STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF UNETHICAL PRACTICES IN FFA COMPETITIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine perceptions of agricultural education students concerning unethical practices in FFA competitive events and award programs. The following objectives were formulated to accomplish this purpose: Identify selected demographic characteristics of FFA members in the population; Identify unethical practices taking place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA; Determine FFA members' awareness of unethical practices taking place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA; Determine FFA members' perceptions of how common these unethical practices take place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA; and, Determine if there are any relationships between FFA member characteristics and the members' awareness of unethical practices. Data were collected from 399 students enrolled in secondary agricultural education courses. The data collection instrument was a researcher-designed survey composed of two parts. The first part was a list of unethical practices related to FFA competitive events. Respondents indicated their awareness of each practice and how widespread they perceived the practice to be. The second part of the instrument was designed to gather data about the students, including their involvement in FFA activities.

The results indicated that students who participated in the FFA competitions were aware of a variety of unethical practices that take place in those events. Among the most common were physical abuse of show animals, someone other than the speaker writing a prepared speech and judging team teammates sharing class results. While recognizing that perceptions, particularly perceptions of children, can be inaccurate, the researches conclude that the results of this study indicate the need for an ethics education among FFA members. Efforts should be made to help competitors understand the values associated with character and fair play.

Introduction

In his book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things,* Robert Fulghum (1989) listed some simple truths that he believed were important to live a meaningful life. Near the top of that list was "Play fair" (p. 6). But, how much do kids learn about fair play in school today?

The November 22, 1999, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* focused upon cheating in our nation's schools. In the Editors' Advisory (November 22, 1999), the editors of that publication asserted that the majority of American students cheat, whether they are in middle

school or professional school. In a random poll of 1000 adults that included 200 college students, 72% of the respondents said high school students cheat often. Sixty-four percent of the respondents said that college students cheat, 31% said parents of children cheat, and 25% said teachers cheat.

In a *Newsweek* (May 8, 2000) story, a 17 year-old student said, "'lying and cheating are standard behavior'" (p. 2). That thought was supported in a survey conducted by Who's Who Among American High School Students (Kleiner & Lord, Nov 22, 1999). In that study, 80% of "high-achieving" high school students said they had cheated at least once and over half said that cheating was not necessarily wrong. Kleiner and Lord (Nov. 22, 1999) also quoted a college student saying, "'I know it's [cheating] wrong, but I don't feel bad about it either, partly because I know everyone else is doing it'" (p. 2).

Cheating in schools is not limited to academic work, though. Virtually every year a number of athletic programs at universities are investigated and penalized for violations of the rules for recruiting student-athletes. Most recently Brown University, an Ivy League institution, was found to have violated rules in the recruitment of athletes for four of its athletic teams (CNNSI, 2000).

The use of anabolic steroids by high school athletes is also a growing concern. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (May 18, 2000), the illegal use of anabolic steroids by high schools students has increased since 1991. The Institute says that high school students take the drug to gain a competitive edge over their opponents or even to improve their physical appearance.

So, have cheating and lying become a part of the "American way?" In a 1987 article in *U.S. News and World Report* (McLoughlin, Sheler & Witkin, February 23), John Gardner of Common Cause was quoted as saying, "'Duplicity and deception, in public and private life, are very substantially greater than they have been in the past'" (p. 54).

With all of this dishonesty and lack of fair play in our schools, thankfully, there are some bastions of hope. In many schools, groups of students have crafted honesty statements and honor codes. Since its inception, the National FFA Organization has promoted fair play. The fourth paragraph of the FFA Creed (National FFA Organization, 1999) states that members believe in "playing square with those whose happiness depends upon me" (p. 10). The FFA Code of Ethics (National FFA Manual) states that FFA members pledge to "Be courteous, honest and fair with others" (National FFA Organization, 1999, p. 12).

Recent research shows that the FFA and the overall program of agricultural education in secondary schools holds great opportunity for teaching students about fair play and other values. In their investigation of the teaching of values in agricultural education, Lockaby and Vaughn (1999) concluded that teachers believe that values should be taught to students in agricultural education. While their respondents indicated that values could be taught through the classroom, laboratory and SAE program, they said that the FFA was the most ideal component of the program to teach students about values. The teachers said the most important values to be taught were honesty, courtesy, responsibility and cooperation.

