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12. ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEXITY IN A PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Unlike most modern institutions of higher education, SUNY Empire State College (ESC) was not created with academic disciplines in mind, or faculty, or curricula. It was not established with the intention of instructing students in traditional courses by traditional methods, but to guide students in self-discovery. In general, its students do not study together, but alone; its faculty does not plan their studies together, but alone; its programs and divisions operate independently of one another; students enter and leave the college throughout the year; it has no single location; and its alumni are only loosely connected to the institution. The primary model of instruction upon which the college was founded – guided independent study – owes more to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge than to American higher education; although its philosophy of progressive education is very much an American construct.

In keeping with this philosophy, the administrative structures supporting the College's main instructional system emerged organically, as an outgrowth of student and faculty needs, rather than providing a framework from which the College grew. This makes it almost unique in the annals of late twentieth century higher education, a legacy of which founder Ernest Boyer was understandably proud: Boyer not only proclaimed Empire State College his greatest achievement as Chancellor of the State University of New York, but emphasized that his conception of "a new kind of college based on student learning … *around which all other arrangements would be organized*" [emphasis added] was an idea whose time had come (Bonnabeau, 1996, pp. 6–7).

Speaking in July 1981 at the 10-year anniversary of the College's founding, Boyer elaborated on this theme, noting that "My dream was a college … where the focus was not on buildings or bureaucracy or on rigid schedules – not on mindless regulations but on students and education. … My dream was a college located all across the state geared to serve the student, *not the institution or the process*" [emphasis added] (Bonnabeau, 1996, p. 106). In the early 1970's, when the College was conceived and brought into being in a matter of months, student radicals on campuses across the country were clamoring for relevance in higher education, criticizing the staid academy for its outmoded hierarchies and unwillingness to engage the critical issues of the day. In the midst of this turmoil, Boyer imagined an institution that would encourage the kind of personal

and social transformation students seemed to want, one based in the progressive tradition of higher education.

Boyer's vision of Empire State College was explicitly non-authoritarian. It was also non-hierarchical, unstructured, and so loosely coupled (Weick, 1976) that in purely analytical terms, the college possessed few of the features theorists associate with organizations: rules, policies, plans, organizational charts, coordinated activity, boundaries, communication systems, self-regulation, interdependence, or predictable responses. As Bonnabeau (1996) observed, "Empire State College began enrolling students while it was constructing an academic program, somewhat akin to laying track fast enough to stay ahead of the locomotive" (p. 40). The College was chartered before it had an academic plan; the *Prospectus* (Boyer, 1971) around which it was organized was conceived in three months; and much within the *Prospectus*, such as the role of mentors and the structure by which the College would operate, was either "suggested" or not fully articulated.

COMPLEXITIES OF THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Clearly, the movement in higher education today is in the very direction Boyer envisioned. Years before "disruptive innovation" (Christensen & Eyring, 2011) became a byword in higher education, and before the "big three disruptions" of prior-learning assessment, competency-based learning, and efforts to issue credit for MOOC's were receiving attention, Ernest Boyer was enamored of a different educational disruption, one rooted in the work of John Dewey and his pedagogical forbearers. Progressive education is a uniquely American educational philosophy, part of the progressive movement that swept America at the turn of the twentieth century. Its educational principles are lofty: education is based on activity directed by the student; students learn best when they are involved in experiences in which they have a vital interest; individual differences are to be honored; methods, classroom practices, and curricula should be adapted or reorganized to meet student needs; formal, "authoritarian" procedures should be opposed; and ideally, studies should reflect and contribute to the life of society.

True to that spirit, Empire State College built itself around the students whom it intended to serve. Table 1 illustrates the connections between the principles of progressive education and the Empire State model.

Innovative in conception, many of these features are now being adopted by both traditional and non-traditional/for-profit institutions. However, important structural differences exist between SUNY Empire State College and most other academic institutions that relate directly to its progressive origins. Boyer alluded to the major difference, and the one most linked to organizational complexity, when in a 1996 preface to *The Promise Continues*, he admitted that looking back he was struck by "about just how difficult it was [and is] to create a college with no buildings, no traditions, and no procedures to guide people through the day" (Bonnabeau, 1996, p. 7).

