

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL EDITION ON ADMINISTRATION AND ADMINISTRATORS IN CANADIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: THE SPECIFICITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

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Abstract

This article introduces the Special Edition devoted to Canadian higher education administration and administrators. It situates its contributing articles within the context of the dominant themes noticed in the extant research literature: neo-liberal and managerial shifts, gender and race career asymmetries, macro- and micro-politics, and professional identities; and highlights their salient contributions. It identifies some of the confusion around the specificity of higher education administration and presents a definition that clarifies how administration differs from management, leadership, and governance, as well as circumscribes the role of academic and career administrators in relation to those of administrative staff members. The article closes with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: higher education, administration, management, leadership, administrators

Résumé

Le présent article, en guise d'introduction au numéro spécial sur l'administration de l'enseignement supérieur canadien, présente les articles du numéro spécial et montre comment ils contribuent aux thématiques explorées par la recherche actuelle, c'est-à-dire la recrudescence des approches néolibérales et managériales en administration, les inégalités persistantes liées au genre et à la racialisation des administrateur/riche/s, les comportements politiques des organisations et des individus, et l'identité professionnelle des administrateur/riche/s. L'article met aussi en lumière la confusion qui règne autour de l'utilisation des termes administration, gestion, leadership, gouvernance et administrateur/riche. En réponse, il présente une définition de l'administration de l'enseignement supérieur qui précise sa spécificité et identifie comment celle-ci se distingue de la gestion, du leadership et de la gouvernance, en plus d'identifier les différences entre les termes administrateur/riche/s et personnels administratifs. L'article se termine en proposant quelques pistes à suivre pour les recherches à venir.

Mots-clés : enseignement supérieur administration, gestion, leadership, administrateurs

Introduction

Higher education institutions present singular challenges for administrators. By essence, they train individuals to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and to treat authority

with a healthy dose of suspicion. Their faculty and staff members also enjoy a fair modicum of job security. Their faculty members specifically further enjoy academic freedom and tenure, which protects them from undue influence, but also direction, and allows them to be openly critical of

their institutions. The size and complexity of higher education institutions and the nature of their research and teaching activities hinders coordination efforts within and across units. Finally, their governance invites and gives voice to a broad range of stakeholders, which ultimately shape the directions administrators may follow, beyond the constraints set by provincial regulations. Nonetheless, higher education administrators are not without power. They shape how decisions are made and how policy becomes action, and understanding who administrators are and what work they do is an essential piece of the higher education puzzle.

The present Special Edition foregrounds the domain of higher education administration and its administrators. It collects peer-reviewed articles reporting on studies focusing on administrators' recruitment and selection, identity development, collaboration and reciprocity, and transitions. In this article, we start by providing a definition of higher education administration that highlights its specificity and differentiates it from management, leadership, and governance. We then draw a portrait of the extant literature on Canadian higher education administration before going over the key findings and contributions of each contributing article. We close with suggestions for future research.

Higher Education Administration and Administrators: Definitions and Differences with Management, Leadership, and Governance

Higher education administration represents either a set of roles and activities or a set of individuals occupying these roles and responsible for these activities. As a set of individuals, the term is used to refer to the group of administrators in an organization: "the Administration." As a set of roles and related activities, higher education administration is concerned primarily with setting direction and overseeing operations for an organization or a unit, and typically includes activities of supervision, communication, leadership, planning, coordination, negotiation, and decision making (Bose, 2012; Hill, 2003; Mintzberg, 1994; Webber, 2016). These activities take place in a way that is specific to higher education institutions. This specificity stems from the specificity of teaching and research operations (Musselin, 2007); academic administrators' reduced authority (Hellowell & Hancock, 2001); constituents' number, variety, and power (Gmelch, 2002); and unique administrative

processes such as admissions, promotions and tenure, degree-granting, and government oversight (Goonen & Blechman, 2000).

