

# NASFAA's "Off the Cuff" Podcast – Episode 283 Transcript

## OTC Inside the Beltway: Tackling the 2024-25 FAFSA Soft Launch

Justin Draeger:

As I was saying, what I want for you, Karen, in 2024, is better internet. Because you have an older home, which is a lovely home, by the way. Is it a historic home?

Karen McCarthy:

No. No, not historic.

Justin Draeger:

Because you're in downtown Richmond. It's a lovely home.

Karen McCarthy:

It's 100-years-old. Yeah, it is.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, it's a lovely home. It could be on a historic register, I don't know.

Karen McCarthy:

It's not.

Justin Draeger:

Is it not?

Karen McCarthy:

No.

Justin Draeger:

Okay, well. Okay. Well, but you're also in downtown Richmond, which I know is definitely zoned for great broadband, so what's going on? Why are you constantly blipping out on our podcast recordings?

Karen McCarthy:

I am going to blame-

Justin Draeger:

Do you not pay for it? You don't pay for it, do you?

Karen McCarthy:

No. I'm going to blame Comcast because-

Justin Draeger:

Don't blame Comcast.

Karen McCarthy:

It's so easy.

Justin Draeger:

This is bull. You don't pay for it. I know you, because I see you with your janky old iPhone, and you don't-

Karen McCarthy:

I don't have a janky old iPhone.

Justin Draeger:

I know you have a janky iPhone. What's the story?

Karen McCarthy:

You know what, though? Wait, so I do have an iPhone story, because over Christmas we are with my nephew, who's 27, who gets a new phone every two years.

Justin Draeger:

Good for him.

Karen McCarthy:

No, no. And he has no money saved. He's penniless. And I was like, "Jack, that's not the way to do it." And he is all like, "But Aunt Karen, how often are you on your..." So he's doing the math on how many hours you're on your phone, how much you're paying per day to have this really great iPhone, the latest and greatest. And I said, "But you know what, Jack? They do that same calculus when they're talking about if you save \$2 a day, in 10 years with compound interest, you could be a millionaire." Jack has no money.

Justin Draeger:

He could be a millionaire and miserable his whole life. You know what, this is like the same people. These are the Dave Ramsey acolytes who tell me not to buy a latte. You know how miserable my life would be if I couldn't have an iced coffee every day or a latte every day? Yes, fine, maybe I'd have \$50,000 in 30 years, but I would have \$50,000 of misery. I just want an iced coffee and I just want you to have good internet. That's all I want.

Karen McCarthy:

I know, but you know what? It really isn't I don't want to call Comcast. I just don't want-

Justin Draeger:

You have an assistant. Can't you just have your assistant call Comcast? I'm sure we can have Christine call.

Karen McCarthy:

I can't make her do that.

Justin Draeger:

I'll have her do it.

Karen McCarthy:

No.

Justin Draeger:

There, let me just fire off an email.

Karen McCarthy:

No, because you know what they're going to... Yeah, they're going to be like, "Oh, I think-"

Justin Draeger:

Christine, get Karen's Comcast account number and call Comcast and upgrade her to the highest internet.

Karen McCarthy:

Because you know they're going to say, "I think it's the wiring in your house, ma'am. Would you like us to..." You know? Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

Okay, quick internet story and then we got to talk about serious stuff. But when Deanne and I lived in an older home... It wasn't 100-years-old, but it was older. And I am like your nephew, who there are certain things in life... I do that math too. There are certain things I'll save on, but there are certain things that I am like, "I use this every day, so I'm going to pay for the best." My phone is one of them. I use it every day. So I like to have a nice phone. I have a nice bed because I sleep in it every night.

Karen McCarthy:

I have a nice bed. Yeah, I'll give you that.

Justin Draeger:

All right. I don't need a nice car because I don't... My car is eight-and-a-half-years-old. I don't need a nice car, whatever. I don't spend a lot of time in the car. I don't care about the car as much as other people do. So I make my sacrifices in other places.

But we had a guy come upgrade our internet in an old home, and he went into our crawl space to update it. And I don't like crawl spaces or attics personally. And he went into our crawl space, and all I saw was him go in and just the floor came alive with bugs jumping everywhere.

Karen McCarthy:

Oh, like those little crickets?

