

NASFAA's "Off the Cuff" Podcast – Episode 373 Transcript

Growing With Purpose: Brandi Blanton's Financial Aid Journey

Natalie Wong:

Welcome back to Off the Cuff, and another episode of Voices of NASFAA, where we get to know the people behind the profession and hear their stories, experiences, and passions that have shaped their careers. Today, I'm excited to welcome Brandi Blanton. Brandi's journey into financial aid was anything but a straight line. She was a first generation college student from a blue collar family who started college thinking she might pursue healthcare, explored several different paths, and ultimately earned her bachelor's degree in fine arts. Like so many of us, Brandi eventually fell into financial aid, but looking back, there are so many pieces of her journey that connect the work she does today. We're going to talk about that journey, her passion for professional development and how financial wellness, how community and connection have shaped her career, and the many ways she could support students beyond financial aid. Brandi, welcome and I'm excited to have you here.

Brandi Blanton:

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Natalie Wong:

Yes. So Brandi, I just wanted to start off by, if you could just let everyone know a little bit about yourself, where you work, how long you've been in financial aid, and we just can't wait to get to know you.

Brandi Blanton:

Sure. Currently, I am the director of financial aid at the Schreiber School of Veterinary Medicine at Rowan University in New Jersey. So we are the first veterinary medical school program in the state of New Jersey. So it's a really exciting time for us. I've been in financial aid for about 15 years and I've done all aspects of aid, undergraduate students, I've worked with graduate and now professional students, both medical school as well as veterinary medicine.

Natalie Wong:

That's amazing. I think that's so exciting that you were part of such an inaugural experience for the state of New Jersey and for your institution. But with that being said, let's dive into your path in your journey. And I kind of want to start from the beginning because like you mentioned, your path to financial aid wasn't a straight line. So with that in mind, will you tell us a little bit about your own college experience?

Brandi Blanton:

Sure. Yes. I had an interest, many different interests actually. I'd had an interest in medicine. So I applied initially as a pre-health student and I thought that I would go into medicine, but during my college journey, I changed my major a few times. I went into the business school and studied computer information science, and ultimately I graduated with a degree, a bachelor's degree in digital media, which went into animation, graphic design and web design. After college, I was looking for a full-time job and naturally I remembered that I had been a work study student all throughout college. So I applied at a local college and started working in student affairs at an art school. And that's where I got my professional start in higher education. There were many different opportunities there. I learned so much

and I was able to apply those transferable skills that I picked up as a federal work study student. I was able to make connections and turn that into my full-time career.

Natalie Wong:

That's amazing. I think that is such a story we hear in financial aid, is that people find their journey through being a work study and then eventually it evolves. I know part of your journey, you mentioned that you were on the West Coast. So clearly you're back in the East Coast. So eventually you found your way back to the East Coast and in the role of financial aid and student success. So we hear so often that people accidentally fall into the profession. What was it about financial aid that made you want to stay in it once you found it?

Brandi Blanton:

Yes, correct. I was living in California and then when I came back to the East Coast, I applied for a position at the same art school, but a different campus location. And this time it was in financial aid. I had experience working with many different staff members all over the college environment and financial aid was a part of that. And my own personal experience with financial aid, I remember doing my own FAFSA. I remember working with the financial aid staff at my college as well as working as a federal work study student. So it was a very familiar setting to me. I also remember receiving that financial aid award letter and making some serious loan decisions. So I think it was a great transition for me, but it opened up a really nice career path that I can apply my own experiences to and help students along the way.

Natalie Wong:

I love that, because I think with financial aid, it's such a career with purpose and I love how your story has connected into the work you do with your students. I know when looking at some of your previous roles, you had a role that focused on readmission, and where you were helping students get back on track toward completing their degrees. With that experience, what did that teach you about looking beyond a student's financial aid account and understanding everything else they may have to navigate? And I know your own story is what really helped inspire you in that work.

Brandi Blanton:

Yes. In that position in readmissions, I was speaking with students that left school for many different reasons, whether it was a health issue or a financial issue that took them out of college and I was helping them get re-enrolled in college. So a lot of things came up in that position. I was able to reach out to many of the office resources on behalf of the student and connect them to whatever on-campus resource that would help them better their situation and re-enroll in their program. So I got a chance to communicate and make touch points with many of the different services and resources that were available. I had to familiarize myself with those things and also be a resource to our students.

And I could personally relate to that just because I went back to school and began my master's program and I considered myself a nontraditional learner. I was a parent. So I had unique needs that maybe not all students experienced, but absolutely needed some different assistance myself. And I was able to connect students just to not only re-enroll in school, but also complete that degree that they started.