Because these activities are in many ways related to other activities, confusion may emerge. This is especially true with management, leadership, and governance; activities which overlap with administration. Case in point, in putting together the call for proposals and discussing with authors, we received several questions about the differences between administration and management, leadership, and governance, and between administrators and administrative staff members. This lack of shared understanding regarding the boundaries of higher education administration is not surprising. It exists in practice; for example, in how roles are named and framed (e.g., Lavigne, 2018a; Lavigne et al., 2022; Lavigne & Sá, 2021), and beyond the higher education literature (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Kellerman, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015), where polarizing and misleading definitions of administration, leadership, and management are commonplace (e.g., Caldwell, 2003; Chiu et al., 2017; Zaleznik, 1977). Nonetheless, when we compare the specifics of higher education administration, management, leadership, and governance, clear and meaningful differences emerge. These circumscribe the specificity of higher education administration and differentiate it from other related spheres of activity. We explore each in turn, starting with management, then clarify how administrator and administrative staff roles differ.

Higher Education Administration and Management

Administration and management are closely related. They both refer to either a set of individuals or a set of roles and activities concerned with setting direction for an organization or a unit, and overseeing production (Simon, 1945/1997). Historically, some scholars have differentiated the two terms with regards to their focus, with administrators being focused on setting directions, and managers on overseeing production, creating an ambiguous continuum of roles in between (see Sheldon, 1924/2003). Other scholars have argued instead that the two were, in practice, indistinguishable, yet that administration had been favoured in reference to public, parapublic, and not-for-profit organizations, and management for private and for-profit organizations (Bose, 2012).

This distinction between organizational categories,

that is, administration in public, parapublic, and not-for-profit organizations, and management in private and for-profit organizations, has led scholars, in the wake of new public management (NPM) reforms in public administration, to explore the norms and values associated with each organizational category and associate them respectively with administration and management (Funck & Karlsson, 2020). For these scholars, administration and management are similar in what they do, but not in how they do it (du Gay, 2000). Administration, in contrast to management, is a vocation instead of a profession. It gives prevalence to following rules, as opposed to meeting objectives, and ensuring due process, instead of maximizing efficiency. It emphasizes responsibility over authority, meeting legal requirements over seeking effectiveness, ensuring fair and equal treatment instead of allowing case-by-case decisions, favouring proven methods over innovation, and serving the public over controlling costs (Lane, 1994).

However, these distinctions remain problematic. Firstly, both administration and management are used in organizations that follow either set of logics. Most for-profit organizations count both administrators and managers among their ranks, and the same goes for not-for-profit organizations. For example, most Canadian higher education institutions count “administrators” and “managers” roles—for example, research administrators and account managers—that carry limited authority and no direction setting or production facilitation responsibilities. Secondly, favouring specific sets of logics, such as prioritizing efficiency over effectiveness (Stein, 2001), is not wired into a type of organization, may vary across units, and be tied to influential individuals and change when they leave. Thirdly, these different dimensions are not coupled and are not selected collectively. A unit or organization may emphasize responsibility over authority, while also favouring innovation over proven methods. Finally, each dimension is not a dichotomy, but a continuum. Accordingly, organizational units may adopt distinct postures, which, collectively, produces an organizational amalgam that, in practice, cannot easily be reduced to either set of logics (Bryson et al., 2014). As such, while distinguishing between administration and management logics (Lane, 1994) is helpful for understanding how particular organizations change or how specific roles are enacted, they should be used with caution and cannot serve to disambiguate administration from management.

Instead, we must accept that administration and management both refer to setting direction and overseeing production, and may be used interchangeably. In general,

we can say that administration tends to be concerned with direction setting, and management with production oversight. We can also say that administration tends to be used more frequently in public, parapublic, and not-for-profit organizations, while management is favoured in private and for-profit ones. This being said, we must remember that most organizations do not follow these trends and, worse, use both terms, even for roles devoid of direction setting or production oversight responsibilities. In other words, there is no reliable and prevalent distinction between administration and management.

Higher Education Administration and Leadership

The previous section introduced leadership as one of many roles associated with administration. As a role, leadership stands for securing individuals’ support and influencing their behaviour through means others than authority (Oumet, 2008). In the context of administration, we can add that leadership also implies critical decisions (Selznick, 1957/2011) that challenge and transform organizational norms, values, and beliefs (Scott, 2013). In other words, leadership does not mean enacting one’s administrator role. It implies making difficult decisions that may go against the grain and actively securing support for these decisions.

