

PAUL L. GASTON

Bologna

A Challenge for Liberal Education and an Exceptional Opportunity

WRITING FOR THE Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), Clifford Adelman in May 2008 rendered higher education in the United States a considerable service. His 128-page report, *The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn from a Decade of European Reconstruction*, describes a process that has influenced higher education in Europe and appears likely to drive further change. In this first of three planned IHEP projects related to Bologna, Adelman also seeks to pose the challenge that Bologna offers to U.S. higher education and to provide suggestions for ways in which we might “join the club.”

The report has generated considerable interest. In an attention-grabbing May 21 headline, *Inside Higher Ed* summarized Adelman’s “jeremiad” as a “Wake-Up Call for American Higher Ed.” Scott Jaschik finds that the report asks American higher education to pay close attention to what the Europeans are doing lest we be “passed by.” A few days later, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* lowered the alert level with its headline, “U.S. Could Look to Europe for Accountability Ideas,” but Beth McMurtrie observes that the report “praises European efforts to define what students should learn at each step along the way.” By implication, we should aspire to do so as well.

Clearly, the Bologna Process, the Adelman report, and the subsequent analyses have moved forward on the agenda of American higher education important issues concerning consistency (how degrees are defined, how

disciplines are structured), continuity (how one degree level should encourage students to attempt the next), quality assurance (“accountability ideas”), and mobility (issues of transferability and transcript transparency). Such issues are already receiving considerable attention here, of course, but Adelman counsels that U.S. educators should find inspiration in the efforts of European colleagues and follow others in joining “the convergence club.” “The smart money is on cooperation and conversation,” he says.

The challenge

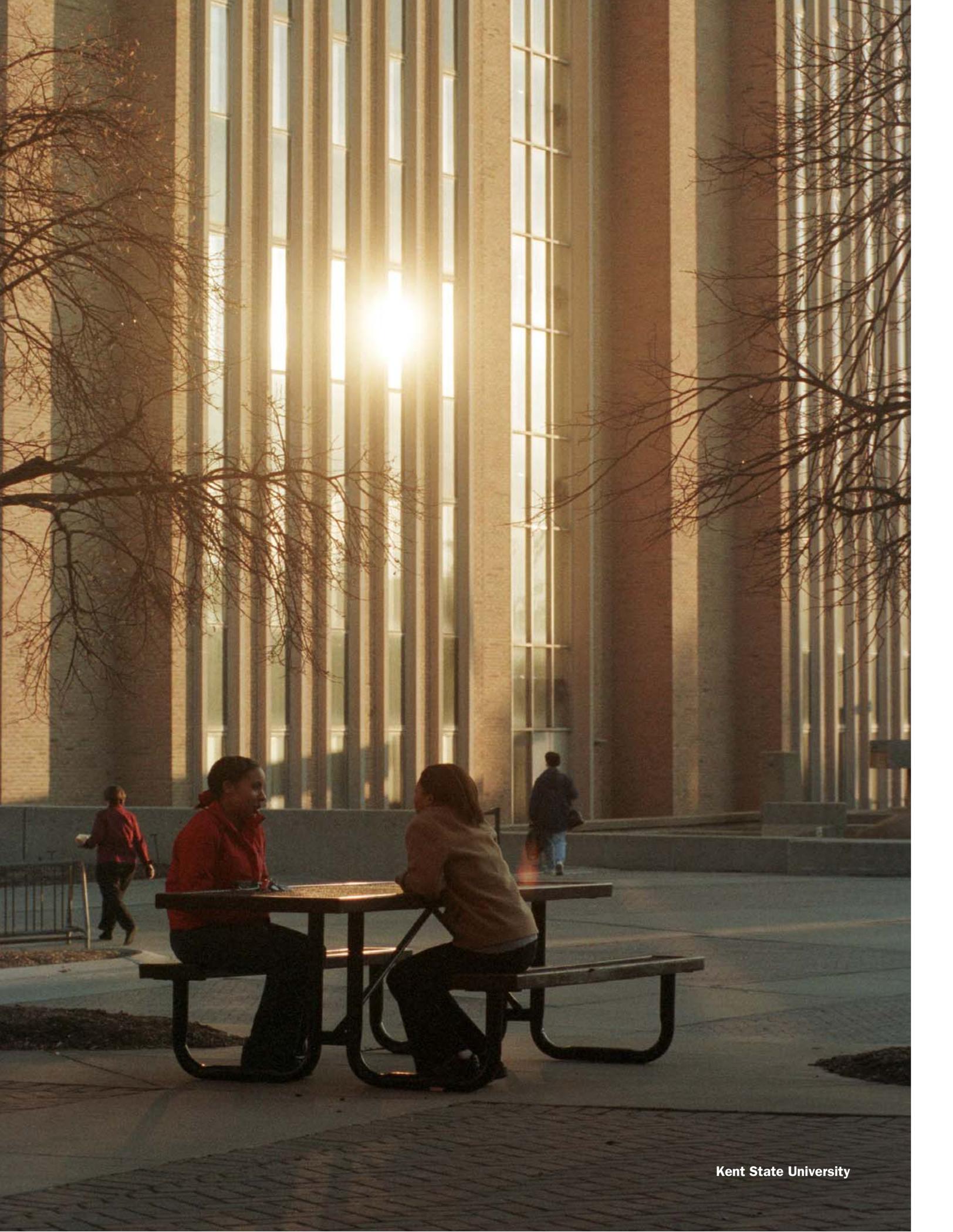
Bologna offers more than a salutary example for U.S. higher education, Adelman emphasizes. It offers a direct challenge—to the principles, the practices, and, most especially, the international competitiveness of U.S. higher education.

