NASFAA’s “Off the Cuff” Podcast - Episode 162 Transcript

Speaker 1:
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Justin Draeger:
Hey everyone. Welcome to another edition of Off the Cuff. I'm Justin Draeger. And today we have a very special episode. We're going to be talking with our current NASFAA national chair, Brenda Hicks. She's the director of financial aid at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas. Brenda has a long history with NASFAA and with her region and state associations. And Brenda, we're really glad that you're able to join us today.

Brenda Hicks:
Thanks Justin. It's good to be here.

Justin Draeger:
There's a couple things I feel like first of all, people may know you because you've been involved in a lot of different areas of NASFAA. You've been a volunteer for, I don't know, geesh, as long as I've been with the association.

Brenda Hicks:
Which would be?

Justin Draeger:
I started.

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah, I remember when you were hired.

Justin Draeger:
Right. Okay. It was such a glorious day.

Brenda Hicks:
It was. It was.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah, so that was around 2010, but when were you regional president of RMASFAA?

Brenda Hicks:
I was on the board with Ron Day for the first time. That would have been 2012-ish, right in there. Yeah. Was when I was RMASFAA president.
Justin Draeger:
And I think it's helpful for folks, when you look at, well, first of all, we should learn a little bit about you. How long have you been at your school? Talk to us about the size, what type of institution you come from.

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah, I actually I'm odd I think in the fact that I started when I graduated from college, I started here. This was my first job in admissions. I was an admissions counselor at Southwestern in Winfield. And I did admissions for about 10 years and I worked my way up slowly from counselor to assistant director to director. And I was there until about 2001. And so then that year I moved to, we had some transition up here in the financial aid office and they were looking for someone who had grasp of financial aid. And if you're in admissions and you don't understand financial aid, you're not an effective admissions counselor. I had embedded myself in this office anyway, just learning. And so they tapped me and they moved me up here as director of financial aid in 2001 and I've been here ever since. And so it's going on gosh, about 30 years, which is a little scary.

Justin Draeger:
That was a fast 30 years. And you're a young 30 years in.

Brenda Hicks:
That's right.

Justin Draeger:
It is sort of unique that you came from admissions to financial aid. You have the whole enrollment management picture because you have the admission side, you have the financial aid side and then of course you deal with cash management. And so you get to see it all. And you've seen a lot of change over your time. I wonder, part of the reason we're doing this is because usually you would give your introductory speech at our national conference, which we did not have. This actually gets you more time. Well played politically, you get to talk for even longer than you would have at a conference.

Brenda Hicks:
Awesome.

Justin Draeger:
Talk to me a little bit, the challenges you're seeing aid folks have today, how is that different from maybe when you first got into financial aid? What did you say was that 2001 is when you transitioned in?

Brenda Hicks:

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. What's different today? What are the big challenges you're seeing?

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah, the thing I always remember is when I started in financial aid and people are going to laugh about this because when I started in financial aid, I remember telling myself, I went to the Summer Institute Bootcamp that RMASFAA holds. I went there my first week on the job, was completely overwhelmed, came home with a yellow notepad full of notes and I said to myself, "You know what? I'm going to take this year and learn Pell. And then next year I'll learn direct loans.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. Then life's time table's a little different than that.

Brenda Hicks:
Right. Right. Yeah, you could do that in those days because I'm horrible with years and facts. But I don't think we hadn't had a reauthorization in several years by around that time. And they weren't changing things every year like they do now and midyear and every month it seems like. There was no need. The rules didn't change. Nothing changed. And so you just could count on the rules being the same year after year after year. And so they were static so you could take your time and really dig in and learn something very well. But nowadays I don't think you can do that. I cannot imagine starting from admissions in this environment, it would be a challenge. It would be a really big learning curve.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. You think about, so 2001 is when you started in financial aid, if you just think about the dollars that are spent annually in federal student aid back in 2001 to today where we have over a $100 billion a year, that attracts a lot of eyes, a lot of regulators and a lot of legislators and you're right, over the last, even 10 years, the amount of change in this profession is, it's staggering and it cause whiplash. Trying to jump into the middle of this, especially during a pandemic where you've got even a new program that's sprung on aid folks that has to be implemented in two months, the CARES Act, it's a lot to wrap your arms around.

