NASFAA's "Off the Cuff" Podcast – Episode 376 Transcript

How to Make the Most of Your NASFAA U Experience

Hugh Ferguson:

Hey, everyone. Welcome back to another episode of "Off the Cuff". I'm Hugh Ferguson with our communications team.

David Tolman:

And I'm David Tolman with training and regulatory assistance. And I have with me today the full NASFAA U team from TRA. And I'll let them introduce themselves.

Jackie Cottom:

I will kick us off. My name is Jackie Cottom, and I'm the Director of Online Education, which means I get to work with our NASFAA U team and also our webinars.

Tonya Hsiung:

And I'm Tonya Hsiung, I am the Program Manager for NASFAA U.

Norma Robinson:

I am Norma Robinson, proud member of the U Crew, a Compliance Generalist.

David Downing:

And I am David Downing. I am a NASFAA U Instructor.

Hugh Ferguson:

Awesome. Welcome, everyone. I love the shirts and the branding and yeah, excited to get to know more about the NASFAA U team.

And yeah, before we dive into today's topic, I just want to note that earlier this week we had the midterm elections, where results are still coming in, but we now know that the incoming Congress is going to be under control by Democrats in both the House and Senate. And we've put together some handy resources outlining the dynamics of these races, what we're now expecting to see happen on the Hill in the upcoming year. And as these leadership elections in both chambers begin to flesh out in the coming weeks, we'll be paying close attention to the new dynamics in the Hill for the next year. And yeah, I will have some links in the show notes just reminding folks of some important deadlines that are coming up and all the congressional dynamics at play.

But for today, it's a good time to look into some NASFAA resources that have more clarity than what we have on the Hill. So, thought it would be a good day to dive into the wonderful world of NASFAA U and everything that your team is up to. And for members that might not have been in a NASFAA U course before to just learn more about what makes this resource so helpful and unique to our members. So David, to get us started, could you just give us a high level, or we have two Davids here today, so anyone is welcome to jump in here, but who wants to take a jump at telling me about what NASFAA U is?

David Tolman:

We started this in about 2013, I think, very small scale. I don't know if people remember Micah Jordan, who got it kicked off, I was one of the first instructors, and then now on NASFAA. But back then, one of our very first NASFAA U adjunct instructors, which means somebody who is actually working out in the field, was Tonya Hsiung. And so, we've worked together for a while. And the five of us, we have fun with these courses, but Tonya's Program Manager, has been for a while. I'll let her talk about what NASFAA U is.

Tonya Hsiung:

Sure. Thanks, David. So NASFAA U actually consists of online courses, and we broadly cover a financial aid topic. So you'll see financial aid topics usually in the self-study guides, but the NASFAA online courses are an actual course. Right? So they consist of live instruction. We'll go, and we call them our get-togethers, and those are usually twice a week. Some of our classes only go once a week, but usually twice a week. But they also, because it's a course, we give you reading assignments, and those reading assignments sometimes we have required reading, sometimes we have other supplemental reading that we'll give you just more as a reference. We have video lessons, we create videos that will help you in your learning. We have discussion forums so you can network with other of your class members. We have assessments, so we do quiz you or we have graded case studies. So you do have to take some sort of assessment to test your knowledge, but we also have practice case studies, and that's where our adjunct teachers come in as well.

Hugh Ferguson:

Awesome. Thanks for all that background, Tonya. Can you tell me a little more about what some of the topics are that your courses cover? We've seen a lot of change in the last year with different regulations being updated, but we also have a lot of things that are almost par for the course each academic year that financial aid administrators need to be aware of. So, what is it that members can expect in upcoming courses?

Tonya Hsiung:

Sure. So currently, we are teaching higher education loans, which consists of direct loans, but we also teach private education loans in there. So, we call it higher education loans. Obviously, that's got a lot of changes with the OBBBA in it. So, that is a very popular course and we're in the throes of that right now.

