Allissa Dillman: Anytime we say we're from the Common Fund Data Ecosystem, people really latch onto this word, ecosystem. Originally, I'm a biologist, and so I really have been kicking around this idea of the Common Fund Data Ecosystem really being like a living, breathing, biological ecosystem. This community of living things that all interact with each other and their environment.

Speaker 2: You're listening to Further Together, the ORAU Podcast. Join Michael Holtz and his guests for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU's storied history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative scientific and technical solutions for our customers, and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU Podcast.

Michael Holtz: Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU Podcast. As ever, it is me, your host, Michael Holtz from the Communications and Marketing Department at ORAU. And we have a special episode of the show this week, this episode, whatever we want to call it. We're doing a dual cross-functional, cross-promotional podcast with the host of Decoding the Data Ecosystem. We are talking about the Common Fund Data Ecosystem. We will explain what that means, but I have with me the host of Decoding the Data Ecosystem, Allissa Dillman, and Jennifer Burnette, who is from ORAU. And Alyssa and Jennifer, welcome to Further Together. We have a lot to talk about today.

Allissa Dillman: Hello.

Jennifer Burnet...: Hello. Yeah, we do have a lot to talk about. Thanks for having us.

Michael Holtz: This is really interesting, and I know this is relatively new work for us.

Jennifer Burnet...: About a year.

Michael Holtz: To be working on the training center for the data fund ecosystem. So, but before we get into all of that, Alyssa and Jennifer, if you will tell me who you are, Alyssa, we'll start with you.

Allissa Dillman: Sure, so I'm Alyssa Dillman. A little bit about myself, so I have a PhD in computational neuroscience. I actually used to work for the NIH, I worked at NCBI where all of the genomics data is housed and all the other research data publications and all that fun stuff. I also finished my tenure there at the Office of Data Science Strategy, where I was really focused on data training and engagement. And for the last three years, I've been running my own company, BioData Sage, where I do lots of things around bioinformatics and data science training, engagement, data management, research support, all sorts of fun things where I get to wear lots of different hats. And that's how I am working on this project with ORAU.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. All the data things, which really, I know at ORAU you've been talking about data management and data, all the things for a while. So, this fits in with a conversation we've been having as an organization, as an institution for it feels like years, for sure. So Jennifer, tell me who you are.

Jennifer Burnet...: Sure. Yeah, Jennifer Burnett, I don't have a fancy degree like Allissa's, unfortunately. But instead, my background is in public health. I have a master's in public health from University of Tennessee. And I have just fallen into a role in project management and being a project director at ORAU. My first love is in emergency management. I know I've been on the podcast talking about that previously, but now I'm actually really excited to be the Director of the CFD Training Center and exploring this kind of whole new world for me of data science and the ecosystem and all the data that's available through the common fund. So, this is really fun and exciting for us to dive in more and talk to you about it.

Michael Holtz: I'm excited to have this conversation, just because again, I love data, I love research, I love talking about it, and I know that the Common Fund Data Ecosystem is an important piece of research, particularly for the NIH and some other organizations. So, let's dig in and start with right at the top, what is the Common Fund Data Ecosystem?

Allissa Dillman: All right, I'll take this one, or at least I'll start it. So, the Common Fund Data Ecosystem has a little over 20 different programs and projects, and they're all focused around different biological questions or diseases, like GTEx, Kids First, SPARC, MoTrPAC. And these programs are now anchored around these five interconnected centers, which are really meant to help build meaningful connections throughout these CFDE programs and build these connections. So, there's the Data Resource Center, the Cloud Workspace Implementation Center, the Training Center, the Knowledge Center, and the Integration and Coordinating Center. And like I said, they as their name implies, have these anchor hub roles. But I also want to nerd out for a second here because-

Michael Holtz: Go for it.

Allissa Dillman: ... anytime we say we're from the Common Fund Data Ecosystem, people really latch onto this word, ecosystem. Originally, I'm a biologist, and so I really have been kicking around this idea of the Common Fund Data Ecosystem really being like a living, breathing, biological ecosystem. This community of living things that all interact with each other and their environment. And so, I want to share a metaphor I've been working on. It might not be perfect yet.

Jennifer Burnet...: We love the metaphor. I love it.

