



ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY ON CAMPUS: A Basic Needs Implementation Guide For Arkansas Community Colleges





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Introduction

Over the past decade, a mounting body of research evidence has made it clear that basic needs insecurity, and specifically food insecurity, is alarmingly prevalent among college students.ⁱ A 2020 survey of undergraduates from more than 200 two-year and four-year colleges nationwide indicated that nearly 60% of students experienced basic needs insecurity, and 34% of respondents experienced food insecurity, a reality that was more common among community college students and among students of color and low-income students. These unmet needs compromise students' ability to be successful in college and move on to stable jobs with family sustaining wages.

To address these challenges and to support student success in college and the workforce, four community colleges in Arkansas – Arkansas Northeastern College, North Arkansas College, University of Arkansas-Phillips Community College, and University of Arkansas-Pulaski Technical College – have worked to better connect students to basic needs resources by strengthening their existing food pantries and by connecting students with public nutrition benefits (i.e., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) and other basic needs resources. Building upon their prior workⁱⁱ and leveraging a Basic Needs Initiative grant from the ECMC Foundation with support from Arkansas Community College's Center for Student Success,ⁱⁱⁱ these colleges partnered with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance^{iv} to transform their food pantries into basic needs hubs.

This new basic needs hub model continues to serve students' proximate food needs, and also provides direct assistance to students in accessing benefits like SNAP and other basic needs supports. More broadly, this new model shifts food pantries from serving as supplemental food distribution centers to basic needs hubs for skill-building, knowledge sharing, and proactive connection to a broad array of basic needs supports (see A Basic Needs Hub Model below).

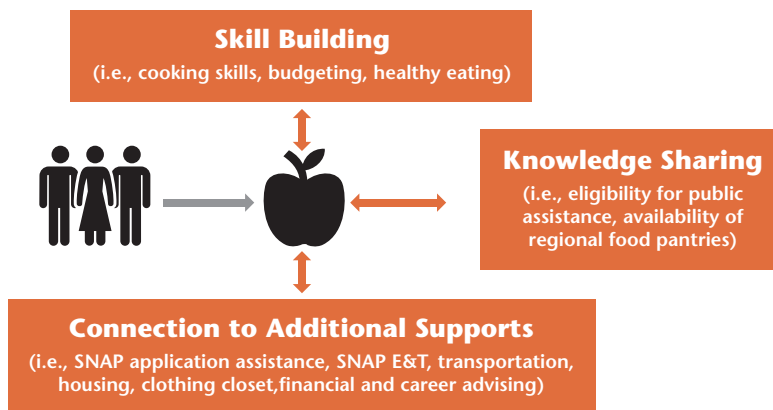
Importantly this new model is associated with notable academic benefits for students. Students accessing the hub are more likely to be enrolled one semester and one year later, and to earn a credential. These academic benefits are present for low-income students, for adults, and students of color who are also more likely to access the hub. To access study results see our final report "Addressing Food Insecurity On Campus: Connecting Students to Basic Needs Supports to Improve Academic Outcomes."

A Basic Needs Hub Model

Pantry as food distribution center



Pantry as hub connecting students to other basic needs resources



This Basic Needs Implementation Guide draws on lessons learned across these four colleges as leaders in providing campus-based and comprehensive basic needs supports both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this guide provides other practitioners in Arkansas and beyond with actionable strategies related to three key elements of successful basic needs implementation: 1) building a campus culture for basic needs support; 2) creating a structure for operationalizing basic needs supports through campus food pantries; and 3) maximizing student engagement by getting the word out through proactive student outreach and by implementing strategies to combat stigma. Specific examples and tips for getting started in each of these three areas are included in this guide, providing colleges with concrete steps to better support their students' success.

Build a Campus Culture for Basic Needs Support

For successful implementation of basic needs supports, national guidance suggests that colleges must first build a campus culture where there is senior-level as well as broad staff and faculty support for addressing students' personal, financial, and academic needs.^v A culture of support includes allocation of sustained resources (e.g., time and financial) from campus leaders and widespread awareness and engagement with basic needs initiative efforts across entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level faculty and staff. As a signal of organizational and resource commitment, campus leaders should designate a lead staff member – supported by a distributed leadership team – to organize basic needs initiatives and to ensure that faculty, staff, and leadership are informed about what supports are available and how to connect students to them. Importantly, building a campus culture of basic needs support must also ensure that student voices are elevated – for example, through surveys, needs assessments, and focus groups – in any discussions of student needs and how to best support students to address these needs.

