

Holly Tate ([00:07](#)):

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast, where we talk about how to build, run, and keep a great team. I'm your host Holly Tate, vice president of business development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, our executive search consultant Brian Jensen, talks with Erica Young Reitz, the author of *After College: Navigating Transitions, Relationships, and Faith*. Erica has made it her mission to ensure that college students are prepared for life after college, as well as preparing educators with the resources to support them.

Holly Tate ([00:37](#)):

Brian and Erica talk about how she drew from her own life experiences to create successful college exit programs, and how these programs set universities up for success in the long run. So tweet your takeaways from today's show, using the hashtag *Vandercast* and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content. In their Facebook group, we'll post today's show notes, so you definitely want to check that out for all of the important leaks from today's show. Without further ado, here's Brian's conversation with Erica.

Brian Jensen ([01:13](#)):

Well, I am so excited to have a good friend with me today. Thank you Erica Young Reitz for joining me. So excited to have a conversation with you, and it's always just good to be with you.

Erica Y. Reitz ([01:24](#)):

Thanks so much for having me, Ryan. Thrilled to be here. Thank you.

Brian Jensen ([01:27](#)):

Yes. So we're going to have a fun conversation, but let's start with this. I would love to just have everybody on listening, hear from you, because I know how cool you are. So, tell us a little bit about who you are, what's your story, and what's exciting about your work right now?

Erica Y. Reitz ([01:48](#)):

Thanks Brian. And welcome to all the listeners too, wherever you're listening from. I'm excited to be with you. As Brian said, I'm Erica Young Reitz, and most of my contribution has been in the space of caring about college seniors as they transition into what's next. And so, I spent years doing work in college ministry with an organization called the CCO out of a local church. And most recently I launched an initiative that's helping other people who care about transitioning seniors and those 20 somethings as they first get out into the world.

Erica Y. Reitz ([02:24](#)):

And so my guess is some of you who are listening, you may remember your transition out of college, or maybe you have someone in your life who you really care about who might be entering that transition soon or even lost in that transition right now. And so part of my story is, I care a lot about this transition because my transition out of college was not the smoothest. I had a good head on my shoulders and a great college experience, but that transition rocked me in ways that I really wasn't prepared to consider. And so I've dedicated a lot of my career to helping others who are in similar shoes.

Brian Jensen ([03:00](#)):

Yeah, yeah. What sticks out in your mind, if you think back, because I think many of us could think back to that time of life, that transition, whether it was pre-graduation and thinking about going into the big world, or after graduation and maybe it's within the first year or two of being in a career or still looking for a career. For you, what sticks out in your mind as you think back to that time? What was the rockiness of that transition?

Erica Y. Reitz ([03:29](#)):

Yeah, Brian, a lot of it was probably this gap between what I expected was going to happen and what actually happened. And it's hard to know what you don't know when you're on the front side of the transition and then you get to the other end. It was things like, wow, I just wasn't prepared to be alone on a Friday night with no one to hang out with. When you're in college, you can just walk across the quad and there's people to hang out with. I did not feel cool at all right after college, a loser on Friday nights.

Erica Y. Reitz ([04:00](#)):

Who am I going to hang out with? I moved to this small town. I knew one other person, my college roommate. She invited me to move to state college area of Pennsylvania and she was the only person I knew. She was dating a guy at the time, so she obviously spent time with him, and that was the reality I was unprepared for. Even just managing my own finances, stuff on the job front. I had a great liberal arts education, but I think I was unprepared for how do I turn this into a viable work beyond this space? So many questions and those were just some of the practical ones. And there were big theological questions. God, where are you in this? Faith and doubt all played into it too.

Brian Jenson ([04:43](#)):

Right. And that that ended up years later becoming one of the driving forces for the book you've put out there. And we're going to get to talking about that. But one of the things I want to ask you, because I like asking people what they're learning as they go through life transition. So, we just talked about a transition that you remember having years ago out of college entering sort of this work force, but you've also gone through kind of a recent transition. You've made some changes leaving the work with CCO and starting some new things and you and I've had a lot of fun conversations about that. So, tell us a little bit about the changes you've made over the last couple of years and what are you learning? What do you sense you're kind of realizing during this transition in your life?