Michael Holtz: We love the metaphor, absolutely.

Allissa Dillman: But all right, so, I know a lot of people use data as the new oil analogy, but I actually like to think about data more like water. Right? You can find it pretty much anywhere, even in the harshest environments, even in the desert you can find water. It flows through the entire system, and it's necessary for life, just like data is necessary for science. So, you've got data as our water. And then if you think of these common fun programs that create the data, they're like these specialized habitats. Right? They each have their own scientific question focused just like these habitats have their specificity. And then you've got these networks and consortia, these people that help build these programs and create data. And I think of those as these organisms that live in each habitat, right? They all work together, they help nurture it, grow it.

Then you've got, I don't know, let's say you're a potential user and you're trying to navigate all of these habitats and organisms and you're attempting to navigate all this water as well. So, you might benefit from some form of transportation. And in my head I'm thinking about water, and I'm definitely going to be thinking about fording the river, like in Oregon trail style. You're going to use some sort of way to navigate these things. And so to me, these different forms of transportation could be tools to help you use the data. Right? Some tools help navigate multiple habitats, where others are much more specialized.

And then finally, at the end of the day, you need a way to guide you through all these habitats and operate all these particular vehicles now. And these maps and manuals are kind of like the five CFDE centers. Right? They act as guides to help navigate each part of the ecosystem to get you through this larger hole. And I've been kicking around this idea for a really long time and we're stuck at trying to come up with my crazy idea as a visual representation, because I am definitely not an artist. But that's the CFDE in a nutshell.

Michael Holtz: ORAU is the airboat of-

Allissa Dillman: There you go.

Michael Holtz: The training system.

Allissa Dillman: Add us in there.

Michael Holtz: The training, that's right. The training center is the airboat of the-

Allissa Dillman: I would love hovercraft. I wrote a whole science for project on hovercraft, I even built one out a shop vac when I was in [inaudible 00:08:47].

Michael Holtz: Oh, seriously? I love it.

Jennifer Burnet...: That's amazing.

Michael Holtz: I love it. So, obviously the Common Fund Data Ecosystem, vitally important. It is the water of science, as you've said. Why does it matter to the National Institutes of Health and the broader fields of omics research in general?

Allissa Dillman: So, what's really neat about the CFDE is it really is all of these really large scale and yet sort of disparate projects. And it's really meant to bring all of these things under one umbrella, bring all these high impact diverse data sets into one place and actually help unlock their full potential together. And this really can help us understand how we can really start having all of these different things, connect them, and have them be better than their parts.

And the big focus of that is making the data more findable, more accessible, more interoperable and more reasonable, or fair. And this idea that if we've got our data to be more fair, we can really remove the barriers and work across all of these different data sets that were not necessarily originally designed to connect. And the more we can learn about this process, the more it'll help us in bioinformatics in general, because all sorts of public data out there from all sorts of not just government agencies like CDC and all that stuff, but research publication data, there's data everywhere. So, the more we learn about how to connect these things that were not originally designed to be connected, the more that we can have meaningful insights across genomics, proteomics, structural data, clinical data.

So yeah, this bare ecosystem model can really help us also sustain resources. Right? All of these things, they're only funded for a certain amount of time. And so if we really understand how we can make these things again, more connected, living, breathing ecosystems, hopefully they'll thrive beyond their sort of initial funding periods as well. Right? They'll really become part of these larger communities.

Michael Holtz: And the data will live-

Jennifer Burnet...: And I guess you... oh, go ahead.

Michael Holtz: No, I was just going to say, and the data will live past their project date, so to speak.

Jennifer Burnet...: And I was going to say, I guess we should step back and officially mention that CFDE falls under the overarching common fund that's managed and run by NIH, and they are the funders of the CFDE Training Center and all of these different resources and components that we've mentioned. But to Allissa's point, many of them have actually already gotten past their funding date and are thriving and sustaining beyond that point. So that's, I think another anchor point within why we think this ecosystem is really important and useful for people because you can see these very long-standing data resources that you can trust will be available for you as you're working through your research and the things that you want to do.

