

PASS IT ON: ALTERNATIVELY CERTIFIED TEACHERS' ADVICE TO PROSPECTIVE ALTERNATE ROUTE EDUCATORS*

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Abstract

Ten alternatively certified teachers provide advice to other non-traditionally certified teachers via in-depth interviews. The alternatively certified teachers interviewed had retained their teaching positions and achieved longevity in the teaching profession. Data collection and analysis resulted in alternatively certified teachers' advice to other prospective teachers who seek to enter the teaching profession through alternate certification paths.



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1 Introduction

Alternative certification programs are designed to assist individuals who have a bachelor's degree, and usually work experience in the area they wish to teach, enter the teaching profession (Hecht, Ashby, Azinger, & Klass, 2000). Alternative teacher certification has been defined as “any significant departure from the traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs in colleges and universities” (Smith, Nystrand, Ruch, Gideonse, & Carlson, 1985, p. 24). All 50 states and the District of Columbia have implemented some variety of alternative certification path (Feistritzer, 2007).

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According to the United States Department of Education (1991), alternative certification programs allow university graduates admission to the field of education through avenues that are often less expensive and time intensive than traditional routes. A program may be labeled as alternative if it is significantly different from traditional programs (Smith, Nystrand, Ruch, Gideonse, & Carlson, 1985). Alternative certification routes present avenues for people from various life paths to enter the education profession (Feistritzer & Chester, 2000). The non-traditional routes have allowed individuals to enter the teaching profession who are “from other careers, from the military, from liberal arts colleges, former teachers who want to upgrade their credentials and get back into teaching and . . . people who trained to teach years ago but never did” (Feistritzer & Chester).

Quality alternative certification programs are *market-driven* and have been created to help fulfill the needs of specific geographic and subjects areas that lack a sufficient supply of teachers. Often alternative certification programs are cooperative efforts. State education departments frequently work with colleges, universities, and individual school districts to facilitate programs (Feistritzer & Chester, 2000).

Many researchers have studied teachers who have participated in alternative certification programs (Brown & Jones, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rocca & Washburn, 2006). Certification literature abounds with discussions on how teacher certification paths impact student achievement, longevity, and instructional methods, yet there is a lack of personal, candid advice from alternatively certified teachers to other teachers entering the teaching profession via alternate routes. Because each year a multitude of non-traditionally certified teachers enter or consider entry into the education profession, advice was sought from others who have walked alternate paths before them.

2 Methods

Ten alternatively certified secondary teachers participated in the study. Each teacher had a previous career in a non-teaching profession. Only alternatively certified teachers who had been rehired to teach in their respective school district for at least three years were selected for the study. Each teacher received certification through his or her state’s alternative certification process. Participants were identified through lists of names provided by school districts, state departments of education, universities, and other alternatively certified teachers.

The educational biography approach, incorporating the fundamentals of narrative and life history methodologies, was the mode of inquiry. Life history biographies were collected in an attempt to “find out how something happened in the life of a person, or group” (Denzin, 1989, p. 185) while focusing on experiences.

When implementing the method of educational biography, “the biographical narrative belongs to the world of meaning and reflection. It does not have the accuracy of a fact or figure” (Dominice, 2000, p. 30). A life history allows the listener and reader to participate in the understanding of another person. Biographies provide specific details about people’s lives and may disclose interesting patterns (Van Manen, 1990). Good biographies “deal with the ways people faced living—tell how they met problems, how they coped with big and little crises, how they loved, competed, did the things we all do daily” (Kridel, 1998, p. 3).

Educational biography is often used to study adult learning. The method assists adult learners as they “prepare and share life histories that become vehicles through which these learners can reflect on their educational experiences” (Dominice, 2000, p. xv). Educational biography “offers the values of reminiscence and the interpretation of experience and influences upon that experience” and serves as a “distinctive approach to teaching and learning because its main purpose is to help adults deepen their understanding of their own ways of learning and of their existing knowledge” (Dominice, p. xv).

Detailed, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with each participating teacher. The interview data were transcribed and coded. The participants’ educational experiences and views were sought in an effort to discover additional information about alternative certification as seen by those who have experienced it.