Justin Draeger:

Yes, the spider crickets specifically.

Karen McCarthy:

Oh, I heard of them as like camel crickets.

Justin Draeger:

They're camel. Yeah, they're like camel crickets, but I think around here they call them spider crickets. Which if you've never seen, are technically crickets, but they look like spiders and they don't jump in any... They don't jump in a logical way, they just jump haywire. And I just was like, "I feel so bad for this guy. We probably should have hired an exterminator. Maybe we should have done something about this." And I don't know, I was just like, "Well, too late now. Anyway, I hope he fixes the internet." I just walked the other way. But anyway. Anyway, Karen.

Karen McCarthy:

I hope he fixes the internet.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, my resolution for 2024 is to get you better internet.

Karen McCarthy:

Okay.

Justin Draeger:

Hey, everybody, welcome to another edition of "Off the Cuff." I'm Justin Draeger.

Karen McCarthy:

I'm Karen McCarthy from NASFAA's policy team.

Tim Maggio:

And I'm Tim Maggio, NASFAA's community manager.

Justin Draeger:

Welcome, Tim. Glad to have you on the podcast. This is our first one of 2024. And we're starting off bringing you on board, Tim, because there has been a lot of chatter in our communities, and you are our community's manager, so you've been monitoring the ebb and flow of how folks are talking. Welcome.

Tim Maggio:

Thank you.

Justin Draeger:

We're going to talk about all things FAFSA today because today we are encapsulating the big rollout of the new FAFSA, how that's been going, some of our members' feelings, and where we might be headed over the next couple of weeks. We've got you, Karen, with us. Tim's with us. Let's jump right in.

So Karen, I'd like to talk to you. First and foremost I want to ask you, did the Department of Education meet their mandate and roll out a FAFSA by January 1st? That's what the law required. Did they do it?

Karen McCarthy:

Is this an opinion question?

Justin Draeger:

Oh geez. You're a clarifier to the end. I mean, this was a yes or no question.

Karen McCarthy:

I know.

Justin Draeger:

Failed. You failed my first test in 2024.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I mean, do you think that they did?

Justin Draeger:

No, that was a question to you. Okay, Karen's stalling, yes. Did they meet the legislative mandate?

Karen McCarthy:

I would say they have met the letter of the law.

Justin Draeger:

Okay. And you obviously chose your words very carefully, because they met the letter of the law, it was a soft launch, and the FAFSA was up very briefly before the new year and then was taken down. And I think the reason that it was up so briefly was because they were accepting a certain number of applicants, a very small number, at least at the very beginning, and then they saw certain errors, they took it down, and then have been working furiously day after day to patch up those errors.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, and expand the window.

Justin Draeger:

And expand the window. And we have seen, I guess you would almost say, an... If you were to graph this out, you would say almost an exponential increase in the time that it's been up since launch day, right, because today we're taping this on 1/4. You might be listening to it today or on 1/5, but today and yesterday it was up for an average of 12 hours on both days. Is that right?

Karen McCarthy:

Oh, today... It is supposed to be up for 12 hours today. So hopefully they'll keep ramping that up, and eventually we'll get to the point where it will be available all the time, 24/7, like the FAFSA normally is.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, I think where we get into a little bit of trouble is when the department... They said it would be a soft launch, and that probably left a lot of room for interpretation. I don't know that people thought when they heard soft launch, that first day would be roughly 30 minutes, next day might be an hour or two, the next day might be an hour or two.

And so when the FAFSA was available, a lot of schools or college access people or states or scholarship providers might've told people, "The FAFSA is available. Go ahead and fill it out." People went and discovered the site wasn't available, or people might've logged on, if they were one of the people that were able to get in, and then the site might've gone down and they weren't able to complete their application, even though they thought they might have been able to. So caused some challenges, is that fair to say?

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I mean, yeah, I feel like they did set the expectations at a certain level when they said that this was going to be a soft launch, and so everybody knew it was not always going to be available. I think that the frustrations for many people are that if it was... It was only open one hour a day, so there were people who were trying every hour around the clock and never hit that hour, so I feel like that really ramped up people's frustrations in terms of the accessibility. I don't think anybody expected that limited availability.

