Katy Oliveira (<u>00:07</u>):

Welcome to Next Practices Data-informed strategies to shape the future of higher ed. In each episode, you'll hear from transformational higher ed leaders on how they're tackling today's most pressing challenges to make a difference for their students and institutions. I'm your host, Katy Olivera.

Phil Hunt (00:28):

If we cannot ensure that we have adequate structures in place, adequate from A to Z, if those structures don't support our goals and priorities, we're done. And that's also your policies and your practices. If they don't arrive to support your goals, then you need to make a change.

Katy Oliveira (00:57):

And this episode, I'm talking with Philip Hunt, special assistant president and university registrar at North Dakota State University with over 20 years of higher education experience, Phil currently oversees and enforces academic policy and coordinates strategic planning for retention as well as diversity, inclusion and respect. In this episode, you'll learn how North Dakota State University is building a comprehensive approach to address declining enrollment. We dive into how NDSU has developed its student success framework, student success analytics technology ISS investing in to achieve its goals, and why it's important to build cross-functional partnerships and democratize data insights to empower data-informed action across campus. But before we dive in, please take a moment to subscribe to the show to stay up to date on the latest in data-informed approaches to student success. Phil, welcome to Next Practices. I'm so happy that you're joining me today.

Phil Hunt (01:57):

Well, thank you for inviting me to be on here and then have a conversation with you. Katy Oliveira (02:01):

Well, let's get started by just orienting our audience a little bit about who you are and the institution you work for. So if you'd share with us a little about North Dakota State University, who at Serve its mission and your role in that work.

Phil Hunt (02:15):

Yeah, sure. So hi everyone. My name's Phil Hunt. I'm special assistant to the president and University registrar at North Dakota State University. I know most people are saying, wow, okay, special assistant and university registrar. How did that come about? That's another story. So that's my pitch to get on another podcast with Katy. But the long and short of it is I'm very, very hands-on in working with our president, our provost, our students, faculty and staff, and really trying to advance the university around retention efforts, our enrollment efforts. And I also work on some what we call diversity inclusion and respect initiatives. That's the DEI work here at North Dakota State University. We are a public four year land grant. We're around 12,000 students. We have undergrad, grad, and doctoral PhDs, like most of our peers around the country. We're dealing with enrollment challenges and we're trying to address those. Some of them, if you've heard me speak at various conferences or sat in some of my presentations, some of this is of our own doing, and I'm sure some folks will be like, yeah, we've got some of those problems too. But we're actively trying to address those so that we can make sure we are fulfilling the promise and fulfilling our mission as a land grant in the state of North Dakota. So serving our state, serving our region, and the students who come here and trust us, that they'll come out and they'll get a degree.

Katy Oliveira (03:43):

Yeah. I'd like to dive a little bit more into those challenges because I know that that's something a lot of people are dealing with is enrollment and removing barriers from enrollment, not just for newly matriculating student, which I think is where people's brain goes when they think enrollment. They think

admissions, but enrollment is so much more than admissions. Enrollment is about keeping the students who already have too in this time of enrollment, cliff and declining population wavering interest in higher ed. So speak a little bit about what that looks like at North Dakota State University and then we can dive into while you're addressing it. But let's start with what that looks like for you.

Phil Hunt (<u>04:23</u>):

Yeah, and I'm so glad that you said that because a lot of people do simply equate enrollment with recruitment. Why? Because that's what we decided to focus on for the last how many decades. And it's like, oh, everything will take care of itself. Let's just get more students in the funnel and we'll be fine. But from a business model standpoint, you're bringing students into the funnel, you're getting them in, but then along the way, they're falling through the cracks. And what we do know is that most times admissions isn't going out saying, oh, well, we lost 50 students from this class, and so we need to make up for that in this class. They're not doing that, right? They're going and they're saying, okay, what's the amount of students we need to get in and let's do that. So you're losing students along the way, which then also means you're losing enrollment revenue from not having those students there.

