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## **Becoming Leaders of Change Through Service: An Investigation of Socially Empowered Learning in Post-Secondary Education**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents findings from the study of a service-learning program for undergraduate students offered by a post-secondary leadership education centre. The program was designed to enhance post-secondary learning beyond the program of studies while developing perspectives of servant-leadership and serving community-identified needs. The theoretical framework is explained and details of the program are described, followed by the research study with findings that support service-learning programs as an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning. Specifically, results indicate that the program investigated here led to a significant increase in group potency, collective efficacy, and overall social empowerment. Implications for the theory of Socially Empowered Learning are explored in addition to recommendations for future research and practice.

**Keywords:** Leadership education, social empowerment, Socially Empowered Learning, Socially Empowered Learning Framework (SELF), service-learning, servant-leadership, co-curricular credit.

## Introduction

Leadership education takes a variety of forms to address the complex social systems and relationships encountered by people who practice leadership (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997; Fullan, 2011; Rost & Barker, 2000). This paper shares a study on a small Service-Learning Program (SLP) that was developed as part of a leadership education centre's post-secondary offerings for co-curricular enhancement. The program was created to meet the needs of undergraduate students requesting authentic and engaging experiences in the community, and to expose them to perspectives of servant-leadership as part of the leadership centre's curricula. The design of the program was influenced by research on servant-leadership (Crippen, 2005; Greenleaf, 1998; 2002; Purkey & Siegel, 2002; Spears, 1998; Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010); student engagement (Katz, 2013; Krause & Coates, 2008; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Ramsden, 2003; Shum & Crick, 2012; Willms et al., 2009); and service-learning (Astin et al., 2000; Chambers, 2009; Calvert, 2011; Dharamsi et al., 2010; Eyler et al., 2001; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Lund & Lee, 2015; Martin & Lee, 2015; Maynes et al., 2013; Stanton et al., 1999).

The intention was to add service-learning to a range of leadership education opportunities reflecting the broad categories of skills required to lead change in a democratic society, including “the evolution of social change and development, the processes that influence social development, and the dynamics of human nature in change processes” (Rost & Barker, 2000, p. 3). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not students who participated in the SLP experienced group-based benefits in a way that they were also more socially empowered than those who did not take part.

Socially Empowered Learning is a relatively new form of pedagogical design that embeds student learning within collective social action on behalf of others, in such a way that students are

intellectually engaged in their work (Martin, 2014; Martin, 2018). We wondered if the SLP, through its design to foster servant-leadership, was also designed to create the conditions for social empowerment? Pedagogically, social empowerment can be achieved when learning is designed to incorporate group-based activities that are agency-rich, connected to real-world issues, and focused on making a positive social impact (Martin, 2018). The SLP was designed to do just that, and a second question emerged: is co-curricular service-learning an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning?

Theoretically, when students are engaged in Socially Empowered Learning over time, they experience an increase in collective efficacy, group potency, and shared agency which, in turn, increases their overall sense of social empowerment. Studies show that an increase in social empowerment has a direct, positive effect on student engagement, with a call for more empirical testing of other potential effects (Martin, 2018; Martin & Calvert, 2018). Thus, these new questions sparked an investigation of the SLP through the lens of Socially Empowered Learning, and it is presented here as such: first, we provide an explanation of the theoretical framework on student empowerment through agentic social action. Next, we describe the design of the SLP under investigation, followed by a description of the research study. Last, we share our findings on data from the SLP, with implications for theory, future research, and practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Socially Empowered Learning is defined as group-based, agency-rich opportunities that address real-world issues and make a positive social impact (Martin, 2014; Martin, 2018; Martin & Calvert, 2018). It is an emerging theory based on the theoretical premise that students will feel more connected to their learning when they sense they are part of a group that is making a positive difference in the world. The variables of the Socially Empowered Learning Framework (ironically,

SELF) were derived by unifying several theories from psychology: social learning theory, social psychology, and cognitive psychology.

