Alumni

28 Famous Columbia Alumni … Who Never Graduated

Some quit school due to war or tragedy, others to focus on art or politics. Though each of these dropouts left Columbia without an official diploma, they all found a degree of success.

By
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|
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Casey Affleck in "Manchester by the Sea." (IMDb)

Casey Affleck

Casey Affleck, the younger brother of Ben, grew up in Cambridge, MA and made his television debut when he was just 13 years old. He attended Columbia College and remembers spending "like 15 hours a day in the library just reading and doing all my work. I'd never done that much work, y'know, studied like that before in my life. It really changed me. I really felt like I learned a lot." After two years, a string of acting opportunities lured him back to Hollywood. Although he never achieved his older brother's level of stardom, Affleck went on to win the 2017 Oscar for best actor for his performance in *Manchester by the Sea*.

James Cagney (IMDb)

James Cagney

Actor James Cagney, known for his rugged roles in old Hollywood gangster flicks like *The Public Enemy* and for playing George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy,* hailed from Manhattan’s Yorkville neighborhood. He attended Stuyvesant High School and went on to study at Columbia in 1918, serving in the Student Army Training Corps. The death of his father forced him to leave school during his freshman year, but soon after he got his first role in vaudeville.

José Raúl Capablanca in 1919. (Wikipedia)

José Raúl Capablanca

Considered one of the greatest chess players of all time, Cuban-born José Raúl Capablanca enrolled at Columbia in 1910 to study chemical engineering. He quickly discovered that he preferred chess to studying, however, and made the strategic move to drop out. Capablanca held the title of world chess champion from 1921 to 1927.

Vanessa Carlton (Wikipedia)

Vanessa Carlton

In 2002, singer-songwriter Vanessa Carlton reached the top ten of the *Billboard* Hot 100 list with her hit song “A Thousand Miles” and, more recently, she played Carole King in the Broadway musical *Beautiful*. Before finding fame, Carlton studied ballet as a teenager and attended Columbia for a couple of semesters, where she had intended to major in English.

Timothée Chalamet at a London special screening of "Dune." (Warner Bros. Pictures/Legendary Pictures)

Timothée Chalamet

Actor Timothée Chalamet studied cultural anthropology at Columbia after graduating from New York's LaGuardia performing-arts high school in 2013. The future star of *Call Me by Your Name* and *Dune* left school after only one year, eventually transferring to NYU. In a 2017 interview, Chalamet told fellow actor Matthew McConaughey that "Columbia takes a wholehearted academic commitment that I think I have in me, but it was just not where my mind was at the time."

Troy Donahue (IMDb)

Troy Donahue

Before getting his big break in the 1959 romance film *A Summer Place*, actor Troy Donahue studied journalism at Columbia. While a student, the future Hollywood sex symbol began to seriously pursue acting and ended up moving to Los Angeles. He appeared in more than a hundred films, including *Susan Slade* and *Palm Springs Weekend*, and TV series, including *Surfside 6* and *Hawaiian Eye*, before his death in 2001.

Amelia Earhart (Wikipedia)

Amelia Earhart

Aviator Amelia Earhart attended Columbia from 1919 to 1920 and later returned in 1925. Although she had plans to become a doctor, she ended up abandoning her dreams of medical school for the more adventurous pursuit of flying. In 1932, Earhart made headlines for becoming the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic.

Lou Gehrig on the Lions baseball team. (Columbia University Archives)

