

Justin Draeger:

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

Alex DeLonis:

I'm Alex DeLonis from Wabash College.

Justin Draeger:

Glad to have you here with us, Alex. Welcome to "Off The Cuff." To all of our listeners out there, obviously, I assume you're a longtime listener, Alex.

Alex DeLonis:

I am. I am. This is actually the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. I love it.

Justin Draeger:

Whoa.

Alex DeLonis:

I know, I know.

Justin Draeger:

And you're a father, right?

Alex DeLonis:

I know. It's literally "Off the Cuff," the birth of my children, my wedding in that order. No, I appreciate it.

Justin Draeger:

Here's what I know for sure from listening to you say that, your family does not listen to this podcast.

Alex DeLonis:

No, they don't. I'm sure they might hear this one.

Justin Draeger:

This is for those of you who have been listening to this for a while, this is one of our new episode formats. We call this Voices. It's a format where we're connecting directly with people from the financial aid profession, get to know more about them and their personal and professional backgrounds sort of highlight the unique experience that our members have. We want to sort of shine a light on them and who they are and how that helps them connect to the work that they do in financial aid. I've known Alex for a number of years. As you said, Alex, you're the director of financial aid at Wabash College. Tell us a little bit about Wabash. Where's that at, first of all?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, so Wabash is in Crawfordsville, Indiana, about 45 minutes west of Indianapolis, rural town. We are a small liberal arts school, about 900 students, all men's school. One of three all male schools still left in the country, actually.

Justin Draeger:

Oh.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah. Been around for a long time. I've been at the school for about four years now and did some time at Ivy Tech prior to that, and then started my career in Illinois actually.

Justin Draeger:

How did you get your start in financial aid?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, as a federal work study student, as I'm sure many in our profession have, because you can't necessarily major in financial aid, so you have to stumble upon it in some way. For me, what I learned later is my financial aid counselor and the person who kind of oversaw federal work study at Harper College is where I went to, they just kind of scroll through a list, 30,000 students, who has federal work study eligibility, and then they kind of pull your name off of paper like, "Hey, you want to come work?" No schedule. We came in and worked when we wanted to and then kind of used our allocation that way. I kind of started with a criminal justice focus, but I can't say that was something I was deeply passionate about. It was kind of working in the financial aid office that kind of introduced me to a lot of different things.

Yeah, I did that for a couple years, and then I actually took a staff position at Harper when I was 20 before I had graduated. Then it was about my junior year of college, it was about around the 2008 recession or so in the headlines is no one's getting jobs, college graduates aren't getting jobs. I got a little concerned. I started applying probably earlier than I should have, and I started testing for police jobs. Then I also at the same time started applying to financial aid jobs because I had the experience. I somehow got hired when I was 21 and took my first full-time financial aid job at Oakton Community College. I was actually able to use their tuition reimbursement to finish my undergrad, had to do it part time, but definitely saved a little loan debt that way.

Justin Draeger:

One of the purposes of this entire Voices series is to try to explore a little bit how people's backgrounds and their experiences and their identities help them be successful financial aid administrators. Sort of curious about your personal background, how that's helped you with students, Alex. Let's go back as far as you want. Catch us up.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

What's helped you?

Alex DeLonis:

Oh, goodness. All right. I'm a first generation college student, Pell recipient. My mom, single mother, two other siblings. My mom had me. She got pregnant at 16, had me at 17, so probably didn't plan it that way. We were living in Michigan City, Indiana at the time. My mom did the best she had, I think, with the cards she was dealt at that point. I am the oldest, so I was her first. We bounced around a lot, living with other family members, random people, and at one point we were kind of living in the projects or subsidized housing.

Yeah, I can't say that I had the best start. At that point, wasn't a great kid. That was coming throughout elementary school, through middle school. Probably spent more time in detention, suspension, in school suspension than I did actually in school to the point where I actually, I believe it was early in high school, I actually received an award. I don't know how well you can see this. I had to bring in this prop for you, but it says Turnaround Achievement Award for me, and I have to bring it in person. Because when I talk about it, people don't believe me. That's why I felt like I had to bring it in. In recognition of your outstanding achievement in turning your life around. I don't know if you know what kind of a dirt bag you have to be to get an award.

