



Toward inclusive and relevant second language education for Black students

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Abstract

In this report, I describe the research and curricular changes I am implementing to deal with issues of inequity encountered by Black students in the Spanish program I direct at Western Michigan University. In the first stage, a comprehensive analysis of student demographics, enrollment, and academic performance over six years revealed that Black and African American students begin Spanish education at high rates but are less likely to advance to courses beyond second-year Spanish and more likely to obtain lower final grades than other groups. These findings are consistent with literature showing similar patterns of participation and achievement among Black students in language learning across secondary and higher education. Following methodologies used in previous studies, the second phase of the project consists of a comprehensive needs analysis composed of surveys, interviews, and class observations aimed at better understanding Black students' experiences and needs in my department's Spanish program. Based on results from the needs analysis, the last part of the project will educate personnel in the program on issues of equity and diversity and will implement changes in the curriculum to make our Spanish courses more relevant for Black students.

Keywords: *academic achievement, enrollment, equity, inclusion, language program, race and ethnicity, Spanish*

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Introduction

When I arrived at Western Michigan University in 2015, I was pleased to see a sizeable number of Black¹ students on campus and in the introductory Spanish courses I was hired to direct. Informal observations during my first years in the position, however, showed that Black students are less likely to continue studying Spanish beyond the second year and potentially receive lower grades than other students. As the language program director and an academic dedicated to fostering success for all students, I decided, in 2020, to undertake a formal assessment of the Spanish program with the goal of better understanding the reality and needs of Black students.

In this report, I present preliminary results of the program assessment, describe concrete measures taken so far, and outline plans for curricular revision to be implemented in the near future. What started as program assessment has now evolved into an exciting multi-year project involving major curricular changes. Although curriculum revisions are currently at the initial stages, I feel it is important to share what I have accomplished to date. Given the level of social injustice in the United States that recent events have exposed, immediate action is needed in all areas of society, and higher education is no exception. I hope

this project inspires educators to look at their own practices and reflect on how we can create more inclusive second language (L2) programs at all levels of education.

This report is organized roughly in the same order I developed the project. First, I synthesize the literature review that allowed me to understand how issues of exclusion in my program fit within the larger context of Black students in the United States. Second, I examine enrollment and achievement data that confirm my initial suspicions that Black students are at a disadvantage in the Spanish program. Third, I describe the needs analysis, currently underway, to understand the Black student population at my institution better, and I explain concrete changes to be made in the Spanish program to better serve this student group.

Background

My initial observations of issues of inequality among Black students in the Spanish program led me to delve into the existing body of literature on this topic. Not surprisingly, I confirmed that issues of enrollment and academic performance among Black students are not unique to my institution. In terms of enrollment, several studies have shown Black students to begin L2 education at rates that reflect the general population at K-12 and at postsecondary levels. However, their participation declines or vanishes altogether in upper-level courses, and they are less likely to major or minor in languages than their peers (Charle Poza, 2013; Gatlin, 2013; Moore, 2005). In a study of 631 students enrolled in Spanish at a high school in West Texas, for example, Pratt (2012) found that, when compared with percentages for the school district's population, African American students ($n = 102$) began Spanish education at higher rates than Hispanic and White students, potentially indicating a high interest in studying second languages among these students. However, percentages of African American students enrolled in Spanish classes dropped from 23% in first-year Spanish to 5% in the fourth and fifth years.

What accounts for lower participation in L2 education among Black students? Previous research shows that the reasons are complex and multifaceted but overwhelmingly tied to systemic and long-standing patterns of exclusion, self-perceived inadequacies to learn languages, lack of culturally relevant materials in the L2 curriculum, and restricted access by educational gatekeepers who discourage Black students from pursuing language study. For example, Lucas (1995) and Charle Poza (2015) reported that African American college students tended to see little value in studying French or Spanish, viewed themselves as less skilled at language learning than their peers, and experienced high levels of anxiety over the low grades they expected to receive, or actually received, in their language classes. Black students enrolled in Spanish classes at a historically Black institution expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the scant emphasis their courses placed on the Black experience in Spanish-speaking cultures (Davis & Markham, 1991). At a predominantly white university, 128 Black students reported little interest in taking language classes in college after having negative high-school experiences with L2 classes and materials, which they found boring or irrelevant to their African American identity (Moore, 2005).

