

Making College “Worth It” – Season 3, Episode 6

Multi-Semester Capstone Undergraduate Research Experiences

Nolan Schultheis (00:02):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie L. Moore (00:10):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:25):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a third-year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and legal Professions scholar.

Jessie L. Moore (00:37):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of professional Writing at Rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:43):

In this episode, we'll talk with Blake Colclasure and Tyler Granberry about a multi semester capstone undergraduate research experience

Jessie L. Moore (00:53):

In the Center's 2025 national survey. Of recent college graduates, only 41.5% had participated in a capstone experience and only 45.8% have participated in undergraduate research. We know that these high impact educational experiences have substantial benefits for students success, so more students should have these opportunities during college. In addition, participating in multiple high impact practices amplifies their positive effects, Colclasure and Granberry stacked capstone and undergraduate research experiences. And their study offers insights for other universities that want to adapt the strategy. Let's meet our guests.

Blake Colclasure (01:38):

So my name's Dr. Blake Colclasure and first and foremost, thank you so much for having us on today. We're excited to be here, myself and Tyler Granberry, and he'll introduce himself in a second. So currently I am a teaching associate professor at the University of Tennessee in Herbert College of Agriculture. So this is my third year here and before that I was an assistant professor of environmental science at Donne University and at Donne that is where kind of the multi semester undergraduate research experience took place that we're going to be talking about today. So I look forward to it.

Tyler Granberry (02:17):

And I am Dr. Tyler Granberry. I'm assistant professor of agricultural education here at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. This is my fourth year with UTK. And before this I was a high school agricultural science teacher for a little while and my background with undergraduate research experience is a little bit more limited. It was actually my introduction to Dr. Colclasure that got me started down that path working with some undergraduate students on some social science type research and some things like that. And then eventually looking at curated undergraduate research and multi semester and some of the other things that are in Blake's purview of research that he's worked on.

Jessie L. Moore (03:13):

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I love how those relationships come into play to get us interested in and extend our work concern areas of higher education. But we really appreciate both of you joining us today. Thank you for making time for this conversation. So jumping back into some of our questions, you have a recent article in teaching and learning inquiry, and before we talk about your say specifically, I wondered if you could give our listeners an introduction to the multi semester capstone research experience that you researched and share about in that article.

Blake Colclasure (03:49):

Yeah, absolutely. So as I mentioned previously, I was at Donne University for about four years. So Donne University is a small predominantly undergraduate institution, liberal arts minded I think is a good way to kind of phrase that. We had about a thousand residential undergraduates on campus as part of the curriculum for any student who is majoring in a STEM discipline, which included chemistry, anything related to math, computational thinking, natural resource, environmental science, biology. They were required to have kind of a capstone project and that was through three semesters of undergraduate research. And it started in their junior year. So either in the spring or fall semester the junior year, they would enroll in research one. So it was kind of the large cohort of all the STEM majors. Their junior year would enroll in that course and then they would essentially learn the process for the capstone where they would have one instructor, they would create a proposal for what they wanted to do for the research project.

(05:13):

They would meet with faculty in the university who would be willing to serve as a mentor, talk about similar interest, things of that nature. And then for their senior year, they would really begin the actual implementation of their research project. They would work really closely with the mentor that they selected and that carried out through the whole school year. So both semesters, everything from finalizing the research design to implementing the research to collecting data. And then the last semester of their senior year, it kind of all came together where they created a report of their undergraduate research that'd be similar to kind of an undergraduate thesis, written thesis. And then we had something called Mind Expo, which was really just a sharing of all the undergraduate research experiences through either posters or oral presentations. And then many of the students would go a step further and they would actually present their research results at statewide conferences like the Nebraska Academy of Sciences or discipline-based conferences in my cases with the American Association of Agricultural Education in which students were able to share some of their work. So in my mind it was a really impactful experience for students at Donne University. Throughout the whole four years, we tried to establish a culture of where students were trained to think and act like scientists. So we embedded a lot of undergraduate research experiences through course-based projects, supplemental opportunities for students, and at the end, everyone was required to do the multi semester capstone.

