

NASFAA's "Off the Cuff" Podcast - Episode 167 Transcript

Justin Draeger:

Hey, everyone. Welcome to another edition of Off The Cuff. I'm Justin Draeger.

Allie Arcese:

I'm Allie Arcese with our communications team.

Allie Arcese:

I'm Megan Coval with our policy team.

Karen McCarthy:

And I'm Karen McCarthy also with our policy team.

Justin Draeger:

Welcome back, everyone. Allie. Welcome back from vacation.

Allie Arcese:

Thank you.

Justin Draeger:

You look well rested. You look better than you've ever looked before.

Allie Arcese:

Oh good. It was getting kind of like rough there for a little bit, full of energy.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, no, you look, you look like a person coming back from vacation. So welcome back.

Allie Arcese:

I'm not an amorphous blob.

Justin Draeger:

I've never said that you ever... Generally people don't know, that's how I say I see everyone. But, we have a special guest with us this week. I want to do a word association game here, okay. When I say the following, I want you to tell me the word that pops into your mind. Okay. I'll start with you, Megan.

Justin Draeger:

Senator Lamar Alexander. What's the word that pops to your mind.

Allie Arcese:

Gentleman.

Justin Draeger:
Gentlemen. Okay. Allie?

Allie Arcese:
FAFSA.

Justin Draeger:
Karen?

Karen McCarthy:
Paper FAFSA.

Justin Draeger:
All right. So, first of all, Megan, Bravo, Brava. I think that was a great answer. He is a gentleman.

Allie Arcese:
I was anticipating some other FAFSA so I was trying to think of something else.

Justin Draeger:
Well, thank you. But yes, a gentleman and we asked if he'd be able to come onto the podcast. Talk to us a little bit about his passion about the FAFSA, and talk to us a little bit about what he sees in the next few months in the waning days of this legislative calendar. So let's welcome Senator Alexander. Well, I'm glad to have a special guest with us today, former secretary of education, former governor, former college president, and for the last 18 years, the Senator from the great state of Tennessee, Senator Lamar Alexander, who's also currently Chairman of the Senate health, education, labor, and pensions committee. Senator. Thanks for joining us.

Lamar Alexander:
Thanks for inviting me, Justin. Good to talk with you again.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. Always happy to have you with us. If I were to do a word association with your name amongst our 20,000 members, I think the one word they would most often say is FAFSA.

Lamar Alexander:
Well, I would hope so. And maybe they could get my colleagues in the United States Congress to do the same thing in the next few weeks.

Justin Draeger:
Why of all things, you've been in higher education for a really long time, for decades. Why is this one issue one that you keep revisiting? Where's the passion come from here?

Lamar Alexander:

Well, one is it's so obvious. I mean, a few years ago when we were working on fixing No Child Left Behind, one of the major magazines said, "It's a law everybody wants fixed," and this is something everybody wants fixed. But more important than that, it's the single biggest obstacle to helping low income, especially minority students, go to college. In our state of Tennessee, where two years of tuition is free, we have the highest participation in filling out the FAFSA of any state. But our former Governor Bill Haslam says that, "The biggest obstacle to low-income and minority kids and older people going to two years of free education is the complexity of filling out the FAFSA."

Justin Draeger:

When you look over the many years that we've been now talking about this, and you've gotten some legislation passed that's taken us incrementally closer to simplifying this form, have you changed on any of your views about how the FAFSA can be simplified? How we balance all this complexity with still getting information from students?

Lamar Alexander:

Well, I have, and I think I learned a lot from the financial aid administrators. You'll remember a few years ago, I came to your meeting in Nashville and Senator Bennet of Colorado, and I had taken the 108 questions and boiled them down to two. And you guys who are in the middle of this and women all the time said that will keep us from having the information that we need to make institutional aid. So we listened and we changed what we were doing. And so instead of going from 108 questions to two, I think we've done a good job of incorporating your ideas, so you still get the aid you need, and the students won't have to answer more than 33 questions. In fact, you'll get more information because Senator Murray and I were able to get the Senate to pass the Future Act last year, which got rid of some of the most onerous requirements, which was giving your tax information to the federal government twice. So that should make it easier really for financial aid administrators to administer other programs.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. And it's verified data, so hopefully we're doing less verification, less hurdles for students. It's a win for everyone.

