

# Assessment in Space Designed for Experimentation: The University of Washington Libraries Research Commons

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## Abstract

Since opening in 2010, the University of Washington Libraries Research Commons has used a number of quantitative and qualitative assessment methods to evaluate its space, services and programs. Because it was designed for constant experimentation and change, Research Commons assessment has been driven by the desire to stay true to user needs, make the case for growth, and test new models of space design, programming, and services. This paper will describe assessment activities and projects kept in spirit with the experimental, agile nature of the space, and how the focus shifted from space assessment to programmatic assessment. In order to respond to changing user needs and push for innovation, the Research Commons has evolved to examine space, services, and programs in an integrated holistic manner. This has allowed the staff to not only understand what users do within the space and their preferences, but also how effective are programming and services offered at meeting those user needs.

## Introduction

The UW Libraries Research Commons opened in 2010, and was designed as a collaborative space focused on supporting the research process and fostering interdisciplinary connections. It is also intended as an experimental space that allows the UW Libraries to innovate as it tests programming, services, and space design. Considering the primary focus and mission of the Research Commons, assessment must consider not only the physical space itself, but also the services and programming being offered.

Assessment in libraries is evolving from a focus on collections, utilization, and services to user-centered outcomes. In recent years, there has been an effort in our field to examine tying space assessment to student learning.<sup>1</sup> Referring to Pine and Gilmore's *The Experience Economy*, Forrest and Bostick suggest in their article "Welcoming, Flexible, and State-of-the-Art: Approaches to Continuous Facilities Improvement" that libraries can view themselves as transitioning into the experienced-based economy, in which the total customer experience becomes central to measuring success. Beyond just evaluating patron interactions with resources and services, research libraries are increasingly looking at how these things impact user outcomes such as the transformation of student learning and improvement in the quality of research. This transition moves libraries staff from the role of gatekeepers and assistants, and into the role of collaborative partners. They point out that a decline in large-scale financial investments in library facilities renovations, combined with this emphasis on user outcomes, forces libraries to innovate our spaces and services on a more rapid cycle.<sup>2</sup>

In his essay, "Flip the Model: Strategies for Creating and Delivering Value," Mathews argues that, in today's constantly changing information and learning environment, librarians need to have an eye for innovation and must continually reexamine their roles to adjust to users' needs. Libraries must continually evaluate how they create and deliver value.<sup>3</sup> Considering the nature of the Research Commons as an experimental space designed to evolve and change, it is critical to design and continually evaluate our assessment to ensure that the space and programming are measuring for the desired outcomes. Assessment in an experimental space can act as applied research, allowing for incremental improvement to services and programs.<sup>4</sup>

Nitecki argues that in the experience-based economy, library spaces are an important factor to consider as librarians move into the new roles of collaborator and facilitator in learning and creating knowledge. The value of space, physical or virtual, can only be determined in how it supports the activities and experiences of its users, and assessment should be designed to take that into consideration.<sup>5</sup> This allows for creating user-centered renovation and refreshment, which has been shown to have a positive impact on space utilization in commons areas of libraries.<sup>6</sup>

This paper examines assessment aimed at measuring whether the user outcomes and preferences are achieving the goals and missions set for an experimental, ever-changing space.

### **Background/Description of Research Commons**

The UW Libraries Research Commons is a 15,000-square-foot renovated space located in the Suzzallo-Allen Library, the largest of the 13 libraries on the UW Seattle campus. The brightly colored space is designed for flexibility and collaboration, featuring movable furniture, large screens for sharing, and whiteboard tables, panels and wall surfaces. Booths, alcoves, and semi-private rooms can be reserved by university students, faculty and staff. Technology tools offered to support collaboration include projectors, microphones, and whiteboard markers. The development of the Research Commons addresses the Libraries' goal of responding to the transition away from solitary, print-based scholarship and toward collaborative sharing of ideas in a public space. It also reflects the desire to create spaces that support the needs of students and faculty whose coursework and research are increasingly in digital form. Finally, it reflects the growing trend in creating flexible library spaces that mirror the future work spaces of students and supports their work through all stages of the research process.

