

NASFAA 2026 National Conference First-Time Attendee Task Force Final Report

July 2026



The NASFAA Conference First-Time Attendee Task Force was assembled by NASFAA staff, the Task Force Chair, and the 2026 NASFAA National Chair, ensuring diverse representation across institutional types, regions, and professional backgrounds. This group was charged with supporting and enhancing the experience of first-time attendees at the NASFAA 2026 National Conference, held June 29–July 2, 2026, in National Harbor, MD.

This year, the task force built on previous efforts by focusing on expanding opportunities for connection and inclusion for all first-time attendees. A full list of opportunities included:

- Participants were able to connect with others before the conference through NASFAA Communities powered by Slack.
- A dedicated webinar for First-Time Conference Attendees ahead of the National Conference.
- Mentor and mentee assignments were structured as “pods,” with one mentor assigned to multiple mentees rather than a one-on-one relationship.
- The First-Time Attendees Kick-Off Networking Event & Reception on Monday, June 29, served as a welcoming space for community building and fun.
- Throughout the conference, first-time attendees could visit a dedicated First-Time Attendee Booth in the Innovation Hall, participate in various networking opportunities, and compete for prizes.
- Dedicated teams at after-hours conference networking events.

Additional details for each effort are outlined below.

The mission of the task force remained clear: help new attendees feel seen, supported, and equipped to navigate the conference and the financial aid profession with confidence. With a strong focus on mentorship, networking, and ongoing engagement, we provided a space where everyone, no matter how they entered the profession, could grow together.

Chair: Wendi C. Owens, University of Miami

Members:

- Jessica Flogaites, University of Pittsburgh
- Kemmoree Duncombe, Kirtland Community College
- Sondra Fonville, University of Michigan
- Dawn Boman, Johnson County Community College
- Cyarnae Fields, Western Governors University
- Kevin McCrary, Bethune-Cookman University
- Celena Tulloss, Auburn University
- Eudelia Gomez, Texas A&M University-San Antonio
- Ben Montecillo, University of Houston
- Alisha Aguilar, University of Redlands
- Susan Stephenson, Eide Bailly

NASFAA Staff Liaisons:

- Charlotte Etier, Director of Research and Grants
- David Downing, NASFAA U Instructor
- Christine Attardo, Executive Assistant

NASFAA 2026 National Conference First-Time Attendee Initiatives

Communications

Task force members worked closely with the NASFAA staff liaisons to produce and deliver:

- A welcome email and event details to all first-time attendees, including a kick-off event RSVP
- A solicitation email to returning attendees to serve as mentors
- Email templates for mentor outreach to mentees
- Posts and articles for NASFAA's *Today's News*, including a [Q&A with the Taskforce Chair](#)
- Posts for the Slack NASFAA 2026 channel for First-Time Conference Attendees
- A dedicated first-time attendee webinar ahead of the National Conference
- A dedicated [webpage](#) on the conference microsite with detailed information for First-Time Conference Attendees

Mentor/Mentee Program

This year, mentees and mentors were matched into pods, with multiple mentees assigned to a single mentor. Assignments were made based on region and institution type, with special consideration given to graduate and professional institutions, matching them with a mentor in their sector, even if the region differed. As part of a larger communications strategy, first-time attendees were marketed the need for a conference mentor as a guide for their first conference experience, not only for those who were new to the profession. This shift was intentional, as prior conference feedback outlined that many felt mentors were only for someone with little experience in financial aid administration. Matches were finalized by June 8, 2026. Last-minute pairings were accommodated onsite at the networking event. Additionally, during the match notification process, an email was sent to the mentor and all mentees as a single group, allowing each pod to communicate with one another automatically. Mentors were asked to arrange at least one virtual meet-up with their pod prior to arriving at the national conference; this effort replaced the mentor training held in prior years.

In 2025, approximately 33 individuals signed up to receive a conference mentor ahead of the national conference. In 2026, 101 people signed up for a mentor before arriving at the conference. An additional 19 first-time attendees signed up for a mentor during the kick-off and networking event, bringing the total to 120 mentees. In 2025, 31 seasoned conference attendees signed up to be mentors, and in 2026, 35. This count includes all First-Time Conference Attendee Task Force members, who served as mentors. These counts show growth across the program overall. Individuals who participated as mentors are listed in Appendix A.