Brenda Hicks:
Well, and you're dealing with whatever's happening on your local campus. You have to really consciously dig yourself out and say, "I need to catch up with the national scene here for a minute and see if there's anything out there that happened that I need to pay attention to." And if you're not in tune with that rhythm, it's tough.

Justin Draeger:
I think one of the unique things about you that will resonate with a lot of aid folks out there is our national chairs come from all different types of institutions. We've had aid directors and vice presidents and provosts from very large public schools. And we've had aid directors from smaller schools, public and private. You're one of the folks that brings a different perspective because you come from a smaller private institution in Kansas. What do you think is different? The perspective you bring to the table, how many students do you have there?

Brenda Hicks:
We have 1,200-ish students. And about half of those are online. This is over simplifying, but about half of those are online and half of them are here on campus.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. A small private not for profit school, facing, I imagine, challenges that are different from maybe a large flagship public. But when you look at the NASFAA membership, we have a pretty even distribution between publics and privates. Maybe talk a little bit about what challenges are you guys seeing on your campus?

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah. On our campus, I think it's very similar actually to what people are experiencing just on a smaller scale. We have five people in my office, I'm one of those five. And one of the great things about working at a school this size is I talk to students so I have a caseload. I have my little people who come in and talk to me. I was in a meeting just a little while ago and one of my little guys came popping in, so I had closed my door and told him to come back. But it's fun. I enjoy. And that part of my job feeds me. I really enjoy the ability to keep in touch with on a real close level, my students. Students, it's a more direct link to what you're doing and you get fed from that every day.

Brenda Hicks:
And I sort of feel like, I'm a mom to about 300 kids and that's nice. We're dealing with everything like everybody else is. There's uncertainty. We don't know, my team, some of them have kids in school systems so they didn't even know what their day to day life's going to look like in the next couple of months. We're all wondering, is everybody going to come back? Who's enrolled? They're enrolled, but they're not showing, where are they? Are they okay? Are their parents okay? We're dealing with a ton of appeals right now. It's the same stuff, just smaller.

Justin Draeger:
Well it's I feel like, so this is what I say. Sometimes I feel like the community gives the impression that certain people make good financial aid administrators. But I do feel like there's such a diversity of schools and students and positions in financial aid that in my mind at least, we can make use of anybody, all different types of people, extroverts, introverts. There are some people who love interacting with students and that's the passion, part of the passion you're bringing to the job. You like that interaction with students to get a feel for them and care for them. There are other folks who don't like interacting with students, but there are places for them in financial aid. It might not be where you're sitting or, I was sitting as an aid director at a smaller school, but there are lots of places for anyone. Come one come all into our profession.

Brenda Hicks:
Absolutely. I agree. I agree. Yeah. When you're at a smaller place, I think you become, you're a generalist. When you are at a larger place, you have the ability to specialize a little bit more. And if you're a person who doesn't necessarily want to meet with people and you'd rather just process, there's a lot of great things you can do at a larger place, a larger school.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. Financial aid work, social justice work, there's room for everyone. Everybody has to lift where they feel they can contribute the most. And sometimes people are more comfortable behind the scenes doing processes or programming or working within the bureaucracy of an institution, but they can still be a part of what our movement is, which is helping students.

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah, absolutely.

Justin Draeger:

Brenda, I think one of the things that's also unique about small schools sometimes is that it can be harder for a small school, with a smaller staff to volunteer and be active in an association just for the simple fact that, like you said, you have a caseload. If you are not on campus, the caseload doesn't just vaporize. How did you, you've been very involved in your state, region and national associations, how have you prioritized that? How have you made that a reality? And what kind of conversations did you have with your school?

