

Federal Student Aid Should Be Freedom, Not a Trap

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

When I was an undergrad, there was a particularly unpleasant student who lived next door to me one year. Callie (a pseudonym) didn't seem happy to be in college—she didn't seem happy with anyone. So when she wasn't nice to me, I knew it had nothing to do with me. But I did ask her roommate about it one day. "What's up with Callie?" I asked. "She's kind of hard to get along with." The other girl said, "Callie's got it hard. Her parents refuse to pay for college unless she majors in biology and fulfills all of her premed requirements."

Although I was firmly in the humanities, I knew what a burden that course load was. But the worst part was that Callie didn't have a choice. But part of me wondered how her parents could control her. What was their leverage? Why, I remember thinking to myself, couldn't she tell them to forget about it and take out student loans?

Today, I know more than I knew then: Student loans are their own kind of nightmare, burying many students in debt for decades. And for someone like Callie, whose parents, I knew, could afford to pay for our college out of pocket, student loans were not an option at all. I didn't know how much of a bind Callie was in because, like most students, I didn't understand how hard it is to declare independence from your parents under the rules of the Office of Federal Student Aid.

The Rules

If you are under the age of 24, not in the military and unmarried, undergraduate students have an extraordinarily difficult time getting financial aid—even if their parents are abusive.

Even if a student is and has been completely self-sufficient since turning 18 (or earlier), the [Office of Federal Student Aid of the Department of Education will not grant a dependency override](#). A parent's refusal to give the student money, or to file a FAFSA—those aren't enough. Even if the parents don't claim the student as a dependent, the student is still a dependent in the eyes of student aid. Only extremely dire circumstances, which must be dealt with locally at the student's school and reviewed by the local college financial aid administrator, might grant a student an override. I know—I've experienced it firsthand.

These include parental abuse, parental abandonment and incarceration or institutionalization of the parents—both parents.

These highly restrictive rules make escaping to college for students who live in abusive households extraordinarily difficult. For one student I know, the abusive parent used his ability to control financial aid as a way to control the geography of his child's college choice—and thereby keep his child close to home and under his thumb. The child was accepted to a school in another state, but the abusive parent refused to file the FAFSA as

a way to ensure that the child stayed nearby.

And abuse takes many forms, not only physical. It can be psychological, and coercive, like what Callie experienced. [One student, Seth Owen, ended up homeless after a year of "conversion therapy," a form of abuse that parents inflict on their gay children](#). He managed to graduate as his high school's valedictorian and was accepted into Georgetown University DC. Georgetown, however, presented him with a financial aid package far too low because it took into account his parents' income—as required by the Office of Federal Student Aid.

What You Can Do

You can advocate for your students right now. I've done it, and it was hard. Here's one story.

When I was a professor, I had a student, Mark (a pseudonym), who sat in the front of the class. One day, Mark came to class with a black eye. The next week, Mark had his arm in a cast. The next, he was on crutches, and he had a bruise across his jaw. Either Mark was a bull rider or someone was beating him up regularly.

After class, I asked Mark if I could speak to him. I said something like this: "I'm going to say some things. If I'm wrong, it's OK if you get mad at me, and I'll apologize. If I'm right, and you don't want me to ever mention it again, that's OK too—we'll forget this conversation ever happened. But if I'm right and you need help, I can help you."

And then I asked Mark if he was being abused. He paused for a minute, and then said he was. He said he needed help, but he didn't know how I could help him. The abusers were his parents, and they forced him to live at home.

All Mark wanted was to be a normal college kid: to live in the dorms, to eat in the dining hall, to make friends. To not be afraid. He'd been abused his whole life. He thought going to college would change all of that. He'd been wrong.

That very moment, I walked with him to our student aid office, and we were hit in the face with bureaucracy. Here's what I learned from working with Mark about what it takes to protect an abused student. The details may vary depending on your school because the individual director of each school may have different requirements—but the hurdle will always be high.