Jessie L. Moore (07:05):

I love the combination of undergraduate research and capstone and we know that when we stack high impact practices, they have even more impact for students in positive ways. And it reminds me in the way that you're describing and of some of the signature work activities, again thinking about how can we have extended mentored high impact experiences that really deepened the student's experience. So what a fantastic opportunity

Blake Colclasure (07:34):

And it really was a neat process to be a part of. So even though I was only at Donne for around four years, I did not have undergraduate research experience during my undergraduate years and going through my higher education, I was really only exposed to RES once I got to Donne University and I realized the culture that they embedded not only in STEM but really across the university and the arts and humanities, they also did a lot of undergraduate research. So it was really neat to be exposed and to learn from the other faculty that's been doing that for so long and learning how to be a good research

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mentor and to actually see students become scientists and become researchers and really improve their identities and self-efficacy and doing that. And then a lot of our students would go to grad school, so we had a very high rate of students going into graduate school or going directly into highly technical careers and being successful.

Jessie L. Moore (08:38):

What a great culture of undergraduate research there too. That's great. So part of your study explored the challenges that students experienced in this multi semester research experience and two interrelated themes were navigating the time commitment with competing responsibilities and opportunities. And then one of your alumni remarked, and this is something that Nolan drew attention to and he and I were talking about this earlier, that they treat the program like a part-time job. What would you identify as the pros and cons of such a time intensive experience?

Blake Colclasure (09:15):

Yeah, that's a great question. And first let me set the stage on how we conducted the research because we had basically, as I mentioned, every student goes through the capstone program. So we sent out emails to all of our alumni between 2016 and 2020 to see if they'd be willing to have one-on-one conversations about the reflecting back on their undergraduate research capstone and where we're able to have conversations with 16 of those students. So a lot of them were currently in graduate school, a handful were currently in careers. So we asked them about some of the challenges that they mentioned, and time commitment was a huge one. So I think initially they probably didn't understand the amount of time that it actually takes to do authentic research. So they'd be super unrealistic at the beginning, right? They didn't know that, but they would design a study that in reality would take three years and then they go, oh shoot, I have two semesters to complete this. So they would have to narrow down the scope and size of their project, but a lot of them were just spending so much time in the lab to collect their research. So some students would spend more time than others, some students were all in and as they've become obsessive over their research and they loved it and then other students probably didn't love it as much at the time, but they still put in the work that was required.

Nolan Schultheis (10:54):

I was going to say, I do recall reading further in that research that a lot of the students who were complaining or I don't want to even say complaining, just noting the work and time effort that was put into it, that they said that they would do it again and had a positive summation experience from it. Yeah, it was hard in the moment, but ultimately I'm far happier that I went through it than without it.

Blake Colclasure (11:20):

And a lot of the students mentioned that they were thinking about, oh man, during that time I was just so busy and I was doing so much because a lot of our students are student athletes, so they're traveling for sports teams. A lot of the students were involved with their sorority or their fraternity. A lot of students were in clubs and activities, small liberal arts universities, they have a lot going on for students and they can get actively engaged in all sorts of stuff. So then when they start having to put all this time in the lab on their undergraduate research experience, they have to kind of decide what's most important to them. And I think just based upon the conversations with students, they were frustrated in the moment, but then afterwards they go, oh my goodness, I put in all this work in this time and look at the outcome from this. I learned so much. And they go, wow, that was really valuable. That was transformative to me, my identity as a scientist, as a researcher because of that I went to graduate school and that's where they're at now and they're ahead of their peers and able to conduct research.

Nolan Schultheis (12:26):

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I think the ownership aspect plays into the evaluation of worth a little bit as well. I think obviously if you have more of a connection to your work, you're far more likely to look back on it in a favorable outlook than as, oh, I was doing this work for some professor to take this and then go propose this idea to someone else. It was really more of a student ownership and collaboration. And you knew your work was going back into the community that you came from.

Blake Colclasure (12:54):

Yeah, absolutely.