However, all does not appear to be honest and fair in regard to educational programs for agricultural youth. Kieth (1997) found that parents of youth participating in livestock shows believe that dishonest and unethical practices are a problem in livestock showing. One of his respondents claimed to have seen people cheat to win and another indicated he believed some competitors would do anything to win. In a 1999 study Kieth and Vaughn found that parents identified unethical practices as one of the most common problems with 4H competitive evens.

Apparently, those concerns have merit. Murphy, Norwood and Dubes (1995) found that 25% of participants in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo admitted to knowingly using illegal drugs on their show animals. Further, more than 37% of the respondents said they had falsified information on registration certificates. Last spring, a freshman FFA member in Texas voiced concerns about one of her competitors. She claimed that an FFA member from a neighboring chapter told her he had never seen his show pig until the night before the show (Lynch, April 11, 2000).

Are these unethical behaviors limited to livestock shows or do they extend to other areas of competition and award programs in the FFA? How many students are aware of these practices taking place in FFA competitions? Perhaps the students who participate in these activities can shed some light on this subject.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine perceptions of agricultural education students concerning unethical practices in FFA competitive events and award programs. The following objectives were formulated to accomplish this purpose:

1. Identify selected demographic characteristics of FFA members in the population.

2. Identify unethical practices taking place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA.

3. Determine FFA members' awareness of unethical practices taking place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA.

4. Determine FFA members' perceptions of how common these unethical practices take place in competitive events and award programs of the FFA.

5. Determine if there are any relationships between FFA member characteristics and the members' awareness of unethical practices.

Methods

The population for this study was agricultural education students in a state with a large FFA membership. Because of the sensitivity of this study, the state will not be identified. Cluster sampling was used with schools being considered the natural forming group. Fourteen

schools were randomly selected. The agriculture teachers at those schools were contacted and asked to participate in the study and indicate the number of agriculture students at that school. This procedure yielded a sample group of 399, which is in excess of the needed sample size for a population of more than 10,000 (Ott, 1986).

A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The instrument consisted of two parts. Part I was designed to gather information about unethical activities related to livestock shows, public speaking contests, judging contests and other career development events, individual award programs and chapter award programs. Part II was designed to gather selected demographic data about the respondents and their involvement in the FFA.

To formulate the items in Part I, a panel of experts consisting of 50 pre-service teaching candidates enrolled in an upper level agricultural education course at a comprehensive university were used. The panel, with each being a former member of the FFA, was asked to identify unethical practices associated with FFA competitions. These data were synthesized and integrated into the instrument to collect data from the high school students.

The instrument was pilot tested at a school that was not a part of the sample group. Members of the pilot group completed the questionnaire, answered questions related to the clarity of the instrument and made other suggestions. No major changes were made to the instrument as a result of this process.

The instruments were administered on site by the researcher at all but one school. At that school, a packet of instruments was mailed to the school and administered by the local agriculture teacher. Data analysis revealed no significant difference between the two instrument administration modes.

Data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows. Descriptive statistics were calculated on every variable. Correlation coefficients were also calculated between all of the variables. T-tests and ANOVA procedures were used to compare means. Real limits were used to describe means and Davis' (1971) conventions were used to describe correlation associations.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

More than two-thirds of the 399 respondents were male. As shown in Figure 1, while only 26 students were eighth graders, the remainder of the group was fairly evenly dispersed among grades nine through twelve.

The students were asked to provide information about their membership in agricultural youth organizations. As illustrated in Figure 1, nearly 95% of the agriculture students indicated they were FFA members. Of those, more than 60% were in their first or second year of membership. More than 35% of the respondents were or had been a member of 4-H. These findings are representative of the population.

