About this Report
Inspired by the 2019 Dallas Herring Lecture delivered by Dr. Sanford C. “Sandy” Sugart on Tuesday, December 3, 2019, this report is a part of a series that will address critical issues of transfer in North Carolina. The Belk Center’s research team, graduate faculty, and doctoral students jointly explore and propose solutions to problems of practice relating to transfer pathways.

About the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research
With a $10.86 million grant from the John M. Belk Endowment, the NC State College of Education established the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research to enhance and strengthen its support of community colleges in North Carolina. The Belk Center seeks to develop and sustain exceptional community college leaders who are committed to advancing college access, the social and economic mobility of their colleges’ students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center conducts and disseminates research to address current and emerging student success challenges facing community college leaders and policymakers in North Carolina and beyond.

Advisory Board: John Fink, Keith Witham

About The John M. Belk Endowment
Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, the John M. Belk Endowment is a private family foundation committed to transforming postsecondary educational opportunities to meet North Carolina’s evolving workforce needs. Its mission is aligned with the vision of its founder, the late John M. Belk who served four terms as mayor of Charlotte and was CEO of the department store company Belk, Inc. He created the John M. Belk Endowment in 1995 to fund a national merit scholarship program for his beloved alma mater, Davidson College. Now led by Mr. Belk’s daughter, MC Belk Pilon, the John M. Belk Endowment staff and board continue to partner with innovative, results-oriented programs in North Carolina to further Mr. Belk’s values, legacy, and focus on the value of education as a means to personal fulfillment and community vitality.

For more information, please visit http://jmbendowment.org.

Acknowledgements
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Abstract

In 2014, the North Carolina Board of Governors approved revisions to the state’s Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA). The research summarized in this report explores the impact of these revisions on three key outcomes among community college transfer students: bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and accumulation of excess credits at graduation. Our results suggest an overall positive impact of the CAA on both bachelor’s degree completion and the reduction of excess credits. These results serve as a reminder that it is possible to advance transfer student success through reforms to policy and practice. At the same time, while the CAA is an important component of statewide transfer policy conversations, it should not be seen as the sole solution to the many barriers to bachelor’s degree completion that transfer students face.
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Executive Summary

The research summarized in this report explores the impact of the 2014 revised Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) on three key outcomes among transfer students: bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and accumulation of excess credits at graduation.

These outcomes have important implications for both individual students and the state as a whole. Students who take longer to complete a degree or who take additional credits beyond what is required to complete a bachelor’s degree not only face the upfront cost of paying for extra courses but also incur opportunity cost from delaying their entry into the workforce. Moreover, slowed or lack of degree production is not in alignment with the needs of the labor market in North Carolina. It is in the state’s best interest to ensure that transfer students complete their bachelor’s degrees and do so in a timely fashion so that they can fill positions in North Carolina’s quickly expanding, knowledge-focused job market.

Our results suggest that the revised CAA was successful in both increasing the likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion and reducing the number of excess credits among students who completed CAA qualifying degree programs. While bachelor’s degree completion among transfer students at public four-year institutions in the state is decreasing overall, we found that the CAA mitigated this decline to an extent for students who earned an Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree prior to transfer. Indeed, our results point to an approximate 3-5% increase in the likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion among these students after the CAA revisions. Regarding excess credits, our results indicated that after the CAA revisions, students transferring with an AA or AS degree experienced a 12-29% decrease in excess credit accumulation. However, the CAA revisions were not associated with a reduction in time to degree among qualifying transfer students. Indeed, our results suggested that students who earned an AA or an AS degree prior to transferring to a four-year UNC institution took between half a semester to a whole semester longer to graduate after the CAA revisions were implemented.