Positioned within the Reference and Research Services Division of the Libraries, the Research Commons was initially staffed with one .75 librarian and one part-time graduate student, with operational support provided by the division's manager of operations. Staffing has increased and now includes 2 full-time librarians, 4 part-time graduate students, and 7 undergraduate students. The Research Commons was designed with a single service point, a Help Desk staffed initially by librarians, staff, and students from multiple library units.

Services include consultations and workshops provided by graduate student staff from the Libraries and campus partner units. The Graduate Funding Information Service provides graduate students with one-on-one guidance and workshops on how to search for research

funding opportunities. Research Commons graduate student staff also provide advising for students and faculty on citation management tools. Services provided by partners from outside the Research Commons include drop-in writing help provided by the Odegaard Writing and Research Center, and a Design Help Desk, supported by the UW College of Engineering and UW Design Division. This service offers students, faculty, and staff assistance with data visualization, presentation design, and other visual work related to research and teaching.

While the space is designed to meet the needs of students regardless of level, services are primarily aimed at graduate students. Given data showing the decline in use of the physical library by graduate students, the UW Libraries had an interest in engaging with this population around their research needs in a library space. A strong partnership with the UW Graduate School aids in the development and promotion of these services.

Programs piloted by Research Commons staff are designed to encourage cross-disciplinary sharing of research. Two of the best examples of this are:

- **Scholars' Studio**, a quarterly series where graduate students from across the university gather and present their research in a 5-minute lightning talk. Each quarter a theme is chosen that will speak to students in humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Graduate students doing research on that theme are invited to present, through a call for proposals. Students are selected to present at each quarter's event, which is attended by an interdisciplinary audience of faculty, staff, and students. Guidance is provided to students on how to effectively present their work to those outside their discipline and how to craft a presentation using a template with slides timed to auto-advance. At each Scholars' Studio, a librarian is also selected to present a 5-minute opening talk on how the theme relates to library collections, services and/or resources. Past themes include "Predictions," "Robot," "Disaster," and "Water". This series is co-hosted by the UW Graduate School.
- **Collaborating with Strangers (CoLAB)**, a series of 2-hour workshops held quarterly, where students, faculty and staff engage in 3-minute speed meetings, sharing their current research interests and assets. Created by Bess de Farber, Libraries Grants Manager at the University of Florida, the CoLAB Planning Series<sup>®</sup> inspires potential research partnerships across disciplines, and helps participants build confidence in speaking about their own work<sup>7</sup>. Attendees fill out a paper profile, enabling them to quickly share their research projects, skills, and networks with others. A post-workshop website is created to encourage participant follow-up with their new connections. In 2013, the Research Commons librarian applied for funding to bring de Farber to the UW campus for a 3-day training, in which a group of subject liaison librarians learned about the CoLAB process and the facilitation of workshops. In the 2013-2014 academic year, we held three interdisciplinary Collaborating with Strangers workshops in the Research Commons. Subject librarians facilitate and participate in the workshops, offering an example of non-traditional librarian engagement with students and faculty.

## **Evolution of Research Commons Assessment**

The UW Libraries has a strong culture of assessment. The Libraries' organizational structure includes a Director of Assessment and Planning, a Libraries Assessment and Metrics Team and a half-time Assessment Coordinator. Since 1992, the Libraries have conducted a large-scale Triennial Survey of students and faculty regarding use, preference, satisfaction, and importance of library services and resources as a whole. In 2002, the Libraries began distributing a second user survey, the In Libraries Use Survey, also on a 3-year cycle.<sup>8</sup> This survey is given to users entering every library location on campus during sample times, asking questions about use of library physical spaces. These surveys help the Libraries prioritize services, improve spaces, reallocate budgets, and inform the overall strategic planning process.

After opening in 2010, the Research Commons Librarian, in consultation with the Director of Assessment and Planning, began setting yearly goals and activities for assessment of the space, services, and programs. These activities include involvement in the large-scale surveys mentioned above, as well as short-term assessment projects focused on pertinent questions surrounding Research Commons staffing, services, and space.