(05:12):

And the other piece is we know that not only when you lose a student are you losing that money that you use to get them on your campus, but then you're losing that money year to year. And so it's actually important for us to do our best outside of what we said we were going to do with our mission, but from a business standpoint, we got to keep these students here. And so we focus that in the issue. We focus a lot of our efforts, not just on the recruitment side, but really we want to vamp up what we're doing around retention. And so a couple of years ago sat down with a handful of colleagues and said, what are we going to do around retention? We need to solidify a strategy. We need to solidify a plan, operationalize those things because we talk about student success, but we've never really defined it anywhere.

(<u>05:55</u>):

And so we sat down and we defined it, and as a result of that conversation, and I just pulled it off my wall, you can't see this, but we've established a framework for retention at NDSU. So for some of our viewers who may have sat through some of those presentations with me and some of our team members at Civitas, we walked through what that framework looks like, and we call it the managing the academic enterprise framework, where we talk about student success is getting students into the funnel from recruitment, retaining graduation, and then what they do. And then we've identified all the variables and the factors that influence student success and or retention, their ability to be retained. And that includes anything from advising to our curriculum and our co-curricular activities. And so you dig in it even further, you peel the layers back. You are looking at scheduling, you're looking at course outcomes.

(06:50):

You're looking at what unintended barriers you've created within your curriculum. There's a whole science and an art to all of this. There are a number of resources that are out there, but we've really started peeling the layers of that onion. One of the outcomes of this for us is we decided to partner with Civitas because we were really looking for a comprehensive student success and analytics tool that would help us achieve the goals of the framework and strategies that we've laid out. And we've got a team of folks on our campus that include myself, our director of our career and advising center, our Vice

Provost for assessment and strategic initiatives. We've got our director of institutional research, and this is kind of our core team where we work with Civitas and we have our own little internal meetings where we come up and strategize, okay, here's this tool.

(07:46):

How do we use it in relation to the framework and the strategies that we've set around retention. And I know that's a lot of it comes down to the details advising. We're looking at persistence rates. We're trying to really focus again in on our curriculum, how easy is it for our students to get through? Are we offering courses in the sequences that students need them in the times that they need them? And in asking these questions, that prompted us to put together what we call the student course section satisfaction survey. It's a lot of words I know, but at the end of the day, what we were trying to get to was how satisfied are our students with how we schedule our courses and the ways in which we're scheduling 'em and the ways in which they interact with them. If our students can't interact with our courses in a meaningful way, then what are we doing? That's a challenge. And so if they can't get the classes they want at the times that they're need 'em, guess what? They're going to go, and we've heard this from our students in prior surveys. So again, really taking a deep dive look into where we're losing students, why we losing them, and then trying to address those areas.

Katy Oliveira (08:59):

Oh, very wise students success professional that I used to work with back when I worked in higher ed once said that higher ed does not have a funnel. It has a colander.

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Phil Hunt (<u>09:09</u>):
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I like that. I like that. No,

Katy Oliveira (09:13):

You were talking about we have to peel back onion. We have to look at this, and we have to look at that. We have to look at this. We have to look at that. It really up that memory, because you're right, there are so many factors that go into enrollment and retention and completion, and they're all related, and we tend to look at them separately, but they're all part of the same process that students are experiencing. And there are little spots along the way, holes along the way that they can fall out of the colander. And it's about making sure you turn that colander into a bowl.

Phil Hunt (09:46):

That's right. Because there's

Katy Oliveira (09:47):

No,

Phil Hunt (09:48):

Yeah, because the students are coming in and they're experiencing us as whatever our institution is. So a student comes in, they're experiencing us as DSU, and if there's a problem, there's a problem at DSU, it's not a problem with faculty. It's not a problem with one stop. It's not a problem with financial aid. It's an DSU problem. And so we have to, whatever we're doing, we need to make sure that we are being intentional about addressing the issues. We have alignment with how we're going to do it, and there's accountability for what we're going to do and what we said we're going to do. And so that's what we're

working on on our campus. Leveraging tools, like I said, like Civitas learning, advising, planning. I'm looking over here. My whiteboard has all these things for all of our strategies and tactics on it. We're looking at course insights, DFW rates, course outcomes.

(10:39):

Students that take this sequence of courses together have XGPA. And so as we look again at how we schedule, that's giving us information that we can then use to maneuver differently. We want insights. We want to be able to make data informed decisions as we address these problems. Because if we cannot ensure that we have adequate structures in place, adequate from A to Z, if those structures don't support our goals and priorities, we're done. And that's also your policies and your practices if they don't align to support your goals that you need to make a change.