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Table 1. Progressive principles embodied in Empire State College pedagogy and organization

Progressive education principle	Corresponding ESC education principle
Students learn best in those experiences in which they have a vital interest	ESC will be "a college based on student learning around which all other arrangements are organized." Students are responsible for directing their own learning.
Education should be a continuous reconstruction of experience based on activity directed by the student	Student interests determine study objectives. Student degree plans are developed individually by students, in consultation with a mentor and a degree planning committee.
Recognition of individual differences considered critical	Individualized learning contracts for every study. Credit given for prior learning in multiple domains. Students study at own pace. Accommodations made for differences in learning styles.
Opposed to formal authoritarian procedure	Steadfastly opposed to creating a college orthodoxy. No bylaws or operating procedures until after students enrolled. Mentors responsible for typical administrative duties.
Fostered a reorganization of classroom practices and curriculum	No fixed curriculum. No classrooms. Guidance rather than "teaching." Student academic interests replace curriculum committees. Independent study a main instructional mode.
School should reflect the life of the society	Students' personal and career goals determine academic needs. Social and personal transformation a stated objective. Institution willing and able to respond to changing contexts.
Adapt the method to the needs of the student	No seat requirement for successfully completing studies. Only one required course. Open evenings and weekends. Studies available in person, online, in blended formats, statewide.

Progressive education is at its heart an unregulated, unplanned enterprise. Student needs and abilities determine all that follows. The *Prospectus'* statement that the College "… will rely on a process, rather than a structure, of education to shape and give it substance as well as purpose" (Boyer, 1971, p. 2) illustrates this point: not only was Boyer reflecting the progressive theory that education (i.e., the process) must be a *continuous* reconstruction of students' lived experience, and therefore not only individualized but incapable of being determined beforehand; but signifying that the College would begin with no pre-set structure in mind. Clearly, Boyer and his colleagues were thinking of conventional academic structure – required courses,

set periods of time, residency requirements – when they referred to its purposeful absence. Nonetheless, the same principle logically extends to other forms of institutional structure if one begins with the idea that the institution exists "to create alternative models of education other than the classroom … and to experiment with other models, keeping the student at the center" (Bonnabeau, 1996, p. 24).

When Boyer decided to form a college based on student learning "around which all other arrangements would be organized," the "arrangements" to which he was referring are the characteristics that most organizations use to coordinate and carry out their activities. At ESC, these elements have largely emerged as byproducts of learner issues rather than actions taken intentionally by the college to ensure that its systems are, for example, consistent, rational, or predictable. Hampered by its distributed, individualized model from systematically gathering data related to trends or patterns, leaders are often unable to identify issues as problems until they reach a tipping point – when systems become unusable, dissatisfaction becomes widespread, or disruptions in workflow become inimical to the effective functioning of the institution. The founders' desire to have the institution follow the process of students' learning – to pointedly *not* be concerned with such things as policies, procedures, lines of communication, or coordinating mechanisms – makes it distinct from most other institutions of higher education.

Seen in a different light, the organizing principles illustrated in Table 1 bring with them a set of tensions that complicate the Empire State model. Table 2 displays the progressive and historical foundations of the College in juxtaposition with the related outcomes that it holds in tension.

Each tension listed here, if properly balanced, provides an opportunity to strengthen the institution. As Boyer observed, though, it *was* "difficult" to start a college before an academic program was in place; to envision, propose, and get a new institution approved in a matter of months; to begin operations with no bylaws or operating procedures; and to eschew organizational arrangements that in most other institutions would be considered commonplace. The very features that make Empire State College distinctive have made it difficult to govern: In effect, the institution has backed into the creation of managerial and organizational structures that make leadership possible rather than conceiving of them at its start (as nearly all other organizations do). Further, its principled decision to remain true to its learner-centered vision as the College has grown larger and more complex has magnified the following set of organizational challenges.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

1. Systems are Ambiguous and Unknown

Few processes for getting things done are transparent or predictable, or exist in common across the college, e.g., how mentors notify other mentors about student issues; how to determine needs for particular specializations within areas of study; what happens if an instructor of a group decides to cancel a class; what a new adjunct

