



Prior Learning Assessment Expanded Policy Recommendations

Prepared by the MUS Prior Learning Assessment Task Force

Adopted September 17, 2015

(Revised DATE)

This document includes final recommendations for MUS Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policy written by the PLA Task Force. The Task Force, appointed by the MUS Commissioner of Higher Education, sought and received input from all MUS constituencies; faculty, institutional staff, student representatives and leadership.



Our Philosophy

We recognize the diversity of our citizens' unique learning experiences, aspirations, and intellectual pursuits by providing opportunities for validating that learning through rigorous assessment directly linked to Montana University System (MUS) faculty-defined learning outcomes. An MUS college degree or credential is based upon clearly defined outcomes, dispositions, and competencies as assessed by our faculties. Prior learning assessment (PLA) can provide the bridge for student learning acquired outside of the traditional college setting and the credential or degree completion plan.

PLA provides avenues for more Montanans to access and engage in postsecondary education, leveraging their college-level learning that was gained through independent intellectual pursuits, training and education programs from work, and through learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom. Our faculties determine when PLA credit can be earned and how it can be applied to degree requirements.

PLA is essential to achieving the MUS goal of increasing the overall postsecondary educational attainment rate of Montanans. PLA research has shown that students who earn academic credit through PLA are more likely to persist, take more courses over a longer period of time, and graduate with credentials and degrees. Overall, we believe our PLA philosophy and academically sound practices will have a positive impact on Montana's future economic development, workforce readiness, and quality of life. We encourage all Montana colleges and universities, whether MUS institutions or not, to consider this policy.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLA) BACKGROUND

Upon receiving nominations from each MUS campus, PLA Task Force members were appointed by the Commissioner of Higher Education for the Montana University System in June 2014. This 30-person Task Force structured itself into smaller work groups to discuss the various issues related to prior learning assessment, including review of how other states have formulated policies, PLA research, PLA methods and terminology, as well as administrative functions for fees, staffing, and communication. The work groups brought forward initial recommendations at a September 30, 2014 PLA Task Force meeting in Helena, Montana. After identifying information gaps, and the need for further discussion, the Task Force met again on October 20-21, 2014 to continue deliberations. Feedback, revisions, and edits resulted in a new draft document that was discussed at a November 25, 2014 teleconference meeting. Beginning on November 28, this PLA document and its associated policy recommendations, glossary, and sample course syllabus was then shared across the MUS.



Feedback was collected and applied to create the December 15, 2014 policy draft. To seek further input, this second rendition was distributed and shared on the MUS website through March 27, 2015. The Task Force deliberated on the resulting responses on April 13, 2015 and again on July 24, 2015. Four additional document updates followed. The PLA Task Force submitted the final version of this packet (having compiled feedback and gained input from across the system, with particular attention to gaining faculty insights) to the Commissioner for consideration. It was presented to the Board of Regents and adopted on September 17, 2015.

The MUS recommends that the policies and guidelines subsequently developed by MUS institutions be clearly articulated to their faculty, staff and students accordingly. This policy and PLA recommendations are the result of 16 months of task force work.

MUS PLA POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In recognition of the need to evaluate learning which has taken place outside the formal higher education structure, the MUS-policy recommendations follow:

- Each MUS institution is responsible for determining how best to implement PLA within the context of its mission, culture, student needs, and academic programs.
- Each MUS institution will oversee and maintain the efficacy of this policy, and will assure students have access to the most appropriate prior learning assessment methods as deemed appropriate by its faculty.
- MUS institutions will assign oversight of PLA to the highest ranking Academic Officer for each campus or his/her designee. MUS institutions will work with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to support all PLA efforts. Non-MUS institutions within Montana are invited to develop and adopt PLA policies using these guidelines.
- A goal of this policy is to attain a uniform transfer of PLA credit among all MUS institutions, understanding today's students are mobile.
- When appropriate and with approval from the MUS faculties, PLA will be made available for approved programs in a consistent, transferable and comparable means for which students may be awarded credit for prior learning.
- MUS institutional leadership in collaboration with the MUS Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, will support academic rigor according to the MUS quality principles for the assessment of college-level learning derived from outside of the traditional college classroom setting (Appendix A) and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and



Universities accreditation standards, in alignment with the national guidelines of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Academic program leadership will determine how best to comply with special program accreditation requirements that may or may not preclude PLA.

