

Beth Maglione:

Hello, hello, and welcome to another episode of NASFAA's Off the Cuff podcast. I am Beth Maglione, NASFAA's Interim President and CEO for a handful of days. I will be handing it over to our other guest today.

Melanie Storey:

Good day, NASFAA. I am Melanie Storey, incoming president and CEO of NASFAA. Excited to be here and to say hello and spend some time with everybody today.

Beth Maglione:

Well, we are incredibly excited to have you, to have you here on Off the Cuff, to have you in general serving as the leader of NASFAA. I don't think I need to tell our listeners that Melanie's appointment is the result of almost a year of presidential search, a very deliberative process by our board and search committee.

And she comes to us with decades of experience in federal higher education policy and implementation. Most recently at the Department of Ed's office of Federal Student Aid. But Melanie has also worked at other organizations inside of our sphere, the college board, the American Council on Education. And basically, she is a known friend to our community and somebody that we're really privileged to have coming in to lead the association. So, Melanie, do you want to say a few words about yourself?

Melanie Storey:

Not really, but sure. No. I mean really, I couldn't be happier to be here, although I worry that maybe everyone is sick of hearing about me at this point. But really excited to get started this week. It's a big week. As we are recording, the house is marking up the reconciliation bill today. That is probably not the welcome I had hoped for, but it means that we will have a lot of work to do and I'm ready to jump in.

So, I do just want to say thanks to so many people really who have reached out and been so kind in welcoming me to NASFAA. Really, this community is amazing and I'm so pleased and honored to continue to be a part of it. And I know you all are juggling so very much.

And so, while you listen and multitask as you listen to Off the Cuff, whether you're driving, cooking, mowing the lawn, but just tuning in, know how much I appreciate you and look forward to advocating for you and for all of our students.

So, for those who haven't had a chance to meet me or read any of the very kind things that NASFAA has published since my announcement, as Beth mentioned, my professional experience, I come most recently from Federal Student Aid, where I was the director of policy implementation and oversight. Many of you saw me in various iterations, either on webinars or at the NASFAA conference talking about fastest simplification and I think we'll probably talk a little bit more about that as we chat today.

I did also work at the college board, again in their policy office, always with an eye to students and affordability and access. I also worked for the American Council on Education and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Those are two of the presidential associations here in Washington. But always my work, regardless of the organization was always financial aid if not focused adjacent.

And my very first job out of college was working for what was then called the Central Processor, which was the organization that calculated Pell Grants. And so, when you say I have decades experience, it's true, but it makes me feel old. But I've seen a lot of the transformations and changes and I'm excited to continue to help navigating them.

My higher ed experience, I was a financial aid recipient. I'm a true believer in the power of post-secondary education. I'm a first generation student. My mom was a receptionist. My dad worked in a box factory, which made moving to college a lot easier. I'd always had the best boxes.

I'm a native new Englander transplanted to Washington for all of my career with a short stint in Austin, Texas. Love food, good food, travel, but really, I believe in the power of people. I think it's the power of NASFAA. I believe in kindness and working in support of others. So, yeah, let's dig in.

Beth Maglione:

Yeah. Okay. So, we asked our members to submit questions and they answered the call. We have a lot of really good questions. I've grouped them by topic, but I just want to also say that if you're excited to see Melanie speak in person, I would ask that you please join us in Anaheim. We can't wait to have you. I think our early bird ends May 1st, coincidentally, that is Melanie's first day. So, jump in before early bird.

Or if you can't come to Anaheim, please do sign up your institution to participate in the virtual conference, which is July 7th through 11th, where Melanie's shining face will also be there to tell you all things NASFAA. And with that, I will jump into a few questions, okay?

Melanie Storey:

Let's do it.

Beth Maglione:

All right. So, in the general topic of support for the financial aid profession and for financial aid administrators, I don't need to tell you, but I'll say it for the record, that we know this has been a challenging year or few years in terms of staffing, burnout, increasing complexity of the job. How do you plan to help NASFAA support financial aid professionals on campus?

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. I think we've seen a heightened sense of this over the last few years as you mentioned, but I think this is a pernicious challenge. It's what I talked about when I was interviewing for the job. Financial aid as a profession really grew up with the Higher Education Act, as we developed the Title IV programs created this profession of financial aid. So, that's about 60 years ago, give or take. Of course, it was much simpler then. And it has certainly grown both in numbers of programs and complexity, compliance and oversight.

