

NASFAA's "Off The Cuff" Episode 104 Transcript

Allie Bidwell: Hey everyone, welcome to another episode of "Off The Cuff," I'm Allie Bidwell, one of our Today's News reporters.

Stephen Payne: I'm Stephen Payne with NASFAA's policy team.

Megan Coval: And I'm Megan Coval with NASFAA's policy team.

Allie Bidwell: Justin is on a much-deserved, well-earned vacation for the next couple weeks.

Megan Coval: Doing very fun, active vacation.

Allie Bidwell: Right.

Megan Coval: Not a ... laying around with piña coladas, umbrella in your drink type of vacation. That's what I'd be doing too. Good for him.

Stephen Payne: We'll do our best to hold down the fort.

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah. Sorry if it's disappointing.

Allie Bidwell: It's been another busy week in D.C., surprise, surprise. Couple more hearings on the Hill. We had one on the House education committee side, another-both were yesterday, Wednesday, in the House and in the Senate. On the Senate, the help committee, they had their third HEA hearing this go-around, and it was focused on...

Stephen Payne: Accountability.

Allie Bidwell: Accountability. And on the House side, Secretary DeVos testified before the House education committee and this is like her third time before a committee in the last two or three weeks.

Megan Coval: Yeah. In two weeks, I think.

Allie Bidwell: Two weeks? Yeah. 'Cause she went before the appropriations subcommittees, so she's been busy. It was over four hours long.

Megan Coval: And you watched the whole thing, right, 'cause you covered it for us?

Allie Bidwell: I did. Yeah, so they started, they took about an hour break somewhere in the middle to go vote. There were votes that needed to happen. Reconvened, went another couple hours, so in total, the hearing was probably four-four and a half

hours. It was so uncomfortable. This was-the topic was just examining the department of education's policy priorities, and so really the House committee could ask Secretary DeVos anything under the sun, and they did.

Megan Coval: 'Cause the last two that she did were solely focused on the budget. So this was budget, accreditation, servicing, whatever they want to get into.

Allie Bidwell: They did touch on the budget, but I mean they talked about student loan servicing, they talked about negotiated rule-making, they talked about borrower defense claims, they talked about the FAFSA Act, they talked about Pell Grant expansion, Federal Work-Study, so many things. And that was just on higher ed. They touched a lot on K-12 issues, like the scholarship tax credit that the department is proposing in their budget. And that took up a lot of time in questioning as well, but...

Stephen Payne: Well when you think about it, the way they set up the hearings compared to the other two, where it's the appropriations subcommittee, which is only a handful of members, versus the full education committee which is about 40 to 50 members, and if you give them all five minutes...now not everyone can be there. People are tied up with other hearings or other meetings, but that's why these hearings, especially a hearing like this where everyone wants to question the secretary, just goes on and on and on and on.

Allie Bidwell: Right. 'Cause you don't get that chance all the time.

Stephen Payne: Right, right.

Megan Coval: And nobody doesn't use the full five minutes.

Stephen Payne: Right.

Megan Coval: No member of Congress is not gonna fully utilize...

Allie Bidwell: They'll yield back with like a couple seconds left, and actually one thing that happened was kinda funny was someone was yielding back to-you yield back to the chairman, so Rep. Bobby Scott is the chairman of the committee and they yielded back to Rep. Scott and he was not there. So they panned over to an empty seat. But yeah, they pop in and out.

Megan Coval: So Allie, why were you uncomfortable? 'Cause I had it on and off. Stephen, I don't know about you.

Stephen Payne: Yeah same.

Megan Coval: I have a feeling I know what you're gonna say, but...

Allie Bidwell: I mean...yeah, you know that Secretary DeVos is not particularly popular with Democrats, so you know it's gonna be tough. There's gonna be some tough questions, but it was just so far beyond that, that it was getting kind of aggressive and, yeah, it was-there was a really, really clear partisan divide in the committee and even in some opening statements, ranking member Virginia Foxx straight-up said the Republicans on this committee want to know what you've been doing to help students succeed and things like that, and just kept saying the Republicans on this committee know this, and we want this, and...

