# Stellar students mingle with movers and shakers

By Liane L. Young GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

magine discussing the information age with best-selling novelist Amy Tan. Imagine having lunch with Grammy Award-winning singer, songwriter, and producer Lauryn Hill. Imagine watching three Nobel prize-winning professors jive to country tunes performed by Wynonna and Naomi Judd.

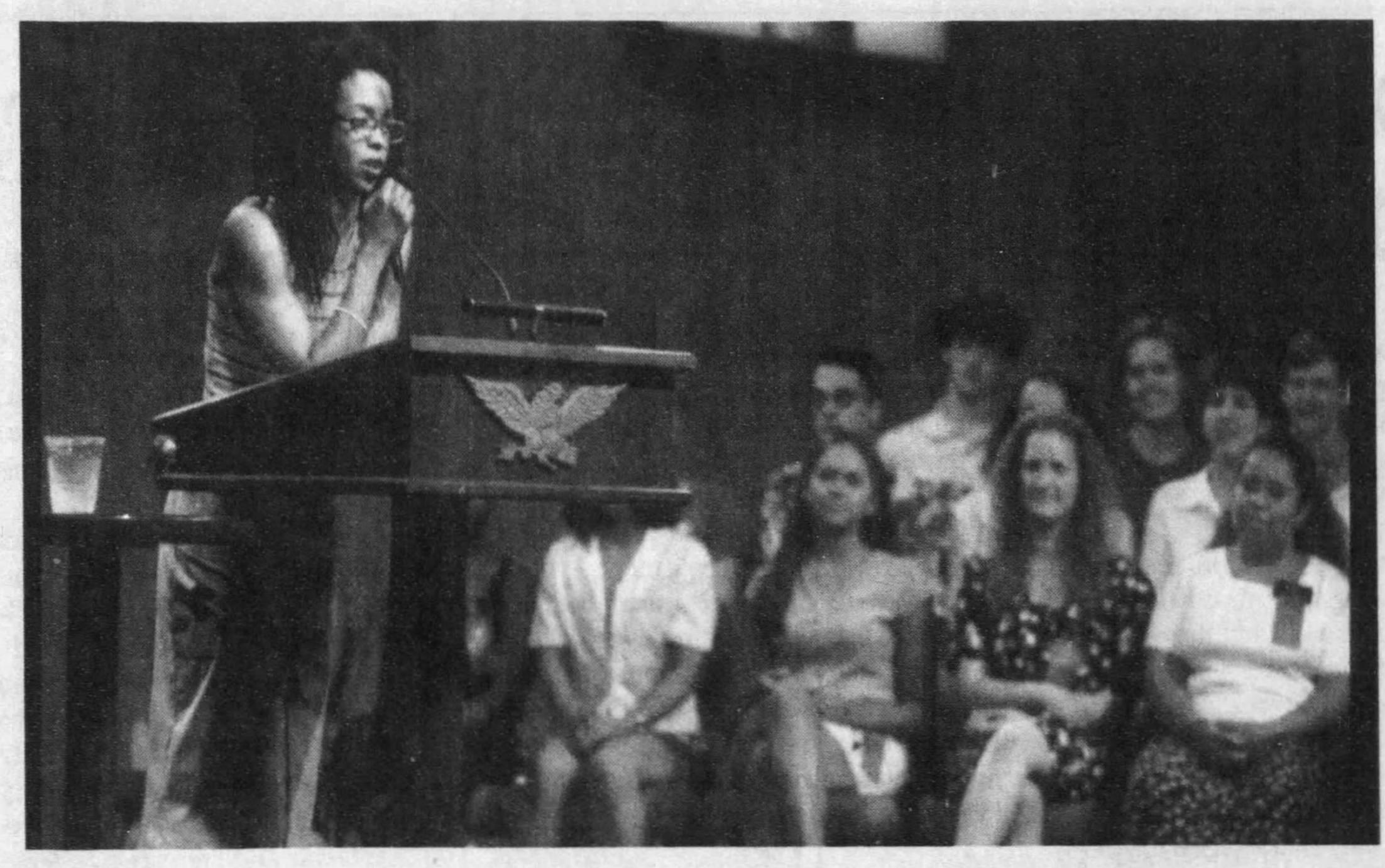
The 450 high school honor students invited to the American Academy of Achievement's "Salute to Excellence" program didn't have to imagine all this.