Lamar Alexander:

Yeah. Well the verification is a real pain in the neck. Now, a lot of people don't know about that, but what I try to tell my colleagues in the center, we're talking about 20 million families who have to fill this out every year and it's not just the filling it out, it's the giving the same information twice. And then seeing if the Department of Education can catch you making a mistake so that won't be necessary anymore. And the verification process that we'll get rid of is as onerous as any other part of the reform that we're doing.

Justin Draeger:

So when you look at the next few months, the window for future legislation is closing. If you were to give advice to aid administrators, NASPA is supportive of your legislative efforts, what advice would you give us all to say, if we're to try to get something done before the end of this legislative calendar, how do we go about doing it?

Lamar Alexander:

I'm going to be very simple about this. I would go to your member of Congress or Senator at home. We all go home, particularly these days, and I would take five or six students. And I would ask for 15 minutes and I would show the member of Congress one, how much of a problem this is, especially for low income students, and second, how much agreement there is about fixing this. And say, "There's no reason not to finish doing it now." We've often done some pretty good things in the lame duck session after the politics is out of the way for a little while. So I would ask for that appointment now, have it after the election and bring the students. Seeing people at home and showing them just how many students in a congressional district might be affected. For example, in Tennessee, there probably 400,000 families who have to fill this out every year. I mean, the Nashville area, they're probably 40,000. That's a lot of people. And I think if the Congressman from that area saw that he'd say, "Well, why don't we do this?"

Justin Draeger:

So you mentioned, after the politics are over, things can start to move, start to happen, especially things that people agree on. I'm curious, given your tenure in the Senate, from the outside DC things look awfully divided, partisan, sometimes bitterly so. Is that been your experience in the Senate as someone who's been able to get bipartisan legislation passed? What's it like in the Senate collegiality wise?

Lamar Alexander:

Well, of course COVID makes it different because we don't see each other as much, but collegiality's fine. I suggest you look at the Senate as a split screen television. On the one side, you've got the tweets and the Supreme Court justices and the opposite. And see, on the other side, you've got people working together to permanently fund black colleges to take an important step at the same time to simplify the FAFSA, to pass the most important outdoor recreation and legislation in 50 years, all that happened recently. Now what hasn't happened, are some other things that should happen if we would work better together and finishing the job of simplifying the FAFSA at this time, when everybody is interested in equity and racial justice, I mean, there couldn't be a better flag to fly and then simplify the FAFSA.

Justin Draeger:

Just a personal question Senator, the week after retiring from the Senate, what does your week look like?

Lamar Alexander:

I haven't even thought about that. It'll be in Tennessee. That's for sure. I guess I'll be unpacking and renovating. I've so enjoyed my time. I've enjoyed the people I work with. I enjoy getting up every day and thinking I may be able to do something during the day that helps the country and usually go to bed at night thinking I had. So I've enjoyed that and I'll miss that, but there comes to time to end everything. And I'm looking forward to the next chapter.

Justin Draeger:

One hard hitting question to end. Do you prefer Volunteers or Commodores?

Lamar Alexander:

I usually watch that game on television. I was president of the University of Tennessee and I attended Vanderbilt University and they're both great institutions and I've worked hard to support them both.

Justin Draeger:

Well, that to me seems like the perfect answer from a Senator. So you've walked the line quite well. Will you come back and talk to us sometime in the future after you've had time to reflect?

Lamar Alexander:

Well, I'd be glad to, but I don't intend to be one of those office holders who never goes away. I think there's a time for everything. And I've had a lot of time. I mean, the Tennesseans gave me two terms as governor and then three terms as Senator and nobody else's had both those positions for that long in our state. So, I think it's time for me to get out of the way and let somebody else step up.