Allie Bidwell: Towards the end of the hearing, she closed out with some remarks that just sort of ... this is a summary of what happened in this hearing. She said that the committee needed a definition of accountability, since that was the topic of the day, and she said "accountability is asking the official a tough question and listening for the answer before deciding they're wrong. It's not grilling the witness and talking over them the moment you don't hear what you wanted to hear."

Allie Bidwell: She went on to say, "My Democratic colleagues have tried for the better part of four hours to twist your words out of context. After doing so they did not allow you to respond and instead filled the time with what they wanted to hear. This is a 'gotcha' hearing, not an honest attempt to learn how the government can better serve students. The arrogance exhibited in this committee today has been breath-taking. Indeed, rarely have I heard so many people tell you how to do your job and say they know how to do it better than you do."

Stephen Payne: Strong words.

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Allie Bidwell: She just like dropped the mic.

Megan Coval: Yeah, there was a lot. And like I said, I sort of had it on in the background, doing different things, but there was a lot of talking over. So really, literally asking the question and then not even offering her an opportunity to answer. And you do feel bad when that's the case, because...

Allie Bidwell: I understand when they're asking a question and the witness kind of dances around the answer and doesn't really get to it. I understand that. But there were parts of this hearing where she would literally get two, three words out, not even a full sentence, and would be cut off.

Stephen Payne: It seemed like everyone was, and in the age of social media and all of that, and people posting all these videos all the time, and even just recently in one of these hearings, an exchange at a hearing with Secretary DeVos and Rep. Pocan went viral. And so I think a lot of folks think, especially newer members-and on the democratic side there's a lot of new members, 'cause they took the House back. And I think a lot of them are looking for an opportunity maybe to go viral a

little bit, and so I think sort of an over-eagerness to really get a lot of questions in and poke out all these holes in what she's saying, but sometimes you have to ask questions and wait for the answer and see where it's going instead of really try to like go...

Allie Bidwell: You have this line in mind going into it, and when it's—wanting to see it through, that doesn't make sense...

Stephen Payne: Well I know what you're saying, and I think for a lot of it, it comes down to, when you think about all the different members of the committee you're trying to talk about something different than what everyone else has talked about, so you and your staff are looking for different issues that you wanna cover and that you wanna point out and you wanna be the one who talks about them, but sometimes it's awkward and you maybe need a back-up plan.

Stephen Payne: But if you come out with this first question, and then they answer it completely differently than what you expect, but you just sort of keep going on that track, it's kind of awkward and...

Allie Bidwell: That's what I was getting at. Thanks for explaining it better. But that being said, there were some topics that needed to be talked about, like borrower defense claims was brought up multiple times again, like it was in these other hearings earlier last month. And Rep. Mark Takano from California was asking what's up with ... why haven't claims been approved? And actually, I thought it was interesting, I didn't know this, but he pointed out that claims are not being approved or rejected, but they're being closed. So just asking about that, and then Secretary DeVos was saying they're dealing with this court case referring back to the one that directed the department to implement the 2016 regs, so...

Megan Coval: There was some substance, but really, normally I feel like when we talk about hearings here in this podcast, we go through and talk more about the questions and the responses and there's-you just gave one example but...

Allie Bidwell: There were peaks and valleys.

Megan Coval: There's not a lot that we can really offer in terms of meaningful discussion that occurred.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, there were a handful of topics that were meaningful discussion that were repeated a lot. So there was a lot of discussion about expanding Pell Grant eligibility for things like dual enrollment programs or short-term programs, things like that. Borrower defense came up a few times. Loan servicing came up a few times. The OIG report on loan servicing was brought up. And like I said, that scholarship tax credit was...yeah. Other than that, that was kind of it.

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Allie Bidwell: Negotiated rulemaking came up towards the end. Public Service Loan Forgiveness, and this was when Ranking Member Foxx was doing her line of questioning and was just sort of saying the blame isn't on this administration for PSLF not being implemented well, and it's not on this administration for the issues that people have with negotiated rulemaking, 'cause Congress implemented negotiated rulemaking, so...

Stephen Payne: Plenty of blame to go around.

Megan Coval: Plenty of blame to go around. Yeah.

Allie Bidwell: It was a hot mess.