- In order to best understand the academic success of students earning PLA credits (such as success in subsequent higher level courses, persistence toward the credential or degree, and graduation rates), it is recommended that MUS institutions work with the MUS Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to ensure information technology systems can consistently record and track PLA data, as well as enable accurate reports.
- Ideally, MUS institutions will designate Prior Learning Assessment Liaisons (one per institution) as a resource for faculty, administrators, OCHE, staff, and students.
- MUS colleges and universities will provide professional development for those faculty members, administrators, and staff working with PLA students to assure a high quality, transparent, and consistent academic program for evaluating and awarding PLA credit.
- Institutional leadership, in cooperation with the MUS Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, will integrate review of institutional PLA practices into existing curricular and accreditation review cycles to maintain their currency and relevance.
- MUS Office of Commissioner of Higher Education will conduct a policy audit review every seven years.
- We encourage collaboration of systems-level Veterans Administration and PLA experts to assure best academic and student support services for military service members and veterans.



Proposed Policy Statement

The Montana University System colleges and universities recognize the value of prior learning in the achievement of academic goals. It is the policy of the MUS Board of Regents that a student's previous college-level learning, including that acquired outside of the traditional college setting, may be evaluated for college credit upon the student's request. The credit evaluation should be done in compliance with institutional PLA policy and faculty requirements. MUS students need timely, clear and concise information concerning how prior learning assessment may help them.

Scope

This policy applies to all units under the control of the Montana University System, and to the community colleges subject to approval by their local governing Board of Trustees. Non-public Montana institutions are invited to adopt these policies.

Definition

PLA is a set of well-established, researched, and validated methods for assessing learning for college credit. It is a process that allows any student to demonstrate knowledge, competencies, skills and habits of mind in a particular field or fields and have that learning evaluated for college credit by faculty subject matter experts.

College-level learning attained by students from outside of the traditional college setting may be eligible for credit through PLA if it is at the college-level, is equivalent to a course in the student's program of study, and is demonstrated by successfully passing an appropriately rigorous assessment.

There are two broad categories of PLA. *Instructional-Based* PLA includes learning that typically has taken place in a classroom, but not within a two- or four-year institution. The most common examples of Instructional-Based PLA include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, American Council on Education (ACE) and National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) credits and can include evaluative measures such as CLEP, DSST, and UExcel examinations. *Experiential Learning-Based* PLA describes learning that has occurred outside of a traditional classroom setting and can include evaluative measures such as ~~CLEP, DSST, UExcel examinations, and~~ performance or portfolio assessment review.



Educational Principles

Through this policy, the MUS Board of Regents recognizes the following educational principles:

1. Learning occurs both within formal educational settings and at the initiative of the individual learner.
2. The evaluation and transcribing of learning should take into consideration the degree objectives of the student as well as the learning outcomes articulated by the academic program, institutional and state system requirements. Consideration will be given to not awarding excess PLA credits that might not benefit a student's degree objective.
3. Prior learning assessment should provide substantive information about the knowledge, competencies, skills, and habits of mind gained from outside of the college environment.

Montana University System Standards

1. The learning has been assessed in accordance with national, state/system standards and best practices (see Appendix A).
2. Prior learning may be assessed through these PLA methods:
 - Standardized Tests (CLEP, DSST, UExcel, AP, and IB)
 - American Council on Education (ACE) and National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS)
 - Faculty-Determined Assessments, including;
 - Challenge Exams*,
 - Portfolio Assessment,
 - Individual Performance Assessment,
 - Locally –Evaluated Industry and Workplace Credit

*Challenge exams do not exist for all MUS courses.

3. The learning is college-level and the learning is properly evaluated by faculty/subject matter experts.



Procedural Standards

With regard to awarding credit through any one of the PLA methods:

1. If the student successfully demonstrates evidence of college-level learning, credit will be awarded by the institution and identified on the student’s transcript as credit for prior learning. The institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution’s review process.
2. PLA credit will apply toward appropriate degree or certificate requirements.
3. A PLA appeals process will be available to MUS students, in accordance with other appeals policies, such as grade appeals.
4. In accordance with NWCCU ~~Standard 2.C.7 policy~~, the experiential PLA credit awarded will not exceed 25% of the credits required for the degree or certificate. A suggested rubric follows.