Katy Oliveira (11:27):

Yeah. I want to dive a little deeper into some of the things that you're doing and what kind of technology that you're using. But I want to point out something that you said that I think is really, really important. So I want to point it out for emphasis for the audience because it's a pattern that I'm seeing emerge amongst institutions that are just really knocking out of the park on student success. What I see them doing is they take a minute to get a framework, get a philosophy, get aligned on what the student success means, what does it look like here at our institution? And then there, what are we going to do about it? What do we need to do something about it? How are we going to organize around it? What are we going to action on? What technology do we need? How are we going to do something about it? And then they don't stop there. They assess and they iterate. And it's multifaceted approach that they are constantly assessing and iterating in real time, not once a year, at the end of the year as they're going, as they're doing it, using the latest in data technology. And that's kind of what you've mapped out. And different institutions have different parts of that puzzle, but the institutions that I've seen have been the most successful, have all of them, have all three pieces.

Phil Hunt (12:48):

I'm going to give a lot of credit to our team here on our campus, from our president to our provost, our deans. We've got some new deans that have come on board that have really embraced the challenge that's in front of us and asked some really, really great questions and have embraced the framework that we've laid out. And to our president's credit, he said, okay, how do we eat this outfit? We have this framework now how do we support the people in doing the work? And so we've created these councils. We've got a President's Council on retention, which I co-chair with our director of career advising. And now this other person, faculty member who is also an associate dean, has now become our Vice Provost for faculty affairs. That's a meaningful group. We got faculty representatives, we got student representatives, we got staff representatives from across the institution.

(13:41):

So there are different groups. These different councils are charged with different areas of our strategic plan to help us with retention. We have a council on wellbeing, sense of belonging. We have a council for diversity, inclusion and respect. And as you can imagine, you talk about wellbeing, you talk about DIR or DEI, and you talk about retention. Are those not all interrelated in some way that need collaboration? And so what we also then have is that we have this joint council group where all the chairs of these councils get together and say, okay, what are you guys working on? Where are there opportunities for collaboration? And then we break off into our councils and then to our various work groups where we

have alignment, because again, alignment is important. You got to stay on task and make sure that you have accountability as well, top down and across. Very, very important.

Katy Oliveira (<u>14:37</u>):

Yeah, it's so important. So where are you seeing the combination of strategies and practices? And you started to get into some of this with course insights and being able to project course demand, being able to proactive in your outreach to student. You mind talking a little bit about the combination of different data informed strategies and practices that y'all are using that you see are making a real difference for your students, but also your staff and institution and operations as well?

Phil Hunt (15:07):

Yeah, I would see some of the big ones as we start off this work. We said, what are some of the initiatives that are going to give us the biggest return on our investment? And we said that it was going to be changing and revamping our advisement model. We went from faculty advisors to a more centralized professional advising. It's been great. The students have noticed it. The faculty have noticed that there was some resistance in the beginning, but we said, look, we've listened to our students. We're student centered. We're student focused. At least that's what we say we are. And our students are saying they're having issues with advising. In my role as registrar, a lot of the issues that my staff were seeing and bringing up to me and appeals and whatnot were because somebody either got bad advice or there was a lack of advice that indicated to us that we needed to make a change.

(16:01):

That's to point fingers, but to say, how do we best serve our students and why they're here? We're leaning and leveraging on the advising tool in CITAs. The other thing that we're doing that's paying off dividends is we really took a hard look at how we schedule courses. We started doing that in the pandemic. How are we scheduling courses? We did not enforce a block meeting or a schedule pattern. They were all over the place. And as you can imagine, faculty, there were some that were resistant, but we've done it, it's paid off. The feedback that we got in that survey is that, Hey, look, for the most part, I can access the courses that I need when I need them. Now we know though, generally most of our courses Monday through Friday, primarily between nine, and we stressed it before it was really kind of that prime time nine and two.

