

NASFAA's "Off the Cuff" Podcast – Episode 315 Transcript

OTC From the Field: A Conversation with ED's 2025-26 FAFSA Executive Advisor Jeremy Singer

Beth Maglione:

Hello, and welcome to another episode of NASPA's Off the Cuff. I am Beth Maglione, NASFAA's Interim CEO and President.

Karen McCarthy:

I'm Karen McCarthy from NASFAA's policy team.

Beth Maglione:

And I'm really excited to welcome our special guest here today, Jeremy Singer. Jeremy is the President of the College Board, which oversees advanced placement, SAT, and all related instructional and assessment programs, as well as many other things including finance, technology, operations, risk management, legal, all the good stuff. And most importantly, Jeremy has extensive leadership experience in the not-for-profit area and in for-profit education organizations. But you may know him from a recent temporary gig that he had where he joined the Department of Education in a key position as FAFSA executive advisor, helping FSA to oversee and improve the rollout of the '25/'26 FAFSA.

Jeremy, thank you for being here.

Jeremy Singer:

Well, thank you for having me. It's good to be on Off the Cuff. Before we jump in, I should make it clear that my last day with the government and with FAFSA was December 6th. I also, while as you note I'm president of College Board, I'm not speaking in capacity of that nor representing the Department of Education or the administration. But with that said, I'm ready to get rolling.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you. All right. Well, we usually keep it pretty cool here, pretty low-key, so feel free to jump in with any thoughts or questions you have outside, but we'll kick it off with a few questions for you. Specifically about this role, this is a pretty unique short-term position to take on. Could you talk a little more about how you got involved in your role with FSA?

Jeremy Singer:

Sure. So I got a call through the administration in May, and I think based on my background within education technology and my experience leading large-scale software launches, there was some interest. They shared that they wanted some external leadership similar to the model I think that they used to support Healthcare.gov when it first launched. And I'll be honest, my first reaction was I was not interested. My job-

Karen McCarthy:

Why not? [inaudible 00:02:32]-

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, right, surprise. To jump into the fire. But no, my job at College Board is fairly demanding and it was hard to think of disappearing from that role for six months. In addition, just personally, my 23-year-old daughter had just graduated with her master's in social work and was coming from St. Louis to move into my apartment for Brooklyn for some time before she goes on her own. And I really didn't want to spend those six months with her around in an apartment in DC. So I had some initial resistance, but then as I started to discuss the ask with College Board CEO, David Coleman, and then our board and many of our members, it became pretty clear that I needed to do this.

FAFSA, you all know better than anyone, but is such a critical tool. It helps make education more affordable for millions of students. I think we all believe and know it's a key to upward mobility. And then from College Board's perspective, our mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. And the biggest challenge these students had last year was their ability to complete the FAFSA and get accurate sense of aid. Similarly, like NASFAA, College Board is a membership organization, and our biggest challenge for our higher ed members, just like your members, which are often the same, was the FAFSA. So anything that I could do to help the FAFSA experience improve was 100% aligned with College Board's mission. And so once I put that, it was a no-brainer that I had to.

Beth Maglione:

Well, we're grateful for your public service. And I have more questions on this topic. You obviously know the profile, which is used by 400 or so colleges to award institutional aid, but this was your first time jumping into government work, is that correct?

Jeremy Singer:

Well, yeah.

Beth Maglione:

Which has got to be a whole different vibe. What were some of the surprising challenges that you learned as you first jumped in the deep end on FAFSA?

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, I'll say as an aside, one of the funny things was when I was talking to the Secretary and to the administration about the role, they liked my experience in software, they liked the fact that I knew the space. They were very skeptical or questioning, I guess, of my lack of government experience. And I tried to say, "Well, I've worked in nonprofits, I've waited in the line at DMV, does that count?" And they were like, "No." And they were right, by the way. One of the hardest parts of the job was navigating. I was lucky that there were people like the acting COO Denise Carter and others who were unbelievably experienced in navigating government, because I was completely challenged from that angle.

