# Four Ingredients for Building a Great Study Abroad website

BY ADAM SCHULTZ, CEO VERIFIED STUDIOS

I've been working with higher education program directors since 2006, crafting and deploying website redesigns and improving site performance.

I've tackled nearly every type of college, university, department, school and program website, but took on my first study abroad program site redesign in 2014. David F. Taylor, Director of Global Abroad Programs at Wake Forest University's Center for Global Programs and Studies, and his staff were pleased with the results and allowed us to share them with you.

This paper details the four vital lessons learned during the redesign and marketing strategy sessions for the Wake Forest University's Center for Global Programs and Studies website. The following are the four specific challenges we encountered and the associated solutions implemented.
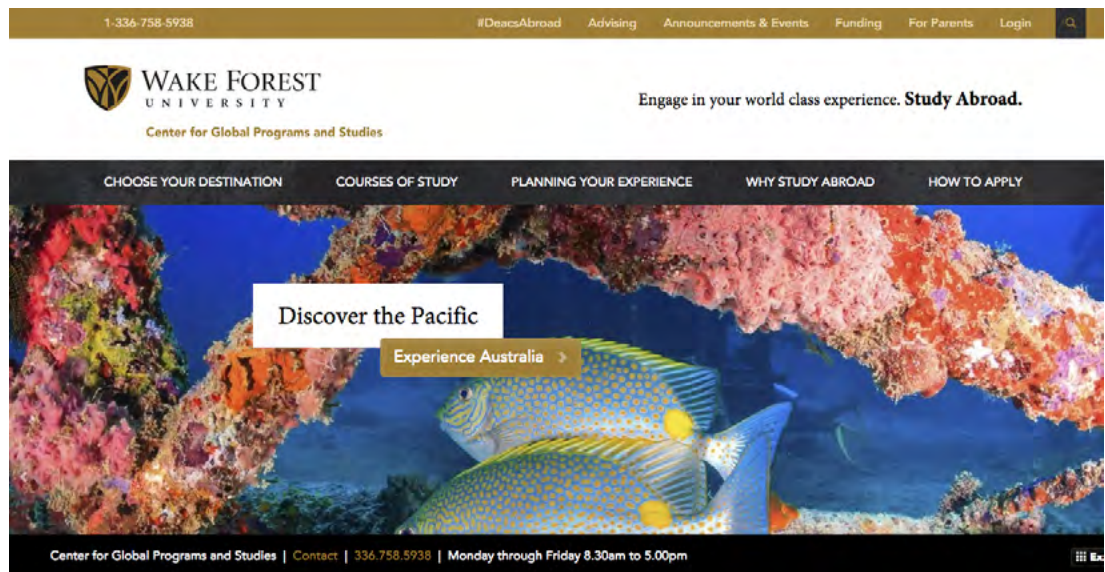
(Wake Forest University's Center for Global Programs and Studies Site - After the Redesign)
http://studyabroad.wfu.edu/

www.verifiedstudios.com

Before we begin any project, we collaborate with the client to determine what is working, what isn't working and what resources are already in place.

We quickly realized that Wake Forest University's study abroad program was already a flagship program. According to the IIE ([Institute of International Education](#), publishers of *Open Doors*), **they rank #3** in the nation, meaning they have the third highest percentage of students who study abroad before graduation. Between 60-65% of their student population studies abroad.

To give you an idea of how impressive that participation rate is, the IIE reports **that fewer than 10% of American college students study abroad**. Wake Forest University was already ahead of the competition, *but they weren't satisfied*. They wanted help as they raised the bar even higher.

You've probably heard of the **IIE Generation Study Abroad** campaign goal, which is to double the number of students that study abroad by the end of the decade. Many institutions are making commitments to try to double their numbers. Since Wake Forest already has participation percentages in the low 60s, doubling their participation rate simply wasn't possible. They set their target pledge at 75% participation by the end of the decade.

WFU worked with us to identify known issues that might have prevented them from meeting this goal. During that process, we uncovered **four significant challenges that appear to be common for study abroad program sites across the board**. It is our hope that the solutions that worked for WFU will be helpful to you as well.