We're also teaching the return of Title IV funds, and a few years ago that had a lot of changes in it too. So that's always a very popular course and it had some more changes recently. So again, that's a very popular course, we teach that one twice a year. So if you're interested in that course, definitely sign up for that one early because it does get very popular.

Recently, we just finished verification and packaging and aid notification. Our verification course always sells out and we teach that one twice a year as well. But verification is always very popular and again, always sells out.

We do cover, like I said, most of the topics that are covered in the self-study guides, not every year, but we might have a topic that we cover one year and then we might not teach that for another couple years. But we also teach some additional topics that are not covered in the self-study guide, and that includes enrollment management and academic calendars.

Hugh Ferguson:

Great. That's really helpful information. We're talking about a lot of these different resources that NASFAA has for members. Sometimes there might be some confusion between some of these digital

assets because we have your NASFAA U classes and we also have a host of different webinars that delve into all sorts of different issues. So I was wondering, Jackie, can you break down for me what the big difference is between these two things?

Jackie Cottom:

Sure. We do have a little bit of confusion about the two. So a webinar, and many of our members are familiar with our webinars, it's in depth on a certain topic. Usually they range from 90 minutes, sometimes to even two hours. So, there's no way we can cover everything about that particular topic in a webinar. Our NASFAA U offers more of the full coverage of a broader topic and our NASFAA U classes are anywhere between four to eight weeks. And like Tonya said, we have two one hour get-together live classes each week, so we are able to go in a lot more detail that covers all of the aspects of that topic.

So for example, earlier this year we did something with return of Title IV funds for a webinar, and it was just talking about some of the regulations that went into effect July 1. That was only a 90-minute webinar. There was no way we could cover everything about return of Title IV funds in a 90-minute webinar. It was just that particular area. But in our NASFAA U course, we go from the very, very beginning, our R2T4 class is five weeks long, and there's a time commitment outside of the class. For the webinar, you present the topic and we give you some resources, but in our NASFAA U classes, we actually explore all the aspects of the course and we do a very deep dive. So, it's a lot more comprehensive. Some of our new course participants are surprised by the amount of time and the amount of information we cover in our NASFAA U courses. And they are also surprised that we have homework assignments and quizzes, because we really want to make sure that they understand all the different aspects of the topic that we're discussing.

One of the other big differences is that webinars are purchased at the institutional level. So we encourage offices to view webinars together. We take the theme of, the more, the merrier, but NASFAA U courses are intended for individual learners. So each participant requires an individual registration, even if they're at the same school. So we do have folks who multiple people will take a class at the same institution, but each participant requires an individual registration.

Hugh Ferguson:

Great. Yeah, that's super helpful. Always good to know what you're signing up for before you get to a specific class. And yeah, you can sometimes show up and think, "Oh, I'm good to go." And then maybe realize, "Oh no, I need to do a lot more prep work before starting this resource." So, very helpful reminders there, Jackie. And then yeah, so everyone that's joining me today, you're all instructors on these NASFAA U courses?

David Tolman:

Yep.

David Downing:

Yes.

David Tolman:

Yeah. There's usually two of us for each class, and that helps. One's talking while the other is monitoring chat. Depending on the class, some are pretty quiet and some are very active and asking questions all the time. But one thing that's really helpful in these classes is, and we've had this since the beginning, I

mentioned Tonya was one of the first, but what we call adjunct instructors. This means they're a practicing financial aid administrator, and we have at least one in almost all of our courses. The fundamentals basic course, we don't have one for that, but I think all the others do, right?

Norma Robinson:

Academic calendars, David-

David Tolman:

Oh, yeah, academic calendars.

Norma Robinson:

... we usually do just the two of us.

David Tolman:

And we had a lot of fun with that, huh?

Norma Robinson:

Yeah. It's a lot going on in there.

David Downing:

And our fundamentals of student financial aid class also does not have an adjunct instructor. That's more of a basic overview of financial aid. And we get folks in that class that are not just in financial aid, but they might be in a partnering office. So we've had enrollment folks, academic folks, bursar, that just want a basic 101 level overview of financial aid.

