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## **Nontraditional Service in Academic Libraries for Student-Parents**

*Julie D. Carmen, Central Washington University*

### **Abstract**

This paper represents research about student services offered by academic libraries. The student services are in response to the growing number of nontraditional students identified as student-parents across the United States, England and Wales. Family-friendly spaces are examined, as there are several academic libraries now offering these spaces for student-parents with small children. A meta-analysis was used combining information found in journals about higher education, sociology, library science and family learning. This paper will review literature on the topic of student-parents and provide recommended practices on issues of service to young children, family parking, lactating/changing rooms, 24/hour chat and online resources access, after-school programing and funding to make these services happen. Resources also include tips on creating spaces for an age group such as small children that academic libraries are generally not familiar with serving. Tips on how to find grants, find good partners to collaborate with to apply for grants, how to get more informed and active on campus, and promoting new services in the library are also covered.

*Keywords:* student-parents, adult learners, collaboration, higher education, nontraditional students, outreach, family-friendly spaces, lactating rooms, after-school programs, retention, educational persistence, student-parents, grants, child-friendly spaces

## **Introduction**

Understanding the growth of nontraditional students in current and future years may well affect how colleges and universities support their students in earning a degree. Recognizing the challenges of being a college student while pregnant or raising small children is necessary in understanding the needs that these students require to earn a degree. Statistics shared in this paper show a noticeable increase in the enrollment of older students who may have dependents. Academic libraries can enhance this student support by creating new spaces and special services that will support the growing numbers of student-parents. Any campus will need to understand the challenges faced by those students who may have small children in their daily lives. How can academic libraries support these nontraditional students to attain graduation goals? This paper will consider different services including family-friendly spaces, as a service which academic libraries can offer to help support the caregiving responsibilities, academic endeavors, and career goals of the student-parent.

Once an academic library fully understands the need of services that may support the student-parents in their communities they may see their options to serve more clearly. Women with children are the most disadvantaged of nontraditional students of both genders and are less likely than nonparents to complete their degrees, with a great percentage of the nontraditional student population made up of student-parents, women make up the highest subset of nontraditional students (Brown & Nichols, 2013). Institutional support for all undergraduate and graduate student parents will continue to attract and retain a more rigorous student body, benefiting from the talent and experience contributed by these student mothers and fathers (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid,

2009).

With a high percent of this student population as student-parents, this paper will examine the challenges faced-by student-parents and how colleges and universities can approach this emerging group of student population. Campuses in the United States, England, and Wales report a growth of nontraditional students who are seeking an undergraduate or graduate degree (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Research found for this paper shows the imbalance of daily demands on these student-parents which further challenges their persistence in attaining a degree.

### **Nontraditional Student Enrollment**

The United States Census Bureau (2007) reported 38% of all enrolled students as being nontraditional (United States Census Bureau, 2007). They define a nontraditional student as being, “over the age of twenty-two, usually attends school less than full time, often has family, and may work full time” (Luzius & Webb, 2002). As cited in Brown and Nichols (2013), The National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) 2002 report projected that nontraditional students would represent 35-38% of the undergraduate population within the next fifteen years. They also predicted that pregnant and parenting students would make up to 50% of this nontraditional population. As cited in Cannady, King, and Blendinger (2012), in 2010, the NCES report predicted a continued upward trend in this same age demographic with an expected increase of 20% between 2007 and 2018.

According to The National Center for Education Statistics 2017 Report, there was an increase of 18% of students under the age of 25 from 2004 to 2014, with an increase of students older than 25 of 16%. However, they predict the rate of increase will be lower

for students under age 25 than for those older in the future. Between 2014 to 2025, NCES projects the number of students over the age of 25 will increase by 18 percent (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

From England and Wales, a survey from the National Union of Students (2009) showed that one-third of higher education students were predominantly students older than 25 years of age. Further reports reveal some campuses did not fully understand the challenges of their student-parents and their educational experience further defined by Moreau & Kerner (2015) as an invisible or unknown qualifying number. Understanding the stress and perspective of the student-parent is a developing process, and one which colleges hope will help them better retain their nontraditional students (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Higher education is recognizing the significant enrollment numbers of their nontraditional students and is looking at retention and ways to support student success. “Pregnant and parenting students, a subgroup of nontraditional students, are enrolling in higher education at numbers higher than previous decades” (Brown & Nichols, 2013). This resonates with Moreau & Kerner (2015) who stipulate that student population has changed and now includes a larger number of parents with most of them women (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