Although most studies on Black students in L2 education draw their conclusions from enrollment records or surveys on students' opinions and attitudes, no study has explored, to the best of my knowledge, how these students actually perform in L2 classes or how their performance compares with other groups. Nonetheless, key research has demonstrated that general achievement gaps (usually in the form of grades) between Black students and other groups are a concerning reality at both K-12 (e.g., Hung et al., 2020) and college (e.g., Walpole, 2008) levels. This body of research has also shown that academic underachievement among Black students is associated with, and probably explained by, complex realities these students often suffer, such as inequality, racial discrimination, and lower socioeconomic status. I suspect that these patterns of systemic exclusion and limited access also explain Black students' performance in L2 classes across educational levels.

Enrollment and Achievement Analysis

In mid 2020, I sought permission to compile a database for the Spanish program using students' demographic and academic information provided by my institution's office of institutional research. For

this project, I examined records for the last six complete academic years (AY). Hence the data presented here span from August 2014 to May 2020. I selected the variables *ethnicity* (self-reported by student), *course* (Spanish course in which students enrolled), *academic year*, and *grade* (final grade obtained in course) for this analysis. The final dataset consisted of 7,705 observations, each defined as the grade a student of a certain ethnicity received in a Spanish course during a given academic year. Descriptive statistics and graphs were produced with R Statistical Software (R Core Team, 2020).

Results show that, during AY 2019–20, enrollment in the four introductory Spanish courses (Basic Spanish I and II, and Intermediate Spanish I and II) and the two 3000-level bridge courses (Spanish Conversation and Spanish Composition) totaled 1,261 students; of these, 209, or 16.6%, self-reported as Black or African American. I was pleased that this percentage was above the 12% reported for Western Michigan University and the 14.1% reported for the state of Michigan. Over the last six years, the rate of Black or African American students has remained stable and represents the largest racial-ethnic minority group in the Spanish program (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The analysis from this point onwards primarily compares Black or African American students, who represent the largest group of people of color at Western Michigan University, to White students. Hispanics, the second largest group of people of color, are included in graphs to provide a wider context of student demographics. Since students in other self-reported groups represent very small percentages, both on campus and in the Spanish program, they are all grouped together under “other.”

Figure 1

Number of Students Enrolled in Six Spanish Courses by Ethnic Group and Academic Year (2014-15 to 2019-20)