Michael Holtz: And that's really important for researchers to know that data is accessible, they can get data, they can get what they need to be able to do, whether it's their current project or the next one that they get, that they get funded, that data's accessible. Allissa, as you said, it's fair, it's out there, and that it all talks to each other. It seems like that makes a whole heck of a lot of logical sense.

Jennifer Burnet...: More difficult than it sounds, but yeah.

Michael Holtz: Right? What kind of data can be found in the Common Fund Data Ecosystem?

Allissa Dillman: So, there's a real wealth of data in CFDE, and you can definitely get a snapshot of this by visiting the Knowledge Center. So they have a really nice web browser where you can interact with the different flavors and types of data. But just generally speaking, we do tend to focus on omics data, so that's genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, metabolomics, and the like. However, there is more than just omics data. There's clinical data, there's imaging data, there's a ton of structural data. So, it really does run the gamut but I will say the omics flavor of data is definitely some of the strongest and is overarching across quite a few of the programs, if not all of them.

Michael Holtz: Okay.

Jennifer Burnet...: And the other thing I wanted to mention too, it's not just data. All of these different CFDE programs have data coordinating centers that each of them have sustaining and supporting whatever the data is that you want within that program. So it really is very comprehensive, even within each of the individual data coordinating centers, or we call them DCCs.

Michael Holtz: Gotcha.

Allissa Dillman: And then [inaudible 00:14:08]-

Michael Holtz: So, there's a lot of components in addition to data, there are other components that are a part of the ecosystem.

Allissa Dillman: And a lot of them also build tools to interact with their data, they also have web portals where you can have interactive data views as well. So it's definitely not just the data itself but all the bits and bobs that go along with it to support it.

Michael Holtz: Gotcha. Come and swim in our data.

Jennifer Burnet...: There you go.

Michael Holtz: Figure out what you want.

Jennifer Burnet...: Back to the water. I like it.

Michael Holtz: Right, right. So if I'm a researcher, what is the benefit of the Common Fund Data Ecosystem to me?

Allissa Dillman: To me, as a researcher, the thing that's really powerful about CFDE is it really gives you a single place to discover and access these really diverse NIH common fund data sets. Right? Instead of time spending hunting down this resource or figuring out how to connect that resource, you've got this CFDE portal that quickly helps you find, combine, and analyze across programs. So, it really works to save that effort by giving you access not only just to the raw data sets as well, but actually some of the centers now have these pre-processed or kind of tertiary level data products that are completely ready for exploring an analysis by a couple clicks of the button. So, these interactive tools in the portal make it a lot easier to explore these things and you don't have to go hunting in every different direction. And then the cloud workspace will hopefully help support all the computational needs for this work as well.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Then, so ORAU is responsible, let me ask that question, let me start over. So, ORAU is responsible for the Common Fund Data Ecosystem Training Center. What is the role of the Training Center within the CFDE?

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, I can take that one. So as Allissa mentioned before, there are five different centers, we are the CFDE Training Center. One of our biggest goals I think is focused around bridging a lot of those connections and waterways and being a guide and helping people, one, join the ecosystem in the first place, figure out where they might fit in, and then also have some baseline training that helps them have the skill sets to really dive into the data and start exploring how it might incorporate in their research. So, even though we do really want to be inclusive of all CFDE learners or folks that would be potential learners within CFDE, a lot of our focus is often around students and early career researchers, because we recognize how significant that barrier can be when especially think about what we just described, is involved in this ecosystem. Right?

Michael Holtz: Right.

Jennifer Burnet...: All these different data coordinating centers, they're all coming with a ton of resources and tools themselves. Then you've got the broader ecosystem itself and all these different centers and components, and I think it can be very overwhelming and a lot. I know when we joined and created the Training Center last year, getting a baseline understanding of this ecosystem did take quite a bit of time and figuring out how things all fit together was important. Right? So we've got the knowledge center that does a lot of that kind of baseline information understanding and our other centers falling in as well. But for us, if you don't have the skillsets to even get started, then you're really going to struggle. So, that's where we feel like the Training Center can come in and really break down that barrier so that everyone is set up for success.