Justin Draeger:

Well, I know speaking on behalf of a lot of people, we're sorry to see you go Senator, but celebrate all of your accomplishments and we'll be pushing with you in these final months of the legislative calendar to see if we can get FAFSA simplification, even further down the road.

Lamar Alexander:

Good. Let's work together on this. This is something we can do.

Justin Draeger:

Thank you. And thanks for your time. All right. So we had previously recorded that and we're really glad that he could join us for the podcast. And we hope to see some additional FAFSA simplification on the waning days of this legislative calendar. So we will see what happens. What'd you think of the interview? Allie, you were there with us, would you?

Allie Arcese:

I only wish we had more time. I know, obviously he's a sitting Senator, he's extremely busy, so I'm glad that they were able to make time for us. I just wish we could have had him for a little longer.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. More time. Obviously, we've interacted with him a lot and his staff quite a bit. He's very casual, very effective. I wanted to dig into the piece where he said that he's planning in retirement doing a lot of-

Allie Arcese:

Renovating.

Justin Draeger:

Renovating. Yeah.

Allie Arcese:

Yeah, I know.

Justin Draeger:

Well, like what? I want to know what renovating he's going to do, but-

Allie Arcese:

Maybe, his second career or his retirement career or whatever side hustle is going to be flipping houses.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah.

Allie Arcese:

HGTV.

Justin Draeger:

I like the idea of senators with side hustles. All right. Well, we've got a lot to get to on the agenda today, before we get into what's going on in Congress and obviously the Vice Presidential debate, we've got some updates on some HEERF reporting. Before we get to all of that though, member comments, Allie, what do we got?

Allie Arcese:

So we had one member comment from Amber Robbins at BYU. And last week it sounded like you guys were talking about some virtual homeschooling issues. And Joel was talking about just the struggle with multiple kids at home doing virtual school. So Amber said, "Jill, I understand your pain with standardized testing at home with little kids. You're not alone in your experience. Well maybe with tears breaking the computer, that was a sad but amazing story. We had days of tears, yelling, and running to rooms and locking the door refusing to come out with our six and seven year olds, Amber's husband's uncle who researches educational testing professionally," interesting. "He says standardized tests for anyone younger than third grade is often described as cruel and unusual punishment since they can't understand why it's okay to get answers wrong." Amber said that her six year old had questions asking about the root words and actual dictionary entries with pronunciation guides that he was supposed to read and understand.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. That's a lot.

Allie Arcese:

Frustrating for a six year old.

Allie Arcese:

That's a lot.

Justin Draeger:

That doesn't seem to me like month one of school that's like end of year stuff there.

Allie Arcese:

You know what? I don't understand, just with my own experience, was I went to Catholic school and we didn't have to partake in the state standardized testing. So we had end of year testing, but we didn't have the standardized testing, why is it-

Justin Draeger:

Is that still true today? Is that, Catholic schools don't have to do it? Yeah. That's-

Allie Arcese:

Yeah, because they're private. They're private. So, but why are they done at the beginning of the year?

Justin Draeger:

It's a benchmark, right? To see where people are at and then-

Allie Arcese:

I figured it would be end of the year to see-

Megan Coval:

Do they do them again at the end to measure? I don't know.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I think some of it is like a teacher performance evaluation thing, so that the teachers can show how effective they've been over the year or something like that.

Justin Draeger:

There's a lot that's questionable about this. And this is a big shout out to our friend, Stephen Payne, who used to be on the podcast. I feel like he would have a lot to say about K-12 standardized testing. Hey Karen-

Allie Arcese:

Stephen wrote in, by the way.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, we've heard from Stephen recently?

Allie Arcese:

Yeah. Steven wrote in on September 25th and he said, "Happy birthday to Off The Cuff, best episode yet."

Karen McCarthy:

I have a Stephen story when we were talking about Senator Alexander and the paper FAFSA, because Steven had a paper FAFSA, because they no longer make paper FAFSA. So used to just be able to get one and then you could unfold it like Alexander does. And Steven printed out the PDF FAFSA and then taped all the pages together so that he could mimic Senator Alexander. I thought of him just the other day. I think Jill has it now.