Leadership may describe either a process or an outcome. As a process, leadership describes securing support and influencing behaviour, while leadership as an outcome describes the state of having secured support and influence. This dual use is found in Canadian higher education institutions’ job advertisements, where required qualifications mention demonstrated leadership in their current roles, while role expectations include developing leadership in their future ones (Lavigne, 2018a; Lavigne et al., 2022; Lavigne & Sá, 2021). Leadership is central to many higher education administration roles. It is a process administrators are expected to engage in, but it does not mean that they will be successful in developing it. The process is a given, but not the outcome. We would not think of leaders as individuals trying to secure support, but as those who have secured it.

This contrasts with the current observed tendency to use leadership as a synonym for administration or management (Cronshaw, 2012); for instance, when a group of senior administrators is referred to as “the leadership team” or as “the leaders of the institution.” In such depictions, administrators who have authority over others (that is, formal

power supported by rules and regulations) are assumed to also have leadership (that is, informal power granted by individuals). In other words, administrators are expected to develop leadership within their units and beyond, for leadership gives them influence, which may reach beyond the control offered by authority (Clegg, 2006), but that does not mean that by becoming an administrator one is also imbued with leadership. Authority comes with the role, it is given by organizations, while leadership must be developed and secured, it is gifted by individuals. To confuse administration with leadership is the same as saying that all administrators are leaders, a faulty generalization that supports administrators' roles as symbols (Pfeffer, 1977), but ignores the tensions and inequities that stem from asymmetrical power relations and the potential for oppression they enable (J. Acker, 2006; Padilla et al., 2007).

Conflating leadership with administration is not only a matter of faulty definitions. Leadership comes with a positive aura. It implies success and support from the base, which in turn further legitimizes administrators' behaviour, even if they act in ways that threaten, invalidate, or abuse their units' support. Leadership is also associated, rightfully or not, with other well-regarded attributes such as vision, energy, charisma, assertiveness, impact, and, more broadly, the right to ignore the rules when required. As such, conflating leadership with administration serves administrators because it distorts perceptions and promotes self-serving attributions, but it also threatens organizations who take for granted that the process of leadership leads to the outcome of leadership, which in turn may lead to growing staff dissatisfaction (Alvesson & Einola, 2019).

Higher Education Administration and Governance

Higher education administration and governance share many characteristics. Broadly, they both concern themselves with establishing direction and overseeing production, though governance is charged with defining broader organizational orientations and policy making, while administration is tasked with operationalizing these orientations and turning policy into action (Sporn, 2006). This being said, internal debates regarding where governance ends and administration begins, the extent to which governance should dictate operations, and how much discretionary margin administrators should be given, are commonplace, and are often a source of tension between governing boards and senior administrators (Cafley, 2015).

Higher education administration and governance are also intrinsically connected. Governance bodies are generally responsible for appointing senior administrators and overseeing their activities, and senior administrators are often *ex officio* members of governing boards (Skolnik & Jones, 1997). As a result, administration is part of higher education institutions' governance and administrators may influence institutional orientations and policy, while they are concurrently responsible for enacting them. Further, administration is often tasked with drafting policy on behalf of their boards, which further increases administrators' capacity to influence policy. This integration of administration into governance is by design, but the extent to which administration shapes governance needs to be carefully monitored and evaluated. On the other hand, governance influences how administration operates through setting orientations and policy. Governance boards appoint their senior administrators, and they also dismiss or refuse to reappoint them. This level of control over senior administrators' careers means that board members' perceptions and opinions matter to senior administrators and shape whether and how they can enact their roles (Cafley, 2015). Accordingly, governance and administration are in a relation of mutual influence, with contested and overlapping boundaries between their respective realms of oversight.

While higher education administration and governance share many characteristics and remain connected, they nonetheless differ in their composition, modes of participation, and decision-making processes. To start, governance and administration groups have vastly different compositions. Governance invites broad participation, including from individuals outside higher education institutions, and conflicting perspectives, and distributes power across its members. Administration, on the other hand, concentrates power hierarchically and expects an alignment of efforts flowing from the top of its hierarchy. Governance invites individuals from a broad set of constituencies to come together in determining orientations and making policy, and recognizes many constituencies with conflicting interests. By design, governance structures allow for these interests to be expressed and shape policy. Contrastingly, administration restricts divergence and favours goal-oriented technical arguments over expressions of interests. Administration further assumes that its administrators' interests align with those of their senior administrators. Individuals who find themselves misaligned are sooner or later isolated or invited to leave.

