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HBCUs: Continued Relevance In The New Century

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16

HBCUs

Continued relevance in the new century

Sarah Willie-LeBreton

Introduction

There are nearly 5,000 colleges and universities in the United States;¹ two percent of them are defined by Congress as “Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (HBCUs). HBCUs had to have been founded before 1964, with the principal mission to educate African-American students.² Like women’s colleges that once played the primary role in educating female leadership in the country, historically black colleges have a long tradition of educating large numbers of African-American leaders.³

Even though they no longer enroll 95 percent of black students, as they did 50 years ago, there are several reasons why HBCUs have remained important for black students’ education in the U.S. HBCUs remain devoted to the education of African-descended peoples even though they enroll only 12 percent of black students, awarding bachelor’s degrees to 30 percent of all black students (Kelderman 2010, p. A1). They allow African-American students a sense of racial anonymity, including the freedom to express aspects of their individuality that are not necessarily tied to racial identity. The faculty members at HBCUs do not associate a student’s success or failure with being African American. And finally, African-American students at HBCUs can navigate college life in an environment freer of racism against blacks than on predominantly white campuses. Indeed, one might hypothesize that the relative lack of anti-black racism has benefits to scholarship for both students and faculty.

In fact, HBCUs have been in a very precarious situation recently, not only because of finances and relaxed racial restrictions at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) but because of court mandates, as I show below, that are now holding them to the same standards for desegregation as their wealthier white

counterparts. Leaders from the nation's black colleges, in part spurred by President Obama's articulated support for HBCUs, gathered early in the summer of 2010 at North Carolina Central University, the country's first public liberal arts college for African Americans, to brainstorm ideas for making themselves more competitive and reinvigorating their mission (Kelderman 2010, p. A1).

In the balance of this essay, I offer an abbreviated history of African Americans in college. Bringing us up to the present—and what has been treated by some as a post-racial climate—I offer observations and conclusions about the continued relevance and uniqueness of HBCUs in the American higher education landscape.

Where we've been: Pre-Civil War to post-Reconstruction⁴

In the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of colleges were founded in the United States since states were empowered to grant charters to college boards. As a result, America became a land of many small colleges rather than a country with a few centralized national institutions, as is the case in Europe. That one's children—especially males—should be educated was part of the democratic creed; beyond (white) race and usually (male) gender, there was nothing particularly exclusive about these numerous small colleges (Williamson and Wild 1976, p. 1–2).

With few exceptions, the over 800 colleges founded to educate America's white citizenry before the Civil War did not admit free African Americans. Records show only 28 black graduates of historically white American colleges by 1860 (Pifer 1973, p. 9), far fewer than the number of black veterans of the Revolutionary War.⁵ Neither did the land grants for public colleges, which were established with the Morrill Act of 1862, admit or court free persons of color or recently freed blacks. However, three colleges were established for the express purpose of educating blacks before the Civil War: Cheyney State College in 1830 and Lincoln University in 1854, both in Pennsylvania; and Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856.

Records indicate that after the Civil War, over the thirty-year span from 1865 to 1895, about 200 blacks graduated from a few historically white Northern schools, 75 of them from a single college, Oberlin in Ohio. The rest were scattered sparsely among the North's other historically white colleges.

Apart from these openings for blacks in higher education, white missionaries, usually from the North, made the greatest effort to provide education for blacks.⁶ Many whites saw it as their Christian duty to offer freed men and women the benefit of (their) knowledge. Several Protestant denominations established higher educational institutions for blacks with help from Northern philanthropists. But most of these were colleges in name rather than in curriculum. Many of them were seminaries, teachers' colleges (also called Normal Schools), and colleges of home economics. Only a handful offered a post-secondary level of study. Furthermore, since whites maintained full control of both administration and teaching (even through the 1920s and later), very little of the education received by

former enslaved people reflected their own history and experience. Instead, they were taught a curriculum based on ideas of white racial superiority and European and Western cultures and values (Harper *et al.* 2009, p. 5).