And so, while 60 years is a long time, I think we're still very much growing roots. I think we're still invisible to many outside of higher education if you're not in the ecosystem of higher education. Financial aid isn't necessarily the first thing that everybody thinks about, but how critical financial aid is to the broader landscape of access and affordability and completion.

And so, I think a really important part of our responsibility at NASFAA, my responsibility at NASFAA is to elevate and spotlight that work. We need to tell your story and demonstrate value. And ironically, I think the FAFSA crisis might actually be helpful here. I think policymakers and higher education leaders, FAFSA just went along. We were solid. It could be complex and it could be challenging, but I think if it doesn't hurt, you're not paying attention to it.

Well, we started to hurt and I think what happened over the last few years with FAFSA really made important decision makers aware of the critical role that Title IV plays in the broader process of admissions, enrollment, completion, and truly financial stability for our institutions. So, let no crisis go unleveraged. Let's take that moment and talk about how critical we are to university operations and we

need to be supported as such. We need to make sure that we have the resources and the staffing to deliver on that.

So, I think that's a big piece of it. I also think there's a lot of work to be done around career paths. There are challenges, there's a lot of work, but there are also amazingly deep rewards to this work. It's a great blend of tech-savvy and we can talk a little bit about what the future of tech might be in financial aid, but there's also compliance and accounting and then the softer skills of student and family counseling.

So, I think there's a lot to be said here around the value of it as a career and encourage and making sure folks are aware of it and are moving into it and see their career paths. So, I do think we need to eliminate complexity. Notice I didn't say simplification. I think we have to review all of our work with a lens to the implementation and delivery as well as the oversight. But I think that the ultimate reward is that you and institutions really can and do regularly demonstrate a good stewardship of these really important programs.

Beth Maglione:

Melanie, you obviously have a very deep and rich and varied experience in the financial aid landscape writ large, but you, like me, have not served directly as a financial aid administrator. So, given that, how would you consistently represent those day-to-day concerns and perspectives of our members and keep NASFAA's goals firmly aligned with members?

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. You, you are the solution. All of the financial aid administrators out there. It's about listening to you, visiting with you, seeking your input and building a relationship of trust and candor. Say the hard things and tell me the hard things, tell NASFAA the hard things so that we can be the full-throated advocates with details.

We need to focus on the issues core to financial aid. We need to lead on that. But remember that the skill set we use at NASFAA to impact the broader world of financial aid are really policy and advocacy, training, professional development. Those are tangential related, but different skills than being a financial aid professional.

So, NASFAA's role is really to bring together some of our experiences, all of the financial aid officers experiences and expertise with the other extraordinary talents and disciplines that NASFAA brings to that to make sure that all of your day-to-day challenges are heard, considered, it's hopefully mitigated, and that we understand how to seek innovations and changes that serve you and your students.

I think it's important that we just recognize that there are different disciplines here. And so, while I don't have the direct day-to-day, I have been very adjacent to that work for a long time. And I think you'll find that I'm open to hearing what your day-to-day challenges are and working with you to convert that into what stories we need to tell policymakers, legislators, and campus leaders to understand what those challenges are.

Beth Maglione:

Yeah. One of the ways that we are blessed at NASFAA as an association is that we do have a very vocal membership. So, I feel very confident you will get all the feedback and more. This is a pivot into the political and policy realm, but this is also I think, indicative of the generosity of spirit that our members bring to the table. But I've seen this in our communities and we also received this question. So, I just think it's a kindness that it's something our members are thinking about.

They asked, "Does NASFAA plan to support RIF federal employees reentry to the workforce," meaning those who have been subject to the reduction in force at the Department of Ed, meaning access to job boards and training resources or things like that. I wonder what you think about that. And kudos to the kindness of those out there struggling in the financial aid office who are also thinking about their federal partners.

Melanie Storey:

I saw the same, Beth, and I also got outreach from some of my former colleagues asking about that. And really, it is an incredible testament, and I've been so touched to see how some of our state and regional partners have been opening up their offerings to former federal employees. It also speaks to how much we all see ourselves as partners in this work, even when that partnership has been strained.