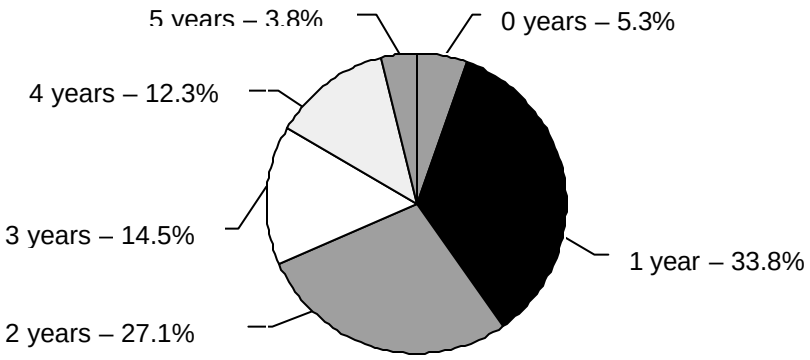

Figure 1. Years respondents have been a member of the FFA.

Information was solicited about the students' involvement in selected FFA activities. Figure 2 shows a list of the activities included in this study along with the frequency and percent of respondents participating in each. The FFA activities in which the most students were involved were livestock shows (38.8%) and career development events (CDE's) (36.3%). Almost one-fourth of the students had attended the state FFA convention and more than 14% had attended the national FFA convention. Fifteen percent of the students were chapter officers and 15% competed in public speaking contests. Only 9% of the respondents indicated they had applied for a proficiency award above the local level. Eighteen (4.5%) students said they were involved in all eight of the activity areas. On the other hand, 177 (44.4%) were involved in none of the activities investigated.

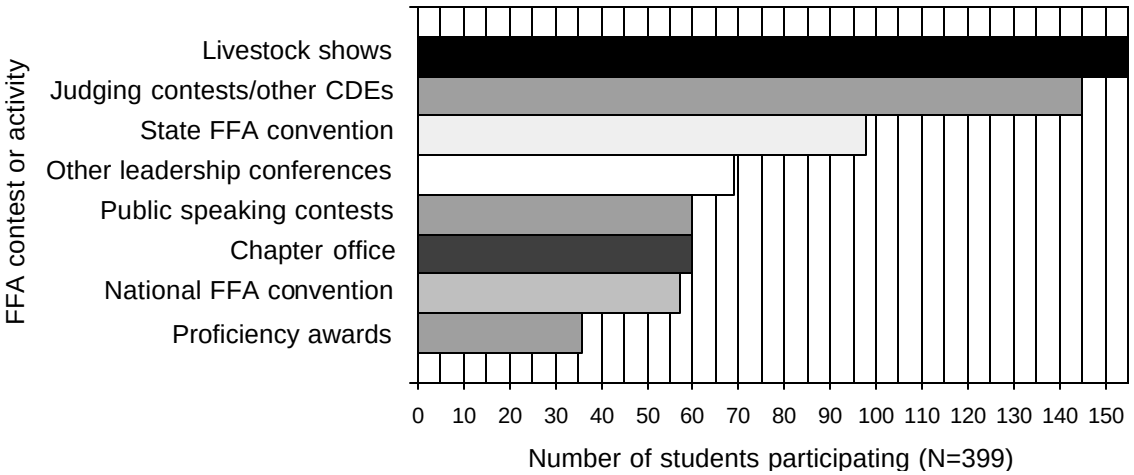

Figure 2. Number of students involved in selected FFA activities.

Identification of unethical practices

The panel of university students studying agricultural education identified twenty-three unethical practices associated with FFA contests and award programs. Eight practices were

related to livestock shows, two were related to public speaking contests and five were related to judging contests and other CDE's. The group also identified six unethical practices related to individual award applications such as the state FFA degree and proficiency awards and two practices related to chapter award programs. A list of these practices is shown in Tables 1 – 5.

FFA members' awareness of unethical practices

Data related to this objective were analyzed and reported in three ways. First, all respondents were grouped together to show the perceptions of the high school agriculture students as a whole. Second, only those students who indicated that they participated in that activity were grouped together. Third, the students who indicated that they had participated in two or more of the leadership related activities were grouped together and labeled "Chapter Leaders". Those activities were: state FFA convention, national FFA convention, other FFA leadership conferences (MFE, COLT conference, state leadership camp, etc.), and chapter office.