In the South, the notion of separate but equal became a way to contain white anxiety after the Civil War had ended. It also became more popular as a way to circumvent both integration and equality for blacks as the twelve-year period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) came to an end. A decade after Reconstruction was halted, Congress passed “The Act of 1890 Providing for the Further Endowment and Support of Colleges of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts,” also known as The Second Morrill Act. Morrill Two affirmed the legality of separate but equal by requiring all states to admit blacks to existing institutions *or* to provide separate and equally funded schools for them. Southern and border states opted for the latter (Fleming 1984, p. 5). In 1896, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the legality of the separate but equal doctrine in the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. These laws were used to justify separate and unequal funding in many aspects of public life and at every level of public education.

The majority of colleges and universities founded with the historical mission to educate black Americans that are still running today were established by 1890—40 private colleges and 17 public colleges (Bowles and DeCosta 1971, pp. 30, 32). These institutions increased the numbers of black college graduates considerably, to more than 1,100 by 1895, with most having little opportunity other than to serve other African Americans as teachers, ministers and other professionals (Pifer 1973, p. 12). Estimates vary, but by the turn of the century, between 2,500 and 3,400 African Americans had graduated from both black and white colleges.

Into the twentieth century

As the numbers of black graduates grew to a critical mass, they began to articulate their group’s political aspirations. Black activists and lawyers saw that as long as defenders of segregation assured the courts that they could and would provide equal but separate protection under the law, blacks were stymied in their goals for justice. During the first half of the twentieth century, the decision was made to change their strategy from focusing on the right of African Americans to equal protection under the law to attacking the legality of racial separation, upheld in *Plessy*. Success was achieved with the NAACP’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in which a unanimous court ruled that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal.

By the mid-1960s, several successful anti-segregation protests throughout the South in the 1950s were forcing the nation to confront racial prejudice and discrimination (Pifer 1973, p. 21). According to Mason and Stephenson, “[t]he pace of [educational] integration quickened after 1965,” partly as a response to the race riots that plagued scores of American cities and threatened to disrupt educational institutions. Compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act was also necessary to

continue receiving federal funds, made “conditional on integrated education” (Mason and Stephenson 1987, p. 543).

Title III, *Strengthening Developing Institutions*, of the 1965 Higher Education Act furthered desegregation and equality for African Americans and HBCUs. The Act sought to support HBCUs during the period in which increased numbers of African-American students were beginning to seek educational opportunities elsewhere (Harper *et al.* 2009, p. 7). Title III favored HBCUs by providing certain subsidies for their survival. It provided funds for faculty and curriculum improvement, student services, exchange programs for faculty and students, and various administrative improvements policies.

Roebuck and Murty discovered that “[t]he term ‘developing institutions’ was incorporated into the legislation as an apparent effort to avoid designating Black higher education institutions as the primary recipients of the federal assistance” (1993, p. 40). This legislative wordsmithing revealed both strategy—a way to get funding past conservative lawmakers—and ambivalence—if HBCUs were better funded, fewer African-American students would matriculate at PWIs.⁷

This federal government support of black colleges, therefore, came from two unlikely bedfellows: the politicians who were convinced by black college presidents and Civil Rights Movement leaders that supporting greater funding for historically black colleges was the moral thing to do; and those legislators whose support of black colleges was based on the desire to keep black attendance on historically white campuses down. That supporting black colleges could satisfy these opposing motivations suggests that “separate but equal” remained an implicit feature of changes that putatively constituted a redress of past discrimination.

As previously all-white campuses began to enroll black students at the close of the 1960s and early 1970s, those campuses were not immune to the climate of frustration and activism that was emerging in the country with the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy and the popularity of groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. The New Left Student Movement was taking its cues from the Black Freedom struggle and contributing to a growing momentum against the Viet Nam War and for the rights of women, American Indians, gays and lesbians, Asian Americans, Latin@s, and other marginalized groups. Resistance—especially non-violent social action and civil disobedience—was becoming an expected way to confront societal ills. Black students, too, utilized this mode of action, and almost every predominantly white college or university with a population of more than 20 black students experienced a dramatic racial confrontation between 1968 and 1971.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, the situation of black students in college has been a picture of peaks and valleys. In 1978, the Supreme Court ruled in the famous *Bakke* case “that *race can be used* as a criterion for admission to undergraduate or graduate and professional schools, or for job recruitment, as long as race is combined with other criteria, and as long as rigid racial quotas are not used”