Natalie Wong:

That's amazing. And I do want to talk to you, and I think this is a good time, about some of the work you've done around food insecurity on your campus, because I just think that is something I'd love for

our members to hear about, again, how you stretch your role in financial aid even beyond that and are always looking at the student holistically.

Brandi Blanton:

Yes. I definitely try to look at the student as a whole student. They are a person first and they can come in with many different needs. In my time working with students, and especially in the financial aid office, I've encountered students that they mentioned they didn't eat breakfast or they would mention they didn't have dinner last night. So oftentimes I would keep food at my desk to be able to give to a student who didn't have breakfast or I would keep granola bars at my desk for them. And I ended up joining a community at my university of concerned professionals. And we sat around and talked about different issues that were affecting students, but they weren't necessarily in our core departments. And food insecurity came up a lot. I realized that some of my students that I met with had food insecurity and others around the table did too.

So we ended up doing a survey. We did a campus wide survey and the results were shocking. It was more prevalent on our campus than we all knew and we knew something had to be done. So from that experience, we launched a task force and we were able to open up our first food pantry. I'm so proud to say today I've been able to be a part of opening up four food pantries right here in the Rowan University community. Yes, it's very exciting. And we actually have a full functioning food pantry here at the vet school. It's within our building, so just in case students don't have food or maybe money is short, they can easily go get some things from the food pantry that's built right into our building.

Natalie Wong:

That is incredible. And I just think the work you're doing there is so inspirational and always going above and beyond in a way that is so impactful is just amazing to hear. And it's so great though that you also had the support from the Rowan community and they saw this as a campus wide issue, even though it may have just started from your conversations you were having in the aid office. It's really incredible to see the impact it has made probably so positively for so many students on your campus. With that being said, I know you also, again, you're always consistently looking at the whole student. And I know you mentioned, I think you were the first financial literacy specialist on your campus. Can you talk about that piece of it? Because I think with financial aid, yes, we can get students in the door with money, but then how do we continue to make sure they're successful in many aspects of their financial journey when it comes to attending college?

Brandi Blanton:

Absolutely. Yes. I was given the opportunity to take some additional training and became a certified personal educator of finance. And I did become our campus's first financial literacy specialist. And I would do, or I still do it actually, I do presentations and workshops on not just financial aid, but also money management topics. For example, it can cover things like budgeting, credit management, savings. We talk about student loan repayment, all different things. But I think that is really important because getting a student in school is one thing, but we want them to be whole while they're here. So a student may be able to cover their tuition with financial aid, but also may struggle in other areas. And sometimes those other areas can cause a student to leave school prematurely or just not enjoy the experience. So the financial literacy just goes into other things that students can learn along the way that will help their journey, but it'll also empower them to develop smart financial choices as they go throughout life.

As we're seeing more students are borrowing private loans, they may need to borrow private loans. So that's something that a credit score, credit check is involved. So credit is becoming very important for students and they have to start learning. They should learn before they apply for credit and what it can do. If you miss a payment, if you miss a credit card payment, that can interrupt your loan for next year. So just bringing up things like this and having these conversations with students just helps the journey so much.

Natalie Wong:

No, and I completely agree. And I think especially right now, it's so crucial for, especially students at the graduate level to be aware of all these different aspects of financial literacy and wellness, because you said there's so much more that goes into the decision to attend college, but then what they need to know in order to maintain financial security and feel confident in their finances wellbeing in school. With that being said, what were resources that you accessed so that you could educate yourself more on these topics so that you could help students?

Brandi Blanton:

Yes. There are so many resources. I consider myself a lifetime learner. So I do like to just pat myself with lots of education because you know students, they will ask you questions about everything, even if it's not in your area of specialty. But I definitely received lots of education from the courses provided by NASFA. Those were great just in the profession of financial aid. Also, as I mentioned, I have taken personal finance courses and earned a certification there. Some other things that I've done is participate in professional development opportunities. So on my campus, we have a organization called WAN, or the Women's Alliance Network, and they provide professional development series. It could be in a form of workshops, it might be just networking. And we get an opportunity just to talk about developing yourself as a professional. So that's been really helpful. And I have also engaged with some other organizations.

I just finished and graduated from the AAVMCD, the American Veterinary Association's Professional Development Program. So that was a leadership program and I got a chance to meet veterinarians from all over the country. And I was actually the first financial aid director to graduate from that program. So that was a really great experience. I think I bring the financial aid background, but I'm still learning the veterinary profession. So I've been able to just make so many wonderful connections with people in the vet profession. And then last but not least, I also have to mention NASFAA's Leadership Program.