Justin Draeger:

Okay, so let's not spend a lot of time there. I mean, it's been getting better every single day, so we are getting the issues worked out. We'll talk more about the issues in just a moment. Tim, let's go to you, because you've been enmeshed in the NASFAA communities in all of this. What are our members feeling as we go through this process? And on all sides of this, what are they talking about? What are they seeing and feeling?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, I think going from what Karen was saying is I think that we still had some community members back in December who were hoping for... had a lot of hope and stuff like that. So as we've gotten closer to January and after the soft launch, I think some of that hope has kind of been deflated for some.

But I think we're getting some mixed reactions. A lot of what people are saying is that they're feeling disappointed, confused, anxious. But some people are seeing... They were kind of expecting that. One member... One of my favorites is you know that meme that says, "This is fine," and there's a dog with a coffee cup and fire? He said that's the perfect meme to sum up how he's feeling right now.

And it's just I think our members are trying to be as uplifting and good-spirited about it as they can, but they're just... They're in a place of just what's next? They were hoping this would initiate a next phase, and they're really feeling, I think, a little bit powerless for how they can help their students and what they can do next. But they're trying to keep it lighthearted and have some fun, and over in our community space, they've been sharing some very funny memes and gifs of how they're feeling.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, I appreciate the angst, the frustration, the challenges, and they've been sending those into us as well, Tim. I know that our colleagues over at the Department of Education are also working on this very

hard, and as we said, some of the issues we've seen get resolved very quickly and they are increasing the time that it's available.

Tim Maggio:

We've had a lot of members who've actually acknowledged that and said they... If I was to ask them earlier this week how they were feeling versus today, I think the answers would've been a lot different. So there's a lot of people who are acknowledging all the work the department's doing. And one member even went so far to say, "What could we expect if ED hasn't been given the right amount of funding?" That's been one comment that's been made.

Justin Draeger:

Resource constraints aside, I suspect when we get on the other side of all of this... And I mean "all of this" in all caps. This is really a multi-step process that we haven't really thought about as a community, and I'm sure the public doesn't have a lot of insight into this at all. But student fills out the FAFSA. The Department of Education and all the database matches that happen, the Department of Education processes the FAFSA. Goes to the institution. The institution takes that processed application, turns it into an aid offer, provides and pulls all the external resources and internal resources into one aid offer. All of these processes are steps in a very long road, that you realize how fine-tuned this process is when you break them all apart in 2024. People have complained for a long time this is a very disjointed and confusing process.

Well, what if we broke them all apart and then separated them by multiple weeks? Now we'll see just how complicated this all really is because that's what's happening right now in real time. So we're in, like, students are filling out a FAFSA. The part we're not even at yet is where schools are receiving that applicant data. Any of our members talk about that, Tim?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, and I think that's where some of the mixed feelings come in, is that they've acknowledged that when they've helped students fill out the FAFSA, it does seem easier for the student when they're filling it out. But they live in both worlds essentially, where they can see how the student has having an easier time, but they're just waiting for the data to get here, is what a lot of people are saying, is it's great that we've had this soft launch, but there's nothing that they can really do. They kind of feel like their hands are tied has been some of the messaging.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, any other comments worth highlighting here, Tim? Summarizing or quoting anyone?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, I think one of the things that has been mentioned a few times is the amount of leeway that is being asked to be given to the department is something that a lot of schools have mentioned, a lot of our members have mentioned, is when it's our turn to be asked for this leeway, where is it for us?

Justin Draeger:

So this is highlighting the fact that schools are given hard deadlines and isn't necessarily given the sort of grace that's being asked of the Department of Education.

Tim Maggio:

Oh yeah, that's been mentioned multiple times. And not just about FAFSA simplification, a lot of different topics that feeling gets attached to.

Justin Draeger:

I know this has been a long time ago, probably before a lot of maybe our Department of Ed colleagues who are currently working on this may have even been at the department, but certainly some haven't. But Karen, it reminds me of gainful employment round one when this was all new and there were reporting requirements, and all the reporting requirements weren't even out and the department was sending threatening letters to schools telling them they weren't administratively capable.

Karen McCarthy:

Right, right.

Justin Draeger:

It didn't feel like there was any leeway given at that point to schools, and that the department was contending that schools had plenty of time to get this done. This is the sort of thing where it's coming back around.