#1. WFU's Study Abroad Website Needed a Facelift

Since most study abroad programs use the same software (Terra Dotta is the parent company of the old StudioAbroad software, now TDS for Study Abroad), many of the study abroad program sites can look similar. WFU wanted their site to shine, and that required changes to the design and an assessment of their use of images.

#2 WFU's Site Appealed to a Very Specific Student Profile

They were quite successful with certain segments of their student population, but they realized they had an untapped student demographic in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics majors) students. If they wanted to meet their new goal, they were going to have to figure out how to reach those students.

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#3 Their Recruitment Funnel Wasn't as Effective as It Could Be

Older designs don't incorporate new learnings. Depending on when your site was designed and who designed it, it may or may not have a clear-cut recruitment funnel in place. See if yours is effective by posing the following questions:

» *Once students find your site, is there any obvious way for them to engage with you?*

» *Is it easy to find essential information?*

» *What does your site do to convince students that they can afford to study abroad, and that they must study abroad?*

» *Once students are persuaded, is it easy for them to apply or sign up for more information?*

Site designers have learned a lot in the past decade about how important navigation and calls to action are. That's why older .EDU sites typically don't deliver results as well as sites that have been redesigned by recruitment experts who have experience in the higher education industry.

#4 WFU Didn't Have Concrete Analytics Tools in Place

In the decade that I've been working with higher education sites, I've repeatedly come across people who either didn't have access to the analytics of their site performance or who only had access to confusing and practically unusable reports. They often don't know where their site traffic is coming from (Mobile phones? Tablets? Organic searches? Paid search?) or how effective their web pages are (or are not) in capturing student interest.

Good analytics reports are invaluable. With accurate measurements, you can determine what is working and what isn't. This empowers you to make decisions that will get results.

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As we worked with Wake Forest University's Study Abroad program website, we developed solutions that not only solved the problems mentioned above but also enhanced the user experience overall.

Our client was happy. He said "*Our Summer 2015 and Fall 2015 applications are up - and I think the new site has played a contributing role. Also, we continue to receive great feedback on the new design from both internal and external sources.*"

As you examine your site, you may decide you want to address these same issues.

#1. Sites Look the Same? Make the Site Stand Out

Travel brochures are never dull; likewise study abroad sites need to inspire through vibrant visuals. A Temple University study evaluating the role of images on tourism websites found that inspiration-related elements had the greatest impact on first-impression formation. Our experience with higher education sites coincides with the study's conclusion that visually appealing images get attention and motivate people to explore your site.

Scroll down to see how we utilized this concept for Wake Forest University's program site redesign.
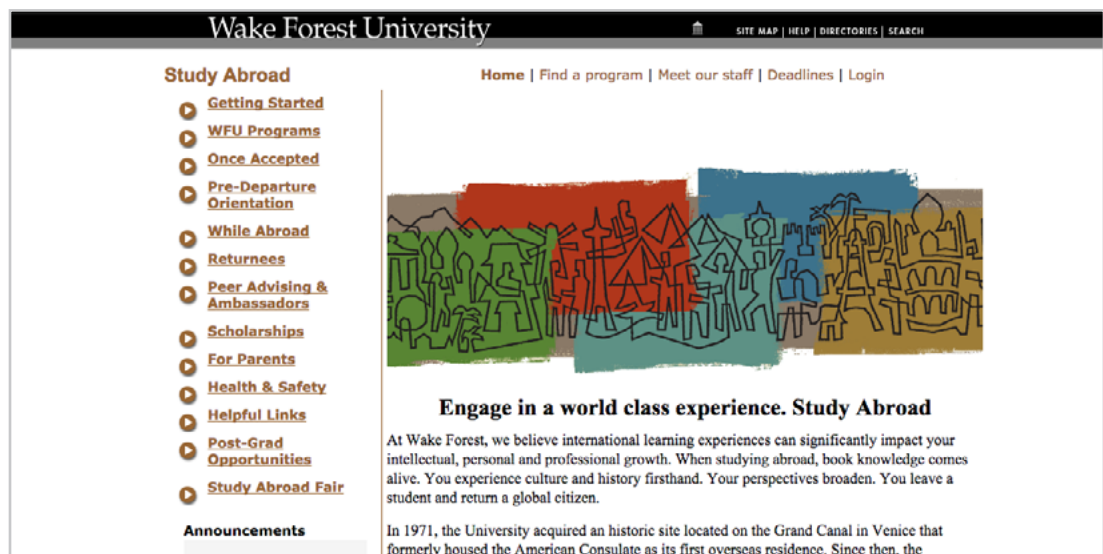