This past June, in Scottsdale, Ariz., the American Academy of Achievement honored 50 eminent achievers in their fields with "Golden Plate" awards. What distinguished this event from, say, Hollywood's Academy Awards or a Nobel Prize presentation ceremony was that all adult honorees shared their experiences, perspectives, and attention with a group of high schoolers during a four-day joy

Students, selected for academic and extracurricular merit, included the Intel Science Talent Search winners, some of the 141 Presidential Scholars, and the members of the All-USA High School Academic Team. The members of this talented and talkative bunch represented different parts of the nation, urban and rural districts, and varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

The academy and its patrons sponsored all student guests. Everything was provided - from transportation, food and lodging to boys' tuxedoes and girls' corsages, which were donned at the program's culminating award ceremony, the 39th annual Banquet of the Golden Plate.

Yet even these accommodations paled in comparison to the academy's facilitation of the studentadult interaction via conversations, meals, and lectures. To mull over issues with adult achievers from every facet of American life - the sciences, business, the professions, sports, literature, entertainment, the military, the arts, and public service - seemed so unreal, said one California student, that he didn't get his hopes up until his plane ticket arrived in the mail.





Lauryn Hill (left) addresses students; composer-conductor John Williams accepts a Golden Plate award from poet Rita Dove; and students (below) gather around paleontologist John R. Horner.

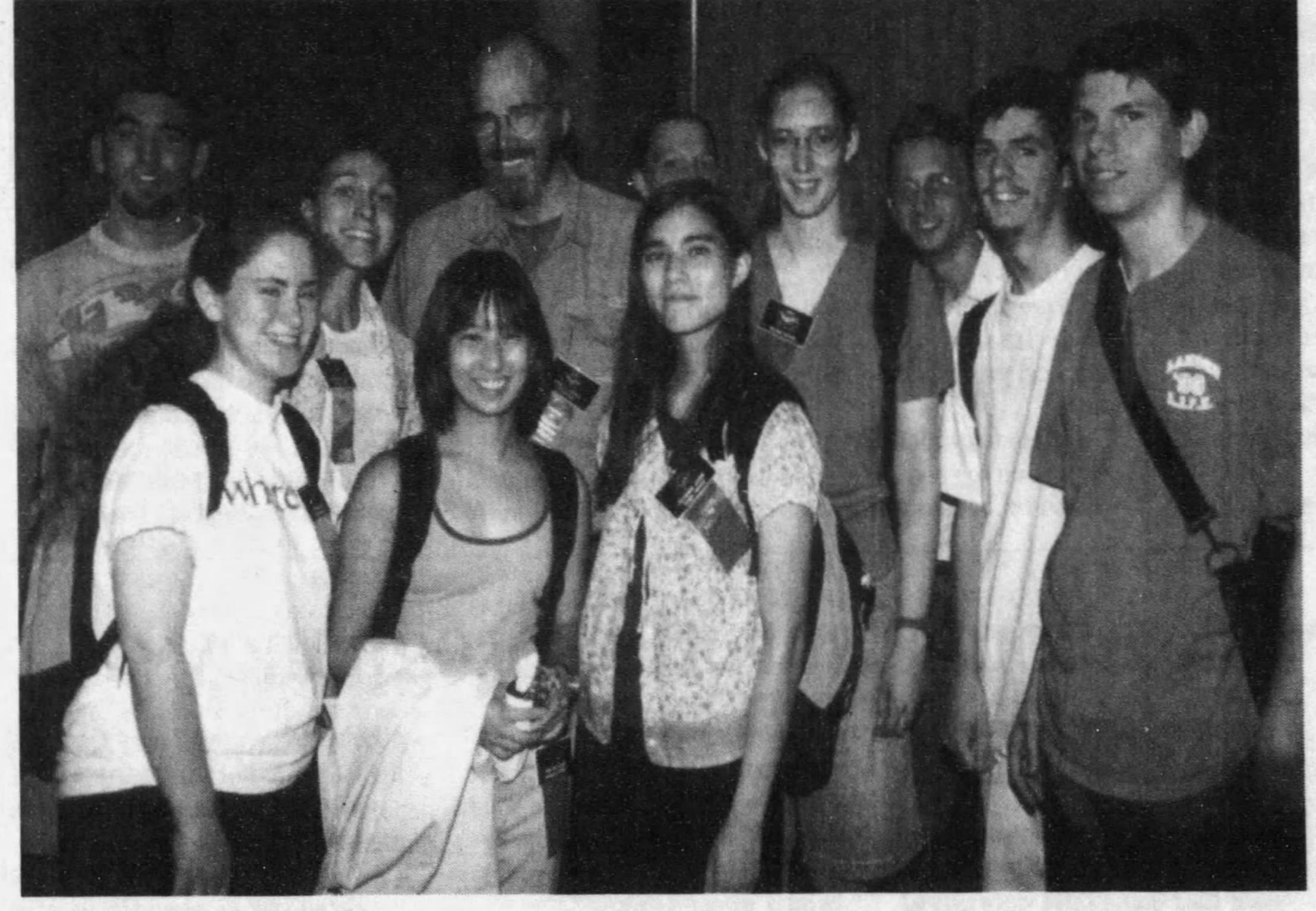
For many of the students, meeting the other "leaders of tomorrow," a term favored by moderator Sam Donaldson of ABC News, proved to be as rewarding as meeting the Golden Plate recipients.