I've been a part of that program over the last year, and that's just been another wonderful opportunity to network with professionals from all over the country. We get together, and now I have personal connections. We have a group. We can go in there and we can talk to one another about what's going on at their campus. If we have questions, I have a network of people that I can reach out to for help just to bounce some ideas off of, and I can also use them as a resource for whatever's going on in my office.

Natalie Wong:

No, that's amazing. And I'm so glad you've touched upon right now a lot of the professional development experiences that have really helped elevate your career, but also help you just professionally and personally. So with that being said, I feel like right now, a lot of people sometimes look at professional development as just another responsibility or an added extra, and sometimes are a little bit apprehensive. What would you tell someone that is nervous or thinks they may not have the time for professional development and maybe why they should make that time?

Brandi Blanton:

Yes. Working in a financial aid office, I will admit we are always busy. There's always things to do, always projects going on. But in my journey, I think professional development has definitely just been a way for me to step outside of my office, meet other people that are in other working areas that, again, these are my colleagues, I just might not see them day to day. It's also fun. I have a lot of fun with the people that I meet. Professional development also can fill your cup. We are solving the problems of so many students. So sometimes it's like I give out so much, who is refilling me? So I think professional development can be that thing that kind of really fills you up and it gives me an opportunity to engage in some of the things that I find fun. And again, be around people that I can relate to, you can vent to, you can form community. So I think professional development, while it sometimes can be additional work, it also can be totally worth it.

Natalie Wong:

No, I love that. And clearly I feel like people who are listening to your story can see how much value it's brought to you and hopefully be inspired by that. So with that being said, for someone listening who wants that sense of professional belonging, but hasn't found their community yet, what would you encourage them to do?

Brandi Blanton:

I would encourage them to just step outside and just try something different. Go to a meeting. Maybe if there's an area of interest and you're curious, just stop by a meeting, talk to the different people on your campus, see what's going on. And if you don't find something that you're into, you can start your own group. I'm sure there's other professionals that feel the exact same way that you do. Some of my colleagues, they've done 5Ks. We do volunteer activities together. There's book clubs. So I mean, it totally, there's something for everyone. And again, if you don't find your place, you can absolutely start something at your campus.

Natalie Wong:

I love that. And I think that's the perfect advice just saying sometimes you just have to put yourself out there and step out of your comfort zone. And to your point too, there's so many levels. We have at least in financial aid, state associations, regionals, and then the national. So I always like to say that there's a home somewhere out there for everyone. And I love community clearly. But on the flip side too, for those professionals, you are also a working mom and sometimes there is a lot on people's plate. So how do you make space for everything? You've talked about the amazing work you've done on campus around food insecurity. You are an office of one and a director of an entire veterinarian school. You are educating students on financial wellness. And like you said, you are an active member of our DLP this year. How do you balance all these aspects and what advice would you give there?

Brandi Blanton:

Yes, I'm also a mother, so I have a busy 11 year-old and a 20 year-old. So my time is just, I split it as best I can. And that's something that I had to learn as well as to work on my boundaries. So if something is important to you, then you'll learn to fit it in. So I make sure that I have time for everything. I have time for work, I have time for my children, I have time for my activities. And together, they all keep me going. I think my children are a big part of my life and I'm so lucky because I've been able to incorporate them into my career a little bit.

My 11 year-old, I'll bring him to our campus event sometimes. So he absolutely is getting exposure to the veterinary profession. He's seeing the models at the school. He gets to see the vet school students. He's just excited about the school, just as excited as me. Watching the new building come up, he was so excited to see it finally open and all the things like that. My oldest son watched my career progression and now he's in college. So he's just been able to kind of watch my pathway and he understands the importance of education, not just because I said it, but he also sees my journey. So I think that's really important to not only say these things to your children, but they also see your journey as well.

Natalie Wong:

No, and I think that's incredible to say how you can balance it. You were showing your children this amazing experience of higher education and showing them the value and the beauty of it, while also still doing your job. And I think that was great that you were able to balance those two aspects of your life, and it brought opportunity to all parties involved, which is always really nice. I kind of want to pivot now in talking about your journey of being the first financial aid director to complete the veterinary association leadership program. There's something really full circle about someone who entered college as a pre-health major now helping educate and empower future vets. So what did that experience mean to you, becoming the first director of the school, doing this program and kind of seeing how your puzzle pieces are kind of all fitting together?