But more broadly I'll say, in my career I've been involved with a lot of very complex software projects, and these are by definition hard to pull off, even in the best run private sector companies, even in the best circumstances. And then you layer on the complexities of getting things done in the government and the challenges go up exponentially. Everybody I met on this project, whether it was FSA staff that we worked with, staff from the Department of Ed, White House staff, educational policy staff from the Hill, and I think you've seen this too, to the person they were trying to do the right things for students and families, they wanted to expand access to federal aid. But thanks to the inherent nature of bureaucracy, this path was made quite challenging.

So to your question, one of the things that was the biggest surprise that while I knew it was going to be hard to produce good software in government, it was even more challenging than I had anticipated. And we can get into why in this discussion, but obviously that was a challenge.

Beth Maglione:

Again, thank you for your service. I am curious, so the FAFSA Simplification Act was signed into law some four years ago now, and I am curious if you could talk a little bit about when you stepped into this role, where did you find the process at that time? Why do you think it was maybe not as far down the road as it should have been? Do you have any insights there?

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, yeah. A bunch. I'd start with the Future Act and the FAFSA Simplification Act were clearly well intentioned. But I think what we find with most legislation is it's a theory that only gets tested when you put it in contact with reality. And as I said, big bang software projects like this, they fail at a high rate in the private sector even without these additional government constraints that I mentioned.

So here the legislation, I mean, this is not new, but the legislation dictated the scope, it dictated the timeline, and to some extent it dictated the investment. And so by default it in some ways defined the user experience and it made it next to impossible for the team to work with users and other stakeholders to simplify, make it easier to understand, to navigate. And it really required what is now not a popular software approach, more of a waterfall approach. It required that kind of approach versus really agile development where you're constantly learning and interacting with users as you go. Again, none of this is unusual and I don't think any of it was done with any ill intent in the legislation, but it really didn't set up the FSA team for success.

I'll say one other big challenge that I saw is, and again, I think this challenge is not unique to this project nor to government, but the most common major issue with new software development is you have clear improvements, but they can create unanticipated complications, and if you think of the world of two steps forward, one step back. So specific example here: one of the best things the legislation did is it vastly reduced the number of questions on the form, so really did that. And one of the ways it did it is instead of manually entering your tax information, it would get pulled from the IRS. We all know that. That's a big win, it's a clear improvement, but it also created some real challenges.

So the FAFSA system now had to integrate with the IRS system. And to do that responsibly, it required parents or contributors to have StudentAid.gov accounts for the first time. And you know these numbers well, but let's say there's 17 million students who annually complete the FAFSA, a reasonable percentage of those students have one or more contributors, so we were requiring many, many millions of individuals to create accounts for the first time.

Then to further complicate matters, these contributors had to be matched to students, to student accounts. And it was important to do it right for a myriad of reasons, including these accounts both contain PII, and so forth. So, a lot of these things were like requiring contributors to create accounts and matching these accounts with student accounts was the single biggest problem last year, in my view, for students and families trying to complete the form. It wasn't the only, but it was the biggest and it was about one third of the calls to the call center is the estimate I heard. So it's just interesting. That was a byproduct of something quite good. And again, that's normal, but we had to deal with that.

Beth Maglione:

I'm wondering if we can get into a little bit of the details of the '25/'26 process, and we'll talk about beta some too. I know Karen had some. Are you going to throw some?

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I know that you were hired, Jeremy, specifically to work on the '25/'26 FAFSA launch, but I know that you have said that there was some kind of holdover from '24/'25 that informed your ability to launch right into '25/'26. I'm wondering if you can share how one year bled into your year.

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, sure. So I will say was, probably I didn't do all my homework, but one of the largest surprises when myself and my team got there was a considerable amount of attention and effort going toward '24/'25 really as late as August. And it put us in a hole because ideally I wish we could have been focused primarily or almost exclusively on '25/'26. My experience, whether this was like when I've launched complex software of the scope of FAFSA, maybe not the scope but close to the scope, probably FAFSA is quite unique. Whether I was at McGraw-Hill or when I was at Kaplan or the last 11 years at College Board, a project of this complexity in the scope, I would've said, "Hey, we want to be code complete, meaning the development work for the most part, complete probably by June 1st for an October date." That would have been how I would've managed a project.