The Arkansas community colleges featured in this guide benefit from strong support of their basic needs initiatives by senior campus leaders, especially Presidents and Vice Presidents. These senior leaders signal that supporting students' basic needs is a campus priority via regular communication during all-campus meetings like convocation and by supporting the pursuit of grant, community, and other funding. Colleges also benefit from a key staff member on campus who leads and champions their basic needs efforts. These individuals serve as the point of contact for basic needs supports for students, faculty, and staff, and they consistently engage with senior leaders to keep them informed about food pantry operations, SNAP application support, and other basic needs efforts. In addition to serving in a hands-on role in the provision of food supports – for example, opening the campus hub in off hours or assembling and delivering food and supply bags to students as needed – many of these key staff members also oversee student-facing departments or divisions like advising, career pathways, and adult education. This organizational alignment allows for students to be more seamlessly referred to additional campus supports and provides opportunities for cross-training of staff within these divisions to provide additional points of access to supports.

Having a designated point of contact, senior leader support, and organizational alignment are important foundations for providing comprehensive basic needs supports for students. In order to scale and sustain efforts, it is equally important that awareness and buy-in is expanded beyond key campus champions. The following strategies for garnering broad campus awareness and support draw from the work of the four Arkansas community colleges.

Fostering Broad Campus Awareness and Buy-In

- **Form a basic needs committee:** Create an advisory committee comprised of faculty and staff from diverse departments and disciplines. The committee should formulate an outreach plan for students, faculty, and staff; help set procedures related to the food pantry and other basic needs supports; assist in building internal and external partnerships; and serve as the core volunteer base for the pantry.
- **Create a “go to person” handout:** Circulate a handout each semester to all faculty and staff that outlines the key points of contact on campus where students can be referred for various resources (i.e., food pantry, SNAP application assistance, clothing closet).
- **Embed basic needs information into faculty and staff training:** Include information about the basic needs supports that are available, and how faculty and staff can refer students to these supports, into existing faculty and staff training – especially new employee onboarding. In addition to ensuring that this information is systematically shared, embedding this information into existing training opportunities also signals that basic needs supports are a priority for the college.
- **Create an early alert specific to basic needs:** Within existing early alert systems, include an option to allow faculty or staff to indicate if a student might benefit from basic needs supports. These early alerts can notify the correct campus department to provide proactive outreach to the student. In addition to providing students with the appropriate supports, having a “basic needs” option within early alert systems serves as a constant reminder to faculty and staff of this wide-spread need by students.

Encouraging Faculty and Staff Engagement in Basic Needs Efforts

- **Open the basic needs hub to faculty and staff (in addition to students):** By advertising that the hub is for everyone on campus, faculty and staff feel more welcome to come visit the hub. Faculty and staff may also experience food insecurity or may benefit from a snack during the day. In addition to fostering greater awareness and buy-in by faculty and staff by making them feel welcome at the hub, when college personnel access the hub or carry hub goods around campus, it can help destigmatize use of the pantry for students.
- **Leverage volunteerism and giving:** Invite faculty and staff to volunteer in the hub in order to bolster campus involvement and increase their knowledge of what supports are available. Volunteering can occur on a regular basis or for special events (e.g., creating food baskets that can be used to prepare a Thanksgiving meal). Colleges can also create friendly competitions as fundraisers for the hub or offer a payroll deduction option where faculty and staff can donate to the hub with each paycheck. These efforts can help increase awareness in addition to providing sustained support for food pantry operations.

College Highlight: North Arkansas College

North Arkansas College builds buy-in for their basic needs supports by cultivating campus-wide engagement and participation with their basic needs hub, “Pete’s Pantry.” Evidence of North Arkansas College’s culture of student support can be seen in the large number of staff who volunteer to assemble and hand out food baskets with ingredients to make a Thanksgiving meal, and in the college President’s annual remarks to faculty at convocation about the importance of supporting students’ needs.

