# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## The Conversation

Opinion and ideas.

**November 15, 2013 by Steven Conn**

Comments (77) (http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/11/15/the-diy-university/#disqus_thread)

# The DIY University

As my colleagues and I began to get our courses organized for this academic year we were atwitter with anticipation. The classroom-management website we use had been totally reorganized over the summer. We were promised something new and exciting.

Most faculty members use classroom sites nowadays. Blackboard's is a popular version. At Ohio State University the site is called Carmen. The old version of Carmen was entirely adequate. It would sometimes slow down (or crash) at the start of each term—you know, when students were actually using it. But most of us accommodated ourselves to its foibles and got on with our work.

The new, improved version, however, was an unmitigated disaster. If you somehow managed to navigate its confusing interface, you would discover that many of its basic functions didn't work. Or they worked sometimes and not others. Or they worked for you but not for your students. Tears in our eyes, many of us called IT for help.

But those IT folks are no fools. They never answer their phones; who wants to deal with angry faculty members? When, finally, one of my colleagues tracked down a "secret" IT phone number, a peace delegation of IT diplomats agreed to come to my department to calm us all down.

No, they couldn't provide any more (or, in fact, any) actual IT support, but, they said enthusiastically, they would set up a special tutorial so we could all be trained to use the new thing. It would take only a few hours of our time.

Welcome to the do-it-yourself university.

It did not occur to the IT gang that many of us don't have the time to be taught the idiosyncrasies of pointing and clicking through this particular website. Or that we wouldn't want to. They were crestfallen when someone pointed this out to them. But it isn't their fault. The DIY university has become an ingrained idea: Not only should we do everything ourselves; we should all be happy to do so. Whistle while you work because that work isn't going to get done all by itself, is it?

Take research, for example. Over the years, as our library evolved from a library into a self-service "information center," reference librarians disappeared like buffalo from the plains. If you go to the information desk at the main library you will confront a work-study student who may—or may not—know where the restrooms are, but probably can't help you find that obscure journal you need. After all, you should be able to find that yourself.

Underneath all the chirpy language about personal convenience and control is something more sinister. As in so many other sectors of American life, the DIY university is really an excuse to cut costs by firing the staff members who used to help with all the tasks we now get to do ourselves. Booking travel? Sure, I can navigate Expedia (http://www.expedia.com/) as well as the next guy. Managing grants and populating spreadsheets? That should definitely be a skill I have in my toolbox. Photocopying? Of course. Who doesn't want to master the 18-step process to scan a PDF? I've been told I can manage my payroll deductions from a mobile app, but good luck finding someone to answer some basic questions about it all.

For administrators the DIY university makes sense in two directions. First, all the money that the institution saves by letting go of the support staff can be used to hire more administrators, for which there is a never-ending need. Second, the staff cuts come with no institutional downside. Everything still gets done; faculty members are simply expected to do what the staff used to handle. Faculty time is price-less—as in, it has no value. A win-win!

In that sense the DIY university is about saving money by shifting costs from people who actually knew how to do those things (the support staff) to people who are often inept at them (the faculty). At the DIY university we are less concerned about getting things done well than we are about getting them done cheaply. Sort of like that bathroom-tile project you botched because you didn't want to shell out for a professional.

DIY isn't just about "doing," however. It's also about paying for things we once thought were, you know, part of the terms of our employment.

Take, for example, the brilliant DIY move the chair of my wife's department made a few years ago. To please administrators and "reduce costs," she had the phones ripped out of all faculty offices. When my wife asked how she was supposed to communicate with students and colleagues, she was told to use her cellphone. Surely there's no problem giving out a personal cellphone number to hundreds of students, right? Brilliant!

No phones, no IT, no library staff, no HR. But why stop there?

Perhaps in the future we could eliminate the registrar's office by making faculty members responsible for scheduling their own classes. The start of each term could be a festive frenzy like a reality-TV show: Survivor: Race to the Classroom! As we discover new frontiers in cost sharing, the library could make money by charging faculty members each time they checked out a book. Professors, in turn, could charge students when they came to see us outside of class time. Call it a "classroom overage" fee, not "office hours." Once you get with the DIY program, there's no end of creative ideas.

Of course, I did feel particularly bad for my colleagues going through the tenure process this fall. They were required to manage their dossiers using the platform "Research in View," a particularly gruesome system in which all pegs, no matter their shape, are forced into the same round hole. The system malfunctioned more than the "new and improved" Carmen. Suffice it to say that, for many of those colleagues, work sometimes disappeared from view entirely when they entered it, causing some, tears in their eyes, to pull out their hair.