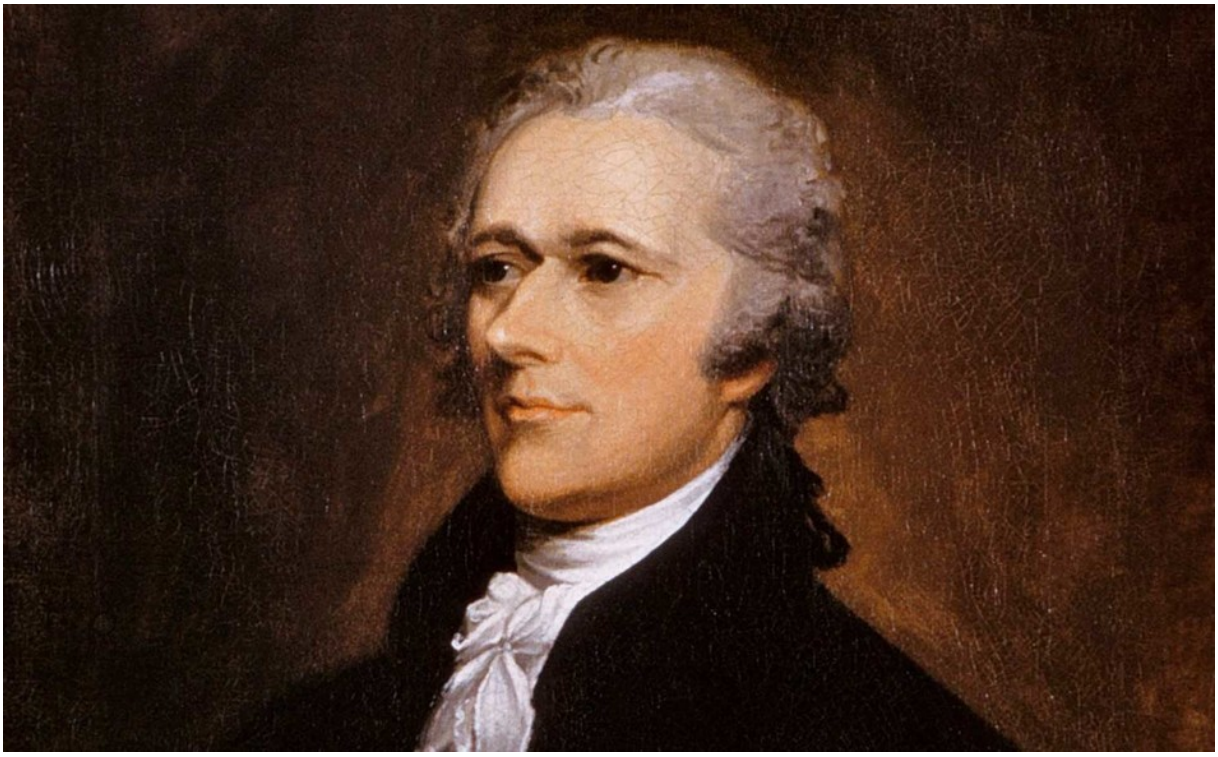
Lou Gehrig

Known as “Columbia Lou” while a student from 1921 to 1923, Lou Gehrig started his baseball career with the Lions and also played on the football team. He had wanted to become an engineer but left school when he received a lucrative contract with the New York Yankees. Gehrig remained a loyal Lions fan until his death at age thirty-seven from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Jake Gyllenhaal in "Zodiac." (IMDb)

Jake Gyllenhaal

Following in the footsteps of his older sister and fellow actor Maggie Gyllenhaal ’99CC, Jake Gyllenhaal enrolled at Columbia College in the late 1990s. He majored in Eastern religion and philosophy and studied with Buddhism scholar Robert A. F. Thurman. When he landed a starring role in the 1999 film *October Sky*, Gyllenhaal decided to trade Morningside Heights for Hollywood. The decision paid off — the A-list actor went on to star in a slew of films including *Donnie Darko*, *Zodiac*, and *Brokeback Mountain,* for which he received an Academy Award nomination.



Alexander Hamilton painted by John Trumbull in 1806. (Wikipedia)

Alexander Hamilton

Founding Father Alexander Hamilton enrolled at King’s College in 1774 and, as a promising young student, wrote speeches and papers criticizing British rule over the American colonies. Hamilton was forced to leave his studies to join the Revolutionary War, but later returned to Columbia to serve on the College’s board of trustees.

Ed Harris in "Westworld." (IMDb)

Ed Harris

Before becoming a prolific actor in numerous films, TV shows, and plays, Ed Harris attended Columbia on a football scholarship, playing defense for the Lions. He had originally planned on becoming a professional athlete but found his true calling in theater and left the University after one year. Harris got a BFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 1975 before going on to star in *Apollo 13*, *The Truman Show*, *Westworld*, and other projects.