Table 1 displays the data associated with unethical practices related to livestock shows. A higher percentage of students who participated in livestock shows and of the chapter leaders were aware of each of the unethical practices investigated compared to the overall group of respondents. More than two-thirds of the chapter leaders and more than 62% of the participants were aware of physical abuse of animals taking place. More than half of the participants and nearly 60% of the chapter leaders were aware of the use of illegal drugs on show animals. A high percentage of students were also aware of unethical practices regarding ownership and registration of animals as well as grooming and other alterations of the appearance of animals.

Table 1. Agreement with statements concerning livestock shows

Unethical practice	All respondents %	Participants in livestock shows %	Chapter leaders %
Physically abusing animals	49.1	62.3	66.7
Illegal use of drugs to enhance growth or performance of show animals	39.1	52.3	58.3
Showing an animal with out owning it for the required amount of time	31.3	45.8	50.0
Illegally altering the physical appearance of an animal (injecting air, filing teeth, dying hair, etc.)	31.1	51.0	56.9
Giving false information about the date of birth (fixing papers) of a breeding animal	31.0	45.1	52.9
Animals cared for by a professional feeder rather than by the show person	28.7	39.4	48.6
Changing ear tags or altering tattoos of show animals	22.7	34.6	43.7
Use of professional groomers at shows where that practice is not allowed	17.1	31.0	38.9

For FFA speeches in this state, the competitor and his/her advisor must sign a form certifying that the manuscript is the original work of the competitor. More than 70% of the students who participated in FFA speech contests were aware of competitors giving speeches that were not the original work of the speaker. While more than 40% of all respondents were aware of this practice, more than 60% of chapter leaders knew of it. A summary of the data related to public speaking contests is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Agreement with statements concerning speech contests

Unethical practice	All respondents %	Participants in speech contests %	Chapter leaders %
Someone other than the speaker writing the speech	40.8	71.7	61.1
Not citing references used	18.2	43.3	33.3

As can be seen in Table 3, more than one-third of the students surveyed said they participated in judging contests and other CDEs. Nearly half of all students and more than two-thirds of the participants and the chapter leaders were aware of competitors in CDEs "sharing" answers with teammates. More than 55% of participants and chapter leaders were also aware of contestants looking at the work of other contestants (not on the same team) during a contest. More than one-third of the competitors and chapter leaders were aware of the practice of team coaches illegally talking to or signaling contestants and more than half of the chapter leaders knew of the practice of contestants using pre-written reasons in a contest.

Table 3. Agreement with statements concerning judging contests and other CDEs

Unethical practice	All respondents %	Participants in judging contests & CDE's %	Chapter leaders %
Teammates sharing answers (talking, passing notes, signaling, etc.)	48.9	68.3	68.1
Looking at the work of other contestants in a group	39.8	55.2	56.9
Coaches talking to or signaling contestants	27.6	33.1	38.9
Using pre-written reasons	25.8	42.4	53.5
Using illegal charts, notes, measuring devices or other materials during a contest	13.6	21.5	28.2

Unethical activities associated with award programs were also studied. Approximately half of the chapter leaders and award program participants were aware of assets being over-

valued on award applications. Some 40% of the award program participants and chapter leaders were also aware of existing debts not being claimed by award applicants. As can been seen in Table 4, the students had similar opinions concerning other discrepancies related to falsifying records on award applications.

Table 4. Agreement with statements concerning individual award programs

Unethical practice	All respondents %	Participants in individual award programs %	Chapter leaders %
Over-valuing animals, land, equipment or other assets (claiming something is worth more than it is truly worth)	33.9	51.4	49.3
Not claiming debts that exist (not showing losses that occurred with projects)	24.6	40.0	39.4
Falsely claiming participation in activities	24.6	41.2	37.1
Falsely claiming ownership of animals, land, equipment or other materials (assets really owned by someone other than the student)	23.4	40.0	37.5
Falsely claiming awards or other recognition earned	17.7	34.3	23.9
Falsifying receipts, registration papers and other documents	16.8	37.1	26.8

About one-third of the chapter leaders and about one-fourth of all respondents were aware that chapter award applications included activities that did not take place and exaggeration about participation of activities took place (see Table 5). A category of "participants" was not included for these items since they related to chapter awards. Presumably, every chapter member would be a participant.

