



July 19, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

FOIA Public Liaison
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Management
Office of the Chief Privacy Officer
400 Maryland Ave, SW LBJ 2E320
Washington, DC 20202
EDFOIAManager@ed.gov

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Public Liaison:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations promulgated thereunder for the United States Department of Education (“ED” or “the Department”), 34 C.F.R. Part 5, the National Student Legal Defense Network (“Student Defense”) makes the following request for records relating to the Department’s use of nonprocurement debarments and suspensions under 2 C.F.R. Parts 180 and 3485.

Background

On March 28, 2012, the Department issued a final rule adopting the Office of Management and Budget’s guidance on implementing the government-wide common rule on nonprocurement debarment and suspension, 2 C.F.R. Part 180, with the same additions and clarifications that the Department had previously made to the rule. *See* 77 Fed. Reg. 18,671 (Mar. 28, 2012) (to be codified at 2 C.F.R. Part 3485). The Department, like other federal government agencies, “uses the nonprocurement debarment and suspension system to exclude from Federal programs persons who are not presently responsible.” 2 C.F.R. § 180.125(b). In the Higher Education Act (“HEA”) context, both debarment and suspension preclude a person or entity from further participation in Title IV HEA transactions. 2 C.F.R. § 3485.611.

Request

Student Defense hereby requests that the Department produce, from 2019-present, the following in the time and manner required under FOIA and the Department’s regulations:

1. All Notices of Proposed Debarments issued or provided to any individual or entity relating to, or arising out of, that individual’s or entity’s participation or involvement in Title IV, HEA programs, including any attachments or enclosures; *and*
2. All Notices of Proposed Suspensions issued or provided to any individual or entity relating to, or arising out of, that individual’s or entity’s participation or involvement in Title IV,

HEA programs, including any attachments or enclosures.

Student Defense does not object to the redaction from such records of any names or personally identifiable information of any individual, so long as that information does not already appear publicly in locations included, but not limited to, the System for Award Management (“SAM”) or a state or federal court docket.

FOIA presumes disclosure. Indeed, “[a]gencies bear the burden of justifying withholding of any records, as FOIA favors a ‘strong presumption in favor of disclosure.’” *AP v. FBI*, 256 F. Supp. 3d 82, 2017 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 161516 at *10 (D.D.C. Sept. 30, 2017) (quoting *Dep’t of State v. Ray*, 502 U.S. 164, 173 (1991)). Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, an agency is permitted to withhold materials only in one of two limited circumstances, *i.e.*, if disclosure would “harm an interest protected by an exemption” or is otherwise “prohibited by law.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A)(i). If ED takes the position that any portion of any requested record is exempt from disclosure, Student Defense requests that ED “demonstrate the validity of [each] exemption that [ED] asserts.” *People for the Am. Way v. U.S. Dep’t of Educ.*, 516 F. Supp. 2d 28, 34 (D.D.C. 2007). To satisfy this burden, ED may provide Student Defense with a Vaughn Index “which must adequately describe each withheld document, state which exemption the agency claims for each withheld document, and explain the exemption’s relevance.” *Id.* (citing *Johnson v. Exec. Office for U.S. Att’ys*, 310 F.3d 771, 774 (D.C. Cir. 2002)); *see also Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973). That index must provide, for each document withheld and each justification asserted, a relatively detailed justification specifically identifying the reasons why the exemption is relevant. *See generally King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987).

In addition to the records requested above, Student Defense also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used (if any), the locations and custodians searched, and any tracking sheets used. This includes any questionnaires, tracking sheets, emails, or certifications completed by, or sent to, ED or OIG personnel with respect to the processing of this request. This specifically includes communications or tracking mechanisms sent to, or kept by, individuals who are contacted in order to process this request.

Student Defense seeks all responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting ED’s search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages, transcripts, notes or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations, or discussions. Our request includes any attachment to these records. In addition, ED has a duty to construe a FOIA request liberally.

In conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, ED must use the most up-to-date technologies and tools available. Recent technology advances may render ED’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. Moreover, not only does this request require the agency to conduct a search,

but individual custodians must conduct their own searches in order to make sure that documents are appropriately collected.

To ensure that this request is properly construed and does not create any unnecessary burden on ED, Student Defense welcomes the opportunity to discuss this request at your earliest convenience, consistent with and without waiving the legal requirements for the timeframe for ED's response.

Please provide responsive material in electronic format, if possible. Please send any responsive material via email to robyn@defendstudents.org. We welcome any materials that can be provided on a rolling basis. Nevertheless, Student Defense fully intends to hold ED to the timeframe required by statute for a response to this request.

Request for Waiver of Fees

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(a), Student Defense requests a waiver of fees associated with the processing of this request because: (1) disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest; and (2) disclosure of the information is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.

Disclosure of Information is Likely to Contribute Significantly to Public Understanding of the Operations or Activities of the Government

1. The FOIA request specifically relates to the operations or activities of the government. This request seeks documents relating to the Department's use of the debarment and suspension procedures to limit further participation of individuals or entities known to have violated Title IV, HEA requirements. The Department's use of these procedures relates to its effective oversight of individuals or entities participating in Title IV HEA programs and, therefore, relates specifically to the operations or activities of the government.

2. The requested documents will contribute to an understanding of those specific operations or activities. This request seeks documents that will contribute to the understanding of the circumstances under which the Department issues a notice of proposed debarment or suspension in order to ensure individuals' or entities' compliance with Title IV of the HEA.

3. The disclosure will contribute to a greater understanding on the part of the public at large. Student Defense seeks this information to aid the public discourse surrounding issues related to the Department's effective oversight of federal student aid disbursed under Title IV of the HEA. Student Defense has the capacity to analyze any documents provided and disseminate its analysis to the public through its website and other sources.

4. Disclosure will "significantly" contribute to the public's understanding of government activities. As noted above, the subject of this request is a matter of public interest. This request seeks information that will allow Student Defense to more completely understand the instances under which the Department uses its debarment and suspension procedures to limit ongoing Title IV violations, beyond that information already available to the public. Moreover, Student Defense's analysis of this information will inform further public discourse and comment on

these issues, thereby significantly enhancing the public's understanding of the Department's oversight of institutions participating in Title IV programs under the HEA.

Disclosure of Information is Not in the Commercial Interest of Student Defense

This request is fundamentally non-commercial. Student Defense is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization. Student Defense's mission is to work, through a variety of means, to advance students' rights to educational opportunity and ensure that higher education provides a launching point for economic mobility. We also believe that transparency is critical to fully understanding the government's role in providing student protections and promoting opportunity. As noted above, Student Defense has the capacity to make the information it receives available to the public through reports, social media, press releases, litigation filings, and regulatory comments to government agencies. For these reasons, Student Defense qualifies for a fee waiver.

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Student Defense looks forward to working with you on this request. If you have any questions or concerns, or anticipate any problems in complying with this request, please contact me at robyn@defendstudents.org. If Student Defense's request for a fee waiver is not granted, and any fees will be in excess of \$25, please contact me immediately.

Sincerely,

/s/ Robyn K. Bitner
Robyn K. Bitner
Senior Counsel