With regard to participation, participation in governance is fluid and contingent on interests (Baldrige, 1971).

Individuals begin and end their terms at different times, stay for different periods, and tend to increase their participation and presence when debates align with their interests. Who participates in governance, with the exception of *ex officio* roles, is unpredictable and changes periodically. For several governance roles, a process of selection is involved. These roles tend to either require specific skills or experience (for example, in finance or law), or belonging to a specific stakeholder group (for example, being a student). In these instances, individuals are identified and approached, calls for participation are issued, or elections within constituencies are held. Further, some members are appointed by governments or other external groups historically linked to institutions. The situation is vastly different for administration, which solely proceeds through hiring procedures that combine qualification requirements with selection processes, where supervising administrators enjoy a high level of control over hiring decisions.

As for decision making, governance and administration also differ in how they make their decisions. Governance decisions are made collectively and, in most cases, are legitimated by votes. The specifics vary, especially when it comes to the proportion of votes given to each constituency, but operating principles are democratic and allow for ample debates (Skolnik & Jones, 1997). This is not the case for administration, where high-ranking administrators have authority over other administrators and typically enjoy a fair measure of discretion over their areas of responsibility. When this is the case, centralized command and control approaches can be leveraged, which ensure clear alignment of efforts, though such heavy-handedness may reduce engagement and promote performativity or other non-productive ways of dealing with authoritarian administration (Davis et al., 2016). It is also important to note that command and control approaches tend to go against the cultural grain of most Canadian higher education institutions. As well, a great number of higher education professionals enjoy an important level of control over their work, which shields them from overly authoritarian administrators. This is particularly true for faculty members, whose central teaching and research roles are protected by academic freedom and tenure.

Higher Education Administrators and Administrative Staff Members

Having clarified how higher education administration differs from management, leadership, and governance, we turn to administrators. Based on the criteria presented above,

administrators are those tasked with administration; that is, with setting direction and overseeing production. However, this straightforward definition does not entirely reflect how higher education institutions use the term. For instance, most organizations use the expression “the Administration” to refer not only to role setting and production oversight activities and individuals, but also activities and individuals broadly tasked with supporting these activities. As such, in common usage, “the Administration” includes both administration and administrative tasks (for example, accounting) as well as the administrators and administrative staff performing those activities. Furthermore, organizations do not restrict their use of the labels “administrator” and “manager” to refer to roles tasked with setting direction and overseeing production; for example, research administrators and account managers, which are tasked with important and advanced administrative tasks requiring a high level of professionalization, but remain responsible only for their work.

In essence, the distinction between administrators and administrative staff should lie with their role-related activities and responsibilities—that is, whether they have direction setting and production oversight roles and responsibilities beyond their own work (Hill, 2003). Setting direction involves determining how policy will be put into practice, which implies clarifying goals in light of organizational capacity and articulating how those goals will be met (Bose, 2012), while overseeing production involves planning unit activities, assigning individuals and resources, communicating and coordinating within and without, and monitoring activities and outputs (Mintzberg, 1994). Another defining characteristic of administrators is that they are provided with a fair level of discretion and authority in determining their units’ goals and in allocating their resources (Hill, 2003). Consequently, administrators are responsible and accountable for their units’ collective production. They coordinate the work of others, and, in many ways, they work through others, and are provided with some level of authority, discretion, and resources to enact their roles. Accordingly, administrator roles vary based on their scope of responsibility, discretionary margin, accountability, resources, reporting individuals, and authority.