Lauryn Hill in 2019. (Tore Sætre / Wikimedia)

Lauryn Hill

Hailing from Newark, New Jersey, singer and rapper Lauryn Hill was already a member of the rising hip-hop group the Fugees when she enrolled at Columbia in 1993. Her band's second album, *The Score*, was such a critical and financial success that Hill decided to leave school after having completed a year and a half. She went on to win multiple Grammy's with the Fugees and for her solo work.

Langston Hughes photographed by Carl Van Vechten in 1936. (Library of Congress)

Langston Hughes

One of the most famous poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes originally set out to become an engineer at the urging of his father. He attended Columbia’s School of Mines (now the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science) from 1921 to 1922 but, although he excelled in the coursework, dropped out after a year to pursue the arts.

Jack Kerouac at Columbia. (Columbia University archives)

Jack Kerouac

Writer Jack Kerouac, known for his 1957 tour de force novel *On the Road*, enrolled at Columbia on a football scholarship in 1940 but broke his leg during the second game of his freshman year. He dropped out of school shortly after the accident but remained on the Upper West Side, where he mingled with Allen Ginsberg ’48CC, Lucien Carr, William S. Burroughs, and other writers of the Beat Generation.

Alicia Keys (Michael Muller © 2016 NBCUniversal Media / IMDb)

Alicia Keys

As a teenager living in Manhattan’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood during the 1990s, Alicia Keys became the valedictorian at her performing-arts high school and received a scholarship to attend Columbia. The rising R&B powerhouse had recently landed a record deal, however (coincidentally, with Columbia Records), and left college during her first year to focus on her burgeoning music career.

Sandy Koufax (Wikipedia)

Sandy Koufax

Born in Brooklyn in 1935, legendary pitcher Sandy Koufax played for the Dodgers from 1955 to 1966. Shortly after joining the team, he began attending night classes in architecture at Columbia’s School of General Studies. Although he never became an architect, he did go on to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1972 at thirty-six years old — the youngest ever inductee at the time.

Joseph Gordon Levitt in "Don Jon." (IMDb)

