PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH-MAJOR GRADUATES' ATTRIBUTES, SKILLS, AND PERSONAL QUALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Concerns over job applicants' deficient work skills continuously circulate among employers as the need for competent and work-ready graduates persists. To gather current feedbacks, this study investigates what attributes, general skills, specialized skills, and personal qualities do the employers of English-major graduates' judge as important and satisfying along with job performance. A mixed-methods approach was utilized. Researcher-made questionnaires were administered to 21 employers in various career sectors. The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 software. Interviews were analyzed qualitatively. Results showed that employers put high regard on personal qualities, primarily determination and persistence, self-discipline, and specialized skills, namely communicating in English fluently, accurately, and creatively, and producing well-written texts for various academic and professional purposes. They revealed the least satisfaction on specialized skills such as the graduates' capability in facilitating English language learning in diverse social, cultural, academic, and professional settings; and general skills, namely planning and organizing, and the ability to manage or demonstrate leadership qualities, thus, confirmed the enhancement needs. The further development of communicative competence in English was viewed as an impetus in empowering the graduates.

INTRODUCTION

The graduates' work performance and employers' feedback are anchored on the attributes, skills, and personal qualities. In doing so, the higher education institutions (HEIs) play more prominent roles in ensuring that the produced soon-employees hold a competitive advantage and command greater employment chances. HEIs are therefore expected to "produce graduates with high levels of academic, thinking, behavioral, and technical skills/ competencies that are aligned with national academic and industry standards and needs and international standards" (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2012, p. 2). Different HEIs in the world share in this perspective. Various policies, strategies, and initiatives are being undertaken in public and private HEIs to adapt to changing society (Ruiz & Junio-Sabio, 2012; Segovia & Galang, 2002; Yonezawa, 2007).

Employability refers to students' (and thus, graduates') capabilities to be employed and metamorphoses in the work environment (Yorke, 2006). The context of employability covers the dynamic development of one's abilities (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018) directed at "acquiring, maintaining, and using qualifications aimed at coping with a changing labor market during all career stages" (Thijssen, Van der Heijden & Rocco, 2008, p. 174). Further, it includes adaptation and continual enhancement of skills and attributes for the graduate and everyone in society (Oliver, 2015).

Communication skills are paramount in Asia, and English proficiency is a central idea taught since elementary days as a passport to expeditious employment. In Sri Lanka, Wijewardene, Yong, and Chinna (2014) indicated that good command means strong job potential. More so, in Malaysia, English fluency would mean global employment among its engineering graduates (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Thus, the lack of it would mean shrinking job opportunities. In the Philippines, taking English as a college major is a fully subscribed option because of its flexibility and applicability in various communication-related jobs. Due to its natural proximity to the Filipino language, majoring it is uncomplicated. Likewise, it is an inexpensive course offered in state universities and colleges (SUCs) in the provinces.

Moreover, its degree holders are considered "in demand in the fields that require effective use of the English language to realize specific goals. Career opportunities include academic and scholarly work such as teaching and research, business and industry jobs such as public relations, advertising and documentation, and media and publishing such as writing, translating and editing, and government and diplomatic service" (CHED, 2017, p. 3). Additionally, jobs abound in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries as they have already mushroomed in the country. The only well-known requirement for an applicant is proficient in the English language. In recent years, however, "the outsourced work to developing countries has become more complex and professionally challenging, putting even great pressure on the workforce to communicate effectively in English" (Forey & Lockwood, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, this resonates with more stringent and highly competitive requirements that could cripple those English communication incompetency graduates.

In every academic year (AY), HEIs produce thousands of graduates. In AY 2017-2018 alone, 751,310 Filipino graduates add to the job market (CHED, 2019). Expectedly, their attributes and performance in their respective fields of work speak of the quality of instruction, training, and values they received and developed from the schools where they graduated from.

