

Justin Draeger:

Hey everybody. Welcome to another edition of "Off the Cuff." I'm Justin Draeger.

Brad Barnett:

Hi, I'm Brad Barnett, Associate Vice President of Access and Enrollment Management and Financial Aid Director at James Madison University. That title gets longer all the time. The goal is just to keep it on the front side of the business card so it doesn't have to wrap around.

Justin Draeger:

And also our '22/'23 national chair. Brad, it's really good to have you here with us today. Brad, you're kicking off a new series for us as part of our "Off the Cuff." You know one "Off the Cuff" episode every month is really devoted to public policy and what's going on in Capitol Hill and with our colleagues at the department. We have one "Off the Cuff" a month that's really focusing in on something that's going on regulatorily or implementation-wise on campus with Jill and David. We want to start a new series. It's called Voices from the Aid Office. And Brad, you sort of straddle that line between governing on part of NASFAA's governance structure and obviously enmeshed in institutional practice. And so you're going to kick off this new series. And for other folks that are interested, we're really looking for how someone's background, their experiences, their education, how what makes them helps them be a better financial aid administrator. And so Brad, this is a lot of pressure for you because you're our inaugural guest on this. How do you feel?

Brad Barnett:

I'm sweating already. So yeah, it's tough. If I had hair, it'd be all messed up right now from the stress.

Justin Draeger:

For what it's worth, you don't look any different to me. If this is your stress face, you're looking alright. Brad, we've had a chance to work together for a lot of years. You've been the treasurer of NASFAA, you've been on several committees, you've been involved in our board before. You've been a regional president, now you're our national chair. Couple things I've learned about you, Brad, and I want you to tell me if you think these are fair, okay? One is you're a guy who likes to look at the beginning and see the end in terms of you're immediately looking forward to say, "Okay, this is where we're starting, this is where we need to be. How are we going to get there?" Is that a fair statement, you think?

Brad Barnett:

Yeah, I think so. It's that Stephen Covey beginning with the end in mind piece. So yes, I think that's a very fair statement.

Justin Draeger:

I think it's also fair that, and we'll talk a little bit about this today, that you have a unique background. Everybody has a unique background, but you have a unique background that sort of makes financial aid very personal for you and college opportunity very personal. Is that fair?

Brad Barnett:

Extremely fair, yes.

Justin Draeger:

Is it fair if I say that, in getting to know you over the years, you're also a guy whose biggest joy in life is finding a good deal?

Brad Barnett:

Oh gosh, yes. Hands down. And my wife is the same way and it's amazing. And my youngest son is the thrift store king. So yes, we have handed those genes down to our children.

Justin Draeger:

I am glad that you and your wife found each other, because there are some things over the years I've learned that you do that I'm like, I don't care how much I have to pay. There are some things I'm not giving up in life. And you, on the other hand, you derive a certain joy from depriving yourself, from deprivation. My observation, do you think that's true?

Brad Barnett:

Yeah, but it's not deprivation. It's a game.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, here we go. Here we go.

Brad Barnett:

If I can save money here, then I can spend money somewhere else. So it's all an opportunity cost analysis and how much money we can save somewhere gives us just more freedom. I will say though, I am glad I found my wife as well, but we have both agreed that if we knew each other in college, we would not have liked each other.

Justin Draeger:

Is that right?

Brad Barnett:

Oh gosh, yes. We found each other at the right stage of life. We would not have been together had we met in college.

Justin Draeger:

Why is that? What about you would've repelled Sarah here? I'm curious.

Brad Barnett:

Yeah, I think that's a conversation for a different podcast.

Justin Draeger:

That's all I want to know about here, because I know you and your wife. So all right, we'll save that for another...

Brad Barnett:

We were both very different people.

Justin Draeger:

Well, let's talk about that for just a minute. You as national chair go and you talk to different audiences. You represent NASFAA and you share a little bit about yourself and we don't want to go, you're going to be in SASFAA coming up, you're going to be at ISFAA coming up, you're going to be at our western region. You'll also be at a handful of states in the next few months. So I don't think we want to tell your entire life story, but I'd sure love to hear just a little bit about where you come from and what makes that so personal for you in your financial aid work.

