middle States competencies.
4. There is strong support in the General Education Working Group to reduce the number of General Education credit hours required in the first two years of study. There are both pedagogical and programmatic advantages to a reduction in General education credit hours. Pedagogically, reducing the general education credit requirement allows curriculum designers to meet both SUNY’s mission and the individual campus mission regarding general education. Additionally, a reasonable reduction in the general education credit requirement in the first two years would further value the student’s general education by enabling depth of study, not just breadth. A reduction of credits would allow associate-degree programs to include more transfer-path courses and other types of courses that facilitate student success while still working to meet the 64-credit limit for the degree.

However, the Working Group has differences of opinion on where that reduced number of credit hours should lie. It is especially difficult to present a consensus opinion as we can only speculate on the effects of each option below given that they are all hypothetical.

The Working Group’s difference in opinion rests with the three options outlined below:

**Option A) Reduction of general education to 21 Credits:** The number of credit hours required in the first two years of study to satisfy SUNY General Education should be reduced from 30 to 21 credits. This would align with the 7 category requirement that is currently in policy and recommended above (#3). It was also a long-standing practice prior to the 2012 Board resolution.

The advantage of a reduction of 9 hours is that it would alleviate the burden on Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degree programs that were driven to eliminate desired program requirements after the implementation of the SUNY Board’s 2012 Seamless Transfer policy. At community colleges, a reduced general education credit hour requirement will facilitate innovative considerations of local general education requirements, make room for first year seminars and allow for more flexibility to accommodate transfer path courses.

Students in baccalaureate programs would also benefit by scaffolding of general education courses from the lower division to upper division work if a 21 credit general education requirement was approved for the first two years of study. Students in baccalaureate programs would maintain the 30 credit requirement for general education over four years in order to allow baccalaureate degree-granting campuses to develop and/or continue the practice of local general education requirements that are specific to campus mission or preference. This may encourage students to add a minor or major, allow for the integration of general education into the major, provide general education that builds on students’ previous knowledge, or allow students to engage in more critical thinking, analysis and communication skills. Expanding the timeframe to complete the additional nine credits in general education demonstrates the ‘scaffolding’ that is presented as a best practice in the Chronicle report (page 15).

The disadvantages of such a reduction of credits in the first two years may include the fact that students would arrive at their baccalaureate granting institution without having completed
their general education requirements. Thirty credits are currently guaranteed for transfer which if reduced, may impact the number of accepted credits at a receiving institution.

**Option B) Zero Credits of general education:** The credit requirement might be removed leaving only the 7 category requirement in place. In this scenario, seven courses would be the default requirement for campuses that retain a course-based general education program. It’s unclear what the consequences might be for the elimination of a credit hour requirement.

The advantages to this approach may be that maximum innovation would be supported for a campus that chooses to move to competency based general education outcomes. The State Education Department and Middle States do not require a credit-based general education framework. Baccalaureate programs with a need for a high number of credits may be advantaged with this approach because eliminating general education credit requirements might enable fusion of general education competencies into courses in the major.

The disadvantages to this approach may facilitate a ‘race to the bottom’. If campuses are motivated to further reduce general education requirements (with no credit minimum) and several competencies are achieved with only a few completed courses, then even more room is available for students to explore. But if those students are ill-advised, they might take courses that don’t transfer. Additionally, the removal of a credit hour requirement only harms students who transfer from a credit-based system in that they are released from taking general education courses that currently support their successful transfer. Credits will still be the basis of a transcript even if general education is achieved through infused competencies. Lastly, critics of a 0 credit requirement submit that the way the general education learning outcomes are written (and will need to be revised) already enables competency based general education.

**Option C) Maintain the 30 credit requirement:** This option maintains the 30 credit requirement because some argue that it facilitates transfer within the SUNY system.

Those who prefer the 30 credit requirement believe we could be creating challenges for students who arrive at their receiving transfer institution without their general education completed (with 21 credits as proposed in option A). A reduction of SUNY General Education credits in the first two years may impact the number of credits that are guaranteed to transfer from sending colleges to the receiving colleges. Currently, requiring 30 credits of SUNY General Education courses in the first two years as well as the SUNY Transfer Path courses (when completed) may have provided substantial transfer remedies since the passage of the Seamless Transfer policy in 2012.

The disadvantage to maintaining the 30 credit requirement is that it does not facilitate the innovation at the campus level that we set out to accomplish when we began this work. Most members of the Working Group want to encourage campus experimentation within the framework of the SUNY General Education competencies and categories. If the number of
credits is not lifted in the first two years of study, general education cannot be integrated into the major and many baccalaureate degree-granting institutions will continue to grow their local general education requirements in order to link their general education program with mission-specific courses/competencies. Lastly, community colleges expect equity in the potential of achieving the same innovation in their general education programs that is already provided to the baccalaureate degree-granting campuses. This equity is prohibited in the current framework.