Brenda Hicks:

Yeah, not always really well, but honestly, but volunteering to me, and I thought a lot about this. It started very selfishly because I am a kinetic learner. And so my first volunteering that I did here in financial aid was to teach at Summer Institute. I went to Summer Institute. It was a valuable experience. I learned a ton. I knew I needed to dig more into these topics and for me to learn something I have to fully embed. And so I volunteered to teach because that's how you learn. Teach something, you learn it really well. And so that is what I've done. And so that spring boarded, I met people and started to talk to people and financial aid people are so great. They are so supportive and wonderful. I started getting involved in being an officer, being on committees and things like that.

Brenda Hicks:

And honestly, I think my volunteering has made me better, a better professional over the years. And realistically, to keep it all up, I'm available by email quite a bit. And so, you work, you go to the conferences, you meet with people. It's hard work. It's not easy. I would answer emails at night. With five people and our staff size, you can structure the work so that my team when I'm not here, they do pick up some of the slack, but the students know they can always meet with me. And if I'm not here on Wednesday, I will be here on Friday and they can set up appointments or they can email me and I'll talk to them.

Justin Draeger:

Well, one of the things I've always appreciated about working with you, Brenda, is that you're very grounded. And maybe this is because I consider myself a Midwesterner still at heart, but there's a, we're not going to sugar coat it. And so what I'm hearing you say and you'll correct me if I'm wrong, is that volunteering does take work. Putting yourself out there takes work. Making connections takes work. But one of the things I've heard you talk about is the return that you get from that, by putting yourself out there is this network of colleagues and friends. And then, the more you contribute, the more you get out of it. And especially from a small school, that's taken effort and you end up paying a price, I assume. If you're out of the office, the work still has to get done and everybody faces that. But you feel like you're getting something more out of that.

Brenda Hicks:

Absolutely. Yep. You got it right on.

Justin Draeger:
Can you talk a little bit about some of the support structures or for those who are thinking about getting involved in their state or regional or national association, how should they approach this? How do they make inroads with their institution to let them get involved?

Brenda Hicks:
Right. Absolutely you should have approval first. And I will say at first, Justin, I actually also sometimes funded my own participation. It meant that much to me and it fed me that much. I considered it a personal investment in my career and in myself, but it's much better. And I would take vacation time, but it's much better if you can get the support of your institution and your supervisors so that they know what you're doing and you can dip your toe in the water. Particularly right now, lots of people are volunteering just online. Many jobs are being done on Zoom, not at your desk. And so it's really not extra travel time or outside of the office time, you can do it on your extra time. Extra time, that's a difficult concept in August for students, for the profession.

Justin Draeger:
What extra time? Yeah.

Brenda Hicks:
You can. You can fit it in. And you just have to make it a priority and stick it in there. And I would say, if there are supervisors out there, if you're not encouraging your young people to engage and involve themselves, then you're missing out on developing some first rate people. We have five people, I need them humming on all cylinders. I need them to be knowledgeable. I need them to be engaged in the profession as well as in learning. And so that is through professional associations and I'm encouraging them almost pushing them a little bit. Why aren't you? What committees are you going to be on this year? Because I need those connections, those side conversations that they're going to have with the person who processes work study at WSU or the person who processes Pell Grant over in the community college. I need them to have those connections so that we can benefit from everything that everyone's doing.

Justin Draeger:
You've been a long time participant in your respective associations. When we asked you for your, when you came on board as national chair, we did an article where we asked you a series of questions. One of the things that you said, just about the best professional advice you ever received, was have a mind like water. And I wonder if you could talk about that, but also talk about it in the context of everything that's going on right now with COVID-19 and besides the professional stress, just the personal stress of living through a pandemic. And some people are living in isolation, they might be alone, but they chose that because they wanted to travel or connect with friends and they can't do any of that. Or you're trapped at home with young children and you feel like you're not keeping up with work or your family responsibilities. Have a mind like water. Give it to me.