3 Findings

Each of the alternatively certified teachers had a unique story to tell. All of the teachers entered the education profession with a wide assortment of past experiences. The participants seemed to enjoy their choice of profession and stated that they became teachers to help students learn.

3.1 Backgrounds of the Alternatively Certified Teachers

The participants came from assorted professions, family lives, and degree fields. Four of the participants, Allen, Michael, Trevor, and Lawrence, had previous military work experience. Frank and Javier formerly practiced law. Frank, Isabel, and Kristal worked as substitute teachers. Marvin, Kristal, and Elise worked in service-oriented professions. Marvin worked in a bank, Kristal was employed as a jailer and waitress, and Elise worked in the medical field. Isabel worked in the business field and Michael served as a security officer and worked in a distribution center.

Kristal's Experiences. Kristal earned a bachelor's degree in pre-law with a minor in sociology and a master's degree in counseling. At the time of the interview, she had been teaching secondary history for six years. Kristal's early educational experiences were positive. "I have always loved school. It has always been my favorite thing," she said. "I had a 4.0 in high school and I didn't miss a day of college until I was a junior. I was afraid to miss. I was afraid I'd miss something," stated Kristal. "There haven't been any bad experiences as far as education for me."

Even before she had received her first teaching contract, Kristal's classroom experiences had begun. "I was substituting because there were no jobs to be had. I was going to college...to get my master's and I was subbing for the home economics teacher and I don't know anything about home etc." Kristal involved the class in a mock marriage activity. Students paired up and had to create a budget. After that positive experience, she attempted to intersperse real-life experiences throughout her lessons. "Those are the kinds of things kids are going to remember," she said. "I interject all kinds of life experiences. Everything you need to learn in school isn't between two covers of a book."

Marvin's Experiences. Marvin earned a bachelor's degree in a medical-related field and a master's degree in educational administration. He taught secondary math and coached basketball, softball, and tennis. Before teaching, Marvin worked during the summers in fields such as banking and sports training. His jobs before teaching were all temporary, however. Teaching was a lifelong goal of Marvin's, although he entered the profession via an alternate, rather than a traditional, route.

Marvin named many positive classroom experiences. One of his students became a National Merit Scholar and countless others earned college scholarships. After high school graduation, Marvin's students continued to contact and visit him. The former students "remember specifics about my class and they thank me for what I made them do," he said.

Amid the successes, Marvin described how he often had to change the way he taught to meet students' needs. Other struggles included working with students who lacked guidance and assistance at home, versus students "who [were] sponges and [could] learn on their own." Marvin spent much time getting his advanced students involved to help other class members.

Marvin shared that his positive classroom experiences were assisted by his good relationships with people and his ability to speak to others. "To speak and communicate with people...get a point across and try to do it in a positive way...I think that all comes from my past...the things I've done...the things I've been involved with...it's just a culmination of everything," he said.

Elise's Experiences. Elise earned a bachelor's degree in a medical-related field and had completed nine years of public school teaching experience. She taught in a junior college while taking the courses required for alternative certification. Elise received the certification necessary to teach science and had taught in both junior and senior high schools.

When asked to discuss her classroom experiences, Elise said, "sometimes it's probably more the little things that you smile about...because the big things you don't find out about until years after you've had a child." She enjoyed visits from past students. "Somebody...comes back a year later and says, 'remember what we were talking about that one day' and they'll describe something." Elise shared that students

sometimes said, “we’re doing it again and I remember it was really easy when we did it in your class’...or ‘I understand it really well now that you’ve explained it to me on my level.” She added that one of her life’s philosophies is that you cannot teach anything at too low of a level. “If it takes drawing a picture in crayons, I’ll try it,” she said.

When asked if she would repeat her choice of professional career, Elise said, “I don’t regret it. I don’t know if I would repeat it or not.” Elise added, “if we were still living in the same area, I probably would have stayed with [medical technology] a little longer, but because we were moving, it kind of made me go ahead and start going in this direction.” Elise said that she did not regret her career change. She stated that she knew she could always return to her original career if teaching did not work out.