Erica Y. Reitz ([05:28](#)):

Yes. So, for listeners who don't know, I did start after college transition and initiative in January where I'm just reaching out to practitioners, people in your shoes who care about helping those transitions. And I really have gotten to eat my words from everything that I've said to students for many, many years has applied to me in this transition. Stepping out in risk and in faith. I just really sensed God was saying that my time doing college ministry with the CCO was coming to a close. I'd served for 14 years and it was just time for a new adventure. But I stepped out not knowing what that adventure would be. And so I've definitely had to lean into all of the things I've been telling students for 14 years as they make their transition. And part of it has been just trusting God's character.

Erica Y. Reitz ([06:22](#)):

I think that's a huge part of what I'm learning is you need to step out in faith, and I've told students that dwelling on God's character can help in those times. And so that's been huge for me. Even the process

of transition, as much as I can tell students, "You're going to go through this process, you're going to have this difficult in-between time," going through that for myself, the grieving, the challenge of being in that middle space, and even the false sense of, "Oh, I launched the business, so the transition must be done." The new thing is clicked. That wasn't the end of the transition. I'm still processing. So, I think we have that moment where we make that leap of faith and there's exciting parts of that and then there's even more hard parts that continue to follow. So, I'm learning about myself and God's character in transition.

Brian Jenson ([07:20](#)):

That's such a good, thank you, and a good word for all of us. Either experiencing extensive transitions or just kind of the transitions of living life that we go through on in rhythms really throughout. Thank you. So Erica, let's start talking about your book a little bit because you put out a fantastic book called *After College: Navigating Transitions, Relationships and Faith*. And it is incredibly practical. It's providing a tool box for recent grads really as well as those who work with 20 somethings. So, walk us through how you decided to do this. Why this approach? Why did you decide to go this direction?

Erica Y. Reitz ([08:13](#)):

So for many years I, along with a team of co-laborers in state college, ran a program called Senior Exit. And Senior Exit was founded to really help our seniors at Penn State University think about the transition in all its facets. I think it's so tempting for students to reduce that transition to a checklist. Credits are in, check. Job offer, check. I know where I'm living, check. And what we wanted to do was open that up and help students see that the transition is so multifaceted.

Erica Y. Reitz ([08:46](#)):

It's about friendships, it's about finances, it's about your worldview and your perspective in the transition. And so leading this program for many years and people coming to me and asking, "Hey, can you tell me about that?" People across the nation, practitioners across the nation asking for, "Tell me more about what you're doing," led me to think, can we put some of this down in writing and really the catalyst was a conversation in Dallas, Texas, a number of years ago.

Erica Y. Reitz ([09:16](#)):

We were a part of a leadership network, think tank opportunity, talking about university students and how do we better transition or better reach to students at the university. It was church-based folks who work in a church setting, like many of you who are listening, who wanted to better reach out to campuses. The focus wasn't necessarily on transitioning seniors, but what surprised me about gathering with 30 other leaders across the nation in this three day think tank, was how many of them were, "Tell me more about that senior exit program you run. This is such a need for us. This is a gap for us. We're not doing this well. We want to do this better. We're hearing from our alums and we're struggling post-college. Even our best and brightest are floundering in this next phase."

Erica Y. Reitz ([10:01](#)):

And so I walked away from that time in Dallas with confirmation that this isn't just a state college thing, the nation needs this resource. Not just our students at Penn State and how to lay down even some of my fears of the publishing process. And I had a good friend who just said, "Erica, if you put it out in a PDF, is it worth it?" And I had to say, "Yes, I'm just going to get started." So, I started outlining the book on the way home on the plane ride home from Dallas, Texas. And that was really the catalyst of wanting

to put this practical resource in the hands of students and those who work with them, because I saw such a gap in the literature.

Brian Jenson ([10:42](#)):

Yeah. Well, and it's fun to see how that springboarded. I mean, from that plane ride home, and I remember you and I and another one of our friends, we had very early conversations about that book, and how we should pursue putting it out there and what you were going to do with that. And it's exciting to see what has happened since then and how the Lord is using that resource across the country. So, what do you hear over and over? You spend a lot of time with 20 somethings, you spend a lot of time with people who work with 20 somethings. What do you hear over and over again from that age group? Recent college grads in their early 20 somethings. And then I want you to also say, do you believe leaders in churches that are working with young adults or leaders that are working with college students, do you think they're hearing those things? Are they connecting those dots?