They couldn't attend the Carmen tutorial because they had to attend a special workshop to learn how to work around the kinks of "Research in View." Such is life at the DIY university.

Steven Conn is a professor and director of public history at Ohio State University.

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## 77 comments                                                              ★ ◂ 1



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OpenSourceGadfly  •  a month ago
I used to be on staff for a large university, and I made a point of teaching my interns more in one

semester than the faculty could in several years. I helped teach their classes, guest lectured and substituted for them when they were off. I wrote their exercises and consulted on their lesson plans.

With the glut in the professorial market, the ROI on Higher education being as low as it is, and the general over priced ineptitude of your average ivory tower inhabitant, I'm not surprised that more work isn't placed on their shoulders. we need to separate the different functions of the higher education operation into its component elements. why entrust the education of the future to researchers who's communications skills are a roll of the dice. (thank god for Rate my Proff). Professors are by and large not incentivized for education so they see it as a chore taking time away from research for which they are incentivized. why go to the same shop for education as you go for credentialing. why can't I read a few books from the library, write a paper or two, take a test, have some starving grad student grade it and get 3 credits for $100. I'm not willing to pay several thousand dollars to hear a researcher mumble about a subject they are unfamiliar with then get graded by their grad students. Economics do not support the royal treatment professors and universities have become accustomed to over the last few generations. there is an economic niche open for something new. You can't fight economics with anything but economics. no money means more work for faculty.

⌃ | 1 ⌄ · Reply · Share ›

**martha** · a month ago
At my university, the DIY mentality extends to trash removal! No more janitorial staff to remove trash from our offices - this is the job of faculty. The administration justified this as a "workload neutral" policy for the janitorial staff. No word on the change in workload for the faculty....

⌃ | ⌄ · Reply · Share ›

**fsw1993** · a month ago
Guess OSU has not more money to take care essential function, after you have to pay more than a million dollar to your president.

⌃ | ⌄ · Reply · Share ›
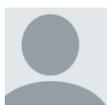
**cerebellum** · a month ago
Interesting: I've read this essay three times, and nowhere do I find the wording of the online promotional blurb for this piece, "'Do it
yourself' is a sinister, administrator-driven idea to make faculty members
do more for less." But, it's certainly close.
Having been at an institution that had to make very painful cuts to support staff, I wonder why Steven Conn assumes that the goal is to make faculty do more work. At our institution, support staff were cut (and faculty were not) in acknowledgment of the fact that faculty deliver the education that students come to our institutions for. So, faculty were protected, support staff were not. Did

this make more work for faculty- probably yes. However, most of the support staff who were cut were not providing services primarily to the faculty, and the intent was not to make faculty fend for themselves. The people most impacted by the cuts were the students, who now had longer lines and fewer supports and the remaining support staff, who had to pick up much of the work previously done by others.

If cutting staff was used to increase the number of administrators at OSU, that is shameful. However, at most public institutions, when cuts are made, it is because of financial constraints, not a desire to take faculty for granted.

That said, there are also some really dumb cost-cutting measures, and I would include taking phones out of faculty offices as one. However, just because one cost-cutting measure in dumb, does not mean they all are dumb or mean-spirited.

3 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

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shmuelchaim • a month ago

stop whining

⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

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rosebiblio • a month ago

When Google came along 15 years ago, many corporations got rid of their research departments (librarians.) What a cost savings! Then the corporations realized they were paying high priced engineers, etc. to sit around Googling all day. Googling all day and finding zilch. So the corporations finally realized that they needed to rehire the librarians. Lets face it - not everyone is GOOD at everything. Not everyone has the specialized skills or the comprehension or even the patience required to DIY. There's a time to teach people how to do something for themselves and then there are times when the problem just needs to be fixed. By experts. And as to the car analogy - we expect the car, like our technology, to take us where we need to go. If the car breaks down, does our mechanic offer a tutorial on how to fix it?

2 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

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dopefein • a month ago

I am astonished at how closely this matches my experiences. My college continues to load up on the administrators (at this point, they aren't even embarrassed by the public perception of continually adding positions to their ranks), even while reducing necessary support staff. Worse, they continually ask more of faculty ("Yes, we are a teaching-oriented school, and you must be an excellent teacher, but we want more publications than ever, and more service in and outside the school. Don't like it? Leave, there are dozens of you clamoring for this job.") while asking less of administrators ("President, I can't do all the work in front of me, I think we need to hire a vice-something-something so I can delegate this work to someone else, who might also hire an assistant vice-something-something. Don't worry about the money President, we can hire more adjuncts or cut more humanities or squeeze the paychecks of the lowest paid support staff on

campus. If they don't like it, we will let them go and hire someone else."). Funny, whenever I have tech issues, it's always the student workers who fix the problems for me. I ask them, "what do your bosses do?" The standard reply is, "sit around and tell us to fix things." My library does ten thousand things (apparently), none of which have to do with research and books. We change classroom software platforms every four years (to save money?) so no one ever gets used to the system. Departments have to maintain and build their own websites, even though there are dozens upon dozens of people in IT who seemingly do the same thing. IT really is the worst tentacle on the octopus; I haven't a clue who to call or what avenue to take to solve tech issues anymore. So, like the author says, I just do it myself!

⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

**Tom** • a month ago

The privilege of an R1 faculty oozes through this piece. It's the twenty-first century. You have a PhD. It is not unreasonable for the institution to expect you to learn how to use the courseware program you employ in your classroom and the photocopier. The vast majority of faculty at non-R1s have been doing these things for decades. We even tie our own shoes.

3 ⌃ | 1 ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

**Barbara Piper** →Tom • a month ago

Hi, Tom. A very large portion of your point is valid, and I would be the last to dispute it. I remember the advent of VCRs, when people professed not to be able to program them, until they really wanted to record a show they couldn't live without watching, and suddenly learned to read a manual. Many of my colleagues have figured out how to use more than one finger to type, how to make their own phone calls, and even how to decipher the complex regulations and reporting on federal grants. I think the complaint is about the yearly increase in the jobs that get shifted on to us, while the standard job expectations remain the same. The possibility that faculty in top universities may have fewer of these burdens than colleagues in community colleges is neither surprising nor especially immoral. Prestige and privilege often support each other.

1 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

**Greg** • a month ago

After requesting help on a online course where the "links" were broken because of the course import process I was told by IT that they only design the course sites and they have a record on file that they explained how to fix these links a year previously and that they can't keep helping me if I am unwilling to remember what I have already been taught. I told them I thought the IT people who designed the courses on the platform were responsible for problems that occurred. I was informed that they only design the course and have no responsibility for it once it goes live. I didn't pursue it and was not willing to share the fact that I have no concept of what a broken link is, why it is important to me, and why as a faculty member there would be an expectation by anyone that I would know how to fix it. We might as well have been talking about magic beans.

would know how to fix it. We might as well have been talking about magic beans.

8 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

Ikatt ➚Greg • a month ago

In some cases, the department, not IT, is responsible for keeping its own web page content updated. It is especially important when editing department-specific content to keep a list of linked pages mentioned in this content. I would suggest taking notes before making any changes. Keep a copy of the current page saved as a web page also. It can be your reference as you edit in the new content. I am guessing this might apply in your department's scenario as it did in ours. Then if you do hit a snag that is difficult to undo by your staff/web guru, IT or your webmaster's group can work with you to straighten it out.

If the flaw is in the overall design, document each iteration of the flaw, and then present the documentation for a fix. I would be surprised if there is no process for addressing the most serious failures such as web crashes or lost data.

Often an IT department, just like a building contractor, implements based on the specs they were given. If later, the client wants something different or did not state it. that can cause misunderstandings, too.

In any of these scenarios, documenting the events is important. Does it happen the same way each time when A is done after B? etc.

⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

MChag12 ➚Greg • a month ago

You really should have complained and brought it up in the faculty senate. Letting tech clerks get away with that attitude only allows more of it.

2 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

Brian Abel Ragen • a month ago

Professors have become what I understand businesses call "self-sufficient knowledge workers." In business you become a self-sufficient knowledge worker when they fire all the secretaries. Universities have just gone a bit farther.

The truth is, though, that I would have been happy to do many jobs if only the systems had worked as promised. The software we used always seemed to be designed to ensure that every task took several extra steps and to make it hard to figure out if you had accomplished what you had set out to do. The university kept buying new systems that barely worked. It seemed that the people in charge had never checked to see that they were operable before asking us all to use them. (Yes, it does sound like the healthcare website.)

There are areas where I would like to see the "Do-it-Yourself" model applied much more often. Let

all administrators, especially presidents and chancellors, write their own speeches. Surely the head of a university should be a "Self-Sufficient Knowledge Worker" when it comes to what are presented as his own words.

4 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**MChag12** • a month ago

Forgot to mention that cellphones usually don't work inside campus buildings, or that removing phones generally doesn't save much money. Putting them back in costs A LOT of money. When they took our phones, I simply told students I didn't have a phone number. They could call the Dean's office and leave a message, but don't expect a return call. When they had to put them back in the following year because it was such as disaster, it cost a third of the college's budget. I often wonder who made the money off that deal. Corruption is more present inside the university than outside of it and it is built into the system generally in the name of "gifts" and efficiency. One of my favorite was the gift of the large number of full grown trees now on our campus as a result of a "gift?" Guess who the maintenance contract went to?

