New teaching, learning initiative sparks innovative projects

Whitman College has launched a bold initiative spearheaded by President George Bridges to fund innovation in teaching and learning.

Nine projects designed by 14 Whitman professors were selected in the first cycle of the initiative. They range from an ethnographic summer field school in Ecuador to a theater project with students at the University of Damascus to Lego Mindstorm robotics kits for courses in computer science.

“These new grants underscore Whitman’s commitment to academic innovation that provides our students with an individual and highly original learning experience,” Bridges said. “The projects of our faculty and staff reflect the heart of the college’s learning tradition: intellectual curiosity, creative enterprise and rigorous critical inquiry across a broad landscape of disciplines.”

Members of the Innovation in Teaching and Learning Grant Committee reviewed 26 proposals submitted by 38 faculty and staff.

“I was impressed with the wide range of creative proposals generated by the faculty, all building on Whitman’s exceptional curriculum and designed to provide important opportunities for students,” said Provost and Dean of the Faculty Lori Bettison Varga.

In December the program received a major boost with a $500,000 gift from the Aven Foundation headed by Whitman Board of Trustees Chair John Stanton ’77 and his wife, Theresa Gillespie. The Stanton Fund for Innovation provides a permanent funding source.

Some $100,000 of the gift will go toward immediate funding of the initiative. The remaining $400,000 will be used to create an endowment for the program.

“The Stanton Fund for Innovation advances Whitman’s support of a campus culture that values and fosters innovation within the college’s rich liberal arts and sciences tradition,” said John Bogley ’85, vice president for development and college relations.

For a complete list of projects, visit www.whitman.edu/content/news/innovationgrants/

National awards spur research by Whitman faculty

Patrick Frierson, associate professor of philosophy, will spend the next academic year researching Kant’s theory of human nature. Elyse Semerdjian, assistant professor of history, is dividing her time this academic year between Syria and Lebanon, researching Armenian refugees who sought a safe haven after the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In December Frierson received a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship Award for the 2008-09 academic year. Semerdjian earned a Fulbright Scholar Program award for this year.

Frierson’s award funnels from NEH’s Division of Research Programs, which provides support for college teachers and independent scholars whose research promises to yield new knowledge about human history, language and culture. His book will be published by Routledge, a leading academic press in the humanities.

Frierson’s award, too, credits Whitman for contributing to his NEH award.

“Whitman is a place where the humanities are respected as an essential part of a liberal education,” he said. “The small size of the school, the close-knit relationships among faculty and the broad interests of students mean that I have the opportunity to interact across disciplines, which provides a needed background for the kind of project that I’ll be working on for my NEH fellowship.”

Frierson has taught at Whitman since 2001. He earned his master’s and doctorate degrees from the University of Notre Dame in 1998 and 2001, respectively. Semerdjian came to Whitman in 2003 from Georgetown University, where she earned her Ph.D.

REMEMBERING LIVES LOST

For a week during fall semester, Ankeny Field fluttered with more than 120,000 white and red flags placed in memory of U.S. soldiers and Iraqi citizens killed in the Iraq War. Whitman faculty, staff and students (including Jordan Clark ’10, at left), and community volunteers worked for four days to assemble the Iraqi War Flag Memorial and another five days to dismantle it. “There were many, many people who put in one or two flags on the way to class, people who put in 30 minutes, and people who put in hours of time,” said organizer Adam Chapman ’10. He and Ari Conant ’08, Lauren Benson ’09 and Nadim Damhash ’10 organized the exhibit, a candlelight vigil and panel discussion to emphasize the shared human element of the war. The students’ goal was to “begin a constructive dialog about what it means to be a nation at war in the context of local communities,” Chapman said.

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January 2006 CAMPUS NEWS

“Working Class” group raises awareness of issue

By Amelia Singer '08

Many students turn to Whitman’s First Generation/Working Class group for emotional support and count on college administrators to work on resources that will help alleviate financial problems.

Julie Charlip, associate professor of history and adviser to the group, along with co-presidents Gabrielle Arrowood ‘08 and Amelia Singer ‘08 tackled many of the difficult issues facing first-generation students in a session at the second Symposium on Diversity and Community in January. In “Myths of Poverty at Whitman,” the students noted that sometimes even their friends don’t understand: “There are students who ask why I don’t just ask my parents to put more money in my account if I can’t afford to go out to dinner,” Arrowood said.