Erica Y. Reitz ([11:45](#)):

Yeah. I mean, the word that comes to mind initially is just the word weird. The transition is weird. It's a totally different space than the undergrad years. And so much is shifting. Unlike other transitions, so much is shifting at once. And so for those of you who are listening, you can probably picture your own transition or even someone you know who's in that transition and think about how for 17 plus years this individual has been a student and now role is changing. Even if they go onto graduate school. It's such a different experience than the undergrad years and so much shifts at once; financial situation, opportunities for fun. How do I find community? Work life. And so many times we confuse role and identity and so big identity questions are happening right at that transition. And so for many of our students, it's weird.

Erica Y. Reitz ([12:40](#)):

It's not like anything they've experienced before until, I tell them, it's not weird till you're 30 or something, but until you find that new normal, it's a strange experience. And oftentimes I think a lot of that weirdness comes from, like I mentioned earlier, a gap between what they're expecting is going to happen and what actually happens. Oftentimes there's this picture that we have in our head of how this is going to play out and how I'm going to find community after college and how I'm going to crush it in my first job out of college.

Erica Y. Reitz ([13:13](#)):

And when those things aren't clicking right away, even with relationships, it can send us on a spiral and it can be really hard. And so that would be the other word that I'm hearing, not to be fatalistic about this transition. There's so many good things. It's like best of times and worst of times. Opportunities oozing, but also the challenges are very real. And so, I would say for most the narrative that I see again and again is it's weird and it's hard.

Brian Jenson ([13:44](#)):

Yeah. Well, and I think it's... I want to, this just came to mind, so I hope that... I'm going to put you on the spot. But included in your title is the word transitions. And we talk a lot about transition and there's things that you could choose to focus on right now with this age group. And there's great research out there on characteristics of millennials or gen Z, so you could have taken that approach. There's so many

other avenues you could take to talk about this generation experiencing this phenomenon in their experience.

Brian Jenson ([14:22](#)):

But the key word for you is transitions and that's what you've chosen to focus on. And I think that's really intentional and I think it's really good, because there's all these other things that come along, but really what they're experiencing is this kind of what our friend Steve Garber would call the Valley of the Diapers. Right? There's this transition happening and things are going to change. Things are going to be weird and things are going to be hard. But there's also goodness in that and there's good things coming out of that.

Erica Y. Reitz ([14:52](#)):

That's right. And that word choice is intentional because I think that as a culture, we talk a lot about change. Change is exciting. Hope and change was a campaign. Change something we all seem to rally around and get excited about. And we even have certain cultural markers for kinds of changes that occur. But what people often don't talk about is transition. And one writer, William Bridges, makes a distinction between change is this thing happening externally where transition is the thing going on internally.

Erica Y. Reitz ([15:24](#)):

And oftentimes we're not discussing that all those internal things. I mean, I remember even the transition into motherhood and people are giving you all sorts of marriage advice and I love that my friend Kate was like, "Don't be surprised if you grieve. If you just miss your husband in this transition or you grieve the autonomy you had when you weren't nursing a baby." No one gives that, that's not your typical baby shower advice. Same with the college transition. Oftentimes there's lots of great advice about the exciting change that's occurring, but not everyone's talking about all of the internal things that are going to go on.

Erica Y. Reitz ([16:01](#)):

And two students will cross the commencement stage the same day, but have very different emotions around that. Very different things that they're processing. And same with when they get into that post-college transition. So, I think it's so key to talk about the actual transition, and as I've been helping folks across the nation, I think about a group that got a senior exit program started at Purdue University. My friend, Rick Whitlock, he says, "My passion for doing this with seniors is because life is full of transitions and if I can give them a leg up on how to just process transitions now, they're only going to be that much more prepared for when life's transitions hit them." Just like the one I went through. Right?

Brian Jenson ([16:39](#)):

Right. So good. So, I want to ask this question now because I think this is key. How are Christian colleges and universities then best positioned to help students through these transitions, help them navigate that road towards and then onto post-college life?