Recent Research on Canadian Higher Education Administration

In recent years, Canadian higher education administration scholars have been drawn toward four broad areas:

neo-liberal and managerial shifts, gender and race career asymmetries, macro- and micro-politics, and professional identities. Neo-liberal and managerial shifts in the way administration operates in Canadian colleges and universities are presented as remedy by some and poison by others. For instance, Webber (2016) argues that higher education administrators' roles and responsibilities should ultimately gravitate toward four self-supporting imperatives, all of which either echo neo-liberal aspirations or are framed as such: social impact, community engagement, labour market success, and financial stability. Meanwhile, Tamtik (2022) takes the opposing view when investigating how senior administrators use neo-liberal tenets to legitimize their controversial and contested international education partnership decisions. With regard to managerial shifts, Lavigne (2018a), Lavigne and Sá (2021), and Lavigne et al. (2022) examine how Canadian universities describe deans', provosts', and presidents' roles and qualifications in job advertisements. Their work suggests that managerial and collegial expectations are both present and similarly represented, but that role descriptions tend to favour heroic depictions and symbolic leadership roles, in particular for presidents and deans. Importantly, the authors connect this change to universities' increasing reliance on external recruiting firms.

As for gender and race career asymmetries within higher education administration, Johnson and Howsam (2020), based on diversity audits of five Canadian universities, find that barriers to career progression remain salient for racialized administrators, but not for White female administrators. Lavigne (2020), examining the situation for university deans, paints a somewhat different picture, where both racialized and female deans continue to face important barriers to access the deanship, but also where these barriers grow higher as racialized and female administrators occupy higher roles. Related, Povey et al. (2022) examine the situation for Indigenous administrators, who also face not only important career progression barriers, but also barriers to enacting their roles, and, significantly, barriers to implementing their institutions' emancipatory change agendas.

In the third area of recent focus in higher education administration, politics, Tamtik (2018) describes how senior research administrators shape national innovation policy through their concerted and coordinated efforts. Shifting from a macro- to a micro-perspective, Lavigne (2018b, 2022) examines how politics play out and shape the outcomes of decanal reappointments through the work of agents and the facilitation of structures. Relatedly, Muzzin

(2016) examines how college administrators and faculty engage in conversation differently and according to topics, in ways that reflect Glaser and Strauss's (1965) seminal categorization of doctor-patient interactions as closed awareness, open awareness, mutual suspicion, or mutual pretense.

Finally, broadly related to professional identity, Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) explain some of the tensions and ambiguities emerging from the way mid-level administrators' multiple roles come into conflict with one another, and Cowley (2018) further argues for research to give more space to the less explored emotional dimensions of administrators' work. Broadening the focus from individual administrators' identities to group ones, S. Acker et al. (2019) examine the professionalization of research administrators, who have become a recognized group of professional administrators with a distinct professional identity and norms, and a growing network now expanding across institutions. Finally, and moving now to professional identities and their relation to institutional identities, Levin et al. (2018) explores how presidents of former colleges now turned universities understand their institutions' new purpose, functions, and needs, in relation to their also shifting professional identities.

Taken together, this body of work shows that Canadian higher education administration remains a healthy and active field of study, and the present Special Edition aligns well with its highlighted recent areas of interest. Indeed, the articles presented in this volume touch upon similar areas, that is, neo-liberal and managerial shifts, politics, and professional identity development, with the exception of gender and race career asymmetries.

Overview of the Special Edition

Next, we present a brief overview of the articles collected in this Edition and highlight the key contributions they make to the scholarship of higher education administration. The first article by Marc Usunier draws from interviews with provosts, deans, and search consultants to bring to light how external search firms shape decanal searches. The author brings us behind the scenes of senior administrators' recruitments to understand how the introduction of an external agent is both experienced and understood by administrators on both sides of hiring processes. The article explains how external search firms shape the pool of applicants through active recruitment and fostering interest for the position. The article also highlights a shift in hiring practices, where candidates

are more likely to be contacted and convinced to consider a new role, than to be on the lookout and applying for enticing new positions. The article makes important contributions to our understanding of administrators' career paths and career decisions, and of the control external parties have over internal hiring decisions.

In the second article, Derek Stovin examines the process of identity formation for associate deans and its relation to their role enactment. His study used narrative inquiry to clarify how associate deans' academic and administrative identities developed, evolved, and interacted in their administrative roles. The findings highlight the role of inter-relations and early positive experiences in identity development and concludes that identity shifts were not experienced as crises by participants. The article contributes to our knowledge of administrators' transitions and identity formation by producing a theorization of identity formation that foregrounds the interplay between personal-professional values and ideological commitments in relations with organizational characteristics and leadership roles.