Brad Barnett:

Sure. And I appreciate the comment about how much do we want to get into because it is a story that I think is best told in person, at least it has been best told in person. So there's a limited amount that I'll probably get into here because I do have a lot of conferences coming up. But I will say this before I get into that. As you said, Justin, we all have our history, we all have our issues and our things we're dealing with in our past. So it's not that one person's past or history is harder or worse or better than anybody else. It's all personal and it's all an individual. This story about where I came from, the reason I felt compelled to tell it this year was because of a former JMU student who contacted me right around the time I became national chair.

I go into this when I share the story, but what he shared with me really laid it on my heart that, yeah, this is a time I need to share this because I don't think that happened by accident. So just know that it's kind of coming from a place of a former student who pushed me down this road. The really short version without going into all the details is, I grew up in poverty. A lot of people say poverty and what does poverty mean? Well, I actually lived in a tent for part of my childhood. So to say we were financially challenged is probably a bit of an understatement.

There's not a whole lot of people who actually literally lived in a tent and had a hole on the ground as a bathroom when they were growing up. That whole lifestyle and the family configuration that I go into when I tell the story just put me in a situation where there was a point in time where I knew I needed to find a way out to a better life. The way out ended up being through college, but it's definitely impacted me. That story is part of what I hold onto with my job, and it's really part of what led me to creating the class that I teach here at JMU as well.

Justin Draeger:

Suffice it to say, when you say you grew up in poverty and you give the example of there was a time when you and your family didn't have a home and you were in Arkansas at that time. And so tell us about that connection. How do you go from that, briefly, to college is a possibility for you? It's quite a turnaround from some of your humble beginnings.

Brad Barnett:

It's funny, for all the challenges that we had growing up in southwest Arkansas, and even in the poverty, for most of my childhood Arkansas was home and Arkansas was probably where I was going to stay. There were some family circumstances that I go into when I share the story at the different conferences, when I was a senior in high school, that led me to realize this is a place that I don't need to stay. This is a place that I do need to leave. And at that point in time, it's how do you get out? Where do you go?

I went to a really small school. We were K-12, all in the same building, public school. It wasn't education at its finest. Just picture that: all in the same building in the deep woods of southwest Arkansas. So your

options are not great. But there was a school where some of my friends went to, and it was about 30, 35 miles away and I thought, you know what? I can apply to this college. I can start working my way up and out. And that's exactly what I did. I applied to one school. That was it. That was my hope. I hung it all on that one school and got in and then worked my way through school with financial aid and the rest is history, so they speak.

Justin Draeger:

Did you get to know your financial aid administrator at that school?

Brad Barnett:

It's funny, she is an integral part of this story and this path because she is the one who opened the door for me to do this. And her name was Dorothy Duncan, and I still remember her name to this day and I still remember meeting with her, and I still remember walking out with a dependency override and being able to go to college and say, "Okay, this is it. I'm moving forward." So she literally changed the direction of my life.

Justin Draeger:

She was the financial aid director at Southern Arkansas University. And you just said it, but to put a finer point out on it, without her, without her dependency override, without her intervention, I guess it's tough to say you wouldn't have gotten a college education, but maybe in a real way she made that possible for you.

Brad Barnett:

She did, yeah. If it wasn't for her then I probably still could have gone, but I would've incurred debt for going to college. I would've been a little bit lost in what I needed to do. That fateful meeting when I walked into her office and then walked out in a different place of life was, it's hard to put it into words. As aid administrators, we do these things for students all the time, but you really never fully understand, as much as a student might tell you, you don't fully understand how they feel. We try to be as empathetic as we can, but when you're that student and what that feeling is, it's hard to put into words.

Justin Draeger:

Dorothy Duncan, she intervenes. She helps you with financial aid. Bridge the divide for us on, one, at what point do you get into financial aid. From the point that you receive financial aid, you get this tremendous opportunity, you go to college, how do you get into financial aid? And two, then I want to get into a little bit about how does your experience growing up in poverty, being a student aid recipient, how does that inform your work as a financial aid administrator? So first bridge the divide to financial aid as a profession.