Nolan Schultheis (12:56):

After hearing alumni's perspectives on the time commitment, is there anything you would change about the multi semester course structure if you were redesigning it now?

Blake Colclasure (13:05):

I think because Donne has been implementing this structure for so long, I think they really narrowed down that structure and that process to work well for the institution and those students. So I wouldn't necessarily recommend any changes on the structure. I would say a positive thing that they did was they offered a lot of flexibility for students because some students maybe knew that they wanted to go to graduate school and they wanted to have a knockout project and they wanted to get it published in a peer reviewed journal. So they were able to put more time and then we would allow students to count more credits for that research two and three. So it was a variable credit load. So students who had more robust projects could earn more credits. And then maybe some students who are super busy and they knew that research wasn't for them, we still wanted them to complete a project, but they could develop a smaller project, if you will,

Jessie L. Moore (14:05):

And you both are now at other institutions. So I'm curious if you were to extend that train of thought, if you were giving recommendations for how to implement something similar at another institution, what are some of the things that you'd encourage in faculty and institutions to prioritize and what might you really encourage folks to think about adjusting for their institutional context?

Tyler Granberry (14:36):

So that's actually something that we are working on doing because we're both at the University of Tennessee. UT has really made a strong push for undergraduate research over the past few years especially. And we're both in the College of Agriculture and we see a growing interest in undergraduate research within our college. Some of the other colleges that are here on our campus have really been entrenched in undergraduate research for a long time. But for our college, it's a little bit more of a waiting in process. And so we're really well positioned, especially with this work, to kind of make some recommendations with some of the things. And that's things that we're not only recommending to other people, but things we're doing ourselves because we both mentor undergraduate research students, other faculty in our department do. And so some of those pieces that are really important first and foremost is making sure that the faculty who are going to take on an undergraduate researcher understand the depth of mentorship that's going to make that an impactful experience.

(15:48):

That's one of the big ones. Not only just having a student who's going to work on a project, but understanding what those students' goals might be long-term, if they have a particular interest in this as a career field, or maybe they're looking at going to graduate school, which we find is really common with a lot of our undergraduate researchers, that those experiences need to become part of that mentorship working towards those goals. So that's some of the big ones. Some of the others things that you might think

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of that are pretty, when we think of it on the back end of a study like this, scaffolding coursework to where making sure we have students have the particular sets of skills that they need to go into some of these undergraduate research projects. But when you're looking at that from a curriculum standpoint, that may not be as evident early on.

(16:45):

So a great example of this, when Blake joined us here at UT, we had a lot of programs within our department that resulted in student internships as kind of a culminating experience. We had not thought up to that point to include undergraduate research experience as something that could be equivalent to a student internship or something like that. And we've since made those changes in our curriculum. So when you combine that along with making sure there are some courses that students might take that will better prepare them for what the expectations of their project might look like, that's a really important piece as well. One that also may not be thought of early on until someone's taken on a student or started someone like this is access to space and equipment. That's one that I think a lot of the times, especially as a faculty member, I can tell you when I first started taking on undergraduate researchers was something that you're really excited, you want to jump in.

(17:52):

There's students that are interested in what you do and they want to learn more about it. And especially for people who are in some of the benchtop sciences and things like that, access to equipment and lab space, especially if you've got a lot of folks working, grad students, other faculty, all kinds of projects, making sure that that time and space can be allocated for those undergrads to run their experiments, collect their data, do things like that. That's something that has to go into that planning phase pretty substantially early on. And then opportunities for collaboration with their peers. And that's where when we think about things like CURES curated undergraduate research experience, being able to have groups of students who even though they may be working on different projects, they can still collaborate on some of the challenges they're running into some of the things that are working well for them, things that translate across projects for 'em.

(18:51):

And sometimes that looks like faculty members who are independently advising these students coming together on these things. So one of the things that we've done when we know we have students that are going to present their work at a conference or at a meeting or something like that, all of the faculty in our department who have undergraduate researchers will bring 'em together for practice sessions to where they can practice being a member of the audience, but also in that presenter role and get a feel for what that's kind of like and how that's going to be for them in terms of a lot of 'em being their first experience doing something like that. So there's a lot of little support pieces there that they seem very obvious, but when you first get started in this process, it's very much a learn as you go and you pick up these things along the way.