Credit Type	Not Applicable Toward the PLA 25% Cap	-Applicable Toward the PLA 25% Cap
Instructional-Based PLA Credits <i>(These credits are for college-level learning <u>typically</u> derived from formalized instruction and training.)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ American Council on Education (ACE) Credit Recommendations ▪ National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) Credit Recommendations ▪ <u>AP and IB Credits</u> ▪ <u>CLEP, DSST, and UExcel Standardized Examinations</u> ▪ <u>Course Challenge Exams</u> 	
Experiential Learning-Based PLA Credits <i>(These credits are derived from self-directed independent study, and learning from work and learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom.)</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Portfolio Assessment ▪ Individual Performance and Demonstration Assessment ▪ CLEP, DSST, and UExcel Standardized Examinations ▪ Course Challenge Exams



Student Eligibility

1. Undergraduate students must be fully admitted and enrolled at an MUS institution in order to be eligible to earn PLA credits for their anticipated program of study.
2. The number of PLA credits awarded by institutions should be limited only by the residency requirements of the regional and other accrediting bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the student degree plan.
3. Military training and education is evaluated by the American Council on Education for college credit. Air Force students should also provide their regionally accredited Community College of the Air Force (CCAF or Air University) transcripts. All evaluated military training and education credit recommendations will be reviewed by institutions to honor applicable credit toward specific degrees and credential requirements based on the student's academic goals. (See also Appendix B & C.)
4. MUS institutions award PLA credit on a course-by-course equivalency basis. Institutions may establish their own rubric(s) for awarding credit using any of the following accepted sources and validation methods:
 - Credit recommendations listed in the American Council on Education (ACE) National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training and the ACE Military Guide.
 - Credit recommendations listed by National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS).
 - Credit demonstrated by successfully passing national for-credit examination programs such as: DSST Exams, UExcel Exams, CLEP, IB or AP exams at nationally normed passing or above scores as determined by academic program leadership.
 - Prior learning credit awarded and transcribed by other similarly accredited institutions.
 - Individual portfolios assessed by faculty/subject matter experts based upon MUS-determined quality guidelines.
 - Faculty-approved industry-recognized certifications.



Application

1. Wherever programmatically appropriate, institutions may assign traditional letter grades when PLA credit will be awarded. Institutions may allow use of learning graded as “Credit/No Credit” toward program or degree requirements (particularly for portfolio/performance assessments).
2. Prior learning credits will be applied to degree or program requirements in the same manner as credits earned at the awarding institutions, once approved by faculty.
3. The institution will clearly articulate whether or not the application of experiential learning based credits for prior learning count toward institutional academic residency requirements.

Instructional-based prior learning credits will not count towards academic residency requirements.

Transferability

Once recorded on an MUS transcript, PLA credit is transferable on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through regular study at the awarding institution.

Fees

Prior learning assessment fees will be transparent throughout the Montana University System. Fees will be determined in accordance with MUS standards and reflect the operational cost of administering a PLA program. Fees will not be based on the number of credits awarded as per quality standard number eight.

Tracking

MUS institutions will track student usage information and data on the number and demographic of students with credit for prior learning, number of credits for prior learning awarded, type of assessment methods, associated costs to the student, which will be available for annual reports to MUS and OCHE to the extent practicable with MUS and institutional information technology systems. The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education will produce a Prior Learning Assessment Annual System Report that will include recommendations to summarize/evaluate efficacy of PLA on a statewide basis.



In addition, institutional degree completion data collection and reporting offices are encouraged to examine the relationship between degree completion and PLA credits awarded for research purposes related to student performance, persistence, and graduation rates.

Information and Dissemination

Policies and general information about the availability of prior learning assessment will be made widely available to current and prospective students, including information on each institution's website. All institutional PLA information will also be accessible at the MUS website for purposes of transparency.

All state institutions will post on their websites or share in the manner in which they typically communicate information to the student body and prospective students the following information:

- PLA methods available and fees
- How to access PLA advising
- Acceptable cut scores for standardized exams
- Any program exceptions

Compliance

We recognize the extent to which institutions will provide PLA to students is subject to institutional and faculty approval, as well as academic program and student needs. Institutions may determine and implement their own assessment criteria or use other validation methods to meet these criteria for specialized accreditation attainment in accordance with their institutional missions.

Private Institutions

Non-public Montana institutions are invited to adopt these policies.

Quality Review



This policy will be reviewed every seven years by MUS. All PLA processes will be consistent with the MUS PLA Quality Standards (Appendix A). Note: To fine tune this document where relevant, policy review will occur annually during the first two years of implementation.

Professional development and training is important for faculty and staff working with students to ascertain their prior learning assessment needs and provide assessment services. Faculty involved in the assessment of learning will receive periodic professional development to ensure consistency, rigor, and fairness in assessing learning. *[The PLA Task Force encourages OCHE to formalize resources for ongoing professional development as well as appropriate compensation for faculty assessors.]* Prior Learning Assessment processes and procedures, as well as student outcomes information will be reviewed at the institutional level by the highest ranking Academic Officer, or his/her designee, who will integrate review of institutional PLA practices into existing curricular review cycles to maintain their currency and relevance.