Stephen Payne: But I do think, thinking about the endgame of it all, as we're saying, not a whole lot of really big takeaways from it, I don't think there's any—well, we haven't seen it, but any big viral moment, or big media coverage, and C-SPAN covered it, and it wasn't like it fell through the cracks. I just think nothing really of major note came out of it. Which is interesting as all these staff members and members are strategizing about what they're gonna ask and all of this, like...

Allie Bidwell: Yeah. It was—so, also something kind of behind the scenes that's interesting. Usually after a hearing or at some point during the hearing, you get a press release sent out with the chairperson and the ranking members' opening remarks, and throughout this whole hearing, there were competing press releases from the Democrat side and the Republican side about ... little clips, basically, of what they were saying and trying to prop themselves up. It was weird. It definitely stood out to me. Normally I don't get that many press releases on one...

Stephen Payne: Yeah, the social media seemed pretty partisan, too, with interesting things, but...

Megan Coval: I will say, though, the secretary is a very polished, and she does a good job, but she kept her cool yesterday. For being interrupted and...

Allie Bidwell: She definitely started to push back towards the end.

Megan Coval: She started to push back, which I don't think was unreasonable, but she didn't let it fluster her, is what I should say. She sort of was like, okay, you're clearly interrupting me, but she didn't let it get her off-track.

Stephen Payne: For that length of time?

Megan Coval: Yeah, that's what I mean.

Allie Bidwell: I would not have the patience for that.

Megan Coval: No, no. Also, to an unrelated point that we've discussed before on the podcast, I love to see that she was wearing a dress yesterday and not a suit jacket. Remember we've had this conversation?

Allie Bidwell: With the sleeves, you mean? Or...

Megan Coval: Just a dress in general, and not a suit jacket. 'Cause this is like this conversation I've had about what's appropriate attire for women on the Hill, and I mentioned how I saw Cathy McMorris Rogers, who's in a leadership position ... I was in Washington State once, and she had this nice dress on with this nice necklace and no suit jacket, and that signaled to me, okay, that's okay for women, and I was happy to see her...

Allie Bidwell: I think clothes are okay for women.

Megan Coval: I know, I know, I know, I know. It's this whole thing.

Allie Bidwell: We don't talk about what the men are wearing. Unless they were wearing like jeans or something.

Megan Coval: Yes, but I do think that there is another level of attire for the Hill. I'm in work clothes today, but I would not-and Stephen, I think you would say the same thing, you're in a button-down, and if someone called me up to the Hill today, I would be like, yikes, I can't go to the Hill in this.

Allie Bidwell: Right, yeah.

Megan Coval: So that's all I'm saying. I'm not...

Allie Bidwell: And haven't we talked about before too how there's that rule where you can't have bare shoulders?

Megan Coval: Yes, the right to bare arms. Yeah. I know I'm going...

Allie Bidwell: Lots of weird stuff.

Megan Coval: I'm just happy that she was wearing a dress.

Allie Bidwell: It's validating, huh?

Stephen Payne: I'm happy too.

Megan Coval: I know that you all were thinking the same thing. I'm trying to lighten up the mood, guys, 'cause that hearing was very heavy.

Stephen Payne: It was.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, when it ended, I was like, "Shake it off."

Megan Coval: Allie's had the tough job over covering neg reg, covering these slog hearings...

Stephen Payne: And you're just sitting there grimacing.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, that's the thing, I'm just like, "I wanna do something, but I can't do anything except just tweet that meme with the dog on fire." This is fine.

Megan Coval: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Anyhoo.

Allie Bidwell: So, other things going on. There is some news about a provision from the recent budget deal about student loan borrowers who are undergoing cancer treatment.

Stephen Payne: Yes. So there was a provision that was, as Allie says, in the final spending bill that was passed at the end of September, and that provision, and we talked about it briefly, I think, at the time it was passed, was a piece of legislation that had been floating around with a ton of bipartisan support for some time, and what it did was-or does, I should say, present tense, is it provides interest-free deferment on your loans while you are in cancer treatment and in the six months following cancer treatment.

