Iowa Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

THE INFORMER

The Bi-Monthly IASFAA Newsletter

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Strategic Planning is Underway

Submitted by: Kelsey Foss, Past President

Every 3 years IASFAA works on a new strategic plan. Our last plan ran from 2024-25 through 2026-27, so the Strategic Planning Committee is in the process of working to create the next plan! The committee consists of the elected members of executive council as well as two appointed IASFAA members and is chaired by the IASFAA Past President. Our appointed members are Tristan Lynn from Iowa College Aid and Jacob Severn from Iowa State, thanks to both of them for agreeing to help with this important work!

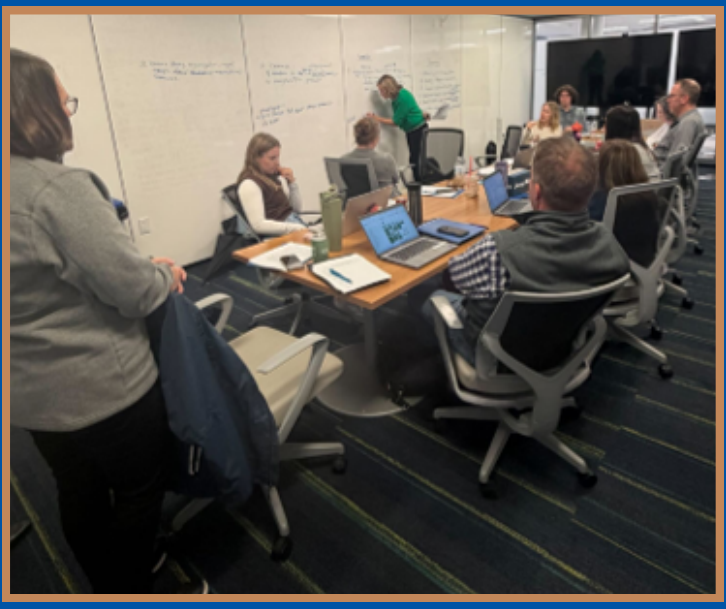
Our committee also is enlisting the help of Kim Linduska, who worked with the committee on the previous plan as well. Kim has had a long career in higher education and her past experience leading these types of planning processes is much appreciated.

The Strategic Planning committee met in person in early November to dig into what IASFAA's next three years might look like. Themes that the group discussed included the increasing pace of changes in regulations, rise in AI technology in our work, the enrollment cliff, and staffing issues. The group also looked at IASFAA's finances as they will be working to develop a fiscal strategic plan in addition to goals and strategies to achieve those goals. Some of the priorities the group talked about focusing on for IASFAA members were providing meaningful community and learning opportunities, increasing member engagement, and working on IASFAA's communication processes, among other things!

The committee will continue to meet throughout the year to finalize a plan that will be presented at the spring IASFAA conference.

If you have any thoughts to share about what IASFAA's goals should include, please email them to **kelsey-foss@uiowa.edu**, we would love to hear any and all thoughts!





Save the Date: Upcoming Virtual PD Chats!

Submitted by: Bella Baldassano, Professional Development Chair

The Human Side of Financial Aid — **Wednesday, December 9 | 3 p.m.**

Behind every application and award is a student with a unique story. We'll share ideas and best practices for handling challenging interactions, fostering belonging for all students, and delivering customer service that helps students feel seen, heard, and supported.

Let's Talk Advocacy — **Wednesday, January 27 | 3 p.m.**

Advocacy isn't just for association leaders or elected officials. Whether you're sharing student stories, engaging with policymakers, or championing change within your institution, every financial aid professional has a role to play. Join this discussion to explore ways to advocate and learn how your voice can help shape the future.

Iowa Showed Up. And MASFAA Felt It.

99 Iowans. 327 registrants. Four days of learning, leadership, and a whole lot of teamwork.

When the Midwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (MASFAA) gathered in Cedar Rapids, October 18–21, Iowa's financial aid community did more than welcome its regional colleagues. It helped power the experience.

The conference theme was *Where We Gather, Greatness Happens*. Iowa helped bring those words to life.