A **PLA Council** will be appointed by the Commissioner of Higher Education for reviewing PLA data at the institutional and state levels to determine trends, student academic outcomes, and policy efficacy.

All prior learning assessment policies, services, and procedures will comply with Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities [Standards and Policies](#), as well as any specialized or program accreditation guidelines.

APPENDIX A
MUS Prior Learning Assessment Quality Standards*

To determine whether to award college credit to students for prior learning, follow these standards:

1. Credit will be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted
6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded. Fees will also cover the cost of assuring quality of PLA including but not limited to the cost of funding professional development for faculty and staff.
9. All personnel across the state involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. PLA programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.
11. PLA credits will appear on the academic transcript according to the MUS Course Name and Number for which the credits were awarded.



12. PLA credits will be transferrable throughout the system.

*These quality principles align with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) National Standards.

APPENDIX B

Financial Aid and PLA

Satisfactory Academic Progress: Credits earned via portfolio assessment for prior learning will count toward the calculation of a student's Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). However, the consideration of credits during the portfolio review that does not result in credit being awarded, will not count as credits attempted as the student is not enrolled in specific courses.

Maximum Credits: To avoid excess credits which may impact financial aid eligibility, credit recommendations accepted via the Prior Learning Assessment process should be limited to those that assist in completing the student's degree requirements.



Appendix C

Montana University System

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Policy Definitions

25% PLA Cap: The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU [Standard 2.C.7](#)) limits the number of experiential learning-based credits to no more than 25% of the credits required for any degree.

Excess Credit: Any Military-Related PLA credits that are not applicable toward a degree or credential requirement are considered “excess credit.” It is recommended to not record excess credit recommendations on a transcript. Military-related credits, in particular, may result in excess credit if all American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations are placed on the student’s transcript without regard to the degree or credential requirements. Excess credit may affect a student’s financial aid eligibility (See Appendix B, Maximum Credit).

Experiential Learning-Based Credits: College-level learning acquired through work and learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom, learning activities such as independent reading and study, mass media ~~(as defined by NWCCU)~~, open courseware or other self-directed learning may be assessed for PLA credit. The assessment may be via ~~a standardized exam, a course challenge exam (not associated with registration or enrollment in the course for which credit is being sought)~~, portfolio assessment, [Individual performance or demonstration assessment](#), or other faculty-determined assessment methods. Experiential learning-based credit awards may not exceed 25% of the required credits for any degree per Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU [Standard 2.C.7](#)).

Instructional-Based Credits: Credits earned as a result of formal instruction and/or assessment. Examples of instructional-based credits include, but are not limited to: AP (formal Advanced Placement passing exam score), military training and educational programs (evaluated by the American Council on Education), faculty-developed course challenge exams taken within the first three weeks of a course, ~~and~~ formal training and educational programs offered via business and industry evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE) or the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), [and assessment methods such as CLEP, DSST and UExcel standardized exams](#). As such, these credits are not considered experiential learning-based credits and do not count toward the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU [Standard 2.C.7](#)) 25% PLA cap.

Course Challenge Exam: A student who takes MUS faculty-developed Course Challenge Exams or Assessments without enrolling in or registering for the course in which he/she is seeking credit will be considered attempting an ~~instructional-based experiential learning~~ assessment. These exams taken are independent of course instruction and will **not** count toward the [NWCCU Standard 2.C.7](#) 25% PLA cap. [Challenge exams do not exist for all MUS courses.](#)

Recording PLA Credits: Prior learning assessment credits will be coded, documented, and tracked in student records for purposes of research and reporting.

Transcription of PLA Credits: If the student successfully demonstrates evidence of college-level learning, credit will be awarded by the institution and identified on the student’s transcript as credit for prior



learning and the institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution's review process.

Appendix D

Glossary of Common Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Terms

Basic College/University Definitions

Apprenticeship: A combination of on-the-job training and related instruction in which workers learn the practical and theoretical aspects of a highly skilled occupation. Apprenticeship programs can be sponsored by individual employers, joint employer and labor groups, and/or employer associations. For more information visit: www.dol.gov/dol/topic/training/apprenticeship.htm

Certification: A designation earned by a person ensuring the individual is qualified to perform a specific task or job. Certification differs from licensure in that certification is an employment qualification and not a legal requirement for practicing a profession.

Credit (or college credit or semester credit hours): "Credit" or "credit hours" is used to track a student's progress through his/her degree. Each course is worth a specific number of credits. Students must accumulate specific credit hours for the intended degree sought (typically 60 for an associate degree and 120 for a baccalaureate degree). Students can earn credit by taking courses in the classroom, online, or through prior learning assessment.

