

Eileen O'Leary Inaugural Speech

So...why am *I* here? Was there a warp in the time-space continuum that mistakenly placed me here in front of you as your newly installed National Chair? Someone who works at a small liberal arts college and did not come up through the regional association ranks?

Perhaps. But more likely it is because *just enough* of you voted for me instead of for my very distinguished, formidable, and capable colleague. For this I am extremely grateful and I thank you for this incredible opportunity from the bottom of my heart. The opportunity to serve you – who share my profession of financial aid administrator - and to shepherd our association through a new year of exciting organizational evolution, advocacy efforts in the midst of Reauthorization, and the enhancement and strengthening of the value of your membership, is one that I look forward to with great anticipation.

If I took a quick doodle poll of you today, asking the reasons you are financial aid professionals, I am sure the results would run the gamut, all the way from “It’s the only job I could get after graduation” to “I have found it to be my lifelong passion and could not conceive of doing anything else.” I would fall into the latter group.

We are variously seen by each of our institutions as gatekeepers, as roadblocks, facilitators, federal compliance officers and technocrats, as enrollment managers. And while we may be some or all of these things at any given moment, we are much, much more.

I would like you to imagine this: ***We are venture capitalists*** – that’s right, venture capitalists. But we don’t invest in start-up companies, we invest in ***human*** capital and potential. And these investments are in the students that we meet every day. Think of the hundreds and perhaps thousands of students with whom you have worked, whose files you have read, whose eligibility for Pell Grants you have confirmed, whose difficult family and financial circumstances you have been made privy to, whose trust and confidences you have received. Remember where they come from and imagine where they are going. Understand that they stand on ***your*** shoulders. Through them you touch the future.

Thomas Jefferson believed that an educated citizenry is the single most important factor in creating and sustaining a strong and viable democracy. Through *your* work then, you are not only investing in ***human capital***, you are also investing in ***America’s*** future.

And I firmly believe that we do this best when we are expert in arcane statutes and regulations, when we have strong interpersonal and managerial skills, when we are able to navigate the politics of our institutions and when we are effective advocates for well-crafted, reasonable, and sufficiently funded financial aid programs.

Enter NASFAA - the *only* national association focused exclusively on the professional development and training needs of financial aid administrators. Under the extraordinary leadership of Justin Draeger our President and CEO; Beth Maglione – Vice President of Communications; Mindy Eline, Vice President for Membership, Marketing, and Programs; Megan McClean, Managing Director of Policy and Federal Relations; Connie McCormack, Chief Training Officer - NASFAA continually reinvents and reimagines itself to provide us, the members, with opportunities, training, and an ever-stronger voice in Washington. We are very fortunate to have such a dynamic team in place.

And the talent doesn't stop at the top. While I won't mention everyone by name, I would like to acknowledge the great work being done by professional and support staff including Jennifer Martin (director of content management); Joan Berkus (senior policy analyst); Karen McCarthy (policy analyst); Jesse O'Connell (who trains and accompanies the less experienced of us on Hill visits); Eileen Welsh and Eunice Powell and the many others on the Training Team; Mary Nokes and Audra Love; and Jennifer Jackson (the organizational genius behind building such great conferences as this one.)

As Craig outlined yesterday in his "farewell address," NASFAA – its volunteer members and its hard working staff – have accomplished so much.

During this next year while I am National Chair, NASFAA staff and your Board of Directors will continue to make changes to organizational structure, member services, and operations that we believe will enhance the value of your membership and provide you with greater opportunities to be active in NASFAA.

I am very excited to be the first chair to work entirely within the construct of one of these improvements. We have moved away from non-Board standing committees that operate for an entire year, which reduce our flexibility to react to our ever-changing higher-ed environment. Instead, we will charter multiple shorter-lived task forces and thought forces that will have set, purposeful goals, working within shorter timeframes, that will focus on projects like:

- Loan servicing issues (chair Tami Sato);
- Identifying the distinct needs of our graduate/professional school members, recommending the actions NASFAA should take to insure we are serving this cohort well (chair, Mary Fenton);
- Recommending the direction NASFAA should move in to serve the current needs of members in the area of diversity (chair Wayne Harewood)
- Planning for the celebration of NASFAA's 50th anniversary in 2016 (chair, Clantha McCurdy);
- Redeveloping NASFAA's web presence to be more user-friendly, useful, and robust for all of you (chair, Justin Brown);
- Convening thought forces to address new issues and policy concerns that may arise during the Reauthorization process.

A few other new initiatives are on the drawing board as well, like a redesign of our fall Leadership Conference. Instead of being an event meant solely to train those newly elected to regional and state association leadership positions, it will be expanded into a Leadership Expo, with a concurrent track for new and aspiring aid directors as well as professional development in the area of advocacy. Please keep your eyes open for an announcement and consider going or sending your up and coming stars.

I'm not sure if everyone here realizes, as I have come to realize, that this is not the NASFAA of even a half decade ago. What I believe – what I know – is that NASFAA is reinvented and revitalized. It is very clearly seeking to serve members and meet our needs as I believe it has never done before. This new NASFAA has boundless energy, unlimited enthusiasm, and is clearly member-focused. And I know that it is the continuous and visionary efforts of Justin Draeger, our President and CEO, who has brought us to this place. Please stand and help me to show Justin our thanks for his good work on our behalf.

Finally, I challenge each of you, whether you are new to financial aid, looking to move up to a new directorship, or are closing in on retirement. I challenge you to get involved. Many NASFAA members have already done this many times, over the years. You have stepped out of your comfort zones, challenged yourselves, and put yourselves on the front line. I ask that each of you volunteer again **or more importantly for the first time** to serve on a task force - and to volunteer again and again until there is a spot for you. I promise that half of those selected for each task force will not have had the opportunity to serve before; please answer NASFAA surveys; run for a position on the NASFAA Board of Directors. ***Run for National Chair.*** We need you!

I've always believed that if you do not participate in the process, you forfeit the right to complain about the results. Don't sit back and grumble if NASFAA is not living up to your expectations. Stand up, participate, and help us move forward.

And remember, this year I am your cheerleader, your mentor, your voice. I am here this year as National Chair to help NASFAA continue to improve as our professional association.

In his book *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, Jon Meacham wrote, "Jefferson believed that the future could be better than the past. He knew though, that life was best lived among friends, in the pursuit of large causes..." I am among friends. We are pursuing a great cause. There is nothing else that I would rather do.

Thank you - each and every one - for this opportunity to be of service to you, NASFAA, and to our profession.