David Tolman:

And the adjunct instructors, typically when we do have them in the class, they take one of the weekly get-togethers and there's a case study. There's a couple case studies every week, but one is practice, and they will go through the practice case study. So when people are taking our classes, it's not just like we're regurgitating information and sharing that with them. We want them to be able to apply it. And so, that is why we have these case studies and led by a practicing aid administrator, because sometimes it brings up, "Well, how do you do this at your school? How do you do this at your school?" So we have some really good... I am really proud of who we have do that from the financial aid community.

Hugh Ferguson:

Amazing. So yeah, I know on the back end of promoting these courses and getting them scheduled in Today's News to go out to members, we get a lot of interest in a variety of these courses. And I was just wondering, why do so many of these sell out?

David Tolman:

I don't know, that's a good question.

Norma Robinson:

I'm just going to say because they're-

Jackie Cottom:

Because they're awesome.

Norma Robinson:

Exactly. They are great. You learn a lot. I mean, I feel like that's a pretty obvious question, Hugh. I'm sorry.

David Downing:

Well, I don't mind explaining a little bit more. So as Jackie mentioned, this isn't just a webinar where we have thousands of thousands of people listening in. It truly is like you're back in college, taking a class. We want them to be interactive. We encourage our participants to come on the mic, we encourage them to ask us questions. As instructors, we hold weekly office hours as well. So folks can pop in and meet with us live one-on-one to discuss whatever questions they have on the topics we've presented for the week. We also have a discussion forum so the participants can network and interact with one another, ask each other questions like, "What do you do at your school for X, Y, Z?" And they share knowledge with each other. And then again, like Jackie mentioned, we have assignments and case studies and grades that are associated with the class.

And one thing I don't think was mentioned yet is the reason those assignments are important is when folks pass our class, they get complimentary access to take the NASFAA credential that's associated with the topic if there is a credential. So for example, like right now, Jackie and I are teaching together return of Title IV funds. So at the end of that class, all of our participants who pass the class, they can move on and take the R2T4, the Return of Title IV Funds NASFAA credential. So not only do they pass the class, but they can go on and earn that credential in that topic.

So the class size, if it's very, very large, it really diminishes the learning experience if we have a class that's too large. So, that's why they do sell out.

Hugh Ferguson:

Got it. So I think I should have rephrased my question to ask, why not just have unlimited class sizes? Not that I didn't think there was a intense interest in these courses, more so of like, well, if they're all selling out so much, why don't we let everyone in at all times? But David, you very clearly explained why having limits on these sizes is really beneficial and necessary for the just thoroughness of these courses.

David Tolman:

Yeah. And Jackie, you oversee both. What is the typical... Well, I know there's not typical, but how many people would you plan for on a webinar?

Jackie Cottom:

Usually at least between 2,500 to 3,000, that's the average. But on some of our highly viewed anticipated webinars, such as the FASFAA update, the verification, we can have close to 5,000 people attend. And so, it's definitely a much larger crowd.

One of the things that we do in NASFAA U is we have office hours. So if folks have questions about the assignments or the materials, they can come and speak to us one-on-one, give examples. And so, that's something that we would not be able to do in a webinar format. We can't have everyone asking questions. They ask questions on the backend and we'll do the Q&A section, but the NASFAA U experience, it's more of a personalized experience because we're walking through scenarios with them

during our office hours. And they are not recorded, the office hours. So we always tell folks that, "What happens in office hours stays in office hours." So sometimes people may be shy about asking certain compliance questions that they may realize their institution is not doing correctly. And so office hours is a time for them to ask and there's no judgment. We'll work it through with them and they're not advertising to everybody that this is an issue that they found at their institution.

Norma Robinson:

Oh, is there something that I can mention that I also like that's also a difference between webinars versus online courses? Especially now with our new get-together platform, we get to interact more. Now, we can actually see our participants on camera if they choose to be on camera. They are participating a lot more, we get to hear their voices. So it's a bit more personal, definitely more personal than a webinar where you're only just hearing us speak to you. It gives a lot more back and forth communication.