(Andersen and Taylor 1999, p. 306, italics added).⁸ Although the ruling affirmed the legality of affirmative action, it ushered in a climate chilly toward racial equality in higher education. And the minority opinions written in the case gave credence to reverse discrimination just as doors were being opened in significant numbers to African Americans. After the tremendous gains of the 1970s and 1980s, when black students were finally being admitted to and attending colleges and universities that had been racially exclusive, came a dismal period for black students as political and economic conservatism masked the backlash against access to education and jobs for non-whites. As part of this backlash, black students lost ground, suffering from massive cutbacks in funding and the anti-affirmative/anti-minority tone set by the executive and judicial branches of the federal government.

Black students continued to finish high school and pursue college education, despite resistance to integration, and, thus, they often looked to historically black colleges. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 1990 that while freshmen classes were shrinking at up to a rate of 35 percent nationally, historically black colleges were increasing enrollment by up to 10 and 15 percent, with some having experienced this increase over the past few years (Wilson 1990, p. A1). The *Wall Street Journal* confirmed the *Chronicle's* report, noting that the 10 percent increase was accompanied by a rise in average grades and test scores among applicants (Alexander 1990, p. B1). These gains suggest that at least some black students responded by choosing to attend HBCUs even when they might have attended more prestigious predominantly white institutions.

In 1995, the University of California Board of Regents decided to suspend the policy of using ethnicity, race, and gender in their consideration of students for admission.⁹ Over the decade that followed, the percentage of black students plummeted at both of the state's flagship schools, UCLA and Berkeley. In 1996, 7.1 percent of Berkeley students were African American; a decade later only 4 percent were black. At UCLA, 5.1 percent were African American; a decade later only 2 percent were black. On the heels of the California decision came the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal's 1996 ruling in *Hopwood v. Texas* that the University of Texas at Austin Law School's policy of affirmative action in admissions was unconstitutional.

These rulings, and the broader anti-minority tone of the public discourse surrounding them, clearly restricted African-American access to postsecondary institutions. Prior to the *Hopwood* decision, African-American students at the University of Texas-Austin comprised 4.1–5.6 percent of the total student body between 1988 and 1996. Once the *Hopwood* decision was implemented, however, and race was banned as a consideration in admissions and financial aid policies at the University of Texas-Austin, African Americans comprised just 2.7 percent of the first-time freshman who entered during the fall 1997 semester (Southern Education Foundation 1998, p. 50). As an even more striking development, the California Institute of Technology, one of the nation's top universities, did not

enroll a single African-American first-year student during the 1999–2000 school year (Reisberg 2000).

Where are we now?

In 2003, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case filed against the president of the University of Michigan by a white candidate for law school, Barbara Grutter, who argued that she was not admitted to the University of Michigan Law School because racial minorities were given preferential treatment. In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court upheld the verdict from *Bakke* that racial quotas are not acceptable, although race may be used among many distinguishing characteristics in admissions policies. But the surrounding public discourse, including Grutter's claim that she suffered from reverse discrimination, has continued to erode the established validity of arguments that support affirmative action, namely the legacy and ongoing effects of racism that adversely and disproportionately affect particular racial groups. This move to a "post-racial" stance ironically appears to have produced the same effect as the actual overturning of affirmative action. From this point of view, the Supreme Court's *Grutter* and *Bakke* decisions work together to undermine affirmative action rather than to buoy it. Even as they uphold the letter of affirmative action laws, they delegitimize the goals and spirits of those laws, and so, too, the rationale of racial equity and redress that underlies them.

As suggested above, "post-racial" thinking is clearly not limited to the legal arena, but has taken shape in the public discourse of U.S. society as a whole. In her analysis of this phenomenon, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that:

Society has embraced the rhetoric of equal opportunity without fulfilling its promise; creating a break with the past has formed the basis for the neoconservative claim that present inequities cannot be the result of discriminatory practices because this society no longer discriminates against blacks.