Brad Barnett:

So that all started literally in undergraduate school still. I had a Pell Grant. I had a couple of scholarships that helped me get through school, but I also needed to work. And I worked several jobs while I was an undergraduate. One of them was, I was a student ambassador as an undergraduate student. As a student ambassador, we're kind of the front facing students. Every admissions office has them. We call them something different. But we had to know a little bit about financial aid when we were communicating with students about interest at SAU. Then after I graduated SAU and moved to Virginia and eventually went to graduate school, I walked into the financial aid office at Virginia Commonwealth

University looking for ways to pay for graduate school. So I'd been accepted to school. I was like, now I need to figure out how to pay for it.

I walked in, they had a big sign above the counter that they were hiring for graduate assistants in the financial aid office. So I ended up having a conversation with somebody in the office, and I walked out with a graduate assistantship. So tuition's paid for, and I get 20 hours of work a week with a little paycheck. So my graduate school was covered, and did that until I graduated with my graduate degree. Went out in the real world, so to speak, working with my graduate degree in my chosen field for a couple of years. And then VCU called me and said, "Hey, we've got a financial aid counselor position open. Are you interested?" And I reflected on it for a moment and realized I enjoyed the financial aid work a lot more than what I was doing then.

Justin Draeger:

Well, what were you doing?

Brad Barnett:

So I said, sure.

Justin Draeger:

Well, what were you doing though?

Brad Barnett:

I was a certified rehabilitation counselor, which was what my graduate degree was with a specialization in mental health. A lot of counseling stuff, but I ended up getting hooked up with a company that was doing mostly workers' comp claims. So I was working with a lot of people who are out on workers' comp claims, trying to get them back to work, dealing with insurance companies. And it was just a mess. It wasn't very gratifying. It was kind of nasty work, and the financial aid work was so much more fulfilling. So I jumped ship and went back to the aid office.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, good for you. So you were at VCU for how long?

Brad Barnett:

VCU, a couple of years as a graduate student, and I think it was four, four and a half years as a full-time employee before I came to JMU.

Justin Draeger:

And then you moved over to James Madison University. Both public schools here in Virginia.

Brad Barnett:

Yes.

Justin Draeger:

And so now you've been in this. For how long have you been doing financial aid? If we were to do the "stand up, if you've been in financial aid this long," where would you be?

Brad Barnett:

It's like 26 and a half, 27 years, somewhere around in there.

Justin Draeger:

And when we say you've been in financial aid for that long, we mean you've been on campus literally administering financial aid?

Brad Barnett:

Yes. You got it. Yeah, it's been my life, my life's blood.

Justin Draeger:

Which, I just like to differentiate. I've been in financial aid for 23 years, but only a small portion of that was actually on campus at a school. So I just like to differentiate what that means for people when they've been in financial aid for that long. So connect us to then, you've been in it for this long, you've stayed in it for this long. You've moved up through the ranks. You now are an associate vice president there for access enrollment management at JMU. How do you think your past experiences have informed the way you approach financial aid on campus?

Brad Barnett:

So I'm a really big believer, and this is one of the core things that I talk with students about, whether it's in class, whether I'm speaking to groups or individually. I do not believe your past dictates who you're going to be or what your future will look like. I do believe your past can influence your future depending on how much influence you allow it to have. There's some people who come from really impoverished backgrounds who just allow the past to repeat and they just repeat the poverty and they repeat the cycle. There's other people like myself who took that and said, no way do I want to go back. I want to use my past as motivation to find a better way and to do something different.

So it's influenced me from the perspective of giving me drive, drive to get a better life, drive to make sure that my children had opportunities I didn't have and that my children didn't have to go through some of the same struggles that I did. Translate that to a college campus, where you're around thousands of students every single year. Many of them are also coming from very challenged backgrounds. It gives me the ability to relate with them at a way that I never would've been able to relate had I not had the past that I had. So I think in a way it's made me, for some of the populations of students I work with, better at what I do because I just have the ability to relate in some ways that some people don't.

Justin Draeger:

It strikes me, Brad, that you might be straddling a line here when you talk to students. So on the one hand, you can empathize with where, say for example, a low income student might be coming from. You empathize with that, but then you also might, with that empathy, come with some motivation that you can give them to say, "I know you can do this. I know you can rise above, because I've experienced that myself," sort of thing. So there's this line where we're trying to do whatever we can for a student and also trying to give them the encouragement and courage to meet these challenges face on. We're going to be here to help you, and I want you to do your part sort of thing.

