ROUNDTABLE REPORT

Responding to Work-Force Needs

Views on how colleges can partner with employers to teach students 21st-century skills



THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education[®]





While designing a biology course on the principles of cell culture, one of our Suffolk University professors queried industry veterans and career scientists at area biotech companies. She wanted to know what they were looking for in new hires – what was at the top of their "wish list." There's no questioning the strong demand for research and technical aptitude in the heart of Boston's life sciences community. But these experts emphasized the importance of certain soft skills. They wanted graduates who understood how to design experiments and who could communicate effectively about their work. They were interested in students who had success working on projects in teams and could clearly share their findings with peers and broader audiences.

Like colleges and universities across the country, Suffolk University is acutely aware of the so-called soft-skills gap. Employers often tell us they are looking for those soft skills – including what I think of as the power skills of human interaction – interpersonal and communication skills, adaptability, collaboration, creativity, and emotional intelligence. As the importance of digital, quantitative, and technical skills has increased, we in higher education need to ensure that we also are teaching those skills of human interaction, along with writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills, and that our students are embracing them all with intentionality. These skills are critical to our students' long-term career trajectories. At Suffolk, we are taking a comprehensive and university-wide approach that leverages experiential learning, as that is key to successfully closing the soft-skills gap.

Suffolk University joins the Chronicle of Higher Education in this important conversation about how universities and employers can collaborate more deeply to ensure that graduates are developing the full range of skills needed for success.

One way that we are strengthening the ties between our university and industry is through partnerships and investment in our career services operation with renewed attention to the role of career services professionals in our structure. We view career services as a bridge organization – a critical link between employers and faculty. A robust career services organization, with discipline-specific staff (including in the liberal arts) responsible for supplementing and supporting the faculty's career preparation efforts, can serve as that essential link between industry, faculty, and the curriculum. In that way, the goal of career services extends well beyond helping students with resume writing and internship/job placements (which have always been important and remain so). It also centers on building and maintaining relationships with industry partners, better understanding employer and market needs, and sharing that information with our faculty so that they can more fully align curricular innovation with the professional aspirations of our students.

Maria J. Kelley

Marisa J. Kelly President, Suffolk University

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Photographs by Julia Schmalz

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INTRODUCTION



mployers and higher-education institutions have long collaborated to develop vocational and academic programs that fill gaps in the local and national work force. But today there exists an opportunity to strengthen such partnerships, making them more effective, strategic, and sustainable. To seize on that opportunity, both companies and colleges need to rethink how they work together.

That was the big takeaway from the *Chronicle* discussion with leading experts, which included faculty members, college administrators, association leaders, and an education director of a global-technology company. The goal of the roundtable was to bring together people with diverse perspectives to identify what's working in employer-college partnerships — and what can be improved.



One example participants cited was the Capital Collaborative of Leaders in Academia and Business, or CoLab. Working with 14 companies and 12 universities in the greater Washington area, it recently helped develop a credential students can earn in digital technology. The businesses proposed a list of about 40 skills, and institutions like George Mason University and American University had the flexibility to design programs or stitch together existing courses to impart some or all of them.

That arrangement — employers coming together to define their needs and colleges maintaining the independence to make the academic decisions — is a sign of how new models are emerging to try to bridge the so-called skills gap and make a college education more relevant to today's in-demand jobs.

PANELISTS

Jeanne Contardo is the managing director of the Capital Collaborative of Leaders in Academia and Business (CoLab), which is part of the Greater Washington Partnership, a regional business association. The Capital CoLab helps form partnerships between universities and companies to develop digital-technology skills and resources. She holds a Ph.D. in education policy and leadership studies from the University of Maryland at College Park.

Liza Wilson Durant is the associate dean for strategic initiatives and community engagement for George Mason University's engineering school. In that role, Durant develops partnerships with corporations, government agencies, nonprofits, and other colleges. She is also a professor at the university. She earned a Ph.D. in environmental engineering from the Johns Hopkins University.

Ken Eisner is the director of worldwide education programs at Amazon Web Services. In 2015, he helped start AWS Educate, which is the company's effort to provide elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educators and students with the resources to increase the number of graduates ready to enter a cloud-enabled work force. He holds a master's in business and a master's in public policy from Georgetown University.