“I would say that student success is our culture now. I do feel that we all look at the student holistically, from faculty members to the janitors. That opens the mindset for change, for the focus to be on the students and to allow us to see the challenges students face.”

-North Arkansas Administrator

At North Arkansas, faculty and staff are engaged in the hub in ways that also raise funds to support operations. Faculty and staff can purchase “Pete’s Eats” t-shirts, they participate in competitions where departments compete against each other in “penny wars” to donate funds to the hub, and they can choose to donate to the hub through payroll deduction.



Create the Structure: Operationalizing Basic Needs Hubs Through Campus Food Pantries

Several existing reports provide guidance on how to operationalize a college-based food pantry, including how to use the pantry as a connection to more sustained food security support.^{vi} Operationalizing a basic needs hub requires a staffing plan; sustainable resources to stock the hub and for needed operating supplies; and processes for attracting and referring students to the hub and documenting student usage. Running a basic needs hub also requires colleges to make ongoing decisions about which groceries and household supplies to distribute (e.g., non-perishable and/or perishable) based on supply and students' needs and dietary restrictions, as well as how to distribute these resources (e.g., student shopping vs. pre-prepared bags). Food pantries are designed to provide supplemental supports for food insecurity and are most useful when they are leveraged to connect students to additional, more sustained food resources like SNAP as well as other community resources. In order for basic needs hubs to connect students to SNAP, staff need to understand the current federal and state regulations related to college student eligibility for SNAP, paying specific attention to income and work requirements. Colleges may choose to partner with a local organization or state agency to support students in determining their eligibility and to assist in the application process.

The Arkansas community colleges participating in the Basic Needs Initiative grant are on the forefront of innovations related to the re-imagining of campus food pantries as basic needs hubs. They are operating robust hubs, many of which were strengthened or expanded to include additional services or offerings using grant funds (e.g., providing laundry services for housing insecure students; offering non-perishable food and household supplies like baby formula, feminine products, toilet paper, and pet food). Importantly, colleges are also leveraging their hubs to connect students to SNAP application assistance through a partnership with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA), and they are working to connect hubs to SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) resources. A key goal of the Basic Needs Initiative grant, these colleges have been reframing their food pantries from food distribution centers to basic needs hubs that help students learn new skills, learn about and apply for additional supports, and connect to additional food resources. Reimagined food pantries help students with skill building by providing cooking classes and recipes that use pantry items to create healthy meals, and skills around grocery shopping for healthy foods on a budget. Colleges are also using hubs to curate and share knowledge about other supports that are available, like regional food pantries or information about eligibility for public assistance. Basic needs hubs are also directly connecting students to supports like SNAP application assistance, career closets, SNAP Employment and Training (E&T), transportation vouchers or gas cards, financial and career advising, assistance finding housing, and other basic needs supports.

Staffing the Basic Needs Hub

Staffing a basic needs hub ideally relies on **dedicated staff** to ensure accessibility to the hub and to maintain inventory; however, many of the Arkansas BNI colleges must rely on volunteers. Some colleges are using creative strategies, such as hiring AmeriCorps VISTAS as a cost-effective way of having dedicated staff. When looking to staff hubs with dedicated personnel or with volunteers, colleges stressed the benefits of **employing individuals with prior experiences working with the Department of Human Services (DHS)**, as these individuals are broadly knowledgeable about how social support systems work and have existing relationships with other community-based organizations that can be leveraged on students' behalf. Campuses are also **involving students in hub operations**, for example, by staffing the hub with representatives from student organizations or with work-study students, a practice that also helps to reduce stigma for other students accessing the hub.