(<u>16:57</u>):

That's where the majority, now we're seeing more courses into the evening hours. We still have opportunities there. We still have opportunities early in the morning. We're seeing that more of our students want more online options, and it's not just for those students that might be in online only programs. Some of our ground students want access to online courses as well. And so we're taking a look at that data, trying to figure out various strategies so we can help those students out and reshape our curriculum in meaningful ways. So that means working with the department chairs, the deans and saying, Hey, where are those courses that students really want to take looking at our course schedule? When have we normally offered these courses? Where do students need these times? What we're noticing is that there's a high demand courses throughout various times of the day, and not all of our departments have the number of faculty to meet that current demand right now. But that's an opportunity for us

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Katy Oliveira (18:03):

Just to better understand the pattern. Is game changing?

Phil Hunt (18:07):

Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt. Yeah.

Katy Oliveira (<u>18:09</u>):

Yeah. I know that organizing humans getting aligned, getting a unified approach, meeting regularly in committees, communicating across institution is no small feat from my 15 years in higher ed. I think that's part one. And then part two is having information that surfaces to you what it is that the opportunities are to make adjustments and differences. So how are you as a team, as an institution leveraging technology which is available with insights and analytics and understanding what's working on your campus and helping it to help streamline process and reduce capacity constraints that so many institutions are facing. What does that look like for your institution?

Phil Hunt (<u>18:59</u>):

A work in progress. That's true

Katy Oliveira (<u>19:04</u>):

Everywhere.

Phil Hunt (19:06):

It's a work in progress. And give a shout out to our Office of Institutional Research because they've done a great job in setting up dashboards, a number of dashboards for us to help us address some of these issues and provide us with answers to the questions that we've been asking as we've taken deeper dives into our processes in tar data and how students are interacting with the institution on the academic side of the house. They did a lot of heavy lifting on that. And then now we are working there partnering with us to really help inform the information that we're seeing in the Civitas platform as well. Again, we have our strategic plan. We've developed strategies and operational tactics now and then. So as we go down that checklist of things, we are looking at those resources to help inform the kind of next steps and the decisions that we need to make.

Katy Oliveira (20:06):

What did that look like before you had access to the technology to help reveal that?

Phil Hunt (20:12):

A lot of anecdotes.

Katy Oliveira (20:14):

I think that's comment. I think that's a common practice across institutions is here's what we perceive as happening versus here's what the data tells us. And was there a difference when you were able to compare those anecdotes to actual data?

Phil Hunt (20:29):

That's right. And surveys. That was how, and we've had various reports that we'd have to pull from our SIS system. I'm not going to state what our SIS system is. There are days I like it and days that I don't like

it, but we'd have these Excel sheets, these reports, and you'd have to go in and you'd have to manipulate them in various ways, and that's how we would have to do some of the work. But again, we have a really, really good institutional research team where we haven't had to do a lot of that, and they've been able to really socialize our dashboards out across the campuses. We've extended licenses to all of the colleges and departments. Because the other issue too, and this is that institutions are really good at gathering data, is how they share that data and how they act upon that data is what makes the difference and then can be changer.

(21:25):

And so we said, look, none of this is a secret. We're a public institution. Somebody can call up and say, Hey, I want that on X, Y, and Z. As long as it's not FERPA protected, they can get it. Then why are we being so restrictive and not sharing out some of this other information with our own folks? And so there's more open communication, sharing of data, sharing of insights to make informed decisions. And we can empower our people to make decisions too. Because what we've heard a lot through this process when we ask questions is, why is something done this way? Oh, well, that's the way we've always done it. Well, I'll say I gave you permission not to have to do that anymore because the data is informing us that there's a problem from what we're seeing in our reports and then also what we're hearing back from students. And so we need to now you are empowered to make decisions to address these issues, and people appreciate that. Sometimes you got to give people permission or sometimes people feel like they need permission to stop doing something that they've been doing to make those better changes for our students.

Katy Oliveira (22:31):

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(23:07):

You really, really, really important point that I think kind of goes under the radar when talking about how to have digital transformation on a campus or how to expand access to data or democratize data on the campus is the relationship between institutional research and the breadth of the institution who is doing enrollment and student success work. I'm going to make a plug for another episode that we have actually with the University of Texas at San Antonio. I'm going to drop the link in the show notes where we talk about how they knit together their student success in IR and how they work together as a team to democratize their data and how they've created dashboards. And it sounds very similar to what you are sharing in that I think in the old days where you have to go to IR and get a report or pull down a report from the SIS, the data gets siloed with the leadership and it doesn't normally get distributed.