Justin Draeger:

Who gave you this award?

Alex DeLonis:

This was for all of Michiana. It's an Indiana, Michigan, it has my high school on it, but it was at a bowling alley that had, but there was dinner. I went up on stage, I shook someone's hand, I took pictures. At the time, I didn't really take all of that in, but definitely as now I'm older, I was like, oh, that was actually, yeah, that was a whole thing.

Justin Draeger:

This wasn't a group of friends or family? This was an official award?

Alex DeLonis:

No. Yeah.

Justin Draeger:

You clearly had demonstrated some growth here and people recognized it.

Alex DeLonis:

Oh yeah. In eighth grade, I actually ended up getting expelled. I wasn't out robbing liquor stores or anything. What they said, I don't think I, again, completely understood this at the time. They kept using the word insubordination. I just wouldn't listen to anything anyone would say. At one point they traded me for two other kids with behavioral issues from another school, which I probably, that may have started leading to this. I was like, okay, maybe that's kind of a big deal and I need to start figuring some things out.

Justin Draeger:

Well, so two questions. What age was it where you started to turn things around and what do you attribute the turnaround to?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, so that was probably, I think if I'm doing the math correctly based on the date on here, that was, I got this at about sophomore, junior year of high school. I will say that that's probably once I got to high school and got more involved in athletics. I was an Allstate football player, Allstate Wrestler, junior college All-American wrestler. I was a captain of both of those teams. There was people, I guess in my view, who really started to depend on me. If I'm suspended and expelled all the time, I'm not really able to be there for the team and people who need me. Also it was the people, most importantly. There was coaches, family members, random security guards, seriously, all kinds of people who I felt wanted to see me succeed and offered to do the nicest things for me coming up and to get me through that time.

Then that kind of continued through college as I had to, I felt like I kind of had a late start there, so I had to relearn how to do a lot of things. That's kind of where my financial aid counselor helped out a lot in being able to support me through learning how to be a college student when I barely made it through high school.

Justin Draeger:

Well talk to us about that financial aid counselor.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah. Yeah. Rena Kilabru, she is retired now, but she worked at Harper College when I was with her. I believe she entered her career at the College of Lake County. She was my mom away from home. She would definitely interject and give her opinion on things I was doing as a young college student to advise me in the right direction, which is exactly what I needed at that time, give me career advice and even help me land that first job in financial aid when I interviewed at 21 and started at Oakton, you start to learn these things later. Rena and the director who hired me knew each other very well, and I had no idea. When I started there, my director kind of said, "You may want to give Rena a call." I was like, "Oh, okay. I'll give Rena a call."

Yeah, we stay in touch to this day. She was actually at my wedding. Kind of a lifelong connection that we made there. Things definitely would've been different without our connection. Knowing what I know now, I worked a lot in her financial aid office. I was earning, and I actually had to go back and look at my W2. I was earning 15 grand a year in work study, and then I was working my job. Now as I'm building cost of attendance and doing all of these things. I'm like, how on earth at a community college was I ... But that was a long time ago, long time ago. Yeah, it got me great experience - when our night person, our night financial aid staff person left, they didn't replace them. They just had me come in at night after wrestling practice. I come in all sweaty and I start [inaudible 00:12:11].

Justin Draeger:

Is that because you wanted to or because they were trying to keep you busy?

Alex DeLonis:

Probably a little bit of both.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah. You know what they say about idle hands, I just didn't know if it was a mixture of both or if this counselor was saying, "Alex, we have the work for you. Let's get you more money. Let's keep you busy." If it was all of it together or what was the plan there.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, I think it was a win-win for everyone. Yeah, it definitely kept me, I mean, it was class all day work, wrestling, work, probably study at night, wake up and do it again. That was just a couple years, couple years straight, and it worked. It definitely helped.