Brandi Blanton:

It means so much. Just thinking about my journey, it really did come together very nicely, but I think I just picked up things along the way and just created a path that works for me. It might look different for everyone, but I think we can add those experiences along the way to just create a life that we're proud of. You can have fun in what you do and do things that you absolutely love. So I put so much of my own experience into the way I counsel my students and develop my program. And I really think the students just feel my passion, the way that I try to prepare them and the resources that I provide, the way I counsel them about money matters. That comes from a real place, that comes from my experience. I didn't necessarily have a roadmap, and so I'm able to make the road a lot more smooth for these students. So I'm very excited and just so happy to be able to use my experience to help the next generation of medical professionals.

Natalie Wong:

No, and I think that's a beautiful way how your experience is helping you change to make other students' experiences better. Because I think that's so important. We can always see what we can continue to do better, how can we make things easier for them? So if you could, could you elaborate on some of the conversations you are having with your students right now? Right now, especially like I said, on the grad side of things, financial aid is feeling incredibly complex and overwhelming. How have you kind of eased the feelings of your students right now as they're navigating these big changes happening in financial aid?

Brandi Blanton:

Absolutely. That's a very timely question. It's a lot going on in financial aid and we're not in a bubble, so everything that happens, the students are hearing it, they're feeling it, they're experiencing it. So I lean into that. I don't run away from what's going on. I have to stay on top of changes from a policy standpoint. So I make sure I prepare myself by learning as much as possible about any changes and what that means to my population. And I'm able to come out with guidance for those students, whether that

be updating my website in real time or holding a workshop just to talk about things. For example, the FAFSA just opened up. We had a pop-up event yesterday. So just letting students know, "Hey, the new FAFSA is open. Here's what that means to you. If you're receiving financial aid, now's the time to reapply."

So this was a, I was just kind of in our hall and mixing and mingling with our students and we were having light snacks, but students come up, they chat with me, they see me in the school and they feel comfortable talking to me. Some of my conversations, I invited students to come back to my office, maybe for a deeper conversation at a later time. But they know that they can come talk to me about anything, whether it be their student loan, their school finances or another personal financial matter, I'm able to coach that student and just provide a listening ear or additional guidance or resources, whatever's needed. I also wanted to say one of the things that I've been able to do through my professional development opportunities is go up to the Hill visits.

And so I was able to talk to senators and people that are making decisions that affect financial aid, and I'm able to tell them about our students, tell them the stories of the students here on our campus, about the student that has wanted to be a vet since they were four years old and what these student loan changes mean to their financial aid portfolio and what it means to their future. So I'm able to hear the fears of our students, prepare them on my campus, but also been able to share that with some of the decision-makers. And we had some very rich conversations, so I was happy to be able to do that. And I think a lot of good will come from these opportunities.

Natalie Wong:

Yeah. Brandi, that's so powerful, you saying how you've taken your student stories to the Hill and advocated for them and are really showing the impact of some of the changes. I think that's amazing and I think that's really a testament, like you said, to you putting yourself in those professional development scenarios so you can have the right skills so that you can do the most from the position that you sit in. And again, you're just consistently making an impact in students' lives. I just think it's so great to hear. It's so great to remind our listeners the purpose behind the work of financial aid because it can get stressful and overwhelming. So I really appreciate you sharing that and I appreciate you sharing tips on how can you help students navigate these changes. I think, like you said, sometimes it's just showing them a face and saying, "Hey, we're not scary and we're here to talk to you." So I think that's great that you create opportunities for your students to connect with you in person.

But with that being said, I do want to wrap this up with saying, for our financial aid professionals listening to this episode today, what is one thing you hope other financial aid professionals take away from your story, especially those who still may be trying to figure out their own path in this profession?

Brandi Blanton:

Yes. I would say just really get out there, get outside of your office and meet other people. Just meet people in your community, outside of your community. The financial aid profession is so rich. There are professionals in every major, other schools across the country. There's even schools outside of this country. So just get out there, talk to other people, and you'll find someone or something that you're interested in. Don't be afraid to try new things, learn more, and just remember why you got into this profession in the first place. We do have our not so good days, but again, there's other professionals that are going through the same thing.

And maybe you can come together and talk about that, cheer each other up, cheer each other on. So yeah, just try new things, meet new people, and I think that really makes a world of difference. In my own story, it has led to additional career opportunities and a job that 15 years ago, if you told me that I

would be the director of financial aid at a veterinary school, I would not believe you. So it can just open up so many pathways.

Natalie Wong:

Thank you so much. Brandi, I just want to thank you again for sharing your story with us. I think your journey is such a great reminder that careers don't always follow one path, and especially the path we originally imagined, and sometimes the experience that don't seem connected at the time are exactly what is preparing you for where you'll eventually end up. So I wanted to thank everyone for listening to another episode of Voices of NASFAA on Off the Cuff. Thank you.