My former colleagues are also an incredible talent pool that financial aid officers and professionals at schools and vendors and other organizations would be incredibly lucky to hire. So, I've also gotten the question. It's good to know that as an organization, we've gotten it as I begin this week. I think that's a conversation we need to have, to look for similar opportunities, to support our federal and other impacted partners. Other vendors and other areas are also experiencing RIFs as a result of some of the significant changes at the federal government. But how we at NASFAA can look for opportunities to support them in their goals to continuing to support and serve students in our shared missions.

So, let's put a pin in it and say more to come. I think that's a conversation we need to have once I'm on board, but truly agree that it's incredible that our own membership who are working through their own challenges are thinking through the challenges of important talent that are facing really unimaginable challenges this time.

Beth Maglione:

Yeah. Thank you, and thank you to members submitted that kind question. And it doesn't surprise me that our members are thinking about others. That is where their mindset is at all times. And I should say though, NASFAA has a career center. We feature job openings in our Today's News newsletter every day. And that said, we don't charge job seekers. So, the fee is for those who are advertising jobs. So, please do any federal employees or otherwise who are interested in financial aid careers should look at NASFAA's Career Center. So, thanks for letting me throw that little plug in there.

Melanie Storey:

That's great.

Beth Maglione:

Okay. So, as staying in the advocacy policy realm, and this is a big one, broad one. How do you see NASFAA effectively advocating for the needs of our an increasingly volatile political context?

Melanie Storey:

Whatever do you mean. Yeah. Boy. Yeah. I feel like I've lived that. That's my lived experience certainly for the last five years. And I feel like I have both the battle scars and the victories for that. But really what does it come down to? What does advocacy come down to in terms of the really partisan politics that we've been experiencing? In many ways, the pendulum swings over the last five to and maybe even more years.

For me, it is focus on our core values. If you can be steady and firm in those and find common ground across the political spectrum, which I think you can do when your core values are around supporting opportunity, supporting economic opportunity, supporting students in achieving their full potential throughout their lives, not just in the traditional sense, but for those who want to return to school and take advantage of other post-secondary opportunities. I think know what your core values are and stick to them.

When I was in grad school, one of the greatest experiences I had was to take an ethics course with Barbara Jordan, who was a member of Congress, a very well-known, respected member of Congress. And she used to tell us frequently that the imperative is to define what is right and do it. But I think that is really how if you are aware and always have what your end goal and values are in mind that will strengthen your advocacy.

But tactically, what does that mean? Well, I think data, data, data. I think we have to demonstrate value. I think it's always good to focus on policy versus politics. You can find common ground in policy and hopefully avoid some of the slings and arrows of politics.

Build coalitions, creative coalitions. We already are part of a lot of great organizations, coalitions and groups that work on behalf of students. But as we move forward and as things change and we start looking at potentially significant changes in our programs, who else should we be partnering with to talk about the value of higher education and the value of opening those doors for all students.

The other plea I will make to our members is that everyone is an advocate for financial aid. How you talk about it, how you talk about the power of it to your neighbors, to your local politicians, to your presidents, to your institutional leaders. I really think it is important to leverage every voice.

It can be hard sometimes when we're feeling really burned out and worn down. But at the end of the day, what we do is incredibly valuable and it is part of our core set of values. And having that as a touchstone is energizing. And so, use your voice. And I think that part of getting out of the political, like I said, infighting, is to talk about those larger goals, the broader policy, and that everyone can be an advocate for that. Talk about your successes. Everybody wants to be part of a winning team.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. Very well said. Okay. So, much of our work is helping students at the margins, maybe low income, often first gen, immigrant, mixed citizenship status families, sometimes students of color who have suffered from longstanding racial wealth disparities. How can NASFAA lend its voice to these student populations and work to improve the process for them?

Melanie Storey:

It's a great question. I think it's such an important question. The direct answer is really by centering these students and their challenges in every conversation. I mean evaluating every policy, every implementation change, everything that affects the Title IV programs with an eye to the impact on the least resourced, broadly defined, least resourced and minimizing complexities.