And also, this past year we made a How-To series that just really went back to the basics of intro-ing and reminding people, as Allissa has said before, you kind of remember learning about genes or these different components in science back in the day, but maybe you need a little refresher. And then you can say like, okay, genomics is really interesting to me as an undergraduate student. Now that I've seen this intro, maybe I'll do some research on it. Well, what data should I use? Right? And so we did these How-To series where it's this intro to genomics and also here's some CFDE data to get you started.

So, things like that, just trying to bring learners in, really lower the barrier to entry in a way that also gives them an increased skillset and sets them up for success and whatever research they're interested in. So Allissa, I don't know if you want to add to that.

Allissa Dillman: I feel like you had a really encompassing answer. I think really the only thing I could add is we're also building activities that help connect across these networks of people as well. So, not just teaching people how to use the data and tools, but also how to interact with each other across different fields of study as well.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, that's a good point. Something I guess I can take a few minutes to talk about the different components. So if you visit the Training Center website, it's pretty brand new, we just launched it in July, but there's three kind of components to our site. We want you to connect in different ways, learn in different ways, and then learn about CFDE.

A couple of things. So, we have our own podcast that Allissa is host of, Decoding the Data Ecosystem. That comes out monthly and it's really broad in the types of topics that we cover in that podcast. So, you can really get a flavor of, well, what kind of stuff is available? What kind of research can be done with this type of data? And it's just listening, right? You're just passively taking that in. And if you're listening to this podcast, you must be into podcasts, right? So you should definitely check that one out.

Michael Holtz: Plug for Decoding the Data Ecosystem right here.

Jennifer Burnet...: Exactly. Plug for Decoding the Data Ecosystem. Allissa's the host, I had to do it, so.

The other thing we have is upcoming events, and we do have quite a few of them. So we just hosted a virtual symposium earlier in August. The recording's available if there's interest there. It showcased all of our different mentee teams from our summer program that we hosted this past summer. It was a pilot program, but we do plan to launch it again in summer 2026. So we'll have an application coming out actually in the fall, which is basically almost now, so that will be coming really soon. But in that symposium, they got to talk about what they were able to accomplish with CFDE data just in a short 10-week period during the summer.

And then we also, there are internship programs across the CFDE ecosystem as well. So, we also were able to feature several interns from other programs within CFDE and the work that they were able to accomplish over the summer. So, that's another place where you can just passively take in and see what types of things you could do with this data and the type of projects that you might want to explore. So, that's a really good one to look at.

And then we have a whole learn component, and I mentioned the mentor program, and so you should definitely keep an eye out and check out our application for that when it goes live if you have interest. But the other big piece is our E-learning dashboard, and that's where the How-To series that I mentioned is housed. And we're just going to be ongoing consistently adding modules to that E-learning dashboard so that folks just have the ability to, whenever they want to, sit down and take time to learn and absorb and do a little bit more of that skill building piece.

And then beyond that, lots of more direct engagement in-person type stuff as well. And so I did want to give Allissa a chance to talk about our hackathon from this past year and some of the workshops and things, which I might be jumping ahead because we're probably going to talk about what's next too. But Allissa, do you want to add any to some of the stuff we did this past year? Because that gives I think a good sense of the types of stuff that's available.

Allissa Dillman: Sure. I can certainly talk about my favorite topic in the planet, which is hackathons. So we did run a hackathon at the Bio-IT World Conference this year that was very much focused on CFDE data and tools. And actually, all five teams ended up either using CFDE data or tools in the event, and we have a GitHub repository for each one of those projects, so if you are interested in seeing what communities build on the fly with CFDE resources. So, this hackathon was completely open to any people who are local to the Boston area, and also people as part of the conference.

So the Bio-IT Conference skews pretty heavy towards technology, so there are lots of people there who actually are not necessarily as familiar with the biology, but then we've got our CFDE folks who are. Right? So it was this beautiful blend of people working across all sorts of different fields. We had lots of people who didn't even know what CFDE was, so they got to learn all about all of the resources that are available. And if you're interested in seeing what kinds of projects that people build, like I said, we've got the GitHub repository, but we also recorded all of their final presentations. So if you're interested in that, you can also check that out.

Jennifer Burnet...: And that's on the podcast. Plug for the podcast again.

Michael Holtz: I love it.