Table 2. Creative tensions associated with the Empire State Model

Characteristic/organizing principle	Tensions
Purposely created without structure (opposed to formal authoritarian procedures)	Tension between the lack of structural elements that restrict problem-solving, allowing mentors to respond to students as circumstances dictate; and the equity and stability associated with coordinated activities, common practices, and common understandings.
Student-driven (education should be based on activity directed by the student; student learns best in activities in which s/he has a vital interest)	Tension between putting the learner first and allowing studies, degree planning, and curriculum development to react; and possessing enough control to ensure that academic oversight informs the process. Between individualization and organizational complexity.
Mentors at center of institutional model (reorganization of classroom practices and curriculum)	Tension between the role of mentors as guides of student learning who embody ESC's philosophy of individualized attention; and the ability to know, understand, or plan in relation to one another's practices, specialties, philosophies, and capabilities.
Distributed	Tension between the ability to be locally-focused, and serve students statewide through multiple modes of learning; and the need to break down resource and information silos that, while promoting autonomy, lead to issues of integration, coordination, and control.
Recognition of individual differences considered critical	Tension between remaining open to the diversity of adult learners and first generation students; and responding effectively to their wide range of needs, preparation, learning styles, and personal circumstances. Between accepting differences and providing/envisioning a realistic chance for students to succeed.
Adapt the method to the needs of the student	Tension between the willingness to meet students where they are; and students perceiving their experience as a commodity exchange. Between self-selected modes of study and learning issues that could impede success. Between few requirements and the ability to assess and monitor students' progress.
Schools should reflect the life of the society	Tension between having the flexibility to modify systems, structures, programs and methods in response to external demands; and ensuring that the college's core values determine its direction. Between remaining competitive and remaining institutionally coherent. Between new program development and skills of the current workforce.

faculty member can expect with regard to a sequence of interaction with the college once he or she is hired; identifying where students stand in the educational planning process. Major institutional functions appeared late in the college's history. Formal connections between subunits are weak. Solutions tend to follow problems, rather than being anticipated.

The College's progressive philosophy affords mentors and students great room for creativity and adaptation – something which the relative absence of systems facilitates. At the same time, organizational theorists have observed that as institutions grow larger, more diverse, and more highly differentiated (i.e., specialized), all of which has been the case at ESC in recent years, the greater the need for linkages, coordination, and sophisticated forms of control to keep things organized.

To be sure, academic institutions are far more loosely coupled than most organizations: colleges and universities typically have multiple goals, unclear boundaries, informal mechanisms for coordination, loose vertical and horizontal integration, high levels of autonomy, and few rules. Finding a way to balance the learner-driven, individually inspired ESC model with the needs of a complex organization is a creative challenge facing the College, though. Indeed, Bolman and Deal (1984) assert that "achieving a balance between differentiation and integration is one of the most fundamental issues of structural design" (p. 33). As tasks, functions, locations, and goals proliferate, people and subsystems become dependent on one another to get things done. In turn, increasing institutional diversity requires that special attention be paid to matters of integration among units and subsystems to avoid having organizations become "fragmented, fractionated, and ineffective" (p. 37).

Bonnabeau (1996) observed that ESC was "more chimera than substance" when approved by the SUNY Board of Trustees (p. 34), and that both Arthur Chickering, (its first vice president) and the faculty were comfortable with that ambiguity, wanting no part of anything that smacked of planfulness (p. 165). Finding a way to respond to "… the inevitable intellectual and practical evolution inherent in an increasingly fluid and unpredictable world" (Hancock as cited in Edelman, 2014, The Unique Experience section, para. 5) while maintaining the flexibility and openness that rests at the heart of the college is a key organizational issue.

2. Communication is Uneven and Difficult

Numerous problems exist due to: (a) the dispersed nature of the institution, (b) local practices, (c) centralized and decentralized decision-making in a single structure, (d) the independent, highly individualized work of mentors and students, and (e) the existence of silos based on location, modes of delivery, and competing conceptual frameworks. Appropriate people often are not informed about issues relevant to their work; it is difficult to know who should be informed; and linkages that are essential for positive and negative communication are hard to create or maintain.