Overall, our results suggest a positive impact of the CAA on the likelihood of success among North Carolina community college transfer students. At the same time, we recognize that the CAA is but one component among many necessary to strengthen transfer in our state. For example, the CAA does not focus support on students who earn Applied Associate of Science (AAS) degrees even though the rate of transfer among this student population has increased dramatically in recent years. Moreover, lack of completion among community college transfer students seeking bachelor’s degrees has long-lasting negative consequences for both students and the state. We discuss potential reasons for this decline in this report. In addition, transfer agreements support only those students who actually transfer rather than the large percentage of students who intend to transfer but never do. The positive effects of the CAA, summarized in this report, serve as a reminder that it is possible to advance transfer student success through reforms to policy and practice. At the same time, while the CAA is an important component of statewide transfer policy conversations, it should not be seen as the sole solution to the many barriers to bachelor’s degree completion that transfer students face.
In 2014, the North Carolina Board of Governors approved revisions to the already-established Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA), which is designed to ease transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. This policy represents one step in supporting the transfer pathway for students. The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and University of North Carolina (UNC) System are required by North Carolina General Statute to conduct biannual joint reviews of the CAA to ensure the agreement is “fair, current, and relevant for all students and institutions” (Annual Report, 2019). This report builds on the joint review and examines the effect of the revised CAA on three key student outcomes: bachelor’s degree completion among community college students who transfer to public four-year institutions in the state and time to degree and excess credit earning among transfer students who subsequently completed a bachelor’s degree. Our results suggest that the revised CAA was successful in both increasing bachelor’s degree completion among transfer students and reducing the number of excess credits for graduates enrolled in CAA qualifying degree programs [Associate of Arts (AA) and Associate of Science (AS)]. However, the policy was not associated with a reduction in time to degree among these students.

Transfer in the state of North Carolina has increased by almost 250% in the past 20 years (D’Amico & Chapman, 2019). Although this pathway to a four-year degree is a popular choice among North Carolina students, researchers and practitioners alike question the extent to which cost is reduced by starting at a community college (Belfield, Fink, & Jenkins, 2017). That is, community college students who successfully transfer and complete a four-year degree may face penalties compared with their peers who started their studies at a four-year institution, such as accumulation of excess credits and increased time to degree (Cullinane, 2014; Xu, Jaggars, Fletcher, & Fink, 2018).

Indeed, when transfer pathways are not well articulated, the potential financial savings that a student might enjoy by choosing the community college as a starting point to a four-year degree may be lost (Belfield, Fink, & Jenkins, 2017). The goal of North Carolina’s CAA revision was to ease transfer between public two-year and four-year institutions in the state by creating efficiencies that would reduce excess credits earned and time to degree.

Background
The revised CAA includes four key components intended to improve the transfer process from North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) institutions to University of North Carolina (UNC) System institutions:

1. agreed-upon guaranteed transfer of certain general education courses from any NCCCS institution to any UNC System institution;

2. a requirement of all UNC System institutions to publish four-year degree plans with courses mapped to course offerings at NCCCS institutions;

3. a suggestion for all NCCCS students intending to transfer to select their planned transfer major prior to completing 30 hours of coursework; and

4. guaranteed 60 transferable credit hours to a UNC System institution for all NCCCS students who complete a transfer associate’s degree, Associate in Arts (AA) or Associate in Science (AS) (North Carolina Community College System, 2014).

The updated policy changes were implemented across all institutions in the fall 2014 semester. Only students who earn a transfer associate’s degree, defined as an AA or AS, are eligible for the benefits under the CAA. (See Annual Report on the CAA to The Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee for additional background information.)

Students’ outcomes, especially bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and excess credit earning, have important implications for both individual students and the state as a whole. Students who take longer to complete a degree or who take additional credits beyond what they would need to complete a bachelor’s degree not only face the upfront cost of paying for extra courses but also incur opportunity cost from delaying their entry into the workforce.

Students who do not complete a degree invest time and money into education with nothing to show for it in the end. Moreover, slowed or lack of degree production is not in alignment with the needs of the labor market in North Carolina. North Carolina legislators, educators, business leaders, and others recognize the urgency of having a well-trained workforce to fill anticipated jobs in high demand fields and have embarked on a statewide attainment goal to increase the number of North Carolinians with a high quality postsecondary credential to 2 million by 2030. It is in the state’s best interest to ensure that transfer students complete their bachelor’s degrees and do so in a timely fashion so that they can fill positions in North Carolina’s quickly expanding, knowledge-focused job market.
To assess the impact of the revised CAA on students’ outcomes—**bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and excess credit accumulation**—we used a difference-in-differences analytic approach, explained in-depth in Appendix A. In our analyses, we compared transfer students who earned one of the CAA-qualifying degrees (AA/AS) with those who transferred without earning one of those degrees.

Our general dataset included information from students who transferred from an NCCCS institution to a UNC System institution between Fall 2010 and Spring 2019. However, we used a different subset of this dataset to examine each of our outcomes of interest, given the nature of the outcome.

To examine bachelor’s degree completion, our dataset was limited to students who transferred between Fall 2010 and Fall 2017 (N=74,436) because, under the revised CAA, students should be able to enter the four-year institution and graduate in two years. Limiting our dataset in this way allowed students at least two years to graduate. Because time to degree inherently only applies to bachelor’s degree completers, we limited the dataset to students who both transferred between Fall 2010 and Spring 2019 and graduated with a bachelor’s degree (N=33,663) to examine this outcome.

