

# Factors Influencing Senior Athletic Training Students' Preparedness to Enter the Workforce

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**Context:** Athletic training education programs must provide the student with opportunities to learn the roles and responsibilities of the athletic trainer.

**Objective:** Investigate factors that help prepare the athletic training student (ATS) to successfully enter the workplace upon graduation from her undergraduate program.

**Design:** Exploratory qualitative study using phone interviews.

**Setting:** Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education–accredited programs.

**Patients or Other Participants:** Twenty-six interviews were conducted with ATSs (7 men, 19 women) who were pursuing an athletic training position postgraduation.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed utilizing the specific procedures of grounded theory. Trustworthiness of the data was established by using 2 specific strategies, including (1) member checks and (2) multiple analyst triangulation.

**Results:** Two themes emerged from the data explaining the ATS level of preparedness, as they got ready to assume a position in the athletic training workforce: diversified clinical experience along with strong mentorship.

**Conclusions:** Athletic training educators need to promote the mentorship relationship between the ATS and clinical instructor as it helps the ATSs gain self-confidence in their clinical abilities. Moreover, by providing variety in clinical experiences the ATS can gain a holistic impression of the field, thus gaining an appreciation for the varying roles within each clinical setting while developing clinical competence and confidence.

**Key Words:** Mentorship, diversity, socialization

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# Factors Influencing Senior Athletic Training Students' Preparedness to Enter the Workforce

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## INTRODUCTION

Athletic training programs (ATPs) are charged with the mission of providing a comprehensive academic and clinical experience to help the athletic training student (ATS) create a strong foundation for a career in athletic training. Each ATP has the autonomy to provide these experiences, but fundamentally the practice is similar and capitalizes on the process of professional socialization. Professional socialization is the process whereby the ATS is introduced to and educated about the roles and responsibilities of the profession of athletic training<sup>1,2</sup> and has been thought to shape one's perceptions of the profession.<sup>1-3</sup> Professional socialization is an ongoing process but can be viewed as 3 separate phases: (1) recruitment, (2) professional or anticipatory, and (3) organizational.<sup>1-3</sup> The first phase typically occurs before formal admission into a degree program and involves the aspiring student evaluating the requirements necessary for the career she has selected. The second phase involves the student learning the roles and responsibilities of her intended career through planned, supervised educational experiences. This process helps the student develop and appreciate the skills, values, attitudes, and norms of behavior of her career.<sup>1,2</sup> The final stage occurs once the individual has entered the workforce and essentially receives on-the-job training regarding the specific responsibilities associated with her position and clinical setting. This process can be either formal or informal but is often much more informal and involves the practitioner learning through her daily work experiences rather than through formal orientation.<sup>2</sup>

The professional preparation phase (also referred to as *pre-service* or *anticipatory*) has begun to garner some attention in the athletic training literature.<sup>3-5</sup> Clinical education experiences appear to be a critical factor in the professional preparation for the ATS, as they provide the chance to gain a real-time assessment of the professional roles of the athletic trainer. A very important socializing agent in this experience is the mentorship relationship forged between the ATS and the preceptor. This relationship allows the ATS to anticipate future professional roles through continual feedback, ongoing dialogue, support, and being challenged to pursue his or her own professional goals.<sup>6</sup> Klossner<sup>3</sup> found that the second-year ATS needs to develop relationships with preceptors, peers, patients, and coaches in order to gain a sense of legitimation. Legitimation, the process of being accepted within a role, is crucial in the preprofessional development of the ATS, as it allows her to gain self-confidence in her clinical abilities as she develops skill competence and, in a sense, is formally inducted into her professional role.

The decision to choose a career in and remain in the profession of athletic training is often influenced by mentorship received during the preprofessional training for the ATS.<sup>5,7,8</sup> In 2 separate studies<sup>7,8</sup> support and mentorship from ATP faculty and preceptors has been shown to influence the recent graduate to enter the workforce upon graduation from

an ATP. Despite this information, there is a paucity of literature on what factors have an effect on the ATS's readiness to handle the responsibilities of a full-time athletic trainer after making the decision to pursue a position as an athletic trainer. Our study was designed to expand the existing literature<sup>1-5,9,10</sup> on the professional socialization process for the ATSs. Specifically, our purpose of this study was to investigate, utilizing the socialization framework, what factors during the professional preparation phase help prepare the ATS to enter the workforce upon graduation. Armed with this information, the ATP can continue to make programmatic changes to better prepare ATSs for careers in athletic training.