5. Scientific Reasoning is a required competency that students must fulfill for the Middle States general education program. In order to facilitate its completion, SUNY should require scientific reasoning as part of the SUNY General Education Program.

6. Each campus will determine whether and how to infuse Middle States competency categories such as diversity and ethical reasoning.

7. A review of all category learning outcomes will be conducted and revised as deemed necessary. This process and timeline will be defined by the Provost’s advisory committee on general education and should culminate in an endorsement of said process by the UFS and FCCC. The learning outcomes should be written in a way so as to enable but not compel competency based learning outcomes. We advise the Task Force to particularly examine revisions that allow for a more explicitly stated diversity category, as well as a consideration as to whether a distinction of oral communication from written communication should be made in the Communications category.

8. Courses currently approved for General Education shall continue as approved courses. As courses are updated at the campus level according to the revised learning outcomes, campus general education courses may be replaced or eliminated (with an effective date three years from the policy’s approval). This will allow for a phase-in of new courses over time.

9. In order to maintain the integrity of the adopted general education categories, we submit that a general education course may not be used to meet more than two categories of general education.

10. System Administration will determine a means to document and transcribe courses deemed to meet infused categories so they are transferable across and between campuses.

11. System Administration will encourage campus creativity and innovation. More important, perhaps, than an innovative revision of SUNY requirements is the creation of an open field for campuses to tailor local programs for individual campus conditions and traditions. While revising SUNY mandates to eliminate unnecessary restrictions, the system should work to be a resource for education and development of innovative general education programs at the campus level. To encourage campus creativity in general education programming, the System should support statewide and regional conferences, incentive grants, communities of practice,
conversations in the discipline, and open-access publications. Resources should also be made available to facilitate this work. This future, on-going role of the SUNY System in supporting innovation in general education will involve sharing examples of innovative general education models.

**General Education in AAS and AOS Degree Programs**

SUNY policy requires General Education at the Associate level in AA and AS degrees only. In Memorandum to Presidents Vol 11, No. 1 (p. 4) AAS degrees are also encouraged to include as much of the SUNY general education requirement as possible, “especially if a program tends to transfer significant numbers of students or graduates to SUNY baccalaureate programs.” The New York State Education Department requires a minimum of 20 credits of Liberal Arts in an AAS degree and no liberal arts credits in an AOS degree (See this link: http://www.nysed.gov/college-university-evaluation/department-expectations-curriculum.) Although Liberal Arts and SUNY General Education content may be similar, there are some distinct differences. Studio art courses, for example, may count toward the SUNY GER in the category of The Arts, but according to SED policy, may not be counted toward the liberal arts requirements of a degree program. Careful consideration of a course’s learning outcomes, may additionally provide insight into whether a course with a typically Non-Liberal Arts designation may lend itself to either a Liberal Arts designation or a SUNY GER designation. For example, a Business course with a substantial focus on ethics, or oral and written communication might be approvable for either general education and/or Liberal Arts.

It seems clear, then, that neither SUNY nor SED requires AOS degrees to have general education content. AAS degrees are notable in that, by SUNY policy, they are not expected to meet the full SUNY GER requirement. For Middle States, however, this expectation is substantially different for both AAS and AOS degrees. According to the Commission’s senior Vice President Dr. Robert Schneider, “...general education applies to all degree programs offered by an institution.” He goes on to convey that, “the standard itself does not mention numbers of credits, much less “courses”--it mentions proficiencies: ‘The institution’s curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency.1’ ... These competencies do not need to be taught in separate stand-alone courses; rather, they can be embedded in the A.O.S. curriculum in ways that are integrated within the content of each specific program. While this may present a bit of a challenge, it is (and always has been) the intent of the Gen Ed standard.... So, the Commission does not require general education courses or even, in the end, general education credits. It requires that students acquire and demonstrate certain

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1 The communication referenced here was based on the Characteristics of Excellence, which were revised and adopted in 2014. The new Standards add information literacy to the list of proficiencies. The study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives are referenced in both sets of standards, and are not required of all institutions and programs, but are indicated as appropriate for inclusion depending on institutional mission.
proficiencies. How they acquire them and how the proficiencies are assessed is up to the institution.”
(Dr. Robert Schneider MSCHE.)

In endeavoring to support SUNY institutions in meeting Middle States expectations, the Work Group recommends that guidance be provided that clarifies how these expectations may be met despite limitations on Liberal Arts course content in these two types of degree programs.

**Next Steps**

The members of the General Education Working Group look forward to the next phase of revising SUNY's general education policies for our current and future students. We hope our recommendations will be thoroughly considered by the Provost's advisory committee on general education, knowing these recommendations are coming from a faculty-led group of committed scholars, instructors and practitioners who have many years of experience in the classroom and in advising SUNY’s students.

The SUNY General Education Working Group consisted of these members:
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