Nolan Schultheis (19:45):

I'm actually a psychology major, and when you said access to equipment and resources, that reminded something in my head, jogged a memory. We recently lost half of our psychology building to a daycare, and I think that's for the professors or people in the surrounding area that have children, regardless. I remember before the construction took place, a lot of professors that were researching, even students that had research were like, I don't know what I'm going to do now. My lab for my research is getting taken away. I don't know where I'm going to go. I remember there was a lot of confusion even behind putting students into new classrooms. I mean, these research labs could also be used as classrooms in a sense. And it was just a big moment on our campus for a certain division of academics. And it was interesting to see how it all unfolded. To tell you how it unfolded, I ended up having to trek places across campus to go to psych classrooms, just residual classrooms on campus. But yeah, access to the equipment is definitely one of

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the biggest, if not probably one of the largest roadblocks because you can't do the research without the proper equipment,

Blake Colclasure (21:02):

Yeah, I think that's a very fair point. And one thing that we saw at Donne University, because again, pretty tiny university didn't have, we had a fair amount of space in resources because the university really supported undergraduate research, but at the same time, we didn't have access to maybe some of the technology that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. So we had faculty use their networks of other faculty and nearby institutions or larger research universities and put their student mentee in touch with those individuals. So that was also great for those students to be able to talk to other scientists and other researchers and maybe send their data and get support that way. So that's one technique that we use is to take advantage of each other's networks and support from the scientific community to help out students.

Jessie L. Moore (22:01):

And that's a great strategy for others who are thinking about implementing this type of model. I think Nolan's example and Tyler's commentary highlight that sometimes, although the space needs, the equipment needs should be obvious. They can be a little bit invisible beyond our disciplinary areas. So it may be harder to make a case with administrators and others who are overseeing space and budget allocations. So thinking about who else is in the area who you might partner with, I think is a great tip, was also struck by both in the article and in the conversation so far, the emphasis on just the relationship rich environment around these projects. And you've already touched on much of a question on this. I was going to ask, but as Blake, you were sharing that you had not actually done undergraduate research as an undergraduate. And Tyler, you were talking about introducing this as an additional option to compliment internships, and that suggests that there probably were some colleagues that this was also a new experience. I'm wondering what tips you might share with other faculty who are new to thinking about undergraduate research and thinking about a multi semester undergraduate research experience?

Blake Colclasure (23:28):

I think one of the things that institution could do if they're trying to promote undergraduate research is to offer professional development opportunities for faculty on techniques and strategies to become a highly undergraduate research mentor. A lot of our training is probably mentorship for graduate students or PhD students on complex scientific topics and how to guide a thesis or a dissertation. So at the undergraduate level, it's not quite that advanced, and they do take probably a lot more time commitments to actually mentor them through the process. They're just learning how to be a scientist and to think critically and to problem solve. And this may be the first time in which they're not just given a cookie cutter lab and say, you need to measure X, Y and B, X, Y, and Z, and then you do this and you analyze the results. They're designing everything from scratch.

(24:30):

And I think that's really powerful and it's much more, I think, of a learning experience for those students because there's lots of different structures of research. There's lab apprenticeships where a student can, technically, they're conducting undergraduate research, but they're in a lab and their mentor just says, measure these things, and then that's your job 10 hours a week for the semester. So while that's undergraduate research experience, I don't think that's as a high impact experience. They're learning some good lab skills, but they're not learning the true process of research. So I think that's the biggest thing is probably developing a mentorship plan, learning strategies, meeting often with your research mentee, developing rapport with that individual, treating them like a person first and then as a researcher. And I think by doing that, it'll just be more of a positive experience throughout your time. Mentoring undergraduates,

Tyler Granberry (25:29):