Lawrence’s Experiences. Lawrence was an alternatively certified teacher who entered the profession via the Troops to Teachers program. He had experience teaching almost all subjects, including social studies, science, and math, to secondary students enrolled in an alternative school setting. At the time of the interviews, Lawrence was completing his fifth year of teaching. Lawrence’s past careers included work in a trade as well as military service. When Lawrence began college he believed he wanted to major in physical education and become a coach. After a short stay in college, he dropped out to join the military. Lawrence disliked school, but while in the military he said he started to see things from a different viewpoint. He shared that he chose a military career path because he wanted to make the military better and chose teaching to help students learn.

Often Lawrence provided opportunities for his students to work to mastery. His program was demanding, but he was consistent in his dealings with students and parents. According to Lawrence, his classes have accomplished great things. “The principal told me at Christmas he had never seen so many classes completed by the students in here,” he said. “The average students last year increased their reading level by two grade levels. I don’t know about things like that. All I know about is that I’m here to teach these kids to read and write and do math.”

Isabel’s Experiences. Isabel had a bachelor’s degree in a business-related field and a concentration in management information systems. She was certified to teach business math, accounting, business English, finance, and various other business classes. She had spent the past four years teaching grades seven through twelve. Before entering the teaching profession, Isabel worked in data processing, during which time she went to school on and off. “After ten years of that...my philosophy was I was tired of being watered and I was ready to grow,” she said. At that point Isabel said she was either going to complete her college education or stop pursuing it. She chose to complete her education. Upon graduation, Isabel worked for an oil-related company. After approximately eight years of working for the company, she heard about a local catastrophe. “As kind of a result...I had a...life changing evaluation of what was important and where I wanted to go with my life,” Isabel said. “Teaching was always my childhood dream, but in the late 70s the money was not there for sure and my interest was math and computers and I sought other degrees.”

After Isabel’s husband retired, she had “the realization that...we are secure in our life, where we want to be financially, where we need to be. It’s time to do things that we want to do.” Isabel said her company was also downsizing. “I just went to the boss and said, ‘Look, if somebody’s going to go, I’ll go,’ and had an excellent out package.” The funds assisted Isabel for the next year as she completed the requirements necessary for alternative certification. “It was a time of challenge, but it was also a time of realization...after having gone through that, we just kind of reevaluated...what’s important...it opened my eyes.”

Allen’s Experiences. Allen held a bachelor’s of science degree in a law-related field and a master’s degree in a counseling-related field. He was certified to teach various social studies classes as well as psychology. For the past six years he had taught students in eighth through twelfth grades world history and psychology and served as a high school counselor. Allen was the only teacher in his family and was the first person in his family to go to college. Before teaching, Allen worked with juvenile delinquents for over 10 years. He also served in the military before entering the teaching profession.

When Allen began college, he originally wanted to become a teacher. “I went my first year of college and that was when the Vietnam War was going on, a lot of protesting going on the campus...so I did my own protest. I enlisted in the Army.” When Allen later returned to college, he chose to major in the area in which he was working. Allen said that while serving in the military he “started thinking, if I was to go

ahead and take the early release money, what would I do? Teaching...I enjoyed that...and they were talking about Troops to Teachers at that time to help people get into the classrooms,” Allen said. “And I thought, sounds like a pretty good deal. So I decided to go into teaching at that time...the seeds were sown...but then...they just sprouted.”

Javier’s Experiences. Javier held a bachelor’s degree in a science-related field and an advanced degree in law. At the time of the study, he taught upper mathematics classes to students in grades nine through twelve. He had been teaching in the same school district for ten years. Before beginning his teaching career, Javier worked as an intern at a firm, and then practiced law. Javier said that he quickly became disillusioned with the law. “I got to thinking about things, other things I would like to do. Teaching was at the forefront.”

One of Javier’s classroom victories was seeing his students’ eagerness to take a variety of his courses. “They’re always very anxious to get in a second and a third and a fourth course with me,” he said. Javier also shared that students who entered his classes hating math exited the courses being able to tolerate or even enjoy the subject. “And I’ve actually had a student who...felt like she could not do math, and by the time I had had her for two different courses...was saying things like, ‘I think I would really like to be a math teacher.’” Javier had received several teaching-related awards and earned national teacher certification.

Frank’s Experiences. Frank had a bachelor’s degree in a government-related field as well as a law degree. He was certified to teach various history courses, but mainly taught students in a lower high school grade. After practicing law for more than 15 years, Frank went into business with several other people and served as an executive officer in the company. After selling his interest in the company, Frank said he was not interested in returning to the practice of law.