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah. Have a mind like water. There's a phrase and it's paraphrased, I think from Ralph Waldo Emerson, which as people don't know, I'm an English major. I read a lot of Emerson in my college days and I didn't realize how much he was influencing me, but as I do things and the quotes and the things that I know and repeat to myself, seem to all stem back to him. He's a great read. He was a transcendentalist in the Civil War era, but he has a quote that is paraphrased from him. It's called, Life is a Journey, Not a
Destination. And I think that's an important thing to remember. His actual quote that it's paraphrased because his actual quote was, I looked it up was a definition of wisdom. And he said, "To find the journeys end in every step of the road."

Brenda Hicks:
And so I think when things like this happen to a person, the important thing to remember, chaos. When life throws you chaos, which it does occasionally, it's just important to take a step back and pause and recognize that sometimes we get on these tracks that are going forward and you're accomplishing things and you're achieving things and you're getting things done. And then this happens and you can't go forward, you have to stop. And it's important to recognize the beauty in that. And just learning to pause and learning to be, maybe not accomplishing everything you want to accomplish, but just being in the moment and pausing and looking around and appreciating what is there in the present and looking for opportunities in the present. There's a lot of great stuff that I'm getting out of this pandemic for myself personally.

Brenda Hicks:
And then also just the use of Zoom in my profession. We have grown so much in our ability to reach out to families just by using Zoom and have made leaps and bounds of progress in getting that implemented into our systems because we had to, during this pandemic, that I think will carry forward. And they're great, great things. And I can really celebrate that about this pandemic. I think, in general, when life hits you like a speeding train, like it's doing right now, you just have to step back and remember it’s okay. It's okay to stop. And it's okay to pause and it's okay to just be and maybe not accomplish things for a while.

Justin Draeger:
I appreciate that. I was in a meeting with you maybe a year or so ago. And you and I were talking about something that escapes me now. I can't remember what it was, but I do remember you saying something to the effect of, "Justin, glass is half full, Justin." And I remember saying, I remember this conversation kind of might not get all the details right. But you and I sort of take different tracks, but we arrive at the same place, which is, I'm a half as glass is half empty kind of guy. But I think of worst case scenario and then I arrive where you are, which is yeah, but the worst case scenario is usually one, unlikely. And two, even if it happens, I can deal. What really can't you deal with?

Justin Draeger:
Now, I'm not trying to rank people's issues or problems and minimize anything. You've had stuff in your life, Brenda, personally, I've had stuff in my life, personally. Everybody faces tragedy. I was watching a show last night on HBO where some of the conversation was, "Our relationship ends in tragedy." This guy sees the future. And she said, "What kind of relationship would that be?" And he was like, "That's every relationship." There's a tragedy in everybody's life. The point is, is that perspective, we can handle and that chaos you speak about, even when there's chaos around us, we can sort of fortify internally.

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah. Yeah. It's what it is, is it's a lack of control. And I think things like this when they happen, you realize how little control you have over your life really. I'm thinking of a joke, which is probably completely inappropriate, but it's what I like to say. It's life is a terminal disease.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah, from the moment you're born.

Brenda Hicks:
That's right. From the minute you're born, you're dying the rest of the time. And so, yeah, it's just the way it is. And you can either struggle with that or you can accept it and just enjoy the journey. And it may not end up, in my life, well, for example, when I was in admissions, I was really getting into admissions. I was much younger and less philosophical than I am now after raising two boys.

Justin Draeger:
Right. With its own set of challenges that you can't, speaking of not being able to control. Your kids are their own people, you cannot control them.

Brenda Hicks:
You cannot, you cannot. And so, you just have to take step back. And I was headed on enrollment management track, I was going to be an enrollment manager and then life happened and I switched and had to switch, up here to financial aid. And I love it. I love it. And so it's not always bad. Things may not always be like you want them to, they may not turn out like you want them to, but who cares? Sometimes what you want to do is not always the best thing.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. And at the end of the day, we all end the same way. The story all ends the same way.