Karen McCarthy:

What goes around comes around, yeah.

Justin Draeger:

What goes around comes around. This is like year three, and a year was provided of grace by Congress, and so I understand that sentiment from institutions.

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, I think they feel like they're asked to be put in a bubble where they can only focus on FAFSA simplification, but they had federal work study reporting deadlines that they had to get, and we're getting lots of emails about those too. So they're getting hit at all angles right now.

Justin Draeger:

One of the things that does stand out to me, Karen, I wonder if you have an update on. A lot of schools right now, because they don't have... I want to pick up on this thread of the January 30th date that you mentioned members are talking about, Tim. But in between here, because schools don't have applicant data right now, Karen, they could be testing records. I think a lot of schools are worried about the fact that they don't have... They're worried that when ISIRs start to flow to institutions, they will not be ready to go because it hasn't been fully tested on their systems or with their software providers. The department had promised several hundred records beyond the three that they provided in the fall. Do you know where we are with those hundreds of records that were supposed to be coming? Because the schools could be testing those records right now in their systems.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, the department had promised to release additional test ISIR records, and the latest update that we had from them is that they will be released sometime in January. I do not know what the progress is



of that, but yes, that is one of the things that I am thinking about now, Justin, in terms of what... looking down the road and how this might go and the fact that schools don't have records and people are, I think a little bit, assuming that when the records come... Not necessarily schools, our members, but out in the community, that when the records come, everything's just going to flow from there seamlessly. And I know that we haven't had the adequate number of test ISIRs for schools and software providers to do all of that testing, so that's one of the things that I'm concerned about. What if there are issues when those ISIRs first come to schools and then that delays the process even further?

Justin Draeger:

So as of today... And it's Thursday at 4:00 Eastern Time when we're taping this. I'd say in the last four days we've received... I'm not joking, I'm not being hyperbolic. We've probably received, I don't know, 30 to 40 press inquiries about the FAFSA release.

Karen McCarthy:

It's a lot.

Justin Draeger:

A lot, and Karen, you and your team have been doing a lot of those, most of those. And I think one of the questions we get asked most frequently is, with the FAFSA rollout being as it is, how will this impact aid offers to students? And what we put out in our statement, which Hugh will include in our show notes, is trying to answer that question, which is until schools have the date whereby they receive this applicant information, no school can provide a realistic timeline about when students and families will receive their financial aid offers. So we need that date from the Department of Education before we can say.

And then as you just pointed out, Karen, so let's say we get ISIRS or the applicant data by the end of January, which is the current timeline we're working with. I want to circle back around to that in a second, the current timeline we're working with. If they haven't had time to test their systems, we are assuming that the data that they receive is compatible with their systems, their financial aid management system, that it's data that they can work with, that it doesn't error out, and that they can turn around a financial aid offer in about three weeks. That's best case scenario.

And so far, I would say through all of this, like the last 10 months, which is when we really got into test records, a map that the Department of Ed put out of when they would start hitting certain benchmarks, the department hasn't always hit those benchmarks. And I guess I'm just saying that three weeks is best case scenario of a turnaround for some schools, not all schools. Three to four weeks is probably best case scenarios for schools, because they have to do a lot of work with those records when they come in, but that's only if those records don't have errors and are compatible with their systems.

Karen McCarthy:

Right. And they could be testing those now.

Justin Draeger:

They could be testing those now. All right. Tim, anything else on... Any schools talking about this January 30th, which is when they're supposed to start receiving applicant data?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, there's a lot of people who have watched this soft launch happen and they're wondering if this is how the soft launch went, then how is the launch of the data they're supposed to be getting? One person was saying they're not very hopeful that they're going to get data by February, is what one member wrote.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, I want to draw the distinction here between January and February, because this is a little bit like going to Walmart and seeing something on sale for 9.99 versus \$10, because January 30th and February 1st are... This is all messaging, but if it makes people feel better to say end of January versus February 1, then so be it.

But I guess there's the question of the Department of Education, as we mentioned, making a lot of... putting a lot of effort into smoothing out the soft launch, and whether those resources then are pulling any resources away from what appears to be unfinished work that needs to be done to get this process ready for institutional delivery of applicant data. And that's an open question. I'm not answering that question because I don't have the answer. Do you have the answer, Karen?