Linkages, in particular, are the glue that holds most organizations together. In complex organizations, relationships among individuals and groups typically grow

stronger as a result of increasing interdependence. If these relationships are not present, or less than effective, "specialized efforts do not get linked together, and various individuals and units may pursue their own goals while ignoring the larger mission of the institution" (Bolman & Deal, 1984, p. 37). At Empire State, linkages of these kinds are both more casual and less likely to happen as a result of formal coordination and control mechanisms than would be the case in other organizations.

The lack of hierarchical control carries certain advantages. Among others, it gives life to the principle that mentor/student interactions rest at the center of the institutional model, and that each mentor embodies the college in his/her interactions with students. The progressive philosophy of re-organizing classroom practices and curriculum to meet student needs manifests itself in mentors' individualized attention to students, as well as their freedom to adapt whatever methods or studies they think necessary to meet students' personal learning goals. Additionally, the relative absence of rules and guidelines means that the college has fewer barriers to overcome when encountering changing circumstances to which it must respond.

These advantages exist in tension with less desirable outcomes, however. The decentralized, mentor-as-college model restricts the flow of information about excellent practices and methods to peers statewide who could use it. Few good channels exist for "scaling up" promising ideas. It is difficult for mentors to keep abreast of colleagues' evolving interests and specializations. People are forced to reinvent existing practices when they don't have regular channels for hearing about and sharing information. In "open systems," especially, where the flow of information to and from various parts of the institution is dynamic and nonlinear, access to information is particularly critical. As Birnbaum (1988) observes, "[S]ystems can respond only to stimuli to which they are sensitive … data for which no channels exist do not come to [people's] attention" (p. 188).

In order to avoid dysfunctional adaptations (Argyris, 1964), mechanisms need to be found to communicate important information to the right people, and useful information to peers, without adopting the kind of one-size-fits-all measure that compromises the integrity of the Colleges' locally focused, learner-driven model.

3. Dissonance Exists between Centers and the Whole

Regional locations of the college tend to function like mini-colleges rather than parts of a single system: micro-cultures, goals, and practices develop at diverse locations that often are only loosely linked to other locations or to the college as a whole. Regional cultures tend to be collegial, while the college's institutional model is bureaucratic. Envisioning one's center or unit as part of a whole runs counter to physical constraints as well as budgetary realities that, historically, create intra-organizational incentives to compete for resources. The difficulty of being heard or understood regardless of one's position in the system contributes to uncertainty and can foster discontent.

In effect, many of the organizing principles on which the college is based unintentionally create silos that, while functional in terms of promoting autonomy and inspiring allegiance among the members of dispersed groups, detract from the ability of the college to function as one college. Structural issues are part of the problem, as is the nature of college life itself.

An institution like ESC – spread across a state, operating in regional and remote locations, offering studies online, face-to-face, and in blended formats – clearly fits the definition of a complex organization. Horizontal forms of coordination like meetings and task forces are typically used to supplement vertical controls in such organizations (i.e., standard operating procedures, hierarchy, etc.). Their use in a dispersed environment like ESC tends to reinforce one's allegiance to center cultures and local mores, though. At units, which are so small that most employees interact with each other on a daily basis, local solutions to problems are both necessary and desirable.

Furthermore, while the managerial need to coordinate activities has grown in recent years, ESC still functions mainly as a collegium, in which members have equal status, decision-making is egalitarian and democratic, and thoroughness and deliberation are prized. Unfortunately, as Birnbaum (1988) notes, because collegial relations are based on the opportunity for regular face-to-face contact, "size … limits the possibility of the development of collegiality on an institutional level to relatively small campuses" (p. 93). Two cultural systems are therefore in play and potentially at odds with one another as ESC grows larger and more complex: a locally-driven culture that builds community and encourages people to feel like working together – typical of loosely coupled systems in which "the elements of the system are responsive to each other, but … [seek to] preserve their own identities and some logical separateness" (pp. 37–38); and a bureaucratic culture that, while less personal, facilitates decision-making, advances the college's statewide footprint, and ensures consistency and predictability in students' experience of the college.

Balancing the progressive impulse to respond locally to students' unique circumstances with system-wide issues of academic quality, curricular oversight, and the need to serve students equitably across all divisions of the college is another creative tension facing the college.