First, SELF draws upon the concept of efficacy from social learning theory. According to Bandura (1977; 1982), increasing self-efficacy increases motivation. This can also happen at the group level as collective efficacy, a shared belief in a group's collective power to produce desired results (Bandura, 2000). Bandura explains that increasing collective efficacy can increase self-efficacy, and that one way to accomplish this is through positive, social activism as a group, on behalf of others (Bandura, 2000). This is a critical concept within SELF, as it centres on the notion that when groups work together for the good of others, the group members experience social benefits as individuals.

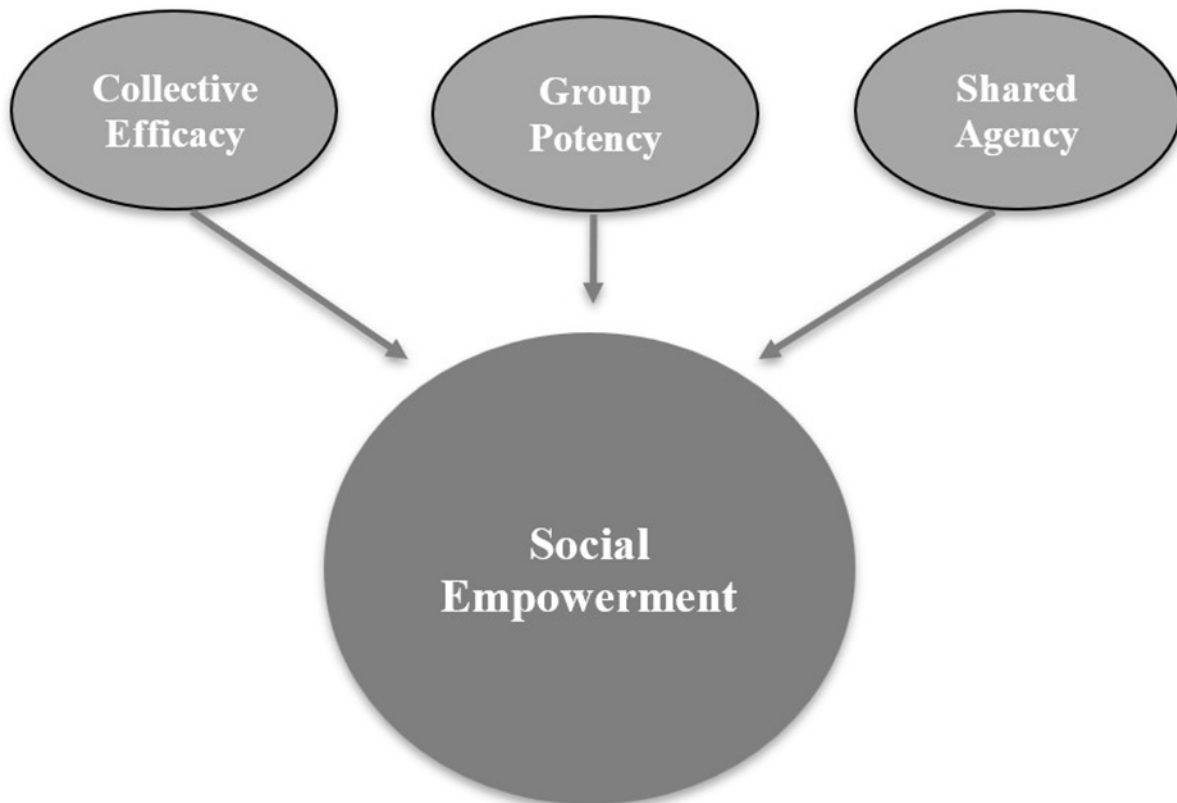
Next, SELF draws upon the concept of group potency, a shared sense of confidence that develops over time through a group's repeat experience with success. Group potency is "the collective belief in a group that it can be effective" (Guzzo et al., 1993, p. 87). Further, group potency includes the role of that collective belief in determining group effectiveness. As with collective efficacy, group potency levels can rise or fall based on experience, except that in the case of potency, it is about a group's overall effectiveness, regardless of task (Guzzo et al., 1993).

Additionally, recent research based on SELF found that levels of student engagement are positively influenced by aspects of shared agency (Martin, 2018; Martin & Calvert, 2015). Agency in learning requires purposeful options for students, "to make a difference not just to themselves but to the world around them ... [to] stimulate and drive learning forward" (Frost, 2006, p. 21). In Socially Empowered Learning, students are drawn into learning experiences that offer a myriad of choices, opportunities for their own input, and a sense that they have control over what happens next.