Finally, the dataset examining excess credit accumulation included students who transferred between Fall 2010 and Fall 2017 and who subsequently graduated within three years of transferring (N=19,886). This final subset allowed us to explore excess credit accumulation among students who completed bachelor’s degrees but may have taken longer than two years to graduate.
Table 1 above provides specific definitions of our three outcomes. Demographic characteristics of each sample can be found in Appendix B.

We analyzed the impact of the revised CAA on these outcomes in two years: 2014 and 2016. We chose these two years to account for policy uptake during the year the CAA revisions were implemented (2014) and to observe differences in outcomes two years after the policy had been implemented (2016), with the idea in mind that students might need time to take advantage of the CAA.

Table 1
Outcome Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree completion</td>
<td>Either a student completed a bachelor’s degree or did not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time to degree</td>
<td>Number of semesters between transfer and graduation¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excess credit accumulation</td>
<td>Number of credits earned beyond those required to earn a typical bachelor’s degree (120 credits)²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ For our purposes, we considered each academic year to consist of three semesters: fall, spring, and summer.
² 120 credits was chosen as the cutoff point for this measure of excess credit accumulation since it is the standard minimum number of credits required for a bachelor’s degree; however, there are some degree programs that require more than 120 credits for students to complete their degrees. While we did control for major in our analyses, we also ran analyses with the cutoff points at 126 and 128 to ensure that our analyses were not affected by longer degree programs. We found that the estimates only changed slightly using these different cutoff points, and all cutoff points reflected reduced excess credits.
The results of our analyses for each outcome variable are summarized individually in this section. All of the results presented here were statistically significant at a standard level ($p<.05$ or less).

**Bachelor’s Degree Completion**

Figure 1 summarizes bachelor’s degree completion rates for each year in our dataset. In this figure, and all subsequent figures, the blue line represents transfer students who qualified for full protection of the CAA; those who earned AA and AS degrees prior to transfer. The yellow line refers to all other students, such as those who earned another kind of associate’s degree prior to transfer [e.g., an applied Associate of Science (AAS) degree] or those who did not earn a credential at all prior to transfer. We provide potential explanations for these decreases in bachelor’s degree completion over time in Section 3 of this report.

While similar negative trends in bachelor’s degree completion are observed among students who were able to take advantage of the CAA and those who were not, degree completion rates were consistently higher over time for transfer students who earned an AA or an AS degree prior to transfer. The results of our analyses indicated that the revised CAA had a positive impact on bachelor’s degree completion among students who transferred with qualifying associate’s degrees, as summarized in Figure 2.

Specifically, when we considered policy implementation in 2014 (the blue arrow), the likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion among students who earned an AA or AS prior to transfer increased by approximately 3%. A larger increase, approximately 5%, was observed when we considered policy implementation in 2016 (the yellow arrow).

These results suggest that while bachelor’s degree completion rates were decreasing over time in general among community college transfer students, this decrease would potentially have been even greater for students who transferred under the CAA in the absence of the policy.
Figure 1.
Annual Bachelor’s Degree Completion Rates among Transfer Students at UNC System Institutions Before and After the Revised CAA (N=74,436)

Figure 2.
Increases in Bachelor’s Degree Completion among AA/AS-earning Transfer Students who Graduated from UNC System Institutions After the Revised CAA
Time to Degree

Figure 3 summarizes average time to degree among students in our dataset. This figure illustrates similar patterns for CAA-qualifying students and their non-qualifying counterparts in that time to degree for both groups has decreased over time, especially in recent years.

In 2016, CAA-qualifying students took, on average, almost an entire semester longer to graduate.
However, while in years prior to the revised CAA, students who did not earn an AA or AS prior to transfer took longer on average to earn a bachelor’s degree compared with their AA/AS-earning counterparts, after 2016, we see that CAA-qualifying students began to take longer to complete their degrees.

Results of our statistical models regarding time to degree are summarized in Figure 4. Our results indicated that after the 2014 revision to the CAA, students who qualified for its protections took around half a semester longer on average to graduate compared with students who did not qualify for the CAAs protections. This increased average time to degree was even larger when we considered a delayed effect for the policy. In 2016, CAA-qualifying students took, on average, almost an entire semester longer to graduate.