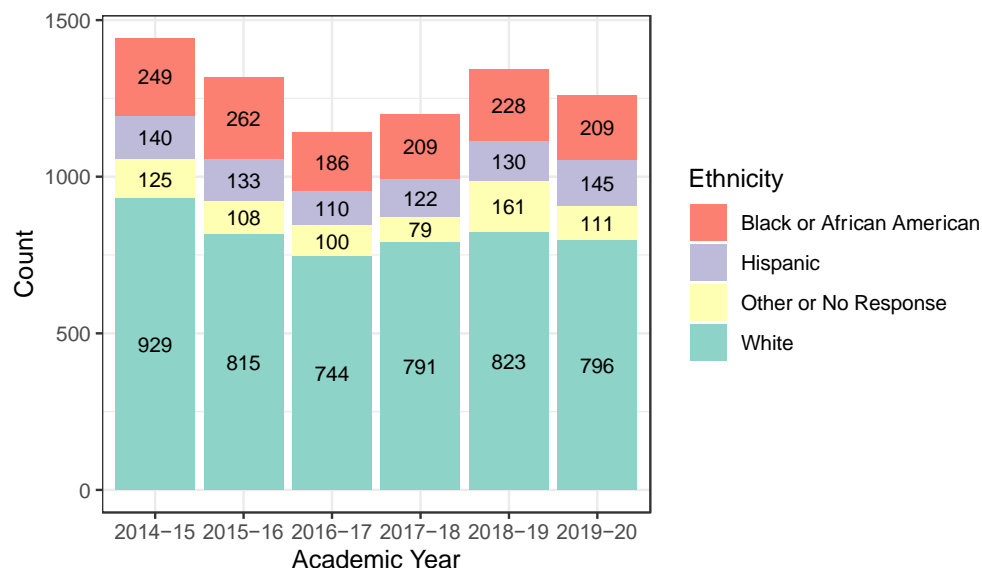
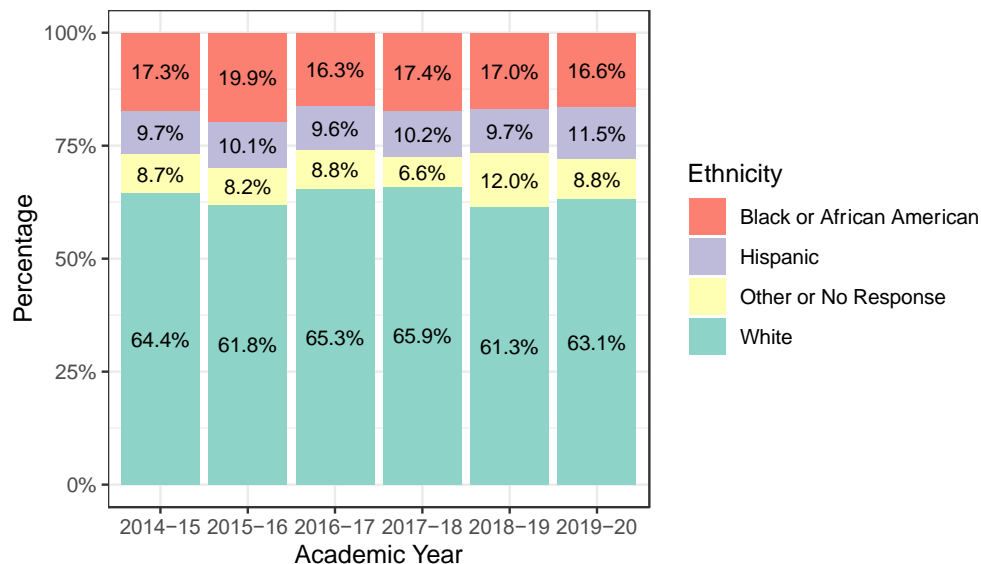


Figure 2

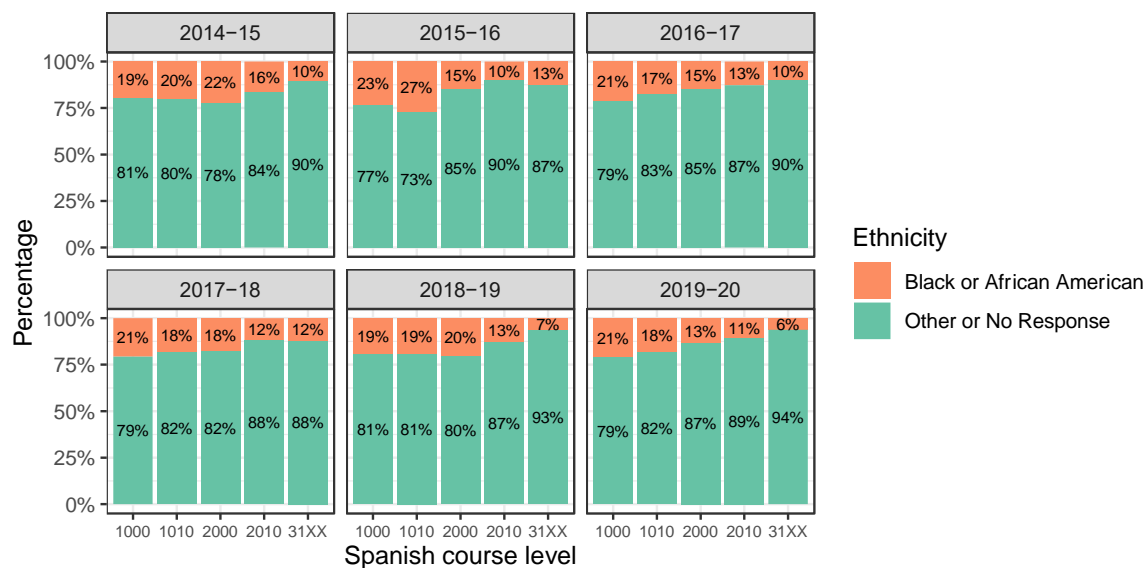
Percentage of Students Enrolled in Six Spanish Courses by Ethnic Group and Academic Year (2014-15 to 2019-20)