David Tolman:

Yeah. I couldn't imagine doing office hours when there's 2,000 people that have joined.

Norma Robinson:

Not at all.

David Tolman:

We start to panic when there's five.

David Downing:

And I just want to add, Jackie mentioned office hours aren't recorded, but those weekly get-togethers, those are recorded. So if a participant can't make it to the live instruction, it is recorded so they can listen to it on demand and catch up before the next live lesson, which is another benefit of our classes. Because things happen, they have meetings, they have students to meet with, they might even be on vacation for a week. So that's okay, because our classes do run several weeks long. We do record the get-togethers so people can watch those at their own time during the course of the online course.

Hugh Ferguson:

Great. That's all really helpful information. Could you guys all describe what goes into developing an online course?

David Tolman:

Right now, the higher ed loans course, Tonya and Norma, they had to do a lot of work because of those new changes in OB-3s. You got some new videos. You guys want to talk about what you did for that class?

Tonya Hsiung:

Sure. So the first thing we started out with is we had to look at the timeline of the class, because the higher education loans course is actually one, it's the longest course that we offer. It's eight weeks long. So, we had to look at the entire eight weeks and see, how are we going to instruct this course with all the changes? So the biggest change, obviously we have the interim exception, the expected time to

credential, and the schedule of reductions. How are we going to add that information in? Where are we going to put that information in? And what are we going to do in order to best suit the entire class to still instruct everything else that we need to instruct about direct loans and private loans and all of the other things we need to instruct on, plus all of that other additional information?

So once we have that timeline down, then we have to get into figuring out how we write our quizzes and our case studies. Go ahead, Norma, you were going to say something.

Norma Robinson:

Yeah. I was going to say, when you're talking about the structure and the way we structure the weeks, because we have to try to do it in a way that makes sense to you, right? We can't just throw out, "Here's how you complete a schedule of reductions," without you understanding the base underlying principles to direct loans. So a lot of thought goes into not only what we're covering, but how we cover it, the structure of it, and in what order we are covering it as well.

Tonya Hsiung:

And we do this in all of our classes. We go and look at the structure and then we write all of our own quizzes and all of our own case studies, and we create the videos that are associated with each of the weeks that we have. So we want to make sure all of the assessments that we have and we want to make sure that all of the learning that we're putting in, it makes sense for everyone who is learning the information, because we don't want to have just one type of learning. We don't want to have just a live get-together, we don't want to have just reading for people, and we don't want to have just the video lessons. We want to have each type of media that people can learn from it in a different way.

Hugh Ferguson:

Yeah. So, that's definitely a lot of work on the back end for you all to sort through. I mean, just navigating the usual calendars of what topics are going to be relevant at a given time. It's basically like you guys are trying to look into the future to sort through how to put these things together for folks. So I guess in developing these courses, what's something you've all learned through the process of putting these courses together?

David Tolman:

One of the things that's really interesting about these courses, we survey them to ask, "How many years of experience have you had in financial aid?" And it's not unusual in a class to have somebody say, "Well, I started last week," and others say, "I've been doing this for 20 years," all in the same class. So, we need to make sure that the content is relevant. And sometimes we forget that, or we assume financial aid administrators are going to know this concept. So we're going to go through some examples of things that we've learned that we took for granted that people just would understand this, or it's just commonly misunderstood.

So for example, student aid index is now nine months. It's not prorated like the EFC used to be. It's not as big of an issue as it was around the time the change was being made, but we needed to make sure, okay, we need to spell out the SAI is never prorated anymore. And still, occasionally we'll get some people who that's new to them, they hadn't heard it. And not only is it the variety of experience, but also the positions. We might have some front counter people, directors, even registrars and others. So, we're going to go through some of these misunderstandings. Each of us are going to do one quickly, some things that we have learned that are commonly misunderstood, maybe, and we're going to set the record straight on five of those things. And we'll start with Norma.

