

February 8, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Attention: FOIA Public Liaison  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Management  
Office of the Chief Privacy Officer  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW, LBJ 7W104  
Washington, DC 20202-4536  
[EDFOIAManager@ed.gov](mailto: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 of the U.S. Department of Education (“ED” or “Department”), 34 C.F.R. Part 5, the National Student Legal Defense Network (“Student Defense”) makes the following request for records.

**Background**

In the Higher Education Act (“HEA”), Congress made clear its intent that taxpayers not bear the costs when an institution collapses or fails to meet its obligations to students or the government. The HEA is replete with references to how the Department “may” require institutions to submit “financial guarantees” sufficient to satisfy certain of its liabilities, “shall” require institutions to be financially liable for certain failures associated with the Direct Loan program, and “shall” pursue claims against an institution of higher education (“IHE”) for losses associated with certain loan discharges. HEA § 454(a)(3), 20 U.S.C. § 1087d(a)(3); HEA § 498(e)(1)(A), 20 U.S.C. § 1099c(e)(1)(A); HEA § 437(c)(1), 20 U.S.C. § 1087(c)(1). Congress authorized, and at times even mandated, that the Department recover taxpayers’ financial losses from individuals who “exercise substantial control over [an] institution,” i.e., individuals who “directly or indirectly” control a “substantial ownership interest in the institution,” and individuals who are “member[s] of the board of directors, the chief executive officer, or other executive officer of the institution or of an entity that holds a substantial ownership interest in the institution” (collectively, the “Institutional Control Group”). *See* P.L. 102-325 § 498 (July 23, 1992) (adding HEA § 498(e)(1)(B), 20 U.S.C. § 1099c(e)(1)(B))

In establishing the student aid programs in Title IV of the Higher Education Act, and in committing to provide billions of dollars annually to institutions of higher education, Congress emphasized that owners and executives must be held personally accountable for financial losses that result from the acts of their institutions.

This Request seeks to understand the circumstances in which the Department has enforced personal liability for such financial losses.

### **Requested Records**

Student Defense requests that the Department produce the following records within twenty business days of the date of this request:

- Documents sufficient to show all communications with any outside party regarding the assumption or imposition (regardless of the means) of personal liability for losses arising out of an institution's participation in the Title IV programs.

The Department can construe this request as seeking records dated January 2018 to present.

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's regulations, Student Defense requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

Student Defense requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is "in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of operations or activities of the government."<sup>1</sup> The public has a significant interest in the methods the Department uses to ensure recovery of taxpayers' financial losses. Records with the potential to shed light on the circumstances in which the Department has enforced personal liability of owners and executives for their institutions' financial losses would contribute significantly to public understanding of the federal government and these processes. Student Defense has the capacity to analyze records and to use the sought records to inform public discourse regarding issues currently pending at the Department. Student Defense has the capacity to broadcast its analysis through the news, its website, and via social media—thus "significantly" contributing to the public understanding of issues present at the Department, including those raised by the Department's processes for handling FOIA requests.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>2</sup> Student Defense is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization.<sup>3</sup> Student Defense's mission is to work, through a variety of means, to advance students' rights to educational opportunity and to ensure that higher education provides a launching point for economic mobility. We also

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<sup>1</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>2</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>3</sup> See *About Us*, NATIONAL STUDENT LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK, <https://www.defendstudents.org/about>.

believe that transparency is critical to fully understanding the government's role in 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, in litigation filings, and regulatory comments to government agencies. For these reasons, Student Defense qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, Student Defense provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics.
- In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record” in its 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 and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions.
- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>4</sup> It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; Student Defense has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>5</sup>
- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-

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<sup>4</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>6</sup> and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.

- In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

## **Conclusion**

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to Student Defense, please do not hesitate to contact Student Defense to discuss this request. We welcome any opportunities to discuss this request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, Student Defense and the Department can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Please send any responsive material being sent by email to [info@defendstudents.org](mailto:info@defendstudents.org). If it will accelerate release of responsive records to Student Defense, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

Student Defense looks forward to working with the Department on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, or anticipate any problems in complying with this request please contact me at [isabel@defendstudents.org](mailto:isabel@defendstudents.org). Also, if Student Defense's request

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<sup>6</sup> Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2011/12/01/2011-31096/managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

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for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

/s/ Isabel Tessier

Isabel Tessier  
Paralegal  
National Student Legal Defense Network