Despite the apparently robust number of Black students enrolled in the first six courses offered in the Spanish program, a breakdown of enrollment by course reveals that the proportion of Black students progressively declines in courses beyond the 1000-level. Figure 3 shows that over the last six years, roughly 20% of students enrolled in Basic Spanish I and II were Black or African American, well above university rates for this student group. However, percentages for the 2000-level courses fell to the 11-18% range. More importantly, proportions of Black or African American students continued to decline in 3000-level courses, often below university means and to an alarming six-year low of 6% in AY 2019–20, the last full academic year for which data were available. This decrease in the number of Black students who enrolled in upper-level courses (i.e., courses beyond the second year) is consistent with enrollment declines reported in Pratt (2012) at the high school level as well as students' self-reported lack of desire to continue language studies at the college level due to factors such as family background, bad high school experiences, or demotivating curricula (Gatlin, 2013; Moore, 2005; Pollock, 2018).

Figure 3

Percentage of Black Students Enrolled in Six Spanish Courses Compared to Other/No Response by Academic Year (2014-15 to 2019-20)

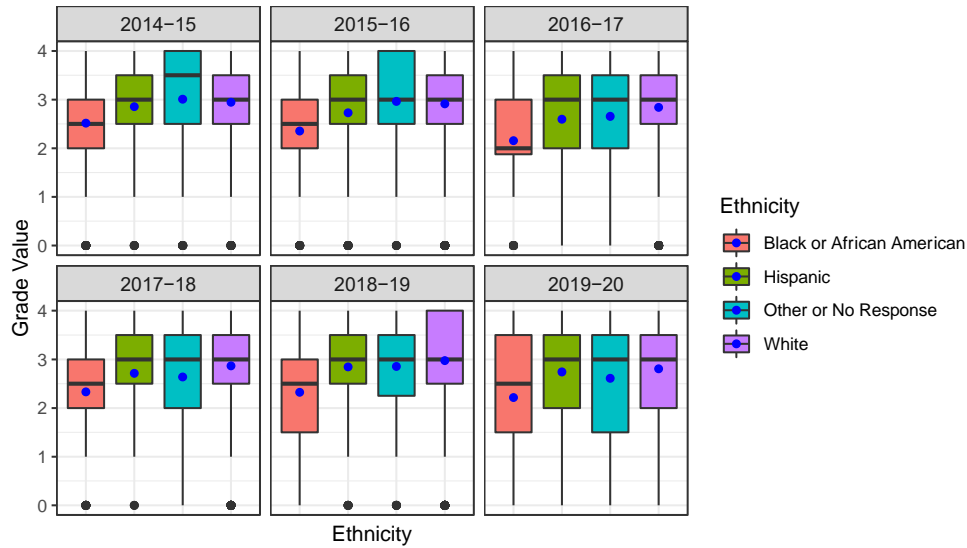


Note. 1000 = Basic Spanish I; 1010 = Basic Spanish II; 2000 = Intermediate Spanish I; 2010 = Intermediate Spanish II; 31XX = Spanish Composition and Spanish Conversation. The two courses at the 3000-level are combined because students can take them in any order, unlike 1000- and 2000-level courses, which are taken in sequence.

The disadvantage that Black students experience in the Spanish program becomes more pronounced when considering academic performance, as evidenced by final grade values, shown in Figure 4. On average, across six Spanish courses, Black or African American students consistently received lower grades than their peers. An extreme area of concern is AY 2016–17, for which the median final grade value for Black students is an entire grade point lower than the median for all other groups; the mean grade also trails substantially behind. Inequity in academic performance between Black students and the other groups surveyed becomes more worrisome when data are broken down by course, as shown in Figure 5. For every course, both mean and median final grade values are below other groups, with the starkest contrast in the two 3000-level courses, where the median final grade value for Black or African American students is 1.5 points below that of White students. Comparable grade gaps between Black students and the other groups surveyed have been reported and explained in the literature (e.g., Hung et al., 2020; Walpole, 2008), though not specifically for L2 education.