Iowa by the Numbers

- **99 Iowans** represented institutions and organizations across the state.
- **At least 26 educational sessions** featured Iowa presenters, sharing expertise on topics ranging from federal loan changes and data analytics to student communications and leadership.
- **130+ attendees** participated in the inaugural Capstone Learning Labs, with Iowa colleagues contributing to all three.

Why it matters: Iowa's impact reached every corner of the conference, from the educational program to the people making everything happen behind the scenes.

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It Took a Village. Iowa Brought One.

Months of planning became four memorable days thanks to the creativity, flexibility, and dedication of the Program and Local Arrangements Committees. Volunteers handled everything from session development and registration to entertainment, decorations, fundraising, audiovisual support, and countless last-minute adjustments. **And a special shoutout to the hotel liaisons and AV crew**! Those upstairs breakout rooms provided plenty of unexpected challenges. The team's patience and quick problem-solving kept the conference moving.

Iowa colleagues also served in key leadership roles: **Renae Armentrout** (*MASFAA Treasurer*), **Jess Graham** (*State Delegate*), **Vanessa Wiest** (*Program Chair*), **Sarah Freestone** (*Local Arrangements Chair*), and **Chad Olson** (*Site Selection Co-Chair*).

Iowa Expertise on Display

From seasoned professionals to emerging leaders and student presenters, Iowa brought valuable perspectives to the educational program.

A round of applause for Iowa's presenters and panelists:
Sarah Alberts, Matt Anson, Taylor Beyal, Alice Bunjer, Tony Carrillo, Isaac Ehlers, Matt Falduto, Jacob Fetterer, Kelsey Foss, Sarah Freestone, Kristi Fuller, Heather Gaumer, Jess Graham, Tammy Hansen, Julie Hostager, Kylee Klommhaus, Tristan Lynn, Rachel Moser, Chad Olson, Lacey Patterson, Jeff Pierpont, Allie Pitz, Dr. Kate Ralston, Chris Roling, Jacob Severn, Abbie Steinberg, Vanessa Wiest, and Ryan Zantingh.

Iowa Leaders Recognized

Three Iowa colleagues received special recognition for their contributions to MASFAA. Their recognition reflects the leadership and commitment Iowa professionals contribute to the regional financial aid community throughout the year.



Jess Graham and **Sarah Freestone** were honored for their outstanding service on the MASFAA Summer Institute & Leadership Symposium Committee, awarded with the *Committee of the Year award.*



Vanessa Wiest received both the MASFAA *State Leadership Award* for Iowa and the MASFAA *President's Award.*

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The Biggest Takeaway? People Make It Happen.

Conferences are often remembered for their sessions, speakers, and celebrations. But behind every great experience are people willing to give their time, share their knowledge, solve problems, and support one another.





To every Iowa colleague who planned, presented, volunteered, attended, or stepped in when something needed to get done: **thank you**.

The conference lasted four days. The connections, knowledge, and impact will last far longer. Iowa showed up. And it showed what is possible when we gather.

Save the Date: 2027 IASFAA Conference

Submitted by: Sara Sroka, Program Chair



Fact: You're Going to Want to Attend This Conference.

Bears. Beets. Financial Aid! Get ready for a conference that's sure to be more exciting than a meeting in the Dunder Mifflin conference room!

Join us April 14–16, 2027, at Bien Venu in Cedar Falls, Iowa, for our Spring 2027 Conference, featuring this year's theme: “The (Financial Aid) Office.”

We're excited to welcome special guest Karen McCarthy from NASFAA! Whether you're more of a Michael Scott, Jim Halpert, Pam Beasley, Dwight Schrute, or Angela Martin, there's a place for you at the table.

As Michael Scott would say, “You miss 100% of the shots you don't take” (Wayne Gretzky). So don't miss your chance to join us!

Early bird registration opens in early January. Stay tuned for details!

More of a behind-the-scenes insight:

Program Committee began planning in August! Currently working on finalizing sessions and schedule so there’s something for everyone. Multiple workalike groups (not sure how to say that) such as software groups, position groups (directors/loan processers/counselors), and sector (private, regent, community colleges). I think the biggest thing is probably that NASFAA will be there! Wednesday only so Karen will be doing 2 general sessions in one day: One Big Beautiful Bill Act and Inside the Beltway. MASFAA will be there as well. State update on Friday. We will also have a great keynote speaker on Thursday – Robert Smith, Executive Director of **UNI-CUE** on why relationships matter.