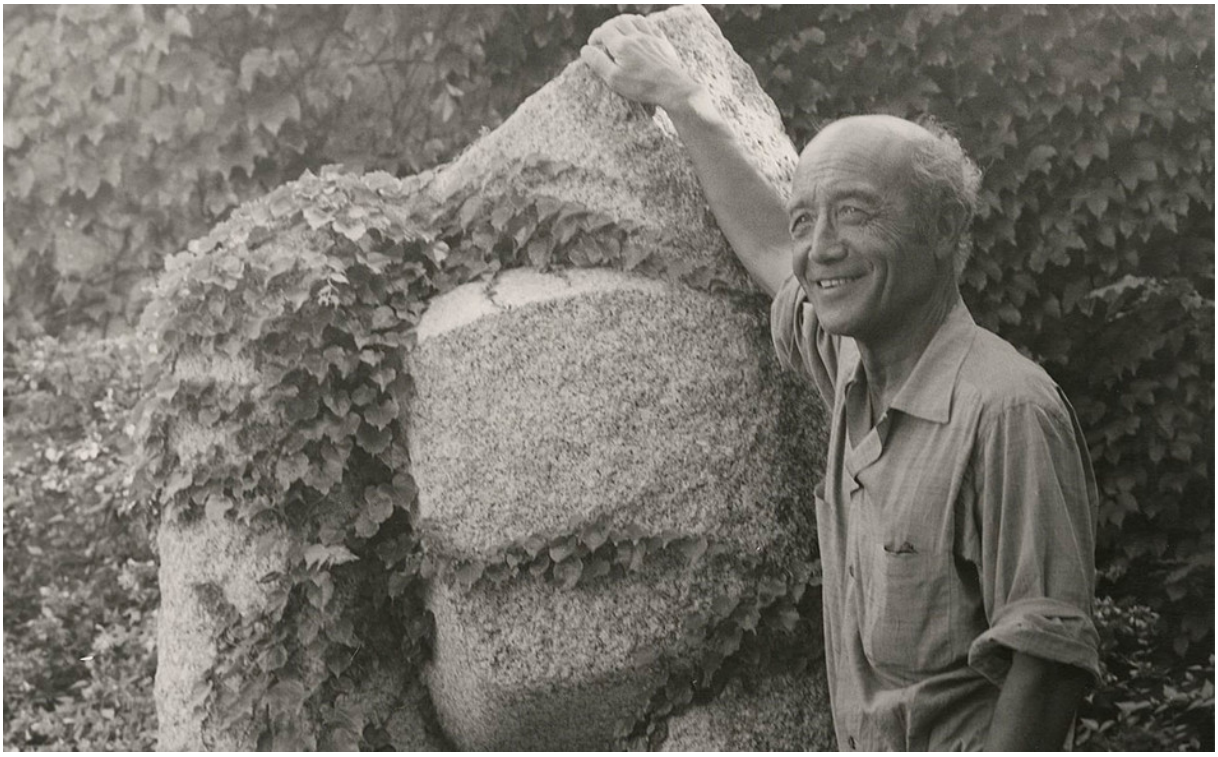
Joseph Gordon Levitt

Actor Joseph Gordon Levitt was riding on the fame of the 1999 teen romcom *10 Things I Hate About You* when he enrolled at Columbia in the early 2000s. He lived in John Jay Hall. (His ex-girlfriend and former costar, Julia Stiles ’05CC, lived on the same floor.) Levitt studied history, literature, and French, but then returned to acting. He went on to make popular films like *Inception*, *500 Days of Summer*, and *Don Jon.*

Yo-Yo Ma in 2008. (Andy Mettler / World Economic Forum)

Yo-Yo Ma

One of the most revered cellists of all time, Yo-Yo Ma was born in 1955 in Paris to Chinese parents and moved to New York at the age of seven. A child prodigy, Ma went on to attend Juilliard but briefly took a break from music and transferred to Columbia. The school didn’t strike the right chord, however, and Ma left Morningside Heights without completing a single semester. (He eventually graduated from Harvard.)



Isamu Noguchi at the Noguchi Garden Museum. (©David Finn Archive, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library)