Figure 4

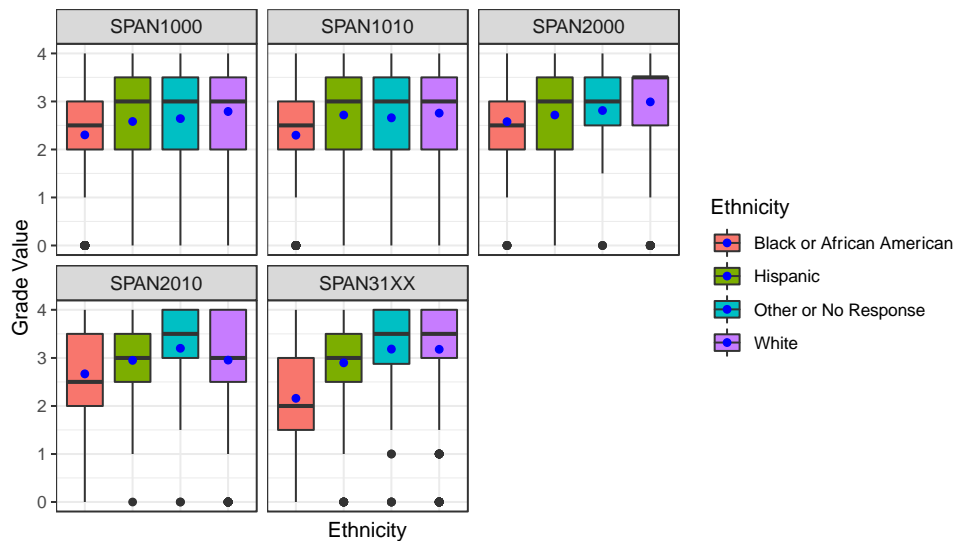
Final Grades (0-4 scale) Across Six Spanish Courses by Ethnic Group and Academic Year (2014-2015 to 2019-2020)



Note. Horizontal line inside box represents median. Blue dot represents mean. Black dots show outliers.

Figure 5

Final Grade Value (0-4 scale) Across Six Academic Years by Ethnic Group and Course



Note. Horizontal line inside box represents median. Blue dot represents mean. Black dots show outliers.

In summary, the initial examination of the issue at hand demonstrates that Black and African American students at Western Michigan University begin Spanish education at high rates but are less likely to advance to upper-level courses and more likely to obtain lower final grades than other groups. Also, the achievement gap becomes more pronounced in upper-level courses. These results are consistent with previous literature

showing similar patterns of participation and achievement among Black students in L2 learning across secondary and higher education.

Addressing the Problem

Quantitative evidence substantiated my anecdotal observations that enrollment in Spanish courses by Black students declined over time and revealed that they receive lower grades than their peers. In view of these results, the second phase of this project—currently underway—consists of gathering quantitative and qualitative data to understand why this level of inequity exists in the particular context of Western Michigan University. I hypothesize that many of the explanations and patterns found in previous studies also account for poor retention rates and lower academic performance among Black students at my institution. In order to explore these hypotheses, and, informed by findings in previous literature, I devised a needs analysis with four main components:

- (a) An online survey distributed to all students about their past and current experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding Spanish language education. The first part of the survey consists of a modified version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI; Horwitz, 1985, 1986), based on areas of learners' beliefs and attitudes that proved relevant in previous related research (Charle Poza, 2013, 2015; Gatlin, 2013). The second part contains Likert-scale and open-ended questions about students' overall assessment of their language-learning experiences both at the K-12 level (if any) and in the Spanish program. The last part requests information on students' demographics and use of languages in their families.
- (b) Online or paper surveys distributed to students' current teachers and other stakeholders involved in forging students' paths during their L2 education, including family members, high school teachers and counselors, college academic advisors, course coordinators, and administrators.
- (c) Follow-up interviews with Black students and influential people in their lives on major topics that emerged from surveys in (a) and (b) above. The goal of these surveys and interviews is not only to understand students' experiences but also how people might have shaped their beliefs about language learning and decisions to begin and continue learning a second language. In particular, previous studies have highlighted the influential role that school counselors, teachers (e.g., Pollock, 2018; Pratt, 2013), and family members (e.g., Moore, 2005; Offutt, 2017; Pollock, 2018) play in students' decisions to engage in or continue L2 studies.
- (d) Class ethnographies and observations to assess how interpersonal relationships and classroom dynamics affect L2 Spanish learning for Black students. Since all 25 sections of introductory Spanish were taught online due to COVID-19 during AY 2020–21, I analyzed 50 hours of recorded in-person classes that I collected in late 2019 for a separate project. I will use this initial analysis to create and refine observation categories to be used when observing and analyzing in-person classes in AY 2021–22.