Coming Soon: IASFAA Conference Scholarships!

Want to attend the **2027 IASFAA Spring Conference**? IASFAA will award **four conference scholarships** to help members participate in this valuable professional development opportunity!

Mark Your Calendar:

- **Application Deadline**: January 8, 2027
- **Recipients Notified**: January 29, 2027
- **Conference**: April 14-16, 2027, in Cedar Falls, Iowa

Applications aren't open just yet! Watch for additional details and a link to apply in an upcoming IASFAA communication.

IASFAA Members Bring Financial Aid to the Leadership Table at the Way Up Conference!

Financial aid is more than awarding dollars. It's a strategic part of student and institutional success. That was the message four IASFAA colleagues brought to **The Way Up Leadership Conference**, held November 5–6 in Coralville.

During the panel discussion, ***Financial Aid as a Strategic Partner: What Leaders Need to Know***, **Rachael Koehler** (*Iowa Valley Community College District*), **Sarah Freestone** (*Drake University*), **Jerry McKeen** (*Des Moines Area Community College*), and **Kelsey Foss** (*University of Iowa*) shared how financial aid intersects with enrollment, student success, institutional compliance, and campus-wide decision-making.

Why it matters: Financial aid decisions don't happen in isolation. Strong partnerships across campus help institutions navigate complex regulations, support students, and achieve institutional goals.

A special thank-you to these IASFAA members for stepping up, sharing their expertise, and ensuring financial aid has a voice in conversations shaping the future of higher education! Financial aid belongs at the leadership table, and Iowa professionals are helping make that happen.



Ways to Manage Stress and Emotions During the Holidays

Submitted by: Josh Rinderknecht, the Wellbeing & Connections Chair

The holidays can bring a mix of emotions and challenges. Remember, you can enjoy the day and make meaningful memories without sacrificing your mental health.

- **Identify Triggers and Plan Ahead**. Recognize situations or conversations that may cause stress. Have a plan in place, and don't hesitate to step away if conversations become heated.
- **Set Healthy Boundaries**. Decide how long you plan to stay, which conversations you are comfortable having, and which traditions you do or do not want to participate in.
- **Practice Emotional Awareness**. Acknowledge your feelings and recognize when emotions begin to rise. Try to find common ground when possible, or consider revisiting difficult conversations at another time.
- **Use Mindful Coping Strategies**. Take breaks, practice deep breathing or grounding exercises, and identify a quiet place where you can decompress. This could be a quiet corner or taking a short walk.
- **Prioritize Your Mental Health**. If you are missing loved ones, allow yourself to acknowledge and process those feelings. At the same time, make room for positive experiences and moments of joy.

Remember: Your mental health matters during the holidays. Give yourself permission to set boundaries, take breaks, and enjoy the moments that bring you happiness.

Meet One of our Silver Sponsors:

Sallie



Partner with IASFAA! 2026-27 Sponsorship Opportunities

Connect with Iowa's financial aid community while supporting professional development and educational opportunities across the state!

IASFAA offers several sponsorship options to fit your organization's goals and budget:

- **Gold Sponsor | $1,500**: Includes two complimentary conference registrations, preferred exhibit space, and year-round promotional opportunities.
- **Silver Sponsor | $1,000**: Includes one complimentary conference registration, exhibit space, and promotional opportunities.
- **Conference Exhibitor | $500**: Connect directly with financial aid professionals at the 2027 Spring Conference.
- **À La Carte Opportunities | Starting at $50**: Additional ways to support IASFAA events and initiatives.

Whether you're a longtime partner or considering sponsorship for the first time, we'd love to have you join us!

Explore the opportunities and become a 2026-27 IASFAA sponsor today!



Student Success Story of the Year Award: Start Thinking About Your Nominee!

Financial aid changes lives, and **we want to celebrate those stories!**

The **IASFAA Student Success Story of the Year Award** recognizes a student whose educational journey demonstrates the impact of financial aid in achieving their postsecondary goals.

Who is eligible?