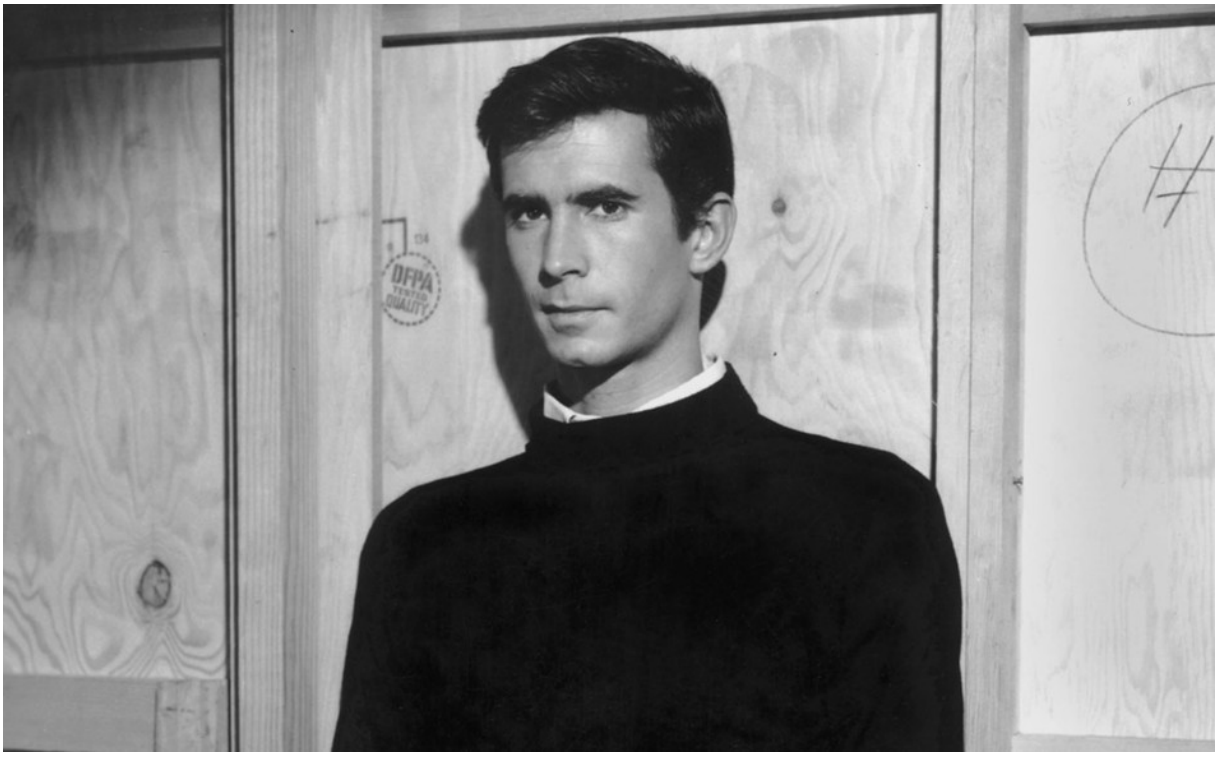
Isamu Noguchi

Abstract sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who was born in Los Angeles in 1904, started his career as a teenage apprentice for Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore. He attended Columbia College on a premed track during the mid-1920s but quit after a year and a half. Noguchi returned to art and went on to create a wide range of mid-century masterworks, including gardens, urban installations, ballet backdrops, and his ubiquitous coffee table.

Anna Paquin in "True Blood." (IMDb)

Anna Paquin

By the time she enrolled at Columbia in the early 2000s, Canadian-born actress Anna Paquin was already a teen celebrity (in 1993, she had snagged the Academy Award for best supporting actress at only eleven years old for her role in *The Piano*). The future *X-Men* and *True Blood* star studied at the College for one year before returning to acting full-time.



Anthony Perkins on the set of "Psycho." (William Creamer / © MPTV / IMDb)

Anthony Perkins

Best known for playing Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 horror classic *Psycho*, actor Anthony Perkins first attended Rollins College in central Florida. He transferred to Columbia in the early 1950s and, while still a student, got his big Hollywood break in George Cukor’s 1953 film *The Actress.*

Ben Platt (IMDb)