Brian K. Fitzgerald is the chief executive officer of the Business-Higher Education Forum. The organization facilitates partnerships between businesses and academic institutions to develop programs that serve emerging STEM and other work-force needs. He earned a doctoral degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.









PANELISTS



Rajni Goel is a professor at Howard University's business school, where she also served as a chair of the Information Systems and Supply Chain Management Department. She helped revamp the institution's cybersecurity curriculum in partnership with local businesses. She holds a Ph.D. in information technology from George Mason University.



Laura W. Hanson is the associate vice president for corporate solutions and apprenticeship at the Tidewater Community College, in Norfolk, Va. She develops programs and partnerships to meet the needs of local and regional employers. She holds a law degree from Regent University.

MODERATOR



Ian Wilhelm is an assistant managing editor for Chronicle Intelligence, a division of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He produces reports, events, and webinars to help campus leaders understand and solve pressing problems in higher education. He has a master's in journalism from Columbia University.



"The one thing that all professors raise in this discussion is: Is industry leading the curriculum?" –Rajni Goel

The Potential for New Partnerships

he relationships between colleges and employers are changing. They are looking for less transactional, one-off partnerships than they have in the past, said participants at the *Chronicle* roundtable. And with more students seeking tech-driven skills like data analysis, there's a broader range of academic departments that are possibly interested in developing such expertise with the input of companies.

For their part, businesses, especially technology companies, are learning more about how to work with higher ed. One of the panelists, Ken Eisner, of Amazon Web Services, discussed his company's approach to fostering more graduates with expertise in cloud computing. Through its education arm, AWS Educate, it offers a wide range of resources to develop academic programs. For example, it provides a framework that breaks down what cloud-based skills students should learn at different stages; faculty members can adapt it to design a curriculum.

Eisner said the goal isn't to tell professors what to teach or to partner with an institution to infringe on its academic independence. The goal is to develop a "common language" that both sides can reference and create a basis to learn from each other.

Ian Wilhelm: I want to ask a broad question to start. How well does higher education collaborate with business to shape curricula? If

you want, rate it on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the top mark.

Laura W. Hanson: I'd look at it as a 2 or 3.

Jeanne Contardo: It depends. Some higher-ed sectors do much better than others because it's baked into their DNA. Certainly community colleges have a tradition of doing it. It's the four-year colleges that sometimes have a harder time collaborating because they either don't need to, from a resource standpoint, or they don't realize the need to because they're in an older model.

Ken Eisner: I would give it about 3.5. Three or four years ago, I probably would have given it about 1.5 to 2. But we are seeing collaboration take place.

Liza Wilson Durant: Well, I'll bump up it to a 4. George Mason has a history of developing curricula to support the tremendous Northern Virginia industry and federal-government sector. An example would be our program in cybersecurity engineering that was developed with Northrop Grumman and others. We were also agile in responding to Amazon Web Service's interest in cloud computing. It only took us a few months to spin that up.

So industry usually says, "Hey, we have a need, and you all have the course content." And we're able to identify the curriculum, repackage it, and deliver it. **Eisner:** I would give George Mason 4.5. It did announce the first bachelor's degree in cloud computing with us. And that's an example of the speed at which institutions can collaborate if they think differently.

Durant: It's about being responsive to your student needs. And a lot of our students are working and need upskilling.

Brian K. Fitzgerald: It is important to recognize that neither business nor higher ed is monolithic. But the bottom line is both need to do better. One of the ways that we've been able to improve both sides of the equation is to look more deeply at the resources that companies have. Whether it's Northrop Grumman in cybersecurity or AWS in cloud computing, there is an opportunity for faculty and engineers to work as peers on new, up-to-date curricula.

Wilhelm: Rajni, from your perspective as a faculty member, how well does higher ed collaborate with businesses?

Rajni Goel: I don't think it's doing as well as it should. Academia is very embedded in its culture. When we talk about the different sectors of higher ed, it's also about the different disciplines at the university. We're talking predominantly about STEM. What about all those students that choose a non-STEM area?

If you look at academia as a whole, I would give it a 2. Because, yes, it's working really well in engineering and in business. But I don't see, say, history or the fine arts as involved. There's a lot of room for growth.