WFU Center for Global Programs and Studies Site: Before Site Revision

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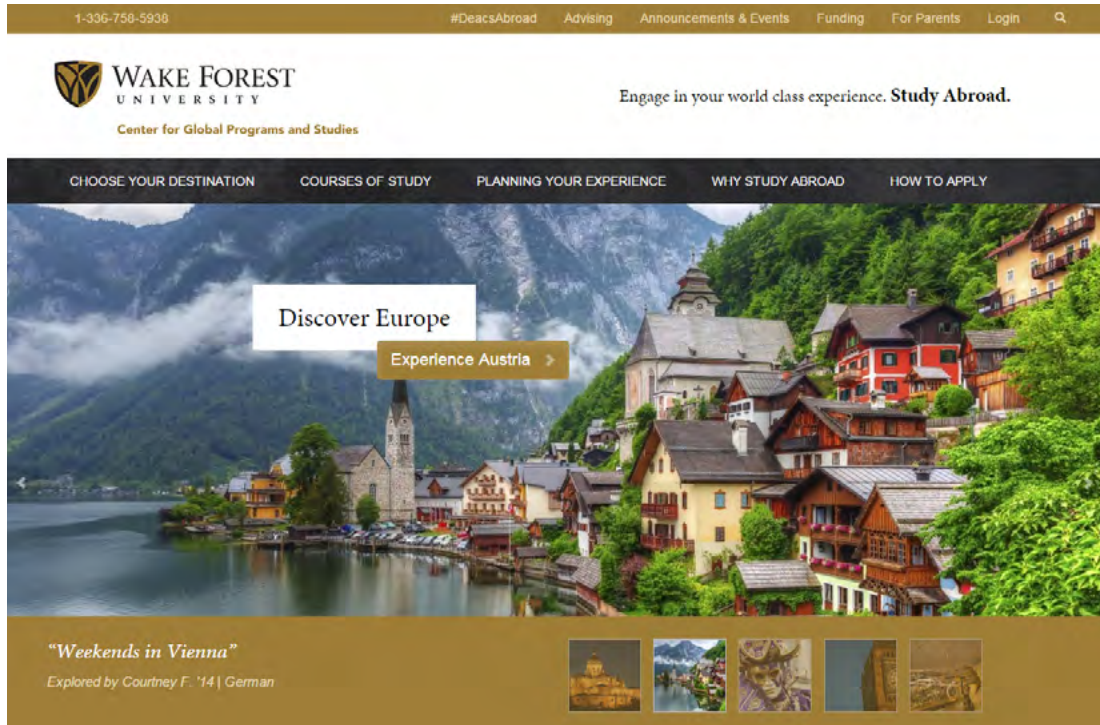
WFU Center for Global Programs and Studies Program Site: After Site Revision

The home page now hosts a slider featuring vivid pictures of fascinating destinations. We intentionally filled the site with images that make people want to travel and explore.