**Increase in Number of Semesters Needed to Graduate**

![Graph showing increase in time to degree among AA/AS-earning transfer students who graduated from UNC System Institutions after the revised CAA.](image-url)

*Figure 4. Increases in Time to Degree among AA/AS-earning Transfer Students who Graduated from UNC System Institutions After the Revised CAA*
Excess Credit Accumulation

Figure 5 summarizes average credits in excess of 120 for the students in our dataset over time. While excess credits appear to be decreasing for both students impacted by the CAA and those not impacted, this decline is steeper for students covered by the CAA.

Our statistical analyses confirmed that students experienced significant benefits from the 2014 CAA revision regarding excess credit accumulation.

As shown in Figure 5, students who transferred to a four-year college in 2014 graduated with 12% fewer credits past 120 compared with those who transferred at the same time and were not enrolled in CAA-qualifying degrees. Students who earned CAA-qualifying associate’s degrees and transferred to a four-year college in 2016 graduated with 29% fewer credits past 120 than those in other degree pathways.
Figure 5.  
Average Number of Credits in Excess of 120 among Transfer Students who Graduated from UNC System Institutions Before and After the Revised CAA (N=19,886)

Figure 6.  
Percent Reduction in Excess Credits Over 120

Reductions in Excess Credit Accumulation among AA/AS-earning Transfer Students who Graduated from UNC System Institutions After the Revised CAA
Given the recentness of the CAA in 2014, it is encouraging that we found significant results in our research. The students in our dataset took the majority—if not all—of their community college coursework before the CAA revisions. In all cases, our results show a stronger impact of the revised CAA in 2016 compared with 2014, suggesting a delayed impact of the policy. Specifically, we found that the revised CAA both increases students’ likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion and reduces the number of excess credits that they accumulate at graduation. However, it also appears to increase students’ time to degree.

While these results at first glance appear to be contradictory, it is possible that the CAA revisions resulted in a shift in the demographic characteristics of students who transferred to four-year institutions in North Carolina. Such a shift may have resulted in more part-time students transferring. These students would benefit from the revised CAA in terms of excess credit reduction and increased likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion all while contributing to an increase in the average time to degree among bachelor’s degree completers in the state. The data used for this investigation did not include full- and part-time enrollment status.

Time to degree is also related to availability and scheduling of courses. Part of ensuring seamless transfer requires needed courses to be offered in a schedule that accommodates/supports transfer. This impact of the revised CAA has important economic implications for both students and the state.

Future research is needed to further explore these and other possible explanations for why the revised CAA resulted in an increase in average time to degree. Our findings otherwise indicate that the revised CAA has a positive impact on both bachelor’s degree completion and reduction of excess credits.

This impact of the revised CAA has important economic implications for both students and the state. Clearly, an increased likelihood of bachelor’s degree
completion is good for students economically. Recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that median earnings for individuals with a bachelor’s degree in North Carolina are around $47,000 annually—over $10,000 more than individuals with some college or an associate’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Economic benefits also derive from a reduction in the number of excess credits that students accumulate at graduation. Students in our dataset who transferred to the four-year college with CAA-qualifying degrees before 2014 earned, on average, 138 credits at graduation—that is, 18 excess credits. Those who graduated after the policy was implemented earned an average of 133 credits—that is, 13 excess credits.

We saw a similar reduction in excess credits when we considered policy implementation in 2016. Students who transferred to the four-year college before 2016 graduated with an average of 137 credits—17 excess credits—and those who transferred after 2016 graduated with an average of 131 credits—11 excess credits.

While these decreases in the average number of credits earned at graduation may seem small, a reduction of five or six excess credits has surprisingly large financial implications for students. For example, taking six additional credits at the most expensive UNC System institution, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in 2019 would cost a student upwards of $2,700 (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019). The state of North Carolina also benefits from the impacts of the revised CAA. With projected job growth at 23.8% in fields that require a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 11.6% and 10.2% in fields that require an associate’s degree or non-degree credential, respectively (Tippet & Stanford, 2019), increased bachelor’s degree production helps the state of North Carolina to fulfill the needs of an economy that relies increasingly on a more educated workforce.

In sum, data suggests that the revised CAA increases the likelihood of bachelor’s degree completion and reduces excess credits among students who earn either an AA or an AS at a North Carolina community college and who then subsequently transfer to a public four-year institution. Yet, the CAA is one component among many necessary to strengthen transfer in our state among all students. For example, the CAA does not focus support on students who earn AAS degrees. This point is especially crucial, because, over the past 30 years, transfer rates for students with degrees other than an AA or AS (such as the AAS) have increased at a higher rate than AA or AS transfer. AA and AS transfer has increased by 118%, while the transfer rate for students with other associate’s degrees has increased by 134% (D’Amico & Chapman, 2019).