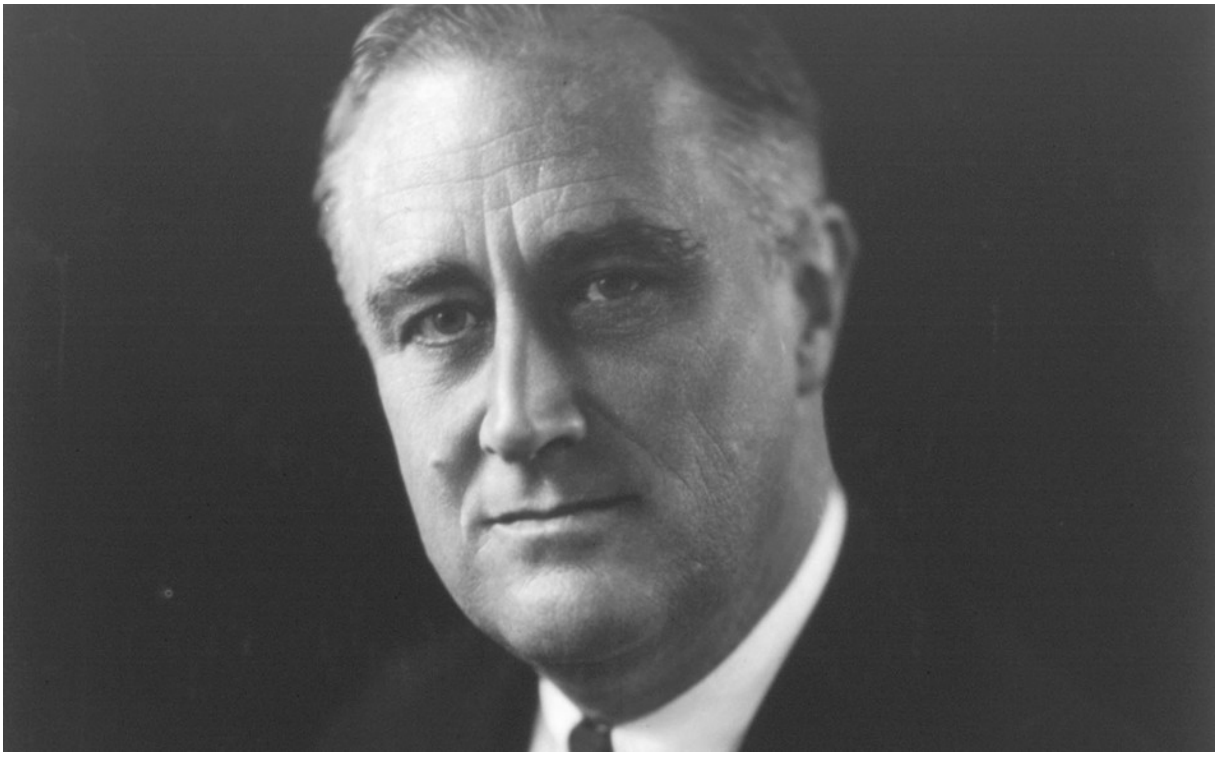
Ben Platt

Actor and musical-theater star Ben Platt briefly attended Columbia's School of General Studies in the early 2010s but left after he was cast in the Broadway show *The Book of Mormon*. Platt ended up winning a 2017 Tony Award for his role in *Dear Evan Hanson* and also starred in the 2021 movie adaptation of the musical. During the pandemic shutdown, he gave a virtual performance of the song "Oh, Columbia" by Tom Kitt '96CC to honor the Class of 2020.

Richard Rodgers (seated) with Lorenz Hart in 1936. (Library of Congress)

Richard Rodgers

Composer Richard Rodgers was an undergraduate student at Columbia when he met the two most important creative partners of his career: songwriters Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein ’16CC. He teamed up with Hart, a Columbia Journalism School dropout, to write music for the 1920 Varsity show before he eventually transferred to the Institute of Musical Art, which later became Juilliard. The pair ended up embarking on a two-decade collaboration, creating popular Broadway shows like *On Your Toes* and *I Married an Angel*. But it was Rodgers’s partnership with Hammerstein, beginning in the 1940s, that would spawn some of the most revered musicals of all time, including *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933. (Elias Goldensky / Library of Congress)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Before becoming governor of New York and then president of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt attended Columbia Law School from 1905 to 1907. (At the time, his distant cousin, fellow Columbia Law dropout Theodore Roosevelt, was in the White House.) Roosevelt never completed his degree, however, as he passed the bar exam before graduating.

Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. (Library of Congress)

Theodore Roosevelt

In 1880, Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt began law school at Columbia, having recently graduated from Harvard. But he left his studies after two years because he was elected to the New York State Assembly. His political career gained momentum from that point on, and in 1901 Roosevelt became the 26th president of the United States.

Emmy Rossum in "Shameless." (IMDb)

Emmy Rossum

Growing up in New York, actress and singer Emmy Rossum started her career as a child performer with the Metropolitan Opera. She acted through her teenage years and enrolled at Columbia in the early 2000s, but plum roles in *Mystic River*, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *The Phantom of the Opera* interrupted her studies. Today she is best known for starring in the 2011–2021 TV dramedy *Shameless*.

Hikaru Utada's 2008 "Heart Station" album.

Hikaru Utada

Once considered “Japan’s Britney Spears,” Japanese-American pop sensation Hikaru Utada left Tokyo as a teenager to study at Columbia during the early 2000s. She ended up dropping out after less than a year and becoming one of Japan’s top-selling musical artists of all time.

Eudora Welty in 1962. (Wikipedia)

Eudora Welty

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Eudora Welty ’82HON, famous for her stories set in the American South, attended Columbia Business School from 1930 to 1931 with plans to start a career in advertising. She briefly worked at a New York City agency before her father’s death forced her to move back to Mississippi. She published her breakthrough short story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” in 1936.

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