In the first year of operations, assessment efforts focused on collecting data that could show how the space was being used, what the space enabled, and what users valued about it. We conducted discussion groups with student users of the space, asking questions about what the space helped them accomplish, what types of furniture and technology met their needs, and what barriers prevent using the space effectively. From these conversations, we learned that students sought out the Research Commons for group work and felt strongly that any changes or improvements should serve to enhance flexibility and collaboration. Students identified areas they felt could be improved to better facilitate group work, and many called out improvements they felt were needed in our online room reservation system. In 2011, our 4th In Libraries Use Survey provided basic demographic and preference data on how users of the Research Commons differed from users of other library spaces on campus. The key takeaways were that users stayed longer than in other libraries spaces, they were predominantly undergraduate, and they wanted more of the same furniture and technology being offered.

Also in 2011, when we received new funding to renovate a space that had been left fallow from the original renovation, we quickly pulled together students, faculty, and staff from partner units for a design charrette. During this workshop, the Research Commons librarian shared existing data on use of the space and led a series of activities with the group. These activities helped clarify user priorities for student and faculty use of the space and brainstormed potential design solutions that might best meet their needs. From this exercise we learned that there was a clear need for larger reservable spaces for group work and graduate student presentations, as well as a need for space that more clearly centralized services within the Research Commons.

A year after opening, it was also clear that there was a need for more operational support in the space, and that we needed to reexamine whether our staffing model was best meeting users' needs. At the time, librarians, professional and student staff members from multiple library units, each staffed the desk for no more than 1-2 hours per week. This made it challenging to ensure

that everyone was kept up-to-date about policies and equipment specific to the changing space. The Research Commons Librarian was frequently pulled away from her work to provide operational support. In 2012, we sampled staff-patron transactions at the Help Desk and found that the large majority fell into three categories: circulation, assistance with directional questions, and questions about technology and equipment specific to the space. Only 3% of questions were considered by staff to be reference or research-oriented.

In 2012, we also began collecting evaluative feedback on a series of workshops hosted in collaboration with the UW Graduate School on topics ranging from citation management to academic networking. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and showed us that the content we were providing was relevant to graduate student needs, but attendance at for these workshops was low. To gain insight on how to better meet graduate student needs, we conducted a series of short, semi-structured interviews with graduate student users of the Research Commons, designed to solicit ideas for programming and service delivery for the 2012-2013 academic year. We learned that graduate students were looking for opportunities to connect with their peers, had a strong interest in building presentation skills, and that international graduate students desired programs tailored to their specific needs.

The Libraries conducted our 8th Triennial Survey in 2013, which was sent via email to all graduate students and a representative sample of 5000 undergraduate students. The question, "During this academic year have you visited the Research Commons?" was added to this survey. We received a 19% response rate (2,127 surveys returned) from graduate students and a 21% response rate (1,044 surveys returned) from undergraduates. 39% of graduate student and 48.2% of undergraduate student respondents indicated that they have visited the Research Commons, with undergraduate students in their third and fourth years indicating more visits than those in their first two years. Students from across all disciplines were represented in the "visited" responses, with the exception of business and health sciences, programs that are unique in that they have libraries with significant space and services. Additionally, results showed that graduate students who indicated having visited the Research Commons rated importance of and satisfaction with Libraries physical spaces/facilities higher than those who did not indicate visiting. When asked about services that would be most useful to their work, graduate students, as a whole, rated highest support for citation management, publishing, and data management.

### **How Assessment is Used**

Assessment has allowed us to do a number of important things: make the case for growth, iterate quickly keeping the space and programming relevant to user needs, share lessons learned with libraries undertaking similar space renovations, and stop doing things that do not work or support our goals and mission.

Assessment data was used to write grants to support new technology and furniture in the Research Commons. For instance, the UW Student Technology Fee (STF) Committee, which oversees the expenditure of fees collected as part of student tuition, has fully funded two grants

providing collaborative technology including screens, projection, and sound systems in reservable spaces. In 2013, we used data from the surveys and room reservation system in our STF funding proposal, to make the case that the space is utilized and highly visible across campus.

Our 2012 evaluation of transactions at the Help Desk provided evidence that a new staffing model was needed, in order to better utilize the expertise and time of existing staff. Results from the assessment of Help Desk transactions were included in a successfully funded proposal for a small team of student staff who would work this desk exclusively, supporting the specific functions of the space. This student team receives intensive training on Research Commons policies and procedures and is able to provide operational support that greatly aids our programs and space. This decision made better use of librarian and professional staff time and ensured that the questions being asked at the desk were answered by someone deeply familiar with the technology, policies, and services of the space.

