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Abstract

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Keywords

Doctoral Success, Action Research, Longitudinal, Student Success

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The Impact of Longitudinal Action Research on Doctoral Student Retention and Degree Completion

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The impact of a longitudinal action research (LAR) project on the retention and success of students enrolled in a leadership studies doctoral program was the focus of this study. The purpose was to understand how the experiences obtained through an action research project, conducted over 12-15 months, affected students' development while they completed the first two years of their doctoral coursework. Ten doctoral students, who were at various stages in their educational journey, were interviewed and asked to reflect upon their experiences while completing their LAR project. Findings indicated that the LAR project provided an opportunity to apply theoretical concepts and methodological tools obtained in their classes to real-world issues and concerns within their respective organizations. Additionally, students indicated that the experiences obtained through LAR projects increased appreciation for their doctoral education which, in turn, impacted their retention and success. Keywords: Doctoral Success, Action Research, Longitudinal, Student Success

An increased focus on the recruitment and retention of doctoral students has occurred within the United States given an economic shift from a product-based to an information-based commodity (Davis & Botkin, 1994; Davis & Davidson, 1991). Between 1998 and 2010, the United States witnessed a 64% increase in doctoral student enrollment (OECD, 2013). However, in spite of the increased need to train and graduate students who possess advanced degrees and the upsurge in doctoral enrollment, the Nation's doctoral completion rate continues to hover near 50% (Di Pierro, 2012a; Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008) and research on this student population indicates that between 40% to 60% of students who begin a doctoral program will fail to complete the degree (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Cassuto, 2013; Geiger, 1997; Lovitts, 2001; Nolan, 1999; Wendler et al., 2010).

The aforementioned statistics are troubling when one considers the substantial investments of resources that are made by both students and institutions toward the completion of a doctoral degree. Individuals who choose the path toward a doctoral degree spend significant amounts of time and money in the pursuit of his or her degree (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; Di Pierro, 2012b). When a student fails to complete a doctoral program, it is not only psychologically damaging and monetarily expensive, it also negatively impacts the faculty involved, as well as damages an institution's reputation (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 2000; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Johnson, Green, & Kluever, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

To date, research related to doctoral completion has yet to identify salient approaches that could lead to positive, substantive changes regarding curriculum, programming and advising (Di Pierro, 2012a; 2012b). As Golde (2005) explained, earlier research on doctoral attrition and completion failed to produce improved methods through which to adequately address attrition, especially in regard to diverse students. Postgraduate educators are familiar with statistics related to doctoral non-completion, however, "[t]he implementation of actual corrective measures to staunch doctoral attrition is slow in coming and begs the question regarding why universities do not more aggressively address doctoral losses" (Di Pierro, 2012a, p. 29).

The present study was conducted to understand the impact of a longitudinal action research (LAR) project on the retention and completion of students enrolled in a leadership studies doctoral program. The purpose of the study was to identify the ways in which an LAR project, completed over the course of 12-15 months, might have an effect on students' development and decision-making processes – specifically related to persistence while in the midst of doctoral coursework.

A deeper understanding and knowledge of how a long-term action research project, conducted while students complete their doctoral coursework, can assist academic institutions with programmatic changes, improve students' academic experiences and reduce attrition. Such enhancements are timely given the growing challenges of revenue generation and increased budget cuts at all postsecondary levels. Additionally, the knowledge gained through this study adds to the current knowledgebase on best practices within doctoral education, as well as informs postsecondary educators, leaders and policy-makers on the important effect that real-world applications of research and theoretical knowledge can have on student retention and success.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study drew primarily from three areas – Astin's (1999) Eclectic Theory, Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory and the preexisting literature on factors that impact doctoral attrition. Astin's (1999) Eclectic Theory places the accent, or focus, on the individual. The theory is described as “flexible” – borrowing from other pedagogical approaches as needed and tailoring itself to address the unique needs of each student. Astin further explains that “the philosophy underlying most student personnel work (e.g., guidance, counseling, selective placement, student support services) implicitly incorporates the individualized or eclectic theory of student development” (p. 521).