When Frank was offered a last minute teaching position, he worked quickly to prepare for the classroom. “There was a lot to do to get the...approval, get the course work set up.” Frank was required to complete a teaching methods course and a special education course, for a total of six semester credit hours.

Frank described his classroom management as “a constant, consistent project,” but said he had been relatively successful. He shared that many people believe “older folks” are “reluctant to change for negative reasons...but generally it’s a matter of perspective...you’ve really got to see a worthwhile likelihood of a worthwhile change.” Frank said that lack of classroom experience “is a daunting thing...for an administrator thinking in terms of hiring somebody.”

Michael’s Experiences. Michael was a math teacher with a degree in mathematics. At the time of the study, Michael had been teaching grades nine through twelve for eight years. Michael had formerly worked as a security officer and at a distribution warehouse and had served in the military. Several experiences and interactions led Michael into teaching.

When he was in high school, Michael taught weekly language courses to younger students through a language class. “Somehow, I ended up in Future Teachers of America...and I was always being a smart aleck in high school. Somebody said, ‘You want to teach?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll make enough money to starve off.’”

Michael shared that while in the military he received calls and letters from family members that described the trouble his niece and nephews were having in school. Michael’s sister told him that the state needed math teachers and shared the details of an alternative certification program. “So I got my early out, came back, started working...went and checked on the alternative...program,” he said.

Michael shared that he liked to think that he was making a difference with some students. He added,

3.1.1

But more and more I hear things like people who graduate from high schools, they go on to tech schools for a year or two. They get out, they’re making \$40,000 a year...you get students you do all this stuff for. It’s hard to keep doing all that stuff and not get thank yous...there’s always a lot of students that will say ‘thank you,’ or they’ll get the bright look on their face, and that’s a thank you.

Trevor’s Experiences. Trevor earned a bachelor’s degree from a United States military academy. At the time he graduated from the academy there were no specific majors so he earned a master’s degree in a computer-related field. Trevor retired from the military and substitute taught for three months before

becoming a full-time teacher. He was certified to teach secondary math and science. At the time of the study, Trevor was teaching junior high science. He had been teaching for six years.

Trevor shared that some of his greatest classroom accomplishments involved using real-life scenarios in his lessons. “For example, it may be in pre-algebra and I’ll be talking about ratios, and I’ll want to talk about miles per gallon or cost per ounce or something like that,” he said. “Sometimes it catches the children’s interest.” Trevor added, “my successes are when I find somebody who actually believes that there is an application for science or math in real-life and it’s pretty satisfying when you run across that in ninth grade, or younger.”

3.2 Advice to other Alternative Path Teachers

The alternatively certified teachers provided advice to their future alternate path colleagues. The teachers’ advice centered around the themes of working with students, interpersonal skills, past work experiences, self-confidence, commitment, and the pursuit of a traditional teaching degree.

Experience Working with Students. The participants recommended obtaining some type of classroom experience before beginning to work as an alternatively certified teacher. Javier said that others who wished to become alternatively certified should “get into the schools long before they make the quantum leap of...quitting their job and getting into the program.” He had been in classrooms and talked to teachers and administrators a great deal before making the decision to teach. “I think, unfortunately, a lot of people come in...think that schools are like they used to be. Well, they’re not. They’re not...anything like they used to be. Students have a lot more say in...what is done in the classroom,” Javier said.

Kristal’s advice to other alternatively certified teachers was to work with children and in classroom environments as much as possible. She suggested that alternatively certified teachers observe first to see if teaching is the right career for them. “I wouldn’t change a bit the way I’ve been certified. It worked for me and my life and my situation,” she said. Isabel’s advice to others who seek alternative certification was to first work in a school. “When I subbed for that one year...it opened the doors to me; the opportunity to see and focus in on the age group that I liked...I would highly recommend the substituting.”

According to Frank, past experiences in schools would be helpful: “it’s...a formidable situation in high school with the high school kids and...the fact that you can’t just strong arm them...They have to want to do what you want to do in order for you to get anything done.” Frank said that he substitute taught some because he “just wanted to be sure...that I could handle the kids and handle the situation...and when I decided that I could do that, I went ahead and took the examinations and passed the tests I needed to pass.” Javier suggested that alternatively certified teachers should ensure their skills are strong. “I would suggest anybody...thinking about alternative certification not overlook the curriculum that they’ll be teaching.”