Karen McCarthy:

No. But yeah, I do have the same question, that if they were done with the ISIRS then we would have ISIRS. So clearly they still had work to do in the ISIR space. And then they launched the FAFSA, had all of these issues. I imagine, appropriately, that it was all hands on deck to get this FAFSA up and running and have the soft launch work well, but probably some of those hands on deck would have otherwise been working on the ISIR.

Justin Draeger:

Right. Okay, so I think it's an appropriate question. And then there's a scenario that you and I talked about in our webinar, which, Hugh, let's drop a link in the show notes to that webinar in December. And we're not speaking... I feel like we have to speak with all the caveats here, Karen. I don't know if we have a disclaimer we can run and run it in triple time, Hugh, like they do on commercials, if anybody-

Karen McCarthy:

At the bottom?

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. Anybody watches commercials anymore, but if you're not paying for YouTube premium. Yeah, the disclaimer is we're not speaking with insider information here, but we know that several reports have pointed out that the department did not update income protection allowance tables that are supposed to be updated this year. And if the department or the administration is looking at updating those, which would be material and lower SAIs because you're protecting more income that students and families then wouldn't be contributing to their education, so you would be lowering their student aid index numbers, that could be material for a lot of students and families, like hundreds of thousands of them that could make them Pell eligible, not to mention more eligible for just other scholarships, like potentially FSEOG or other institutional or outside aid as well. So that's material.

If they're still considering that, that could also lead to potentially delays, because those tables would need to be updated in some way and then relayed to the institution, which I don't know if it's even worth us trying to offer conjecture on how that would be done, today at least. We've already done this.

You can go listen to the webinar, we get into that. But that could also. So I guess I'm doubling down on the January 30th, February 1st ISIR delivery is an open question that we are asking of our federal colleagues.

All right. This has been such big news that we've released a statement, we've responded to a lot of press inquiry. Such big news that it was even asked at a White House press briefing today, which if you don't watch your White House press briefings like we do inside the DC Beltway, these are usually freewheeling. These are White House pool reporters. They ask about everything from the conflict right now in Israel and Gaza to incursions across the globe to our border crossing immigration issues. And today higher ed was on the agenda, and there was a question from a pool reporter specifically about the FAFSA. Let's give this a listen. Hugh, you want to play that clip?

Reporter:

Just one more thing. How concerned is the president about what appears to be a pretty botched rollout of the federal financial aid form? It was due to be out in October, then it was a drop-dead deadline at the end of the year. Now, there's this soft launch that is going quite poorly, and there's, like, hundreds of thousands of American families trying to figure out paying for college.

Karine Jean-Pierre:

So, look, I do want to take a little bit of a step back here and just lay out a little bit of what we've been able to do over the weekend. So as you stated, they initiated the soft launch, the Department of Education, with the goal of ramping up volume over time to monitor the site performance and create a better experience, obviously, for students and families. And so this is consistent with what... us trying to put forward best practices. That's what you're seeing here.

And just the other night, more than 400,000 applications had been completed, so that's important. The application opened at 8:00 a.m. yesterday and it will be open for the majority of today, obviously. And so this better application process will make college more affordable and a reality for more students. That is what this administration fights for every day. And so obviously, the Department of Education could speak more specifically on details.

But this is part of our best practices. We're trying to do our best to make this process easier for families and students. And so, look, it's going to take a little bit of time, right? It is. But they've been working through it. The Department of Education's been working through this through the weekend, and so we're seeing some better improvements here, and I think that's important.

Justin Draeger:

So I think this is a pretty general statement from the White House press secretary. And I guess the one point I would say is... And Tim, I wonder if we have any member comments about this, if we want to end the sentiment piece on maybe an upbeat note, which is this. The promise of FAFSA simplification, when the kinks are worked out, is that it's supposed to be an easier form for people to complete. And the part that the White House press secretary pointed out here is that this is supposed to be an easier process, and a better application process should make college more of a reality for students. And she refers, like, the Department of Education can speak to more of the specifics.