Most notably, perhaps, Bologna’s sharp focus on building successful careers and sound economies confronts our diverse and somewhat less clearly defined aspirations. While we may speak of enabling our students to thrive as sensitive, curious, and responsible individuals, Bologna emphasizes demonstrable competencies, job readiness, and student persistence through carefully delineated educational sequences. Outcomes that can be defined most clearly in “operational” terms—that is, those that can present objective “benchmark criteria”—form the core.

As a means of developing this core, one element of the Process, the “Tuning” project, has convened representatives of various disciplines to create “reference points” for students progressing through the higher education levels.

How might advocates for liberal education respond most constructively and effectively to the vital principles of the Bologna Process?

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The detail given in these points and their organization in terms of a clear sequence of incremental competencies create an appearance of rigor and consistency that few disciplines in the United States could match. So even while we may detect a curious inattentiveness in Bologna to some of the values we have traditionally identified as desirable outcomes of baccalaureate education, the challenge Bologna offers us may be thereby all the more direct. Our not taking that challenge seriously could weaken our own convictions regarding educational values long in development, ones that have been articulated with any degree of precision only within the past few years. But our simply reasserting such convictions without addressing the serious questions raised by Bologna may indeed increase the risk of our “being passed by.”

And that is one apparent intent. A clearly stated priority of the Bologna Process is Europe’s recovery of the dominance in higher education that it once enjoyed. The joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education (1999), which formalized “the European process,” was signed at and informally named for the oldest university on the Continent. The declaration itself makes clear the intent “to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe,” “to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship,” and to build competencies among Europeans in tandem with “an awareness of shared values” arising from “belonging to a common social and cultural space.” There is a clear commitment, finally, to promote “the necessary European dimensions in higher education.”

While U.S. higher educators want to see their European colleagues succeed in making higher education on the Continent more accessible to Europeans, more understandable to those outside Europe, and more effective, our disregarding the challenge of Bologna and ignoring the potential risks the Process may create for U.S. higher education would be inattentive at best and negligent at worst. If Bologna were to accomplish only its most prominent aspirations, U.S. universities could face decreasing enrollments of students from Europe, a decline in opportunities for student and faculty exchanges between the United States and Europe, and, according to the most pessimistic perspective, a progressive marginalization of U.S. higher education on the world stage.

The opportunity

Yet as compelling as the Bologna reforms and the challenges they pose appear to be, the potential limitations of Bologna’s sharp focus are equally intriguing. From the beginning unashamedly utilitarian in its focus, the first priority of the Process has been to qualify students for the labor market more expeditiously through an abridged three-year baccalaureate. The evolution of the Process to include an increasing emphasis on the master’s degree has, if anything, further stressed the priority given to specialization and job readiness. And the “qualifications frameworks” that Adelman commends to state higher education systems in the United States make even clearer the economic and vocational thrust of the Process. So while American colleges and universities continue their quest to prepare students for both successful careers and satisfying lives, Bologna has from the start concentrated more or less exclusively on the economic advantages enjoyed by competent individuals and the societies in which they live.