Again, "simplification" is a hard word, but I think minimizing complexities is really core to serving these populations. Every workaround, every nuance is really code for barrier for students with less resources or families with no experience and higher education. So, getting to a place where we have fewer complexities, workarounds, nuances in our implementation is how we help those students navigate these programs.

This is often not the experience of policymakers. Policymakers are not often, although there are some, but they often have been able to navigate the Title IV programs and college and admissions and

completion with support from their own families. So, we also need to find ways to share stories with them about these complexities and how it does become a barrier for these families without being performative and putting additional burden on these students and on these families.

But I think really centering, again, just centering the challenges and the barriers that even the smallest kinds of changes can put in front of these students and really amplifying that and making sure that all of us who are responsible for the delivery of these programs understand the impact is always outsized for these students.

Beth Maglione:

Hear, hear. Thank you. Given that shifting political climate and the increased scrutiny on all funding, higher ed funding specifically though in our case, what do you see as the most critical changes coming? So, crystal ball this, what do you see as the most critical changes coming to the Department of Ed and Title IV programs and how should institutions be preparing in terms of compliance or funding or finding ways to innovate or stay in front of the curve?

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. That is a crystal ball. I think we're very much in the middle of that trend, or maybe at the front end. I'm not even sure we're at the middle, quite frankly, of a really significant set of transitions at the department. I think everyone is acutely aware of the significant departures at the department, whether it was via reduction in force or many of my former colleagues who chose to leave either retire or take leave, just results in a real shift in not only the number of people but the historical knowledge and skill set there.

So, I think where we are seeing significant impact right now is in the area of institutional support around compliance and audit and all that because that is where a lot of the frontline employees have left or been riffed. And so, I think that is a challenge for our institutions. And we are at our core good stewards of this really important investment and take compliance seriously. And it's really difficult when you can't get answers from the department on any number of issues, whether it is just compliance or other eligibility issues.

And so, part of, I think working with our presidential association colleagues, I do think higher education leadership are deeply aware of the challenges there, but I think that is one area that we just need to continue to educate all of our leadership on, that the support that was in place is not fully there at this time. And it's unclear how the department is going to fill some of those gaps.

Technology might be the answer in some cases, but I think as we know more than any, this is not something easily done with a chatbot. These are very specific complex cases and I think it's going to take some time for the department to figure out and for us to learn new ways to interact with them and get answers. And so, I think just being very clear with our institutional leadership about that.

Innovation, I think we are already starting to look at that. We can talk a little bit more about how new technologies, artificial intelligence, AI, and other things might be able to support our work. But whether or not we can fully rely on that when we do have very complex and individualized cases both at the institutional and student level to address. So, I think that is something we absolutely want to explore and embrace, but I think we also need to make sure that we are meeting our obligations to these programs.

In terms of funding, oh, lordy, I mean, I think as I mentioned, and I know our policy team will be saying a lot more about this. We saw the first volley around reconciliation, the reconciliation process. This is a budget process where programmatic changes can be made as long as they have budgetary impacts.

We are seeing, at least in that initial volley from the house, significant changes to the loan programs. I think we're seeing support, but changes to the Pell Grant program. We are seeing some additional changes related to compliance and oversight.

I think what I want to say is how to stay ahead of the curve is stay in touch with NASFAA. We are going to be following this every day, sharing information with you, and then hopefully providing you the talking points and the soundbites to make sure that you can communicate with the folks that you need to be prepared.

But let me say this about reconciliation. As I said, today's the first volley. This is a long process. There's a lot of rhetoric about getting it done quickly. The house and senator are very far apart and these are very significant, complex, big, beautiful bill changes, if you will. And so, stay close to NASFAA.

But the other thing I want to say about staying ahead of the curve is to not be battered by the back and forth. This is a long process. We want to play the long game here, and we at NASFAA will be engaged in those conversations every day, every week, and we want to share that information with you. But please always remember that this is a long deliberative process across the House and Senate, across lots of constituencies, and we will keep you informed.

And when we feel there are real critical periods where we need you to engage, we'll ask you to do that. But it can feel overwhelming. The noise can feel overwhelming. And so, just trying to encourage you to maybe block some of that out and focus on the good work and help us make the case for the good work that you're doing.