And then I would've spent the interim period between code complete and when we actually launch load testing, security testing, testing with select real users, all so that we would have a tremendous amount of confidence that we found and addressed any major issues before we opened it up to 17 million people. And obviously that was not tenable when we came and they were still working on some major features.

And I should say, part of this challenge was just the nature of the first year of rolling out new software. So they were working diligently but it created a bit of this hole. So if I can say, I think a couple of things we wanted to do quite differently when we joined, one was we saw a desperate need for a clear scope and schedule that was achievable. Second, we needed to dramatically expand and extend the type of testing, including introducing a beta period where we would test with real users on the real software. Third, we wanted to double our investment in tools and resources for all the orgs that support students and families. So those are your members, community-based organizations, high schools, districts, state agencies. It was clear that all these are so vital in the ecosystem of successfully supporting students and families through the process, so we needed to make sure to the extent we could that they were all fully equipped to lean in and support the process.

And then lastly, and this is something we'll probably get into, but we felt an important need to rebuild trust and transparency. Much of that had been during the hectic first year was challenged, and so we shorthand call this working in public.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, I think you've touched on all of the things I was going to ask you about. But so going back to the scope and schedule. I have heard you talk, and I don't recall if this was publicly before, so I'm asking you to repeat what you've said before about scope and schedule and the trade-offs that were involved with what is a reasonable schedule for the '25/'26 FAFSA? And so I wonder if you can talk about the trade-off conversation? Because I feel like our members in particular, the trade-offs are always there, but I feel like our members have always been in the dark about what they are. And so then they don't have the information so they don't really understand the big picture and where those trade-offs fit in.

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah. So look, scoping schedule is so fundamental. And to state the obvious, you often on software projects, those are a tension" the more scope, the worse the schedule; the faster the schedule, you have

to be harsher on scope, so there's that inherent trade-off. And we knew we had to reach consensus both internally and externally. That was actually quite difficult and at times it felt impossible. The core FSA team and the contractors, they felt disempowered and their feeling was a deadline or scope would be imposed upon them.

And in fact, when we started, as you know in June, there was a ton of pressure on October 1st, regardless of the feasibility. And your podcast has covered the Secretary gone before Congress in the spring and suggested the team would deliver on that date. It became clear very quickly that there were plans for, I don't know what the right terms are, but political theater grandstanding from the Hill. And even some well-intentioned external groups, possibly even including NASFAA, were demanding 10/01. And in June, there was a letter to the secretary saying, "Hey, you have to launch October 1st."

The challenge is that deadline wasn't based on any objective analysis or feasibility study. As I mentioned, even in August, the vast majority of software work being done was on '24/'25, not 2025/'26. And frankly what added further complication is there was pressure not to compromise, as you pointed out, on any scope, which made the timeline even worse. And that, by the way again is, I've struggled with that in my career, it's unwillingness to prioritize and make choices between. Scope is often a reason some big software projects fail and it's hard to make those calls.

So here I would argue my team was quite lucky and to be in a very unique position, we were these outsiders. We had temporary tenures, we could be quite candid, we could deliver messages that others may not be able to or didn't, and we could deliver messages that some people didn't want to hear. And we could make frankly unpopular choices. So we focused on a schedule that was not easy but we felt was achievable, and overall would still support the needs of students, of families of higher ed institutions.

And we also made hard choices on scope. And you guys know this well, but a key functionality that your members were appropriately clamoring for was batch corrections. It was not something popular to defer. But given what we knew about the software development capacity of one of the key vendors, we saw that if we prioritize batch and there'd be other features associated, we would have put the '25/'26 in a very similar situation to last year. And it may have been even a struggle to release before January 1st.