Stephen Payne: So that concept sounds simple enough, right? But as we all know with a lot of these provisions, particularly around student loans and financial aid in general, that the devil is always in the details. And the way that the provision was written, was written in such a way that maybe causes some implementation challenges for the department. And we've heard this from FSA folks as they're on the road, at the FSA conference this year, they talked about the provision and talked about who was eligible and who wasn't.

Stephen Payne: And FSA federal update presentations across all the states and regions, this provision has been tucked into their slide deck, and they've talked about it. And what folks are noticing as FSA is talking about how the language was written was that there's a few issues and the first is that the deferment was designed in such a way that it's applied to each loan. So it's not borrower-based, it's loan-based. So then, the only loans that are eligible for this active cancer treatment deferment are loans that were in repayment at the date of enactment, which again was September 28 of 2018, this past September, or loans that are dispersed on or after the date of enactment.

Stephen Payne: The issue with that is that you're missing a whole set of borrowers, particularly those who are-who may not have been in repayment on the date of enactment but maybe let's say they're in school. So for example, if you have a student who is in her fourth year of a program, and her most recent and final loan was dispersed before September 28, any loans from her program then would not be

eligible for this deferment because she wasn't in repayment and she doesn't have any new loans after that.

Stephen Payne: Let's say you have someone in the middle of their program, like half of their loans would not be eligible because they weren't in repayment on the date of enactment, but half would be.

Allie Bidwell: How was that not caught? That seems like a pretty glaring issue.

Stephen Payne: Yeah, I think that's a really great point. And that's a great question. The way that ... the process behind the scenes of how this provision was included was, when the House full committee was marking up the final spending bill, there was an amendment, very last minute, to include this bill as part of the spending package. And the chairman of the subcommittee, Chairman Cole, said, well, I don't have any numbers about how much this provision would cost, but for now we'll keep it in, and we'll see if it makes it into the final bill.

Stephen Payne: And so at that point as you're watching it, you're thinking, "I'm not sure this is going to make it into the final agreement." But ultimately, it did, and it comes out, the spending package comes out and all of its 800+ pages, and it's tucked in there...

Allie Bidwell: And they just never circled back to it, I guess?

Stephen Payne: They never-they probably could have used another set of eyes on the provision as they were drafting, and stakeholder feedback, and feedback from servicers who would have flagged a few of these things, and financial aid offices. I'll say that, that's one issue. The loan piece is problematic.

Stephen Payne: The other issue is-and there has been news coverage of this, most recently in CNBC this week under the headline "Student loan borrowers with cancer are supposed to be able to pause their payments. They're hitting a wall." And in the article they talk about how the provision became effective on the date of enactment. And so that means that if you are in active cancer treatment or in the six months to follow, you are immediately eligible for this deferment, except these loan servicers don't have any info from the department about how to implement it.

Allie Bidwell: Sounds like some other programs that we follow.

Stephen Payne: Yeah. And so what ultimately is happening right now, I guess behind the scenes, is the department is working on a form that servicers can use. They're also figuring out the definition of what cancer treatment is, and so there's just all sorts of...

Allie Bidwell: Six months after this was enacted. Six months.

Stephen Payne: And so what's happening right now is servicers are saying to folks who are bringing this to their attention is either, "I'm not familiar with that. That's not a real thing," to which the folks who are familiar with this provision say, "No, it was signed into law. Here's the provision." And then if it elevates up the chain, they're essentially told that we don't have the process in place right now to implement this provision, so the only thing we can provide is a forbearance. Which is very different from interest-free deferment. Which is why Congress wanted to design a deferment and not do forbearance. There's limits on forbearance. Interest accrues in forbearance, so...

Megan Coval: ...doing it loan by loan versus per borrower will actually just be more burdensome on the...yeah.

Stephen Payne: Yeah, and there's a lot of questions with this provision, and it's one of those things that has a lot of bipartisan support, right? But who's to say, as you're thinking about some of these things, and maybe in HEA, the community can think about some of these ideas more holistically, as we're thinking about student loan repayment, but there are a variety of medical circumstances that are severe and are challenging for folks as they're undergoing any sort of medical treatment, and so to single out one treatment is maybe not the way some folks would think about it, if you're thinking more holistically about trying to really get at folks who are having trouble paying back their loans because of medical treatment, so...