Charlip said that when she founded the original Working Class group in 2002, she saw it as “just a social and support group. Recently, though, we’ve started branching out.”

Facilitating the symposium session represents one way the group is reaching out and raising awareness of its issues.

Arrowood, who deeply appreciates the financial aid package that allowed her to come to Whitman, said she also sees the need for a fund that students could use for unexpected expenses, including postage to ship a musical instrument from home, the purchase of a passport for study abroad or an airplane ticket to get home for a family emergency.

“The college and its alumni are well aware of these needs,” said John Bogley ’85, vice president for development and college relations. “One of our fund-raising priorities has been to create a fund to enable all students to fully participate in experiences associated with a Whitman education.”

As a result, development officers are finalizing details on the Class of 1997 Student Emergency Endowment, created by class members who “fully embrace the importance of such funding,” as well as working on a separate Student Emergency Fund, Bogley said. Alumni have donated $13,000 to the emergency fund since December 2007.

“That’s awesome, it’s wonderful,” Arrowood said of the new funds.

She hopes to continue to spread awareness of class issues this year and beyond her graduation. The group Arrowood encountered when she arrived on campus has evolved, thanks in part to financial support from the Dean of Students’ Office and programming support from the Residence Life and Housing Office, which now encourages residence hall staff to plan activities that don’t require money.

The First Generation/Working Class group’s current project is to create a partner organization of students from other backgrounds who have a sincere interest in the group’s issues. Even with all the time and energy Singer and Arrowood devoted to strengthening the First Generation/Working Class group, they’ve found time to experience the many other activities available on campus.

Singer plays softball for the Women’s Fastpitch Club, mentors a middle school student, serves as RA of La Maison Francaise and is a member of Voice for Planned Parenthood.

Arrowood has been involved with the Renaissance Faire, student government, the Medieval Society and the America Reads program, in which she tutors special needs elementary school children. “I love how easy it is to get involved in Whitman and how easy it is to be a part of something, as long as you’re willing to get up and move,” she said.

Arrowood will hand over leadership of the First Generation/Working Class group to Singer and a new co-president, but she’ll be back for reunions to check on their progress.

“I’m going to be one of those proud Whitman graduates who tells everyone I went to Whitman,” she said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
First Generation/Working Class group
E-mail Julie Charlip at charlija@whitman.edu

Class of 1977 Emergency Endowment and Student Emergency Fund
Call the Office of Development at (509) 275-1144

Symposium on Diversity and Community: Visit www.whitman.edu/content/diversity/symposium/. The text of the plenary session talk “How Do You Celebrate Class?” by Julie Charlip, adviser of the First Generation/Working Class group, is available at the site along with the texts of other plenary speeches.

My door is always open, but if it isn’t...
Longtime dream becomes reality; club to support varsity athletics

Four decades removed from his days as captain of both the football and baseball teams, Jim Moore ’66 has lost none of his zest for Whitman athletics. A former quarterback who also played catcher, first base and center field on the baseball diamond, Moore is ready to step to the plate once again for Whitman, this time to call signals of a different sort.

Moore is the first president of the W Club, a new alumni group dedicated to Whitman varsity athletics.

“The purpose of the W Club is to provide support — both in terms of enthusiastic alumni attendance at athletic events as well as financial support — for the Whitman varsity athletic programs,” Moore said. “My fondest hope is that the W Club will be a vehicle for the development of a strong spirit of support for Whitman athletics.

“For Whitman to field varsity teams on a par with its outstanding academic programs and to compete at a high level within the Northwest Conference, more support is needed on a regular basis. Although Whitman teams have been successful at times, the support they have received and their subsequent success has been far from consistent.

“From my own experience at Whitman, I know it can be very challenging as a varsity athlete to invest the necessary time and effort unless you feel you have a fair chance to compete,” Moore added.

Whitman student athletes “deserve the opportunity to further develop their athletic and competitive skills in a supportive environment where they have the chance to win every night,” he said.