Tinto's (1993) Integration Theory posits that students who become more connected to their colleges, are more likely to remain enrolled and persist. Connection can occur along two dimensions: socially and academically. Social connection is achieved when a student forms relationships with peers through participation in clubs and engagement in campus activities. Academic connections are established when a student forms a relationship with his/her professor and takes part in academic activities. Failure to form academic or social connections can result in a student feeling disconnected and isolated which, in turn, can increase the likelihood of attrition. At the core of this framework is an argument that advocates for the holistic integration of a student with his or her campus - both in and out of the classroom environment. While Tinto's Integration Theory focuses primarily on an undergraduate student population, its core elements aid in identifying internal and external factors that impact student persistence. As such, Tinto's framework is salient at all postsecondary levels.

A doctoral student's decision to abandon his or her degree is rarely the result of just one factor (Ivankova & Stick, 2007) and research on doctoral attrition highlights the multifaceted nature of the issue. Reasons for non-completion include: academic advising (Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Golde, 2000), institutional or departmental concerns (Austin, 2002; Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Lovitts, 2001), family and employment challenges (Frasier, 1993; Golde, 1998), self-motivation (Lovitts, 2001; Reynolds, 1998), and external support (Hales, 1998). Astin's (1999) and Tinto's (1993) theoretical frameworks, as well as the doctoral attrition factors outlined above informed the data collection and analysis processes in this study.

The Longitudinal Action Research Project

One requirement of the doctoral program wherein this study was conducted is that all students be employed full-time throughout their doctoral journey. The LAR project was designed with a goal to link full-time leadership experiences with doctoral coursework. The project is completed over the course of 12-15 months and begins in the second year of the program. During this time, the student, the organization where he or she is employed, and the university form a partnership to address a specific dimension of the student's organization and to design or redesign that element of the organization to enhance its overall systemic function. The student is expected to employ what he or she is learning within the classroom to a real-world problem. The student first identifies a dimension or issue within his or her organization and then proposes a plan of action to his or her doctoral advisor and a supervisor within the organization. Once the proposal is approved by all parties, the student conducts action research on the organization's issue with an end goal of positively addressing the identified issue.

A minimum of four check-points between the student and his or her advisor occur during the 12-15-month period while the project is underway. During this time, the role of the advisor is to monitor the student's progress and respond to any concerns that may arise from the student or the organization where the LAR project is being conducted. The culmination of the project is a portfolio which includes a scholarly paper that details and explains the ways in which information, ideas, concepts, etc. from the doctoral coursework contributed to the completion of the project. In addition to the portfolio, students are required to present an overview of their projects and outcomes to peers, faculty and staff. The presentation provides students with an opportunity to highlight the challenges/obstacles they experienced, the lessons learned, and the ways in which they were able to apply the knowledge, skills and theoretical foundations obtained in the classroom to a real-world situation.

As a member of the doctoral program used for this study and advisor for many doctoral student LAR projects, I often received positive feedback from students. Their comments indicated that they valued the opportunity to apply classroom learning to real-world situations. Over time, I grew to suspect that the LAR project might aid in the retention of students. As such, this study endeavored to explore whether or not the LAR project had a positive impact on doctoral student retention and degree completion.

Methods

To address the study's research question, "What is the impact of a longitudinal action research project on the retention and completion of students enrolled in a leadership studies doctoral program?" a qualitative methodology was chosen. By doing so, a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon would be obtained (Creswell, 2012).

Participants

Following Institutional Review Board approval, a convenient, purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of ten students who were currently enrolled in a leadership studies doctoral program at a small, private, Midwestern university was obtained for the study. To achieve maximum variation in the sample, participants were drawn from one of the following three categories: (1) successful completion of their doctoral degree (GRAD); (2) successful completion of a longitudinal action research project and doctoral coursework (ABD); and (3) currently involved in the longitudinal action research project and coursework (CURRENT). Anonymity of the participants was accomplished by assigning each participant a pseudonym.

Additionally, any and all identifying information obtained during interviews was omitted from the results of the study.