(1995, p. 107)

Not only have commitments to equal opportunity been disconnected from effective action, but the resulting empty rhetoric has come to stand as evidence that equal opportunity has actually been achieved. By disallowing the possibility that the complex and bureaucratized legacies of racism manifest themselves in the present, this move simultaneously makes it impossible to claim that discrimination and its effects exist. The social space in which legitimate claims to discrimination can be made has shrunk; we are caught between putatively post-racial ideals and the reality of continued institutional racism.

How does this affect black students in higher education? The total number of black students enrolled in higher education in 2007 is 2,383,400, rising from 1,730,000 in 2000 (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Spring 2009, p. 3).¹⁰ Although these numbers are certainly encouraging, challenges remain for black students as

well as black colleges to achieve full parity in U.S. higher education. These challenges are linked to the “post-racial” dilemma identified by Crenshaw, and in particular to the ways in which affirmative action has come to function for HBCUs. Ironically, the commitment to establishing equality and equity between PWIs and HBCUs has become a mandate to desegregate HBCUs along with PWIs, as if HBCUs had had a history and a mission of racial exclusivity, which they have not. Most significantly, HBCUs are legally required to comply with standards of racial equality in order to receive much-needed government funding. In a “post-racial” world, HBCUs must ensure they enroll white students, but because of a history of underfunding and their reputation as “black colleges”, they find this difficult to do. Yet they are withheld funding until they do so (McClure 2007, p. 36).

Harper *et al.* elaborate on how the desegregation requirement, which implicitly charges HBCUs with contributing to segregation, rather than redressing legacies of racism, has negatively affected historically black colleges. Considering two Supreme Court cases, *Adams v. Richardson* and *United States v. Kirk Fordice*, these authors argue that the decisions “[m]andated states to strategically employ efforts to eliminate all policies and practices that mirror a dual system of operation and keep public institutions racially identifiable” (2009, p. 399). This has forced HBCUs to find ways of enrolling non-black students, a difficult task for some because “poorer facilities, lack of resources, and largely regional reputations” make them less attractive to potential white applicants (Harper *et al.* 2009, p. 399).

In the absence of any recognition that HBCUs are on an unlevel playing field with their PWI counterparts, attempts to comply with desegregation requirements bear the mark of both past and present inequalities, with detrimental effects on students at these institutions. Per-student allocations of public funds provide ample evidence that disparities continue to exist. For example, during the 2000–2001 school year, public HBCUs allocated just over \$6,000 a year per student compared to public PWIs which allocated more than \$10,200 a year.¹¹

Not all legal decisions have conformed to a post-racial approach that works against the survival and growth of HBCUs. The *Ayer v. Fordice* (in Mississippi) and *Knight v. Alabama* (1995) cases claimed that public HBCUs received unequal funding after legalized segregation had ended. Decisions in favor of the plaintiffs yielded significant monetary rewards for HBCUs in Mississippi and Alabama. But such recognition has become an increasingly rare occurrence. Overall, HBCUs are held to desegregation requirements originally designed to redress historical legacies of inequality. They struggle to succeed precisely because any claims to the inequalities recognized by earlier desegregation efforts have been delegitimized.

The very real threat posed by a post-racial approach to HBCUs’ continued survival is clarified by a report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 23, 2009) on the twelve remaining students of historically black Barber-Scotia College. They wonder if their hugely indebted, non-accredited, and deeply struggling school will remain open throughout the school year (LVI (9), p. 1). Although this college may need to close or partner with another stronger institution for the

good of their students, its precarious situation indexes a wider fragility among HBCUs.