Together, the three independent variables of collective efficacy, group potency, and shared agency contribute different, motivating, and empowering effects that aggregate into an overall sense of *social empowerment*. Figure 1 illustrates this model below (Martin, 2014; Martin, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*The Variables of the Socially Empowered Learning Framework (SELF)*



As Figure 1 illustrates, one's social empowerment is dependent on one's perceived efficacy, potency, and agency as it relates to the group. Learning can be designed in a way that harnesses the power of each through group-based activities that create observable social change, repeat experiences with positive group outcomes overtime, and shared opportunities for student choice and voice as part of the process. When aggregated, the effects of all three variables create a sense of social empowerment that is deeply engaging (Martin, 2018) in such a way that

individuals are motivated to lead social change and make a difference in the world. In this way, social empowerment is a powerful tool for leadership, and Socially Empowered Learning is a pedagogical mechanism for achieving it. Thus, SELF provides a guide for educators who want to plan meaningful experiences that increase a shared sense of efficacy, potency, and agency in such a way that draws students into the activities (Martin, 2018). For the purposes of the current research, the questions posed earlier can be reframed to arrive at two, theory-informed research questions:

- 1) What is the effect of the SLP on student levels of collective efficacy, group potency, and shared agency?
- 2) What is the effect of co-curricular service-learning, as it is designed in the SLP, on student levels of social empowerment?

Answers to these questions will provide a program evaluation, of sorts, in assessing effectiveness of the program in terms of group-based benefits. If results are positive, they also offer the possibility of identifying an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning that can be pedagogically replicated in practice.

### **The Program Design**

The new co-curricular SLP was designed with leadership development in mind. Servant-leadership is a growing form of leadership required for making community-engaged change, and we know that service-learning can place students within a context of servant-leadership (Crippen, 2005; Dorado & Giles, 2004). Service-learning enriches the educational experience of individuals by immersing them in a community context where they can directly apply the knowledge acquired in their educational program while, at the same time, they are exposed to knowledge and

experiences that can only be found in a community setting (Dorado & Giles, 2004; Lund et al., 2014; Lund & Lee, 2015).

The SLP of this study was community-engaged from its inception, designed as a natural response to community-identified needs (manifested as frequent, unsolicited requests from community organizations for student servant-leaders and volunteers). At the same time, by serving in the community, there was a perfect opportunity for reciprocity that placed students in ideal contexts for acquiring knowledge outside their formal learning.

In terms of governance, the SLP was housed in the leadership education centre and set up as a matching service where students could peruse a menu of service-learning opportunities and select one that fit with their preferences, aptitude, and course schedule (Levesque-Bristol & Stanek, 2009). The centre facilitated relationship building and partnership agreements to customize each service-learning opportunity in a way that students and community partners all benefitted. Centre staff worked with the university's administrative offices to establish a co-curricular record so students would receive transcript credit, signifying they had completed 20 hours of service within the specified term.

The administrative workload was substantial, and there were certainly benefits to having dedicated SLP staff, as opposed to being added workload for a faculty member. Housing the program in one location instead of with different professors also created a central magnet for community partners and provided the capacity to honour and sustain authentic relationships. Centre staff identified mutual benefits for community partners and students, with the desired reciprocity for effective, meaningful service learning relationships (Donahue et al., 2003). Although professors were invited and encouraged to connect relevant co-curricular service-learning opportunities with their courses, the experience was neither graded nor governed by

faculty members. Regarding the decision for appropriate community partners, the SLP was designed to offer a specific range of experiences, so if a community request did not fit the bill, it was graciously declined. This was critical to ensure all offerings provided a service experience that was linked to the SLP learning goals outside of registered courses, but still relevant to the students' program. Specifically, the SLP learning goals were as follows, to:

- expand undergraduate exposure to real-world servant-leader contexts;
- extend course-based learning through service-learning;
- foster community-based leadership skills in students; and
- strengthen undergraduate engagement.