And I guess I just want to point out, I've had a few aid directors who had personal experience in the last week who were able to get in and complete an application or complete an application for a family member or a student. The people who are actually completing it are like... The comments I've seen, which are an N of like a few, it's not a representative sample, are saying it's pretty easy. It's quick. It sounds like it's an average of under 15 minutes. The IRS transfer of data is happening almost-

Karen McCarthy:

Well.

Justin Draeger:

Well 100% of the time, like it's just coming over. They don't have to do anything. It just comes right over almost in all instances, not always. But there are reasons. We knew ahead of time that it wouldn't come over in certain circumstances. But it's working. People are in and out quickly.

Karen McCarthy:

The funny part, I feel like, about the data retrieval working so well is that it works so well that people are suspicious.

Tim Maggio:

Yeah. Yeah. One person said-

Justin Draeger:

Wait, did this work?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, she was like, "What?" This is disbelief, like, "I don't think this is right."

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, this must not be working right here because it was so easy. They didn't ask me any of these financial questions that I've always had to answer in the past.

Tim Maggio:

I think that says something when people react when it's working so well that they're kind of suspicious.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, yeah.

Justin Draeger:

So we get over the application bumps and kinks, which have been challenging, because I don't want to skip past all of those frustrations. But when it works, on the other side of this, I really do believe that we'll have a simpler process for students and families. I hope the promise of all of this work, and it will be work, will be realized. And I don't think we are by no means out of the woods.

Let's run through some of the outstanding issues that we've identified. And the Department of Education, to their credit, is transparently putting up an issues list so that we as a community can watch and know what is being reported as an issue. Karen, can you run us through some of the big ones right now? And, Hugh, let's drop a link to that issues list that the Department of Education is publishing.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, they have a list of, I would say, 8 to 10 issues the last time I checked, that the department had posted. They were all listed as still open issues, so I haven't seen resolutions just yet. To be fair, they just

posted the list for the first time today, yesterday. And some of the issues that are listed there, I won't go through each of them step by step. But some of them affect small populations of applicants or even smaller populations of applicants, who when they do certain things, they get error messages. So in my mind, those are definitely issues that need to be resolved but aren't affecting huge numbers of people.

And then there are a couple issues there that I think of. They also, they list the issue, whether it's still outstanding, and if there is a workaround, they itemize those as well. And some of the issues that are listed there have what I would consider to be an intuitive logical workaround and probably something that the applicant would try on their own. So for example, there was an example of a student or parent who goes through their section, signs their section, does not submit, probably because they're waiting for their contributor to come in. And then when they come back in, their signature has been erased, and the workaround is that they need to sign again. And so for me, I was like, "Okay, that's easy enough." Yes, ideally the signature would not be erased, but if that were me, I would see, "Oh, my signature's not there. It's prompting me to sign. I already did that. I guess I'll try that again," and then it would go. So those are, I think lesser, issues in my mind.

I think there are two on the list that I think are more concerning. One is about the parents who do not have social security numbers, and those folks, those are the people they had to create the whole new process for them to get an FSA ID. So we've been talking a lot about this population of applicants. And apparently from the issue that is listed there, parents without a social security number are unable to either start a FAFSA form on behalf of their applicant or contribute to an already existing FAFSA. So it doesn't have a lot of detail as to how far they get and when the error message appears.

But the other concerning part about this, the first is that they cannot do anything. And the second concerning part is that the error message that is appearing tells these parents who do not have social security numbers that they are unauthorized to act on behalf of the student since they already have a '24-'25 form. So it's inaccurate, A. A little scary when you start using unauthorized language. So that is an area, I think. This is a significant population that we've been paying a lot of attention to, and they're not able to do anything at this point.

Justin Draeger:

No workaround. There's no workaround from that.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

Talk to me, give me examples of who this population is.

Karen McCarthy:

So this population, probably the biggest category that people have been talking about are parents who are undocumented. The student is eligible for Title IV aid, but their parent is undocumented, does not have a social security number. And so right now... And you are correct that it is listed as no workaround right now. They'll be able to do this when the issue is resolved.

Justin Draeger:

Right. Okay. So this is a pretty big concern. This is at the top of our priority list, I'm sure. We've talked about this with the Department of Education, actually, in meetings. They've put it on their issue list.

They know this is a top priority. They've acknowledged that. All right, you said there's a second, so what's the second?