Justin Draeger:

All right. Good.

Allie Arcese:
Pass it down.

Justin Draeger:

All right. Moving on. Let's get to our Vice Presidential debate just happened this last week. I'm curious. Let's be honest. We're all friends here, just the four of us. Did you watch it start to finish Megan?

Allie Arcese:
I did.

Justin Draeger:
All right. Good for you, Allie?

Allie Arcese:
I watched more of it than I watched of the presidential debates.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah, all right.

Allie Arcese:
But I turned it off after they mentioned higher ed, because I was like, "It's not going to go around again."

Justin Draeger:
You were like, that's our one shot.

Allie Arcese:
Yeah.

Justin Draeger:
Karen, how about you?

Karen McCarthy:
My answer would be the same as Allie's. I watched a little more than the presidential debate. And then I went to bed.

Justin Draeger:
I was called out by our national chair last night, who texted me and said, "Hey, do you have a second for a quick phone call?" I was wrapped up and didn't see it until like eight 45 at night. And I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm free now for about the next 45 minutes." Because I go to bed early, I get up between five and six. And so she calls she's like, "Hey." And I'm like, "Hey, what's going on?" And she said, "So I guess you're not watching the vice presidential debate." I was like, "Yes." I was like, "I just can't right now." And I know that I have great people like Megan and Allie and Karen and others who are watching it. And when I looked at the topics of next morning, higher ed was not one of the major topics.

Allie Arcese:

No, it was the fly.

Justin Draeger:

What do you mean by that? Like-

Allie Arcese:

There was a fly that landed on Vice President Pence's head and sat there for like two minutes.

Allie Arcese:

Two to three minutes straight.

Justin Draeger:

So wait a minute. Did he SWAT at it?

Allie Arcese:

No.

Allie Arcese:

No, I don't think he knew it was there.

Justin Draeger:

No, he must've known.

Allie Arcese:

No.

Megan Coval:

No, I don't think he knew. Cause people are like, "He went on without being distracted," and like, he didn't know the fly there. It was like, here, it wasn't like on his forehead. It was on like-

Justin Draeger:

No.

Allie Arcese:

It was in his hair.

Megan Coval:

You need to check out the Twitter verse.

Justin Draeger:

I think this might be an exercise in extreme discipline. You know-

Karen McCarthy:

I don't know, I think that his hair, I don't know, he must have had a lot of hair product. Right?

Megan Coval:

I think so too.

Karen McCarthy:

And that it probably created a little shield and the fly is walking around and I don't know that he felt it.

Megan Coval:

I agree.

Allie Arcese:

It was like tap dancing on his hair.

Megan Coval:

On the other hand, I just kind of thinking, if I was Kamala, I could not have held it together.

Justin Draeger:

Because of the fly?

Megan Coval:

Maybe she didn't even see it.

Allie Arcese:

Yeah.

Allie Arcese:

Because it was... It was just very funny.

Allie Arcese:

I would have stopped and were like, "Excuse me, can I just-"

Megan Coval:

Excuse me sir, you have a fly.

Justin Draeger:

I feel bad for anyone who has, because he could SWAT at it, but you know that fly, they don't leave. They just circle around, over and over again. Oh, that's too bad. But that's when the higher ed stuff came up, and as I was reading and watching the videos and the recaps, they did talk a little bit about... What, a little bit about loan forgiveness? Allie, you want to catch us up? She referenced their higher education plan.

Allie Arcese:

Sure. Yeah. So Senator Harris did mention. It was in the segment on the economy and she was talking about the plan for tuition-free college and debt forgiveness. And part of this plan was released quite a while ago. Obviously, free community college became sort of a major part of the discussion when President Obama was in office and Vice President Biden was in office with him. So that has become part of his platform. They expanded that to include free tuition at four-year public colleges and universities if your family makes under \$125,000 a year. The debt forgiveness portion of that was a little bit confusing, to be honest. And I think we still haven't exactly heard how this would be determined, but it was to forgive tuition-related debt up to a certain amount, and it's just unclear how they would actually siphon out what was tuition-related debt, so that has yet to be seen. Now during the pandemic too, the campaign did come out and also say that they would forgive up to \$10,000 of debt for all federal student loan borrowers.