Justin Draeger:

Tell me, you're going, working your way through college, you do all of this stuff. How does that help you transition then into full-time financial aid work? You told us from there, you looked for a job in your field of study, but you ultimately decided, "Hey, I'm going to do financial aid."

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, so well, I started the financial aid job and about six months in, so the way police testing works, at least in that area, no one was actually hiring. I think their list expires after a year or two. So they put out a test. You come out, you take a little exam, you do a bench press and run around a track, and then you get put on a list. Right? Well, I got my first call back about six months after I started my first financial aid job to come in and interview. I think I was top three on the list. I declined the interview. I didn't go.

Even during that first six months working in an aid office surrounded by the people I was surrounded by. I felt like I was really onto something. I can give a shout out to the director who is at Oakton Community College now, Dr. Cheryl Warman, who was a former ILASFAA president who said pretty much, and this is kind of the same speech now I give to newer professionals in my office. You're going to figure out really quick if this is what you want to do long term. To give yourself the best opportunity, the way she phrased it for me is it's a job requirement for you to go volunteer for ILASFAA. It's not an option. You go volunteer for ILASFAA and be on a committee and kind of navigate things that way. She even framed, take it a step further, especially someone like me who's a little competitive, she said, "You don't join a committee just to join a committee. You join a committee to win committee of the year." Yeah. I was like, "Okay." 21 year old me. "All right, Cheryl. We'll see what we can do."

I did. I won the conference scholarship to go to my first ILASFAA conference for free, which is given by the Diversity Issues Committee. The next year I was on that committee. Two years after that I was chairing the committee and we did win Committee of the Year within one of those years. A lot of that happened right in that first six months, and I was really enjoying what I was doing, but also having holidays off and Winter Break, that didn't hurt either. Yeah, it was kind of all of those things. Really, I can't say that I really assessed my strengths and how that fits into a profession, but Harper was a strengths-based institution.

Even at orientation, we took the strengths finder and three of my top five were communication, woo, winning others over, and competition. It was the communication and the winning others over with a lot of the difficult financial aid conversations we have to have. Anyone who was a potentially issue student, they pretty much gave to me because, I don't know, I almost had fun trying to make them my best friend at the end of the conversation. It's something I really enjoyed.

Justin Draeger:

In financial aid, we see all sorts of different students, students who have frustration, understandable frustration. Sometimes that's misdirected at the financial aid staff because they're frustrated with the process or the school or faculty. Sometimes we're dealing with frustrated faculty or administrations who don't understand why we need certain information or have certain processes or we can't implement a program the way they want. When you were talking about your upbringing, you talked about the things that helped you turn around a little bit. You talked about discipline from sports, you talked about people depending on you as you got into leadership positions, you were the captain of your team. You talked about the people around you from the community that was around you, everybody from your coaches to your friends, your teammates that were depending on you to the security staff at your school and at the sporting event. How does that sort of infuse how you approach working with your students? How does that make you a better financial aid administrator?

Alex DeLonis:

The biggest thing for me is I was given the tools. A lot of people wanted to help me out. I was given the tools to do it, but it doesn't stop at just giving someone the tools. It was learning how to actually use the tools. Have you ever played Uno, the card game Uno? Everyone doesn't start with the same deck of cards. It's almost like, kind of the way I make it make sense is everyone has a different deck. Some people start off a little ahead, a little ahead of others, and even if you give the kid a bunch of draw twos and some draw fours, if they still don't know how to strategically play that hand, they still may not win. That's what I try to do with my students, which was done for me.

It was at first a lot of people just saying, "Well, why don't you do this? This is the smarter thing to do." It wasn't until people actually took the time to show me how, to take the time and the care to actually sit down with me and show me how they did it or give me examples of people who have done it that way. That, I think, is how I make it make sense and how I would approach helping a student, definitely with my background, but any background to try to help them kind of relearn, rethink. Because there's just a lot of, I know for me, there's just a lot of things I had to unlearn. There was just a lot of refocusing that needed to happen. Even if you just gave me a piece of paper and said, "Do this." Just still wasn't going to happen. Really needed that mentorship to really make it work.