The final sample consisted of six women and four men. Three of the women were African-American and ranged in age from 41-51 while the remaining three women were White and in their early-to-mid 30's. Two were African-American males aged 38 & 46 and the final two male participants were White and aged 36 & 44. One woman and one man were currently involved in their LAR project and coursework (CURRENT). Four women and one man had successfully completed their LAR project and doctoral coursework (ABD). And one woman and two men had successfully completed their doctoral degrees (GRAD). Five of the participants worked as P-12 educators, three held positions in higher education and the remaining two were employed in the government and healthcare sectors.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a series of one-on-one interviews with each participant during which a semi-structured interview protocol was used. Questions asked during the interviews endeavored to: (1) gauge the experience level of each participant with action research prior to the required project; (2) explore the challenges that he or she experienced during the project; and (3) determine whether the student viewed the project as beneficial or detrimental to his or her development and progress in the doctoral program. Interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus in a classroom or through a conference calling service that enabled me to record the interview. Sessions lasted between 30 – 60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim by a third party who possessed no knowledge of the participants or their true identities (Creswell, 2012).

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analyzed through a constant-comparative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and initial themes and findings were member-checked with participants to obtain their thoughts and feedback. The qualitative analysis consisted of the following steps: (1) I conducted a cursory exploration of the data during which I read through transcripts and composed memos related to my initial thoughts and observations; (2) I coded the data in segments and labeled text; (3) I aggregated similar codes to arrive at overarching themes; (4) I conducted peer debriefing to confirm congruence between my codes and themes; and (5) I continued to refine codes and themes as new data became available.

Trustworthiness (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009) of my findings was established in three ways. First, a research journal and copious notes were maintained throughout the research process. These documents included my own thoughts and personal reflections related to the participants, their experiences, the themes identified, and the possible connections that may exist between these data. As such, my journal not only served as a means of documenting my actions and thoughts, it also assisted me in the triangulation of data and theme building process. Second, to ensure that the themes identified truly represented the participants, a rigorous process of member checking was conducted wherein transcripts, notes and the themes identified were reviewed by the participants to ensure the accuracy, credibility, and validity of the information. Third and finally, peer debriefing (Merriam, 2009) was conducted wherein I consulted with colleagues who possessed knowledge related to student retention and completion. Doing so helped to reduce the potential impact of my own personal biases.

Results

Among various emergent themes, two primary themes were identified which spoke to how the experiences obtained through the LAR projects benefitted the participants. First, the LAR projects provided an opportunity to apply theoretical concepts and methodological tools obtained in their classes to real-world situations and concerns within their respective organizations. Second, students in all of the groupings (GRAD, ABD and CURRENT) indicated that the experiences obtained through the LAR projects increased their appreciation for their doctoral education which, in turn, aided in their retention.

Real-World Application of Course Content

All participants made mention of how the LAR project afforded them with an opportunity to apply what they were learning in the classroom to real-world situations and concerns. Within this overarching theme, the following two sub-themes emerged: (1) coursework related to organizational development and behavior and (2) coursework related to action research.

Organizational Development and Behavior. Seven of the participants stated that what they learned in their organizational development and organizational behavior classes was applicable to the challenges faced while conducting action research in their respective projects. Greg's project involved the creation of a leadership team within his building. He stated,

What I learned in the organizational development class was extremely helpful at the beginning of my project. It helped me identify many of the underlying barriers that were present which could have been barriers to implementing the professional development program I created.

Additionally, Greg said that what he gleaned through his organizational behavior courses "helped me see and understand why some people were resistant to change. I already knew that most people don't like change, but the classes helped me understand the reasons for their resistance."

David, Marcia, Brian, Chris, Kathy, and Liz all echoed Greg's viewpoint regarding what they learned in their organizational development and organizational behavior courses, as well as how they were able to operationalize that knowledge through their own LAR projects. David's project involved a revision of his company's new-hire training content and procedures. Toward the beginning of his project, David experienced pushback from his peers and said,

At first, the other staff didn't see the value in what I was wanting to do. What I learned in my org classes enabled me to see that I needed to do a better job of "selling" my project – to get people on-board. In the past, I wouldn't have been able to recognize that OR how to promote my project's value.