### **Retention**

Student-parents are more likely not to complete a college degree based on the stresses of caring for dependents. Stress and exhaustion are reported often by parenting students in England, telling of their physical and mental health fatigue due to their time stretched further for childcare demands (Moreau & Nichols, 2013). According to Moreau

and Nichols (2013), there is very little documentation about father student-parents and how they attain a college degree while caring for dependents suggesting further documentation is needed. Students are reported to criticize their college or university as a bad place to take classes because it lacks resources for student-parents (Brown & Nichols, 2013).

Students in this subgroup have reported feelings of isolation and feeling different on their campuses, this includes frustration from needing to bring their children to campus for unexpected reasons and feeling they are not accepted by the total student body as their life styles are different from traditional students (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Moreau & Kerner, 2013).

Some student-parents describe their challenges of caring for dependents while being in college as being 'time-poor'. Feedback from one student explained her feelings by describing her time management as a constant balancing act and one she can never win. If she could dedicate the time she craved to her studies, she would be neglecting her child, and the same feelings of neglecting her studies should she be able to spend as much time with her child as she wanted to (Moreau & Kerner, 2013).

It is recognized that treating all students with consideration and understanding will go a long way toward including those students who are raising a family and dealing with the external pressures of being a student-parent (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009). Due to the added stress of parental duties these students are less likely to finish their degree. Academic libraries can strengthen the support of these students in creative ways, thus assisting with overall retention on campus and specifically with regards to the parenting population.

Colleges and universities are increasingly recognizing the income potential of enrolling and serving nontraditional students. They also understand their social responsibility to deliver education to a diverse array of students and that the demographic of enrolled students is changing. How do they support this growing population of nontraditional students? With their current approach to offering a ‘one-size-fits-all’ product to the rapidly increasing diversity of students on their campuses, colleges and universities are recognizing the need to do something different. They are continually challenged with finding a solution to the problem of attracting and retaining adult learners (Hadfield, 2003).

To solve this problem, many schools look to business and industry leaders and their approach to excellence. One strategy that sets the high-achievers in the lead is that of developing high-quality customer service. This has been identified as the single most important factor in determining the future success or failure of programs for adult learners, now and for the foreseeable future. Colleges and universities that serve adult learners are in the business of providing customer service (Hadfield, 2003). Taking this a step further, academic libraries offering new services such as family-friendly spaces will support the student-parents in their communities thus supporting their campus’ mission of success and overall retention.

### **Academic Library Services**

Academic libraries are approaching this critical need to meet student success in nontraditional ways by partnering with other campus and community organizations to support the academic pursuit of these students. Their approach to student services may surprise some as their support to this new influx of student-parents can be interpreted as

nontraditional. Some library approaches include family-friendly spaces, family-parking, lactating and changing rooms, educational programs, as well as 24/hour access to online references. Due to the revolving issues of increased numbers of student-parent enrollment more documentation is being published about support to student-parents including libraries offering family-friendly study spaces.

### **Family-Friendly Spaces**

The term family-friendly acknowledges the allowance and welcoming spaces for small children. Public libraries, school libraries, and some special libraries are typically seen to support such spaces. According to Keyes (2017), academic libraries often have policies that are unwelcoming to small children, but can be changed by updating the library's policy. Resources found on how to create family-friendly spaces and how these spaces can support nontraditional students with parental duties are shared in this paper.

A literature search in 2016 revealed little research about family-friendly spaces in academic libraries. Much of the discussion could be found on library websites and social media. Some blogs also addressed the need for family-friendly spaces for student-parents and how academic libraries can help. With the impact of larger numbers of student-parents enrolling in college, and women making up a large percentage of these enrollees, higher education institutions are looking for unique ways to support these students in accomplishing their academic goals (Cooper, 2015). A literature search in 2017 revealed more articles about academic libraries and their services to support this growing population of college students. Some of these services by academic libraries include improving their hours of operation to better fit the student-parents' study hours, offering 24/7 chat reference, and online library resources for research (Luzius & Webb, 2002).