Although the United Negro College Fund insists on its website that HBCUs graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees (www.uncf.org/members/aboutHBCU.asp, Sept. 2009), other research suggests that HBCUs have increasingly high attrition rates and falling graduation rates. U.S. Department of Education data, shown below, substantiates that claim, but some scholars have argued that more black students start out at HBCUs and yet do not finish there. Kimbrough and Harper (2006), for example, chronicle these declining trends, noting that while HBCUs have successfully recruited and graduated African-American students in the past, these numbers have declined drastically in recent years. Similarly, they cite Braddock's (1981) finding that HBCUs graduate 69 percent of their African-American students, compared with 31 percent at PWIs. This rate, again, has declined radically according to recent NCES data on six-year graduation rates for undergraduates who started college in 1997. Out of 105 HBCUs, only fourteen graduated more than 50 percent of their students in 2003 (NCES 2004) (Kimbrough and Harper 2006). Clearly, keeping track of who graduates from where after having attended what kind of school is challenging since many students attend several colleges, including community colleges, HBCUs, state colleges and universities, and for-profit schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics' Fall 2002 Survey, of all degrees that went to American blacks, HBCUs granted 2.8 percent of associates degrees 21.5 percent of bachelor's degrees 11 percent of master's degrees 10.7 percent of doctoral degrees, and 17.2 percent of first professional degrees. Although thousands more African Americans are going to college, the percentage that does attend HBCUs is much smaller than it was in the past. By any interpretation, however, HBCUs make degree completion possible for about one fifth of all African Americans pursuing bachelor and professional degrees. (Another national survey like this last one completed in 2002 is due to be conducted in 2012.).

Students at public HBCUs are also feeling the effects of policy decisions made at the state level to cut remedial programs in public education. Summarizing research on the history of these programs, Kimbrough and Harper note that HBCUs have historically provided remedial education for students who did not receive adequate educational training in secondary school. HBCU campuses began to introduce "developmental studies" courses in the 1960s, which provided remediation in English, math, and reading. With the loss of these programs, HBCUs are less able to provide their students with important educational resources that, again, are only valid if racial inequality in pre-college education can be identified and taken into account. Remedial programs' demonstrated capacity to improve access to higher education and academic performance, and decrease attrition is being lost as these programs are victims of dramatic budget cuts (Haeuser 1993 and Walleri 1987 in Kimbrough and Harper 2006, p. 192).

Where are we headed?

Observers of the current state of HBCUs—especially those who have adopted a post-racial view—might conclude that these institutions have no future, and, since racism is a thing of the past, perhaps they do not deserve one. The value of HBCUs can only be fully recognized if we step outside of the post-racial/post-racism fantasy, not only in order to see discrimination and the complex manifestation of continued racism, but also to appreciate the particular strengths of HBCUs.

Although it is commonly accepted today that African-descended people in the United States were, have been, and continue to be psychologically damaged by the culture of white supremacy, scholars of the African-American experience have also recorded an alternative culture of meaning that black Americans maintained, especially during the era of segregation. This African-American subculture was a hybrid of African retentions and counter-cultural interpretations of Christianity. It was a subculture that contained a range of values from generosity to revenge, forbearance to self-doubt, internecine violence to political progressivism, social conservatism, and faith. Among the most important things HBCUs offer is the ongoing maintenance of an educational culture, with all its benefits and flaws, in which African-descended people are central rather than marginal.

The remedial programs implemented in HBCUs form a part of this pedagogical culture, one that recognizes some black students may not have been provided the adequate educational environment in which to develop their talents and yet should be provided with such opportunities. More generally, one of several things that HBCUs have done well is to take students from a wide spectrum of academic preparedness and encourage all of them to see possibilities for themselves that they did not see before.

Because historically black colleges have not struggled as PWIs have with the pursuit of an integrated faculty, students at HBCUs also experience pluralism among their teachers, not usually experienced at other schools. As Willie *et al.* note, “Black colleges, though they were segregated by law, have never been segregating institutions; they have always had a substantial number of White faculty members” (2006, p. 103). Not only do students at HBCUs benefit from this ongoing legacy of inclusiveness at the faculty level, but HBCUs have a valuable resource in their ability to maintain such faculty diversity, one that could be utilized to advantage by other institutions (2006, p. 103).

HBCUs are places where African Americans can be majorities, but also where white students can be minorities, and where both groups have unique opportunities to practice generosity and learn empathy.