(24:08):

And you have a huge amount of information. And it's not that we're saying release the floodgate and give everybody all the raw data. What we're saying is, I think, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that the insights from the data, the piece that you can take action on, understanding what's going on with big trends and individual students for those parties at the institution who need that, training people up and

finding ways and technologies that democratize that data that can be really powerful and moving the needle because then you are actioning against what's actually happening, not what you've always done. And I think that that's another place, another lever where people are making really big progress when they make that shift.

Phil Hunt (24:55):

Agreed. And I like to tip my hat to the team at UTSA as well because we were able to have several conversations with them prior to coming on with Civitas. And even now, afterwards, we have some brainstorming sessions. We actually sent a team down there, I want to say a couple months ago to meet with them. They, in my mind, are a good example of people doing the right things and leveraging technology and resources. So for folks that are listening, you get a chance, call 'em up, talk to 'em. They're great folks.

Katy Oliveira (<u>25:25</u>):

And we also have two episodes where they talk about what they're doing too. So if you want to learn more, you can look from there and then hand them up.

Phil Hunt (25:31):

But to your point, as I think about what we've done on our campus in socializing what some of our issues were, we also socialized some strategies of how to solve the problems that we've created. Myself and a couple others, our vice Provost for assessment and strategic initiatives, he and I joke around and he coined this phrase hashtag. And so we're going to get these, A lot of the problems that we have sometimes we've created them. We can't control the enrollment cliff, but we can control how we engage students and the services that we provide them and how accessible our courses are. Creating a sense of belonging and ensuring quality teaching in the classroom. Those are things we can control. And so we need to do a really great job of doing that. And in that, we've had meetings with our deans, we had meetings with our chairs altogether where we socialize these issues, talk about potential solutions, hear from them of why do you think this is happening?

(26:29):

What suggestions do you have? How do we best move forward? What are the tools and resources that you need to help get this work done? And then one of the things we heard from them was exactly what I said before. Well, I've got these things to do. Where am I going to have room to do that? What can I stop doing? And so we had to say, Hey, no, right now, here's the focus and we're going to continue to have those conversations. We're also in the midst of developing a strategic enrollment management plan, and our campus has jumped on board all hands on deck, and it really dovetails nicely with what we're doing on the retention side because we were able to take some of those strategies and incorporate those in that enrollment management plan, not having to replicate or duplicate committee work. So it's been nice.

(27:19):

It's been exciting to see this. And we've even had workshops when it comes to some of the scheduling challenges that we've had. My team has been great here in the registrar's office where we said, you know what? We're going to take a step back. We're going to work with our chairs and show them what we mean, walk them through these processes, and we have degree analysts. The degree analyst is going to sit down with those chairs. Here's the issues with your curriculum. How do you want to showcase

your plan, your curriculum plan now to students knowing that these are some of the issues and they've appreciated it, it takes time, but at the end of the day, you get a really big return on that investment.

Katy Oliveira (28:01):

Yeah. Well, we've covered a lot of ground, so I want to give some space, talk a little bit about what kind of outcomes are you seeing early indicators of success Are you already seeing from shifting to thinking and doing work and organizing in this way? I know that people are always thinking about the big blockbuster outcomes of things like retention and completion, but I think there's so many short term and medium term outcomes that are really important as well, from increased student engagement to ease workloads and efficiency and better communication. What kinds of successes and early wins are you seeing at NDU?

Phil Hunt (28:42):

Yeah, I think our new advising model is probably the strongest one, and we're just getting started. We saw a 2% increase in our retention just in one semester, and I can't wait to see what it's going to look like at the end of this term. And we hadn't even fully implemented the advising model yet. Some of that also, I think I give credit to what we've been doing around scheduling. Students have said, it has been better for me to schedule and find courses that I need than it's ever been prior to. And so I give credit to our staff, to our faculty who have committed to making these changes because they are paying, starting to pay off, and we're just getting started. We're just really just scratching the surface.

Katy Oliveira (<u>29:27</u>):

Yeah, it's amazing that you're already seeing that kind of success early in your advising redesign. What do you think is, I mean, I'm sure, I know it's multifaceted, but what do you think is making the difference there?