Recognizing the different needs of adult learners, student-parents, and the growth of nontraditional student enrollment, customer service is now the immediate focus. How can academic libraries support this student population to attain graduation goals? It appears that family-friendly spaces are quite helpful, and librarians have become active in establishing needed spaces within academic libraries.

An example of this developing service can be seen by the Family Room at The Collins-Callaway Library at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. This academic library addressed the diversity within their student numbers, recognizing many students who were parents with young children, and created a family-friendly space for students to bring their children when they are studying. “Students with small children are recognized as the college’s ‘current and growing population’” (McCoy, 2013).

Portland State University is an example of a university’s recorded growth of students as nontraditional. Their 2012 statistic report stated that they enrolled 28,731 students, 23,170 of whom were undergraduates and had an average age of 26.6 years. Their largest class was the senior class making up 34 percent of the student body with an average age of 28.3 years (Petit, 2014).

Libraries and museums are reinventing themselves into inviting hubs that include youth-generated creativity (Weiss, 2015). According to Morrow and Weinstein (1982), providing family-friendly spaces to small children will benefit their reading and language abilities. It is worth noting that when a parent-student comes to campus and has a space to study, access to computers and printers, and can keep an eye on their child, it will reduce stress and give them the convenience they need, which their non-parent student counterparts do not require. Enriching their children’s educational environment can be a

creative approach to filling a need and providing good customer service.

Best practices for what makes a good family-friendly space are included in this paper. According to Weiss and Lopez (2015), children will thrive when they are given opportunities to participate in different learning settings such as family-friendly spaces. If academic libraries can provide such spaces for these students' children when they are in the library studying, it may show increased numbers in retention.

To create a successful family-friendly study space, Lesneski (2012) recommends using primary-colored themed spaces, which are more inviting and seen as kid-friendly. Lesneski also offers best practices on how to design a proper family-friendly space for libraries, including offering a variety of areas that can be active for social programs, which can also offer quiet and private areas for students and their children. If possible, a space can be designed or arranged to encourage a range of experiences with multiple levels of challenges for different ages and abilities. Technology can be used to teach and engage children by using simple interactive installations such as projected art to respond to movement and to stand the test of time being used by all age groups (Lesneski, 2012).

Being able to relate to and apply ideas across school and various community spaces is valuable to young learners. An educational family-friendly space within the academic library could include the creation of an inviting atmosphere and space with a variety of children's books, allowance for children to check out books to take home, flannel board stories, roll movies, puppets, filmstrips, movies, a brightly colored space, and comfortable furniture (Morrow, 2013). Additionally, Sommer (1977) gives tips on how to arrange a family-friendly space in a library by setting the physical arrangement of chairs and desks to adjust for current and future growth of different ages of children for

desired levels of interaction.

Sommer (1977) also explains methods to incorporate best lighting, temperature, and noise-reduction design of a successful family-friendly space. However, to further add to the concept of a family-friendly space within an academic library, and to adhere to supporting the nontraditional student-parent in the digital age, space for computers, scanners, and printers can be a helpful addition. Offering these services to parents allows them to print materials for homework assignments and scan as needed, while their children would have movies to watch, toys to play with, and access to books, in a safe and monitored area.

Academic libraries are continually recreating themselves based on their community's needs. How will an academic library fund the remodeling of space in addition to educational materials for small children? Assessments and recognizing the population of its users is one way to gather the data necessary to demonstrate a need for new services to constituents and stakeholders (Wyatt, 2011).

Developed partnerships on campus will be necessary to support altering some of their space as family-friendly. Potential partners can include campus administration to fund development or a local Friends of the Library organization to help sponsor some educational materials. Grants may also be sought to fund furniture and learning materials. Some libraries are finding grants to fund this type of project, and looking to foundations within the state that focus on educational, after-school programs. Grants that demonstrate collaborations are the best way to develop healthy and winning grants (Foundation Center, 2017). Look for possible partners on your campus who would be interested in this special student support and apply for grants together.