Allie Bidwell: Right. I have this theory that the way that a lot of these things happen where it's, like you said, one thing when there're many different kinds of medical treatment that are severe, is like a lawmaker or someone in a position to push something like this forward knows someone who said something, and then they're like, "Oh, we're gonna do this one very specific thing because my mother's neighbor's best friend had cancer and couldn't defer their loans."

Stephen Payne: Yeah, I think it will be, when all is said and done, a really great case study in maybe how not to think about some sort of add-on provisions. We've talked about the complexity of the student aid ecosystem and this certainly doesn't help with that, though it's certainly really great intentions. So as we're thinking about it, you have to try to think about how we can weigh designing these provisions in such a way that we can ensure that they can be implemented properly by the servicers, by FSA, and designed in such a way by Congress that you're going to include folks you wanna include. There's no reason why you would wanna inadvertently exclude just people who might be in school.

Allie Bidwell: And I mean, yeah, like while it might be frustrating that doing it a different way would take a little bit longer, in the end I think it would pay off because you avoid situations like this.

Stephen Payne: Right, because now you have folks saying, "Look, there's a provision in law, and the CNBC article does a good job of laying out a few stories." But saying, "Look, there's this provision in law that says I can have an interest-free deferment

during my treatment and in the six months to follow, and I'm only being offered a forbearance," I mean that's an issue. And it's hard for the servicers, right?

Allie Bidwell: Who are getting the question, want to be able to help, don't have the guidance...

Stephen Payne: Right, they need guidance from FSA. And FSA is trying to figure this out because they sort of had this dumped on their lap. An interesting story nonetheless and a good case study as we're thinking about policy design and we'll keep thinking about this and tracking this and... I know there's been a lot of folks on the road who have heard FSA trainers talking about the provisions and who's eligible and who's not, thinking, "Yikes, how did..."

Megan Coval: "How did we get here?"

Allie Bidwell: Meanwhile, it's also still budget season. You have some updates there, too, Stephen?

Stephen Payne: Yes. So, now we're thinking about the other side of the process. Moving on from thinking about implementing a provision in the last spending bill, we're now thinking about how we're going to see bills play out for this cycle. Right now Congress is in the midst of, and specifically in the House, of determining spending caps. And so there's been conversations this week that leadership is now negotiating new spending caps for both defense spending and non-defense spending as many folks know. And we've talked about this before on the podcast, but under the budget control act, which many folks are familiar with sequestration that resulted from the budget control act because of those annual sequestration adjustments to the origination fees, but under sequestration, there are strict budget caps that significantly decrease spending authority.

Stephen Payne: So what we're seeing now is an expiration of the last deal to raise the spending caps. So there's going to need to be a new deal or else there will be dramatic cuts for non-defense programs in excess of \$50 billion, and cuts for defense programs as well. So there's bipartisan support for thinking about these things. And so the House this week attempted to put their budget resolution on the floor, which as we know, this is sort of one of those wonky budget appropriations process things where you think, "Why is it designed this way? Does any of this really matter?" And for folks that follow the process, now there's budget resolutions that outline high level priorities, but it's not really ... it doesn't carry the force of law, where they saw how much they're gonna spend on this or that.

Stephen Payne: And so ultimately the House democrats, there was sort of a caucus revolt this week where progressives wanted higher spending levels for non-defense programs and lower spending levels for defense programs, and moderates, and many of the folks who are in leadership said, "Look, we have a bill here that we

think is a little bit more moderate. It doesn't raise spending caps as much as you'd like. It also increases defense spending."

Stephen Payne: And so ultimately they had to pull the bill from the floor because they didn't think they had the democratic votes to pass the budget. And so ultimately what was left over was, House democrats said, "Look, we're not doing a budget resolution this year. It doesn't matter, and it doesn't really affect much of anything. And we're just going to set spending levels for non-defense and defense in a resolution. And we're gonna move on from there."