Table 5. Agreement with statements concerning chapter award programs

Unethical practice	All respondents %	Chapter leaders %
Reporting activities that didn't happen	23.1	31.9
Saying more people participated in activities than really did	26.6	34.7

Commonality of unethical practices

Data about the students' perceptions of how commonly the unethical practices took place were also collected. Only data from participants in the competitive activities and chapter leaders are presented. As can be seen in Table 6, the mean for each of the practices was in the real limits of the "fairly common" response choice.

Table 6. Commonality of unethical practices

Unethical practice	Participants in activity mean*	Chapter leaders mean*
CDE teammates sharing answers during a contest	2.23	2.23
Someone other than the speaker writing a speech for a speech contest	2.21	1.92
Using pre-written reasons in CDEs	2.15	2.14
Looking at the work of other contestants in a group during a CDE	2.14	2.07
Falsely claiming awards or other recognition earned on award applications	2.08	1.83
Falsely claiming ownership of animals, land, equipment or other materials on award applications	2.07	1.94
Livestock show animals cared for by a professional feeder rather than by the show person	1.95	1.94
Falsely claiming participation in activities on award applications	1.93	1.97
Not citing references used in manuscripts for speech contests	1.88	1.72
Showing an animal without owning it for the required amount of time	1.85	1.83
Use of professional groomers at livestock shows where that practice is not allowed	1.85	1.83
Falsifying receipts, registration papers and other documents on award applications	1.85	1.65
Over-valuing animals, land, equipment or other assets on award applications	1.83	1.89
Physically abusing livestock show animals	1.78	1.80
Coaches talking to or signaling contestants during CDEs	1.77	1.84
Illegal use of drugs to enhance growth or performance of show animals	1.75	1.70
Using illegal charts, notes, measuring devices or other materials during a CDE	1.74	1.80
Not claiming debts that exist on an award application	1.71	1.87
Illegally altering the physical appearance of a livestock show animal	1.70	1.69
Changing ear tags or altering tattoos of show animals	1.60	1.62

Giving false information about the date of birth of a breeding animal on an award application	1.55	1.58
Reporting activities that didn't happen on a chapter award application	--	1.79
Saying more people participated in activities than really did on a chapter award application	--	1.76

* Scale: 1 – 1.50 = rarely happens; 1.51 – 2.50 = fairly common; 2.51 – 3.0 very common.

The unethical practice with the highest mean was for judging contest or CDE team teammates sharing answers (2.23). Forty percent of the participants in this competition area who were aware of this practice said it was a very common occurrence. Three of the five highest means were for unethical practices related to judging contests and CDEs.

The second highest mean was for the practice of someone other than the speaker writing the manuscript of a speech (2.21). Upon closer analysis, 42% of the speech contest participants who were aware of this practice said it was a "very common" occurrence.

Relationships between and among variables

Correlation coefficients were calculated between the selected student characteristics and the other variables. There were no relationships above the negligible level between any of the variables and gender or grade in school.

Twenty of the 23 unethical practices included in this study had positive, low relationships with the years of FFA membership. In other words, as the students' years in FFA increased so did their awareness of these unethical practices. Another variable with which several other variable were significantly associated was 4-H membership. All but six (17) of the unethical practices had a positive, low association with 4-H membership.

Every unethical practice investigated had a statistically significant relationship with number of activities in which the FFA member participated. While most of these relationships were at the low association level, five were moderately associated with this variable. These data are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Statistically significant correlations between student characteristics and awareness of unethical practices

Variable	Years in FFA *r*	Ever a member of 4H *r*	Number of activities *r*
Illegal use of drugs to enhance growth or performance of show animals	.168	.211	.215
Giving false information about the date of birth (fixing papers) of a breeding animal	.141	.206	.254
Illegally altering the physical appearance of an animal	.203	.281	.365*