Here may lie an opportunity—not one to be easily gained, yet one that might offer an alternative to rushing the gates of the “convergence club.” Given a reasonable resolve to learn from the best that the Bologna Process has to offer, we might also respond to the challenge it offers by standing up for the singular strengths of U.S. higher education: our long-standing commitment to broad access, our embrace of diversity as an educational good, and, most notably, our distinctive commitment to providing “tertiary level” students with a liberal education. More effectively developed and articulated, this commitment could become an even more highly visible strength of U.S. higher education and, thus, an even more competitive asset internationally. Indeed, our aspiring to a liberal education for all college students may represent the best means available by which U.S. higher education can maintain or even advance its long-standing reputation for preeminence.

The question is whether U.S. higher educators will accept the challenge and seize the opportunity. And the answer may lie in the willingness of the academy to make the hard choices and the strategic investments required. Some of these choices have been a part of the higher education discussion for some years. Others may be prompted in the months ahead

as we understand more fully the challenges posed by Bologna. As a provocation to further discussion, several possible initiatives are framed below as responses to a single question: how might advocates for liberal education respond most constructively and effectively to the vital principles of the Bologna Process?

Establish definitively, document, and articulate the benefits of a liberal education. Much has been done in this regard through the past decade, particularly through the leadership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Among the many substantive tracts that could provide points of departure for further effort is AAC&U's *Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College* (2005, 1), which describes progress made in validating student growth in "critical thinking, quantitative literacy, communication skills, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement"—competencies clearly of concern to employers and others. But as the report notes, much remains to be done. To the extent they have not already done so, institutions must "set clear goals, establish programs and lines of responsibility for achieving the goals, teach creatively and effectively, and assess to ensure that all students are learning" so as "to meet our society's greater expectations for liberal education outcomes" (9). But thanks in part to Bologna, "our society" is now international as well, and if we are to meet the world's expectations, we must be able through refined outcomes statements and ever more resourceful assessment to argue effectively before an international constituency that a liberal education confers benefits on individuals and society that are identifiable and valuable—and that are unlikely to be achieved through condensed degree programs that assume but do not provide for liberal learning.

Persuasively identify intentional liberal education with the baccalaureate. The Bologna standard of the three-year baccalaureate assumes that many students enter higher education possessing the cultural and social capabilities a baccalaureate degree should assure. Conversely, U.S. higher education has assumed that many of the less tangible capabilities developed through liberal education—intellectual agility, social skills, an ability to

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work in teams, an understanding of examined values, an enjoyment of diversity, an appreciation for culture, and so on—are most effectively developed among students who have completed secondary education. There are good reasons for so believing, but

we must be better able to make that case beyond our borders.

Achieve a higher degree of consistency with regard to the learning outcomes sought through liberal education. This priority would invite U.S. colleges and universities to join more fully in the development of an emerging national consensus regarding essential outcomes. Already, several institutions have found principles articulated through AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative a useful platform for curricular reform. But if liberal education in the United States is to achieve the competitive advantages that a united front could confer, agreement must become widespread. For instance, a broad commitment to LEAP's "Essential Learning Outcomes" (see sidebar on page 18), while leaving institutions plenty of room to design programs expressing their distinctive identities, would have the important additional benefit of assuring on the world stage that students presenting an American baccalaureate degree possess clearly defined competencies and capacities that incorporate but improve upon outcomes sought through the Bologna Process.

Increase access and support mobility. Broad agreement as to the ends of a liberal education would greatly facilitate the acceptance of academic credit across state lines and among institutional categories domestically. By making the expectations of American higher education more understandable for international students, such consistency would also support student recruitment abroad. For large research universities, the advantage would be considerable, but for small liberal arts colleges, more effective recruitment of international students could be a critical survival strategy.