Justin Draeger:

It reminds me of people, we all grow up in different situations, but you sort of need, it's access to people who will give you time. You need access to other people's know-how to show you. You're making time, you're giving people access to the one thing that everyone's most limited on, which is your time.

Alex DeLonis:

Absolutely.

Justin Draeger:

Well, talk to me a little bit about how that then ties back to how you approach the profession then. You talked about some of your involvement that was instilled in you by your, I guess it was the first director that you worked for professionally at Oakton.

Alex DeLonis:

Yes.

Justin Draeger:

How do you approach then your profession, whether that's at the state or the regional or even at the NASFAA level of you as you've gotten more involved?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah. Yeah, from ILASFAA, I eventually made it onto the executive board as an elected member. I have a hard time saying no, Justin. I also feel like I've been taught, or it's kind of beat into me to just not let an opportunity go by. I don't feel like maybe up until now I've not been in the position where I can say, "Oh no, I'll just say no to that and I'll do it next year." I've just been that person, sign me up for that committee. I'll run for this position, I'll do this presentation and take it all in at once. Which for me, I love to stay busy. I am usually full of energy despite my two young children and can get it all done. I say no to very few things, but I'd say my wrestling background helps with a lot of that and kind of handling the pressure and of presenting on big stages or meeting big deadlines.

I also probably attribute a lot of that to my mom. With taking on as much as I do, I'm pretty easygoing and I don't really get concerned about much. My mom, with my brother, I think he was born, I was like 13 or 14. My mom had my brother on a Friday. I was so excited. I got to get out of school, go to the hospital, eat the free food there. It was a great experience. She had that boy on a Friday and then she was back at the grocery store stocking shelves on Monday. There was no leave. If she wasn't there to work, that means our lights wouldn't be on, our water wouldn't be there, food wouldn't be in the refrigerator.

For me, and I could give similar stories about my grandma, grandpa, they just had to grind, right? No matter what. That work ethic that I kind of got to see there, no complaints, no tears. That is just what you did. For me, I'm like, what if I got to stay up a little late to meet this deadline okay. If I've got to work on this weekend, all right. To me that's a different kind of pressure. Just to see how my mom handled things, it kind of put it in a different perspective for me.

Justin Draeger:

Well, one day you and I are going to have a different conversation about the saying no piece. I look at it as, well, look, no, I actually think it's okay. I think it's times and seasons, right? After every season, there's a time. There was a time in my life where I said yes to everything. Then there was a time in my life where I started to be more selective. Then there will be another time in my life where I say yes to more things and times and seasons. I bet if we were to talk to your mom or your grandmother or others, they wouldn't want you to have the exact same life that they did.

Alex DeLonis:

Absolutely.

Justin Draeger:

That's their goal. Yeah. At least I'd say that for my family. That's a separate conversation.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, that's 2.0.

Justin Draeger:

If you were talking to people who were considering, they're just getting into this profession, they're thinking about how do I consider my future in this profession? What advice would you have for them as they think about whether to get involved, how to move up, how they should think about their professional future, what would it be?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, dive right in. Associations are always looking for volunteers. I know for me, I used my association work to bridge the gap that my job wasn't able to offer me on my resume or in my skillset. I actually remember in one of my interviews, being able to talk about leading a committee, leading several committees of people who owed me nothing. I don't sign their paycheck, I'm not doing their performance evaluation. Being able, because I at that point had not had staff report to me, so I had to be able to talk about how I could lead people. I was able to do that through association work. Yeah, I would say dive right in. There are so many different opportunities, so many different great associations within financial aid, outside of financial aid. Everyone brings kind of their own unique skillset to the table.

Whatever you do, for me, it's always been, how can I put my original flavor on this? How can I make people remember that I'm the one who came up with that policy or that new task force or whatever it may be. Especially in associations where the seats kind of revolve pretty frequently. Sometimes it's just little things like when I was Treasurer of MASFAA. For every single check I wrote, I sent a little note to the person that I was sending it to just with a little comment and actually got some that actually blew up in my face a little bit because if I forgot to put a note in there, people got used to it. I started to hear it in board meetings and things like that. Just how can you pick this up, whether it's association work or in your office, how can I pick this up and make it better than what I had it to begin with?