Networking Event

The First-Time Attendees Kick-Off Networking Event was held on Monday, June 29, 2026, from 12:30 to 1:45 p.m. in Maryland AC at the Gaylord National Harbor. The First-Time Attendee Kickoff Event welcomed a record 298 first-time attendees with opening remarks from NASFAA President and CEO Melanie Storey, National Chair Heidi Carl, and First-Time Attendee Task Force Chair Wendi Owens. Attendees enjoyed light refreshments, created regional roll call posters for the Opening Session, and received first-timer buttons and instructions for the Passport networking activity. First-time attendees were also able to connect with their mentors and mentor/mentee pods in the mentor-mentee

networking lounge, creating opportunities to build relationships and gain insights into the conference. Attendees who had not previously signed up for a mentor were able to be paired on-site, helping ensure everyone had a welcoming and supportive start to their conference experience.

Dedicated First-Time Attendee Booth

The First-Time Attendee Booth served as a highly engaged hub throughout the conference. During all Innovation Hall operating hours, the First-Time Attendee Booth was open and continuously staffed, serving as a central hub where first-time attendees could ask questions, connect with conference mentors and First-Time Attendee Task Force members, receive guidance, and participate in the interactive First-Time Attendee Passport Activity.

Engagement is measured through two interactive booth activities: a Geographic and Experience Map, where attendees identified both their institutions' locations and their years of experience in financial aid with color-coded pins, and a Conference Goal Wall, where attendees shared what they hoped to gain from the conference. Together, these activities engaged more than 335 participants representing 43 states, the District of Columbia, and three U.S. territories/ international locations, while providing valuable data to inform future marketing of the first-time attendee programming.

The Geographic and Experience Map challenged the common assumption that first-time National Conference attendees are also new to the profession. It showed that 48% of participants who engaged with the map reported having more than 10 years of experience in financial aid, demonstrating that many attendees were seasoned professionals attending their first National Conference rather than newcomers to the field. Responses from the Goal Wall further reinforced the value of the program, with networking and building professional relationships emerging as the most common goals, followed by expanding knowledge of financial aid and learning from peers. These insights will help the First-Time Attendee Task Force continue refining programming to better meet attendees where they are in their careers while supporting the goals that matter most to them.

On-Going Conference Networking Opportunities

This year, at the after-hours networking events, a dedicated first-time attendee Top Golf and Trivia Team. Led by a seasoned conference attendee, both teams were full by the time the events took place.

Also new this year was a First-Time Conference Attendee Passport. This networking opportunity encouraged first-time attendees to participate in a range of activities throughout the conference, connecting them with fellow first-timers, mentors, and other attendees. As an incentive for participation, any first-time attendee who completed their passport was entered into a prize drawing. Passports were distributed at the First-Time Attendees Kick-Off Networking Event and First-Time Attendee Booth. Throughout the conference, approximately 600 first-time attendee buttons and passports were distributed. While there is no way to track the exact number of first-time attendees who received a passport, the 2026 conference had approximately 650 registered first-time attendees, suggesting that the majority engaged with these networking opportunities.

Feedback & Suggestions from the 2025 First-Time Attendee Task Force

In a report from the 2025 First-Time Attendee Task Force, the following suggestions and feedback were provided to improve the first-time attendee experience. Below, the 2026 task force shares how they addressed each area and offers their own suggestions for future years.

Mentor/Mentee

- Develop a plan to limit the number of day-of mentor sign-ups; Find a way to get more to sign up in advance of the onsite conference
- Develop a more organized way to match day-of mentor sign-ups so that the mentor and mentee can meet in person right away, rather than coordinating the sharing of contact information during the conference

As outlined above, for the 2026 National Conference, efforts focused on highlighting the mentor/mentee program, providing additional information, and connecting mentor/mentee pods ahead of their on-site arrivals.

Kick-Off Networking Event

- When the activities require a lot of movement/walking around, there could be fewer tables and chairs, except maybe more on the perimeter of the room.
- Expand opportunities for meaningful connection by increasing structured networking with mentors and fellow first-time attendees before, during, and beyond the Kick-Off Event.

For the 2026 National Conference, the event footprint was expanded by securing a larger ballroom space, creating a more open layout for networking, and adding a dedicated Mentor/Mentee Lounge where attendees can meet their mentors and gather with their pods.

Engagement increased beyond the Kick-Off Event by introducing the First-Time Attendee Booth in the Exhibit Hall, the First-Time Attendee Passport Activity, the Conference Goal Wall, and the Geographic and Experience Map.

Increased opportunities for structured and informal networking by creating multiple touchpoints for first-time attendees to connect with mentors, Task Force members, volunteers, including creating teams at charity events.

Conference Communications

- Maybe consider creating a “first-time attendee” Slack channel to facilitate informal meetups (like dinner, Disney night, etc.).