Brad Barnett:

Absolutely. It's funny. There's a group on campus of a couple of hundred students, this cohort of low income students that I have the opportunity to speak with every so often. And when I go in, and it's funny, that people are sizing you up as soon as you walk in a room. It's just kind of human nature. They see you and all of a sudden perceptions are being made. We've had all kinds of sorts of conversations about implicit bias and all those types of things. You're just seeing somebody through a lens. So here I am, this bald white guy staying up in front of the room in a jacket, and they have no idea one way or the other who I am or where I'm from. And my job is to come talk to them. And automatically I know they're looking at me that thinking, "This guy can't relate to me. He has no idea."

And I get asked to come in and oftentimes to share some of my story before we get into some of the motivational stuff and the financial stuff. And when I finish sharing my story, you can feel the vibe in the room completely change. And after that, it's like they get it, and then we have laughter, encouragement, and there's a lot of give and take, back and forth, even with a couple of hundred students in the room. But there was a connection that I had to make at first in order to get to that point. So it comes to that, and then the motivation piece comes where I have to watch it. And I appreciate your comment about I've been there kind of a thing. I have to watch myself on the tolerance level. And quite frankly, it's one of these things where I'll catch myself sometimes thinking I don't have a lot of tolerance if you're not putting in effort.

Look, I've been there. I've done this. I know it's doable, so do it. And if you're going to make excuses, I don't have any tolerance for excuses. And it's really quick to jump into that and be less sympathetic, because my expectations are high that they can do this. But I also have to realize, they're not me. Their situation is not exactly my situation, and I don't really know their home life. We can share some commonalities, but they're still different people. So I have to temper expectations and tolerance a lot.

Justin Draeger:

I appreciate that. That obviously requires some self-reflection and maybe sometimes even friends or colleagues who can help keep you grounded. Just like they would make assumptions about you just walking into the room, we have to be careful about making assumptions about our students. I try to remind myself sometimes, too, that I worked hard to get where I am, but it also came with things that were out of my control. Some might call that luck, some might call that divine intervention. I just call it random universe, but those breaks came. And so I had to be in a position to take advantage of lucky breaks, but I had no control over the lucky breaks. And so some people have more lucky breaks than others, but it's always this line about not projecting myself onto other people.

Brad Barnett:

No, you're spot on. And that's where it is. Your story is your story. My story is my story. All these students, their story is theirs, it's not mine. There is a line between projecting too much. So how do you motivate, how do you encourage, how do you support without projecting too much and show a level of empathy and not lose the tolerance piece? I do appreciate your breaks comment, though, about the breaks. I walked into an undergraduate university, literally walked into the aid office, walked out with a dependency override and Pell Grant. I walked into an aid office at a graduate school and walked out with a graduate assistantship and a job. What are the odds of those two things happening in order to get two free degrees? Pretty slim, when you just walk in and just that happens. It's also part of why I believe I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I think there was a path that was kind of laid out. The opportunities were there, I took it, and here I am.

Justin Draeger:

You've been an aid director for a while now. You've mentored other people and spoken at plenty of leadership conferences and management conferences. If you were talking to a new aid director today, what would be the one piece of advice you would give them to be successful? Just one.

Brad Barnett:

Hands down, build your network, you cannot do this alone. It is a big job. It is a complicated job. It can be a stressful job, and you need a network of other people that you can count on, you can rely on, you can talk with about situations. I'm sitting here looking at my email box as we're talking and I'm looking at emails from aid directors from about four or five other states that aren't even here in Virginia. And we're having conversations about all kinds of things. Some of them just fun stuff. Some of them, they're aid stuff. But I would say build your network. You cannot do this job effectively in a silo by sitting at your desk all day.

Justin Draeger:

Do you see financial aid as an art or a science? Don't tell me both. You're not going to tell me both.

Brad Barnett:

Am I cheating if I say both?

Justin Draeger:

All right, well, go ahead. Make your case.