So here we worked to be quite transparent, I hope, to the community you can tell me if we were successful, so that your members and you all understood the predicament we were in. And I know we had multiple conversations. I felt you, by the way, represented your members quite well, you were appropriately critical, but you also listened to the impossible situation that we were in.

And the last thing I'll say is, ultimately, you, NK (phonetic) and others wrote a letter, I think it was in July, maybe August, whatever, that said, "Hey, the date is critical. But getting the functionality." And providing a date that was very unlikely to slip so you could plan around it, your members could plan around it, was also critically important. And so even if it wasn't the 1st but we had more confidence that software's going to work and it was a date that could be delivered on you understood that trade-off. And that frankly helped me get the buy-in internally to do the schedule that we ended up doing.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you for that summary. And it does reflect the conversations that we had. And I think probably I'd be remiss if I didn't offer congratulations and kudos to the administration who saw that this external tiger team, led by you with your crack technologist, was necessary to make this happen. And empowering you all to have those direct conversations with us, it certainly wasn't easy to suggest moving off of October 1 for '25/'26.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. I mean, the secretary had been out there saying, "We're working towards it." I mean, nobody wants to go back on what you previously said. Yeah, very challenging.

Jeremy Singer:

I'd also say it's interesting because it was also ... It was something tangible. So it was like the most tangible thing was October 1st. Like the software, obviously if there are bugs, it's obvious, but you could say, "I want software that has no issues, or I want this." But the date was the easiest thing for people to anchor on so it was very natural. And I agree, the Secretary, the staff at Ed, the White House had the courage to say, "Hey," they understood. Once it was clear we made the case, "This is quite next to impossible," they were receptive to a very different schedule

Beth Maglione:

Right. And you held true to what was discussed about December 1. In fact, things were rolled out even before Thanksgiving this year. And the fact that we knew each step of the process, you talked a little bit about communications and transparency, but just knowing every step of the beta process. Karen and I did laugh because some of it was so transparent, like we knew exactly-

Karen McCarthy:

I don't need that level of detail. I'm glad it's going well.

Jeremy Singer:

We erred on that side, for sure.

Beth Maglione:

But I thought it was a really good faith demonstration of, "Here is what we are doing to ... You agreed to a compromise when we said December 1st, and here's what we're doing to deliver on the promise." And I thought that that really helped increase the trust in the process.

Jeremy Singer:

No, I appreciate it. And I want to be clear: that process paid off. And we can talk more about it. But overall through beta we were able to identify and fix 80 bugs. And so before literally millions of users into December started to access the system, we had fixed a lot of things that these users didn't have to experience and only faced a small number.

So I worry, or I don't know if worry is the right word, but I think some people could say, "Were you sandbagging?" I hate sandbagging. "Could you have done October 1st?" And there was no way we could have hit October 1st with software that worked, the full functionality, which was critically important. We heard from your members in particular that Launching submissions only, which was floated, and doing the processing later could be a way. Maybe processing doesn't open until the new year.

And we heard loud and clear, "Don't do that." Launch submissions, processing corrections, albeit not batch corrections all together. And part of the reason you want to do this because you want to test the end-to-end system, and you can only do that once it's all released. So we sent staff to a lot of higher ed institutions that got actual ISIRs from actual students to watch them process them, to see if there were issues. So we did many things but with the IRS check the data, but we did a million things to make sure

that the ISIRs were correct. So there wasn't going to be a, "Whoops, we have to reprocess ISIRs, or students have to redo it." So I think your member feedback really drove that as well.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, I remember you explaining once the ... I understand from our member side why they wanted the full functionality all at once and not have the stage rollout. Or maybe I think it may have been Jeff who explained the if you have the four stages and you roll them out over a course of months, when you are now getting ready to roll out stage three, what if you discover something and now that would require you to go back and fix something that was in stage one? And now you can't do that because stage one is already live. And so from your side of things, rolling everything out at the same time makes sense because you can do all of that cross-checking and see how all the pieces fit together.