Ensuring Accessibility of the Hub

The hubs' hours of operation are directly related to the availability of staff and volunteers to keep the hub open. Each of the four Arkansas colleges maintains **consistent hours or days of the month** when the campus community can plan on the hub being open. As mentioned previously, in addition to these standard hours, the **hub leader or champion also serves as the point of contact for ad hoc requests by students outside of regular hours**. One college was experimenting with lockers where bags of food can be stored, and students can pick-up the bags at a time that is convenient for them outside of regular hub hours. Most campuses either operate on a walk-in basis, where students shop the inventory themselves like they would in a grocery store, or food pantry staff pre-package bags of food for students to come pick up based on family size (i.e., family of 2 or 4) and dietary restrictions (i.e., gluten free, low sodium). During the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges also experimented with handing out these prepacked bags of food during drive-through hub events. Additionally, colleges set up **online ordering**, where students can order at their convenience and then schedule a time to pick up; however, this strategy also involves staff time to keep the online inventory up-to-date and accurate. Importantly, hubs have a **supply of pop-top canned goods or can openers**, to ensure that students are able to open and eat the food

College Highlight: University of Arkansas-Phillips Community College

At Phillips Community College, basic needs supports are embedded within other required student experiences like orientation and student success classes, making communication about these resources unavoidable for students across all three of their campuses. The student success course is woven into the college experience, providing students with skill development to help them remain on track for graduation in addition to information about basic needs supports.

"The student success courses allowed us to make sure we could reach students who might need food or services such as career closet. In the class, they do workshops about dressing for interviews and healthy cooking. Most students who use the services find them invaluable, and they can choose the food they want, it's like going into a grocery store."

-Phillips Community College Administrator

Phillips' "Ridge Runner Campus Pantry" also works collaboratively with the college's Career Pathways program that provides support for student parents to ensure the services offered are complimentary and that students can maximize available supports.

College Highlight: University of Arkansas Pulaski Technical College

Pulaski Tech has made some operational changes under the Arkansas BNI project to expand their food pantry's footprint and to partner with their student organizations to staff the basic needs hub. These structures are important for the college to ensure their large student body has access to food and other resources.

"Getting students more involved [in the pantry] is really important. I believe that people who are involved in their education is what helps retain students, when they get involved, they learn more about what's on campus."

-Pulaski Tech Student

To further support students, Pulaski Tech developed a unique partnership with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance (AHRA) where they provide AHRA with the names and contact information of students who access the hub and who indicate they want more information about SNAP. AHRA proactively outreaches to these students to help determine their eligibility for SNAP and assist them with the SNAP application. Proactively connecting students to additional food sources is important for addressing students' longer-term food security needs.

they receive through the hub. Basic needs hubs also include **healthy cooking recipes** within the bags, providing students with ideas for how to prepare a meal with the ingredients provided. These innovations all involve additional staff and volunteer time and represent colleges' efforts to increase the accessibility to the hubs and the resources they provide for as many students as possible.

Connecting Students with SNAP and Additional Resources

Arkansas community colleges are intentionally leveraging their hubs to connect students with other basic needs supports. Using information from the hub intake form, which asks students about other supports they receive or are interested in learning more about, colleges **connect students to additional resources** either in real-time (i.e., provided at the same time they are visiting the hub) or in follow-up, proactive outreach to the student. Additional resources students are referred to include Career Pathways,^{vii} financial aid, advising, housing assistance, virtual mental health counseling, and – importantly – assistance with SNAP applications or SNAP E&T. SNAP E&T is a program for SNAP participants that helps them gain additional education and skills and provides financial support for these opportunities as well as resources (i.e., funding for course supplies, transportation, child care) to help students remain enrolled. Many colleges chose to **co-locate their hub with their SNAP E&T Coordinator**, a position that already existed in the colleges' adult education departments, so that students accessing the hub could have direct access to these E&T resources.

Creating this "one-stop-shop" whereby students accessing the hub are connected with additional supports was bolstered by the colleges' partnership with AHRA through the Basic Needs Initiative. Students interested in receiving follow-up about SNAP eligibility and application assistance are referred to AHRA, where a staff member would walk the student through the application process and help them submit to DHS. AHRA also provided training for colleges around SNAP eligibility and application, to enable colleges to provide some of this assistance in-house. Colleges' partnership with AHRA enabled students to have **access to one-on-one expert assistance during the SNAP application process**, an especially important resource given the complicated and ever-changing requirements for SNAP.