## METHODS

### Methodological Design

This descriptive research study investigated the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of ATSs related to a variety of aspects of their professional preparation, including their readiness to assume a career as an athletic trainer. Utilizing an exploratory approach, but borrowing from the grounded theory methodology and principles, the researchers were interested in determining what factors influenced preparedness to enter the workforce. Grounded theory permitted the researchers the opportunity to understand the perceptions and needs of a particular group as they are socialized into their professional roles.<sup>11,12</sup> Specifically, the authors were concerned with uncovering which factors during academic preparation influenced the ATSs' feelings of preparedness as impending employment approached. Moreover, the qualitative research method paradigm is most appropriate when investigating how an individual's environment shapes his perceptions of a particular construct.<sup>13</sup> In this particular case the focus was the ATSs' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes as they prepared to enter into the athletic training workforce.

### Participant Recruitment

Senior ATSs enrolled in Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE)-accredited were recruited for participation. All were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling by directly contacting program directors (PDs) at CAATE-accredited programs. The PDs were asked to forward (via e-mail) the recruitment materials to all their ATSs who meet the eligibility criteria outlined in the e-mail letter. At the outset of the study, the researchers developed inclusionary criteria, including seniors graduating in May of 2011, who were sitting for the certification exam and planning on working in the profession of athletic training next year (graduate assistantship, internship, full-time position). If the ATS was interested in participating in the study, she contacted one of the researchers directly, and data collection procedures were initiated. This resulted in a sample of 26 ATSs, and upon data analysis, it was concluded that data saturation was obtained and that additional participant recruitment was not necessary.

**Table 1. Individual Participant Information**

Name	Age, y	Gender	Postgraduation Decision
Dave	21	M	Graduate school
Tammy	21	F	Internship
Amy	22	F	Graduate school
Jamie	22	F	Graduate school
Nicole	23	F	Graduate school
Karen	21	F	Graduate school
Mark	23	F	Graduate school
Kate	23	F	Full-time position [high school]
Dawn	23	F	Graduate school
Brett	21	M	Full-time position [high school]
Sam	22	F	Graduate school
John	21	M	Graduate school
Ashby	21	F	Graduate school
Claire	21	F	Graduate school
Laurie	22	F	Graduate school
Betty	22	F	Graduate school
Payton	23	F	Graduate school
Chase	23	M	Graduate school
McKenna	21	F	Graduate school
Keira	22	F	Graduate school
Ryan	22	M	Graduate school
Nate	21	M	Full-time position [high school]
Lily	22	F	Full-time position [high school]
Taylor	22	F	Graduate school
Hillary	22	F	Internship
Kinsley	22	F	Graduate school

Abbreviations: M, male; F, female

## Participants

Twenty-six interviews were conducted with ATSs (7 men, 19 women) who were pursuing an athletic training position postgraduation. The average age of the participants was  $22 \pm 1$  years. Twenty-two of the participants were planning to enroll in graduate school with an associated clinical assistantship, while the remaining students planned to assume a full-time position either at the high school level or the collegiate level via a 1-year internship. Table 1 provides individual data for the participants. All names are pseudonyms.

## Data Collection Procedures

Before data collection occurred, the study received institutional review board approval from both the University of Connecticut and Boston University. Senior athletic training students completed consent forms before enrollment, as well as a background questionnaire form. The background questionnaire form included closed-ended questions regarding basic demographic information (age, graduation school information, etc) and was used as a means to identify each participant and distinguishing factors.

Once the background information form was submitted to the researchers, a semistructured interview was scheduled with the ATS. The interview guide was developed by the researchers to answer the research questions posed at the outset of the study. A semistructured format was selected to allow the researchers to remain consistent with questioning but also to capitalize on the freedom to have participants extrapolate on information shared during the interviews.<sup>14</sup> Communication during the

data collection process was ongoing between the researchers to ensure consistency in the interviewing process.