Stephen Payne: And so they did that, and there's some good increases for non-defense programs, and another news item that came out was it looks like the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill will be one of the first then that's considered in this Congress in the House. Obviously, Democrats tend to be a little more interested in the domestic programs that are housed in that bucket, and that may be one of the first, if not the first, bill they take up when they get back from their recess coming up here at the end of the month. Right around April 30, maybe, for a mark-up for the Labor-HHS bill, which is very early.

Megan Coval: A lot of the times, it's one of the last bills. And maybe from a priority standpoint, but also just because it's a really hard bill to get through, when you think about all the programs that are in there. So that is good news.

Stephen Payne: A lot of the behind-the-scenes budget drama, but nonetheless we seem to have come out of it in an okay place in terms of next step. So it'll be interesting to see now that those top level numbers are set how that gets divided among all the 12 subcommittees and then they work on their bill, so ... fun times ahead, as always.

Allie Bidwell: And moving on from budget talk, there was another bill reintroduced this week, the Understanding of the True Cost of College Act. Megan?

Megan Coval: Yeah, so this bill was introduced end of last week, I believe, a bipartisan bill in the Senate from Senators Grassley, Ernst, and Smith. Understanding the True Cost of College Act, which essentially would create a standardized financial aid aware notification. This bill has been introduced a few times in prior Congresses. It was first introduced back in 2012 and the lead sponsor at that point was Senator Franken. So we have ... you might have heard us on the podcast refer to it before as the Franken bill, the Franken bill, but we've been working on this piece of legislation for a long time.

Megan Coval: We're not super excited about this bill because it would, as I said, create a standardized award notification, and we have come out, especially in this past year, in official support of standardized terms and elements, but otherwise leaving the notification flexible. So our big concern with this particular piece of legislation is that it requires a whole host of disclosures and consumer

information to appear on the award letter. So a lot of things that don't really have to do with the actual award and can make it very cluttered.

Megan Coval: And so we actually did a mock-up of this when it was first introduced back in 2012. We did a mock-up as well that we wanted to do one again, because there's even more required information in this most recent iteration. And I have it here. We're going to put it out in Today's News next week, but Stephen, Allie, if you wanna look at it. What are your first thoughts?

Allie Bidwell: That's what the award notification would look like? So many words.

Megan Coval: So many words. You need your readers.

Allie Bidwell: A lot of tiny words.

Megan Coval: So it's essentially, and you'll all see this, it's two pages. It's 8-point font. And the reason-we're not trying to be dramatic here, the reason it as to be 8-point font is the legislation is so specific as to stipulate what actually needs to show up on the first page, even, and the legislation also stipulates that the font size has to be the same throughout the entire award notification.

Megan Coval: So you know that ... you might think that Congress is overstepping when you're talking about font size being legislated on something. So anyhow, all this to say, it's not all bad. It actually has a pretty robust consumer testing structure built into it. So we want to stay engaged. We wanna see some action on award notifications. There are some things in here, like the consumer testing. Also it calls for standardized terms breaking out what type of aid it is. Is it grant aid, is it loans? Things like that. But we will not be supporting this legislation and talking more about what we have as the alternative.

Megan Coval: So stay tuned, we will highlight this bill and what's in it, but also what it will look like, next week.

Allie Bidwell: I don't even remember what my financial aid award notifications looked like when I was in college. Zero memory of it. Could not tell you. I remember getting financial aid. I don't remember, but...

Stephen Payne: There's been a lot of attention to this over the last few years, and especially recently, we did a whole podcast with New America and uAspire, who did a whole report on it. And I think that there was a lot of good stuff in that report in terms of talking about how students view all of these different things and thinking about this issue. But it's certainly one that ... it seems like there's some interest in the Hill as we think about HEA reauthorization in doing something on award notifications. Megan, do you think that this is the ... this piece of legislation is the only way to get at that? Or do you think there's other provisions that... How do you think this will all sort out in HEA?

Megan Coval: I mean, I think that this is really just kind of a marker and a starting point. There's not much that isn't in this bill. So I think that there are of course folks who are in support of it. But I think there are also others in the Hill who have wrapped their head around the nuance that there is with this issue and the flexibility that schools need. So like most things, I can see this being a starting point, and then we pick certain things from it, like the standardized terms and the consumer testing and that type of thing. And I think there will be something in there, and I think in HEA, and I think there should be. I think we've all determined that at this point, but I'd be surprised if it ended up looking just like this.