Based on the Portland State University (PSU) 2012 statistics report, the PSU library gained a better understanding of the change in their student population. With the information from this survey a collaboration between PSU library and the PSU Helen Gordon Child Development Center created a family-friendly space within the library. The PSU Assistant University Librarian for Public Services contacted the Center with a proposal. The proposal was an offer of a storage room within the library to serve this population of students, and asked the center if they, in turn, would provide the toys, books, and furnishings for this space. The center agreed, and in addition, the PSU Office of Information Technology provided two computers and scanners to further support educational learning for the student parents.

With this collaborative approach, the space has been designed to support both college students and their young children. Statistics on the room's use recorded between August 2012 and November 2013, shows it was checked out 194 times, with 89 users using the room more than once, and 13 users utilizing the room more than 10 times. The report showed an overall 2% of the total nontraditional student populations using this room, which may represent that many of their noted nontraditional student population had older children that they did not bring to campus (Petit, 2014).

The Presidential Task Force at PSU suggested that all family-friendly spaces should have increased advertisement to increase the room's use. Additional plans to study the use of this space is to target specific promotion of the space and to survey the students who use it (Petit, 2014).

In the newsletter, *Georgia Library Spotlight*, the article focuses on The Family Room at the Collins-Callaway Library at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. The space

offers a quiet and safe space to study with their children, offering educational books and technology for the Paine College student-parents, with educational materials for their children to explore a different learning environment. Since this space has been offered the library has evidence of an increase in student use. To support this space the college is asking for donations from patrons and the Paine College community in naming the space (McCoy, 2013).

At Southern Illinois University, the Morris Library has created a Family-Friendly Study Room, which is especially designed for student-parents to engage in their studies within a family-friendly environment. The space is limited to occupancy of six with no time limit. However, there are specific policies designed for how this room is to be used, including only students who have children and need the space to study can use the room, the room is available on a first-come-first-serve basis and cannot be reserved ahead of time. No food is permitted in the space. Students are expected to keep the room neat and picked up before they leave, or they will lose future privileges to use the space (Southern Illinois University Morris Library, 2016).

In contrast, the PSU Library requires students to check out a key to gain access to the room and the room can accommodate up to two family groups at any given time (Petit, 2014). With a grant received by the Juan Young Trust, the Library Development Librarian added more amenities including more engaging toys and books, TV, DVD player, and ALA-recommended DVDs. The room was also painted in bright colors making this room appear vibrant and playful in this academic library (Petit, 2014).

The Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, has a Scholarship Family-Friendly Library Room which is designated as a campus resource to

enhance adult students' ability to excel in their academic programs while caring for children and dependents (UNC-Charlotte, 2016). This room was made possible through a partnership with Adult Students and Evening Services (OASES). The room has the following amenities: Early Literacy Learning Station that provides educational technology for children ages 2-8, two computers and desks, printing accessibility, TV, DVD player and headphones, child-sized table and chairs, LeapFrog educational and Disney movies, and an assortment of children's toys (UNC-Charlotte, 2016).

The University of California in San Diego offers two family-friendly study rooms which consist of children's books and other activities to keep their children busy while the student-parents are studying (University of California-San Diego, 2017). The McIntyre Library at University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire, offers a Family-Friendly Room and advertises it on their web site as being available at a first-come, first-served basis for students accompanied by at least one child. The key is available for check-out with their campus ID. The room's amenities include: a computer, printer, television, VCR, DVD player, and furniture with toys, videos, coloring books and crayons for children (University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2016).

Ideally, a campus-wide focus to offer more family-friendly services is needed, and academic libraries are set to continue their quest of being the creative learning hub of the campus which could include spaces to offer family-friendly programs and services. Further focus on other services that can be provided to support nontraditional students within academic libraries must be studied (Luzius & Webb, 2005). This is an opportunity for academic libraries to shine by considering areas in which they can offer space for specific programs geared with the student-parent in mind.