4. Consistency in Instructional and Administrative Practices is Rare

New employees learn that at ESC "there are no policies, only practices." In keeping with the learner-centered commitments of progressive, adult-serving institutions, responses to particular situations vary; exceptions are readily available; most curricula are governed by guidelines, rather than requirements; and most "rules" governing students' progress are advisory, e.g., when in their careers students should submit degree plans; which studies are essential to a particular degree; how late in a term a mentor may consider a student to have "attended"; what content should be covered in the College's one required course (Educational Planning). Student-

centeredness often competes with academic integrity, equity, and reliability in decisions about enrollment, grading, and student service. In brief, there are few policies to guide people's work.

Flexibility in responding to student needs and interests is, of course, what the founders intended. The progressive focus on individual differences, student interests, and student-directed learning fosters a culture in which mentors and administrators are willing to go to some lengths to accommodate learner issues, an attitude encouraged by the lack of authoritative rules that one finds in most other higher education institutions. This focus parallels emerging trends in higher education (Benke, Davis, & Travers, 2012; Fain, 2012a, 2012b), as well as accrediting agencies (Pond, 2002), which are revisiting previously held assumptions about the nature of the educational experience and the resources required to ensure academic quality. In nearly all respects, the 'post-disruption' context for accreditation and quality assurance mirrors the Empire State model, emphasizing local, open, flexible, collaborative, dynamic, tailored, and learner-centered approaches to education.

"Student centeredness" is neither one-dimensional nor unidirectional, however. Creative tensions abound in the interstices between helping students achieve individual goals and ensuring that such goals are of high quality, capable of being assessed in relation to internal and external standards, and adaptive to the skills and learning needs of the students involved. Affording mentors great leeway in interpreting academic guidelines requires, conversely, some method for ensuring that those guidelines are regularly reviewed, discussed, revised based on evidence of students' learning success or lack thereof, and used as a source of inspiration for the development of student learning outcomes. Lack of consensus about what constitutes student progress or acceptable oversight of student work is a source of confusion for both students and mentors.

Remaining true to the College's organizing principles in the face of a growing need for some degree of orthodoxy suggests that the tension between serving students well and ensuring that those services lead to productive, meaningful outcomes receives sustained attention.

5. Visions Compete for Priority

The College is proud of its origins and points to its multiple delivery systems as a strength. The heated debates of Chickering and Baritz (its first provost for instructional resources) over the primacy of individualized vs. structured study still engage the college, however; as do concerns as ESC moves into a new age about the relative priority of online, group, and guided independent study. Faculty and programs associated with one mode of learning tend to see curriculum, policy, and culture in one way, while others may view it in another way. Similar differences occur between disciplines, and between newer faculty and those who have been with the institution for some years. Multiple and competing views can be held together, but they can also be a source of intransigence, discord, and confusion.

Because the college is relatively new (having celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2011), and its founding saga so compelling, its organizational history is well-known by most employees. New arrivals are advised to read Bonnabeau's (1996) excellent *The Promise Continues: Empire State College – The First Twenty-Five Years*; and a fair number of employees hired within the first five years of the college's existence still remain. In an institution in which symbols, myths, and significant events provide a backdrop for current discussions about the college's direction, this history plays a substantial role.

Institutional culture can both facilitate and inhibit institutional effectiveness. Organizations with strong cultures, often founded during times of dramatic change, help employees cope with uncertainty, reconcile contradictions, and resolve dilemmas (Bolman & Deal, 1984, p. 151). They provide a sense of clarity when organizational processes are substantially ambiguous or unclear, offering explanations for otherwise perplexing events. As Birnbaum (1988) notes, culture "induces purpose, commitment, and order; provides meaning and social cohesion; and clarifies and explains behavioral expectations" (p. 72).

On the other hand, institutional myths can be stubbornly resistant to change, even when internal or external circumstances alter considerably. At present, the College is facing challenges to its institutional vision on three fronts: (a) it is among the leaders in the national conversation about college completion – which privileges those parts of the college that can provide low-cost, scalable study alternatives; (b) traditional colleges are now moving into the same markets, forcing the College to find new sources of students – often those with professional goals or employers seeking structured learning opportunities; and (c) the College's size and complexity compel its administrative and budgetary models to become more bureaucratic.