Norma Robinson:

Okay. Since I'm a bit of a rule breaker, I'm not going to give a misunderstanding or misconception. I'm just going to frame this as a realization, especially for some of our newer financial aid administrators. And I'm going to use the R2T4, that roadway analogy that you guys use. You're in a car, you're on the road, you're traveling. There is more than one path to regulatory compliance. A lot of newer administrators sometimes think, "We have an institutional policy and our institutional policy is written this way because the federal regulations say do it exactly this way. This is the only way that you can do it. So that's got to be why we do it this way, right?" That's not always the case. Federal regulations are a lot of times prescriptive, meaning that they tell you exactly what it is that you need to be doing and they tell you how you need to do it, but that's not always the case. They do sometimes give you bits of flexibility and leeway that you can take advantage of.

A big example would be professional judgment, right? That's a huge one. There's parameters, yes, but there's lots of flexibility. There's lots of leeway there. Cost of attendance is another one. You know the elements to the cost of attendance, but the statute does not tell you, "This is how you have to calculate it," in most cases. So you get to choose your data sources, you get to choose reasonable amounts, and you have to spell out in your policy how you arrived at that, but the Department of Education typically doesn't tell you how you have to arrive at that.

So, these are good things about NASFAA U. You are in a class sometimes with upwards of 150 people, so a lot of different perspectives, a lot of different ideas. We give you the citations to find out what the regulations and the statutes actually say. And sometimes you realize, "Our institutional policy does it this way, but we don't necessarily have to." So it gives you a new frame of mind to understand what your possibilities are, and also understand why perhaps your institutional policies are written the way that they are.

Jackie Cottom:

And I think for me too, one of the big things about NASFAA U that I've learned as we've been instructing courses is that just helping folks understand the inputs and the calculations behind the financial aid management systems because so often it's like, well, my FAM system does that. And so we use those systems every day, but really understanding how you arrive at the result, because it helps you recognize if there's something that you need to take a closer look at. Or even being able to confidently explain to parents or students why something is the way it is, because if you're just like, "Well, I put the number in the system and that's what it popped out," but really understanding what's in the number and the formulas will help you explain it to parents and students effectively. And it also just gives you a better whole understanding of the process altogether.

One of the things that we will say often, I'll say it often, is that, "Your system limitations don't remove your responsibility to comply with the regulations." Sometimes we get those aha moments where it's like, "Well, our system doesn't do that." And it's just like, "That's okay, but you still have to comply with the regulations." And there's ways to do that, but that's the beauty of the NASFAA U class, because then we have discussion boards where you can talk to other folks in the class to say like, "Oh, well, what's the report that you run to work around the system issue?" Or, "I have this particular management system. How do you work around this?" So, we're able to discover those things together in the safety net of the NASFAA U class.

Norma Robinson:

Yeah. I'm piggybacking off of that too, Jackie. You also have to be able to explain it to other staff and administration at your own school sometimes. And David Tolman, we get that a lot in academic

calendars, right? I'm here so I can explain to my administration what the difficulties are with this particular program structure with regard to financial aid administration. So, it's giving you the tools to be able to confidently explain those concepts to other people.

David Downing:

I definitely think the aha moment, or like Norma said, where schools are realizing that their institutional policy is, they're doing something that way because that's the way it's always been done, and it's not necessarily a federal requirement.

So for example, the last class I taught on the topic of verification we just wrapped up a few weeks ago. Some of the participants brought up the fact that their school's policy was to collect a tax return transcript from a student or parent when taxes are required because that's what they've always done, not realizing that the federal requirements also allow you to collect a signed 1040 form, which is often much easier for a student to get. So, it was an aha moment for some people.

Also, the recent verification of identity changes that rolled out in the middle of last award year also seemed to be eye-opening for participants. One of the things that some schools were still doing was they were still collecting the statement of educational purpose, that's no longer required. In fact, you can't require it. And there's nothing that needs to be signed by the student when they verify their identity either in person or video call or even from the notary. And so, pointing out the resources like the dear colleague letter that announced the verification requirements that has example forms and notary acknowledgement. And so, that was a big eye-opener for a lot of people in my last class. We actually also had an AskRegs Q&A of the week earlier this week in Today's News about that same topic. So I'm sure we can link it in the show notes, but, so those are just some examples of aha or eye-opening moments that people realize when they're in this environment.