David's comments regarding the "selling" of his project were echoed by Brian who chose to focus on the improvement of support services for students within his school district. Brian explained,

Many of the teachers within the special education department were already unhappy due to a new leadership structure that had been put into place. The last

thing they wanted to deal with were new directives. I had to work really hard to obtain their buy-in on the changes I wanted to implement.

Over time, Brian discovered that if he could provide resistant teachers with documentation that showed how certain programmatic changes resulted in improvements for students, they were much more receptive.

I really had to work at changing the culture within the group. My org classes taught me how to assess and influence culture. Once I presented all of the potential benefits that there were for students, their resistance really died down.

Liz's LAR project took the form of a transition program for 5th grade students who were moving from elementary to middle school. "We saw a lot of students struggling during their first year in middle school, so I came up with an idea for a transitional orientation program that would help acclimate 5th graders into the 6th grade." While Liz did not experience push back or resistance from her administrators or peers, she did learn a great deal about leadership styles:

It's easy to say that you are a certain type of leader when you're sitting in a classroom. But it's a lot different when you actually try to put certain leadership skills and traits into practice in the real world. It wasn't easy but the experience was extremely beneficial.

Ethics were another area in which Liz experienced tension related to the differences that exist between the classroom setting and real-life. Liz explained, "it's easy to say 'these are the things I believe in and how I will act' but actually conducting yourself in all situations that way can be very challenging."

The focus of Kathy's LAR project was the implementation of a state-wide education mandate that effected grades K-3. Kathy recognized her leadership tendencies during many of the discussions in her organizational leadership and organizational behavior courses. She explained,

before those classes, I hadn't really taken the time to identify my leadership traits. I also never spent time reflecting on how those traits effected other people. In class, I learned that I'm not always the best communicator (laugh)... .. once I accepted this as an area of growth for me, I was able to focus on it during my project. I learned that I needed to be more forthcoming with my staff.

Kathy stated that her project provided an opportunity for her to "practice" better communication skills which she learned in her organizational behavior classes.

Action Research. Five of the participants indicated that the experience of conducting action research was a significant benefit. Debbie's LAR project involved the creation of a student handbook and orientation for a new online program at her institution. She explained,

I had to first research other, similar online programs to see what their handbooks and orientation modules looked like. I also conducted a literature review to identify best practices. Having to do these things really helped when the time came to begin my own dissertation research.

Tammy, Marcia, Chris, and Brian also mentioned the value in conducting action research prior to beginning the dissertation process.

Tammy's project involved the creation of a youth leadership development program which was housed at a church in her community. For the project, Tammy explained,

I had to first identify successful models of leadership development programs that were in use at other churches. That took some work because it made me define what "success" meant for my project. Up to that point, I didn't really think that much about the word – I just took it for granted that everyone would know what I meant (laugh).

Once her research question and definition of success were finalized, Tammy moved on to her literature review. She stated,

I did a fairly in-depth literature search to see what the best practices were for youth programs and leadership programs – then I tried to merge the two. It wasn't easy – but it did give me an idea of what it's like to do a literature review and also my first chance at synthesizing information.

When asked whether the LAR project made her better prepared for her own dissertation literature review, Tammy responded, "Definitely. I was able to take my time during project which was nice because there was such a learning curve involved."

Chris' project involved teaching inquiry-based instructional practices to a group of his peers and then monitoring their progress as they implemented the new procedures in their respective classrooms. Similar to the others mentioned above, Chris credited his increased comfort with research to the LAR project. He explained,

my project really brought the program to life because I was able to apply what I was learning – especially research. Prior to my project, I had never conducted research so I learned a lot over the school year. Like how to conduct a literature review, how to create an observation protocol and how to conduct interviews. It really got me prepared for my dissertation work.

Increased Appreciation of Doctoral Education

Another similarity shared between all of the participants was that each recognized the value in what they were learning through the doctoral program and that the LAR project facilitated their appreciation of that learning. This resulted in an increased appreciation of the participants toward their doctoral education. This process occurred along two distinct paths: (1) through the establishment of new professional relationships or a strengthening of preexisting professional connections, as well as new opportunities for professional networking and (2) a direct influence on participants' persistence at one or more points during their doctoral journey.