http://studyabroad.wfu.edu/

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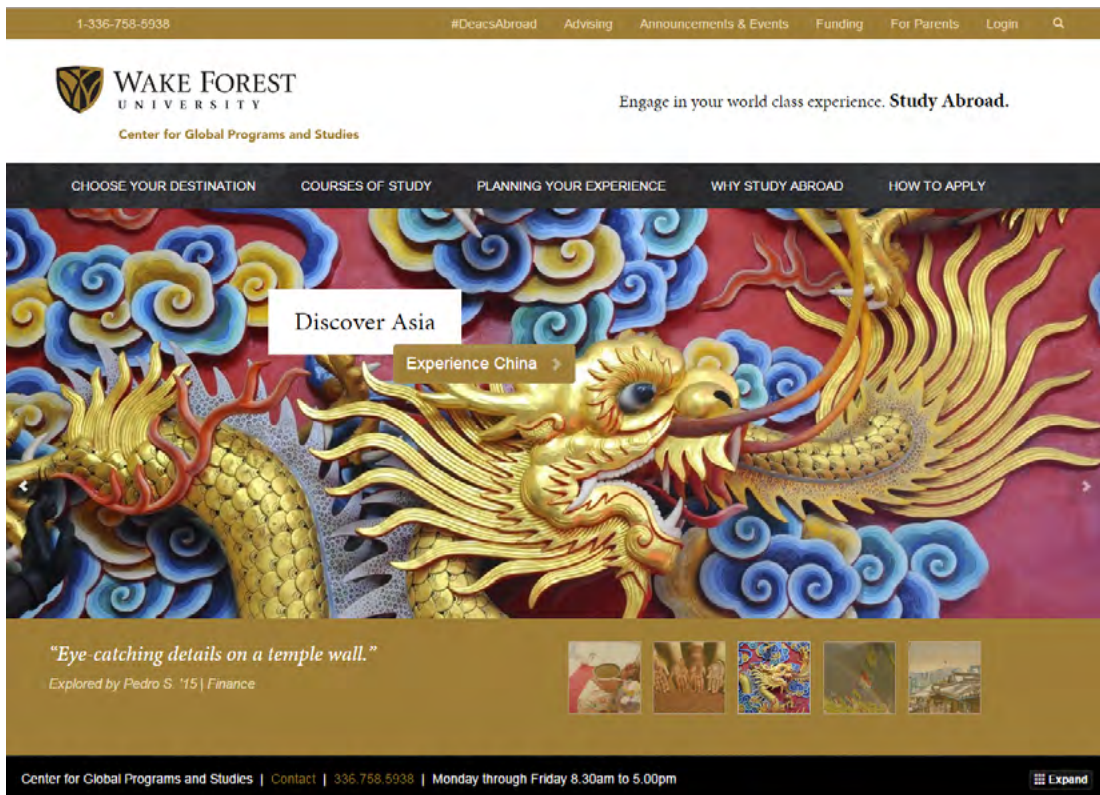
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> **"On the back end you can tell from the functionality that we're StudioAbroad driven, but we really wanted to move away from a look that did not distinguish us," Taylor said. "Verified Studios was able to do that."**

Wake Forest University was quite pleased with the new visuals. When we asked David to rate the aesthetics of the site (on a scale of 1 to 5), David replied, "The site redesign has been a quantum leap forward. **It's a five...** We've gotten a fantastic response from our users. Obviously, we'd been with the former look and feel of the website since '05 or '06. We were in big, big need of an overhaul, and Verified was able to bring that to us."

We also strove to make sure the design was completely different from the typical StudioAbroad/TDS for Study Abroad layout and design. We're quite proud of the fact that we were able to create a distinctive look for WFU.

#2. Limited Site Appeal? Target the Right Students

During our initial collaboration sessions with WFU, we learned that one of their primary goals was to inspire STEM students to study abroad. Verified Studios embraced this challenge, considering STEM students specifically as we designed the main pages.