I think I would like to also just shameless plug, Jackie and I are going to be teaching that verification course again coming up in February, and we'll cover over the span of the four weeks. So even if you're brand new to financial aid or you've been doing it for 20 years, you can join the class. We start at the beginning and we go from beginning to end, learning all the ins and outs about verification. So, we have that course coming up in February. Of course, we also have a webinar coming up too. Again, a webinar and a course are completely different, but there's a verification webinar that's only 90 minutes, but that's coming up in just a couple weeks on November 18th. So, I'll be helping in the background Q&A on that one. But if you want to join me or Jackie for a longer version of verification, we have that class in February. So as we mentioned, they do sell out fast or they can sell out fast, so make sure to sign up sooner than later.

Norma Robinson:

And who doesn't want to spend four weeks talking about verification, right? Sign up.

David Downing:

Yes.

Norma Robinson:

Sign up now.

Tonya Hsiung:

I think one of the things that I find is R2T4 tends to be a big, confusing topic for a lot of people, even if they've been doing R2T4 for a long time. We find that a lot of participants are confusing the two calculations of the 49% and the 60%, and more importantly, when each of those should be used.

So one of the things we did to address this as we developed, and Norma alluded to this a little earlier, was we developed a roadmap and incorporated that into the class. We do refer to that consistently throughout the class, highlighting where we're at on the roadmap and as we progress through the various stages of R2T4. And having that as a visual guide when we're going through the class, I think has really helped. So it's one of those things that you just need some little tool when you're going through the course. And I think it can really help alleviate some of the confusion. And it's something just very small, but can have a really big impact. And I think it really helps.

And especially with R2T4, like I mentioned, with having a lot of the issues with accountable days and the 49%, those are some of the issues that a lot of people tend to have. So we try to go over that as much as we possibly can, but having that roadmap really seems to help.

David Tolman:

And that roadmap really is helpful, I second that. And then the last one I want, Tonya and Norma have been introducing the SOR, schedule of reductions. But in that same class, the loan proration requirement, the preexisting loan proration requirement was brought up. And I was surprised by the numbers in that class who were not aware of that requirement of prorating loans. Doesn't mean that schools aren't doing it. It just means people who are learning about the higher ed loans weren't aware of this previous requirement. And what it is, the one that before, again, nothing to do with schedule of reductions, but if students enrolled in an undergraduate program that is less than one year in length or more commonly the remaining portion of a program is less than one year in length, there's a proration formula that you need to apply to that student's ability to borrow loans. If it's a two semester program or two semesters in your academic year and they're going to attend only the fall semester and then graduate, in that case, proration's always been required. And that caught a lot of people by surprise.

So, there's a lot of these aha moments and it's going to vary from person to person. We try and cover a lot of those in this podcast, Hugh, over the years. And this is where I get a lot of ideas from the NASFAA U courses and the things that we know that people are learning.

But one other thing, David and Jackie talked about the credential testing, and it does sound kind of daunting. These courses, there are retakes allowed on quizzes and case studies on the graded assessments. There's always different ways of getting information and answers if you have any, but those who pass the class generally do really well on the credential. We don't know what's on the credential test, we can't know what's on the credential test, we just teach the topic. And people who go through our classes are like, "Yeah, the credential test was a lot easier than the quizzes you guys gave us. It was really good preparation." And so, that's what we like to hear.

So anyway, we'll have a couple links about how to register for the class and frequently ask questions about those. And I hope we've covered a lot of information that's helpful to our members and consider NASFAA U courses.

Hugh Ferguson:

Great. Yeah, that was all really helpful information and a really good overview of just these varying online offerings that we have here at NASFAA. So, thank you all for taking some time to speak with me today and to go over all of these resources. And thanks, everyone, for tuning into another episode of "Off the Cuff". We will be back with a new episode real soon.