Interpersonal Skills. The alternatively certified participants acknowledged communication and other interpersonal skills as essential to achieving success in the classroom. According to Javier, alternatively certified teachers often fail because “they’re not prepared for the personality conflicts.” Kristal shared that “people skills, not only getting along with teachers, but relating to kids, probably is a weakness I’d say alternatively certified teachers might have.”

Trevor’s suggestion to alternatively certified teachers was “learn that you have to coexist with the people who’ve been doing it for their whole lifetime.” Isabel said she facilitated positive interactions with her students. “But one of the big things that I really demand from my students is...the concept of you build your case before you go to the courtroom. Build your case before you get in my face,” she said. “Maybe they teach this in traditional education, but I really believe that more teachers should be more open, should be more honest, and should be more abrupt with high school kids.” Isabel added,

3.2.1

School should be a good, fun place, but I think that once a child gets to the high school level, they need to recognize that it’s not la-la land anymore, and it’s not all about having fun and being social. It’s about responsibility and trying to better their situation and themselves...maybe sensitivity...a traditional educator

may be taught a little more sensitivity than someone that comes though an alternative [program]. To me business is black and white and education is all that gray matter in between. That was a concept that was somewhat of a challenge to recognize. . .there's not always a right and a wrong; sometimes there is some of that gray matter, because in corporations and businesses you don't have that gray matter.

Prior Work Experience. States vary in their requirements for alternative certification candidates. The alternate path teachers shared that their past employment experiences helped to assist them in achieving longevity in the education profession. An item of advice from Elise to alternatively certified teacher candidates is that the prospective teachers should have five years of prior work experience.

Marvin believed that the various summer jobs he held while in college contributed to his classroom longevity. Elise said she was glad she entered teaching via an alternative certification program. "I feel like I knew what I was doing. It was more of a definite decision, that yes, I do want to go into teaching, and I'm willing to sacrifice [medical technology] so I can get to that point." Elise recommended other alternative certification candidates have at least five years of experience working in their primary fields.

Exude Self-Confidence. Trevor suggested that teacher candidates exhibit enthusiasm and apply their background experiences to whatever area they teach. Lawrence advised that fellow alternatively certified teachers not "feel that just because you have not gone through the teaching program that you are a less qualified teacher. My first year that I was a teacher I wouldn't even go in the teachers' lounge." He added,

3.2.2

As soon as I would walk in there I would just feel so intimidated. . .all these people with all their degrees and they're all so smart. They'd sit around talking about this and that. . .and I was intimidated by all these people. . .but if you have confidence. . .if you're good at whatever it is that you're teaching, you know your subject, and you want to help people, then really, that's all you need.

Lawrence recommended: "never say anything that you're not willing to follow through with. Never make a promise that you can't keep. Never make a rule that you can't enforce. And be fair. The kids have to believe that you're being fair." He added, "You can be the strictest teacher in the world or the easiest teacher in the world as long as you're consistent and fair; the kids will adapt. . .don't be afraid to raise the standards."

Commitment to the Profession. Trevor advised that a decision to enter the teaching profession should not be taken lightly. He shared that teachers should "set a goal of longer than they think they should stay. . .but don't say that I'm going to go in because I'm not happy with my previous life."

Isabel's recommendation for alternate path teachers was to "take the challenge for the reason that you want to make a difference in the kids' lives, and not as a means for a paycheck, because, as far as careers go. . .it has been by far the most demanding career." She said that during her first year of teaching she stayed after school each day so late that her husband asked her what time school was over. Isabel shared that she was challenged to improve each day. She added that teacher candidates,

3.2.3

need that experience of interacting with kids and communicating with kids, and even if they have children of their own, you need to be out there with kids that don't know who you are. . .do it for the compassion of the profession, not just as a. . .change. . .my first choice didn't work so I'll do. . .the runner-up. Don't allow education to be a runner-up. Choose it.