Nominees must:

- Be in their final year of study or have recently earned a degree or certificate from a Title IV-eligible institution.
- Have received need-based financial assistance and Title IV federal student aid.
- Have a story that highlights how financial aid supported their educational success.

It's not about finding the most successful student. It's about recognizing a story that reflects the opportunities financial aid creates for students every day.

The selected recipient will be recognized at the 2027 IASFAA Spring Conference in April.

Start thinking about your nominee now! Award details and nomination materials will be shared with members beginning in January.

Get to Know Your Exhibitor Relations Committee!







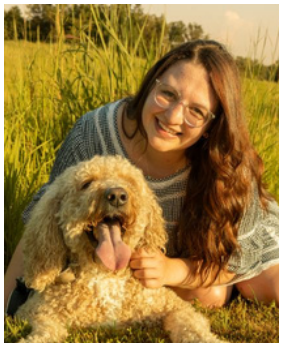
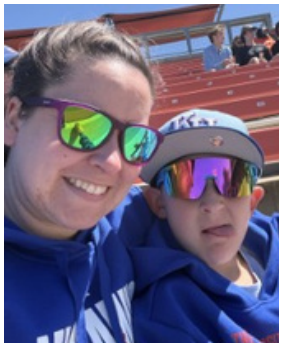
Chair & Co-Chair
Jen Sassman, *Wartburg College*
Shari Yungbluth, *Buena Vista University*

Committee Members
Sultan Karim, *Kirkwood Community College*
Katie Mueller, *RevlTech*
Isaac Ehlers, *Iowa State University*

Season of Gratitude: How do our exhibitors and business partners contribute to the IASFAA experience, and what makes these relationships valuable?

IASFAA runs on its members and volunteers, and our exhibitors are both. Sure, their products help us serve students, but their impact goes far beyond the exhibit hall. Their sponsorships help keep conference costs down. They raise their hands to serve on committees and generously share their expertise. Most of all, they become friends. The bonds formed at a booth or a committee meeting last well beyond the conference. **In IASFAA, an exhibitor is never just a vendor; they're one of us.**

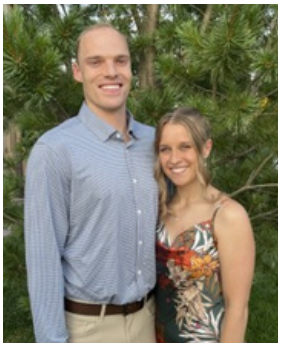
Get to Know Your Professional Development Committee!

Chair & Co-Chair
Bella Baldassano, *Kirkwood Community College*
Megan Nelson, *Palmer College of Chiropractic*

Committee Members
Matt Falduto, *Kirkwood Community College*
Sarah Freestone, *Drake University*
Emma Johnson, *Simpson College*
Tristan Lynn, *Iowa Department of Education*
Sara Sroka, *University of Dubuque*





Member News!

- **Buena Vista University** welcomed **Marlene White** to their team in August. She is serving as a part-time financial aid clerk. Marlene graduated from BVU in May of 2026 with degrees in political science and criminology/criminal justice. She had previously served as a work study in their office for 2 summers.
- We are pleased to welcome **Kelly Carrell** to **Kirkwood** as our newest Financial Aid Program Manager! Kelly comes to us from the University of Iowa, where she worked in the Financial Aid Office for 26 years. "I'm excited to have joined a team of dedicated professionals who make it clear every single day that students are our number one priority," Kelly said. "You know, I was helped by a financial aid professional when I was a community college student many years ago. And now I get to be that person. What a serendipitous way to wrap up my career!"



- The **University of Iowa** has recently welcomed **Ben Heiberger** as a Financial Aid Advisor. Born and raised in Epworth, Iowa, Ben is an alumnus of the University of Iowa, having received his B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Human Relations. During his time as a Hawkeye, Ben gained foundational Higher Education knowledge through his work in Iowa's Office of Admissions, where he served as a Customer Service Student Representative for 2.5 years. This experience, along with his ties to both the campus and state, drew him to his new role at the university's Office of Student Financial Aid. He is beyond excited to be joining the team!







Congrats to Kelsey and Travis Foss! They were married on September 27 in Marion, Iowa.