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, the other one, and this is so... It's kind of benign. It's about the school code list, which you think would be pretty straightforward and easy. And this is just when the applicant is choosing which schools they want to get their info. So really simple, easy process, but obviously crucial to the whole process and the whole information flow.

Justin Draeger:

If you want your information to go to the right school, it's crucial.

Karen McCarthy:

Yes. And so the example that's on the ED list is that some of the school names, if you search by name, are being truncated. And so if your school has an unusual name, then it's not a problem; you can easily identify your school. But if you are searching, say on the University of South Carolina, and they each have different codes, and the schools as they're listed are University of South Carolina Columbia, University of South Carolina Upstate, University of South Carolina Aiken, and all those locations are being truncated, then it can be difficult for the applicant to know which one of these am I supposed to pick? So that is one issue that's listed there on the ED list.

We have also separately identified another school code issue, which is that some schools have let us know that some old outdated, not currently being used, school codes are listed with their school name. And so their fear is that if applicants pick those codes, we won't get their FAFSA information.

Justin Draeger:

So it's almost as if they're working from an outdated school code list?

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I mean, there's one school that said, "We haven't used that code for 10 years or so." So I don't know how it got mixed up, but there's something going on with the school code list.

Justin Draeger:

So they're truncated, so students might be picking the wrong one. And secondly, we have outdated school codes, which is a pretty big... If you want to get to step two, which is your applicant data getting to the schools eventually, is a big issue.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. And the workaround is-

Justin Draeger:

And Karen, this hasn't made it to the issues list over at the department, has it?

Karen McCarthy:

The second one, about the outdated school codes, we notified them, got an acknowledgement. It is not yet on their list.

Justin Draeger:

And we are keeping track, obviously, of other issues that are being sent in. We're not going to spend this podcast listing off all of the issues that people are reporting. Tim, I'm sure you're seeing lots of issues that are being reported out in the communities and out on our social.

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, we're seeing a lot of the same stuff that Karen's reporting in terms of problems with getting the application done and some of the different data points of being able to actually submit it. Some people are still confused on their tax data transfer happening because of the really niche examples where it won't happen. So I think we're just getting through a lot of it. I think we've described this as a very fluid situation. And right now we're right in the middle of it, and I'm really curious about in two months how we're all feeling. I think we're all feeling a little bit kind of on edge, but hopefully as the weeks come and we start to see things get worked out, I think the feelings will be a little bit more calm. But I am worried about how much more our community can handle.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. If people are reporting issues in any of our NASFAA communities, we are monitoring those. Those are passed along. If we see something, we are, of course... That's repetitive and we see a pattern, we do send those along to our colleagues at the Department of Education, so folks should feel free to continue to voice those or send those into policy at nasfaa.org, and we're monitoring all of those channels. Okay.

All right. So we've covered what's going on with the FAFSA launch. We've covered some of our members' concerns. We've covered the stress around a end of January, February ISIR and applicant data getting to institution, concern and open questions around that. We have covered some of the outstanding issues that exist and how members can deliver that up to us.

There's one final thing I want to talk about that. Tim, I think some of our members are talking about, and, Karen, you and I have been talking to other associations partners about, which is really cross-campus departmental communication about what's going on with the FAFSA. And let me try to tackle this from two or three different angles.

One is I saw several institutions who went out with a communication right around December 30th, 31st, January 1st, that said, "The FAFSA is open. Fill it out." And I'm not sure those communications always came from the aid office, because we were clearly communicating soft launch, soft launch, and pointing back to the Department of Education. And I think many aid offices were trying to pull back the reins on those sort of communications until they saw exactly what was happening with the department, and aid offices knew that they weren't getting applicant data until the end of January anyway.

But institutions have marketing teams. Sometimes they have enrollment management machines that are already in process. And so if you're in an enrollment management model or working with your admissions team, or maybe you're working with your institutional research folks, or even your president's office, who's wanting to know, "Hey, how many FAFSAs do we have in the door?" Or they want to know, like, "Hey, can you give us a preliminary on what our budget's going to look like for institutional aid this year?" They just might be so far behind that they don't really understand what's been going on, maybe the challenges associated with the launch. They don't understand that schools literally have no data, like they won't receive data for weeks. Tim, are we seeing any members talking about that in any of our community channels?