Electives: Courses the student may choose based on desire. For example, a student might have a "social science elective", allowing the student to choose any social science course (psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) to fulfill the requirement. In other degrees it may be more open-ended, allowing students to take nearly any course offered by the institution to fulfill the requirement.

General Education Requirements: Also referred to as "Gen Ed" or "core classes," courses required of all students enrolled in the same degree, regardless of area of focus (major). Introductory courses in different subjects, such as math, English, humanities, public speaking, natural sciences, and many others are typically part of the general education core.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA): A set of well-established, researched, and validated methods for assessing learning for college credit. It is a process that allows any student to demonstrate knowledge, competencies, skills and habits of mind in a particular field or fields and have that learning evaluated for college credit by faculty subject matter experts. PLA involves learning and knowledge students acquire while living their lives; working, participating in employer training programs; serving in the military; studying independently; volunteering or performing community service; and through self-directed independent study. PLA may result in college credit, certification, or advanced standing applied to formal education.



Credit by Examination

Advanced Placement (AP) Exams: A series of tests developed by the College Board traditionally offered in advanced placement high school courses, including 34 exams in 19 subject areas. For more information visit: www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/submescts.html

Challenge Exams: Exams used to assess learning and award credit for the course being challenged. The following principles apply: Institutional challenge exams are developed by faculty at the MUS institution awarding course credit when students pass the exam(s). Exams are based on the learning outcomes articulated in the corresponding course syllabus. Challenge exams do not exist for all MUS courses.

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams: Tests of college material offered by the College Board. For more information visit: clep.collegeboard.org

DSST Credit by Exam Program: Formerly known as the DANTES Program, owned and administered by Prometric, tests knowledge of both lower-level and upper-level college material through 38 exams. For more information visit: <http://www.dantes.doded.mil/service-members/prep-for-college/examinations/index.html>

UExcel/Excelsior College Examination Program: Formerly Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams, offered by Excelsior College, NY. For more information visit: <http://www.excelsior.edu/exams/uexcel-home>

Other Methods for Earning Credits

American Council on Education (ACE) Guides: Published credit recommendations for formal instructional programs and examinations offered by non-collegiate agencies (including civilian employers, the military, professional associations, and other workplace-related training).

International Baccalaureate Programs: The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme is an internationally accepted qualification for entry into institutes of higher education. The Diploma Program is designed for students aged 16 to 19; it is a demanding two-year curriculum leading to final examinations. Graduates of the IB program must demonstrate competency in languages, social studies, the experimental sciences and mathematics. In addition, the program has three core requirements that are included to broaden the educational experience and challenge students to apply their knowledge and understanding. To receive a diploma, students must achieve a minimum score of 24 out of a possible 45 points, as well as satisfactory participation in the creativity, action, and service requirement. For more information visit: www.ibo.org/who/

Locally-Evaluated Industry and Workplace Credit: Program evaluations of non-collegiate instructional programs done by individual colleges. The types of programs evaluated are industry certifications, professional licensures, apprenticeships, and other local workplace trainings that demonstrate the competencies required for completion of degree or certificate programs.

National College Credit Recommendation Service: Also called NCCRS. This organization provides college credit recommendations for training and education programs offered outside the college classroom, based upon a thorough review by discipline-specific faculty.



Portfolio: A portfolio is a formal written communication, presented by the student to the college, requesting credit or recognition for extra-collegiate learning. The portfolio must identify learning clearly and succinctly, and it must provide sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it alone, or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for their evaluation. Colleges award credit for learning, not for experience.

Portfolio-Based Assessment: A portfolio is a student-developed paper or electronic summary of her/his non-collegiate learning experiences aligned to specific courses. The portfolio contains evidence of learning as well as documentation. The portfolio is presented for assessment to determine whether college-level knowledge and skills have been acquired. Only a faculty assessor can determine if the learning documented in the portfolio aligns with the academic outcomes for the course(s) for which the student is seeking credit. The faculty assessor awards or denies credit based upon the assessment. Institutions often offer a portfolio-development course for students.

Prior Military Training Credit: The American Council on Education (ACE) provides credit recommendations for all evaluated military training. College credit can be awarded based upon these recommendations (when aligned with degree requirements). For military training and experiential learning that has not been evaluated by ACE for credit, military service members and veterans may seek other forms of assessment to earn college credit (such as a portfolio or exams).



Appendix E

In Appreciation

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education is grateful for the collaboration and dedication of the PLA Task Force and campus constituents who contributed to the creation of this document.

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