Wilhelm: Liza, you mentioned how someone from industry comes calling. How do you vet that offer? How do you determine, OK, this is something we definitely can offer within our curriculum?

Durant: Almost anything that industry comes to us with an interest in, we have some coursework in that area. That coursework, of course, may need to be tailored. We can package the courses. But we're not going to change the curriculum that's within them. We might opt to take a few of those courses and change them to either add or subtract various learning outcomes and exercises. The way we make that decision is on the size of the cohort. If it's a large enough effort, then that signals resources, which we can then invest in adjusting curriculum. If it's a small cohort, then we're likely to offer what we already have.

It becomes an economic decision for the most part. And also how we're able to manage the cohort. And if someone's asking us to teach something — like Excel — that we feel is not something that we need to be teaching, then there's an alternative solution. We would weed out those opportunities.

Goel: In academia there's this notion of having theory, problem solving, and not teaching to just an outcome. The one thing that all professors raise in this discussion is: Is industry leading the curriculum? Or do we as academics look at what industry needs, and then within our curriculum we add a component or not? When companies say, "Teach this particular application," we have to really understand what theory are we really trying to teach? What's the foundation?

Durant: A lot of times it's at the elective level, not at the freshman and sophomore levels where you're teaching critical thinking. Some of the fundamentals like the theoretical principles are taught in the first years. And then it's the applications in the junior and senior years.

A couple of years ago we added blockchain into cybersecurity. It'll probably never go away. But the idea at the time was, Well, we'll put this one in here for a couple of years and see how it goes. And cloud computing can be inserted in a similar way. You can get flexibility in the electives at the higher level.

Hanson: You've both pointed out the advantage that we have in the community-college system where our work-force development and our academic side are so closely integrated. When industry comes to us and says, "We need this skill taught," I don't have to get caught up in the faculty side of, "What's the theory that we're looking at and what are the problem-solving skills?" I can say, "What are the outcomes you're looking for? What are the tangible skills you want folks to have?"

It may not be appropriate for the academic side of the house yet. We may not need to modify curriculum. We may not need to build a certificate. But we can vet it on the workforce side. So the ship-repair industry in our region came to us and said, "We need people who can do welding, pipe fitting, and structural fitting." And that isn't something students get in a degree. But there's an apprenticeship track. If there are enough jobs in the industry

"The challenge is helping higher ed with the right input, the right partnership model, and — this a little bit of hyperbole — helping higher ed move at the speed of business."

–Brian K. Fitzgerald

that can utilize these skills, I don't need to be doing problem solving. I need to be teaching tangible skills.

When we do that on the work-force side, we see how long it's sustainable. If the interest continues, we explore, Do we need to embed this in one of our credit-training programs? What credentials are being earned? How transferable are those? So we're building a pathway from noncredit into credit, into the two-year program, and to a four-year program. The goal is a seamless transition.

Contardo: I've worked in this space of business and education partnerships for about 15 years, and the tone has really shifted. It used to be very transactional. It was much more a contract basis and, "Yeah. I'll let business in if they're going to pay me and give me some money to do something."

Now it's evolving. It makes me hopeful that there is a willingness from higher education to open the door to business in a much more substantive way. But on the flip side, business is then expected to really lean in. You're not allowed to just peek in and start dictating. You're actually going to have to do some work. And so when I look at what we're doing at the Capital CoLab at Greater Washington Partnership, it really is about trying to scale a new type of partnership that exists only in some pockets around the country.

You can't have one-off relationships with every single college in the region. And every college in the region can't have one-off relationships with every single business. There has to be a way to get some efficiencies.

Eisner: The way we did it as a company was we worked to create a cloud-competency framework. We identified the need by talking with customers and partners, and then we defined level one through three knowledge, skills, and abilities. At level one and level two, the framework ensures that students have a pathway of competencies. And competencies that will stay around for the test of time. It's not a specific programming language. It's not a specific database.

At level three, you have some specific skills, but your curriculum is modular. You can insert a hot database, knowledge about XYZ, or the like. It's not that you plop an industry curriculum into an academic environment; they're not fully congruent.

Wilhelm: Brian, do you agree with Jeanne that the conversation has changed, that these relationships are less transactional?