New or Strengthened Professional Connections and Networking. Six participants mentioned new professional relationships that were created as a result of their LAR project or that preexisting professional relationships were strengthened. Debbie and David both indicated that their LAR project had a positive impact on their employment. Debbie explained that her LAR project necessitated her involvement with people across the University's campus and that "later on, a number of those people agreed to serve as references for me when I began looking

for a new job.” David’s experience was similar; however, he directly credits his LAR project with a new job he obtained shortly after his project’s completion: “my new job is a direct result of the work I did for my project. A new position was actually created for me within [my organization].”

Marianne, Liz, Brian, and Marcia shared similar viewpoints on this topic. Marianne’s project, the implementation of a state-wide mandate, also provided her with new opportunities to meet and establish relationships with peers and directors state-wide. Marianne explained,

Given that it was a state mandate, all of the agencies like mine were struggling with the same issues. For the first time, at least as long as I can remember, we began actually sharing information and strategies. I got to meet new people and I also strengthened some of the relationships I already had with counterparts. I was able to share what I had already found in my own research.

Comments made by Liz echoed Marianne’s experiences. Through her school’s new transition program, Liz was able to collaborate with individuals district-wide with whom she had no previous contact. Liz explained,

The conversations that took place between the elementary school and my own school were very beneficial. We started talking more openly about what each side “thought” was being done (but neither side was very sure) and, through those talks, we were able to bridge some gaps.

Liz’ initiative has since grown into a district-wide program that is used between multiple elementary and middle schools. “When [the transition program] went district wide, I found myself talking to building principals and the superintendent. That wouldn’t have happened were it not for my project.”

Marcia was serving as an adjunct at a local community college that was experiencing a high degree of frustration among its faculty. Her LAR project consisted of 2 parts: (1) an exploration into why faculty were frustrated, and (2) the implementation of a solution to what she discovered in part 1. Marcia stated that, “prior to my project, my interactions on campus were very limited. I only really dealt with the chair of the department and one of the full-time faculty within the department.” Marcia’s investigation resulted in her developing a faculty handbook for the college. “The need for a faculty handbook became clear during my interviews.” As a result of her work, Marcia made a number of significant connections across campus. She explained, “the project showed me the importance of building professional connections.”

Direct Effect on Persistence and Retention. When asked directly whether the LAR project had any effect on their persistence in the doctoral program, 5 participants responded in the affirmative. David explained,

There were a lot of times when I felt uncomfortable or was put in new positions during my doctoral studies. The project helped me push past these times because I could see how I was growing as a leader. I learned to become comfortable with the uncomfortable.

David also stated, “I’ve learned more during my project, over the last year, than I ever did in my bachelors or master’s degrees. I wasn’t going to give up on that.”

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Greg, Chris, Tammy, and Kathy. Greg, Chris, and Tammy each referenced the significance of the “continuity” that existed between their LAR projects and the courses they were taking. Greg stated,

The sequence of classes aligned with the stages of the action research project – each class gave me a “little more” which I could then apply to my own project. This was extremely helpful for me because I have a tendency of getting overwhelmed. Whenever I’d reach a point in my project where I felt ill-equipped, I’d learn something in class that would help me push through. I needed that.

Chris expressed a similar viewpoint regarding the connections he drew between the program’s sequence and his own project. He explained,

I never really thought about leaving the program because what I was doing for my project matched up so well to what I was learning in class. I could always see the value in what I was learning as I moved along in the process.

Statements made by Tammy related to this topic were almost identical. Tammy said, “even during really difficult times – personal, professional or with the [doctoral] program – leaving was never an option. My project enabled me to apply what I was learning, and it made me want to learn more.”