Considering the stiff competition, the continuously increasing demands for globally comparable knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and the efficiency in applying them at work, there is a pressing need to gather feedback to determine how the English major-graduates

thrive in the companies they now belong and what necessary improvements have to be made to ensure that the future graduates would be more employable in the kind of work they have specialized for, thus, avoiding either underemployment or unemployment. Many past studies were conducted along this track; however, participants involved were mostly business graduates and scarce on graduates whose specialty is the global lingua franca, thus leaving a gap. Therefore, this study's results could fill the existing gap and provide current perspectives on the issue. Specifically, this intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do the employers perceive the level of importance and the extent of satisfaction on the English major-graduates' attributes, general skills, specialized skills, and personal qualities?

2. Is there a significant relationship between the level of importance and extent of satisfaction on the performance of AB English graduates as perceived by the employers?

Literature review

Advanced skills and desirable personal qualities have long been known to catapult an individual's success (Robles, 2012). In the world of employment, they are the essential elements defining rank, function, and responsibilities equivalent to salary and benefits (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2020). Previous studies have also indicated that they are also the determinants of whether one qualifies for either a national or international career (Bennett, 2002; Bridgstock, 2009). The importance of desirable personal qualities has been emphasized recently (Cann, 2004; Lim, Lee, Yap & Ling, 2016; Singh, Pai & Sinha, 2013), noting that they are exceptionally essential in a workplace (Bohatko-Naismith, James, Guest & Rivett, 2015). Employers narrate that graduates who have strong determination stay longer in the company, endure difficulties, and find ways to attain goals. Bakker and van Woerkom (2017) and Greguras and Diefendorff (2009) support this notion highlighting self-determination as strongly linked to being proactive. "Proactivity makes room for individual goals that are not tied to external rewards but are pursued because they are interesting, highly valued, or reflect authentic interests" (Strauss & Parker, 2014, p. 50).

The human capital theory, in which this study is anchored, posits the absolute "significance of education and training as the key to participation in the new global economy" (Fitzsimons, 1999, p. 1). Thus, education becomes a priority of every nation, believing that "investment in education has a positive correlation with economic growth and development" (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008, p. 479). This corroborates to the emphasis of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals 4 - Quality Education and 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth (UN, n.d.).

In the context of globalization, prevalent dissatisfaction over graduates' skills, alarmingly continues. In the United Kingdom (UK), Moreau and Leathwood (2006) studied "non-traditional" graduates of a university. They reported that "universities are urged to ensure that they produce 'employable' graduates and graduates themselves are encouraged to develop their personal skills continually, qualities and experiences to compete in the graduate labor market" (p. 305). Further, they need to be equipped with the usual English and the kind of English that different communities and cultures find comprehensible (Sharifian, 2013). This strand's problem points to the lack of linguistic capability to fully explain one's qualifications for the work (D. Grasmane & S. Grasmane, 2011; Madziva, McGrath & Thondhlana, 2014; Rackeviciene, Janulevičienė & Mockiene, 2019). Of particular note is that if they are to stand a chance, greater attention is needed to develop communication skills, stay motivated, know what is required, and cultivate a sense of determination and persistence (Graves & Luciano, 2013; Jackson, 2014).

Various studies attest that college students try their best to meet the market's expectations by studying hard and subjecting themselves to the internship (Andrews & Higson, 2012; Nunley, Pugh, Romero & Seals, 2016). In Australia, Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragnolini (2004) surveyed the graduates from three schools within Griffith University to determine the contributions that university learning, work placement, and post-graduation employment brought to them. They found out that "graduates and employers felt strongly that industry involvement in all aspects of the undergraduate curriculum was beneficial, particularly because it exposed students to 'real-world' problems and gave them experience in meeting deadlines and managing their time" (p. 162). Moreover, Harvey (2000) posited that HEIs must train their clients for employment and provide them with transformative learning. This champions the idea that employability is "a journey rather than as it has been more traditionally conceptualized as a destination" (Letts, 2019, p. 81). In the Philippines, there was a recent paradigm shift aimed at ensuring the quality of higher education. It embraced outcomes-based education and included graduates' attributes (Macayan, 2017; CHED, 2012). These attributes indicate the graduates' pinnacle of the graduates' achieved learning embedded in the institution's vision and mission. In Australia, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) reported that the universities' most generic common attributes were "written and oral communication; critical and analytical thinking; problem-solving; information literacy; learning and working independently; learning and working collaboratively; and ethical and inclusive engagement with communities, cultures, and nations" (Oliver, 2011, p. 9).