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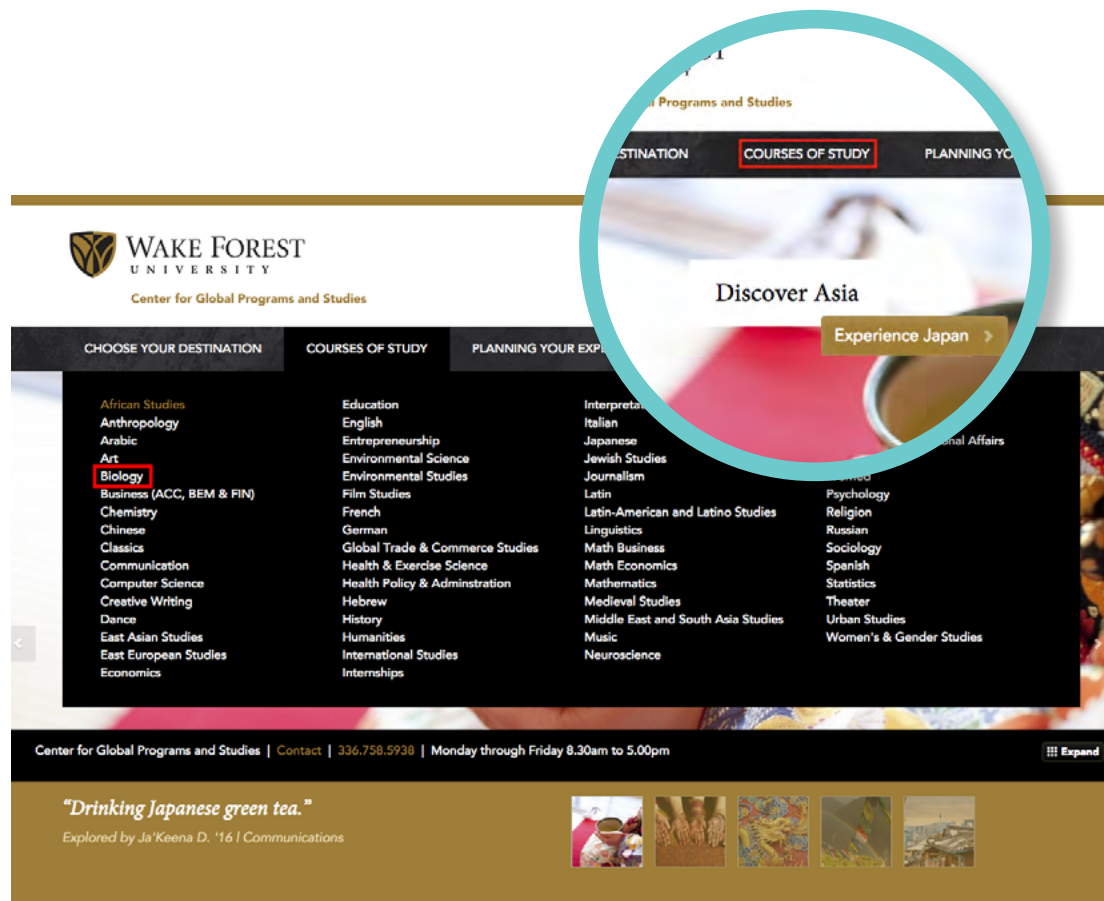
Taylor worked with us to figure out how to reach out to this demographic. Upon review of the changes we accomplished together, Taylor said, "Our previous layout didn't show as well. It wasn't as readable or accessible. Now that the 'Courses of Study' tab is so readily available, students can easily find programs of interest. For example, they can click 'Biology' right from the home page and see all the opportunities for biology students to study abroad."

You also can overcome this obstacle. First, you'll need to identify your most significant untapped demographics, and then you'll want to find effective ways to reach out to them.

#3. Not Sticky? Draw Students Into the Recruitment Funnel

We have learned that students need clear paths, limited choices and intuitive navigation. Most higher education sites have complicated navigation systems in place, but studies show that streamlining choices can increase engagement by up to 600%.

That's why we narrowed down the options to five menu buttons on the top of the home page, simplifying the navigation and making it very easy to find exactly what a student (in any stage of the process) would need.

Then we invite students to engage and enter the recruitment funnel, using social media and email to forge and deepen the connection. Our start-to-finish recruitment funnel guides students from that first spark of interest through to enrollment.