Justin Draeger:

Well, so actually I was going to say, obviously, a lot of this has to go through Congress, but going backwards for just a minute, there have been people making the case that, at least on direct loans, the secretary would have the authority to do things like waive interest and offer some sort of loan forgiveness. So-

Allie Arcese:

Right. I mean, we're seeing that right now.

Justin Draeger:

Right.

Karen McCarthy:

Isn't that what the executive orders...

Allie Arcese:

Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. Minus the loan forgiveness, I suppose.

Karen McCarthy:

Right.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. So I guess we'll have to see what happens if there is a Biden-Harris administration, any other impressions from the Vice Presidential debate?

Megan Coval:

I mean, I think it was just this weird mix of feelings because I was watching it and I was like, "This feels so much sleepier than last week." I was getting a little bored, but then I was also feeling like, "No, that's

kind of refreshing." I feel like infused a little bit of dignity back into election politics and they're both really good debaters. I mean, it is definitely a skill of both of theirs.

Allie Arcese:

I was going to say something similar, Megan. I was reading someone was posting on Twitter about, "People are complaining that this debate is boring and that's how it should be." Yeah. Politics should be boring.

Justin Draeger:

There was a time when politics wasn't a reality show and, and that's not necessarily a dig at Donald Trump being on a reality show, it's just so much anymore. How about a substantive debate? But the parts that I watched were a little bit all over the map, I follow David French, who's a conservative writer on Twitter. He said, "Feeling nostalgic, this debate reminds me of a normal debate when politicians don't answer good questions and respond with canned mini speeches." And I was like, "Ah, yes. That's right."

Allie Arcese:

It was definitely more substantive in the sense that we got to hear what they were saying from both of them and hear actual some policy ideas, some proposals, whatever. But they both definitely avoided certain questions.

Megan Coval:

What I kind of love about this is the moderator definitely had a better night last night, she would just ask her a question and they'd be like, both of them, "No, I'm actually not going to answer that. I'm going to go back to-" I mean, they weren't even skirting. They were just like, "Thanks for that question. I'm not going to answer that."

Allie Arcese:

Well, even on the ones where they didn't explicitly say, "I'm not going to answer that," but they just kind of danced around the topic. Like you said, Megan, they're both such good debaters that you almost don't notice until you think back. And you're like, "Wait a minute. That's not what they asked." It's kind of related, but it doesn't answer the question.

Justin Draeger:

This is where strong journalism comes in because, the pivot, this has been around forever, politicians are masters at it. Which is, you asked me one thing, I acknowledge you asked me, and then I pivot to a completely different topic, but good reporters will continue to try to nail people down to say, "Well, could you answer the original question XYZ?" Listen, I have feel as strongly about debates as I do about the state of the union. And people have heard me gripe about the state of the union before. I want to see major changes to that, if not just foregoing it some years entirely. A written report would work fine. And then second, I want to see Oxford style debates, with actual rules and actual debates, that's actively moderated, because sometimes you could have a computer just reading off some of these questions.

Allie Arcese:

I mean, yes, you could argue, there are actual rules that were agreed upon. It's just, they're not followed.

Justin Draeger:

Right. Well, that's true. And it sounds like we don't know if there'll be any more debates at all at this point. Right?

Allie Arcese:

Right. Yeah. We're supposed to have the next Presidential debate next week, I think, in Miami. And it was announced this morning, Thursday morning, that the debate commission had said that it was going to be virtual due to President Trump's COVID diagnosis. It's presumed that he is still contagious. And then shortly thereafter, President Trump said that he would not participate in a virtual debate.

Justin Draeger:

So we don't know what's going to happen. But if it is virtual, we'll have to change our bingo cards because we'll have to add things like, "You're on mute," that sort of thing will have to obviously be added.