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, 100%. And I mean you don't have to go far. I mean last year once there was an issue discovered in submissions only when ISIRs started to get processed and they said, "Some of the tax information isn't getting transferred correctly." So that could have happened again and we wanted to ensure it didn't.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah. Can you talk about the testing? High level, high level, the testing overall, what you learned going through the testing process. And in particular what you think FSA, how FSA could incorporate some version of that process moving forward? It's probably not the full testing window that you had. But particularly with the timeline constrictions that they have. And now we do have the FAFSA Deadline Act that passed, so they will need to get next year's FAFSA out by October 1.

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, and I'll say there, I think they're in a much, much better position going into this year to hit that date, so I think there's some confidence, which is good news. And I hope it doesn't require any heroics.

I'll say, let me split this up. First of all, there's a lot of things beyond beta testing and Jeff Olson, who you all know, he's the CIO of College Board who basically came on this project in part to save my bacon. It was an act of generosity for me as much as anything else. And he's brilliant. And they introduced all sorts of automated testing. We partnered with IRS so they could test the actual end data back to the original source, which was important. That testing went from just manual user acceptance testing, which is important, but it's such a small piece of the testing puzzle, to he has a testing onion diagram he has. So anyway, so that was incredible and that helped us a ton and it helped us catch things before we launched software into production.

Beta was a specific type of testing and we had really high hopes. I think we expressed that to you about what beta could do. And in reality, it far exceeded any of our best expectations. But the core concept is: don't open to 17 million people. Open to a much smaller group and iteratively test with those students. And so we did. On October 1st we opened, and you know this well, it was to a couple of hundred students. It wasn't like some fake software, it was the actual software that every student is using today. So it was the same software, albeit some bug fixes that we've done since to make it stronger, but it was the same core software, it was on the same production environment.

So the students that participated in the first beta, they were doing the actual '25/'26 FAFSA, so they were completing the form, they didn't have to go back and redo what, it was done. It generated real ISIRs that went to colleges and as I said, were actually processed by colleges, so they didn't have to redo

any processing, and so it was to identify these issues. And as I said, we did, we found a lot of bugs that we were able to fix, and so that gave us a confidence.

In addition, what was so central to success was we partnered with 70 different organizations, including community-based organizations, a lot of your members from state agencies, high schools, districts, to support beta. And they helped us find participants, they helped us find bugs, they helped us fix bugs. They helped identify where we could produce more information either directly for the users or for these parties that were intermediaries to help get that done. And the best part of this was we built confidence both internally and externally that this year's form was working and was worth it, which was an important piece of it.

Last thing I'll say is to the last part of your question, which is: should beta be done? Beta should be done with any software release and they can still do beta, do October 1st, it's just likely the beta will be in September, it won't be as long. And there was a great document that some USDS staff did that really identifies what went well and beta wasn't perfect. So that gives a lot of good guidance to how to do this even better next year.

But I'd also say it shouldn't just be done annually before each fall. Netflix is not unique. Like many software companies, they use beta testing. And so whenever they have a new feature they want to roll out, regardless of the time of year, before they launch that feature to I'm sure hundreds of millions of users of Netflix at this point, they test that with some set of users. So you wouldn't even know. You may log into your Netflix account tonight and you're experiencing some beta tests, but it's in real life and they're learning from that. And only when they get confirmation and confidence that works for that small group, they then roll it out. I think FAFSA and FSA can do the same approach.

Karen McCarthy:

So you think that they could do that mid cycle as they are making enhancements and changes?

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, they're not ready yet. It requires some sophistication of the infrastructure. But imagine, I mean you can hack it, but imagine let's say batch corrections, they roll that out to 10 colleges, test it, they do it, we make sure that the batch process work, and then they say, "Okay, now it's available to all." And I think there are ideas that are no longer there, but I think there are ideas to test it. But there is a way where it is tested so seamlessly that you're not getting volunteers. You just open it to a certain number of participants, see what happens, worked well, no one anticipated consequences. Great. I'm now going to roll it out to everybody.

Beth Maglione:

Well, you mentioned batch, so I'll just ask: do you have any insight about what we can expect?