Most importantly, assessment has allowed us to make data-driven decisions about changing programs, space, and services to stay true to user needs. The open floor plan and movable furniture have allowed staff to make yearly changes to the layout, based on usage data and feedback collected from the In Libraries Use Survey. Information shared during our discussion groups and design charrette helped us make quick changes to the space when short-term funding was made available. For instance, we used results of the 2011 charrette to create a large reservable seminar room configurable for presentations, workshops, or large group meetings. We also created a Consultation Studio that co-located our research support services into one space. Each of these spaces was constructed with glass walls and flexible furniture that allow us to make changes down the road.

We have also used assessment to inform other libraries within our system. Libraries on our UW Tacoma and UW Bothell campuses have each implemented graduate student lightning talk programs based on the Scholars' Studio series. Being able to share evaluative data from this program has been useful in shaping the success of these programs across the system. In addition, the space has attracted the attention of librarians at other institutions who are investing in renovations of a similar scope. Evaluative data has helped us communicate what is working well, so that other libraries can plan programs and spaces shown to bring results.

Finally, assessment has informed our decisions regarding programs and services that should be discontinued. In the first two years of operation, we offered a drop-in workshop series for graduate students on topics such as citation management, time management, and writing literature reviews. Attendance at these workshops declined, despite the fact that the Libraries and Graduate School increased the promotion of these workshops on campus and that student feedback indicated that we were offering content that graduate students wanted. Given the amount of staff time involved in planning and executing this series, we decided to move to an appointment-based consultation model. We piloted our Citation Management Help service, provided by Research Commons graduate student staff on an appointment basis. Users of this service were surveyed post-consultation to determine if expectations were met and satisfaction

achieved. This data informed the continued development of the service, as well as training materials for future staff. Most recently, we began looking at how to collect and use data from these services for more consistent evaluation and service improvement.

### **The 360-Review**

The Research Commons was swimming in data by the end of the 2012-2013 academic year. We recognized that there were a number of data sources that could potentially reveal information about space use, user preferences for services, and how well we were communicating to target audiences about our programs. This included gate counts, headcounts taken at sample times, data from our room reservation systems, social media, and website analytics. It also included data that measured the effectiveness of online campaigns, such as the click-through rates for Research Commons content in the Graduate School's email newsletter, which reaches all graduate and professional students at the university. While we had reviewed results of our assessment activities, such as survey data and workshop feedback, in order to inform yearly changes to the space and program, we had data from multiple sources that hadn't yet been examined.

In the iterative spirit of the Research Commons, we planned a "360° Review" with Libraries staff, pulling together trends and highlights from multiple data sources for a collective brainstorm. Our goals with these reviews were to look broadly at the data we had been collecting, to take stock of assessment efforts, and to create a more sustainable assessment plan for the upcoming academic year. While the process wasn't scientific, it gave us a chance to reflect on what we had gathered, look for trends, and prioritize assessment efforts. Gathering data from the assessment activities and data mentioned above, we printed graphs and charts that would best illustrate highlights from the data, along with printed samples from qualitative feedback (e.g. survey comments, notes from discussion groups, observations) and photos of the space. These documents were posted on the walls around a large meeting room. Staff circled the room and used whiteboard markers and sticky notes to write down what they felt the data revealed, what questions the data raised, and who might be interested in the data beyond Research Commons staff.

This exercise allowed us to see connections between data and reveal questions we had not considered previously regarding our users, space, and services. It allowed us to corroborate results from multiple assessment projects and data sources, revealing a richer picture of user needs and preferences. It also enabled us to determine what information we weren't capturing. Key themes in the data showed:

- Satisfaction with our space is high. Users want more of the same kinds of furniture and technology, and prefer spaces that offer more visual privacy.
- We have a clear picture of graduate student preferences for service content and delivery, but don't understand whether our efforts at marketing services and programs are effective.

- Students from across departments utilize the Research Commons space, but we don't know how and whether we were enabling cross-disciplinary connection.

This final point revealed something big about our previous assessment efforts. *While we were successful at creating a flexible, user-centered space, our assessment efforts weren't helping us account for our mission to foster interdisciplinary collaboration.*

### **Focus on Interdisciplinary Outcomes**

As the Research Commons entered its fourth year of operation, we decided to focus assessment efforts on better understanding the experiences of users who had participated in our programs designed to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and connection.