Erica Y. Reitz ([16:59](#)):

Yeah, great question. And I think it does come down to us evaluating who's responsible here. I think we do have to take an internal look and say, am I responsible for these students who are coming in our doors? Whether that's at a college or university or in your local church. These students are coming

through our doors. Do we have a responsibility to send them out well? There was actually an interesting article by John Steel a few years ago that, John Seale, who said, "Who is responsible for our seniors?"

Erica Y. Reitz ([17:28](#)):

I'm noticing that we're putting so many resources towards incoming students and not nearly enough on students leaving and so really implicating others in this. But I think colleges and universities are uniquely prepared because it's so central to the mission as Christian colleges. If we want to transform students to be agents of change in the world, if we want them to be living out Shalom in every place, every area of their lives, then we have to be preparing them well.

Erica Y. Reitz ([17:54](#)):

It's central to our mission. And it also, when we look at research that's out there, we want our students' last impression of their institution, of their university to be their best. And research shows that students who feel that their institution prepared them for post-college life, they're happier in their workplace, they're way more likely to give back. They have a favorable impression of their alma mater. This is the Purdue Index Study that we can put this up for your viewers, your listeners.

Brian Jenson ([18:24](#)):

Absolutely.

Erica Y. Reitz ([18:25](#)):

But I mean, it just makes sense and I don't even think it's crass to say that part of our motivation is connected to alumni giving. We want students to give back and that should motivate us to send them out well. But I hope it's bigger than that. I hope the motivation is bigger than that.

Brian Jenson ([18:51](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Good. That's good. So, the question that would follow then, because you've mentioned senior exit programs. Maybe I'm going to have you answer this question first. Quickly describe what a senior exit program is? What's your elevator speech? If somebody says what does that mean? What is a senior exit program?

Erica Y. Reitz ([19:08](#)):

Well, in our context it was a one year experience for students who wanted to prepare for what came next. And we delivered it in a workshop style format. Once a month our seniors would get together and we would cover a topic that was most pressing to them. And so each time we got together, we unlocked a different topic. Now, I do say to anyone who's thinking about getting something started, it doesn't have to look like senior exit in state college.

Erica Y. Reitz ([19:37](#)):

Other folks have gone for more of a, it's six weeks in a row, and we're going to cover topics. Or we're going to do a one day retreat and it's going to look this way. So, it doesn't have to be exactly the same as how we've led it here. In fact, I want people to contextualize, but the key takeaway is that we're opening up space in the senior year to have the conversation with our students before they hit that transition.

Brian Jenson ([20:02](#)):

Yeah. What is a bad senior exit program look like?

Erica Y. Reitz ([20:09](#)):

Just a handshake on the way out the door. I think just in-attentiveness to students being in that transition. And I will say as I've been consulting across the nation starting the... I'm a huge believer in early on and often when it comes to interventions that prepare students for life after college. And so, I would say a bad program is starting April 24th. I think if you start in the first semester even, and I'm not saying that if you don't have something going right now, you shouldn't start next semester. Get started. What I am saying is that what I'm hearing from other individuals is the longer the on-ramp that they're able to give their students, and I think there is something special about focusing on seniors even though I believe in interventions in the other years for sure. I think giving that on-ramp starting in the fall and then carrying the thread through to the spring semester could be really positive.

Brian Jenson ([21:01](#)):

Yeah. And in some ways a bad senior exit program might just be a non-existent one.

Erica Y. Reitz ([21:08](#)):

Precisely.

Brian Jenson ([21:08](#)):

Anything else is great. Just be doing something. And I would guess, and I'm going to let you jump in and answer this, my assumption would be that most institutions are doing things they might not even realize are happening that they could point to and say, "Oh, those are things we're doing that can help seniors start to think about post-college life." I know that when I was working on a campus, we would do these types of things like, "Well, we should have a sophomore experience program." Well, then let's try and dream up a bunch of things. Rather than saying, "Oh, what are the things we're already doing that could be combined into, and we could say here's our sophomore experience program."

Brian Jenson ([21:50](#)):

Rather than just saying we need to dream up and recreate the wheel and do all these extra things. So, sometimes an encouragement to institutions could be start with an audit of just what types of things are happening for your seniors right now. And are there things that you can pull together and call a senior exit program. And I'm going to ask you if you've got any examples of this, and then what else can be added to that to really pull it together for a comprehensive senior exit program? Do you see that? Do you encourage institutional leaders like that?