(injecting air, filing teeth, dying hair, etc.)			
Physically abusing animals	.166	.221	.158
Changing ear tags or altering tattoos of show animals	.163	.141	.232
Showing an animal with out owning it for the required amount of time	.259	.287	.272
Use of professional groomers at shows where that practice is not allowed	.224	.214	.326*
Animals cared for by a professional feeder rather than by the show person	.175	.175	.247
Someone other than the speaker writing the speech	.123	.102	.307*
Not citing references used	.231	--	.211
Teammates sharing answers (talking, passing notes, signaling, etc.)	.108	.158	.287
Coaches talking to or signaling contestants	--	--	.133
Using pre-written reasons	.207	.173	.385*
Looking at the work of other contestants in a group	.116	.167	.300*
Using illegal charts, notes, measuring devices or other materials during a contest	.112	--	.231
Falsely claiming ownership of animals, land, equipment or other materials (assets really owned by someone other than the student)	.118	.141	.236
Over-valuing animals, land, equipment or other assets (claiming something is worth more than it is truly worth)	.171	.167	.221
Not claiming debts that exist (not showing losses that occurred with projects)	.114	.140	.222
Falsely claiming participation in activities	.163	--	.218
Falsely claiming awards or other recognition earned	--	--	.194
Falsifying receipts, registration papers and other documents	.110	.190	.238
Reporting activities that didn't happen	--	--	.147
Saying more people participated in activities than really did	.126	.142	.125

* Indicates correlations of moderate association. All others are of low association.

Conclusions and Implications

The following conclusions were formulated based on the results of this study.

1. Nearly all high school agriculture students in this state are members of the FFA. While at first glance this is "good news" it also raises some questions. Is not the expectation that all agriculture students be FFA members? If the student organization is truly "intracurricular," then all agriculture students should be FFA members.

2. Just more than half of the FFA members in this state are involved in FFA contests and award programs such as livestock shows, career development events and proficiency

awards beyond the local level. Fewer than 20% of the students participate in more than 2 areas of competitive events. If the students are not participating in these competitive events, then exactly what are they doing as FFA members?

3. The most popular types of FFA competitions for members in this state are livestock shows and judging contests. A substantial number of students also take part in activities such as state and national conventions and other leadership conferences.

4. High school agriculture students are aware of a wide variety of unethical practices taking place in FFA contests and award programs. As would be expected, students who participate in the contests are much more aware of the practices than those who do not. From what experiences have these perceptions been formed? Are the perceptions formed from lore? Are they simply excuses made by competitors who don't win? Have students witnessed the unethical practices first hand? Have they, personally practiced the behaviors?

5. Overall, students perceive the unethical practices included in this study to be "fairly common" occurrences. In fact, for a few practices participants consider the practice to occur very commonly. So, what are students learning from participating in these activities? What educational value do these activities have when students believe these unethical practices go on? Could these competitive events in fact be miseducational? Are students learning to cheat or tolerate cheaters?

6. Neither gender nor classification in school has any real impact on students' perceptions about unethical practices in competitive activities sponsored by the FFA. However, the longer students are in agricultural youth organizations (FFA and/or 4-H) and the more they participate in their activities, the more aware they are of the unethical practices associated with competitive activities sponsored by those groups.

7. The researchers understand that the findings here are based upon perceptions. The actions of a few could cause FFA members to believe problems are more widespread than they truly are. However, if even a few FFA members are engaged in the unethical practices described here, then there is a problem. If some members choose not to participate in FFA competitive events because of these perceptions, then there is a problem. If some students do not enroll in agricultural education classes because of these perceptions, then there is a problem.

Recommendations

1. Merit must be given to the perceptions of students who are involved in FFA competitive activities that unethical practices are fairly common. Apparently, these students perceive people are getting away with cheating. While more investigation is needed to determine how these perceptions were formed, the fact that students feel cheating is associated with these activities cannot be ignored.

2. Rules that are in place to guide fair play in FFA competitive activities must be enforced. In most cases, there is not a need for more rules, just a commitment to work to identify and punish violators. People who sponsor and supervise these activities need to be diligent in their expectations that rules be followed. There must be serious penalties in place in cases where violations are found and guilty parties are identified though due process.

3. Goodwin, Briers and Murphy (1999) contended that a change in ethical cognition would lead to a change in ethical behavior. If they are correct, then ethics and character education programs need to be taught to students involved in competitive activities. It is important for them to learn to appreciate the value of fair play and the hollowness of winning through cheating.

4. Further research needs to be conducted to learn why some competitors cheat in FFA contests and award programs and who or what influences them to use these unethical approaches to competition.

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