Brad Barnett:

It's totally a science and art. Let's just go with federal methodology as science. There's a formulaic approach. You put the data into a formula and it spits out a number. Today it's EFC. Tomorrow it's the SAI. But there's science behind that. We can argue about whether it's good or bad, but there's science. What our campuses do with that data, that's art. The federal programs are pretty prescriptive, but we use the EFC and the future SAI for all kinds of other initiatives on our campus. When we're looking at how are we going to leverage institutional dollars with federal dollars or state dollars, how do we create that packaging policy to make our institution affordable while keeping loan debt down for students, that's art. And if you looked at every single school, you'll find we all have very different packaging policies in how we utilize that information that's created from science to do something on our campuses. So how's that?

Justin Draeger:

I'll give that a passing grade, but here's a more question. This is why I tend to agree with you. It's sort of interesting, Brad, because having known you for a long time, I would think if I were to ask you to put your finger on the scales and say, is it more art or more science, I would've thought you're a guy who I think really likes to dive into details. So I think you like the science part, but hearing your explanation makes me think maybe you like the art part more than the science. Which is it? Which part attracts you to the profession, the art or the science?

Brad Barnett:

So I'm naturally kind of a numbers/data guy, so I think I gravitate more towards that. But I think one of the reasons... I know this sounds like a cop out answer, but it's really not a cop out answer. I love living



in both worlds, and that's kind of one of the nice things about this, is if you understand the science and you understand the data then the things you can do in the art side, the door's just wide open. My favorite place is in the intersection of the two. But it does start with an affinity towards the data. I think it's hard to be too artful unless you understand the tools that you're playing with, and those tools all come from the science.

Justin Draeger:

A lot of aid offices have told us that they feel unseen on campus, or under-resourced, or maybe even underpaid. I'm curious, from where you sit, not only as a longtime aide director at a large public university, but also on the NASFAA board and as chair, what advice do you give to folks who are suffering through some of those experiences?

Brad Barnett:

The lack of visibility, the feeling like you're underpaid or underappreciated, I get it. We had these conversations during COVID where everyone in the world was getting accolades for handling handled COVID, but nobody thanked the financial aid office for how we handled millions of dollars that came to our campuses with no real instructions in order of what to do. So I get it. The feeling's real. I would say probably one of the best ways I found to combat this though is, it's almost back to your question about what do you do when you're a new aid director, you've got to make yourself visible. So as a new aid director, go build your network on your campuses. You got to build your network on your campus. You got to get away from your desk. You got to get away from your computer, and you have to be seen. And I think for me, it's been helpful to be seen in ways that have nothing to do with being tied to financial aid.

There is more value we can give to our universities than just processing a grant or dispersing a loan. But in order for people to see that, we have to get away from our day-to-day and be a part of some of those other initiatives and groups and meetings and things on campus and build those relationships and build that network. And that all just takes time. And then over time, people on your campus start seeing you a little bit differently. And at that point in time you've created some visibility, which helps. I will say I'm fortunate in that we have some opportunities, and I've had some opportunities on this campus, to be a part of lots of things that have nothing to do with financial aid. And I know that's given me so much more credibility when I have to go to the table talking about financial aid, all because of people know me and those relationships are built.

Justin Draeger:

So it goes back to building out your network, getting outside your aid office, and getting involved in other things on campus so that you are a go-to person they'll think about in all of those aspects. I like that. It's not so different from how NASFAA does advocacy work. We try to learn about what our colleagues and other associations are doing. We look at what Congress is interested in doing. We look at what the administration's interested in doing, and then we try to be visible. We try to support as much as we can some of their objectives, and we become go-to answer people. Like, you're trying to accomplish this. Have you thought about A, B, or C? And it might not have anything directly to do with a Pell grant or a student loan, but then they start thinking about you more and more often.

Brad Barnett:

And then you start getting calls about things that are financial aid related or not financial aid related, but you're building trust. You're building a relationship. With all that said, I get it because we have so much

to do that sometimes you feel like if I leave my computer for 10 minutes, I'm going to be an hour behind when I come back. And it's hard sometimes to balance the how do I keep up with everything I got to get done and processed on the day to day basis and still take the time to go build a relationship and network and that credibility. The one thing I will say to that is, it's time well-spent. Time spent on the front end is going to save you more time in the back end, but sometimes it just takes a few years to get there depending on how new you are to your campus.

Justin Draeger:

And speaking of that front-end time, Brad, as you've gone out and then participated in your state association, your regional association, and then NASFAA, that's time not on campus. That's time not spent doing the work that's piling up back at your aid office. Can you articulate what I've heard you say, but what do you get out of that that then helps you back in your office?