### **Family-Parking and 24-hour Online Access**

With family parking spaces at local grocery stores showing impressive customer service, it is not surprising to read that nontraditional students have also suggested family-parking closer to main buildings on campus, including their academic libraries. Students are voicing a need for parking closer to academic buildings including libraries (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Many of the reasons are to reduce stress and save time for these students who deal with family and jobs on top of their class-schedule. Academic campuses may have to create new policies to decide how providing special services such as family-parking would be implemented. If an academic library were to have a family-parking area, a study would be helpful to show effects of these type of services to parent-student retention. In addition, it is necessary for an academic library to know the percentage of the student body of their campus as nontraditional or student-parents to judge whether specific services should be or can be offered in their library to support overall retention.

In response to one survey students mentioned parking as one of their concerns. In the survey respondents listed weekend hours, parking and the location of the entrance to the library as important reasons why they either appreciated the library or wanted those amenities to change. They also stated the library was a place that they came to find a quiet place to study and do their research (Luzius & Webb, 2002).

Spaces within academic libraries can be helpful in alleviating the heightened anxiety that many student-parents feel, especially about information literacy, how to research and use library resources, and guilt from being away from their children as they study. Although nontraditional students include student-parents, veterans, or older adults

looking for career-change, they may also include students who have been away from academia for a while and are identified as adult learners who may have learning issues. The term “technostress” is an overwhelming feeling of unfamiliarity of technology needed to accomplish their academic studies. Adults with technostress may also feel embarrassed to seek assistance from library staff. Libraries teaching Information Literacy and other research skills may consider offering walk-in classes in their computer labs to further reach this population (Cannady, King, & Blendringer, 2012).

At the Mitchell Memorial Library at Mississippi State University, the academic librarians addressed this idea by consulting with the Leadership and Foundations faculty, with the goal to increase student success and reduce anxiety. This collaboration resulted in assisting students with additional services such as chat and email reference, as well as library services for distance learning faculty and students (Cannady, King, & Blendringer, 2012).

### **Lactating and Changing Rooms**

Research shows student-parents would benefit from a space to study on campus with their children, reducing stress and added fatigue and is one way to support retention in this student population. Spaces can be made within the academic library to support pregnant and parenting students such as lactating and changing rooms, which should always be found on campus via *Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX)* (United States Department of Education, 2017). Other helpful spaces can include comfort rooms where children can calm down, and nursing mothers can have a quiet, private space is ideal (Lesneski, 2012).

Should an academic library be looking for additional ways to support student-

parents on their campus, Springer, Park, and Leviten-Reid (2009) point out that creating a lactation room can be as simple as providing a room with a power outlet, table, chair, and door lock. The space can be as small as a closet to provide a private and safe place for mothers with babies. Also mentioned is that family support services such as establishing support groups, listservs, or web-spaces for these nontraditional students would lessen their feelings of isolation often felt on campuses. Academic libraries can advertise these services by helping be a network too; with signage in their building, word-of-mouth conversations with student-parents, announcing specific services or departments before starting a class, and linking service information on their website.

The Baylor Library has information about their lactating rooms on their web site: “Baylor Libraries support our new mothers who are working or studying on campus. Two private and comfortable rooms in Moody Library are available for either expressing breastmilk or breastfeeding”. They describe that each room has a comfortable chair, side table, lamp, changing table, clock, trash can and an electrical outlet. There is no sink, but there are restrooms with sinks available on each floor (Baylor University Libraries, 2016).

### **Educational Programs**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2009, United States students (K-12) spend about 6.6 hours/day within the classroom during the school week, which gives them time during the remainder of their day, to explore, learn, and apply their skills in other ways. Currently, society is expecting children and youth to learn outside of the classroom. Based on this rationale, libraries and museums are asserting themselves into central learning hubs by offering more after-school programs or out-of-

school spaces to develop individual learning. These extended learning opportunities often offer a focus on art interests, problem-solving and analytical skills, civic engagement activities, college preparation activities, and a variety of science and technology projects (Weiss & Lopez, 2015).