Fitzgerald: We have heard from both sides the need to move from transactional to deep, sustained, strategic partnerships. And one of the ways that our organization enables that is to keep our eye on the leading edge of market intelligence.

We count the jobs, identify the skills, and



look across sectors. For example, in 2016, if you listened to the buzz, everybody needed to be a data scientist. But the majority of jobs are not technical jobs. So what has really happened is that every major company is a technology company today. That's broken down the barriers between traditional STEM efforts and other disciplines.

The other megatrend is that there's a race for talent. And that means companies search for talent in places they've never looked before. It's a much richer context for partnerships.

Wilhelm: What's the typical reaction from a college when you show data on the need for data science to be embedded in a range of majors?

Fitzgerald: Interestingly a few years ago we wrote a piece on data science in the liberal arts. And we brought liberal-arts college presidents in as a focus group. And I thought we'd be laughed out of the room. But the big takeaway was that students are way out in front of their institutions on this.

Students get it. Companies need it. And the challenge is helping higher ed with the right input, the right partnership model, and — this a little bit of hyperbole — helping higher ed move at the speed of business.

Because there's an old saw that when they talk about change, the CEO looks at his watch and the academics look at their calendar. No criticism intended.





"You're completely right that students are expected to come fully baked, ready to go on Day 1, which was not the case even 20 years ago. Today it's like, 'I don't want to talk to you if you can't contribute in some meaningful way on the first week of your work."

–Jeanne Contardo

The Barriers to Growth

o meet the job needs of industry today, especially in the technology sector, broader coalitions of higher-ed institutions and companies need to be built. And, the experts said, regional and state governments need to align policies and make investments to support such work.

While there's a growing effort to expand collaborations between business and higher ed, thanks in part to associations that bring both sides together, one sticking point is faculty members. They often do not have the time to devote to rethinking a curriculum to help serve employer needs, and the incentive structure at colleges often doesn't call out such work. To help, said professors in the discussion, employers could include opportunities for research or experiential learning in partnerships.

Ian Wilhelm: How do you develop the relationships for a successful collaboration to work?

Brian K. Fitzgerald: We use a stratified peerto-peer relationship structure where we've got the CEO talking to the university president; we've got the provost talking to the senior managers about managing the partnership; we've got the faculty and the engineers talking about the curriculum. And it's those peer-topeer relationships as equals that make that partnership work.

Ken Eisner: I challenge that ever so slightly to say that the new relationship actually needs to be consortium driven. You actually need to partner across institutions.

If tech companies continue to recruit in the way that they've been recruiting in the past, which is targeting various institutions and going back to those institutions, we're not going to grow the pipeline. We need to be thinking about inclusivity. So we've focused statewide. For example, it's the Virginia community-college system and George Mason, but also Hampton University and Virginia State University, which are historically black universities.

Rajni Goel: To make it work, it has to be a consortium of industries, too. Universities don't want to train for just one company.

Eisner: Absolutely.

Liza Wilson Durant: As one example, our cybersecurity-engineering program that was developed with Northrop, was also developed with many other companies — and, most importantly, our faculty. The marriage between industry and the faculty was talking about examples of applications for the theoretical skills, knowledge, and ability to various

scenarios. That's where experiential learning comes in. We can't always send our students out for experiential learning. We'd like to. But what we're finding is that industry is not offering us enough opportunities for that. They say they want it, but they don't offer it.

The other thing is money. What we're seeing is that industry is not able to provide training the way it did 40 years ago. They would like to, in some instances, outsource that training. And universities are a great place to go get that training because we're at the cutting edge through our research.

But to train all these people and handle the sheer numbers of tens of thousands of people at our institution, we need resources. And no one is willing to pay for that training that they're outsourcing to the university. We'd love to do it. But if we don't have the resources, we can't do it.

Jeanne Contardo: You're completely right that students are expected to come fully baked, ready to go on Day 1, which was not the case even 20 years ago. Today it's like, "I don't want to talk to you if you can't contribute in some meaningful way on the first week of your work."

The resources issue is key. And in some cases, the hardest part is: Who's going to schedule the meeting? Who's going to make sure that the material gets documented? Who makes sure that we're managing this on a macro-level and encouraging things to move? Oftentimes the very best ideas hit a wall not because they're not great ideas and not because people don't want to do them but because there's just a shortage of time.