Justin Draeger:

All right, Alex, let's get to the speed round a little bit. When I ask you some one-off questions here. Just some one-offs to see where you're at. What's the favorite swag you've ever received from a conference or professional development session. I know you're in financial aid, so I know it's not going to be anything extravagant, but what do you got?

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, and I think when we were together recently at a financial affairs committee meeting, you pointed out some of my MASFAA swag and I was sporting, and I wear it 9 days out of 10, I have a jacket from the 2017 MASFAA Summer Institute leadership symposium that I am still rocking that thing to this day.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, it looked very comfortable.

Alex DeLonis:

Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. It keeps you warm outside, but you're not too warm inside kind of a thing. Yeah, Emily Hanum from the University of Missouri was responsible. She was my co-chair at the time, and we got those. Yeah. That's definitely it. I love anything I can wear generally. All the t-shirts, all the jackets, that's definitely my thing.

Justin Draeger:



I've dropped multiple hints and have yet to hear you offer me up anything from MASFAA. I don't know what a guy has to do but you are not picking up what I'm laying down.

Alex DeLonis:

I know. I'll go in the stash. I'll see what we got.

Justin Draeger:

See what you can do. All right. All right. Next. Favorite film? Favorite movie?

Alex DeLonis:

Oh, of all time?

Justin Draeger:

Well, no, in the last year.

Alex DeLonis:

Okay. Well, oh, of the last year, probably Top Gun Two. I did just watch Creed Three though. From this year-

Justin Draeger:

How was it?

Alex DeLonis:

Oh, it was great. It was great. Yeah. Yeah. I almost ran through my front door when I got home. They got the training montage.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alex DeLonis:

All the hype stuff.

Justin Draeger:

There's a formula. There's a formula.

Alex DeLonis:

Oh yeah. It works. It works. I'll be there for Creed Seven whenever that comes out.

Justin Draeger:

All right. Favorite sport?

Alex DeLonis:

Football. Football to watch. Yeah. I'm really into disc golf right now, so I actually watch a lot of disc golf, but still football's king there.

Justin Draeger:

All right. The one thing you couldn't function without, like "I couldn't function without" what?

Alex DeLonis:

Oh goodness. Actually, disc golf would probably be that.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, really? That's your thing, huh?

Alex DeLonis:

No, yeah, we picked it up during the pandemic, absolutely nothing to do. What's this virus going around? We were like, oh, well, we can get out and exercise. It was like the safest sport you could possibly play during the pandemic. Now I invest way too much money into it, and I'm not that good but I have fun.

Justin Draeger:

I don't know. I have seen people pop open bags of disc golf, and it's like they have a whole set of discs. I don't know how anyone invests so much money in disc golf. I guess I got a thing or two to learn.

Alex DeLonis:

Yeah, it's a whole thing. I surprise myself with how I justify needing an additional disc.

Justin Draeger:

All right.

Alex DeLonis:

But yeah, it's a good time.

Justin Draeger:

All right, Alex, we're really glad you came on the podcast today. Thanks for all you do for students, students at Wabash and students across the country and your volunteer work. You are going to be our incoming treasurer at NASFAA.

Alex DeLonis:

Yes.

Justin Draeger:

We're looking forward to your service here. Certainly folks can look you up in the NASFAA directory,. S if people want to follow you, they can follow you on LinkedIn and Twitter, and we'll put that in the show note so people can follow you there.

Alex DeLonis:

Perfect.

Justin Draeger:

Really glad to have you on. Thanks, Alex.

Alex DeLonis:

Thanks so much, Justin.

Justin Draeger:

All right. That's another edition of "Off the Cuff." This is our second episode in our Voices series. If you are interested in being in our Voices series, and you have part of your story or identity that connects in how you help and serve students, please go ahead and use the submit that's in our show notes. We'd love to hear from you. Thanks everybody for listening. Remember to leave us a rating on your podcast app of choice that helps other people find the podcast, and we'll talk to you again very soon.