Beth Maglione:

Yeah. Thank you. And I believe we will be standing up a reconciliation web center to your point about how this is an ongoing process. We make it our point in Today's News to cover each new development. So, we will certainly do that. But I think it's helpful to review these web centers because you can get an idea for how the process flows, and it certainly is a lengthy process, as you said.

Let me stick with Department of Ed for a second. And I love this question. Some members may associate you with the FAFSA simplification challenges. I love the frankness of our members. They're going to go right there. Anything you can speak to about those challenges that might assuage any questions about your role?

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. Really thank you to whoever submitted it, and I suspect maybe multiple people did, but thank you for asking this. Truly, I do appreciate it. And while I mentioned at the top, I've been overwhelmed by the kindness and good wishes since my appointment. I'm not going to rest on my good press.

I also appreciate the virtual side eye and skepticism. I think that's fair. And you talked about the vocal nature of our membership. I appreciate and embrace that. And I want you to challenge me and challenge NASFAA to make sure that we are your best advocates and representatives in Washington.

And so, it's a very fair question because I was part of FSA and a leader at FSA at what is arguably one of the most, if not the most challenging time in the 60-year history of financial aid. So, let me just talk about the question directly. I think the FAFSA simplification bill, and I'm just going to lump that say broadly with the FUTURE Act as well, we don't have to get into the details there.

When it was developed, it focused on students. And I think it neglected the complex systems that surrounds them that exist and live at the institutions. I think the incredible and important and essential role of institutions was neglected in both the drafting of the bill in some cases as well as in some of our implementation plans.

But specifically, I think FAFSA and Federal Student Aid, specifically the department, but specifically Federal Student Aid, was largely the victim of some politics and some unrealistic optimism. I think there was this persistent hope that we could make up time, we could get it together, that the vendors would be able to pull it off.

And the politics of failure were so dramatic that there was just not a willingness early on to see how challenging this was going to be and how difficult. We had unrealistic timelines for such a dramatic change to both the federal systems, but also all of the processes and systems at the institutions. There were just unrealistic expectations on the timing and complexity and cost.

And while I didn't have a specific role in terms of the funding or the acquisitions issues, I did have and took seriously my responsibility to wave my arms and say, "I think we have a problem here." And I think I really did take on a lot of the voice of institutions. I worked very closely with NASFAA and other organizations to try to raise those issues that were not as obvious. They weren't necessarily as student focused, but were more hidden to the policymakers about the critical role that institutions and vendors played.

And I think and I hope that many of you saw that I was that voice both inside and outside, sometimes to my detriment. But really, again, not to be critical of our policymakers or Congress or anyone, but really there was just a limited understanding of the full ecosystem of aid delivery at both the institutions and vendors.

I became fond of saying the Department of Education doesn't write any checks. We needed to make sure vendors and institutions were informed and ready because they delivered directly to students. And it wasn't until much too late in the process when I think that realization came to light.

There were some unforced errors. I would say some vendor weakness, insufficient integration across systems at FSA. I'm not one to want to play the blame game. I think there was a lot of responsibilities across all of the folks who had a hand in this. But certainly, at FSA we had some vendor weakness and we had insufficient integration of the systems, which resulted in some of those awkward workarounds and nuances that quite frankly, disadvantage, as I mentioned earlier, important populations of students.

Let me say, again, my specific role in policy implementation oversight. For better and sometimes worse, I feel like I was an advocate for the critical role of financial aid and for the states and vendors who support schools and students. But I do think that the experience of students is more often the view of staff, both congressional and administration. And that's understandable. They're trying to serve students and families.

The focus was on the application experience without that deep understanding that the stool has more legs, that we need schools and we need vendors and we need FSA and their vendors to also be strong. I tried to, and I hope those of you who know me know because I spoke to NASFAA a lot, I tried to be present. I think engaging, even when it was difficult was important.

And then I could take that and speak up with the administration. I feel like I never lost sight of you and the pressures that the department and Federal Student Aid specifically put on you, and quite frankly, in many ways still are. And I know that there is still more to do to deliver on the promise of simplification. And I feel like my experiences now at FSA give me a leg up in making sure that we are advocating for you in those conversations.

