

Findings from a Survey on Professional Judgment NASFAA

October 2023

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KEY FINDINGS

The severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families' ability to pay for college appear to be dwindling, with more than half of survey respondents indicating their year-to-year comparison of Professional Judgment (PJ) requests received remained about the same. It is notable, however, that among the one-third of respondents who indicated experiencing an increase in PJ requests, 59% indicated their belief that the increase was due to continuing impacts of the pandemic. That said, more than half indicated economic conditions other than the pandemic as the cause, and nearly half attributed the rise in PJ requests to increased publicity of the availability of PJ, so while the pandemic may still be a factor, it does not stand out as the primary reason families are seeking PJ adjustments.

This year NASFAA added questions about member reactions to a recent Department of Education Office of Inspector General audit of the University of Southern California's use of PJ. Few institutions (9%) reported having changed or considered changing PJ or unaccompanied and homeless youth determination policies in light of the audit findings, with 36% indicating they were not aware of the audit and 31% indicating plans to wait for a final determination before making decisions about changing their policies.

METHODOLOGY

On September 20, 2023, NASFAA sent out an electronic survey to 4,533 members. These members were designated as their institution's primary or secondary contact. This pool represented 2,717 unique institutions. NASFAA sent one survey reminder on September 25, 2023. When the survey closed on September 28, 2023, there were 370 respondents who answered at least one question at unique institutions. Fifteen (15) institutions received a response from two respondents, and during data cleaning and analysis the response of the Primary Contact (PCON) was kept, and the response for any Other Contact (OCON) was removed. The result was a 14% response rate among NASFAA member institutions.

NASFAA has previously surveyed its membership on PJ, beginning in 2020. For the past few years, NASFAA has presented the results as a comparison over time. This year, NASFAA's Policy Department restructured the survey questions to better meet the needs of our members in 2023, and a comparison over time is on longer possible.

OVERALL RESPONSES

PJ SURVEY QUESTIONS

How does the volume of PJ requests your office received for the 2022-23 award year prior to September 15, 2022 compare to the volume of PJ requests your office received for the 2023-24 award year prior to September 15, 2023?

Significantly higher (>50% higher)	7%
Somewhat higher (0-49% higher)	26%
About the same as anticipated	54%
Somewhat decreased (0-49% lower)	10%
Greatly decreased (> 50% lower)	1%
Don't know	3%
<i>n</i>	367

Why do you think the volume of PJ requests has increased? (Check all that apply)

Continuing impacts of COVID-19 pandemic	59%
Local economic conditions unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic	54%
Greater publicity about the availability of PJ due to FAFSA Simplification Act requirements	48%
FAFSA Simplification Act ban on institutional policy of denying all PJ requests	7%
Don't know	4%
Other, please specify below.	15%
<i>n</i>	117

Other open-ended comments:

<i>is less the pjs</i>
<i>Students are DEMANDING more free money</i>
<i>Family, one-time income, income changes, medical expenses, loss of income</i>
<i>This is actually a note about the Sept 15th item below- we are a non-standard term school, and start students monthly (and students are BBAY). Because of this, our appeals are received on a continuous basis and the Sept 15th deadline question does not apply.</i>
<i>Rise of inflation</i>
<i>Not being able to set a deadline for PJ requests.</i>
<i>Families' personal situations.</i>
<i>People are looking for more free money and have heard from others or the news about this option.</i>
<i>Current administration's fiscal policies are devastating American students and families and their ability to afford higher education</i>
<i>Loss of jobs/unemployment</i>
<i>Greater Outreach by our office and increased cost of higher education</i>
<i>More dependency override requests</i>
<i>We mention PJ's regularly in presentations on campus so Academic Advisors are aware and the staff in the Retention Office is aware.</i>
<i>Inflation</i>
<i>We always considered all PJs and never denied any, only if the students had no extenuating circumstances or no documentation.</i>
<i>Dependency Override</i>
<i>People are more willing to share job loss, and other need information.</i>
<i>increase in living expenses</i>

How does the volume of unaccompanied/homeless youth determination requests your office received for the 2022-23 award year prior to September 15, 2022 compare to the volume of PJ requests your office received for the 2023-24 award year prior to September 15, 2023?

Significantly higher (>50% higher)	6%
Somewhat higher (0-49% higher)	25%
About the same as anticipated	52%
Somewhat decreased (0-49% lower)	4%
Greatly decreased (> 50% lower)	3%
Don't know	10%
<i>n</i>	367

Approximately what percentage of PJ requests for the applicable award year does your office typically receive before September 15?

< 25%	26%
25%-49%	13%
50%-74%	25%
75%-100%	20%
Varies too much from year to year to fit ranges provided	9%
Don't know	7%
<i>n</i>	366

How do you anticipate the total number of PJ requests your office will receive for the 2023-24 award year will compare to the 2022-23 award year?

Anticipate PJ requests will greatly increase (increase of 50% or more)	10%
Anticipate PJ requests will increase somewhat (0 - 49% increase)	37%
Anticipate about the same number of PJ requests	42%
Anticipate PJ requests will decrease somewhat (0 - 49% decrease)	7%
Anticipate PJ requests will greatly decrease (decrease of 50% or more)	1%
Don't know	3%
<i>n</i>	367

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (ED) AUDIT REPORT FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SURVEY QUESTIONS

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the Department of Education (ED) recently released its [report](#) on an audit of the University of Southern California's use of PJ. Will their findings influence your institution's PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies?

I am not familiar with the report or its findings	36%
My institution is waiting on FSA's final determination before making any decisions about my institution's PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies	31%
My institution is considering changing our PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies	4%
My institution has already changed our PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies	5%
Don't know	24%
<i>n</i>	338

In what ways is your institution considering changing or has already changed its PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies as a result of the OIG report? (Select all that apply)

Considering or has already limited the types of documentation it will accept to support PJ other than dependency override requests	56%
Considering or has already limited the types of documentation it will accept to support dependency override requests	44%
Considering or has already limited the types of documentation it will accept to support a determination of unaccompanied or homeless youth	52%
Considering or has already limited the types of circumstances it considers special circumstances for PJ other than dependency override purposes	44%
Considering or has already limited the types of circumstances it considers unusual circumstances for dependency override purposes	67%
Considering or has already limited the types of circumstances it considers valid for making a unaccompanied or homeless youth determination	59%
Anticipating denying PJ other than dependency override requests that it would have approved in the past as a result of adopting more conservative PJ policies	26%
Anticipating denying dependency override requests that it would have approved in the past as a result of adopting more conservative dependency override policies	15%
Anticipating denying unaccompanied or homeless youth determination requests that it would have approved in the past as a result of adopting more conservative unaccompanied or homeless youth determination policies	19%
Considering or has already considered taking a more conservative approach in using PJ to adjust individual data elements in the EFC calculation	37%
Considering or has already considered taking a more conservative approach in using PJ to adjust the cost of attendance	30%
<i>n</i>	27

Has the Office of Inspector General's report on its audit of the University of Southern California changed your institution's level of concern about the Department of Education reviewing your institution's PJ/unaccompanied or homeless youth policies?

The OIG USC audit has

Made my institution more concerned	26%
Not changed my institution's level of concern	45%
Made my institution less concerned	1%
Don't know	28%
<i>n</i>	338

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

PCON	78%
OCON	54%
DCON	0%
<i>n</i>	370