The viewpoints above substantiate the universal concern among graduates' work-readiness. While a plethora of teaching innovations have been made, the majority remain mediocre. Hence, enhancements become the focal point. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the employers' judgment on which attributes, general and specialized skills, and qualities are essential and merit satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY
Participants

The key informants in this study are the 21 employers who are in the best position to provide accurate information on what seems to be very important and whether the employed graduates perform tasks in ways that merit a high level of satisfaction. They were from sectors of food and beverages; government and politics; sales, retail and purchasing; advertising, marketing, and press relation; education and teaching; business management and human resource; BPO; customer service; and health care. Seventeen were from private companies and four from public/government. Their companies employed the graduates of Bachelor of Arts Major in English (BA English) within AYs 2012-2013 (3), 2013-2014 (4), 2014-2015 (3), 2015-2016 (4), and 2017-2018 (7) of a state university in Region IV-A in the Philippines. The internship was not a part yet of the course requirements in those academic years. About company locations, 10 of them were in the province of Rizal (where the University is located), and 11 were in Metro Manila. It is worth noting that the graduates' preferred employment in companies nearby.

Data collection and analysis

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach was applied in the study. Data were gathered through quantitative and qualitative ways (Creswell, 2015) utilizing a researcher-made questionnaire-checklist and focus group interviews (FGI). The instrument included four major aspects, namely: 1) Graduate's Attributes (GA), 2) General Skills (GS), 3) Specialized Skills (SS), and 4) Personal Qualities (PQ). The items in aspect 1 were the official Graduate's Attributes of the University understudy, and those in part 3 were taken from the Policies, Standards, and Guidelines (PSG) for the BA in English Language Studies (BAELS) (CHED, 2017, p. 3). The items in aspects 3 and 4 were culled from relevant literature and studies and feedback from the interviewed

human resource officers, employers, professors, and alumni of the university. The instrument underwent content validation of ten experts, and suggestions were carefully integrated before finalization.

Five-point Likert scale was used with the following range and two sets of verbal interpretation that deal with importance and satisfaction: 4.21 - 5.0 (5 EI - Extremely Important / ES – Extremely Satisfied), 3.41 - 4.2 (4 MI - Much Important / MS - Much Satisfied), 2.61 - 3.4 (3 I - Important / S - Satisfied), 1.81 - 2.6 (2 LI - Less Important / LS - Less Satisfied) and 1.0 - 1.8 (1 NI - Not Important / NS - Not Satisfied).

The employers were contacted through initial talks with the BA English graduates/employees whose names were gathered from the Registrar's Office. The study's nature and purpose were explained first to the graduates, and emphasis was made that the researcher's direct communication with the employers will take place to ensure confidentiality. As employers were contacted, orientation was done to ensure their understanding of the study's purpose and salience. Questionnaires were sent via email, and Facebook Messenger to 15 employers, and six were delivered personally. Retrieval ranged from one week to three months due to employers' preoccupation. FGI's were undertaken through face-to-face, phone calls, and messaging to obtain supplemental information and carry out triangulation (Flick, 2004) of the indicated answers. The quantitative data collected were processed at the University Statistical Center using SPSS version 26 software. The statistical treatments utilized were Weighted Mean and Pearson r correlation. Meanwhile, interview answers were processed qualitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1: Two-fold Employers' Assessment on the Level of Importance and the Extent of Satisfaction on the Four Major Aspects

The figure shows that employers considered all major aspects of great importance, as indicated in the mean values range of 4.42 to 4.67. A grand mean of 4. 52 all interpreted as "Extremely Important." Personal qualities (4.67) ranked highest, followed by SS (4.5) and GA (4.49). General skills (4.42) ranked the lowest. This implies that employers are generally of the view that the desirable personal qualities of graduates considerably matter. On the extent of satisfaction, the employers manifested the highest contentment with PQ (4.34) verbally interpreted as "Extremely Satisfied." This was followed by GA (4.17) and GS (4.15). The lowest was SS (4.10) with a similar verbal interpretation of "Much Satisfied," as well as its grand mean of 4.19. This manifests that employers perceived the major-related skills of the graduates not strikingly impressive. Further, it is worth noting that satisfaction did not equate importance.

