

Report to the NeASFAA
Ad Hoc Committee on Training
March 24, 2021

The NEASFAA Board of Directors, under the direction of President Renee Besse, convened a task force in the spring of 2020 to revisit a primary aspect of the organization's mission: ". . .to promote the professional preparation, effectiveness and mutual support of persons involved in student financial aid administration." Within its statement of purpose, NeASFAA exists to "provide training for newly appointed aid officers and develop professionalism among aid officers in Nebraska".

A significant portion of the membership dues NeASFAA receives are dedicated towards training and professional development. The creation of this task force provides an opportunity to reflect on current activities and consider how, over the next three years, the association leaders might consider changing training and professional development to better meet the needs of the membership.

It should be noted that the task force was established before COVID-19 erupted. The task force conducted a survey of members in the summer of 2020 during the pandemic. These circumstances are reflected in both the feedback the task force received from members and the recommendations we are providing to the Board.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Institutions of higher education have been impacted by the global pandemic in multiple ways. Some of those ramifications are yet unknown. Therefore, NeASFAA should avoid any significant changes to its training and professional development programs over the course of the 2021-2022 year.
2. Quality Matters. The quality of training/professional development provided by the Association is the most important factor to members.
3. Distance Learning is Acceptable. Members have experienced more distance delivered training and they now see advantages to it.
4. The current calendar works. Fall training that is typically a drive-in, drive-out program along with the tradition two-to-three -day spring conference is still supported.

Summary of Project:

The task force determined during our first meeting that a survey would provide a good starting point for this project. A consensus was reached that the survey needed to wait however until the summer when the pressure to administer the CARES Act and some of the disruptions related to the pandemic were reduced. The task force developed a Qualtrics survey of members (Attachment I) which was sent via email to members in late July. Two-hundred and five individual surveys were sent. Responses were received from 60 members. Survey responses were divided among three of the task force members by sector for a thorough review. We shared our analysis and found a fair amount of common ground. The primary themes reflected from the survey drive our recommendations.

Recommendations:

1. Many of the survey responses received are influenced by the current circumstances surrounding the pandemic. We do not know how our schools and members will emerge from this. Therefore, any significant changes may be best delayed until that is clearer for NeASFAA leadership. Specifically, there were indications from some that budgets were reduced for the current year. Whether funds for travel and training would be restored at the same level in the future is not clear at this point. Prior to launching training/professional development initiatives for Fall of 2021 and Spring of 2022, we recommend a focused survey on this question be disseminated again.
2. Respondents to our survey emphasized repeatedly, no matter who and how the information is provided, quality matters most. Therefore, NeASFAA leadership should prioritize the quality of the information when planning training and professional development programming. This was prioritized over cost. This was prioritized over the quality of the presenter. That may indicate our members are willing to participate in training even if the presenter is not a “superstar”. Additionally, in comments provided on the survey respondents indicated that “meaty” topics are attractive. There is a need to stay “on top” of changes in statutes and regulations. Nuts and bolts training topics should be prioritized when developing content.
3. Opportunities for training and professional development delivered using distance platforms are now perceived as acceptable, even popular. Post-COVID-19, this may need to be revisited. But the survey indicates that a significant number of members prioritize distance delivered training over in person. There were some generational differences reflected in the survey responses in this area. An area of investment the association may want to consider investigating are platforms for providing quality training via distance. While there could be significant cost there could also be significant return on the investment.
4. Support remains high for the current calendar: providing programming in the fall and a 2-3-day spring conference. However, respondents did indicate some erosion in the desire for or ability to attend a full two to three-day conference. There is significant interest in drive-in, drive-out same day training opportunities. This reinforces our recommendation to assess the readiness for our members to return to normal activities after the pandemic subsides. Specifically, the survey should determine if institutional budgets are reinstated at the level to support attendance at two to three conferences verses one day activities.

Summary:

When this project was proposed none of us had any idea how fundamentally everything was going to change for NeASFAA and all its members and their institutions. The professional development and recognition committee deserves congratulations for quickly pivoting over the past year to provide the spring conference via distance. This fall the NeASFAA Discussion Sessions along with the panel discussion on professional judgment and COVID 19 have provided excellent information to members in a socially distant manner. The NeASFAA Happy Hour events have given us the opportunity to network. Kudos to all who have worked on these efforts.

The strength of NeASFAA has always been the relationships we have developed as colleagues and friends over the years. That is rooted in the opportunities we have invested in to be together at conferences and training event. In a post-COVID world training and professional development that occurs in a conference location, away from our offices when our attention can be focused on the content and each other will be welcomed. But we should not discount what we learned over the past year about distance learning. Just as our students have had to adapt, so have we. We are grateful for the opportunity to assist the association with this important effort and look forward to helping advance the goals of the association in whatever way we can.

Paula Kohles, Director of Financial Aid, University of Nebraska Medical Center, NeASFAA Past President 2001-2002

Vicki Kucera, Director of Financial Aid, Central Community College, NeASFAA Past President 2002-2003

Mary Sommers, Director of Financial Aid, University of Nebraska Kearney, NeASFAA Past President 1999-2000, 2007-2008.

We are grateful for the assistance of the current sector representatives who assisted in the survey design and promoted its completion among its members:

Sheila Pourier, 4-year Public

Kimberly Vanosdall, 2-year Public

Susan Collins, Private Sector Rep

Jodi Vandenberg, Associate Sector

We are also thankful for Erinn Brown, chair of the Membership and Communication Committee who assisted in providing the contact information for the survey. Thanks also to Grace Magill, Communications Coordinator at UNK who managed the Qualtrics survey.