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One of the things that I think is very beneficial, and I've been lucky in this sense, but I know this, especially if someone's institution is new to undergraduate research, this may be a challenge, but finding someone to serve as essentially a faculty mentor to you, someone who's been successful with undergraduate researchers, that a lot of the time they have a process that they follow. They have a mentorship schedule or a structure that they try to adhere to with the students that they're working with and essentially trying to give them the space to express how they go about their process and how that could potentially work for you. So like I said, I was very lucky. I've had Blake as well as some other faculty members who have mentored me in how to be an effective undergraduate research mentor for someone who's maybe at an institution where undergraduate research is not as well implemented, or maybe it's brand new, that may require reaching out to a colleague at a different institution or maybe someone through a professional or something like that that can give some insight, give some tips and pointers on how to avoid some pitfalls and work towards some things that they know to be successful.

Jessie L. Moore (26:55):

Great strategies. And I know that there's the Council on Undergraduate Research, which has a good network, and your article that we started talking about is in teaching and learning inquiry, which is the Journal of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which also has an active special interest group on undergraduate research and inquiry. So just two examples, Blake, it looks like you might be jumping in to say something more there.

Blake Colclasure (27:23):

Yeah, I was wanting to touch upon, I think a key aspect of the question that you asked on specifically the multi semester undergraduate research experience and using that as a capstone. I think that was so successful or is so successful at Donne University, again because the culture of undergraduate research was embedded across those four years. So if an institution or a program is wanting to implement a multi semester capstone, I think that they also should probably try to integrate other undergraduate research throughout the program. I think it'd be hard to do to not have any undergraduate research, no course-based undergraduate research, and then all of a sudden junior year for their capstone, it's like, oh, you're going to be doing this. I think students would be kind of lost just providing those opportunities throughout the four years, getting students familiar with what the process looks like, practicing that process on their own at a much smaller scale, and then the true measure of a capstone as you apply what you learn in the program. So I would recommend structuring it in that fashion.

Jessie L. Moore (28:31):

Such a great reminder that course embedded research early in the curriculum can support more independent research later.

Nolan Schultheis (28:38):

So you just gave a lot of good advice for the teacher side, but now I need some advice for the student side. So my question is, based on your research, what tips would you share with students who are involved in this type of multi semester project?

Tyler Granberry (28:52):

That's a pretty good question. Yeah, that's it. Well, and I think one of the things that we've already touched on that we can circle back to is students that were reflecting on the process and they realized that the time commitment was more than they were ready for, or that they were just kind of surprised by how much time it took. One of the things that I think would be really beneficial from a student perspective is if you have an interest in maybe pursuing undergraduate research to find opportunities to start small, to better prepare you for what that experience is going to look like that you can build upon. So maybe

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starting with some course-based undergraduate, some CURES, maybe finding something where you don't necessarily start by designing your own project, but you're working on an existing project, things like that. And then working your way up.

(29:55):

Because just like Blake mentioned a minute ago, jumping in with both feet towards the end of your degree program is where that shock can kind of come from sometimes. And so pursuing those small opportunities first, building upon 'em, getting a good idea for how that's going to go, that can be an important piece. Another thing that can also play into that is finding other students who are farther along, and especially if they're within your degree program that have undergone some of these experiences and getting the opportunity to ask 'em questions, pick their brain, what went well, what were some things, if you were to do it again, what would you do differently? That can be a peer collaboration, but from more of a mentorship type role, someone who's been there and done it and can give you some of the feedback on their experiences.

Blake Colclasure (30:52):

And Nolan, I'll provide three key pieces of advice that I have, and the first one is to find a good faculty mentor that is really wanting to invest in you. As a young scientist, as a young researcher, I think that a lot of faculty, they get overwhelmed. They might have a ton of grad students that they're also trying to mentor and they're teaching classes and they're doing their own research. So finding an individual that has the passion and the time for undergraduate research is really important and that's a good fit. So at Donne in this multi semester, we allowed students to meet with pretty much all the faculty that had similar interests or aligned to their major, and they had meetings with those individuals to find out what type of mentorship they provide. Is it weekly meetings? Is it biweekly meetings? Is it daily meetings to figure out their communication strategy?