8 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Henry Vandenburgh** • a month ago

They going to have to pay for the cell phones if someone takes this to court.

4 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

> **MChag12** ➔Henry Vandenburgh • a month ago
>
> And more. It is a hostile environment impeding work.
>
> 2 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**awegweiser** • a month ago

What ever happened to OSU's come, go then come back again, $million+president?

1 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›
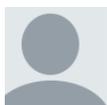
**Justified** • a month ago

You must be tenured. I'd never get a job if I wrote that. On another note, the Boston Globe just had a big story on how Blackboard was opening up offices in its high tek park area and will have a staff of 50. Hopefully, job seekers read to the bottom of the article where it mentioned that the staff was being relocated.

1 ∧ | 2 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

> **MChag12** ➔Justified • a month ago
>
> Every year a new version comes out that is supposed to have all kinds of value added techno-improvements. I gave up on it once they made the grade center useless. You couldn't enter a grade except in the last column. I'm sure there is a way to do it, but at least

Excel remains functionally stable. They improved themselves right out of my office and courses. It is just a mess of screens now, not even useful for sending e-mails to students or posing simple announcements without wasting huge amounts of time. The college's website is much more useful for most tasks.

4 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

dopefein →MChag12 • a month ago

My school has changed platforms three times in five years, first because of cost, then because of one company bought the other. Every time they do this, we have to migrate all of our files from one to the other, even though much is not compatible (of course, after telling us endlessly that these platforms will save us time and work) and we have to learn a whole new process for doing grading, posting assignments, emailing classes, taking attendance, etc. I use the platform a lot because it offers students transparency into my grading and can be a good means of communication outside of class, but the effort is swamping me now.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

MChag12 →Justified • a month ago

wrote what?

2 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

nonPHD • a month ago

Bet you wish you had a secretary too who'd get you your coffee. Afterall, you shouldn't have to DIY -- your time is sooooo important.

6 ∧ | 5 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

MChag12 →nonPHD • a month ago

Oh dear, another resentful job seeker. Never got your Ph.D. done, eh? Looking for a job with that attitude? Good luck with that. You will no doubt be able to keep all that free time.

9 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

IT →MChag12 • a month ago

PhDs are over-rated. Steve Jobs, or Bill Gates did not get one either.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Barbara Piper • a month ago

Prof. Conn's experience parallels my own, and I don't find his tone to be unnecessarily cranky -- those of us who have been around for a while have seen the small changes build up into a dramatically different place, with creeping expansion of the informal job description. When I was hired by my department, we had 8 secretaries, since faculty were not expected to type their own

hired by my department, we had 8 secretaries, since faculty were not expected to type their own manuscripts, syllabi, CVs, etc. With the advent of desk-top computers and word processing, typing jobs shifted to faculty and 7 secretaries were eventually eliminated. I had no complaint about typing -- I learned to type, as most women of my generation did, when I was a girl -- but those secretaries handled a wide variety of other functions that suddenly faculty were expected to do for themselves, from travel to grant management. And the two or three ancient members of the department who insisted that they simply couldn't manage a keyboard under any circumstances occupied a huge portion of the remaining secretary's time until our department chair finally got funds from the Dean to hire a part-time typist.

Faculty at my university are now expected to advise students on all aspects of their undergraduate program, even though the courses that comprise a major are only about 25% of the credits needed for a B.A. or B.S. But having a central advising office for all undergrads was too expensive, we were told. So I have to become an expert on general education requirements, electives in other departments, etc. Students expect me to know if Prof. X in Chemistry is a hard grader, even though

<p align="center">see more</p>

21 ∧ │ ∨ • Reply • Share ›

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**swal2944** • a month ago

While I cannot speak to the details such as how many research consultations were held, etc., I can see by the basic data available on the OSU Libraries data portal that over 27,000 reference questions were answered in 2011-12 and over 1,600 classes were led by librarians. This suggests to me that many faculty members and students were indeed able to find and take advantage of the expert services provided by the OSU library faculty.

3 ∧ │ 1 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

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**MChag12** ➤swal2944 • a month ago

Yes, given the technological side of gathering data, you are referring to the expert answers to questions such as "where is the media center," which, by the way, most of the time can't be answered by the work-study students who "man" those portals.