Eisner: We've found the biggest blocker to scale is faculty readiness, which includes the availability of educators. We're providing greater support around professional development and also figuring out what the best ways are to incentivize educators to add this new curriculum in.

In terms of economic incentive to the schools, we have seen a vast growth in terms of the number of students who register for programs Amazon has supported. That contributes, obviously, to overall tuition revenue. But we see faculty as the flashpoint. **Rajni Goel:** But a lot of the incentives for professors are in research. Research needs to be a vocabulary word in that ecosystem of public-private partnerships.

Durant: To Rajni's point, if industry won't provide resources for faculty hires, then it might be good to see them investing in R&D in the areas that they're interested in and hope that that research will inform curriculum development. Hopefully, it'll make the faculty also better at teaching and have more scenarios to provide in the class.

Wilhelm: What's the thing that employers and higher ed have to learn from each other?

Fitzgerald: The focus on talent has brought a new and better understanding and a common language. Business really needs new hires or reskilling current employees. But the biggest chasm is velocity.

Contardo: The other piece — and someone else coined this term so I can't claim any ownership - is this idea of mutual accountability with differentiated responsibility. Just being really clear about what everyone's dance space is. And that means, frankly, having an intermediary who understand both the business and the education side. And so I would no more tell my university partners how to embed knowledge, skills, and abilities in their curriculum than I would try to parent their children, right? That is not my role. Our role is to help get from business what are those knowledge, skills, and abilities. And then universities, you figure out how you're going to do that.

Wilhelm: Liza, do faculty ever push back and say, "OK, hold it, we're not going to change our program?"

Durant: The numbers of students that are coming to George Mason are exponentially growing. The faculty hires are not. We've doubled the size of the faculty in engineering and computer science. But it's still in no way anywhere near the student-faculty ratio that we want it to be.

So, yes, sometimes faculty say, "You want

"If tech companies continue to recruit in the way that they've been recruiting in the past, which is targeting various institutions and going back to those institutions, we're not going to grow the pipeline."

–Ken Eisner

us to offer a different kind of thing than we're offering already. We don't have enough bandwidth. You'll have to hire another faculty person." And we don't have the resources to do that. If we had more resources, we could hire more faculty. And we could do more of what industry wants us to do. It's very simple, actually.



"I talk a lot about teaching to the skills because that's the industry I work with. They want the skills. But they also want someone who can think outside the box and solve a problem when it comes up and not go, 'Oh, well, this isn't in my checklist. What do I do?'"

–Laura W. Hanson

The Soft-Skills Gap

n 2017, the Business-Higher Education Forum and Business Roundtable released a survey that examined what skills employers found hard to hire for. Cybersecurity and data science/ analytics ranked at the top. But other attributes — critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, having a global viewpoint — also were cited as difficult to find in hires. Indeed, Ken Eisner of Amazon said the global company has its own set of personal competencies it seeks — and it often finds that graduates who come knocking lack them.

To help bridge such gaps, other participants suggested there needs to be a better understanding of what exactly companies are asking for and how they measure the ability of applicants. Liza Wilson Durant, of George Mason, also said that if companies were to get more involved in capstone projects or offer more apprenticeships and internships, students would have a deeper appreciation of the workplace environment and the skills needed to succeed in it.

One possible model referenced in the conversation was the Advanced Cybersecurity Experience for Students at the University of Maryland at College Park. Known as Aces, it started in 2013 with support from Northrup Grumman and includes hands-on learning experiences and co-curricular activities, including a dormitory where freshmen and sophomore students in the program live together and have access to a specially designed lab.

Ian Wilhelm: We've talked mostly about tech skills. But what about the other skills employers say that college graduates don't have. What about creativity, global perspective, and flexible thinking? Can there be a model of

business and college collaboration that gets at these skills?

Ken Eisner: Absolutely. The terminology of soft skills has bothered me for a long time, and I've wondered if they encompass the competencies technology companies need. Amazon has 14 different leadership principles. And I wonder, does education set up students to move at the speed that we need? Because I guarantee you when somebody comes into Amazon Web Services, they will be shocked at how fast we move. Also, are we teaching students to iterate and to learn from failure? Are we teaching them to think big? And are we teaching them to deal with ambiguity?