Studies show that having adults involved in a young person's learning will maintain their interests and extend their desire to learn over time. Programs at libraries and museums are becoming more available to children after school. By the time a child reaches the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade she will have spent 6,000 more hours in learning activities outside of school than students born into poverty (Weiss & Lopez, 2015). This information reveals the need of many after-school-programs and the programming opportunities this can be for academic libraries. In searching for grants for academic libraries, I have identified many funders interested in education and including funding for after-school programs, some aimed at those in financial need and not specific to just K-12 schools. Many of these grants identify those eligible for their after-school programming interests as being 501(c) 3 institutions, colleges and universities. Academic libraries may be able to host after-school programs in their building by collaborating with another organization and/or department on campus. Nontraditional students may find this an opportunity for their children while they are on campus. This is a creative answer to remarkable customer service and an opportunity for the academic library to serve their campus and establish early learning for children while supporting persistence-to-graduate to their parents.

Partnerships created with non-profit organizations, the academic library, and other departments on campus could offer increased educational resources for student-parents. Providing educational support for student-parents can include providing educational

environments for their small children which appears to be an opportunity for all. It would certainly be an interesting study to see if after-school programs offered in their academic library shows any educational success and retention for student-parents.

One program in Milbridge, Maine, *Comienza en Casa* (It Starts at Home), is a partnership between a school library and non-profit organization called *Mano y Mano* (Hand in Hand). The program was funded by the Maine Migrant Education Program, and was a program where families could get guidance in how to understand their new homeland, as well as better understand the new learning challenges for their children (Weiss & Lopez, 2015). An academic library may use this example for their own campus by identifying a population on their campus in which English is a Second Language. Offering an after-school-program that will fill a need to their students and include their families is another consideration for academic libraries. They do not have to offer these programs on their own but can partner with other organizations and departments on campus to design a fitting after-school-program. Finding a partner on campus whether an organization or another department, might develop into a winning grant to provide this unique service to students and their families. Grants that would fund this type of an after-school program may include those interested in education for at-risk youth or underrepresented populations.

### **Conclusion**

With the apparent growth of nontraditional students enrolling into many online and on-campus college classes, and the statistics that suggest much of this population are parents, the need for action is clear. When a person goes to college, sometimes as the first generation in his or her family to go to college; that alone is a challenge. The student will

have no one in his or her family to go to for guidance and must rely on external sources. Add to this challenge, the concept of a mother going to college for the first time. Understanding the decisions any student-parent is faced to make when it comes to graduation is clear. Often the hard decision to put aside college to pay bills, pay for their children's education, or simply keep a roof over their heads must be made. A parent-student may have no options when a babysitter cancels and the parent needs to be on campus to either meet with an advisor, work with a tutor, or work in the library for a homework assignment, therefore, child-friendly spaces are important to these students.

Customer service and specialized spaces are how academic libraries can impact their campus and its community. By creating spaces that allow for comfortable study for the student-parents and their families, by providing 24/7 access to library materials, and in creating educational after-school programs that may impact their children, academic libraries are in a favorable position to create a positive impact to the nontraditional students on their campus.

Family-friendly spaces encourage parent-students to face their research fears and bring their young children with them to the library. While they study and have librarian guidance in their library, they can relax having their families with them while they study in safe and comfortable spaces (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012).

As with any room and service available in an academic library, it is imperative to widely advertise and network across campuses to get the word out so that the student-parents use the resources available to them. At Portland State University, the Resource Center for Students with Children helps promote the Family Study Room in the library by posting information on their website, and putting out flyers around the Student Union and

by word-of-mouth (Petit, 2014).

Partnerships on campus with the academic library can create educational opportunities and strengthen retention for many student-parents. In addition to family-friendly spaces, the consideration of including lactation rooms/changing rooms, providing some family-friendly parking near the library, hosting after-school programs, and providing more online resources could also be considered.

Resources to fund these student services must come from somewhere, and it takes more time and effort to find funding. As a campus is more aware of a relationship between the student-parents and graduation, task forces may be created to address the need for new ideas. If your campus is looking for new services and has created a campus task force for this purpose, then consider having an academic librarian serve on this task force. Working with the campus administration is also one place to start. Get involved with your community organizations and your campus task force units to stay informed, and to share ideas and concerns. The combined efforts of all departments and colleges on a campus will ultimately serve all students including student-parents with a higher persistence to achieving their degree. Academic libraries can be a powerful force in this mission

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