Figure 1: Composite figures on employers' perceived level of importance and extent of satisfaction
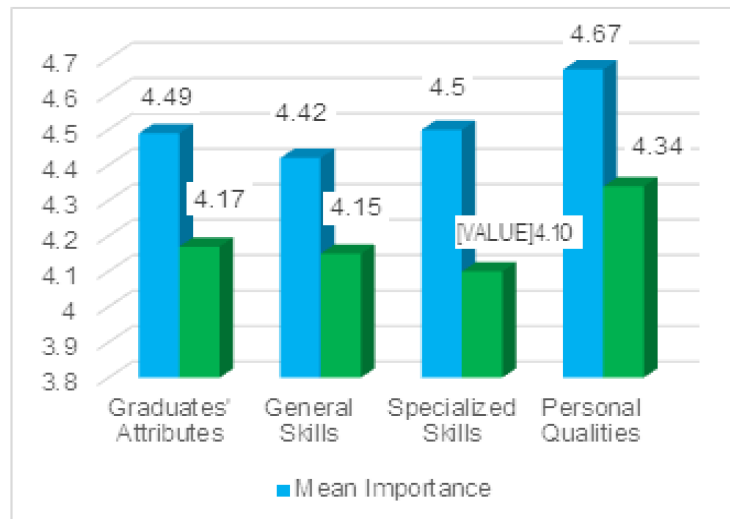
The results of the current study challenged the notion that in the workplace, skills are more crucial than personal qualities. In recent times, where the vast majority obtain higher education credentials, what remains as the point of distinction and edge over others is the set of personal qualities that is understandably unique to each individual. With the unpredictable changes demanded by the labor market, workers are more expected of dynamism and are subjected to pressure, leading to stress (ILO, 2020). Thus, this creates a ripple effect on the recruitment where questions nowadays involve more of "how" and less on "what." How the applicants handle themselves as they answer difficult questions could arguably showcase a strong indication of their degree of determination and persistence towards securing the job (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson, 2008). This corroborates with the current study results wherein out of the four major aspects, PQ emerged highest with highlights on determination and persistence and discipline. In this age of increased globalization where life-changing competitions and struggles abound, most young professionals become fragile and susceptible to suffering in silence and depression (Martinez-Hernaez, DiGiacomo, Carceller-Maicas, Correa-Urquiza & Martorell-Poveda; 2014; Siebert, 2004). Hence, strong determination and persistence all the more become vital towards achieving set goals.

Further, self-discipline was found highly valued by employers. In the study, one of them expressed that "jobs easily get done with those workers who manifest evident self-discipline." Historically, self-discipline plays a major role (Duckworth, Grant, Loew, Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2011; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). One challenge, however, lies with today's massive presence of digital diversion and leisure, where many employees either multitask or demonstrate fragmented attention or distraction as they accomplish tasks rendering them less focused, less creative, and occupied (Haake, 2011; Mark, Iqbal, Czerwinski & Johns, 2014; North, 2010). This was likewise congruent to GS's results (see Table 2) wherein the employers' involvement in social activities was considered the least important.

Next to PQ in terms of importance was the set of SS. This centered on the capability to communicate in English fluently, accurately, and creatively in diverse settings; and on the ability to produce well-written texts for various academic and professional purposes. At work, one needs to be skillful, especially at one's specialization. These results were reinforced by Kassim and Ali (2010) studies, and Riemer (2002). Moreover, these find parallelism with the top attribute written and oral communication reported by the ALTC (Oliver, 2011). Apart from the teaching field and corporate jobs, the proliferation of

BPO industries in the Philippines and other Asian countries like India and China, open opportunities for those who have good English communication skills.