So, I'm ready to push my former colleagues on how to get it done. I'm ready to make sure that we have more clarity and transparency on what is coming. I feel like that was my responsibility and primary role when I was at FSA. And I will expect the department and FSA to continue to find that transparency and to be direct with us about what is coming so that we can avoid any more surprises.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. Yes. I think I know the membership would be very glad to avoid surprises. And I also have to say-

Melanie Storey:

Aren't we all?

Beth Maglione:

Wouldn't we all? The tenor, I mean, there were many times during this period that I saw you on stage and thought, boy, that is a job I don't think I could ever want or would want. Just because it's clear that you, the tenor of your comments to our members was you just showed a lot of humility, a lot of kindness, a lot of frankness with our members, and those who saw you speak to us during that time, all that I talked to took that away.

And recognized that this is a challenging time for FSA, obviously a challenging time for our membership. And yeah, the humility that you brought to that, I think was felt by our members, certainly observed by me. So, I thank you for coming to us and talking to us, frankly. And it's not nothing. It's not nothing that you came to our members and said, "I'm sorry, this has been so lousy for you." That meant a lot for our members to hear that. So, I just want to thank you for that honesty and candor.

Melanie Storey:

Thank you. I'll say one thing about that. I talked earlier about core values. I shared the core values, and I think even in hard times, you just have to not acknowledge their hard times. It wasn't always easy. You have to have a thick skin. The criticisms were well deserved, but it was important for me to remind myself and to say that I shared those values and that it wasn't what we wanted it to be as an organization in FSA or collectively. But hopefully we're turning the corner, so we'll see.

Beth Maglione:

Yup. Well, another observation I have made of our members is that no matter how many blows they receive, they are unfailingly optimistic. So, I do think folks are ready to look towards the future. That's the vibe I'm getting when we think about FAFSA and the application. I think folks are ready to turn their eyes to a better future. Here's one I'm dying to know the answer to. What's something you learned while working at FSA that you wish all financial aid administrators understood better about how the department operates or makes decisions?

Melanie Storey:

Oh, boy. How much time are we taking here on this? Okay. Yeah, a few things. So, let me just say, let me just give you a little background about my ... I mean, I joined FSA in March of 2020, three weeks before the pandemic hit. I had spent the first years of my career about 20 years in the nonprofit association work, as you heard. And quite frankly, oftentimes in that work, literally criticizing what seemed like absurd choices by the department and Federal Student Aid around the Title IV programs.

But when the opportunity came to join FSA, I honored and respected public service, and I thought, you know what? Put your money where your mouth is. It's a lot harder to build something than to tear it down. And I had spent a lot of time throwing rocks. This doesn't make sense, or why would you do this? And so, I thought, you know what? Go in and if you think there's change, go in and make change. Put your money where your mouth is, as I said.

So, I learned a lot in those five years, and I think that experience is going ... I know it will inform my work and leadership at NASFAA and help shed light on the challenges of delivering on legislation and public service. But what did I learn specifically? I think most of the membership knows this, but public servants are mission-driven. They care deeply about the work.

I think particularly at the department in FSA, you see people who have spent their careers fully, truly wanting to succeed and delivering on the promise of Title IV and their work. They are hardworking, truly committed individuals, sometimes working under impossible contexts. And I think we've seen that in a particularly acute light over the last five, six months.

They often do not have as much agency and decision-making authority over the design and funding of their work, which is exceedingly complicated. It is very hard when you may bring a solution to a thorny problem, but there is someone who may not have the kinds of detailed knowledge, who doesn't understand the importance of the design and the needs and funding of that work.

And I think that's something all of us can relate to. I mean, we all have to operate under budget constraints and leadership, but just the sheer scale of the impact of those kinds of decisions or lack of understanding at the department, I think is, yeah, it has a huge impact.

It's important to remember that work goes to the low bidder. And that acquisitions is one of these hidden processes. We've all gone through some version of acquisitions, when you're bringing in a new vendor. I mean, we all have to go through that, but at the department, the work generally goes to the low bidder based on what that vendor says they can do.

And it can be very difficult to course-correct the acquisitions process if they're not delivering because abandoning the process sets you back months, you don't want to have an adversarial relationship with a vendor who you have invested hundreds of millions of dollars and years in. It's a very fraught and complex relationship, but speaks to the, gosh, the importance of the acquisitions process.