Allissa Dillman: I also have been participating in a lot of the more omics heavy conferences. So, I did give a presentation at the ISMB Conference. There's actually specifically a bioinformatics education track, where we talked all about our new training center. We talked a little bit about the landscape analysis that we did to help us build up where we saw gaps and where we wanted to fit things in. So yeah, those are just a couple of the things that we've been doing that are very much on the edge of both training, but also this community engagement component, blending those things together, learning and growing together.

Michael Holtz: You guys have a lot going on with the Common Fund Data Ecosystem Training Center. That's amazing.

Jennifer Burnet...: Just wait until we talk about what's coming up.

Michael Holtz: Just wait, just wait.

Jennifer Burnet...: There's so much.

Michael Holtz: Oh, wait, there's more.

Jennifer Burnet...: There's so much more, yeah.

Michael Holtz: So Jennifer, tell me, what's coming up?

Jennifer Burnet...: So, very soon, we have a couple of things coming up and I'm going to blank on what it stands for, Allissa, ASHD? I'm putting her on the spot too.

Allissa Dillman: American Society for Human Genetics.

Jennifer Burnet...: American Society for Human Genetics. So Allissa and I will be at that conference in mid-October. We'll have a poster on CFDE and the Training Center and specifically focused on hackathons. But if you're local to Boston and you're listening, there's also going to be an after hours event that is just, again, one of those low barrier to entry, just come join the after-hours events, have a little bit of food and a drink, and talk to us about CFDE and learn about the different [inaudible 00:26:56] centers that are there and the training center and meet us. And just a really casual opportunity, and that is featured on the Knowledge Center website, so you can track that down online if you are interested in it. But we'll be there, so that's a good option that's coming up during that week of the 14th. I think it's on October 14th, if I'm not mistaken. But then beyond that... oh, go ahead. What did you say?

Allissa Dillman: We'll also be in the booth with stickers.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yes, we will have a booth at that conference.

Michael Holtz: People love the stickers, man.

Jennifer Burnet...: Allissa's a big sticker fan as well, so. I need to be more into stickers, I have a five-year-old that is also very into stickers.

Michael Holtz: Well, there you go.

Jennifer Burnet...: Not to equate you to a five-year-old, Allissa.

Allissa Dillman: That's okay, I have a five-year-old child like joy.

Jennifer Burnet...: And we love every minute of it.

So beyond that coming up very soon, just in less than a month, we are fortunate to be able to continue with the CFDE Training Center work going into the next government fiscal year. So we are doing a lot, as you say. So I think everything you just heard, that will continue. The podcast is going to keep putting out new episodes. But some of the new stuff that we're going to be exploring is developing some more in-depth training modules and hopefully partnering with folks from our ORAU consortium, I'm sure you've probably talked about the consortium on the podcast before.

Michael Holtz: Many times, yep.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, so working with some of those institutions and creating really unique, more in-depth modules beyond that How-To series that we were looking at. We have a huge assessment and evaluation component to this center as well, so we're going to do some support more broadly with the whole CFDE in support of increasing partnerships across our different centers and syncing up messaging and things like that. Some social listening, as you probably talked about previously. We like leveraging that.

Michael Holtz: We love the social listening component now.

Jennifer Burnet...: We do, we do. And then, let's see, what else are we doing? There's a lot more. Allissa, what's coming to mind that you want to mention?

Allissa Dillman: Open houses?

Jennifer Burnet...: Open houses. Yeah, so that's a good one. Why don't you talk about that one, Allissa, because that's your child there?

Allissa Dillman: Sure, yeah. So we're going to have a couple of, I think they're quarterly open houses, if I'm remembering correctly. And I think we're going to try and anchor them around some of the more common omics data types. And so the idea is we'll have technical folks from the different programs that have those data types come together. We might have a little mini demo of a couple of those, and then it'll just be open to the public to come and ask your data questions.

So for instance, if it were focused around transcriptomics, you could be like, "Hey, what's the new latest and greatest alignment tools for transcriptomics? How do I deal with the splicing? What's your favorite tool for that, or how do I pull exon data?" And if it's genomics it could be, "What are the best tools for pangenomes? We're moving into pangenomes. Where do I find those tools?" So this really, hopefully a good blend of both here's what's new, but also, what are your questions? Where are you trying to go? What are you trying to do with that data?