1 ∧ │ ∨ • Reply • Share ›

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**swal2944** ➤MChag12 • a month ago

No, those would be directional questions, not reference questions (each type being defined and counted differently). I don't have access to the data regarding total number of questions asked at the OSU Libraries, which undoubtedly do include a large number of directional questions as well as questions related to the use of technology, but the 27,000 I cited above are defined on the OSU document as reference questions, which involve direct information assistance, often at a high level.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**xuantraum** • a month ago

Quản lý các khoản tài trợ và populating bảng tính?

http://www.traumvietnam.com

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**xuantraum** • a month ago

http://www.traumvietnam.com/du...

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**MChag12** ➤xuantraum • a month ago

ah, Vietnamese SPAM. How delightful.

3 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**xuantraum** • a month ago

Để làm hài lòng các quản trị viên và "giảm chi phí", cô đã có điện thoại tách ra khỏi tất cả các văn phòng khoa ?

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Guest** ➤xuantraum • a month ago

Well, since we're talking tech, I tried Google Translate, and here's what I got: "To satisfy administrators and "cost reduction", she had separated from the phone all the faculty office?" Ain't tech great?

5 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**minerva9** ➤xuantraum • a month ago

I'll have the sliced beef soup with rice noodles, please.

3 ∧ | 2 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**hc** ➤minerva9 • a month ago

"They" all run restaurants, don't they?

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**minerva9** ➤hc • a month ago

It's a software bot, silly. Save your PC outrage for actual humans.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Huh** ➤minerva9 • a month ago

In case you were wondering, that was still pretty racist

In case you were wondering, that was still pretty racist.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

minerva9 ↗Huh • a month ago
I apologize to any bots who may have taken offense.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

awegweiser ↗xuantraum • a month ago
Thank you, sir (or madam), I'm sure the many reading this are much enlightened.

2 ∧ | 1 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Dennis ↗awegweiser • a month ago
Google translate is your friend. copy and paste, click on detect language (Vietnamese in this case, by the way) and the translation appears for you.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

awegweiser ↗Dennis • a month ago
Well Google seems to not be my good buddy with this:To satisfy administrators and "cost reduction", she had separated from the phone all the faculty office?
I think I can sort it out but some of the translations from Japanese and Chinese come out more funnier (and, no doubt in reverse as well).But Vietnamese does have the fun of rampant diacriticals.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

arnold asrelsky • a month ago
Warning: This comment is completely off-topic.
The author refers to a classroom site named 'Carmen.' 'Carmen' is the name of the computer 'Larry the Liquidator' uses to locate businesses ripe for take-over in the play and movie 'Other People's Money.' Is this just a coincidence?'

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Lowe's ↗arnold asrelsky • a month ago
No, it refers to Ohio State's school song "Carmen Ohio" (composed circa 1903) that is sung after every home football game.

2 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

old nassau'67 • a month ago
Doubtless, OSU's new classroom site was developed by the same IT specialists who designed the Obamacare website.

1 ∧ | 2 ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**archman** • a month ago

When will DIY University become free of superfluous administrators...

8 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**flowney** • a month ago

In the public HE sector, much of this is due to state legislatures reducing funding. Administrators then agonize over the largest line item in the budget which is salaries. So, if you cut staff to maintain faculty positions, those faculty need to either scale down their need for staff support or take up these DIY tasks.

5 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Bonegirl06** ➳flowney • a month ago

Where in that equation does the increase in administrators fall? I'm pretty sure they are paid more than a secretary.

4 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**MChag12** ➳flowney • a month ago

Besides being ridiculous logic, that doesn't answer the question of why administrators are increasing at such an alarming rate.

10 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›
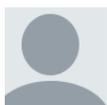
**willynilly** • a month ago

We already have a disturbing large number of these acronym colleges and universities. They are the TYMGYN institutions. They are all situated within the family of for-profit scam schools, aka the TYMGYN method of garnering previously unheard of profits from an industry historically known for only modest amounts of excess revenue over expenses - if any at all. How do these TYMGYN's perform this magic? It is easy for them. It's Take Your Money Give You Nothing - an unbeatable revenue rake-in plan.

6 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**joud3084** • a month ago

Another part of the DIY trap is that because so many faculty, including younger ones who never knew university life any differently, go along with it and don't complain, when someone actually pushes back they get dismissed as a whining crank, a Luddite, etc. The staff who remain, and I'm not trying to blame them because they're also overwhelmed with work and being downsized like crazy, too easily fall into the narrative about "those idiot faculty members who can't be bothered to stay current on the core technologies in their area." It's a ready made environment for budget cutters and so-called efficiency experts and "let's all get excited about the new version of the

course management software" training workshops from hell.

18 ∧  |  ∨  •  Reply  •  Share ›

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