Erica Y. Reitz ([22:22](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, you used the word audit. I use the phrase map the land. That would be, if someone's just looking to get started, that would be a great place to start. Just mapping the land of what currently exists, because you're absolutely right. There's probably things happening already that maybe students don't even know about, or if you're getting in the room with a number of different stakeholders, that would be another thing. Is just evaluate who are the stakeholders, who cares about this conversation, and really appealing to those individuals if you're just getting started. And also just starting somewhere. I know that it can be overwhelming.

Erica Y. Reitz ([23:02](#)):

Do I have to launch a senior exit program? No. No. Just open up the conversation. Really low hanging, get copies of After College in the hands of students before they graduate, and even getting them into small groups to discuss the content if you feel, "I don't have the possible room to facilitate something." And so, yes, I'm seeing that happening on campuses where they're just evaluating what's already happening. I think about folks connecting with some folks at a college in the Midwest who they were just... Through ResLife said, "We already have these programs going in ResLife and we're even tasked as RDs to do certain programming. How can we change the focus just slightly so that we're hitting on some of these topics?" And that would be a low-hanging opportunity in higher ed.

Brian Jenson ([23:53](#)):

Right. Yeah. So it's the encouragement to the institutional leaders that, no, you don't have to find huge dollar amounts to resource this. That'd be great if you could, but don't get discouraged right off the bat that you don't have ways to resource this. Pull things together you're already doing, tweak programs that you're already working on, and figure out ways to intentionally address the senior exit thing that's going to happen with your students. Right?

Erica Y. Reitz ([24:23](#)):

That's right.

Brian Jenson ([24:25](#)):

I want to put you on the spot again and say, "How could this conversation translate to student ministries in churches. Right? So, what can youth leaders do as they're working with juniors and seniors who are getting to exit? Maybe they're not even planning to go to a traditional four year college, but they're thinking about post high school life, and there's a transition there. And some of them may be getting ready then to go do other things that might not be on a college campus. So, how can student pastors work with some of those younger students getting ready to enter a world that's going to be different? Right? So what are some of those common threads of transition that you want to point at?"

Erica Y. Reitz ([25:18](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I think all of that is transferable in terms of the things that we talk about just being in a transition. I use the phrase going to an unknown land. When God calls Abraham to go to an unknown land. I think that for many students who enter the college years, it's an unknown land. I'm appreciating the literature that is trending right now about helping students really consider that step before they move into it. Of like maybe a gap year is a better option than going right to university.

Erica Y. Reitz ([25:49](#)):

And I currently teach first year students at Penn State. I teach rhetoric and composition and they are, many of them lost in transition, because they maybe could have taken a step back and thought about, okay, is this even the right step right now for me? And how do I best lead myself in this transition? And it's things that would relate to either transition about how they want to be intentional in approaching community, friendships, money, food. I mean, all of it should be talked about.

Brian Jenson ([26:29](#)):

Yeah. Which, and then would also be the same for any of our church, young adult leaders who are working with students that are in college and starting to think about graduating from college. Whether the, we can have all sorts of different scenarios here. They might have been at the church just since they

started at college, they're living somewhere that they didn't grow up. And so they've been attending the church since they started attending the college and they're thinking about leaving.

Brian Jenson ([26:57](#)):

They could have been growing up at the church their whole life and they stayed in town to go to college and now they're entering post-college life. Right? And having been at their church. So these conversations can be had not just on college campuses. They would be helpful to be had in any scenarios the students find themselves in. Anywhere that communities of faith are having intentional conversations. And I know that you point that out in your book. So, I don't know if you want to speak to that from your book that you talk about finding a community of faith and how important that is and where that conversation can keep happening there.

Erica Y. Reitz ([27:39](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I'll back up just a moment Brian, because I think you make a really great point of, these students, whether they're transitioning into college or transitioning out or maybe, you have folks who are listening who are working with those who are on the other side of the transition. 20 somethings and that whole population in our church that churches don't always know what to do with and the 20 somethings don't always know where they belong, especially if they haven't started a family. And how do we care for those individuals well.