Get the Word Out: Maximizing Student Awareness and Combating Stigma

National research on basic needs supports stresses the importance of ensuring that students are aware and reminded of the available supports.^{viii} Existing studies also emphasize the need for colleges to combat the stigma which can prevent many students in need from accessing necessary supports.^{ix} Key to fostering student awareness and engagement is to embed information about basic needs resources into colleges' existing communication venues, such as websites, hallways, course syllabi, and campus events. Creating broad awareness through regular and existing campus communication also helps normalize basic needs resources as a typical part of the college experience. In addition, colleges should provide targeted outreach to specific student populations who may especially benefit from basic needs supports and who are least likely to be aware that these supports are available.^x In order to further destigmatize the use of basic needs resources, colleges must carefully consider how they advertise, operationalize, and deploy resources in a manner that allows users to maintain their dignity. Maximizing student awareness of and engagement with basic needs resources is key to ensuring these resources can reach students and support their success in college.

Creating Awareness

To maximize the effectiveness of their basic needs supports, Arkansas community colleges are reaching students by creating broad awareness on campus and through directed outreach to specific student groups. Basic needs information is shared in **broad group outreach** through posting information on digital monitors around campus, providing information during orientation, including statements on course syllabi, and using special events like Thanksgiving food baskets or community outreach events. Campuses are also holding cooking classes, in partnership with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension, to engage students in healthy cooking using food pantry items. To create more **personalized awareness** among students, Arkansas colleges are building basic needs information-sharing into existing college one-on-one touch points, including traditional touchpoints such as advisor meetings or financial aid meetings, as well as less traditional touchpoints like textbook pick-up. Many faculty and staff also shared they keep food in their desk drawers and will include a note advertising the basic needs hub when they give these snacks to students. Finally, colleges are engaging in **proactive outreach to specific groups of students** who may especially benefit from basic needs supports. By partnering with departments or programs that serve similar students like Career Pathways, TRIO programs, and adult education, resources can be braided together to best support students. Financial aid offices are also mailing letters to students with an EFC=\$0 to let them know that supports are available, a practice recently reinforced by the U.S. Department of Education.^{xi}



College Highlight: Arkansas Northeastern College

Arkansas Northeastern College's commitment to meeting students' basic needs through their hub is supported by efforts to greatly reduce stigma. Grounded by their slogan "full stomachs, alert minds," the college works to reduce stigma by holding "community fun day" outreach events. These events, akin to a block party, are attended by college staff, one of the Vice Presidents, and community leaders; the events bring food and festivities to local communities, where information is shared about the college and supports available. Prospective students and community members know that basic needs supports are part of the college experience before they even become students.

"We have Fun Days where we go into the community, hand out free food and drinks, raffle off bicycles, and have music. We have the fire and police departments, and if the mayor is around, he'll come, and the faith community is there. While the children are out having fun, we talk to their parents and let them know 'Wherever you are now, that's not necessarily where you're going. The college has all of these academic programs and basic needs resources, there's something here for you.'"

-Arkansas Northeastern Staff

The college takes additional steps to reduce stigma on campus by providing transportation through their "Opportunity Bus," co-locating their career closet with the hub, offering free gift cards to the campus café, providing mentorship opportunities for minoritized students, and offering a mobile food pantry for students who can't make it to the food pantry during regular hours.

Combating Stigma

Combating stigma is key to ensuring that students who can benefit from basic needs supports actually take advantage of them. Given that stigma is notoriously difficult to eliminate, we provide a long list of strategies below – drawing from the work of the four Arkansas community colleges – for combating stigma by attracting more students to the basic needs hub, normalizing its use, and creating an experience that is as close to a grocery shopping experience as possible.