Tim Maggio:

Oh yeah, a lot of our members are talking about the enrollment pressures that their institutions are facing. They had to spend all last fall and summer trying to prep their campus partners that the FAFSA was going to be delayed, and now they're having to talk to their campus partners about, "Well, yes, it's available," and, "Sometimes it's available," and, "We're not going to have data until I don't know when." And financial aid professionals, they're always typically seen as the "know" people on their campuses, so this is leaving them frustrated, thinking, "I've got these enrollment pressures to hit, but I've gotten really nothing that I can report on to my campus partners." And your president or your executive cabinet hearing you don't have what they want is not an easy task to give to somebody.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. Do we have any of our folks who are sharing what they're doing on their campus to help keep their other offices, presidents, boards, informed?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, there's a number of people who are trying to set up meetings and trying to be as proactive as possible. There's some people who are trying to say, "Let's use our communication channels to say soft launch and prepare people for hey, this is something that they're still working on." And some of our members are successful at getting a seat at that table, but not all of them can, and there's some frustration when they're not able to have their voices heard there.

Justin Draeger:

One of the things I've seen, and I have the unique experience of having now a daughter who's a second year in college and a son who is a rising first year going to college next year, is that I'm now part of multiple parent groups, and I've seen now two colleges who have deployed in this... I don't want to say lull, because I don't think there is a lull in the financial aid office. But because they're not processing necessarily FAFSAs right now or having institutional... They don't have applicant data right now... They have deployed some of their aid administrators to actually go into these Facebook groups, and they are actually interfacing in these channels. Which I have to tell you, in one of these Facebook groups, there are like 18,000 members in this group.

Tim Maggio:

Wow.

Karen McCarthy:

Wow.

Justin Draeger:

And I'm seeing a financial aid person interact and explain, like, "It was a soft launch of the FAFSA. Be patient. There is no rush. The university won't receive any applicant data until the end of January anyways. You have time. The Department of Education is working on this rollout." And I'm actually seeing a lot of patience from these parents. The moderators might be deleting snarky comments anyway, so maybe I'm not seeing all the snark. But I am seeing financial aid folks deployed into various channels via social media to try to keep... Because parents also are very confused and frustrated and impatient, obviously, because they're trying to figure out how they're going to pay for school next year.



Tim Maggio:

Yeah, and a lot of our members, not just us who are fielding media requests, a lot of folks are showing up on their local news stations trying to explain it to their greater communities.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. All right, I think that wraps up what we know today. This is a very fluid situation. Folks should stay tuned to NASFAA's Today's News if they are trying to stay up to date on the day-to-day information. Because this is so fluid, NASFAA is in constant communications with our federal partners, who are putting in long hours, making sure that they can continue to patch all of the bugs and glitches that folks are experiencing trying to keep this application up 24/7. And we are passing along everything that we're hearing from you.

Tim, if folks want to join any of our communities, can you talk about some of our NASFAA communities that might be applicable to them where they can interface with some other NASFAA members and stay up to date on the communications that are happening there?

Tim Maggio:

Yeah, if you go to our website, under Membership you'll find some information about how to join our communities, and I'm sure we can put it in our show notes as well, in terms of joining what we have on Slack. It's an online messaging platform where we've got more than 3,000 of your colleagues who are available to chat each and every day. Today when I was talking about how people are feeling, we had more than 60 people responding today with how they're feeling about the FAFSA launch, so that's just a smidgen of what's out there. So they can join FA Chat. We have a community for our certified members and so much more. And we're in there. A lot of the NASFAA team interacts, but a lot of your colleagues too. So we'd be happy to see you in there, and know that you're not alone in all of this.

Justin Draeger:

Thanks, Tim. Appreciate all of your work and all the folks in our communities. Karen, great work to you and the team. As always, Hugh, thanks to you and the team for keeping everyone up to date via Today's News. Remember, everybody, to subscribe to the podcast. Tell a friend. That helps other people find the podcast.

And we'll keep coming back. We have our regularly scheduled programming through 2024, but as we have breaking news and stuff, we'll come back and make sure we're keeping everyone up to date. And we hope you all have a healthy and happy 2024. We will get through this all together. Stay well, everyone.