

Graduate and Professional Aid Administrators Visit Capitol Hill to Advocate for Students

By [Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)



Earlier this month, nine NASFAA members representing graduate and professional (G/P) schools met with congressional staffers as part of NASFAA's ongoing Advocacy Pipeline initiative. This is the [fourth year](#) that NASFAA has hosted the "G/P Hill Day" advocacy event on Capitol Hill focused on student aid issues related to graduate and professional students, which often get overlooked as policy discussions tend to focus on undergraduate student aid issues.

While on the hill, the pipeline participants met with the staff of 13 members of Congress representing their home states and districts to discuss legislative priorities such as the elimination of loan origination fees, maintaining and lowering interest rates for the Grad PLUS Loan program, streamlining the [Public Service Loan Forgiveness](#) (PSLF) program, and simplifying loan repayment options.

NASFAA members from around the nation participated in the visits, including: Heather Boutell of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Eric Meadows of West Virginia University Health Sciences, Marie-Rose Nduku of New York University Stern School of Business, Fabiola Ortega of Florida International University Chapman Graduate School of Business, Chris Pollard of George Washington University Law School, Jessica Rouser of University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, Michael Silvernail of Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, Tracy Simmons of the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and Lisa Wioskowski of Duke University Graduate School.

We asked the advocacy pipeline participants to share their thoughts and takeaways. Read on to learn about their experiences.

Marie-Rose Nduku, senior director of academic advising and financial aid, New York University Stern School of Business



I have been in the financial aid arena for many years and have been a routine attendee of NASFAA conferences, gathering as much new information as possible to bring back to my team and New York University's Stern School of Business. I was not quite sure what to expect when I was asked to participate in NASFAA's G/P Advocacy Pipeline, but I knew one thing for certain: this was an opportunity to bring to the forefront the real concerns I have about where financial aid for our graduate students is headed.

When we all met at the NASFAA headquarters, what surprised me the most was the enthusiasm all the financial aid administrators and NASFAA staff had for the Advocacy Pipeline. There was excitement and team spirit created instantly.

My team was made of three financial aid administrators — Jessica Rouser, Eric Meadows, and a NASFAA staff member, Jill Desjean. Right away we built up synergy between us as we were preparing to hit the hill. We created our own internal slogan by which we would be approaching each meeting – "Keep it, fix it, and forgive it."

Our team was focused on the Grad PLUS Loan program and all that affects it. We talked about preserving Grad PLUS loans, re-evaluating how the PSLF eligibility review is conducted, and the value PSLF has for all students interested in the public and non-profit sectors. I zoned in on the case for eliminating loan origination fees, which has been very challenging to explain to my business students who are very savvy about how they spend their dollars. I also focused on the relatively high interest rates tacked onto Grad PLUS loans, driving our students toward private loans.

The Advocacy Pipeline meant a lot to me in the sense that it added another dimension to my profession. It is great to be able to offer financial aid, advise students, offer workshops, and run a department. As a New Yorker, it was great to get to visit Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Rep. Jerry Nadler's (D-NY) offices! However, what was most rewarding to me was to be able to actually advocate for my students with people who are at the heart of creating legislations that is affecting them today and most likely for many years to come.

My tip for anyone who is interested in participating in the next round of the Advocacy Pipeline is to be confident that you know much more about the subject than the people you will be meeting with. Because of the knowledge you have, they are open and eager to hear your stories. Seize the occasion and shed light on the struggles your students are experiencing.

Tracy Simmons, assistant dean of admissions and financial aid, University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law



The NASFAA G/P Hill Day was better than I expected! Every single meeting went well. There were opportunities to learn more about what bills are being discussed in the House and the Senate, and to learn more about NASFAA's focus over the next few months. The congressional staffers were so receptive to the meetings, and the conversations were very robust. I expected the staffers to be prepared, but was surprised by their knowledge of exactly where their senator or representative stood on an issue, and their ability to answer questions about NASFAA recommendations, give feedback on a particular item, or respond to my questions about the simplification of repayment plans. We also discussed that despite how divided things may seem in Washington, D.C., there is bipartisan support for many of NASFAA's recommendations to Congress.

The highlights of my trip were pinning my cities — where I was born and where I currently live — on Sen. Kamala Harris' (D-CA) wall; having one of Sen. Dianne Feinstein's (D-CA) staffers recognize my main university; eating lunch and buying a copy of Robert's Rules of Order in the House; and getting to learn about the issues the public policy and medical schools are facing since my focus is on law.

The Capitol Hill visits made for such a productive day. I made new friends from other G/P school disciplines and my faith in advocacy was renewed. I was reminded of the impact the G/P community can have on educational and financial aid policy and that together, we can impact the future. Our current students, alumni and future students are relying on us to be their voice. If we do not step up, who will?

My tips for other financial aid administrators who are interested in participating in future Advocacy Pipeline events is to get involved! Follow NASFAA on social media, sign up for the emails, attend a NASFAA conference to learn more about what is happening in the financial aid arena on a national level, follow the [NASFAA podcast](#) "Off The Cuff," and reach out to your state leaders. Their staffers are well versed in answering questions about their stance on financial aid and educational policies.

Jessica Rouser, assistant director of law financial aid, University of Detroit Mercy School of Law



I've been working in financial aid for nearly a decade, advocating for my students at the institutional level. However, I have wanted to get their voices and concerns out to more substantial policymakers, but wasn't sure how to make that

happen. So when NASFAA offered me the opportunity to participate in the G/P Advocacy Pipeline event, I eagerly said yes. Then the nerves kicked in: I feared I wasn't knowledgeable enough to talk to congressional staff members about financial aid; I feared I'd be dismissed and ignored; I feared I would have to fight to get support. I am thrilled to report that wasn't the experience at all!

Before heading to the hill, the nine financial aid administrators met with the NASFAA team. As a large group, we discussed the agenda for the day and reviewed folders that included NASFAA policy issues to leave at each office. These folders were extremely helpful because even though I have read those documents, having the information in my hands built up my confidence. We then broke out into small groups to finalize the issues we needed to address, the topics we would discuss if permitted time, and who would take the lead on each talking point. Together, we came up with an action plan: "Keep It" (Grad PLUS loans); "Fix It" (cancel origination fees and reduce loan interest rates); and "Forgive It" (improve, simplify, and strengthen PSLF).

We visited five offices — two from New York, two from Michigan, and one from West Virginia — in five buildings. I am happy we were advised to wear comfy shoes! In my opinion, the meetings with the staff members all went well. We met with staff members who had a range of knowledge on federal loans and varying engagement with the topic. The folders did come in handy as a resource, and staff members appeared grateful to have something to share with their congressional representative. Everyone agreed with us that we need improvements to the federal student loan system. We also received a tip that some of these issues would be in the [College Affordability Act](#) (CAA) that was introduced.

This experience was amazing (and a little exhausting). I felt heard by the congressional staff members, supported by NASFAA, and empowered by my financial aid colleagues. I hope that I can do this again, especially now that I feel more confident and comfortable in that setting. Nineteen years as a federal loan borrower. Eleven years as a loan repayer. Seven years as a financial aid administrator. One NASFAA advocacy pipeline visit completed; hopefully, many more to come.

For more pictures from the event, check out NASFAA's Advocacy Pipeline [Facebook album](#). If you're interested in volunteering to be a part of NASFAA's Advocacy Pipeline, fill out an interest [form here](#).

Publication Date: 10/23/2019