Senior ATSs were asked a variety of open-ended questions regarding their perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the profession as well as their thoughts about their undergraduate programs, their career choices, and their future plans (Table 2). The interview guide was developed by the researchers for the purposes of this study and was based on the socialization framework<sup>1-4</sup> and clinical education literature.<sup>6-8</sup> Before data collection occurred, the interview guide was reviewed by 1 peer with knowledge of the socialization process for the ATS and was then piloted with 2 senior ATSs. Two additional questions were developed as a result of this process (see Table 2) and were only further supported once data collection was initiated. The data collected during the pilot process was not included in the final presentation. The interview sessions lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, were conducted over the phone, and were recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes.

## Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed utilizing the specific procedures of grounded theory, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin.<sup>12</sup> Grounded theory is a systematic approach to data analysis, with a specific set of hierarchical procedures, including (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, and (3) selective coding.<sup>11</sup> The authors also capitalized on the

**Table 2. Select Interview Guide Questions**

Topic	Interview Guide Questions
Challenges in early career	What most attracts you to a career in athletic training? Please describe the roles and responsibilities of an athletic trainer. What are your opinions of the athletic training profession? How did you arrive at this assessment? <sup>a</sup> What challenges do you believe you will face early on in your career?
Experiences in undergraduate program	Describe the mentorship you received during your academic studies. What influence did it have on your professional development? <sup>a</sup> Was there one major influence during your academic studies that has led you to your selected career path? Reflect back: has anyone served as a role model? Describe the role they played in your development and why you viewed them as a role model. <sup>a</sup> Was there one major factor that has influenced your willingness to accept the role of an entry-level athletic trainer? <sup>a</sup> Has your academic schooling prepared you for your professional goals? Please explain your response.

<sup>a</sup> Follow-up questions posed by researchers during interview process. Questions not included in initial interview guide but included after the pilot study and during data collection.



concept of “memoing” during the interview process and analysis process to help register key concepts being formulated as the study progressed. During the coding process, the authors took a very general approach by identifying single thoughts or words with common meanings. Labels were assigned to the text to best articulate the phenomena being described by the data. The initial categories/labels were then digested and examined to determine whether they were interrelated. The authors used the major goals of the study to help organize the emergent codes and categories. Those categories identified as interrelated were clustered together to create a higher-level category (axial coding). The final step in data analysis involved collapsing all the major categories to create a central theme (selective coding) to help explain the ATS’s perception regarding the development of preparedness for the workforce. The analysis resulted in the authors uncovering 2 factors that influence the ATS’s readiness to accept the roles and responsibilities of an entry-level athletic trainer, which include diversity in clinical education experiences and mentorship.

### Data Credibility

Trustworthiness of the data was established using 2 specific strategies, including (1) member checks<sup>11,13</sup> and (2) multiple analyst triangulation.<sup>13</sup> Member checks were completed with all participants by sharing the transcripts from their individual interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and to make changes accordingly. In addition, 4 of the participants were presented with the emergent themes for their impressions and agreement as a form of an interpretative member check. They were in agreement with the researchers’ findings. Multiple analyst triangulation was completed by the 2 researchers independently, following the steps outlined previously. Both authors used memoing during the interview process to help capture key points made by the participants during the interview process. Those memo notes were used to help guide the steps previously outlined during the analysis process. Once analysis was completed the first author presented the second author with the initial impression of the data, as analyzed using the grounded theory approach. The second author, completing the same process independently, was able to discuss the presentation of findings with the first author. Both authors were in agreement with the developing theory.

## RESULTS

Two themes emerged from the data explaining the ATSs’ level of preparedness as they get ready to enter into the athletic training workforce. The ATSs spoke of a *diversified clinical experience* along with strong *mentorship* as key factors in feeling prepared to accept their roles as certified athletic trainers. A discussion of each theme follows.