At my institution, the student is required to submit, *each year*, three sworn and notarized affidavits from persons who know the student well, attesting that the student is abused by the parent, that the abuse is ongoing and that the abuse puts the student in danger. The hurdle was so high—especially since most abuse victims tend to hide their abuse in shame.

As an attorney, I was able to explain to my student what these legal terms meant, and to advocate for my student on his behalf—to try to lessen the burden.

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boards who have little experience with shared governance and who want rapid change," Pasquerella says. "That is juxtaposed against faculty who are change-resistant and who fear the corporatization of higher education."

It goes without saying the most serious challenge is finances. Dealing with this as well as day-to-day complex issues on all college and university campuses leaves most presidents little time to be thought leaders. By creating a means for presidents to come together, the AAC&U not only enables an exchange of best practices, but allows them to bolster one another in the hard work of educating for democracy.

Pasquerella says colleges and universities can take an even greater public stance on issues that have a profound impact on society.

"Colleges and universities should play a leadership role in encouraging faculty, staff, administrators and students to exercise their voices in the most critical ethical, legal and social issues of the day," she says. "We need to create structures within the academy to reward that good work through the tenure and promotion process." ❏

Women on the Move, *continued from page 13*

- **Dr. Miriam Sherin** moves from associate dean for teacher education to associate provost for undergraduate education at Northwestern University IL.
- **Dr. Amy Smith** moves from dean of the School of Education for Capella University MN to senior director of Colorado State University Online.
- **Missy Pfohl Smith** becomes director of the Institute for Performing Arts at the University of Rochester NY.
- **Dr. Martha Spack** becomes dean of students at Arkansas State University.
- **Dr. Donna Spiegelman** becomes director of the School of Public Health's Center for Methods of Implementation and Prevention Science at Yale University CT.
- **Dr. Dawn Underwood** moves from assistant VP for research at Chapman University CA to assistant VP for research compliance at Oklahoma State University.
- **Katherine Knapp Watts** moves from VP for enrollment, financial aid, and communications to VP for strategic planning at Salem College NC.

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- **Crystal L. Wheeler** becomes chief people officer at Howard University Hospital DC.

- **Dr. Erika Wilkens** moves from special assistant for global engagement to the senior VP for academic operations to assistant provost and executive director of the study abroad program at Syracuse University NY.

- **Dr. Danisha Williams** moves from assistant dean of admission to director of admission at Fisk University TN.

- **Debra F. Williams** becomes appointed associate VP and chief human resources officer at Wayne State University MI.

- **Dr. Stephanie Woods** moves from associate dean of nursing on the Dallas campus of Texas Woman's University to dean of the Gayle Greve Hunt School of Nursing at the Texas Tech Health Science Center.

- **Dr. Janet Wormack** moves from senior VP for administrative and fiscal services at Montgomery College MD to vice chancellor of finance and administration and chief financial officer at Houston Community College TX. ❏

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Change Is Needed

These arcane rules meant to prevent students from ripping off the government are just an extension of the mistrust we, as a society—and academia, in particular—show toward young people. Student loans are already nearly impossible to discharge. Especially today, when we know so much more about how abuse works within families, giving students a pathway to free themselves from abusive homes, one that includes an education, should be a priority. We need a policy shift, a revisiting of the presumption that parents' income must be considered for undergraduates.

If this policy puts even one student's life in danger, is it worth it? If it makes even one student homeless and forces another into the hands of emotionally abusive parents, is it worth it? Of course not.

And not all abuse leaves bruises that a professor can spot in class. What about sexual abuse? I can't imagine forcing a student to sit in a meeting room and tell all about her father's sexual abuse to a room full of strangers in order to get financial aid and finally be able to live away from home. She shouldn't have to. It's inhumane to make this a requirement.

Moreover, students shouldn't have to rely on an English professor, who also happens to be a lawyer, as an advocate for them to receive financial aid.

The burden of proof for a dependency override sits on the shoulders of our most vulnerable students. It's time to lighten the load and make higher education accessible for these students too. ❏