Particularly worrisome in our results is the continued decrease in bachelor’s degree completion rates among community college transfer students in North Carolina, as illustrated in Figure 1, even after the CAA revision. Such a situation certainly is a
call to action for leaders at both community colleges and public four-year institutions alike as well as state-level policymakers.

Lack of completion among community college transfer students seeking bachelor’s degrees has long-lasting negative consequences for both students and the state. In addition, transfer agreements support only those who actually transfer rather than the large percentage of students who intend to transfer but never do. While it is estimated that around 80% of community college students have plans to transfer to a four-year institution (Horn & Weko, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008), only around 24% of first-time North Carolinian community college students transfer to a four-year institution within six years, and of these students, only around 40% complete a bachelor’s degree (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2017). The positive effects of the CAA, summarized in this report, serve as a reminder that it is possible to advance transfer student success through reforms to policy and practice. The NCCCS and UNC System have developed multiple systems to support transfer in North Carolina while the TAC supports individual institutions with information and strategies to continue to improve the transfer process. The CAA is an important component of statewide transfer policy conversations, but it should not be seen as the sole solution to the many barriers to bachelor’s degree completion that transfer students face.
References


Appendix A

Difference-in-Differences Method

In quantitative evaluations of policies or programs, researchers seek to understand the effects of an intervention (in our case, the CAA revision) on an outcome or series of outcomes (in our case, bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and excess credit accumulation). To understand the true effects of the intervention, researchers are tasked with separating out the influence of other factors from the effect of interest (in our case, the CAA revision) on the outcomes of interest. One way to separate out the effects of other factors from the true effects of the intervention is through random assignment of individuals (students, in our case) to treatment and control groups (that is, some students would, at random, be covered by the protections of the CAA while others would not). This would ensure that the makeup of the treatment and control groups are similar, which allows the researcher to isolate the effect of the intervention without concern that the composition of the groups will mask the treatment effect.

Random assignment to treatment and control groups in this study was not possible or, for that matter, ethical; therefore, we utilized a difference-in-differences (DID) analytic approach, which offers us a way to estimate what would have happened to our treatment group (students who benefitted from the CAA) had the CAA not been implemented (Khandker, Koolwal, & Samad, 2010). DID compares the treated and control groups before and after policy implementation by subtracting the difference in the treatment group outcome variable (denoted by $t$) from the control group outcome variable (denoted by $c$), before (denoted by 0) and after the intervention (denoted by 1), as in the following equation:

$$DID = (Y_{t1} - Y_{c1}) - (Y_{t0} - Y_{c0})$$

Assuming that differences between the groups are stable over time, this calculation isolates the effect of the intervention on the treated (Murnane & Willett, 2011). Below is a graphical representation of DID, using excess credit accumulation as an example. The dotted vertical line denotes the CAA policy implementation, the red line represents credits at graduation for those with CAA-qualifying degrees and the grey line is credits for those without CAA-qualifying degrees. The dotted red line represents the treatment groups’ credits at graduation had the CAA not been passed and the solid red line shows their actual credits. The difference between the dotted and solid red lines are the effect of the CAA on excess credit accumulation.
Our study used regression to estimate our DID models so that we could incorporate control variables, namely a student’s race/ethnicity and gender, whether a student transferred from a rural community college, whether a student received a Pell Grant, whether a student majored in a STEM field, and whether a student earned AP or IB credits in high school. Our regression models took the following form:

$$Y_{ist} = \beta_1 Post + \beta_2 CAA + \beta_3 Post \times CAA + \gamma X_i + \delta X_s + \epsilon_{ist}$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)$$

where $Y_{ist}$ represents our outcomes (bachelor’s degree completion, time to degree, and excess credit accumulation) for $i$ student following $s$ transfer pathway during $t$ semester. The coefficient $\beta_3$ on the $Post \times CAA$ interaction term estimates the effect of CAA implementation for those students who transferred from a NCCCS institution with an AA or AS transfer degree. $\gamma X_i$ represents student-level covariates, and $\delta X_s$ are transfer pathway fixed effects. Our models clustered standard errors at the four-year institution level. The models included in this report employ propensity score weighting to account for the non-equivalence of treatment and control groups in our sample.

### Appendix B

**Demographic Characteristics of Each Sample (Percentages)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Bachelor's Degree Completion</th>
<th>Time to Degree</th>
<th>Excess Credits Over 120</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Race</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended Rural Community College</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received Pell Grant</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>74,436</strong></td>
<td><strong>33,663</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,886</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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