### Diversity with Clinical Education Experiences

The students in our study felt that because they were given opportunities to experience a variety of sports, clinical settings, and preceptors, they had more confidence, eagerness, and readiness to enter the profession of athletic training. While evaluating his educational experiences, Chase attributed his confidence and readiness to assume the role of a graduate assistant athletic trainer to his well-rounded

experiences. He said, while discussing his undergraduate program,

*I would say my professors provided a realistic impression [of the profession]. They did a great job keeping the profession real and being open to the different directions you can go [with it]. Also my clinical experiences, they and the people I worked alongside all introduced me to the ups and downs of an athletic trainer [I know what to expect].*

Brett shared a similar concept regarding the program providing a realistic picture of the profession. He said, “They [my professors] definitely give great experiences because they make sure you see at least one of every aspect of the profession.” Sam and John attributed their preparedness to their diversified clinical experiences along with the hours necessary to complete their clinical educational experience. Sam articulated, “I am confident [for next year] because I have gotten a wide variety of clinical experiences. I have been to a couple of high schools, worked several sports on campus, and had a general medical rotation. So I think providing a wide variety of experiences helps you learn better [and gain more confidence].” John shared, “I was mostly at the high school, but I was also exposed to the community college setting, intercollegiate athletics, as well as a few others. Putting in a lot of [clinical] hours, at the different settings, was key [for me to gain confidence].” Both Nate and Kate, who were assuming full-time positions at the high school, were prepared to do so because of their variety of clinical experiences during their undergraduate schooling. Kate raved,

*One of the best things about our program is the clinical experiences. We spend so much time with our clinical [education experiences]. We get to see [different] colleges, the high school setting, as well as upper and lower body sports, and equipment sports. Right now, I think I am prepared to be a certified athletic trainer, working on my own at the high school.*

Nate agreed: “I was placed in as many situations [as] you can think of, including high schools, college, teams, wheelchair sports, minor league hockey, and other local colleges. So my program had really done a great job [and prepared me] for next year [at the high school].” Providing the ATS with the chance to gain first-hand experience, but in a diversified manner, allowed this group of ATSs to gain the self-confidence to practice independently as clinicians upon graduation.

The participants spoke most often with regard to the positive influence the variety of experiences had on increasing their confidence and feelings of readiness to enter the workforce; however, the data also indicated that the ATSs could encounter negative clinical education experiences, which also could impact their professional development. For example, Karen explained,

*So I kind of realized that it really depends on the clinical setting. I guess I was a little discouraged at first because it was a lot [of responsibility and commitment], but all of my experiences after [that first experience] were really positive, so I am still really positive about the profession.*

When discussing his clinical experiences, Mark stated “ [There are] bad things [about certain clinical experiences]; you do some grunt work and it gets tiring doing that stuff, especially when you know that you are there for educational reasons and sometimes you are not getting educated on the clinical side of athletic training.” The clinical education experience, which also can be affected by the preceptor at the clinical site, can positively or negatively influence an ATS’s evaluation of his learning opportunities, which for this group affected their level of readiness upon graduation.

## Mentorship

Mentorship provided by program faculty and preceptors provided the ATSs with an understanding of the professional roles and responsibilities of an athletic trainer. While discussing her future plans, Payton shared this reflection on the mentorship she received as a student:

*I do feel as though I will be able to handle the responsibilities [of an athletic trainer]. I was taught well, and the clinical experiences really helped, along with all the interactions with the other athletic trainers and [preceptors]. It really gives you an idea what the profession is going to be like [after you are done with school].*

Laura discussed a specific mentor who provided her with someone to model herself after. While discussing her mentor Laura shared,

*I have one athletic trainer [at my school], and she has been a really good example for me. I try to emulate the positive things I see in her and the way she does her job. She is very good at what she does [in my opinion] and she also has a really great manner of being able to adjust her athlete’s rehab and interact with them in a positive way.*

Another student, Taylor, discussed having multiple role models who provided different insights into the roles of an athletic trainer. She had this to say:

*[One of] my biggest mentors was a female staff member [at my school]. Mostly what I learned from her was how to be a female athletic trainer in this profession. She works with a men’s team and she demonstrated how to work with them and maintain professional boundaries and relationships. Another mentor [I had] was a graduate student, who really helped me with maintaining a balance. He wouldn’t let me stay for excessive amounts of time, just waiting around. I was able to watch him prioritize his responsibilities.*

Mentorship, as verbalized by this group of senior ATSs, provided the necessary role modeling to help them gain an appreciation for the roles and responsibilities of an athletic trainer as well as the expectations that might be placed upon them in the workplace.