As Greg Kannerstein comments (in Willie *et al.* 2006: 103), the mission of most HBCUs “emphasizes and legitimates public and community service,” which, he argues, is “perhaps the greatest and most distinctive contribution of Black colleges to the American philosophy of higher education.” Finally, HBCUs include

in their mission serious attention to the African-American cultural experience. Historically black colleges and universities are fragile at the dawn of the twenty-first century, even as they have an unequivocal mission that contributes to higher education's best ideals.

Conclusion

HBCUs offer a unique experience for students, faculty, and staff in their faculty hiring policies of non-discrimination, in their pedagogies of inclusion and remediation, in the importance they place on public service, and in their teaching and respect for the African-American experience. In fact, predominantly white colleges and universities might do well to set up more student-faculty partnerships and exchanges with HBCUs for the broadening of educational ideas. From this author's perspective, HBCUs continue to be worth our investment and protection.

In an interview, the prominent scholar of HBCUs, Marybeth Gasman, says this:

The main thing black colleges have in common is they are dedicated to African American education. They are dedicated to the idea of racial uplift, educating the black community. Now, just like the rest of the over 4,000 colleges and universities in the country, there are some that are strong, there are some that are doing okay, there are some that are just hanging on by a thread. Out of the . . . 105, there are some that have had accreditation problems—it's usually all around financials. They've had leadership problems, they're having programmatic problems. *This happens among predominantly white institutions as well.*¹²

(Davis 2008)

It is not, finally, the continued existence of HBCUs that poses a threat to racial integration or student needs, as a "post-racial" approach would have it. The real threat lies in the continued perception and treatment of HBCUs as separate and unequal. As institutions that undermine individual and institutional racism, their continuation is crucial. It is essential that we work to counter a "post-racial" stance that, in its translation into laws and policies, disacknowledges the dramatic racial disparities that continue to exist and threatens the continued support of HBCUs and the students they serve.

Notes

- 1 The Almanac of Higher Education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* LVI (1), p. 5. August 28, 2009.
- 2 See Title III Higher Education Act of 1965.
- 3 The United Negro College Fund posts these statistics on its website:

- HBCUs graduate over 50 percent of African American professionals.
 - 50 percent of African Americans who graduate from HBCUs go on to graduate or professional schools.
 - HBCUs award more than one in three of the degrees held by African Americans in natural sciences and one third of degrees in mathematics (www.uncf.org/members/aboutHBCU.asp; retrieved Sept. 2009).
- 4 Sections of this chapter have been paraphrased from Chapter 2 in Willie 2003, with permission of the author.
 - 5 <http://www.americanrevolution.org/blk.html>, retrieved July 2010.
 - 6 There were exceptions. Still in operation today, for example, is Livingston College in Salisbury, North Carolina—affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church—founded by a black man who traveled to England to raise monies for the school when the wealthy white fathers of post-Reconstruction North Carolina proved uncharitable. Even when blacks were eager to start their own schools, lack of capital was the greatest deterrent.
 - 7 A similar ambivalence is evident in the funding of Black/Africana Studies programs on American campuses. In the 1960s, the Ford Foundation, for example, funded scores of *programs* at colleges and universities all over the country, but it did not fund the development of *departments*, with their own tenure lines and secure budgets.
 - 8 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978) was a landmark decision of the Supreme Court of the United States on affirmative action. It bars quota systems in college admissions but affirms the constitutionality of affirmative action programs.
 - 9 The University’s decision reflected a statewide popular opinion that the time for affirmative action had passed. Indeed, the University’s decision anticipated Proposition 209, “[p]assed by referendum in 1996 [. . . barring] the state of California—including its public colleges and universities—from giving preferential treatment on the basis of race” (Korry 2006).
 - 10 http://www.jbhe.com/vital/63_index.html, p. 1 of 3.
 - 11 Lum (2001) and Hoffman (1996) both paraphrased in Harper *et al.* 2009.
 - 12 Emphasis added; interview with Heather A. Davis 2008; <www.upenn.edu/pennnews/current/interviews/012408-1.html>; retrieved July 12, 2010.

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