On the other hand, lack of technical knowledge and English skills pose problems in employment (Lim et al., 2016; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012; Wijewardene et al., 2014). Not only oral English is necessary for this digital era, so is written because most of the communications from one entity to another are through electronic means such as emails and instant messages, and these require syntactically and semantically correct and understandable language structures they cannot undergo thorough scrutiny, unlike formal letters. These skills' high expectations are generic to English-major graduates; thus, they must explicitly and remarkably rise to the expectations. A plethora of ways and wise use of digital English learning applications, not to mention the modern pedagogies in teaching, can help improve their English communication skills. Skills enhancement, thus, lies more on the intrinsic motivation of the individual graduate.

On the extent of employers' satisfaction, although the grand mean value (see Figure 1) displayed a positive impression, it is notable that perceptual disparity between importance and satisfaction exists. Indeed, the deficiency was portrayed, which may be attributable to the fact that the graduates did not undergo an internship, which could have provided them with simulation. Therefore, in the absence of actual work experience, there might be a collapse of one's adaptability to the workplace, rendering the entrant confused, hesitant, and timid. Consequences of non-exposure or limited mentoring to what is in store in the real world of work are serious as the graduates grow deprived of simulative challenges. Thus they fail to anticipate appropriate actions (Bay, 2006; McHugh, 2016).

Of the four major aspects, the least satisfaction was with SS, specifically facilitating English language learning in diverse social, cultural, academic, and professional settings. This depicts either the lack of confidence or teaching capabilities of the English-major graduates. This opposes Harvey's (2000) idea citing that "the primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners" (p. 3). They also felt shy and a neophyte to the field. They lamented the absence of an internship in their curriculum, which deprived them of work environment experiences. During the interview, some of them voiced the following concerns:

I don't feel quite confident in teaching my peers since I am new to the company, and I think they may find it offensive.

I didn't feel the need to mentor my fellow workers. I am shy to speak about some of the language elements since all of us are degree holders. I also don't want to be dubbed "smart kid," so I just keep quiet.

I need to enhance my teaching skills if that's required in my current job.

We could have improved a lot if we have had an internship in our 4th year.

Another major aspect with the least satisfaction was GS, of which planning and organizing skills were the lowest, followed by the ability to manage or demonstrate leadership qualities. This projected contrast to the highest item, which was working as part of a team. Arguably, this could be attributed to the instance that while the graduates internalize on being good team members, they have silently imbibed submissiveness and complacency, which do not fully correspond to critical thinking and assertiveness. Unfortunately, this had compromised their abilities to take the lead. Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, and Harding (2012) affirm this notion accentuating that once in the field of work, non-critical thinkers fail to lead.

Further, Jackson and Chapman (2012) confirm that managerial skills appear deficient despite graduates' portrayed abilities in non-technical skills. In thinking that they are merely common parts of the whole, planning and organizing skills were overlooked, thus remained unreinforced. Another salient factor could be the lack of exposure to corporate milieu due to the curriculum's absence. Some of the employers expressed:

It would be nice if she has such abilities to lead because we observe and evaluate who has the potential to become Team Leaders.

Probably, it's because some are still beginners and, thus, handling minor responsibilities for now. But eventually, they have to develop those skills for possible promotion.

While positioned as second in rank in terms of satisfaction, the lowest satisfaction on GA's item *globally competitive* (see Table 1) seemed disturbing. This result challenges educators to educate the students better to embrace upscaling and internationalization of their attributes, skills, and personal qualities to courageously compete for employment in the country and abroad. Likewise, there is wisdom in the offered suggestions of the employers. They serve as authentic antidotes as they were rooted in the workplace where the graduates showcase their experiences. Further, they affirm the cardinal rule of teaching and molding students to be of international caliber due to strong and evolving competition in the world of work. By all means, employees must be globally competitive (Bates & Phelan, 2002). One needs to stand out in the crowd, especially when the stark contrast between the growing number of applicants and the shortage of jobs becomes highly evident. Global labor is recruited through Internet platforms (ILO, 2020; Pongratz, 2018).