Erica Y. Reitz ([28:04](#)):

And I would say the starting place in many ways, because my guess is for those who work with these populations, it's just you're busy, you're really busy. And where's the time to open up this conversation in the midst of everything else you're tasked with? And I have to preach on Wednesday and I have to do this on Thursday.

Erica Y. Reitz ([28:23](#)):

And so, I think it starts with deciding that this matters. This is the mission. It's not extraneous to the mission. It's not an add-on. And so, I can give you just my little case for why this matters. If you want to put that up for your viewers. And I think it starts with this is central. This isn't the extra work of discipleship. This is the work of discipleship. And I think when that shift happens, we start to smuggle it in at all different places.

Erica Y. Reitz ([28:54](#)):

It doesn't have to be this senior exit program or, "Now I have to build a whole nother retreat. Where's the time for that?" No, we can once we know the kinds of conversations we should be having with students, we can smuggle it in at all different turns. And so it starts with this matters and then where can I strategically pull it in?

Brian Jenson ([29:19](#)):

Yeah. I like that, smuggling that conversation into where it's going to best be had. Right? And as often as possible and appropriate. That's good. All right, so for people who don't work in this space every day and read extensively like you do and they want to jump into the conversation, what are your parting words of wisdom? What should people be thinking about?

Erica Y. Reitz ([29:44](#)):

Start somewhere. Start small. What's one small action step you can take today to care? Maybe it's, "I just need to initiate a conversation with a senior or a recent grad because I'm not even, I need to listen better to their world." And so, if that's you, ask a senior what they're excited about and what they're nervous about. I guarantee it will be a great fuel for a conversation. And so, maybe it's just putting your ear to the ground of I want to be a better listener to this moment for these individuals in our lives.

Erica Y. Reitz ([30:16](#)):

Maybe you're ready to take a next step with, "I could pull off a small initiative," and so I'd love for you to get in touch. You can subscribe to After College Transition, you can just aftercollegetransition.com and we can talk about how you can maybe take a next step in your context. And then also low-hanging is just getting a copy of After College and putting it into the hands of young people ideally before they transition. But it's also a great resource. I have a young woman in our community who continues to resource 20 somethings and 30 somethings in her church with the books. So, those would be just a few low hanging ways, but decide for yourself right now. What's one small action that I can take that you are going to be faithful with?

Brian Jenson ([31:01](#)):

Yeah, maybe it's sharing this podcast with those that are working with young adults as they enter post-college life. And Erica mentioned some of the resources she has. Those will be in the show notes as well, so you can direct yourself to those. Her book After College can be found, I love saying wherever books are sold, because all you need to do is Google it and I'm sure you'll be able to find it. But we're also going to have a couple of copies to give away to our listeners, so be on the lookout for that, which is exciting. Thank you to Erica for sharing those with us.

Brian Jenson ([31:35](#)):

And keep the conversation going. Smuggle it in wherever you can. And Erica, I just, as we wrap up, I think it's awesome as we talk about transitions that we pull in the expectation conversation too, because you're right. A lot of this happens because things, reality is happening differently than we thought it was going to. And so wherever we can help students along that journey and then enter into young adulthood and continue that journey, then I think we're doing a good job. So, encourage people to keep that conversation going. Erica, thank you.

Erica Y. Reitz ([32:14](#)):

Brian, I'm sorry.

Brian Jenson ([32:16](#)):

Go ahead. Yes, jump on in.

Erica Y. Reitz ([32:17](#)):

I was just going to say, one real low hanging way to close that gap is just getting alumni to talk to your students. Bring an alumni panel back or even just some alumni testimonies and I can give you a resource on how to run an awesome alumni panel if that can be helpful for your context.

Brian Jenson ([32:32](#)):

Awesome.

Erica Y. Reitz ([32:32](#)):

So whether you work with youth and let them hear from college students of what it was like to transition into college, or if you work with college students, let them hear from some 20 somethings. Thanks so much, Brian.

Brian Jenson ([32:43](#)):

Absolutely. Thank you, Erica. It's been a blast, and we will hopefully do this again sometime soon.

Erica Y. Reitz ([32:50](#)):

Sounds great. Thank you to all your listeners for caring about this topic and making it to the end of the podcast. Thank you.

Brian Jenson ([32:56](#)):

Thanks, Erica.

Holly Tate ([33:00](#)):

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