And in the case of Federal Student Aid, having some kind of acquisitions flexibilities to be able to be more agile and flexible. I really was often dumbfounded at some of the barriers that we would face as a result of the contracting and acquisitions process.

The rules of the programs are written by well-intentioned, but not always well-informed individuals. This is a place where NASFAA can and does help. I think we will continue to do that. But again, this goes to when the focus is on the students, sometimes we miss the fact that institutions are a key part of that process and ecosystem if we don't consider them in the writing of the legislation or the regulations, it can cause real problems.

The intersection of policy and Big P politics is messy. And nowhere was this more evident to me than in FAFSA. The thought that the Secretary of Education and in some cases, the president of the United States was talking about FAFSA was unprecedented. And you don't really want to be there. You really want to be under the radar and just delivering. But that intersection of policy and really big politics is a particular challenge.

And then lastly, this isn't necessarily just about the department, but I think as a nation in many ways, we've lost our way in terms of long-term commitments and strategies. The sort of partisan back and forth ping-ponging, really, is just not conducive to good policy. And I think the pain points of that have outsized impact on our work on campuses, and I think we saw that a lot at the department.

So, yeah, that's a lot. Those are a handful of pretty big lessons. But the folks who are working, the career staff at the department are extraordinarily committed individuals. They are partners, but they are also working under really difficult circumstances, and we need to sometimes help give them cover to navigate the environment that they're working in.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you for that, Melanie. Circling back, you mentioned chatbots and the role of technology. Where do you see the role of artificial intelligence in financial aid administration? Obviously, there's data concerns. Schools would be very happy to be able to leverage AI computing power, but it has to be within these privacy constraints. So, I'm curious to know what you think the conversation among policymakers would be around AI and financial aid.

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. I think this is a great area for growth and change in our work. You're right to raise the issues of data privacy. And let's be clear, Congress has not caught up with, I don't know, this century in terms of data use and technology. I think this is such an important area to engage, but also a really important place, potential area of strong, and I think productive collaboration with the new administration.

We know that many of the new folks at the department, and particularly at FSA, the sort of the technologists, are looking for technological solutions to streamline our work. I think there's a lot of opportunity to collaborate there, but we would bring the eye to student and family protections.

And as with any new technology, we need to be mindful that we're not leaving any students or institutions behind. These types of changes take a commitment of resources. But I think there is particularly coming out of this administration a real interest in leveraging technology to streamline our work, and I think that's an area we'll engage with them on.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. Let's see. Big picture question here. What do you see as NASFAA's biggest priorities in the next year?

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. In the interest of time, I'll try to be quick. I think I've touched on it on at least my thinking on a couple of them. I'll say this, I'll plug that I know that we will be engaging in a strategic planning activity over the course of the next year. So, I think there's a lot of opportunity for the membership to weigh in on what they're seeing as priorities as well as the NASFAA leadership.

But what am I focusing on? I think of, like I said, I've addressed some of them, political stability and representation, making sure our policy priorities are well represented and heard here in Washington. The state of the financial aid profession and professional development and support, and making sure that we are providing training and support in a myriad of ways there.

And then what we just talked about, I think technological innovation is a place where we can and should lean in to deliver on the promise of simplification or eliminating complexity. Those are big, big pictures and there's a lot that falls underneath each of them, but I think those are three key areas to look forward to.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. Yeah. No big deal. Those should be really easy to knock off.

Melanie Storey:

Yeah. Super quick. I mean, I figure I got what, six months or a year, start delivering on that? It should be fine.

Beth Maglione:

Yup. I love it. We're going to dive in. We're going to dive in on those. Oh, I love this question because I know we're all thinking it. Do you have any insight or what are your feelings on the likelihood of the FSA conference ever being held in person, I guess? If you have to ask.

Melanie Storey:

Right. Every time I was at it, when I was at FSA and I was in a public forum, I got this question. So, I feel fully prepared for this one. Wow. Diminished, super diminished, my feelings. If I ever thought that FSA would have an in-person conference and would have the funding commitment, those hopes are diminished. And I know that's not the answer that folks want.

My hope, quite frankly, given a lot of the staffing changes at the department and some of the key conference and other support people that are no longer with Federal Student Aid, my hope for a robust virtual presence is also waning. Again, I'm sorry that that is probably not the answer that folks want to hear.