As part of the SLP onboarding processes, students were asked to take on a *service orientation*: to put themselves in the mindset of those whom they serve, to be committed to serve to their fullest capacity, to build authentic relationships with community members, and to meet community-identified needs while reflecting on their own learning in relation to their course work. To facilitate this, student reflection sessions were conducted at the mid-point and conclusion of the service-learning experience, giving the students the opportunity to learn from each other, and to connect as part of a larger group. In terms of structure, opportunities were designed to include between 20 to 30 hours total, within one semester, requiring approximately two to three hours per visit, per week.

Upon its inauguration, the SLP was immediately popular with students and community collaborators. Within just one year, program offerings tripled and were filled. Student and community partner feedback was very positive. For our purposes, it was important to capture data on the program effects, to inform program growth, and to inform the growing research on Socially Empowered Learning, as well as the fields of Service-Learning and Scholarship of Teaching and



Learning. As such, an empirical study was designed and awarded a research grant from the University's Institute of Teaching and Learning to measure program effects.

## **The Study**

### **Research Design**

The following study was designed to test four theoretical hypotheses:

- 1) Contributing to the SLP's focus on making a positive social change through service will increase student's perceived levels of collective efficacy;
- 2) Experiencing the SLP group's ability to make a collective social impact over time will increase student's perceived levels of group potency;
- 3) Selecting from the SLP's menu of options will increase student's perceived levels of shared agency; and
- 4) Participating in the SLP for the full term will increase student's perceived levels of social empowerment.

The study employed a one-way between-subjects, quasi-experimental design. Due to the self-selection feature of the program, random assignment was neither possible nor appropriate. The treatment – or intervention – is the post-secondary leadership education centre's SLP. To date, most empirical data on Socially Empowered Learning has been focused on middle school and youth. In studying undergraduate students, this study fills a gap in the social empowerment literature, while also identifying measures for assessing the effects of service-learning in terms of efficacy, potency, agency, and social empowerment.

## **Method**

Survey data were gathered through pre- and post-term on-line surveys at the beginning and end of the terms during which students were enrolled in the SLP. The sample consisted of 80 undergraduate participants in two groups: 1) Service-learning students participating in the SLP; and 2) non-service-learning students who served as a control group for comparison. All participants were registered in the same undergraduate program for education at a large, Canadian university. As is typical in the field of education, the overall sample was gender-biased, with 10% of the obtained sample representing the male population ( $n = 8$ ), and the sample size was relatively unbalanced: Service-Learning,  $n = 61$ ; Non Service-Learning,  $n = 19$ .

## **Measures and Procedure**

This study was certified as ethical by the Research Ethics Board. All participants provided informed consent, following Canadian Tri-Council protocols, then accessed the survey through an online, secure link provided by the research team. A series of demographic items were followed by measures of social empowerment based on an 18 item summary scale of the three sub-scales for collective efficacy, group potency, and shared agency.

Using the guidelines provided for measurement by Bandura (2006), collective efficacy was measured by asking participants questions such as, “how well, working together as a whole, can your service-learning program improve the lives of others?”. Group potency was measured using a modified form of Guzzo et al.’s (1993) group potency measure and included items such as, “the service-learning program can make a difference in the world”. Shared agency was measured using a new scale developed by Martin (Martin & Calvert, 2015), and included items such as, “we have the freedom to make change around us”, and “we can influence what we work on together”. Responses to all of the items were made on a five-point Likert-type scale. Although the sample

size was robust enough for pilot data, it was not large enough for generalizability and we deemed it inappropriate to assess levels of internal consistency. However, in other studies with large samples, the internal consistencies of all three subscales and the summary scale consistently score higher than 0.8, assessed by Cronbach's alpha (Martin & Calvert, 2018; Martin, Mesler & Corbin, 2022).

### **Analytic Process**

First, through a pre-program survey, an evaluation of baseline performance was conducted on the measures of collective efficacy, group potency, shared agency, and social empowerment. Then, the same survey was conducted at the end of the term. To assess whether there were significant differences between groups, we conducted two, independent sample *t*-tests. To counteract the inflation of Type I error, significance criteria interpretations were amended using the Bonferroni correction.