In the past, assessment of Scholars' Studio had been limited to a short post-event evaluation form given to attendees, and a brief roundtable discussion with graduate student presenters. While these methods were effective in learning what logistically went well about the event, it did not enable understanding of the outcomes for students chosen to present. In order to gain understanding of the presenter's experience at the event and its potential impact on their research, we conducted interviews with presenters from past Scholars' Studios. Interviews were conducted in winter and spring of 2014 lasting 10 – 20 minutes in length and occurring 3 to 12 months after the event. Interviewers were guided by a script in order to create a consistent interview experience. The questions delved into the student's experience of Scholars' Studio, the program's impact on presenters creating new connections, the effect it had on their research, as well as gathering further information on how the Research Commons and Graduate School can continue to support students.

Questions included:

- Why did they choose to submit a proposal?
- What was their experience of Scholars' Studio? What was valuable? What was challenging?
- How do they currently make connections with colleagues in other disciplines?
- Did Scholars' Studio improve their ability to present and communicate their research?
- Did the experience of presenting, and seeing other presentations, introduce new ideas or make them think about their own research differently?
- How can we better facilitate cross-disciplinary connection during and after Scholars' Studio?

Overall, participants of Scholars' Studio found it to be a valuable experience. For many, it forced out-of-the-box thinking as they developed their presentations to fit within the constraints of timed slides. Most admitted that the timed component was by far the most challenging aspect, followed by determining content to fit the interdisciplinary audience. The presentations at Scholars' Studio did help some of the students rethink their own research as they considered how different disciplines may approach similar research questions.



Others expressed that the theme was very broad and that the other presentations were too different to apply to their research. Disciplinary barriers between sciences, social sciences, and humanities made finding connections difficult. One student suggested that perhaps there should be some sort of cohesive discussion or ending to tie all the talks together. Another student reflected that during the Q&A that having the same question posed to each of the speakers allowed him to consider different viewpoints across disciplines.

Quotes from Scholar's Studio Interview Project Participants:

*I think that it also changed the way I classically thought about my own work. I just do work on race or social groups, but actually that spans a lot of different topics so it was really eye opening in that realm. (PhD Student, Social Sciences)*

*It did introduce me to the full scope of that area, which I can see being helpful just in conversation. (PhD Student, Medicine)*

*In terms of the communication of my research, having that structure where the slides were 20 seconds was really helpful because it made you really condense the information you wanted to say. (PhD Student, Social Sciences)*

The interview also provided the opportunity to solicit feedback on how the Research Commons can continue to support graduate students.

*I think it would be some more advice – I didn't have problems with the slide show and I think that it was very successful in terms of not having too many images. I think I was solid with the text, but for me I was trying to learn ways in order to use a slide efficiently while speaking. (PhD Student, Humanities)*

Feedback from the interviews allowed us to make adjustments in the execution of the following quarters' Scholars' Studio events. Based on the responses we received through surveys and additional interviews those changes proved to be positive.

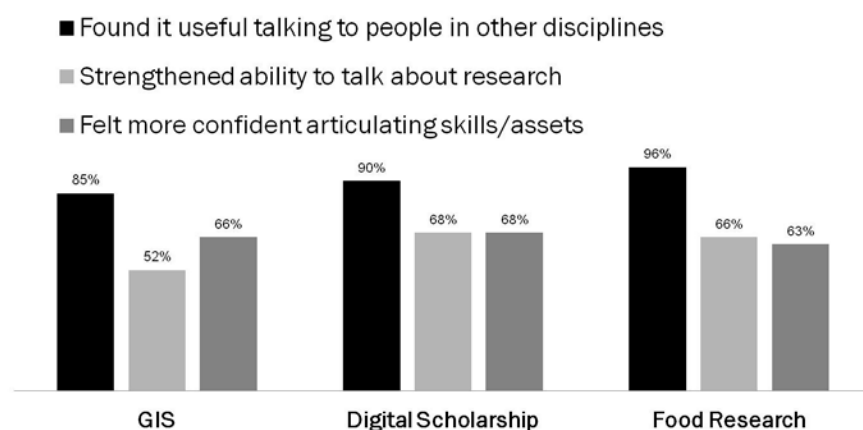
We also examined participant outcomes from the Collaborating with Strangers workshop series, also designed to encourage cross-disciplinary sharing of research. Librarians who received training on the CoLAB process chose interdisciplinary themes that would speak to students in the disciplines they support, and worked with the Research Commons Librarian to plan and promote three workshops held in the space in the 2013-2014 academic year. Each workshop had an average of 27 participants, with a combination of undergraduate, graduate student, faculty, and staff represented at each.