Brad Barnett:

I'm a big believer in being a part of something that's bigger than yourself, and we can get so myopic about our day-to-day and our office and our students and our school, sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture. One of the things being a part of all the associations over the years I've done is, it's allowed me to get a lens of how things look outside of my institution. There's so much knowledge that I've been able to bring back from other schools who I have created connections with and networks with or conference sessions or friendships and relationships that I've brought back to JMU, things that we're doing here that we would've never thought to do had it not been for that exposure on a state and a regional level to other people. So there's a long-term benefit to your institution.

Also, there is just something about knowing that when you really get involved that the work you're doing is helping more than just the students at your school. You're helping other aid officers, your peers, your colleagues, your friends. You're helping them with all the stuff you're doing. You're also helping their students with all the stuff that you're doing. So it's an opportunity to definitely get outside your little box and be a part of something that's bigger than you.

Justin Draeger:

Either at state or regional or even other associations that I get involved with or boards outside of financial aid, I'm fine meeting new people and public speaking, but I'm also a bit introverted in that it's easier for me to meet people in a context. And so if you're struggling to build your network and just walk up to people and awkwardly introduce yourself, it's a lot easier to build a network when you're on a committee or a task force or volunteering at an event and you have a job that's making you interact with people. It's a lot easier to build your network that way.

Brad Barnett:

Yes. I don't think I could have said that any better than myself. You're thrust into a situation and you're working with other aid officers, and before long you've got a relationship and you didn't even know it was happening in a more structured environment.

Justin Draeger:

So I want to ask you some quick, maybe quick questions, maybe not, but you do sit in a unique position, Brad, because you're the national chair of our association. I work with you and the other chairs and the board of directors on things like strategy and planning for NASFAA, our mission, things like that. Given

where you sit, I wonder if there's a thing that you think would surprise people most about NASFAA about how we work, given sort of your peek behind the curtain.

Brad Barnett:

Do you want to give away dirty little secrets?

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, what do you got?

Brad Barnett:

I won't lay out all the laundry. No. It's funny because I have been privileged and blessed to work with NASFAA in a lot of capacities over the years, but being national chair, you do see things that you just normally don't see. And what has really, I think, impressed me the most is the speed at which things happen when factoring in the amount of balls that are being juggled in the air at any one time. NASFAA's supporting over 30,000 aid administrators, over 3,000 schools, with 50 people. And when you just think about the scale and the scope of that, and the complexity of everything that goes on federally, just the organization and structure of how to keep the ship moving, I have been really impressed with how fast things get done and efficient they are, and how many things are being considered at any one given time.

I never fully realized all of the different considerations, strategy, discussions, and decisions that are happening. As a board, we help set priorities for NASFAA, but the day-to-day management of all of those priorities and some of that strategy, that happens on the staff side. And what has been even more impressive to me is, it's being done with people who literally aren't sitting next to each other. They're all over the country. To have a communication plan and strategy and intentionality between the way the collaboration happens between different time zones and people who don't see each other on a daily basis, and to still have it be as efficient as it is, it's been very impressive. I will say I was a bit awestruck when I first started having it. Now I just feel like I'm part of the fray and I enjoy the weekend Slack messages and all the nighttime email chatters, and it's a lot of dedicated people who are just extremely impressive. They're drinking the Kool-Aid, and it shows.

Justin Draeger:

We talked about your advice for a new aid director. What about somebody new in the profession? They're just starting out, and they're existentially questioning whether they're going to continue in this profession. What advice would you have for them?

Brad Barnett:

It's the same advice. It's find a way to build your network and get out in some form or fashion. If you can go to a conference and do something, that's fantastic. If you can get out on campus and go to a student event and see students and interact with students, help them move into the residence halls over move-in, just some kind of human personal connection. My first job when I became a full-time financial aid employee, my boss at that time took me to the VASFAA Conference, which was in Richmond where VCU is and said, "Congratulations, you're on the local arrangements committee. Grab that box, let's go." And I met so many people just by grabbing boxes and lugging stuff around and stuffing packets and doing all that kind of stuff. And immediately your network starts getting built. And I was a financial aid counselor.