Allie Arcese:

Well I mean, from what we've seen from both debates so far, a mute button might not be a bad thing.

Justin Draeger:

No, it's got to be. That first debate was...

Allie Arcese:

Be like, "Your two minutes are up. Mute."

Justin Draeger:

Well, you know what? When we testify on Capitol Hill, they have that red light and it's counting down and you're interrupted and members interrupt each other. So I feel like if Congress can do it to witnesses, we certainly can do it on our candidates. Yeah. All right.

Megan Coval:

One fun thing I learned last night, I already told Allie this cause I was messaging with her. I was a little bored, so I was doing some research on the candidates and just their personal life and their families, and Senator Harris has two stepchildren. And do you want to guess what they call her?

Justin Draeger:

It's not... What, they don't call her mom?

Megan Coval:

"Mamala."

Justin Draeger:

Mamala? Really?

Megan Coval:

I love that.

Karen McCarthy:

How old are they?

Megan Coval:

They're in their twenties. And they gave a quick shout out last night.

Allie Arcese:

I like that.

Megan Coval:

I loved it too. Mamala.

Justin Draeger:

I do. You know what, anything that can help actually personalize people helps break down the barriers of partisanship. So I'm all for it. All right. Thanks for keeping these people real, Megan. All right. COVID talks, Megan. It seems like I was giving a speech earlier this week, a virtual speech on Tuesday to our Midwestern association. Even as I was speaking, I couldn't pin down exactly where we were on COVID talks. A COVID stimulus bill. You want to catch us up? Where are we today? And do you want to grade yourself from your predictions on last week?

Megan Coval:

Yeah, I feel like I get an F again, but it's not over yet.

Justin Draeger:

I don't think so. I think you said you were pessimistic, right?

Megan Coval:

No. I actually said, "Hey, they canceled the vote and they canceled the Wednesday night vote." And then by like Thursday at two, they scheduled a vote, the house one. But it's changed by the day. I feel like we've kind of all lived like 10,000 lives since last Thursday. But it looks right now, like the chances of a big package going through are very slim. Over the weekend, those kind of came to a halt. Secretary Mnuchin and Pelosi were still talking a little bit. And then earlier this week, President Trump came out and said he wanted to nip everything in the bud, no more negotiations then kind of reversed course. So it looks like now that we're looking at maybe some smaller packages, I'm talking about like immediately relief for the airlines and stimulus checks, but nothing that would be as comprehensive to include higher ed relief right now. Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

So maybe it's some sort of one-off bill, but at this point you're changing the forecast from optimistic to pessimistic. Is that true?

Megan Coval:

Yeah. Pessimistic. Although interestingly yesterday, Assistant Secretary Jim Blue, department assistant secretary, was speaking at an event somewhere and he made a comment that the department was working on their fiscal year 2022 budget, which would be something that they're working on right now, anyways, and also working on a potential standalone relief bill for K through 12 and higher ed, COVID relief bill. So I don't really know what to make of that because it wasn't like it was official policy or statement coming from the department, it was sort of just him kind of talking off about it, so.

Justin Draeger:

Well, clearly when Treasury Secretary Mnuchin is talking to Speaker Pelosi, they must be having all the federal agencies pull together what would be a substantive ask financially in a new COVID relief bill.

Megan Coval:

Yeah. But it seems like that would for sure be into lame duck, if not into a new Congress, so.

Justin Draeger:

Right. Well, we will wait and see.

Megan Coval:

We'll see.

Justin Draeger:

And it's sort of hard because the president who's sort of not engaged in these talks directly, is the one who's doing one-eighties about every three days. So on the one hand he said, "Yes, we absolutely should do something." Then he says, "No." And then the latest was like, "We should do direct checks to workers." And so it's kind of hard to pin down where the administration is exactly. But you and your team are following closely if something starts tomorrow,

Megan Coval:

It's so bizarre politically too, it's not really good for anybody.

Justin Draeger:

Right.