Expand the commitment to quality assurance. One limitation of the Adelman report is its less than vigorous acknowledgement of the significant advances in quality assurance that have been introduced in the United

States within the past decade. For instance, both regional and specialized accreditors have prompted their accredited programs to assess more meaningfully and to complete the “quality circle” by using what is learned to effect improvements. That the report gives little cognizance to such efforts offers a reminder

The Essential Learning Outcomes

Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

More information about the Liberal Education and America’s Promise initiative is available online at www.aacu.org/leap.

that if this emergent success is to be acknowledged on the world stage, U.S. higher education must work harder to assure that the results of assessment, broadly considered, are both accessible and intelligible internationally. Doing so would bring U.S. higher education into far closer alignment with one of the leadership claims of the Bologna Process.

Encourage progress through the degrees.

One of the most attractive elements in the Bologna Process may be its purposeful encouragement of baccalaureate students to aspire to master’s level study. Liberal education can play an important role in promoting such progression by enabling students early in their baccalaureate careers to appreciate the educational continuum in which they are engaged. But for such a commitment to become effective, all faculty members must understand and accept their responsibility for the liberal education of all students. Otherwise, study in the major can undermine the best efforts of liberal educators and, paradoxically, discourage the ambition to graduate study that a major should inspire.

Achieve a common vocabulary. While American colleges and universities strive for “retention”—that is, the persistence of students to graduation—high schools define “retention” as requiring poorly prepared students to repeat a grade level. If American educators cannot agree on such fundamental terms, how confusing must our educational jargon be to prospective students and faculty members in other parts of the world? One important effort in support of sustained international competitiveness might be our reaching agreement on the meaning of such terms as credit, term, degree, outcome, and competence. Another important benefit of a common vocabulary would be the clarification of differences with our European colleagues. By confronting real differences rather than rhetorical ones, we would make U.S. higher education more accessible to international students, just as the Bologna members seek to do.

Celebrate and demonstrate the value of diversity. Although the Bologna Process has expanded to include particular attention to “social dimensions”—most especially, the accessibility of higher education to less traditional constituencies—its documents make little reference to what American higher education regards as the educational value of diversity.

Our efforts to substantiate our understanding of the educational value of diversity through rigorous and far-reaching research are vital, for our insistence on diversity as a discrete value may be a further way in which our example can enhance higher education worldwide.

Enable students to document their accomplishments more fully. Within the Bologna Process, this commitment takes the form of a “Diploma Supplement.” Such a credential functions as an educational passport, enabling students to interpret their educational histories to employers and graduate institutions beyond their borders. Again, however, the Bologna standards for such supplements appear so fixedly utilitarian as to risk the reduction of distinctive educational experiences to easily grasped, but less descriptive, common elements. Experiments in U.S. higher education with “portfolios,” which can capture not only measurable attainments but also idiosyncratic abilities, may offer a more promising approach to translating educational attainment into readily understood terms. But the challenge of Bologna should prompt us to scale up this approach so that it becomes standard practice—and to make certain that there develops uniformity among portfolios sufficient to support an increasing degree of transparency.

Caveats

Having argued persuasively for advances evident within Bologna planning, Adelman suggests that we “join the club.” But before doing so, we should perhaps consider certain caveats.

First, the relentless drive for objective evaluation, in some ways a very useful undertaking, should not obscure the reality that many of the most important evaluations within higher education will continue to rely on expert subjective judgment. Deny this, and we deny the value we properly assign to expertise itself. Even aviation, which employs extensive checklists and detailed objective measures, depends also on comprehensive assessments of pilot performance by experienced professionals.

Second, notwithstanding the aspirations of the Bologna Process, higher education in Europe remains highly diverse and idiosyncratic. Whether through A-levels in England or the *Baccalauréat* in France, make-or-break examinations continue to limit access to higher education. By contrast, by offering virtually universal access to higher education, the United

States accepts and may want to acknowledge more directly deeply indigenous challenges and opportunities.

Third, the framing of qualifications frameworks and the creation of a bureaucracy to evaluate and enforce them requires a formidable investment. Even as we continue to move in this direction, we should observe closely the extent to which the benefits of the Bologna Process justify its costs over time.

While joining the club is an inviting option, a better idea might be to strengthen our own club by drawing on the strongest elements of the Bologna Process while maintaining values—specifically, those identified with liberal education—that continue to distinguish higher education in the United States. From that vigorous position, we could work with our European colleagues to create an alliance conferring benefits on both clubs—a kind of “SkyTeam” for higher education. With access to all that European and American colleges and universities have to offer, the world’s college students could enjoy an upgrade to first class. □

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