Justin Draeger:

Let's say fast forward, and Brad Barnett is in charge of federal student aid, okay? What's your top post-secondary priority? What are you going to tackle first?

Brad Barnett:

How much time do we have on this podcast?

Justin Draeger:

Well, we are nearing the end, so you're going to have to be punchy with this one.

Brad Barnett:

Oh, I'm going to have to be punchy with this one. Okay.

Justin Draeger:

I think I know what your answer would be, Brad, but I want to hear what you think, what you have to say.

Brad Barnett:

Oh, I'm intrigued now. See, here's part of the challenge for me is, we know that Congress and the Department of Education, two different things. One sets rules, one deals with regulations. I think a lot of people just think of these two as interchangeable and they're not. So to answer the question, just through the lens of the Department of Education, I feel like I'd be sliding some of the things I would love to see Congress change, but let's just stick with Department of Education because doubling Pell is a Congress thing, right?

Justin Draeger:

Right. That's right.

Brad Barnett:

That's where I thought you might think I was going to go, but now you're tricking with the Department of Ed focus. I think the first thing would be, on September 7th, 2022, which just so happens to be my birthday, by the way, NASFAA sent a letter up the chain to head to said, and I'm paraphrasing, very rough, paraphrasing, "Hey guys, we start working together a little bit better moving forward. Can you let us help you? Because the way things are going right now, you're not giving us the opportunity to help you and it's creating a mess." Obviously that's a very rough paraphrase.

So if you want to ask me right now, the first thing I would do, is I would figure out a way to engage NASFAA and financial aid professionals on the front end before any regulatory decisions are made, packages are written, any of that stuff that goes out for public comment, I would say, let's get these aid professionals around the table and let's figure out together what's the best way to roll this out, then let's roll it out. As opposed to what we're seeing now most of the time is, it's rolled out and then we have to try to figure out how to clean it up.

Justin Draeger:

Well, I won't fault you for that one. I think that is a pretty good one. That was the letter where we cited several changes to NSLDS, that weren't being updated, so schools had to manually do it. This was after Operation Fresh Start where students were getting letters that they were now eligible for Title IV, and

schools hadn't been notified. And by the way, the department said, "Schools, why don't you just go ahead and manually process it? Because we can't update our systems in time." So there had been a laundry list of things that had come down that basically said, "Aid folks, can you just handle it on campus?" I thought you might...

Brad Barnett:

That letter, for me, has been powerful.

Justin Draeger:

Oh, good. And it's resulted in some very meaningful conversations with the department. I won't say everything's going to be solved overnight, but we did hear from several folks at the department, including the very top, and have had multiple subsequent conversations. I thought you might say R2T4, Brad.

Brad Barnett:

I would. So that was my second. I was really going to go R2T4. The challenge of R2T4 is some of it's regulatory, some of it would require congressional action.

Justin Draeger:

Well, see, you know too much.

Brad Barnett:

I stayed away from it.

Justin Draeger:

You know too much about the logistics.

Brad Barnett:

But yes, R2T4's at the top of the list. One of the areas I have seen the department come to the table with practicing aid professionals is with our FAFSA simplification work group. So I do appreciate the partnership on that level, of being able to have practicing aid administrators and NASFAA chat with them before they start rolling out everything that they're going to roll out regarding the new FAFSA.

Justin Draeger:

Yeah, I agree. So we are making some inroads there and always room for improvement. So Brad, really appreciate you coming on and kicking off this new series, Voices From the Aid Office.

For those of you who are interested in participating in something like this, be on the lookout in Today's News. We'll have something out in the near future that talks about the new series. If you want to nominate yourself or someone else whose experiences, life, or financial aid, or otherwise contribute to how they do financial aid, we'd love to have them on and feature a little bit of their story.

Brad, thanks very much for being on.

Brad Barnett:

Absolutely. It's been fun. Thanks for having me.

Justin Draeger:

Thank you everybody for joining us for this edition of "Off the Cuff," Voices from the Aid Office. Again, look in today's news, we will have a submission form there if you'd like to nominate yourself or others to be part of this series.

Appreciate all that you do. Thanks Brad Barnett for being on this episode. If you like this episode, please go ahead and rate it in your podcast of choice so that other people can find it. Remember to subscribe, tell a friend, and we will talk to you again very soon.