Allie Bidwell: We will keep tabs on it, and as always, keep you guys informed. Anyone have a "What was that?" this week? I have a little something.

Megan Coval: Yeah? What have you got? I don't have one.

Allie Bidwell: You don't?

Megan Coval: No, I don't.

Allie Bidwell: Okay. It's been pretty boring.

Megan Coval: I was just gonna say, yeah, I can't think of any weird, crazy things that have happened. Watch, my metro ride home today will be wild.

Allie Bidwell: So, my thing was, just in terms of higher ed on the Hill, higher ed made another appearance in a different hearing this week that was totally unrelated. It was a hearing on climate change, and John Kerry was testifying and there was little exchange that sort of blew up on Twitter between representation Thomas Massie from Kentucky and Mr. Kerry, and I'm just gonna play it real quick:

Rep. Massie: Secretary Kerry, I wanna read part of your statement back to you. 'Instead of convening a kangaroo court, the president might want to talk with the educated adults he once trusted to fill his top national security positions.' It sounds like you're questioning the credentials of the president's advisors currently. But I don't think we should question your credentials today. Isn't it true you have a science degree from Yale? What's that?

John Kerry: Bachelor of Arts degree.

Rep. Massie: Is it a political science degree?

John Kerry: Yes, political science.

Rep. Massie: So how do you get a bachelor of arts in a science?

John Kerry: Well, it's liberal arts, education and degree, it's a bachelor.

Rep. Massie: Okay, so it's not really science. So I think it somewhat appropriate that somebody with a pseudo-science degree is here pushing pseudo-science in front of our committee today. I wanna ask you...

John Kerry: Are you serious? I mean, this is really a serious happening here?

Rep. Massie: You know what? It is serious. You're calling the president's cabinet a kangaroo court. Is that serious?

John Kerry: I'm not calling his cabinet a kangaroo court. I'm calling this committee that he's putting together a kangaroo committee.

Rep. Massie: Are you saying that he doesn't have educated adults there now?

John Kerry: I don't know who he has yet, 'cause it's secret.

Rep. Massie: Well, you said it in your testimony...

John Kerry: Why would he have to have a secret analysis of climate change?

Allie Bidwell: A couple things about this.

Megan Coval: What's Mr. Massie's degree in?

Allie Bidwell: He actually has an engineering degree from MIT. I saw this and in my head had an idea where it was going because a lot of times in hearings people sort of bash liberal arts education, and I think it's funny because I always go and then look up the degree of whatever politician is going on this rant, and 8 times out of 10, they have a liberal arts degree. But this took a way different turn that I was expecting. And the fact that Kerry spoke up and interrupted him and was like, "Wait a minute. Are we really doing this?" It was just ... broke the decorum that there usually is during congressional hearings.

Megan Coval: Yeah, I guess I have a pseudo-science degree, then. Stephen, you too?

Stephen Payne: No, mine's technically not.

Megan Coval: Oh, okay. Just me. There's lots of pseudo-science degrees walking around Washington, D.C., so...

Stephen Payne: Do you ever claim to think of yourself as a scientist?

Megan Coval: I've never ... it's never occurred to me, but now I'm thinking about it. Yeah. I am a scientist. Oh man, well...

Allie Bidwell: This was a weird higher ed appearance elsewhere on Capital Hill.

Megan Coval: Some of the headlines surrounding this, "Is this the dumbest moment in congressional history?"

Allie Bidwell: That's rough.

Stephen Payne: We report, you decide.

Megan Coval: We report, you... Send us your feedback. Let us know what you think.

Allie Bidwell: Definitely all commentary aside, I saw that and I really was like, "What?" That was a "What was that?" in the truest sense.

Megan Coval: Indeed.

Stephen Payne: Indeed.

Allie Bidwell: That's all we got, folks.

Megan Coval: Climate change. And they're talking about degrees.

Allie Bidwell: Anyway. I think that is all we have this week for you guys. Thanks for joining us for another episode. Send us your thoughts, questions, feedback. Remember to subscribe. Tell a friend. And we will talk to you again next week.