Jennifer Burnet...: More tactile, direct-

Michael Holtz: Yep, hands on.

Jennifer Burnet...: Direct engagement. Exactly.

Michael Holtz: Love it.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, and I don't know how I forgot this one. We also are going to host some in-person workshops at academic institutions across the country that really dig into a full two-day skills workshop, and Allissa is spearheading the development of that, in trying to align basically what I mentioned earlier. Right? We want them to build skills while also becoming engaged in the CFDE data and using it with their research. And the skills workshop really marries both of those, I think really well. Do you want to expand on that, Allissa?

Allissa Dillman: Yeah, so there's going to be a couple of these live in-person two-day workshops, and we're going to try to span as much as we can across the skillsets that you'll need for omics data analysis. But also, understand and really be able to utilize all of the different resources across CFDEs. So, both skills, but also, here are all the tools and resources.

And then after iterating through that live a couple of times, it'll hopefully be ready to asynchronize to tweak to be available online as well once we've worked out all the kinks and got a good flow with our in-person audience. We'll add a couple of things, we'll need to change it a little bit to be asynchronous, but that's the plan for that, is we'll get both that in-person feedback and then it'll eventually be available for everybody online.

Michael Holtz: Amazing. You guys have a lot going on.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, we do, we do. And then we are going to have some more internal focusing to CFDE things, looking at increasing capacity for training across the DCCs as well. Because as much as we are the CFD training center, it would be impossible to have the ability to do training for each individual DCC and each tool, each resource that they're developing. There are hundreds of tools and resources available. So, empowering the DCCs to be able to have that training skillset to also be building with on their own as well. So, kind of a train the trainer model internally for CFDE, in addition to the work that we're doing externally as well.

Michael Holtz: Is there anything we haven't covered that you want to make sure we talk about?

Allissa Dillman: I think just putting the message out there that we do have a lot of different ways to engage with us. And I'm going to put in, I promise, my last plug for our podcast.

Michael Holtz: It's all good.

Allissa Dillman: We want to hear from folks using CFDE data. So if you've been trying to learn with it, if you've done research with it, if you've tried to train with it, we would love to have you on to talk about that journey. So, we really want to hear from where people are at, and not just for podcasts, but also for a lot of the training and other engagement activities we have coming up. If there's something that you have an idea on, feel free to shoot us an email, we would love to see how we can incorporate that or I'll point you to the right folks who can help.

Michael Holtz: And I'll put in the show notes for folks who are listening, I'll put a link to the podcast. An email link for you all, as well as a link to the Common Fund Data Ecosystem Training Center so that folks can get a feel for everything we're talking about if they're not familiar with it, and so they can get familiar with it. But also, Allissa, to your point, to reach out with any questions, ideas that they may have. So, look for that in the show notes.

Jennifer Burnet...: Yeah, I think the only thing I would say is just to wrap up our philosophy for the CFDE Training Center. Something we established really early on was these three core components of remember, understand, and apply. And so, anything that we're doing with the training center, whether it's events or hackathons or mentor program, we're always trying to hit at least two of those things. Right? So we want you to remember and understand. We want you to ideally remember, understand, and apply what you've learned. So that is an overarching strategy that we try to consistently implement in anything that we're doing and help us really stay within the scope of what we're trying to accomplish, while also supporting all the other centers available within CFDE and the broader ecosystem itself.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Well, thank you for that, and thank you both for being here to talk more about the CFDE Training Center and the CFDE, and helping us understand what it is, what it's all about, why it's important, and then what you're doing, because y'all are busy, you have a lot going on to help people understand the various components of the CFDE and how it can be beneficial to them. So, thank you for explaining all of that. I really appreciate your time today.

Allissa Dillman: Thank you so much for having us. I really love nerd-ing out about all things bioinformatics.

Michael Holtz: Well, maybe in six months or so we can have you back and we can nerd out further on what you've been up to and keep the conversation going.

Jennifer Burnet...: [inaudible 00:36:37].

Allissa Dillman: Yeah.

Jennifer Burnet...: That'd be great.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Well, Allissa Dillman and Jennifer Burnette, thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate your time.

Jennifer Burnet...: Thank you.

Allissa Dillman: Thank you.

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