Jeremy Singer:

I no longer have any inside information. But I do know that when we left, my last day was December 6th, there was a very reasonable, manageable roadmap that included delivering batch corrections and other deferred scope in Q1. And I have confidence that the team is still on track to do that.

I'd say in addition, just the team is primed to address some other usability issues that's going to make it easier for students, for families, and for higher ed institutions. I think we saw when we visited your members that there was still some workarounds or extra steps they had to do that could be simplified.

And I know the team is excited to make it even easier and work simpler for higher ed as well as students and families.

Karen McCarthy:

I have one quick followup on that. I wonder, Jeremy, can you talk a little bit about the Q1 estimation? Because I know that I have heard some frustration from our members about why you can't be more specific. And the seasonal rollouts we also hear from FSA sometimes. And I know that you said that in the tech world nobody likes to be tied down to a particular date. I wonder if you can talk a little bit more about that?

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah. So what is generally accepted in the software world, if you can, you can't always do this, but it is really traditional software was what is called, I won't go into it too much, but it was waterfall. So you define upfront everything, all the requirements. Imagine you're building a skyscraper and you have to decide everything up front. Then a team starts to build the software. And once they're done building, then a separate team tests it. But the problem with that process is, one, it's very stage gated and it's not very efficient. But one of the tragic pieces of that is you can't really learn as you go, so it assumes at the start you know everything.

And so any developer worth their salt that I've worked in with the last at least 15 years would, unless they have to produce, you have to do this by this date, which sometimes you have to, it's much more efficient to work on the code, figure out the feature, solve it, and then launch it, and so they're very reticent to give an exact date I think. So that's a challenge, but we understand separately, we understood and I think the current FSA team understands the importance of your members want to plan around this, and so they don't want just the vague date.

So we were trying and they're trying to give some indication without giving an exact date because that could lead them to push forward software that's frankly not ready, or tie the team down to one path when there could be a better solution. So I know it's frustrating. I hope your members can understand that and can appreciate that, and feel like we're hitting a balance or they're hitting a balance when they do this. But there's good reason why software companies hate giving exact dates.

Beth Maglione:

So in our last few minutes here as we're keeping, I'd like to keep our eyes focused on the future, I know you haven't had, it's only been 12 days, so you haven't had that much decompression time. I imagine you've just been unpacking your suitcase and probably holiday gift shopping. But have you had a chance to reflect? And in those reflections, what sort of advice do you think you would give to, on one side, the new administration coming in, picking this ball up and running it down the field? And on the other hand, the stakeholders, students, colleges, CBOs?

Jeremy Singer:

Okay, let me take those in two parts.

Beth Maglione:

Big question, sorry.

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, yeah. I'd say for the new admin, I think it'd be a fairly simple ask. I think the software this year is in such a better place than it was a year ago. And with that said, there are still ways to make it stronger. I mean, there's some missing functionality like batch corrections, but there's also just usability improvements that they can do. So I'd ask the next admin to provide the FSA team with the room and the resources to do the work. I think that's the biggest challenge and I think if they do that it will succeed.

I am bullish on that because I think FAFSA is one of the rare bipartisan topics out there. It was a large driver of the legislature. The original acts was Lamar Alexander. Students and families from both parties get federal aid and fill out the FAFSA. So I'm hopeful that politically it's advantageous for both parties to continue to support it, and then as long as FSA has the room and the resources I think they're going to continue toward a really great path.

For stakeholders, including all of you, and you've heard this before, but I appreciate you giving me the microphone, I have really two asks. So the first is keep the pressure on the FSA team and the new administration to continue to improve the software. Again, it is much better than it was last year, but it can still be improved. And students and families, as well as higher institutions, deserve something truly great. What I learned in government, one of the many things was there is an arc of software and government that FAFSA may be a more extreme example, but it follows, which is: year one doesn't go as well as anyone hoped. Year two, it goes better but it's still not great. But people have so much PTSD from year one that they get very conservative and they settle for whatever it is. And I don't think we should settle because of students. So keep the pressure on. I will keep it from when I return to College Board and we'll keep pressure.