With jobs and industry changing, when an interviewee comes to me and asks, "What's my typical day like?" — there is no typical day at Amazon. So are colleges teaching all the right competencies, the soft skills, for that type of environment?

Liza Wilson Durant: I would love to see a focus on capstone projects and experiential opportunities to meet these workplace skills. Or it could be a business project brought in for us to advise on. Students might be better at some of the competencies that you're talking about if they could gain practical experience of applying what they know. It might help with that iterative thinking. I'd love to see more opportunities of that from industry.

Rajni Goel: What would make it scalable is if there is a structure at the university, a program where companies come in and suggest a capstone. And then the professors can say, "I need a capstone for my history class that involves doing research." If it's not formalized and it's not structured, it's only as good as that "I would love to see a focus on capstone projects and experiential opportunities to meet these workplace skills. Students might be better at some of the competencies that you're talking about if they could gain practical experience of applying what they know."

–Liza Wilson Durant

one individual faculty member who by chance knows that one person at the company.

Laura W. Hanson: These hard-to-hire skills that we referenced all go back to that theory in higher education. I talk a lot about teaching to the skills because that's the industry I work with. They want the skills. But they also want someone who can think outside the box and solve a problem when it comes up and not go, "Oh, well, this isn't in my checklist. What do I do?"

I don't think you can do a class on any of these skills, but I think that they have to be embedded in every class, every assignment. It's the process of how do I get to an answer? What are the steps that I've gone through? How do I eliminate choices?

Wilhelm: That sounds like critical thinking. But is there a mismatch between what is taught at colleges and what employers say they want?

Goel: Academia is thinking, "This is what we do. We're teaching problem solving and critical thinking." So what is the measurement that industry is using to say graduates are missing some of these skills? If I learn that, than as a professor I can say, "Oh, that's the way they measure innovation. That's the way they measure critical thinking." How does academia know what needs to be done?

Brian K. Fitzgerald: The skills have to be broken down. When we work with our members to create a learning experience, it's not all about the courses. We examine the skills that can be acquired in work-based learning opportunities and then the personal attributes, the critical thinking, expert communications, ability to work in teams.

This is exactly what happened with the Advanced Cybersecurity Experience for Students program at College Park. The college and the company viewed the program in a holistic fashion and mapped it against learning outcomes, skill development, and personal attributes. One of the first courses taught is ethics.

Wilhelm: Final thoughts. What are the issues you're wrestling with today?

Jeanne Contardo: I'll tell you what we are focused on right now, and I don't have the answer yet. But it's what is a really crisp, clear definition of success? How do you measure success incrementally? How do you keep both sides of the partnership feeling like there's progress and communicating in a way that is allowing everyone to have wins?

Eisner: From our side, we are seeing demand that is blowing our mind. We're queuing up states. We're queuing up countries. And it's because they're all identifying this massive skill gap.

My call to action is to private colleges to think differently about partnerships and collaboration. Amazon can align to academic speak, we're willing to put skin in the game and can convene other employers. We can put stuff together at scale quickly.

The laggers are largely private institutions. We could see quick moves from them around sharing curricula, sharing best practices, and sharing students as they transfer. It just requires a different mind-set. "Businesses and Universities Team Up on a New Technology Credential," by Nick Anderson, *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2019

"Creating Purposeful Partnerships: Business and Higher Education Working Together to Build Regional Talent Ecosystems for the Digital Economy," the Business-Higher Education Forum, 2019

"Reskilling: A Solution for the Digital Skills Gap," by Brian K. Fitzgerald and Michael Fenlon, the Business-Higher Education Forum, 2019

"The Innovation Imperative: The Buzz, the Barriers, and What Real Change Looks Like," by Goldie Blumenstyk and Lee Gardner, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 2019

"The Boeing Blueprint: What Happens When a Corporate Giant Sets Its Sights on Higher Education?," by Lindsay Ellis, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 26, 2019

"Why a New Kind of 'Badge' Stands Out From the Crowd," by Goldie Blumenstyk, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 24, 2019

ACTIONS TEACHER

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