Following psychometric protocols, the obtained data were examined to determine whether the underlying assumptions of the proposed statistical techniques could be inferred and warrant their use. This included the evaluation of univariate and multivariate normality at the individual item and total score levels for all instruments included in the study. No outliers were identified within the obtained sample. The total score for all factors examined in this study demonstrated acceptable central tendency, skew, and kurtosis properties and warranted the use of parametric approaches. Additionally, we performed frequency analyses to examine the percentage of missing values found within the obtained data. The results of this evaluation indicated that missing data was minimal and constituted less than 5% of the obtained sample. The overall pattern of missing data appeared mostly random, with no specific logic to the exclusion of information. Due to the sample size, multiple imputation methods were not used and all analyses were performed on

available data.

## Results

When the two groups were examined at baseline performance, no significant differences were noted. As such, we inferred both groups to be relatively equivalent at the time of SLP implementation. This was not the case at the end of the program. Following participation in the SLP, students enrolled in the program demonstrated a statistically significant increase in collective efficacy ( $t(60) = -2.11, p < .05$ ), group potency ( $t(60) = -2.90, p < .05$ ), and the composite of social empowerment ( $t(60) = -2.34, p < .05$ ). Results for shared agency were not significant. There were no significant changes within the comparison group.

## Discussion

This study began as an inquiry on the effects of a co-curricular service-learning program by asking if participation in the program socially empowers students as servant-leaders of change through increased collective efficacy, group potency, and shared agency. Findings here show that, for two of the three variables, the answer is a resounding yes. Levels of collective efficacy and group potency both increased significantly for students in the SLP, while there was no change in these variables for students who did not participate in the program.

Finding increased levels of collective efficacy supports our hypothesis that making a positive social change through service-learning will have a positive effect on student collective efficacy. At the same time, this finding also supports the pedagogical design of the program as a means of facilitating this group-level benefits attributed to collective service on behalf of others. In serving others to meet authentic needs in the community, participants perceived that they could collectively lead social change. Some of this group-based effect may be due to the cohesion created within the SLP, and future research could focus on teasing out these variables to better understand

the micro-influences contributing to this effect. For example, the SLP incorporated onboarding processes focused on fostering a service orientation, and embedded processes for group-based reflection throughout the program. Unpacking the specific effects of these through more specific metrics may provide valuable information to support future instructional design.

Finding increased levels of group potency supports our hypothesis that experiencing the group's ability to make a social impact over time will have a positive effect on student group potency. It also suggests that there were benefits to participating in the co-curricular program beyond service-learning, since this construct is not task specific. In this case, it could be a perceivable group potency as servant-leaders. Either way, this finding signals that the SLP design has a power to create a group effect beyond the program, with potential benefits that may manifest elsewhere. What those benefits are is not captured in this study, and we encourage future research to investigate this, particularly in terms of leadership education. Findings here suggest that participants in the SLP have a greater confidence in their abilities together. Whether or not this is sustained beyond the program timeframe is certainly worthy of further investigation.

We did not find a change in levels of shared agency, and consequently did not find support for our hypothesis that selecting from a menu of options will have a positive effect on student shared agency. Upon interpretation, we acknowledge that this amount of choice, although appreciated by the students, is likely not enough to cause a perceivable change in agency levels – at least not enough for a measurable difference. Despite the opportunity for students to choose their placement, findings suggest that this single choice was not enough to influence a significant difference in shared agency. In retrospect, we can see that there was a missed opportunity to embed more authentic and meaningful opportunities for student input across the program. Klemenčič (2015) proposes that there may be benefits in connecting students' past experiences and future

orientations to their present context so they are better able to reflect on their choices and the meaning ascribed to them. Regardless, neither of these options were implemented here, and the findings reflect this. Additionally, we recognize that shared agency is a group-level construct, but the SLP did not provide opportunities for choice, input, or creativity that would be perceived at the group level. Placement selection was an individual choice from a set menu at the beginning of the program, and the rest was prescribed. Programs desiring a perceivable agentic effect would likely benefit from more embedded agency throughout the program term that is enacted and reflected upon at the group-level, perhaps through consensus-oriented or democratic decision making that engages each participant's contribution. Yang et al. (2020) utilized a similar model when studying undergraduate students, finding that through this method students developed a higher shared epistemic agency than the control group who did not. Future iterations of the program might incorporate on-going, collective reflection throughout the program. For example, the SLP could be strategically redesigned to invite real-time feedback while students are in the midst of the program. Gathering and responding to student ideas for program improvement in such a way that their input is witnessed could be one way to increase the sense of shared agency within the program which, theoretically, could further increase the level of social empowerment observed.