During the fall quarter we held "Collaborating with Strangers on GIS Research" as part of the UW GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Day program. In winter quarter, we partnered with the UW Simpson Center for the Humanities and UW Information Technology to plan a workshop geared towards students and faculty engaged in digital humanities and related

research. In spring quarter, we held “Collaborating with Strangers on Food Research,” working with partners in campus dining services, the university supported community farm, and the Student Food Co-Op to plan and promote the event.

Participants filled out a 7-question survey<sup>9</sup> at the conclusion of the CoLAB workshops that asked about workshop satisfaction, as well as how strongly they agreed that the workshop helped them articulate skills, talk about their research, and connect with people in other disciplines (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Evaluation of CoLAB conducted during 2013/2014 academic year at UW**



Overall, evaluations have been very positive, with 96% of all Research Commons CoLAB workshop participants indicating that they would “attend a similar workshop in the future.” Results were shared with the planning team, and provided a way for us to understand participants’ experiences. As a next step, we would like to do a post-event follow-up to explore whether participation in these workshops had an impact on participants’ research and learning.

## Conclusion

The renovation of the Research Commons into a modern, collaborative, talk-out-loud space that housed no print collections and looked quite different from the rest of the building signaled that something new was happening in the UW Libraries. The renovation accomplished our goal of providing a flexible space designed for collaboration. Equally important, the newness and “designed for change” visage of the space provided a visual illustration of a philosophy that we applied to our services, programs, and assessment. The creation of the Research Commons gave us an opportunity to explain to members of our community that we wanted to engage with them in new and different ways through programs like Scholars’ Studio and CoLAB. It also enabled us to test new programs and a philosophy of iterative change that might have seemed out of place in more traditional library spaces.

During visitor tours of the Research Commons, it is not uncommon hear the question, “Why is this space in a library?” Indeed, as libraries move towards space renovations that increasingly leave out the elements that used to define us (e.g. physical collections, a reference desk), we must dig deep when considering how exactly we are engaging with our users and supporting

their research process in these spaces. In addition to evaluating the success of these spaces by looking at user satisfaction, we must consider how we are measuring engagement with piloted services and programs, and how those services and programs are affected by the space. As Elliot Felix pointed out at the 2012 Library Assessment Conference, library services and spaces are generally designed separately, which hampers user-centered assessment, design, and the effective support of learning and research.<sup>10</sup> In testing and evaluating new programs like Scholars' Studio and CoLAB in our space, we hope to create a more holistic approach to assessment. Libraries are putting an increased emphasis on librarian engagement within the scholarly community, as well as on understanding the changing needs and practices of students, faculty, and staff.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, we need new models for serving our community in library spaces that go beyond transactional help at a desk. What can we learn about these programs that could help us in developing new models of service?

Evaluating a newly renovated space that is designed to allow constant evolution and change has been a work in progress. For staff leading these efforts, it has reaffirmed the importance of having an established library assessment program in place. Data from the large-scale surveys conducted by the Libraries as a whole provided us with reliable data on user demographics, space preferences, and graduate student priorities for research support. These surveys and local staff assessment expertise provided a baseline of information that helped us make informed decisions, while also freeing us to focus on more iterative assessment projects. In addition, the support of Libraries administration for a "freedom to fail" vision of ongoing experimentation and change afforded us the organizational support necessary to test and evaluate new programs.

Finally, our assessment of programs designed to foster interdisciplinary connections have allowed us to identify how we might strengthen these programs to best meet students' needs. At the same time, it has revealed how much more we have to understand about how cross-disciplinary research works, and how we might best support it. How do students and faculty make connections that will impact their research? And what are the outcomes for librarians who participate in these programs? There is more work to do to examine these questions and new program models to come.

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