Methods (a-c) above have been employed in survey-based research that examines Black students' involvement and performance in L2 education, mostly at the college level. Techniques in (d), however, represent a departure from studies that limit themselves to indirect descriptions of the issues that Black students face in language programs. As Anya (2020) stated, most research “has been conducted from a distance through enrollment and achievement records, interviews, and surveys that rely on participants recalling and retelling. Rare are the studies where the actual language-learning interactions and activities of black students and their instructors are directly observed” (p. 101). Class ethnographies and observations in this project seek to fill this void.

The last phase of the project aims to remedy the disadvantages that Black students experience in the Spanish program at Western Michigan University. As previous research has shown, Black students can thrive in L2 learning when the playing field is leveled (Anya, 2017; Flores & Rosa, 2019; Moore & English, 1998). Based on this premise, this last phase will initially center around two components:

- (a) **Diversifying instruction.** Black students generally do not feel represented in, or connected with, the Spanish-speaking cultures they learn about in their classes. Issues of representation revolve around an insufficient number of Black teachers and role models for Black students (Anya, 2020; Carson Baggett, 2016) and materials or contents that do not represent Black learners (Davis & Markham, 1991; Gatlin, 2013; Offutt, 2017). Afro-descendants make up a large part of Hispanics around the world, yet Hispanic culture depicted in textbooks and other pedagogical materials typically excludes Hispanic Afro-descendants and their experiences. To address this, I will use data from the needs analysis and existing resources (Abreu, 2016; Anya et al., 2019; Kennedy, 1987) to embed the curriculum of Basic Spanish II and Intermediate Spanish I with pedagogical modules that reflect Black experiences. I will implement these changes in at least six sections during AY 2021–22 as a pilot study, assess their effectiveness, and make necessary adjustments for use in all future sections of these courses, as well as extend the model to other courses.
- (b) **Education in diversity, equity, and inclusion.** I am working with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Western Michigan University to implement workshops for instructors on how best to serve our Black students. Most introductory courses in the Spanish program are taught by graduate teaching assistants, some of whom are international and may not understand the scope of the Black experience in the United States. As the Black Lives Matter movement has taught us, even stakeholders with the best intentions sometimes implement practices that alienate Black people. Previous studies have shown how teachers, academic advisors, guidance counselors, and administrators often deter Black students from pursuing the study of additional languages (Moore, 2005; Pratt, 2012, Pollock, 2018). This scholarship also strongly recommends implementing the type of training this project plans to carry out.

Final remarks and expected outcomes

The year 2020 saw high levels of social and racial unrest in the United States. Movements such as Black Lives Matters have made clear the systemic racism faced by Black people in the United States. The initial analysis of enrollment and achievement data reported in this paper suggests that exclusion and limited access also exist in postsecondary L2 programs. The concrete actions presented in this report seek to help instructors and language program directors address issues of inequality and restricted access. Though the project discussed here is specifically intended to improve retention of and academic performance by Black students, the creation of relevant pedagogical materials and practices will benefit all students by raising awareness of the positive contributions of Blacks to the cultural fabric of societies worldwide. Through publications, talks, and digital repositories, I plan to make results and pedagogical modules widely available to help instructors and language program directors implement much-needed changes to the way we teach second languages. These are mostly uncharted pedagogies, and much work remains to be done. Still, any progress toward addressing inequity and fostering the success of Black students—even if modest at first—is a step in the right direction.

Notes

1. Although my university uses the term “Black or African-American” in its university records, and this is the option students in this group can self-select, the term “Black” usually refers to race whereas “African American” is usually used to describe ethnic affiliation. In the field of applied linguistics, these terms have often been used interchangeably (e.g., Anya, 2020). I use the term “Black” in this paper regardless of student national origin, unless I refer to university records or cite scholars who use a different term.

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