## DISCUSSION

The socialization framework has gained popularity recently and has been utilized to investigate career choice,<sup>4,5,15</sup> student retention,<sup>16</sup> and educational and workplace preparation.<sup>1–3</sup> Garnered from the findings of these investigations is the notion that the process is multifaceted and facilitated by

strong relationships built among ATP faculty, peers, and preceptors. In support of the previous literature,<sup>6</sup> mentorship was found to be a critical socializing agent for this group of senior ATSs as they were socialized into their roles as future athletic trainers. Also found to be an important socializing agent was the opportunity to have a diverse but authentic clinical education experience. Clinical education alone is a critical component of many educational programs, including nursing,<sup>15</sup> as it allows the practitioners the chance to develop a sense of their future roles and utilize their critical thinking skills. However, the importance of a diverse experience has not been specifically identified as a component of the preprofessional process for the ATS.

## Diversity

Time spent engaged in clinical education experiences has been identified as an influential factor in an ATS’s decision to pursue a career in athletic training upon completion of his degree requirements.<sup>17</sup> In part, the time engaged in clinical education allows the ATS to receive an authentic experience, which provides him the opportunity to observe his preceptor demonstrate professional behaviors and to appreciate the breadth of responsibilities held by the athletic trainer, as well as eventually to engage in skill application in order to gain feedback about his role performance. Beyond the hours spent working clinically, this group of participants identified that diversity in their clinical experiences was influential in developing their self-confidence in their own skills and abilities and their understanding of the profession. Perhaps the breadth of experiences allowed the students to visualize their own strengths and interests as clinicians and allowed them to make decisions about their future professional goals based on their experiences in a variety of settings. Previous literature<sup>5</sup> indicates that the graduating ATS seeks more specific training in the clinical setting he has visualized as his preferred work setting. Perhaps the opportunity to spend time in many different settings helped students develop insight into their preferences for their desired clinical setting upon entering the field. Moreover, the variety of experiences may have been the catalyst to the ATS finding his niche within the profession, thus bolstering his confidence and feelings of readiness. As outlined in a previous study<sup>18</sup> looking at the educational preparation of the athletic trainer in the clinical setting, each clinical setting requires the athletic trainer to be better versed in certain practice domains (as compared to others). Providing the ATS the opportunity to see many aspects of the profession of athletic training allows her to gain understanding of the uniqueness of the profession, all while gaining the authentic experience she requires to become a skilled clinician. Recent literature<sup>5</sup> suggests that a health care practitioner, especially the athletic trainer, is more likely to implement skills that she has been educationally trained to perform as well as had had previous experience in managing; therefore, diversity in clinical experiences for ATSs can only increase the likelihood of exposure to all areas of clinical practice, which can assist them when they need to implement these skills in the field.

Along with providing a variety of clinical experiences, which this study indicated was an important socializing agent, programs should evaluate their clinical sites to ensure that ATSs are exposed to quality learning experiences, during which they do have the opportunity to enhance their skills and apply themselves in the roles of professionals. Perhaps

another suggestion is for programs to enhance communication with ATSS during their clinical experiences in order to help mitigate any factors that might be leading to a negative experience and/or ensuring that one bad experience will not turn them away from the profession. Diversity of experiences can positively influence ATSS in their readiness to enter the workforce, but programs also need to be aware of the potential impact a negative experience can have on their students.