http://studyabroad.wfu.edu/

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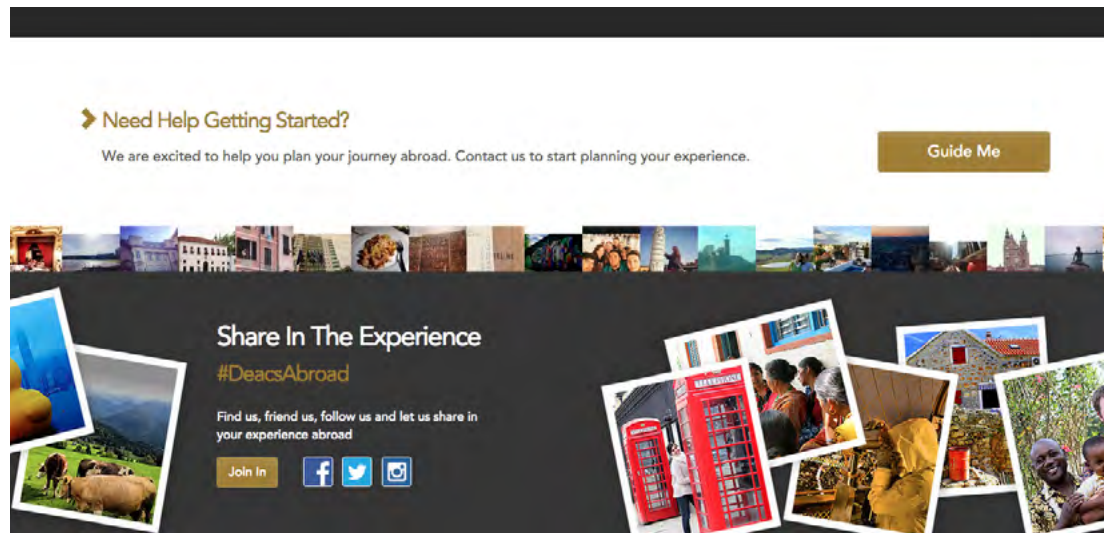
#4. Not Sure How Effective? Get Set to Measure Results (Analytics)

Our strategy for overcoming this challenge is twofold. First, we design the site using SEO best practices. Then we measure, test and react so your efforts get tangible results.

Once a site is equipped with analytics and readable reporting features, the administrators can easily discover what is working (and what is not). They'll know where traffic is coming from, how long students are staying on specific pages, and even what pages they're likely to visit next. Measuring the recruitment funnel allows you to adjust as necessary.

Of course we realize that the end goals - **increased enrollment in the program, high quality participants** - are tantamount, but it's important to realize that the achievement of back end goals (increased site traffic, lower bounce rates, streamlined navigation from landing pages to application pages) is what will produce reliable and predictable increases in matriculation.

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I know that upgrading your site can be an intimidating endeavor. You may have reservations or additional questions. I could tell you that **Verified Studios is dedicated to working with you to get the result you want**, but I believe it's always better to hear it from a client. That's why I'd like to share with you a few quotes from David F. Taylor, Wake Forest's Director of Global Abroad Programs , about his experience with us. We asked him to rate us on a 1 to 5 scale in several areas.

Easy To Work With

"It's been a 5. From the initial conversations to throughout the process. From the first phone call I had with Verified, things moved very quickly. We had a conversation one week, and they were able to get to campus the following week. All throughout the experience, Verified Studios was highly communicative. *Definitely a 5 in terms of a working relationship*."

Affordable

"I didn't think we'd be able to afford [working with you]. I'd seen the work you had done with the Wake Forest School of Business and thought you might be out of my smaller office's price range. Given the fact that we hadn't done an overhaul in 9-10 years and this was a really big change, I thought it was very affordable. And good value. To get a whole new look and feel across the board? *I would rate Verified Studios 4 to 5 out of 5 stars, closer to the 5 range*."

Objective and Knowledgeable - Another 5 Out of 5 Stars

"It was nice having someone who wasn't steeped in the ways of international education and study abroad and who brought a business perspective on the marketing side of things."

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Now that you know what a Study Abroad program site should accomplish to remain competitive in 2015, you may be ready to learn more about specific strategies.

If you're interested in discussing practical applications of the points mentioned here, contact us for a conversation about your website. We'd be happy to provide you with a no-strings-attached evaluation of your site, including suggestions for ways to overcome obstacles.

Thank you for your time and attention. I truly hope these resources prove useful to you, and I wish you great success with your study abroad program website.

Helpfully yours,

Adam Schultz

Adam Schultz

Special Thanks

To enhance and bring optimal practicality to this white paper, we interviewed David Taylor, Director of Global Abroad Programs at Wake Forest University's Center for Global Programs and Studies and our lead contact during the site revision project. David was kind enough to contribute his thoughts to our report, and for this we offer much sincere gratitude.

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