That second ask, and this may frustrate a little, but is: while you apply pressure, be thoughtful of the impact and try to anticipate any unintended consequences. I'm going to give you an example. When I joined, there was a lot of pressure, as I mentioned, to hit October 1st regardless of the readiness. And it could have led to releasing partial bug-ridden software that would've been a nightmare for students and families, and by extension higher ed and your members. So, the letter then you sent with NK and others in July where you didn't back off the importance of the earlier, the better, and October 1 is optimal. But you also then were more nuanced and emphasized the criticality of announcing a date that could be met with software that worked. That helped facilitate a schedule that benefited students, families, and again, your members.

And I'll also say, and we could debate this, I don't know if it's safe to say, but I'll go out on a limb. But I think while colleges weren't ecstatic with November 22nd launch this year, that was the first day everyone had access to the software. I think from what I've heard is this year's schedule was far closer to a normal year than last year. And from my conversations with higher ed, for the most part, they were able and are able to determine the aid packages roughly in the same cadence as normal. Again, I'm not saying October 1st wouldn't be better, and I'm not saying they shouldn't go to October 1st, which they will, but I think all that could have got lost if it was just October 1st, slam your fist down and just stayed there.

Beth Maglione:

Yeah, that flexibility has to be retained, I think. And no question '24/'25, I mean NASFAA's CEO stood before Congress and gave a failing grade to that process. I don't think we would give a failing grade to '25/'26, but it wouldn't be an A-plus. So to your point, I think we should expect A-plus technology when it's this critical, right?

Jeremy Singer:

100%.

Beth Maglione:

So we will continue to beat the drum, and our members will continue to beat the drum as we move forward. Speaking of those heady days of congressional hearings and whatnot, I think it's fair to say that the working relationship between FSA and our members was damaged to some degree during that time period. And I know that does predate your tenure at FSA. But to the issue of trust, how important was it to work to restore trust? And how do we go about continuing that in the future as we work with federal partners?

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah, I think it's critically important, and I can't overstate it. Particularly in a project where it's higher ed institutions, community-based organizations, high schools play such a crucial role in the success. No one party, even the power of the government can do it alone. And so the lack of trust was even more detrimental in most areas.

I think my sense is that it wasn't us that should get ... We should get a little credit, but it wasn't primarily my team while we were [inaudible 00:41:45] working in public and we worked hard. Part of the challenge last year was the schedule and scope. There was so much churn. And again, this is often true with the first year of a software project, a complex software project, is there was no intention to mislead or hide information but they really didn't know certain dates, or they didn't know that when they launched X, there would be these bugs and it'd have to do Y later. Obviously if they knew they wouldn't have done it.

And so I watched a dynamic that emerged, which was they were unable to communicate certain things that they didn't know. And I don't think there's any bad actors here. I think then the community got frustrated because dates slipped, there were bugs, they didn't feel they were brought in, and so then they became critical. That then in turn, the people that were working incredibly hard and were trying to get this right felt like they were being unfairly criticized, and you can debate that. So they were like it made it more antagonistic, and that sort of spiral was happening. So we come into that and we want to really change that work out.

And I think it is exacerbated in these very polarized political times where anything you share can be sort of weaponized if someone wants to. Our approach in working with the department and FSA was to demonstrate by sharing more information and by working in public, we would earn trust of partners. And these partners would be responsible with information they shared. It's not perfect, but I do think that worked. And I think, I hope you can attest that we were able to share more information in the last six months, and I can attest that anything we shared you were quite responsible with.

So I guess that leaves me hopeful that we learned some lessons and we'll see that trend continue. And I think, again, it's so critical to the success of FAFSA because we need your involvement, you're an incredible source. And not just NASFAA in your members, but the K-12 space, the CBOs, and all of that.

Beth Maglione:

Thank you for that insight. And before we wrap, if you would indulge me. I mean, obviously the work of your team, the work of the entire FSA staff to get '25/'26 out the door was important and impactful work, but there had to have been moments of levity and funny things that you experienced or heard about. I'm just curious if you have any great stories you could share with us?