RQ 2: Significant Relationship between the Level of Importance and Extent of Satisfaction on the Four Major Aspects

The data show a high positive correlation between employers' perceived importance with the felt satisfaction on graduates' attributes, general skills, and personal qualities. However, a moderately small positive correlation surfaced between importance and satisfaction on the specialized skills. This shows that the perceived importance was not automatically equated with the felt satisfaction of the employers. More specifically, as communication in English and production of well-written texts are deemed significant, the employed graduates cannot fully deliver to suffice the employers' standards or demands of the work.

This instance corroborates that an individual worker's lack of skills can affect the team in its work and output (Huusko, 2006). Thus, it reflects the idea that impeccable possession of the expected work skills is strongly desired in a company. In the 21st century, skills communication is highlighted as the fundamental skill of all. Before one can excel in media literacy or technology literacy, s/he needs to have strong communication skills. Falling short in that paralyzes the potentials of both the worker and the team where s/he belongs mostly in a modern workplace. These findings reveal a need for a rethinking on the part of the individual herself/himself and the academic institution since gone are the days of simple routines and simple skills. With the technological advancements and the intricate work demands of the present times, one cannot remain mediocre.

Table 1: Significant Relationship between the Level of Importance and Extent of Satisfaction

Importance	Satisfaction	Pearson-r	Sig.	Ho	VI
Graduates' Attributes	Graduates' Attributes	.667	.001	R	S
	General Skills	.774	.000	R	S
	Specialized Skills	.333	.140	FR	NS
	Personal Qualities	.684	.001	R	S
	Grand Total	.652	.001	R	S
General Skills	Graduates' Attributes	.719	.000	R	S
	General Skills	.809	.000	R	S
	Specialized Skills	.429	.052	FR	NS
	Personal Qualities	.867	.000	R	S
	Grand Total	.751	.000	R	S
Specialized Skills	Graduates' Attributes	.465	.034	R	S
	General Skills	.579	.006	R	S
	Specialized Skills	.473	.030	R	S
	Personal Qualities	.548	.010	R	S
	Grand Total	.569	.007	R	S
Personal Qualities	Graduates' Attributes	.540	.011	R	S
	General Skills	.634	.002	R	S
	Specialized Skills	.315	.164	FR	NS
	Personal Qualities	.784	.000	R	S
	Grand Total	.601	.004	R	S
Grand Total	Graduates' Attributes	.696	.000	R	S
	General Skills	.811	.000	R	S
	Specialized Skills	.448	.042	R	S
	Personal Qualities	.838	.000	R	S
	Grand Total	.746	.000	R	S

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides insights that personal qualities considerably matter over skills. In this modern time where graduates have an equal share of higher education credentials, skills enhancement programs abound, and challenges in work demands become unpredictable, employers need strong determination and discipline to adapt to this current work milieu fully. The results further advanced the notion that proficiency in English language skills is an instrument for self-empowerment and keeping up with intense globalization trends. The inequality between employers' assessment of importance and satisfaction on the PQ, SS, GS, and GA reinforced the previous studies that improvements have to be made to merit a high level of satisfaction. Thus, employees must not be complacent and diligently pursue further learning, instrumental in high-performance appraisal ratings and career advancement.

Moreover, the research findings convey implications on the hiring of job applicants and promotion of the employed graduates, the improvement in pedagogical methodologies and techniques, the emphasis to training English-majors to lead and mentor colleagues, the revisit of the curriculum, the integration of the on-the-job training considering the multi-faceted roles of a language graduate in this age of globalization, the roles of the stakeholders surrounding the development of a learner, and the learner's initiatives to exceed the minimum employment requirements thus, employing heutagogy.

Pertinent to approaching the results and implications of this study, caution must be exercised as the generalizability is limited in the following points. First, the study was conducted with a limited number of participants. Second, potential employers' view—those sectors that demand English-specialized graduates—were not considered. Their ideas could significantly contribute to the knowledge economy so that students,

professors, school administrators, and stakeholders, in general, would be provided reference. Given these limitations, future studies may involve more participants for an utterly comprehensive survey. Various factors affect graduates' qualifications, and they merit further investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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