- **Stress that the hub is for everyone:** Open the hub to faculty, staff, and students to normalize use of the hub's services, emphasizing that everyone gets hungry, and the hub is a resource for snacks or meals for the entire campus community. There are likely faculty and staff on campus who are also experiencing food insecurity.
- **Create a mobile food pantry:** Pack an assortment of snacks or individual meal items in a cart and take it to buildings where students may be far-removed geographically from the hub. Programs like welding or nursing, where a student may not have time to make it across campus to the hub due to all-day course schedules, can especially stand to benefit from this mobile access which is open to all, reinforcing the message that everyone needs to eat.
- **Employ students to work in the hub:** Have students volunteer or work in the hub as part of a leadership and/or work position on campus. Having peers present in the hub can help other students feel that being in the hub is a normal part of the college experience. After students complete their volunteer shift, offer them food to go, (re)emphasizing that the hub is for everyone.
- **Establish privacy agreements for hub staff and volunteers:** It is important for anyone working in the hub to have training and signed agreements about how to maintain users' privacy. Maintaining privacy is also important for combating stigma so that students know their access and use of the hub will not be advertised without their consent.

- **Distribute campus cafeteria gift cards:** Offer a limited number of gift cards to the campus cafeteria or food vendors to attract students to the hub (where gift cards are distributed). In addition to routing more students to the hub, offering gift cards can allow students to access on-campus food resources without revealing their economic status.
- **Use regular grocery bags for campus hub goods:** Pass out hub food and supplies in grocery store bags (i.e., not branded with the campus food pantry logo) so that students seen carrying the bags are not immediately associated with accessing the hub. This practice allows students to keep their use of the hub private if they choose.
- **Do not distribute damaged or expired food:** Do not place damaged or expired food on the hub shelves for students, although this food could be included as an “extra” or “on sale” item that users could choose in addition to the food and supplies they are allocated. Handing out or “selling” damaged cans or expired food is not likely to occur in a grocery store, and it could be perceived as less than high quality; not stocking these items helps ensure a dignified hub experience.
- **Offer online ordering:** Enable students to shop the hub online from a list of available food items, where staff can complete their order and have it available for pickup. This option mirrors a grocery store shopping experience and allows students to receive food who may not be able to or may not feel comfortable accessing the hub during regular hours.
- **Use a point system for hub shopping:** Allocate students a number of points, that act like cash, where they can shop in the hub similar to how they would shop in a grocery store. Points can be based on household size and/or specific buckets of items (e.g., proteins, vegetables). This system can also provide students with skills around budgeting and allows them to choose food based on their tastes.
- **Consider pros and cons of hub location:** Prevailing research encourages campuses to locate basic needs hubs in visible and centralized locations to help increase awareness of resources available. Based on the campus climate and student population, campuses may choose to locate the hub near a building’s exit, allowing students to access the hub more discreetly and to park closer to the hub which reduces the need to carry food across campus. In the case of a more discreet location, campuses will need to be creative with how they advertise the hub to ensure awareness is high.



Getting Started: Key Building Blocks for Successful Basic Needs Implementation

Addressing food insecurity on college campuses helps set students up for success. Many Arkansas community colleges are already at the leading edge of rethinking their food pantries as basic needs hubs for student skills, knowledge, and connection to additional basic needs supports. For other colleges considering similar approaches, we offer the following tips on how to get started.

1. **Build a Culture:** Colleges should begin building their supportive culture that will evolve over time by first deciding who on campus will lead the basic needs work. This person should be someone in the organization who is passionate about the work and is connected with aligned services on campus. Colleges should also surround the lead with a team that is cross-functional and has decision-making power, and that is broadly supported by senior leaders. Colleges should also determine what resources – time and monetary – they will need in order to provide comprehensive basic needs supports for their students.
2. **Create a Structure:** Once colleges have a team in place to build and lead a supportive student-centered culture, they should identify a staffing and resource accessibility plan that maximizes the ability to serve as many students (and faculty/staff) as possible with the personnel available. To connect students to additional resources beyond what the campus can offer, colleges should work with community-based partners, like AHRA, to ensure that all students have the opportunity to benefit from public assistance and other basic needs supports.
3. **Get the Word Out:** To ensure students can benefit from the basic needs supports offered, colleges should plan ways to maximize awareness through one-on-one and personalized outreach to students, in addition to campus-wide promotion of resources. Campuses should also discuss and implement creative ways to combat and reduce stigma associated with using supports, in ways that make sense for the campus and the students they serve.



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ENDNOTES

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^{ix}ibid.

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^{xi}Dear Colleague Letter on the Use of FAFSA Data. <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2022-01-20/use-fafsa-data-administer-federal-programs>



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