Brenda Hicks:
It all ends the same.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah, there's an old Latin philosophy, memento mori, which is remember we all die. And it's the only Latin my kids know because I say it all the time. Which is it's again, not to minimize problems. It's to just place them in their proper perspective. We all want to help people. We want to help students. There's all these things outside of our control. And we influence what we can. We work where we can. And NASFAA, one of the things I love about NASFAA is that when we have all of these aid administrators, 28,000 on our rosters, individually, we might all be able to do a little bit, but collectively we all can do so much. And that's what I love about this organization is all of our collective effort, distributes a 150, 130 to $150 billion in financial aid every year. We process millions of financial aid applications. We help millions of students go to school collectively. It's incredible when you add up what our collective effort does in our individual spheres of influence.

Brenda Hicks:
Absolutely. Agree. Yeah. And that's one of the things I've really enjoyed about being involved in NASFAA and volunteering and doing the things that I've done is I feel like I have a voice. I feel like I can control. There we are, see?

Justin Draeger:
Feel like I can control.
Brenda Hicks:
I feel like I can control the outcome of the laws that direct my job. I feel like I really have a voice there and can influence some things. And that's super. Little old Kansas, telling Congress, look, this isn't really a good idea. Or this is a great idea.

Justin Draeger:
Right. And you've been partnering with NASFAA, you've been on Capitol Hill, you've talked to lawmakers and their staff and have influenced. And that's the sort of thing that comes from all of us pulling together. Your year as national chair, place that in perspective for us. What is the message that you would want NASFAA members to be hearing right now?

Brenda Hicks:
I think it's important, as I said to pause, I think this is a good year. Sometimes, some years you have this list, this laundry list of things you'd like to accomplish or whatever. This is not the time for that. I think there's also a benefit to maintaining with excellence. And I think that that's where we are. I think the best thing we can do with NASFAA, with our shops, our individual shops, with our personal lives is just to take a moment and reflect and just try to make it out of this intact, number one and healthy. And in all the ways that that represents. And it's a good time to look and see what we've learned from this experience, what we can learn from this experience and how we can make it through and move forward. Recognize we will make it through. We will. It'll happen. It may not look like we want it to look or thought it would look, but we will make it through.

Justin Draeger:
There's that glass is half full attitude. No, I couldn't agree more and couldn't have said it better myself, Brenda. I think that's it. There are some years when you push and you grow and you push outwards, you push boundaries. And in some years you fortify, you wrap your arms around the students you have. You focus on keeping the students you have who are facing turmoil, enrolled. It's thinking strategically as opposed to reactionarily to everything. And I'm really grateful that you're bringing your perspective from your institution and your experiences to the NASFAA board this year. I'm not a person who personally believes in divine intervention, but I am really glad that we have you here at this time and the board that we have at this time. And we're here to serve those NASFAA members the best way we know how. How would you suggest people get in touch with you if they want to talk to you about NASFAA or what's going on in the profession?

Brenda Hicks:
Yeah, they can email me. That's fine. It's my name and @sckans.edu.

Justin Draeger:
Yeah. And you're in the NASFAA directory.

Brenda Hicks:
I'm in the directory. Yeah. Just shoot me an email. Absolutely.

Justin Draeger:
Is there anything else, Brenda, that you want us to talk about today?
Brenda Hicks:
I'm good.

Justin Draeger:
Okay, Brenda, thank you very much for joining us for our August editions here of Off the Cuff. We're looking forward to the year ahead. I know the NASFAA members will be hearing from you throughout the year. And for all of our listeners, remember to subscribe, send us your comments. Send us any comments to Brenda and we'll, if you send them to us, we'll share them with her and share them possibly on air in a future edition. Tell your friends. We'll see you again next time.