Phil Hunt (29:43):

I'm really going to go back to our advising because we got advisors proactively reaching out to students, working with them to get their schedules. Our schedules are available faster and sooner, more quickly than they've ever been. They're still work for us to do. We're thinking about year long scheduling. We haven't done that yet, but we have the capability to do that with the technological resources that we have and what we've done to streamline our processes. So it's easy for our departments to put their schedules together. They can now make data informed decisions within the tools that we have to see when their prime time to see when there are potential conflicts or barriers with prerequisites, corequisites or gen eds, they're empowered to make these decisions. We can expand this even more. So we have a strong student government. The feedback that we received from them, even through the scheduling survey says that students, for the most part are happy with how we are scheduling and feel like they have access to their courses. Now, there are nuances within different departments, so that doesn't mean let's just keep doing it, but there's always opportunity to improve. And I think there's a cultural shift and a mindset shift on our campus that, yeah, there are great things that we're doing. We have challenges, but we can control what we can control. And there's always room for improvement to best serve our students. And I've been excited to witness that.

Katy Oliveira (<u>31:07</u>):

Yeah, I think two really important themes that I wanted to surface is that it is being able to be proactive at scale, actually having insight and visibility and the tools that allow for that make a huge difference. And then removing those systemic barriers to success and enrollment for students that the things that

you as an institution can control and making sure that those are easy and make sense and are student centered. It sounds so simple, but I know it's really hard to do and it's really, really important to do too.

Phil Hunt (31:40):

And to that point, I've seen better communication across our institution, proactive communications, where our advisors, our professional advisors will reach out to a faculty member. They'll reach out to a student, they'll reach out to my office, they'll reach out to one stop. Or if they have questions about a schedule, they have questions about curriculum, they have questions about when is the course going to be offered? There's access. People have more access to the data, and now we have better lines of communication as well. And it's been great to see. It's really, really been great to see because those are things, again, those are things that we can control that will move the needle in meaningful ways, especially over time.

Katy Oliveira (32:22):

Yeah. Makes a big difference. Well, in our last few minutes, I like to turn it over to you and let you share something I should have asked you and I didn't, or lessons learned or other things that you might like leaders in similar situations to know.

Phil Hunt (32:36):

That's a tough one. I think when you first set out to do this work, it's clearly overwhelming. You'll go in and you're like, oh my gosh, where do I even begin? Where do I even start? We can do this. We can do this. We can do it. My advice to you is to just start doing something to move the needle in a positive way and be transparent with your campus about what you're doing, what you're thinking and the why. You're always going to have those naysayers. You're always going to have those people that come up with some crazy scenario that's a one off and might say, oh, well, we shouldn't do it both because what about this? Well, remember, this is about how do you truly move the needle for the majority of your students? What's going to give you the biggest return? And what are those activities, those strategies that are going to give you the biggest return on your investment?

(33:28):

And start there. But you need to socialize the problem, get input and feedback through your shared governance structures so people don't feel left out. But again, so you can make informed decisions, know where the accountability lies, bring people into the fold because you're going to have a bunch of great ideas. But again, how are you aligned and where's your accountability? And do your structure support your priorities? And as you take a couple steps forward, you may have to take a step or two back because there's going to be something that you didn't think of or you're going to notice that there's something in your current structure or your current process that's going to inhibit your ability to do set and do the goal that you've set for yourselves. And that's okay for people who are like me that are a little impatient, I get a little impatient at times. It's okay because it's better to address these issues now than as you get down the road and hit additional stumbling box, or you create a scenario that you may not have been intended. So it's good to do that.

Katy Oliveira (34:32):

Yeah, you got to start somewhere. Thanks so much, Phil, for coming on next Practices. I really appreciate your time.

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Phil Hunt (34:38):

Well, thank you for having me. This was fun. And for all of you that are out there, if you have questions, feel free to reach out. Not that hard to find.

Katy Oliveira (<u>34:46</u>):

I'll link contact information in the show notes.

Katy Oliveira (34:49):

Take

Phil Hunt (34:49):

Care. Take care. Bye now.

Katy Oliveira (34:53):

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