Allen's advice for others pursuing alternative certification was to be persistent. "The biggest problem that I had was. . .getting that first job. It's tough, it really is. If it hadn't been for Troops to Teachers, I might have just given up on it totally." He added, "Make sure you're prepared. . .get your resumes out and try to get that job." Allen also suggested meeting face-to-face with state department personnel. "Having a Troops to Teachers guy down there in the education department helped. Once I started going through him, I had no delays."

Earn a Traditional Teaching Degree. If he was to repeat his professional life, Michael said that he would probably earn a bachelor's degree in teaching mathematics. Michael's advice for prospective teachers who

wish to pursue alternative certification was “go back and get your teaching degree...[or] you’re going to suffer, and if you have any type of conscience, you’re going to realize your kids are suffering.” Michael said that if teachers did not understand the material and “if they don’t have the understanding of how to deal with the student, deal with the parents, deal with the administrators, and all that combined together, then they’re [education courses] useless. They’re worse than useless. They’re a detriment.” Michael added,

3.2.4

I don’t think the alternative certification program is a good thing and I know the irony is I’m a product of it...but I really think that it’s not answering the problem, the lack of teachers. If anybody wants to be a teacher, really wants to be a teacher, then they would not mind, or they would have the fortitude to go back and get a teaching degree...A school is made up of teachers who can teach. And if you don’t have that, you don’t have a school. I don’t care how much money you’ve got.

If he could repeat his career, Trevor said that he would choose education as his first profession and would go through the traditional certification process. Trevor’s advice to prospective teachers who wished to pursue alternative certification was to contact the state department of education for assistance.

4 Discussion and Implications

Those in favor of alternative certification “insist alternative routes play a critically important role in expanding the pool of teachers, and in particular provide a pathway for unusually capable candidates who otherwise would be lost to the profession,” while those who oppose it contend that “alternative route programs shortchange both teacher candidates and the students they teach because their preparation, particularly in pedagogy, is inadequate” (Education Commission of the States, 2003, p. 3).

Although he had no experience with traditional preparation programs, Marvin said that he wished that traditional certification programs were more like his alternative program. He shared that his teaching skills developed because he was responsible for his own learning, rather than being compelled by a traditional program. Marvin appeared to consider traditional programs as malevolent forces that would require him to participate in field training and additional coursework. He posited that some people are *cut-out* to teach and others are not; whether someone might be a successful teacher, he said, is dependent on the person’s character. Marvin shared the belief that his own character was worthy of the profession, and, based upon his continual rehiring and promotion, his school district’s officials appeared to concur.

Regardless of certification path, individuals new to the education profession can find teaching to be grueling. Much of the advice provided by the alternatively certified teachers may, in fact, apply to novice educators. Those who enter the profession without traditional preparation may, however, find the profession to be even more demanding. The teachers who were studied advised individuals who work with alternatively certified teachers to involve the teachers “in as many different things as you can because they will benefit from knowing...knowing how things work in the honors program...in athletics...in the counseling office...on field trips...get them involved in a lot of different things.” They suggested that school administrators not be concerned with overwhelming the new teachers “because the job itself...is...overwhelming...get them in there, get them involved in many different things so they can create their own styles.”

The alternatively certified participants recommended that their prospective alternate path colleagues be committed to the teaching profession, rely on experiences gained through prior non-education related work, and spend time working with students before committing to a full-time teaching position. Although they had much less preparation than many of their colleagues, the teachers in the study passed judgment on the traditional university preparation in which their traditionally certified colleagues had participated. The teachers in the study judged entry to the profession through their own frames or reference, although they had vastly different entry paths to teaching than did their traditionally certified peers. The teachers who were interviewed will never know what they would have lost or gained through traditional program participation, but they indicated the belief that they could provide valuable counsel to others who enter the profession via similar alternate paths.

5 Summary

Although widely debated and often opposed, alternative certification is a reality and incoming teachers need advice on how to be successful educators. Michael commented that if alternative certification is going to continue to exist, alternate path teachers must gain more real world experiences:

5.1

You can't...say just because someone knows something...they can teach it. And if you don't prepare people for it they're going to burn out. Maybe they've got the heart to be a teacher, they just...didn't get their teaching certificate....There's only so many times you're going to hit your head against the wall.

The suggestions the alternatively certified teachers provided were shared in hopes that their prospective alternate route colleagues would hit their heads against the wall one less time than they did.

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