Empire State is, therefore, at a crossroads requiring both practical and symbolic change. How well it adapts its vision to accommodate these changes will determine whether it "re-emerge[s] … stronger, more agile, more creative and poised" to withstand and address the current challenges confronting it (Hancock as cited in Edelman, 2014, The Unique Experience section, para. 5).

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

As discussed above, the college's founding philosophy carries with it a set of organizational tensions that it strives to keep in balance. These tensions are creative, in that they offer opportunities to resolve longstanding structural issues while retaining values and features that have informed the College's work since its inception. Many of the principles now being cited as "disruptive innovation" have long been in place at ESC: Rosen (2013) predicts, for example, that 25 years from now higher education will be more mobile, personalized, focused on learning outcomes, disaggregated, accessible, global, and "cooler." To a significant extent, Empire State College has embraced these qualities for years, a true testament to Boyer's vision.

A critical distinction exists between the principles underlying the formation of the College and those of the new paradigm, however. The forces driving the current national conversation are about access, degree completion, reducing costs, finding new sources of revenue, employing business models to increase the efficient production of outcomes, and customizing and packaging educational 'products' for students. The radical, student-centered vision that prompted the founding of Empire State College, on the other hand, took its inspiration from the idea that the experience itself, rather than the outcome of graduating, was paramount. The organizational schizophrenia occasioned by the clash of goals is significant. As the College moves forward it will be important to bring the two models more closely together to advance understanding and organizational coherence. In turn, re-envisioning the College's progressive foundations in light of the changing environments in which it is now operating will allow the College to affirm its distinctive character while addressing many of the systemic issues discussed above.

First among them is the opportunity to create better systems to help people carry out their work. Intellectual and educational policy agendas have converged on a set of changes that many see as irreversible, including changes to disciplinary boundaries, pathways to degree completion, and options for delivering instruction (Ward, 2013). Finding ways to reduce the uncertainty caused by transformative change in the external environment is both critical and challenging for an institution like Empire State College. Developing systems that enable people to communicate more effectively, coordinate their activity, process information, anticipate problems, clarify expectations, and better support student learning will require attention to the interdependent nature of college functions.

Second, the College has an opportunity to validate the quality of the student learning that mentors individually judge is taking place. By finding workable methods to extrapolate what mentors know and see to the institutional level, the information can be used to increase learning outcomes, inform the way that mentors plan and deliver studies, contribute to the College's ability to respond to local needs, and allow local administrators to be more proactive in anticipating student demand and mentor capacity. Better data will also foster innovation, providing a platform for faculty to experiment with creative methods for organizing studies within and across programs, centers, and AOS's. More robust academic program review processes will enhance quality by facilitating regular discussion of the review findings.

Third is the opportunity to ensure that Empire State stays true to its mission and progressive heritage by continuing to serve society. A key incentive for Ernest Boyer, today's leaders have recognized that "… combinations of multiple pathways with multiple delivery options [are] necessary if we are to fulfill the expectations of mass higher education" (Ward, 2013, p. 16). SUNY Chancellor Zimpher's stated goal of enrolling 100,000 new adult students in online programs during the next several years foreshadows increases in structured and online programs, modular short courses, certificates, and graduate degrees. Retaining key ESC features at their core is not only essential for student success and institutional integrity, but will help

bridge the gap between present circumstances and those that animated the college at its founding.

Fourth, perhaps most importantly, the College has an opportunity to reaffirm one of its most enduring values by promoting and enhancing individuality in learning. At a time when higher education is in the process of discarding an old paradigm – a teacher-centered, static, prescriptive, model grounded in the concept of time as constant/learning as variable (Pond, 2002) in favor of ESC's learner-centered, dynamic, flexible, and tailored model – these laudable student-centered features no longer set the College apart. What does distinguish Empire State College from other institutions, though, is its continuing focus on individual learners, and on the quality of the educational experience made possible through the interaction of mentors and students. The depth and significance of this relationship, which at its best inspires personal and social transformation, is the realization in practice of Boyer's vision of "a new kind of college based on student learning." As the college continues to strengthen and adapt its systems to meet the demands of a new age, it is this central fact that gives ESC purpose and to which it must remain attached.

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