(31:54):

Right? Are they a very organized person? Some students may really like that. They need a faculty advisor who's very organized on where we're going to meet at this time and we're going to discuss this. Other students may like a more go with the flow faculty member. So you just have to find a good fit for a research mentor. The second piece of advice I'd have for you and other students is to just look for opportunities. Search within your institution, talk to faculty members, talk to other students who may have had experiences, go to any sort of undergraduate research symposiums that your institution may have. See what's out there. Right. There's a lot of CURES. So course-based undergraduate research, there's lots of internship type programs. There's lots of summer opportunities where you can join a program with other students from across the university that come together for two weeks at a certain university or college to study something. So just explore those. And the last one, I think this is really important, and that's don't be afraid to fail, expect to have challenges in your undergraduate research experience. That really is the process of science. So by running into those big challenges and failing, you can problem solve. You can think through the issue and it's authentic science, and you'll become better and more confident as you go along.

Jessie L. Moore (33:27):

Those are really great tips, and I also just appreciate you taking time to visit with us today. It's been a fun discussion. As someone who a couple of decades ago had my first undergraduate research experience in a college of agriculture, I also appreciate the work that you're doing to embed more of those experiences for the students that you're working with. It's been fun to learn more about both the course that you studied and also just the implications for others thinking about extending or adapting this type of project. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners about your research?

Blake Colclasure (34:05):

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Well, I would just say that we appreciate your listeners interest in what we're doing, and I think undergraduate research has just gained a lot of momentum, really. I think it started at these small universities, and now it's really stretching out and you're seeing it become a core piece of the educational program and larger universities, and rightfully so as such a high impact teaching and learning experience. And I've seen just the positive impact it makes in students, especially in today's age, where you can use AI or you can use Google or your phone, you get any information. The beauty about undergraduate research is it teaches students that you can be creators of new knowledge and new information and to solve problems that aren't solved yet. I think that's what really gets them excited about that process.

Jessie L. Moore (34:56):

Well, thank you both. We appreciate your time and just enjoyed the conversation. So thank you. Nolan, what stood out to you that you think students should think about in relation to this topic?

Nolan Schultheis (35:12):

Well, there were a couple elements that really stood out. One of 'em was to be as opportunistic as possible. In an area like undergraduate research, there aren't as many opportunities, and that's half the reason we're having this podcast is because we're trying to promote opportunities for undergraduate research. But there's only so many available at the moment. And so that was kind of what both the guests were stressing was that you should take as many opportunities as you can specifically within their program. And I think their idea could be applied to all other programs, but they were stressing that the amount of time you put into the program is well worth it in the end. I don't know if all undergraduate programs are the same severity in terms of time and commitment required, but I think the sentiment behind what they said is true, and it's that if you care about your work and you put good effort into your work over the years, then the value will just show itself over time.

Jessie L. Moore (36:14):

I also appreciate it on a related note, the encouragement for programs to think about building research in early so that it's not just when they get to engineers or seniors that they're starting to think about research, but they've already encountered it in courses as course based or course embedded research projects, and then vertically integrated throughout the curriculum so that their students are developing the skills that they need, the strategies that they need and their own interest in their research before they even get to that culminating experience. One other thing that I just heard echoes of throughout the conversation is how relationship rich they were making the experience for students in terms of peer mentoring that their article talks about in terms of their conversation about Find the mentor. That's a good fit for you. Don't necessarily just decide with the first person, but talk with folks. Make sure that it's not just a shared topical interest, but it's someone that you can work well together, but then also to their faculty suggesting find a fellow faculty mentor who can share their practices that you can learn from. And then we also heard an example of a department culture around sharing research, and we've heard that in other conversations with guests about course embedded undergraduate research, vertically itegrated projects, et cetera. But it was such a strong theme in this conversation as well of just the role of relationships in this work.

(37:55):

Once again, I'm Jesse Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (37:58):

And I'm Nolan s Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie L. Moore (38:04):

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