So, NASFAA will continue to work with FSA and the department to make sure that we can get information out to our members. One way that we are doing that, in addition to Anaheim, and you mentioned this up at the top, is that we will be hosting a virtual conference in July 7 to 11. We always look and seek FSA in that work. We are working hard to include FSA at the annual conference in June as well. And so, stay tuned on that. I think our responsibility to share information increases as FSA's resources to do, whether it be virtual or in-person conference, are truly diminished.

So, a plug for our work. But unfortunately, given all of the changes that the department and the significant financial and time commitment required for either virtual and certainly for in-person, I think it is very, very unlikely.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you for that, Melanie. Yeah. I think that jives with what we thought you would say about the in-person conference. And I do wonder if even the virtual FSA conference will be diminished in some ways as compared to years past, I guess we will report out as soon as we know anything for sure.

Okay. Before we go, I think we're up at time, but I know that our members want to get to know you personally. So, I have maybe two questions for you that are Melanie questions. Is there anything on your bucket list, and this can be either personal or professional, that you're hoping to cross off this year?

Melanie Storey:

Well, I've already crossed off a big one, which was I wanted to make a career change but retain my commitment to financial aid and student access and affordability. And so, that wasn't an easy achievement coming out of FSA, so that was a big one.

So, I'm super excited to be here. I really want to improve my Wordle scores. That's probably another one. I have a daily Wordle exchange with extended family members. Professionally, we joked about it, but we do have a significant list of challenges. And I hope in May 1st, 2026 when we say that I have completed my first year leadership of NASFAA, we can demonstrate real progress on all three of them, both policy stability, the state of the profession, and embracing technological innovation. I think it's just really essential for us going forward that we make progress there.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. And last but not least, I'm sure you're aware that our last president and CEO rode off into the sunset on a motorcycle, and we're wondering if in Anaheim, you're going to maybe parachute or what are your plans?

Melanie Storey:

Okay. True story, true story. Last year as I was heading out to the national conference, I had heard that Justin entered the conference on a motorcycle. And this of course was in the white-hot heat of FAFSA failure. Last summer, it was definitely high time. And so, I literally spent some amount of time looking for a tricycle or a cozy coupe with a shaky wheel to use to ride into the federal update. It would not have been becoming of a federal official, but I felt like that was probably the parallel last year.

But so, for this year, no, I don't have any plans to jump from the top rope or rappel down from the ceiling. I am giving my walk-up song some serious thought, welcome ideas. My family suggested the Darth Vader theme, which I'm not sure what to make of that. I was like, "What is that all about?" I won't be going with that. I promise. I'm much more optimistic. I share the membership's optimism in many ways, but I'll promise this. My walk-up song is going to be high energy and it's going to demonstrate that I'm fired up. I'm ready to go.

Beth Maglione:

Awesome. I cannot wait to hear that. The Darth Vader theme does feel like a hilarious missed opportunity, but maybe a little more drama than we're trying to convey.

Melanie Storey:

Oh, yeah. Maybe we'll do more than one. We'll see.

Beth Maglione:

Oh, that's good. So, before we wrap up here, I do want to just let members know, obviously this has been an intent to help you get to know our new incoming CEO a little bit better, but we will also have a Q&A article that NASFAA's news team is going to be doing pretty soon after your May 1 entrance here at NASFAA. So, do keep your eyes peeled for that Q&A article.

And let me just say, I would be remiss if I didn't take a chance to say welcome from me, from the staff, from the members. We are so excited to have you. It feels like it's been a long time in coming. And also, a year that went by really fast. I don't know.

Melanie Storey:

I agree. Time has no meaning at this point. It's true.

Beth Maglione:

Yes, exactly. But we are all so very happy to have you on board and part of team NASFAA. So, thank you, Melanie.

Melanie Storey:

Thank you, Beth, and thanks for the team. I'm so excited. I'm thrilled. I appreciate all of your work over the last year. I think NASFAA has remained a strong voice and I'm so excited to join the team and to continue to build on our success.

Beth Maglione:

All right. And with that, we have wrapped up another episode of NASFAA's Off the Cuff. Thank you for joining us. Don't forget to review and subscribe and tell your friends. And we'll see you next time.