Jeremy Singer:

Some of it's depressing. It's like a dark humor. I'll stay away from that. I'll say one of the funny things. So again, to further fanboy my appreciation for Jeff Olson, there is a team within FSA that does the user accepting testing and it is a slog. It is a lot of work testing all these test cases manually. And they had a month to do what they would have preferred to do in six weeks or two months, so it's going to be quite demanding.

And so we created space for them to do it. And Jeff had this insight of he loves coffee, and so he brought in his espresso maker and he built a whole menu of every possible order. And so, three times a day they would go to this team that was working their butts off and they would, next to their name check, "I want this type of latte with oat milk and double this." And then he would literally with our team, make the drinks and deliver them.

And I think in reality when we signed up for that, we were hoping it would be a little bit, it took a lot of work. "Who's going to go pick up the oat milk today?" And to be clear, Jeff and Megan McGuire did most of the work, but it was an ongoing thing.

The other funny piece of this was we were in the FSA, we were at the FSA building on 1st Street and there's not many people there anymore because of COVID, but there are eight really nice security people and you have to go, it's like going into Fort Knox to get in the building.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, been there.

Jeremy Singer:

And so he decided, Jeff in his just goodness, he's like, "We should make drinks for the security." So suddenly he was making drinks for all the people that do all that. Which by the way, we joke, if we ever wanted to sneak Lee Harvey Oswald into the building, the security would be like, "Go ahead," they were such fans of Jeff after making drinks for a month for them. But that was one of the more fun pieces.

Karen McCarthy:

Those security people at 1st Street, they are very nice.

Jeremy Singer:

They're great. They really are great.

Karen McCarthy:

That is a good story. "Who's going to get the oat milk?"

Jeremy Singer:

It was a whole system. We operationalized it, so we're proud of it.

Beth Maglione:

You've got to open your whole toolkit and coffee's right at the top of the professional toolkit, right?

Jeremy Singer:

I joke, but it's like Jeff really sees these small gestures that can mean a lot to people. And when we started, just to put it to a serious note, there was a lot of skepticism by the team, the vendors, the whole

FSA staff. And I think rightfully there was skepticism because they'd seen other people jump in and they're like, "Who are you guys? You're coming in for six months."

Karen McCarthy:

"You don't know what you're doing."

Jeremy Singer:

Yeah. "Why should I trust you? You're not here for the longterm." So I told them up front, I said, "That's valid, but give us a chance." And what Jeff saw was these little ways to earn their trust. He did fun stuff, like one of the big challenges we faced was there was these four vendors in the FSA team, so quickly we convened them all and he would refer to them as the Five Families, like mafia families. And he would constantly say, he would say, "Country over company," like, "Hey, we got to work together." Because one of the biggest challenges were these vendors, and this is more the way government works, I'm not trying to throw shade on the vendors, but they had to work in an integrated fashion and they're just not set up, they're not on the same platforms, all these things. And so by him continually stressing country over company, people got through with this sort of, "It's real." And I think it was amazing to watch him build that, a real team from five disparate groups and five disparate groups that were incredibly skeptical of us when we started.

Beth Maglione:

Well, Jeremy, to you and Jeff and everybody who took time out of their regularly scheduled professional programming to spend six months helping America's college students and schools get through this process, we're grateful. So thank you for the time, and thank you for the time today.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah.

Jeremy Singer:

My pleasure.

Karen McCarthy:

Yeah, this was great.

Jeremy Singer:

My pleasure. I should say, I really do, one of the best parts of the six months was working with both of you and NASFAA and the members, like mission-oriented people, and fun being in a foxhole with all of you. I hope we don't have to do it again. But I do believe 100% that without the engagement of both of you, your members and many others, this wouldn't have turned out so well this fall. So thank you.

Beth Maglione:

All right, thank you for tuning into another episode of Off the Cuff. And be sure to listen to us in the future on your favorite podcast platform of choice. We will see you in 2025. Bye.