Construction of the new Baker Ferguson Fitness Center, which includes an outstanding swimming facility in the Harvey Pool, and imminent renovation of the Sherwood athletic facility are recent indications of Whitman’s increased support for varsity athletics, said Dean Snider, director of athletics and the W Club’s executive secretary.

“The W Club can help us build additional momentum, and its fund-raising activities will make a critical difference for an athletics program that has a variety of needs,” Snider said.

W Club membership is open to alumni, families of students and other friends of Whitman athletics, Moore said. Membership dues will be minimal, but when combined with fund-raising, will support the athletic program in a variety of ways, including defraying the cost of recruiting visits as allowed by the NCAA.

“Whitman necessarily competes with other very high-quality colleges and universities for students who can meet both its academic challenges and contribute significantly to the athletic programs,” Moore said.

“Getting these prospective student athletes to campus is essential to our recruiting efforts.”

Transporting Whitman teams to sporting events also is a financial challenge, Snider said. “When comparing our athletics budget to other NCAA Division III schools, either within our conference or in such areas as Southern California and Minnesota, we face a competitive disadvantage related to our geographic location. We might spend 75 percent or more of our dollars on team travel alone, whereas schools in Portland and Seattle might be spending as little as 5 percent of their budgets on team travel.”

Formation of the W Club caps years of alumni discussions that intensified over the past several months. A working group appointed Moore to lead the group and tabbed Susan Buxton ’85, an attorney in Boise, Idaho, to serve as vice president. Buxton, who played basketball and competed in track and field at Whitman, is a past president of the Alumni Board and is its representative on the Board of Overseers.

Moore, Buxton and Snider were busy in February seeking alumni interested in serving on the first board of directors.

“When the W Club will be a great help as we work to improve the competitive experience of our student athletes,” Snider said.

“The club also will play a very important role in terms of strengthening the connections between the college and the alumni and current students who share a common interest — their love for Whitman athletics.”

— Dave Holden

HISTORIC STORM FELLS TREES, SCULPTURE

The new year blew into the Walla Walla Valley on a ferocious wind Jan. 4. On campus, a sculpture was smashed by one of more than 50 trees damaged or felled by winds that reportedly reached nearly 80 mph. No one was injured (fortunately most students were still away from campus on winter break), and no buildings were damaged. “Joined Together, Let No Man Split Asunder” — a sculpture by Ed Humphreys, professor of art, emeritus, installed in 1980 — was toppled when a historic tree between the Memorial Building and Pearson Library fell. The sculpture is undergoing repairs at the Walla Walla Foundry. The Physical Plant Services crew, including Larry Malott, at left, sprang into action to assess tree damage and begin cleaning up the campus on Saturday after the Friday storm.

Staff members worked through the weekend and well into the next week. In many cases, they postponed cleanup and repair of their own homes and property. Photo gallery: www.whitman.edu/communications/windstorm/

Youngest Greek chapter earns Award for Excellence

When Taurra SunEagle ’09 took over the presidency of Whitman’s youngest Greek chapter — the spry 30-year-old Kappa Alpha Theta sorority — her goal was to recruit more members and increase the spirit of sisterhood within the chapter.

“SunEagle and the Thetas met those goals and more. They recruited 28 new members, earned the highest collective Greek grade-point average at the college, increased awareness of the chapter on campus and raised funds for the nonprofit CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for children).”

As a result, the Thetas earned the prestigious, and fairly rare, Award for Excellence, which means the sorority met or exceeded criteria in 11 categories. “This is only the fifth time the complete Award for Excellence has been given since I began (at Whitman) in 1990,” said Barbara Maxwell, an associate dean of students and adviser to the Greek system on campus.

The Whitman Faculty Code requires all fraternities and sororities to participate in an annual review but does not specify the format. Under Maxwell’s supervision, the assessment has evolved to include an extensive self-evaluation (the Thetas’ submission was 40 pages), and a staff and faculty review in which the groups defend their evaluations.

What Maxwell likes most about this process is that fraternities and sororities “are not competing against each other. Each sorority and fraternity evaluates its scholarship, recruitment, new member education, athletics, chapter programming, chapter management, financial and social responsibility, alumni relations, Panhellenic participation, college relations and community service.