The significant increase in levels of social empowerment for SLP participants supports our hypothesis that participating in the SLP for the full term will have a positive effect on student social empowerment. This finding also supports the proposition that service-learning, when designed as the SLP, is an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning, and suggests that service-learning is a powerful mechanism for developing leadership skills in post-secondary education.

This finding of a statistically significant increase in social empowerment without an increase in shared agency raises theoretical questions regarding the role shared agency plays within SELF. Results indicate that the significant increases in collective efficacy and group potency were enough to reflect a statistically significant increase in social empowerment. Whether or not an increase in shared agency would have made these levels even higher can not be determined, given the data gathered here, and we call for more pedagogical experimentation and testing to better understand this relationship. Findings here suggest that agency is not a requisite factor of social empowerment, and we suggest it may, instead, play a moderating role in relation to optimizing the socially empowered experience.

### **Limitations**

As mentioned, this study is limited by the sample size, and presents findings that can only be interpreted with caution in terms of generalizability. It is also limited by the disproportionate ratio of males to females, with the majority (90%) identifying as female, and though this is not out of line with typical demographics in the field of education, it is also a limitation in that regard. And, of course, the study is delimited to a Canadian post-secondary context. Results need to be interpreted with these points in mind.

### **Conclusion**

This study was designed as an empirical investigation to evaluate a new, co-curricular service-learning program for undergraduate students offered as leadership education. Findings reveal that the program is effective for increasing collective efficacy, group potency, and social empowerment in such a way that students are empowered as servant-leaders.

Results here will directly inform future iterations of the SLP, and reveal how critical it is to design programs with opportunities for agency in order to reap all the theoretical benefits of the

Socially Empowered Learning Framework. Based on findings here, the utility of the program lies in the program design adhering to the requisite elements of Socially Empowered Learning, which are that learning be: group-based and connected to the real-world with an opportunity to make a positive social impact.

We opened this paper wondering if participation in an SLP designed to foster servant-leadership could also foster social empowerment. Given our findings, we can confidently answer, yes. This SLP experience increased students' efficacy and potency in a way that they were socially empowered to lead positive change in the world. We also asked if service-learning is an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning? Findings here indicate that it is – though we add this caveat: the program must be designed in a way that creates the theory-informed group-based effects.

In closing, this study contributes to our understanding of leadership education within a post-secondary context, by measuring effects of a co-curricular program designed to place students in a context of servant-leadership in a way that also created conditions for social empowerment. Through this, we provide evidence that students can empower themselves by becoming leaders of change through service, with potential benefits for individuals, groups, communities, and beyond.



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## **Author Biography**

**Dr. Brittany Harker Martin** is an Arts Educator with a PhD in Business. Specialized in arts integration, she is a thought leader in ways the arts can be used in non-arts contexts, such as applications of dance in science or art to promote mental health. As an Associate Professor of Leadership at the University of Calgary, her portfolio includes teaching (K-12, undergrad and grad students), educational consulting, teacher PD, and research leadership. Collaborators to date include Harvard's Leadership Institute, Stanford's Gardner Centre, Alberta Health Services, Telus Spark, the Creative Kids' Museum, and the Royal Conservatory of Music. Dr. Britt's unique scholarly lens includes expertise in psychometrics, behavioural economics, and arts-based methodologies. She has developed undergraduate and graduate courses, including co-creating Masters level certificates in Transdisciplinary Leadership. Her latest research focuses on art, brain, and mind while continuing work on her frameworks of Artistic Intelligence (AQ) and Socially Empowered Learning.

**Marsha Harris** BA., MMFT is a counselling therapist at Brandon University and currently a Doctor of Education student at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include post-secondary student mental health and wellness, and service-learning. She enjoys designing and leading co-curricular programming. She can be contacted at: [harrism@brandonu.ca](mailto:harrism@brandonu.ca)

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