Megan Coval:

Prior to, especially during a presidential election year. I mean, everybody would benefit from being able to go back home and say that they helped folks out.

Justin Draeger:

Also in news being released just today, earlier this morning on Thursday, Megan, we have a new report out on professional judgment. What are schools seeing?

Megan Coval:

Yeah. So this survey was sent out to members in September asking specifically about the impact of the pandemic on professional judgments. And what we found is that 59% of our respondents said that they were seeing somewhat or great increases in their PJ requests. And we asked them from the timeframe of March 1st through mid-September, and they were comparing year to date to what they had seen the year before. So I think that's kind of what we anticipated, but we've been getting a ton of questions from the media, from Hill, on PJ. So I think it was helpful to have the data and to see that this is really happening.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. And schools are gearing up for it. I mean, one of the things that we were pleasantly, I mean, it's not like we weren't expecting this, but one of the things I was pleasantly surprised to see is that the large majority of schools are preparing for PJ by proactively taking steps to resource up, to do implicit bias training, to make sure that they can truly evaluate students with a committee or a small group of people, to make sure that they're truly evaluating where students are and how they can help them.

Megan Coval:

Yeah. So we asked the question, if folks were zeroing out income earned from work with proof of unemployment insurance, and 50% said that they were already doing it or considering doing it, but notably 80% said they would do it if they explicitly were permitted by the department. And this is an issue we've been pushing on for a long time.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I think that is really interesting because I think that there has been a little bit of feedback. Why does schools need the department or Congress to say they can do this? They can already do this. And I think the fact that so many more schools would do it, if it were more explicit is kind of telling. I also wonder, if it is at all telling of how schools feel about their relationship with the department and how free they feel to exercise their professional judgment authority or whether there is some fear that the department may not look on it kindly. So I think that was a really interesting question to me that stood out also Megan.

Justin Draeger:

I was in a meeting with congressional staff just a week ago and it was a training that was being put on by another not-for-profit, lots of congressional staff there. They had asked that question, "Why aren't schools more aggressive in some of their PJs." And we tried to explain that there's a culture question in here, the relationship between institutions and the federal student aid, there's sort of this scale where federal student aid is sometimes in the past, been a little bit more partnership heavy, sometimes been a little bit more oversight heavy, I'd say for the last 10 years, schools have been feeling the oversight piece. And when you try to stack up financial liabilities and fines against professional judgment or discretion that schools have, I get it, I understand why schools take a very conservative approach. Unfortunately, that doesn't always serve students the best, which is why we need sometimes explicit authority.

Megan Coval:

Yeah, in several of the COVID relief bills that was provided. So that's like yet another thing that we're kind of losing out on with not pushing something through, so.

Justin Draeger:

Well, we'll keep our eyes open here and good work to you and the team for conducting this research. And people can read more about that in today's news. And we'll include a link in the show notes. Okay. Karen, I got to tell ya, I get lost quite a bit. And so I've started grabbing people from your team to join me in virtual presentations that I'm doing, because there are lots of questions about HEERF reporting. And I'm wondering if you can pull out maybe a question from the last week that we're seeing that we can hopefully answer here on the podcast.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. Actually there is a lot still to come on the reporting piece. The most recent thing that has come out that I wanted to flag for people is that there was an FAQ that was posted on Friday that was related to the HEERF funds. And it was mostly about allowable uses of the HEERF funds. And there a couple of interesting things about it. One, is that we found it completely by accident. There was no announcement that this FAQ was going to be posted at all. Jill actually found it. She was looking for something else. And the way that they have the information, all the department of ed information is like they rechange their websites all the time, so sometimes it takes a while to find what you're looking for. And Jill just stumbled across this FAQ. All of the HEERF-related care stuff is all run out of a different part of the department.