## Mentorship

As previously identified within the mentoring literature,<sup>6,19,20</sup> the benefits of mentorship are endless, but specifically for this cohort of senior ATSS, it served as a means to gain self-confidence and to advance clinical competence. Moreover, mentorship has been shown to help the individual learn how to manage role conflict, workplace issues, and work-life balance issues.<sup>21</sup> Preceptors and ATP faculty are influential socializing agents, as they help model the professional behaviors expected of the ATS. This group was able to learn important concepts, including athlete-athletic trainer communication, workplace expectations, and how to prioritize daily tasks as a means to promote a better work-life balance. The mentorship provided by the preceptors provided the ATSS with opportunities to feel integrated into the role of the athletic trainer, an important part of the professional socialization process.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the mentorship provided by the preceptors allowed the ATSS to gain full appreciation for the role expectations of an athletic trainer, and, coupled with the diversity in experiences clinically, this alleviated concerns with accepting the responsibilities as a certified athletic trainer the subsequent year, as they understood what would be expected of them in a variety of situations. The ATSS' belief that an effective mentor must be a role model,<sup>6</sup> which was demonstrated by the findings of this study, appears to be very helpful in providing the ATSS with the confidence in their skills and readiness to handle the full-time responsibilities of an athletic trainer upon graduation.

In addition, highlighted by our results are the unique roles played by both academic professors and preceptors. The academic faculty appeared to strongly influence passion for athletic training and promotion of the profession within the medical community and public venues, while the preceptor served as the mediator for role induction and acceptance of responsibilities. As found by Pitney,<sup>2</sup> organizational learning through support networks and observations can play an important role in the socialization of an athletic trainer in the workplace. Academic professors and programs should encourage the ATS to value opportunities to observe and reflect upon her clinical settings, as this is when true learning can take place. Programs are encouraged to support academic professors in advocacy efforts and promotion of the profession through research and other activities and to expose ATSS to these efforts. Many ATSS in this study specifically mentioned the important role their professors have in developing their passion for the profession, which is likely an important influence on not only their desire to continue in the profession but also their confidence and readiness to enter the workforce. Programs should also continue to provide professional development to all preceptors, specifically related to assisting them in providing quality mentoring experiences for ATSS. Results from this and other studies<sup>3,5</sup> indicate that

mentorship and supervision influence an ATS's experience and learning during his clinical experiences.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Two separate researchers conducted interviews, and although the study was piloted before actual data collection and the researchers were in frequent communication, differences in style and method of interviewing might have occurred. Future research should capitalize on both interviewing and survey methods in order to fully understand the most influential socializing agents in the development of skill competence for the ATS. The results presented in this study are from a very small number of senior ATSS who are entering the workforce, and, therefore, their thoughts and opinions may not represent all senior ATSS. All of the participants were pursuing athletic training positions the following year and were positively influenced by their educational preparations. Mentoring literature suggests that despite the many advantages to the relationship, it is possible that a mentor who has a less-than-favorable outlook on the profession or their role could negatively influence the ATS and influence his professional development. Future studies need to examine both the positive and negative impact mentorship can have on the ATS's professional development as well as its implications on career choice and postgraduation plans.

## CONCLUSIONS

As athletic training educators continue to respond to educational reforms and tow the line between direct supervision and autonomy for development of the entry-level athletic trainer professional, the implications of this study are important. Programs must continue to encourage and promote mentoring between the preceptor and ATSS, as for this cohort, it facilitated their professional development and readiness to assume the roles of athletic trainers, which included increasing their self-confidence as clinicians. This effect often occurred in conjunction with a diversified clinical experience, which afforded opportunities to witness the role of the athletic trainer in many clinical settings and to engage in interactions with members of the sports medicine team in different settings. Gaining affirmation from those individuals who they recognize as components of their professional role is important in the ATSS' ability to develop a positive self-image as athletic trainers; therefore, providing ample opportunities to gain this exposure is necessary to aid in the professional development of the ATS. Programs should also be encouraged to include exposure to a variety of clinical settings, including the nontraditional and corporate settings, as this can help the ATS truly gain an appreciation for the wide range of responsibilities of an athletic trainer. For example, an athletic trainer employed in the clinical setting may need to be more aware of insurance billing policies and third-party reimbursement, while an athletic trainer in the collegiate setting may not need to have knowledge in those areas. If the ATS is never exposed to this clinical setting, he may not be aware of those responsibilities of the athletic trainer and may be less prepared to manage those responsibilities when faced with them in the workplace. The professional preparation phase is a time of significant growth for an ATS student. Programs should recognize mentorship and diversity of clinical experiences as socializing agents during this time and work to maximize the impact of these factors.



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