“It’s a good outline of the things we should be doing in general,” said SunEagle. “Taurra, as president, has been given a great opportunity to improve the format.”

When the chapter presented their was given a great opportunity to improve the format. The Thetas’ success during her presidential term (spring and fall of 2007) in large part to an “incredible” officer team. “They were so dedicated.”
Toasters and Other Enigmas

Editor’s note: The following excerpts are from a memoir written by Erin Elizabeth Salvi ’08 for a Whittman creative writing class. The story, which recounts her family’s realization that her brother suffers from Schizoaffective Disorder, was published in the 2007 blue moon, Volume 20. Ellipses are the writer’s, asterisks mark breaks in the text. Some language has been deleted.

My grandfather didn’t understand how toasters worked. It’s hard to say exactly how many slices of toast my grandmother served him before he asked the question: “Where does the bread go after you put it in the toaster?”

I tried to imagine what my grandfather must have looked like at him as he were a lunatic. Most people would have, Who, was this man that she had married that he did not even understand how toast was made? They had six children, too. Did he understand how those had been made, or were they also a mighty enigma to him, as much as the outer reaches of the universe or God himself? I try to imagine what my grandfather must have imagined when he thought of the inner operations of the toaster. Perhaps a complex system of chains and pulleys run by magical toaster elves who would scurry up to the slots of the toaster to take the bread out of it and send it through a conveyor belt that would whisk the bread away. And then, oh then, they’d lift a piece of toast from one of their many shelves, thick and crisp and brown, and prepare their elin trampline to send it up, back through the open slots.

Or maybe he pictured it a different way. Or maybe he did not ask the question at all, maybe it is simply a story my mother enjoys telling, or a character my grandfather… I like to think that he did ask that question, though, not because I imagine my grandfather as a stupid man (which I know he was not), but because it proved to me that even a smart man may suffer from Schizoaffective Disorder, was published in the 2007 blue moon, Volume 20. Ellipses are the writer’s, asterisks mark breaks in the text. Some language has been deleted.

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K-Dub still “Voice of the Valley” and one of the top college stations in the United States

Matt Aliabadi ’08, co-general manager of KWCV 90.5 FM, knows exactly why The Princeton Review’s “Best 366 Colleges” guide ranked Whitman’s radio station No. 12 in the nation.

“It’s the 12th coolest college radio station in the country,” Aliabadi said.

That’s the simple, tongue-in-cheek (and statistically true) answer. However, the more likely reasons for the ranking are the station’s strong ASWC financial support, high student participation, a perfectly functioning student government (the foyers of Reid Campus Center), and a broadcast radius that serves the campus and community, said station co-general manager Keith Cusner ’08.

Sharing general manager responsibilities, Aliabadi and Cusner believe, has worked well for them and for K-Dub this year. Cusner served two previous years as station music director, and Aliabadi, well-versed in promotional activities, has held every other position on the student-run policy council.

The general managers keep KWCV on budget (it’s funded by the Associated Students of Whitman College), follow federal broadcast regulations (including FCC license renewal), hire policy council members and meet with them weekly. They also sift through hundreds of promotional CDs and trouble-shoot the day-to-day management of the station.

What makes their job easier is the station’s independence. “K-Dub is given free rein,” Cusner said. “We are really grateful for that.”

Aliabadi and Cusner have been tuned into the workings of the station since the first semester of their freshman year at Whitman, when they volunteered to host a radio show, “Armfolder’s Ball.” Four years later, the show lives on, a radio show, “Armfolder’s Ball.”

Whitman, when they volunteered to host the show, they were given “free rein,” Cushner said. “We are really grateful for that.”

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Friends, volunteers are one and the same to retiring Annual Fund director Barbara Saxe Stubblefield ’66.

Stubblefield has spent more than two decades working with her fellow alumni — 200-plus class representatives — to raise funds that support Whitman College and the needs of its students.

“My life and my job have run together,” she said as she prepared to retire in February as Annual Fund director. Many of her class volunteers are her friends, and her friends are volunteers.

When Stubblefield came to work at Whitman in 1981, some representatives had already served their classmates and the college for many years, she said.