Kathy’s views regarding her persistence through the doctoral program differed slightly in that she believed her LAR project strengthened her relationship with her doctoral advisor. “My project helped me develop my relationship with [her advisor] and that helped me to persist in the program because I always had someone I could go to for guidance, assistance or just to vent.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the ways in which a longitudinal action research (LAR) project, completed over the course of 12-15 months, might have an effect on students’ development and decision-making processes – specifically related to persistence while in the midst of doctoral coursework. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with 10 individuals residing at one of three points in the doctoral program: (1) successful completion of their doctoral degree (GRAD); (2) successful completion of a longitudinal action research project and doctoral coursework (ABD); and (3) currently involved in the longitudinal action research project and coursework (CURRENT). An analysis of the data revealed two primary themes: (1) real-world application of course content; and (2) increased appreciation of doctoral education. The findings of this study reinforce preexisting literature related to doctoral persistence and success.

A student’s ability to perceive the value in his or her learning is a crucial step toward retention (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Astin asserted that “adult learners are interested in trying to connect their educational experience to the rest of their lives, and the more they can do that, the more involved they become” (as cited in Richmond, 1986, p. 93). All of the participants in the current study indicated that the LAR enabled them to recognize, first hand, the value in what they were learning in the classroom. What is more, each person described different instances in which he or she was able to operationalize his or her classroom learning during a real-world experience.

The adequate preparation of students to conduct research has been found to be a key area in need of attention at the doctoral level (Henning & Wilkins, 2012). Similarly, among the “promising practices” put forth by the Council of Graduate Schools’ PhD Completion Project (2010) was a call for earlier experiences that provide students with opportunities to engage in research. Such practice not only reinforces the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct quality research, but also facilitates the identification of research interests. Comments made by participants in this study supported this notion. Additionally, data suggested that the ongoing experience obtained through the LAR highlighted the consistency and continuity that existed between the project and doctoral coursework.

Beyond research directly related to doctoral retention lies a significant body of work that speaks to the relationship between mentoring relationships and successful student outcomes (i.e., Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2010; Golde & Dore, 2001; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006). The LAR project in this study not only required, but also facilitated a relationship between this study’s participants and their doctoral advisors. Such interactions speak directly to the academic dimension of Tinto’s (1993) Integration Theory. Most-often, it is only toward the latter half of one’s doctoral journey, when a student conducts his or her dissertation work, that he or she begins working closely with a mentor or advisor. While Kathy was the only participant to specifically identify the LAR project’s impact on her relationship with her advisor, all of the participants spoke of their advisors influence on the process during the interviews. The comments put forth by the participants of this study suggest that conducting an ongoing project earlier in the doctoral process fostered academic integration which may have supported their persistence.

Benefits of the academic relationship, or mentoring, that occurred between the participants and their advisors is a common theme found within doctoral attrition literature. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) stated, “[a faculty member] serves as a role model and becomes the primary socializing agent in the department... ..It is the number of faculty members a student comes to know as professional colleagues that is associated with involvement in the doctoral program” and is “directly related to doctoral degree progress” (p. 185). Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001) asserted that “The cultivation of developmental or mentoring relationships between graduate students and their professors is a critical factor in determining the successful completion of graduate programs” (p. 549). More recently, the Council of Graduate Schools’ (2010) Ph.D. Completion Project also cited mentoring relationships as a critical component in doctoral student success. The LAR project in this study serves as just one example of how programs might use an ongoing student project to foster academic integration, which, as other studies have shown (i.e., Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001), surpasses the significance of social integration at the doctoral level.

Conclusion

Each doctoral student and program are unique and this study provided only one perspective on the impact of longitudinal action research on doctoral retention and success. As it is the only such study on this topic, it leaves a number of unanswered questions, as well as potential avenues for future explorations on the effects of ongoing student projects on doctoral students’ persistence. This study did not take into account the voices and perspectives of the program faculty. Future studies could explore the experiences of both students and their advisors to identify similarities and discrepancies that may exist. The sample size could also be increased which might supply a more diverse perspective on the impact of the LAR project on doctoral student success. Finally, the current study was conducted at a mid-sized, private university. Replicating this study at a larger, public institution could provide an alternate perspective on the salience of longitudinal action research within a doctoral program.

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