"The students were wonderful and surprisingly humble, considering their accomplishments," said one high school senior.

Another student, who will enter Harvard University in the fall, remarked candidly, "No matter what, there's always the perception that people going to prestigious schools are snobs, but they're not. We're

Such an amalgamation of achievement and talent as displayed by the honor students and the adult honorees awed all in attendance regardless of age. In spite of this, students generally refrained from asking the adults to pose for photographs or to sign autographs. Instead, upon arrival, students introduced themselves to honorees and clustered curiously around them in the hotel lobby.

In the grand foyer of Scottsdale's Phoenician Resort lobby there were excited whispers about how uncanny it was to hear James Earl Jones greet you in the deep, resonant voice of his "Star Wars" Darth Vader, how Arthur Golden was by the soda stand discussing the three drafts of his best-selling novel "Memoirs of a Geisha," and



how Michael Moore, attorney general of Mississippi, was explaining how he sued tobacco companies for \$4.1 billion.

The weekend's events highlighted a variety of formal symposiums and round-table discussions. Each of these served as a forum for debate among adults and students. Topics included "Spirit of the American West," "Society and the

Information Age," "Advocacy and Citizenship," "A Passion for Music," "Mysteries of our Existence," and "Art, Science and Creativity."

The Academy (which has a Web site at www.achievement.org), based in Washington, was founded in 1961 "to inspire youth with new dreams of achievement in a world of boundless opportunity." But "achievement" itself was by no

means the only underscored ideal at this summit. In the vast array of ideas and idealism, education - conventional and otherwise - often commanded the spotlight. Lattie Coor, the president of Arizona State University, summed up his advice as: "keep learning" and "help others."

Maya Lin, architect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Wash-

ington, D. C., relayed her parents' advice that "the most important thing we could do was to never stop learning or questioning." Said Lin, "I think in all my work I have tried to create works that present you with information allowing you the chance to come to your own conclusions; they ask you to think."

On the topic of miseducation, Hill had plenty to offer. Of her 1998 solo debut "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill," she said, "The concept of miseducation is not really miseducation at all. It's really about the things that you've learned outside of school, outside of what society deems appropriate or mandatory. I have a lot of respect for academia, but there was a lot that I had to learn - life lessons - that wasn't part of any scholastic curriculum."

Hill would have to agree that a program such as "Salute to Excellence" lends aspiring young leaders the earned wisdom of adult achievers and their life lessons.

A student from New York ar ticulated a sentiment shared by many of the young attendees; "When I tell people about everyone I met, their jaws drop, and I feel so special."

Now what's left for the students is to imagine how special they would feel returning in 10 or 20 years to receive their own Golden Plate.

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