“Charlie Clarke ’64 came to mind. He served as a liaison for his class soon after he graduated, although the official class representative system initiated by alumni didn’t come along until the early 1970s. What we do is pique their interest,” Stubblefield said.

Alumni who agree to be class representatives usually become more involved in the life of the college. Many are overseeing committees and trustees of the college, including James McCarthy ’83, an overseer who has been a class representative since about 1985.

Stubblefield’s first career was as a single mother, raising a daughter and son who were 4 and 2 years old, respectively, when her husband died in an accident in 1973. After her children (Laura Saxe-O’Brien ’91 and Robert Saxe) were grown, she returned to her alma mater for her second career as the Alumni Fund coordinator. The staff was just beginning to use computers to keep track of class representatives and overall giving.

“We didn’t trust them,” she said. “We did the work on the computer and then checked the computer’s work.” As her career progressed — she became the full-time assistant director of the Alumni Fund in 1985 and director in 1986 — so, too, did the methods used to connect with alumni.

With computer databases, the Internet and e-mail, the staff can stay in closer contact with the growing number of volunteers, Stubblefield said. However, it’s the personal touch that makes a difference, she added. Clarke and McCarthy agreed.

“A 10- or 15-minute phone call to Barbara to talk about Whitman … was the equivalent of getting one’s batteries recharged,” Clarke said.

“Barbara has humored, cajoled and organized letter writers from old and new classes to get letters out and contact fellow classmates three times a year,” McCarthy said. The result: “The giving percentage for Whitman College — above 50 percent achieved for many years — is the envy of all.”

Stubblefield will travel a little to see her children and three grandchildren, but she plans to stay in Walla Walla and remain connected to the many friends she has made through her work as well as her “wonderful” fellow staff members in the development office.

French professor explores writings of author Maryse Conde

A new book by Nicole Simek, assistant professor of foreign languages and literatures (French) and general studies, looks closely at the writings of Guadeloupean author Maryse Conde, whose historical fiction probes everything from gender to colonialism to stereotypical images of literary characters.

Simek’s book, aptly titled “Eating Well, Reading Well: Maryse Conde and the Ethics of Interpretation,” examines Conde’s work as sharply as Conde herself challenges the reader with the problematic, yet pragmatic, need to read well.

Reading well for Conde means reading closely, apprehending literature as ethical critique rather than moral philosophy. Researching well for Simek meant mining and illuminating both universal and particular elements in Conde’s work: history, globalization, community, ethics, trauma and subjectivity.

Simek and her husband, Zahi Zalloua, also assistant professor of foreign languages and literatures (French) and general studies at Whitman, have collaborated on another publication as well. They are co-editors of the new issue of the Dalhousie French Studies journal (Winter 2007).

The theme of the issue is “Representations of Trauma in French and Francophone Literature,” and Zalloua has an essay in the collection. Zalloua, author of “Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism,” also is working with Anne Conners ’08 on an Abshire Award project that explores magic realism in Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved.”

Poetry professor’s new work, “Friendly Fire,” in print

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Given the odds, ethics, would you go for the extra credit?

By Barry Balof
Assistant Professor of Mathematics

When faced with an election, are we better off choosing a candidate who will raise taxes to implement more governmental programs? Will our individual votes match what we feel is best for the community? Or is an international scale, what roles do calculation and psychology play in our economic and military decisions with regard to other nations? How should an overcommitted student, as so many of them are these days, decide to allot his or her precious time? Quantities like these require a measure of mathematical ability as well as psychological awareness. During my fourth year of graduate school, I left the confines of my mathematical immersion to take a course in the psychology department on decision-making. During this course, we spent the first day and a half discussing the optimal way to make a decision and the rest of the term discussing why people don’t do it that way. Mathematics plays a large role in the “optimal way,” but we often find that mathematical considerations are trumped by our psychological tendencies.

I’ve incorporated some decision-making exercises into my classes both to help me gain insight into how my students think and to show them something about how psychology affects their own thought processes and mathematical decisions in areas beyond my classroom.

Below are three examples of these exercises. I’ll often give such a question at the end of a quiz. We’ll typically analyze it in the next class, discussing the optimal solution, the outcome chosen by the class and the (many) differences between the two.

What Would My Neighbor Do?