For the 2026 National Conference, the NASFAA Communities team opted to use a single dedicated Slack channel for all conference-related communications and engagement. The NASFAA staff liaisons met with the newly hired NASFAA Community Manager the week prior to the conference to discuss how she could support first-time attendees during the conference and plan for future engagement opportunities.

Feedback & Suggestions for future First-Time Conference Attendee Engagement

The 2026 NASFAA Conference First-Time Attendee Task Force offers the following suggestions for future ways to engage First-Time Conference Attendees at NASFAA National Conferences:

- Offer a mentor/mentee program for first-time attendees who are sponsors and exhibitors. Several individuals who signed up this year were NASFAA Associate Members, suggesting an opportunity for growth in this area.
- Begin the task force recruitment prior to the Leadership & Legislative Conference & Expo, to allow the task force time to begin their work earlier.
- Ensure there are dedicated first-time attendee meet-up opportunities in any additional NASFAA Community Events hosted at future National Conferences.
- Continue first-time attendee engagement throughout the conference by maintaining a dedicated First-Time Attendee Booth.
- Continue to hold a dedicated first-time attendee webinar ahead of the National Conference, separate from the AMA marketing webinar
- Reevaluate the timing and/or food offerings for the First-Time Attendee Kickoff Event. The kickoff is intentionally scheduled immediately before the conference officially begins, making it one of the most valuable opportunities to connect first-time attendees before they disperse into sessions. However, because the event falls during the lunch hour, with little to no time before or after for a meal, attendees are often forced to choose between networking and eating. Providing a more substantial meal or identifying an alternate time slot would remove this barrier and allow attendees to fully engage in the kickoff experience while ensuring they are set up for a successful afternoon of conference programming.
- Evaluate the set-up of the First-Time Attendee Kickoff Event as relates to the mentor/mentee meet-up. Some mentors expressed difficulty in networking with the mentee pod at the small cocktail tables offered, and suggested pods meet at larger seated rounds, where they could more meaningfully engage.
- Consider how final communications for mentors and mentees can be included in an overall plan, to ensure there is clarity on meet-up opportunities and how they will be structured (e.g., a reminder that the First-Time Attendee Kickoff Event is the initial meet-up opportunity, and where exactly mentees can plan to meet their mentor).

Appendix A: 2026 National Conference Mentors

First Name	Last Name	Institution / Organization Name	Region
Jessica	Flogaites	University of Pittsburgh	EASFAA
De Rodrick	Jonkins	Hood College	EASFAA
Christopher	Pollard	The George Washington University Law School	EASFAA
Kemmoree	Duncombe	Kirtland Community College	MASFAA
Sondra	Fonville	University of Michigan	MASFAA
Jackie	Kennedy-Fletcher	Indiana University	MASFAA
Wilma	Porter	Oakland Community College	MASFAA
Alexis	Brown	Blackburn College	MASFAA
Shashanta	James	Western Michigan University	MASFAA
Santwinaa	Nuñez	University of Indianapolis	MASFAA
Sarah	Freestone	Drake University	MASFAA
Dawn	Boman	Johnson County Community College	RMASFAA
Cyarnae	Fields	Western Governors University	RMASFAA
Brenda	Hicks	Southwestern College	RMASFAA
Elizabeth	Reynolds	Colorado State University	RMASFAA
Kevin	McCrary	Bethune-Cookman University	SASFAA
Celena	Tulloss	Auburn University	SASFAA
Wendi	Owens	University of Miami	SASFAA
Vandeen	McKenzie	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University	SASFAA
Joan	Bailey	University of South Florida	SASFAA
Chad	Sartini	Tennessee State University	SASFAA
Michelle	Hare	Winthrop University	SASFAA
Delia	Gomez	Texas A&M University-San Antonio	SWASFAA
Ben	Montecillo	University of Houston	SWASFAA
Tanika	Aggison	Houston Community College System District Office	SWASFAA
Elizabeth	Amador	University of New Mexico	SWASFAA
Audra	Main	Moore Norman Technology Center	SWASFAA
Zachary	Christian	SC Tuition Grants Commission	SWASFAA
Meghann	Nash Degges	Galveston College	SWASFAA
Brandon	Endsley	The College of Health Care Professions	SWASFAA
JoEllen	Price	San Jacinto College	SWASFAA
Alisha	Aguilar	University of Redlands	WASFAA
Susan	Stephenson	Eide Bailly	WASFAA
Raisl	Davis	University of California Law	WASFAA
Kumba	McGill	Ascent Funding	WASFAA