Karen McCarthy:

It's not the standard folks within OPE who we normally work with for our policy questions. And I think that department just runs a little bit differently. So we're used to, IFAP announcements that tell people when things are updated and posted and the HEERF announcements are not happening in that way. So there was this FAQ posted on Friday, we found it by accident. We did highlight it in TN on Monday, just to make sure that people take a look at it. There wasn't anything surprising to us in the FAQ. So I don't want anyone to panic if you missed it, you have time to go back and take a look at it. It was mostly questions about allowable uses of the funds. Some of them were really like questions we've never gotten that definitely came from elsewhere within the institution, the institutions getting the paycheck protection program and how does that work with the timing?

Karen McCarthy:

So that's definitely not a question we've ever gotten from Aid officers. Our AskRegs team though, will be pulling out the relevant questions from that FAQ and running some AskRegs Q and A, so the ones that we think are helpful there we'll pull out for you. But I think that has been, I mean, you mentioned that information is everywhere and I think that has been one of the frustrating pieces, even for us, because we're pulling all this stuff and looking for these documents every day and it keeps moving around and different documents are in different places, so I am frustrated as well I can say.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, when we get stuff from people that we work with all the time, they usually even shoot us an email and say, "Hey, FYI, something's about to post," or, "This is going to be posted tomorrow," or, "This just posted," because this is a completely separate area where it's pulling from several different department of ED offices. It does feel a little more disjointed and stumbling upon FAQ, buried on a very long web page is not our preferred method for receiving information.

Karen McCarthy:

And thankfully Jill found it and it had just been posted that day. So, yeah.

Justin Draeger:

Okay, there has to be a bot, right, that we can use that scours certain ED web webpages and tells us when something's changed. This is one of-

Karen McCarthy:

I was trying to figure that out. I looked at the page, it's like ed.gov, offices, OPE, it's not anywhere where we would normally get guidance because I was kind of looking at it like, can you subscribe to this page? Or how can we make sure other than like circling around all the time to look for, I don't know.

Megan Coval:

And it was like Friday at four, which I don't know about you guys, but that whole period of May...

Karen McCarthy:

It was. Yeah, our poor TRA staff.

Megan Coval:

Everything was coming out Friday at four. I find myself having these like-

Justin Draeger:

Oh, there's definitely PTSD.

Megan Coval:

... Feelings of because there was a period of time where every week we were like, ughh.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, before we log off, who's going to go look at these webpages?

Karen McCarthy:

You sent it around to-

Allie Arcese:

Especially a Friday right before a holiday.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, it was. I sent it to our AskRegs staff when we found it and said, "Jill just found this," and I think the first reaction was, "Make it stop, please."

Justin Draeger:

Well, God bless them. And people can go to our COVID-19 webpage. That's nasfaa.org/COVID19 where they can see all of the forthcoming, current, and former AskRegs questions that the team is publishing. So thank you for that, Karen.

Justin Draeger:

All right. Allie, people can continue to send us their comments, feedback on the episode, additional topics they'd like to hear from. Karen, I think you'll be joining us for the next couple of weeks while Jill is out, so we're glad to have you with us.

Karen McCarthy:

Hey Justin. I was remembering it and I think Allie and Megan were there too. That the last time I was on the podcast, we were in the office and Justin and I were sharing a microphone. And I remember that we were commenting that we were like backup singers. And Justin was like-

Justin Draeger:

I love your memory. When was this? How long ago is it?

Karen McCarthy:

And Justin was like, "I'm sorry, Karen, you're going to have to sit closer to me." And I was like, "Okay."

Justin Draeger:

I'm going to that be struck from the podcast. We can't obviously in 2020, can't have your boss telling you-

Allie Arcese:

It wasn't in 2020.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, okay.

Karen McCarthy:

No. I don't think it was.

Allie Arcese:

I think, think about that now with COVID.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I mean-

Allie Arcese:

Snuggling up under one mic.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. I'm going to be honest with you last week, Owen you used this microphone that I'm using right now. And I did come in and I know it's been a week, but I don't really know the half-life of COVID-19. So I really just scrubbed this baby down today. You look fine. So it's all cleaned up now. All right. Well anyway, thank you all for joining us. Remember to subscribe, tell a friend. We will see you again next week.