Extra credit: Would you like one point or three points of extra credit? Note: If more than 25 percent of you choose three points, no one gets anything. Students have just toiled through calculations of derivatives, integrals or vectors and are now faced with the chance to improve their grade. A response of one point increases the likelihood that the whole group will get something, but as individuals, they might be able to afford to go for the three points, trusting their peers to be more benevolent (or conservative) in their decisions.

So, what would you do? How do you think they did?
In general, my classes will not get any extra credit, and, in fact, they will miss it by a mile. In the last class that had this question, 50 percent of the students opted for three points. One student gave the following rationale for his decision: “I know that I should choose only one point for the benefit of the group, and that my grade could probably afford it (0.38 could), but I would rather that no one get anything than that other students get more than I do.” Not too many in the class were surprised not to get extra credit on this one.

I have also given the slightly more humane variant:

All for One and One for One

Extra credit: You may take one extra credit point for yourself, or zero extra credit points for yourself and give one-tenth of an extra credit point to everyone else in the class (40 other students between the sections of the same class). Your extra credit will be the sum of what you take for yourself and what others give to you.

This is another example where the optimal strategy for the group differs from the optimal strategy for the individual. It seems here that each student will be guaranteed something … unless he or she is the lone student who opts to give out points to everyone! Some calculations on the problems bear discussion. You stand to make as many as five points of extra credit on this one if everyone acts in your best interests. That is, if you are the only student who chooses to take points for yourself and everyone else opts to give rather than to take. You might not even feel too guilty if it happens, as everyone else in the class stands to make nearly four points of extra credit. From a purely “game-theoretic” point of view, you’re always better off taking the point for yourself. If everyone follows this logic, however, the scores will plummet.

What should you do? What would you do? How did the class do?
Again, approximately 50 percent of the group opted for “greed,” earning three points, while the other half opted for benevolence, earning two points. Strikingly, there was no correlation between student choices and such factors as year in school (the group was mostly first-years, still new to college, and sophomores, who may be more attuned to the way their peers think), gender or even standing in the course. (Those who were doing well in the semester were equally likely to choose for themselves or choose for the group.) Again, students commented on wanting to do well for themselves and not have to watch others do better than they did.

Half Full?

Lest you think that all Whitman students are so cynical when it comes to matters of how their peers think, I present the following example based on a short-lived game show, “Friend or Foe” (which itself was based on the classic strategy game Prisoners’ Dilemma):

Extra credit: Complete the following quiz with a partner. The score that the two of you earn is extra credit, but you must decide individually how much of the credit you’d like. You can opt for either “half” or “all” of the credit. If you both choose “half,” then you’ll split the points. If one of you chooses “half” while the other chooses “all,” then neither of you gets any credit.

This example continues the theme of the difference between individual and group strategy, but the fact that the group size is now only two strengthens the psychological component. Individually, each person is better off staying for the whole amount of extra credit, but if both partners follow this individual strategy, both walk away empty-handed. For this exercise, students were paired randomly, so that the “friend” incentive to cooperate was lessened. As contestants on the game show were able to do, the students were given a brief time after the quiz to talk to their partners and convince them to “do the right thing.” It is easy to see how a carefully constructed mathematical argument in this scenario might give way to a “gut feeling” about one’s partner.

How did the class fare?
The arguments must have been convincing, because the students universally opted to split the credit with their partners. Perhaps the earlier exercises had opened the group to the consideration of the whole of themselves, or perhaps, students find it harder to act selflessly when dealing with one individual rather than the nebulous “group.” What is striking is that these data differ from other groups performing similar tasks. In previous studies, participants opted nearly half of the time to act selflessly, which is also in accordance with the amount of money given out by the game show during its short run. As a result, I don’t necessarily expect the cooperation to be quite so pronounced in future groups, but I am heartened by the results thus far.

While these exercises are self-contained and may seem largely mathematical on a first reading, their relevance to other areas is quite clear. The examples on tax policy, foreign relations and time management have both mathematical and psychological considerations, and it’s important to understand how the two are interrelated. So much of a liberal arts education revolves around cross-disciplinary thinking. Through these exercises, students see a different applicability of mathematics — and if they trust their peers — earn a little extra credit as well.

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