Next, authors Morgane Uzenat and Pierre Canisius Kamanzi consider the role of reciprocity in administration in the context of international partnership-building. The authors interviewed senior administrators to identify how transformational aspirations were translated into concrete actions. Their findings show that conflicting imperatives, such as financial returns and social cohesion, exist in tension and inform how reciprocity is enacted in conversation with administrators from other countries. Nevertheless, the findings show that real concerns for reciprocity remain at the forefront of administrators' decisions. This article breaks new ground by examining the salient and timely topic of internationalization, but as lived by administrators. It brings to light how conflicting values and goals shape decisions and mediate negotiations.

Closing, authors Tamara Leary and Linda Pardy examine the transition from university administrator to faculty member, the reverse of what is traditionally covered in the literature on higher education career transitions. Their study built on the authors' personal transition experiences and analyzed the lived experiences of higher education administrators who transitioned into faculty roles. Using the expression "moving to the dark side" as a guide for their inquiry, the authors explore the nature of the divide between faculty and administration roles and the challenges of transition into faculty life when one is used to the logics of administration. The article makes a significant contribution to the career transition literature by complementing our

existing knowledge on career transitions with knowledge on reverse transitions.

Future Directions for Higher Education Administration Research

Administration acts as the primary locus of direction and control in higher education institutions and shapes how orientations and policy are actualized. As such, research on administration and administrators is essential to our understanding of higher education institutions, but it comes with singular challenges. Foremost, much of administration work takes place behind the scenes and is often of a sensitive nature. This makes the work of researchers more complex, if their aim is to understand how and why decisions and processes unfold. Getting access to individuals, materials, or meetings, securing open and complete participation, and triangulating findings is often riddled with dilemmas and compromises, as the information provided is often sensitive, and involving more than one individual becomes a threat to confidentiality. To overcome this challenge, new approaches must be developed and tested, in particular when it comes to understanding political behaviour, failed initiatives, or administrators' dismissals.

Another challenge is that scholars are, for the most part, themselves members of higher education institutions, and therefore have vested interests. They must adequately deal with their intrinsic biases when investigating administration and administrators. As well, several higher education administration researchers are or have been administrators and, as such, are also liable to stray and lose their analytical edge, confusing research with opinion or drawing inaccurate generalizations from their personal experience. Scholarship on higher education administration gains a lot from its researchers having proximity and experience with administration, and from having informed insights into the nature, roles, and challenges of administration, but that proximity must be appropriately harnessed. Experience may guide scholars in identifying salient problems, formulating insightful questions, conducting deeper analyses, and having real impact on the practice of administration as opposed to simply bringing to light practitioner knowledge (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017), but it comes with preconceptions and biases which may lead them astray. We encourage researchers who stem from higher education institutions to cultivate and mobilize their experience, but also to exercise a greater level of vigilance of self-reflexivity toward

their scholarship than other researchers would.

As for promising areas of inquiry, we mentioned early on that the scholarship on Canadian higher education administration has, in recent years, gravitated around four areas of inquiry: neo-liberal and managerial shifts, gender and race career asymmetries, macro- and micro-politics, and professional identities. Certainly, there remains work to be done in these particular areas, and we encourage emerging and established scholars to pursue this work further. We also consider that greater scrutiny be given to the tensions and dilemmas that shape administrators' work. Administration is located at a nexus of tensions (Gmelch, 2002). Some are internal (for example, balancing job security with assertiveness), and others external (for example, conciliating stakeholders' interests). Yet, little research has explored how those tensions are expressed and perceived, interact and interfere with one another, and are ultimately resolved or not. Related, the specificity and purpose of administration in colleges and universities, and what differences exist between different categories of academic and non-academic administrators, remain under-theorized. The literature has primarily examined the realm of academic administration, that is, of administrative roles traditionally occupied by faculty members, and has yet to adequately compare these roles with those of career administrators, and with cases of academic administrators becoming career administrators, to advance our understanding of higher education administration careers and roles. Finally, we encourage scholars to challenge and question the very existence of administration and the legitimacy and purposefulness of administrators' authority. Whether administrators enact their roles adequately, appropriately, or successfully should never be assumed, nor should administration's existence and status in organization should be taken for granted (Clegg, 2006).

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