



April 11, 2017

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

FOIA Public Liaison
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Management
Office of the Chief Privacy Officer
400 Maryland Avenue SW, LBJ 2E320
Washington, DC 20202-4536
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 *et seq.* and the implementing regulations for the Department of Education (Education), 34 C.F.R. Part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Since Betsy DeVos took office as Secretary of Education, the Department has taken at least two actions that raise potential conflict of interest questions. First, the Department extended the deadline for appealing data determinations under the gainful employment rule, which requires institutions to provide data on the debt of their graduates relative to the graduates' earnings.¹ Second, the Department revoked guidance barring debt collectors from charging high fees for past-due loans.² Two former for-profit institution advocates, Taylor Hansen and Robert Eitel, reportedly joined the Department with the new Secretary.³ Mr. Hansen has since resigned.⁴ Notably, his father heads Strada Education Network, an entity that collects education debt and

¹ Nick DeSantis, *U.S. Gives Colleges More Time for Appeals Under Gainful-Employment Rule*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER ED., Mar. 6, 2017, <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/u-s-gives-colleges-more-time-for-appeals-under-gainful-employment-rule/>.

² Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, *Trump Administration Rolls Back Protections for People in Default on Loans*, WASH. POST, Mar. 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/03/17/trump-administration-rolls-back-protections-for-people-in-default-on-student-loans/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.ecfe8a3b846a.

³ Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, *Elizabeth Warren Questions the Hiring of For-Profit-College Officials at the Education Department*, WASH. POST, Mar. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/03/20/elizabeth-warren-questions-the-hiring-of-for-profit-college-officials-at-the-education-department/?utm_term=.5b1a1f8e337c.

⁴ Annie Waldman, *Former Lobbying with For-Profit Colleges Quits the Department of Education*, PACIFIC STANDARD, Mar. 22, 2017, <https://psmag.com/former-lobbyist-with-for-profit-colleges-quits-the-department-of-education-ef3f33ec4135>.



whose lawsuit against the department was arguably rendered moot by the revocation of the debt collection guidance.⁵

Given these high-profile conflict of interest questions, American Oversight is seeking information to determine the scope of access Ms. DeVos and the Department may have provided to industry groups and others with a stake in educational regulation.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that Education produce the following within twenty business days:

1. All calendars or calendar entries for Betsy DeVos or any other political or SES appointees in the Office of the Secretary, including any calendars maintained on behalf of these individuals (e.g., by an administrative assistant). For calendar entries created in Outlook or similar programs, the documents should be produced in “memo” form to include all invitees, any notes, and all attachments. Please do not limit your search to Outlook calendars—we request the production of any calendar—paper or electronic, whether on government-issued or personal devices—used to track or coordinate how these individuals allocate their time on agency business.
2. Any logs or other records tracking incoming and outgoing telephone calls made or received by Betsy DeVos or any other political or SES appointees in the Office of the Secretary, or anyone placing or receiving telephone calls on behalf of those individuals.

Please provide all responsive records from February 7, 2017, to the date the search is conducted.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If your agency uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your 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 and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

⁵ See Douglas-Gabriel, *supra* note 3.

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁶ **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; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**⁷

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered Education’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁸ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but Education’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that Education use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption”

⁶ 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).

⁷ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work-related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁸ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-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>.

or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”⁹ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”¹⁰ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”¹¹ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹²

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 it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹³ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, Education is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and Education can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on rolling basis.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(a), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this

⁹ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

¹⁰ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

¹¹ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223–24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

¹² *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹³ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

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.¹⁴ Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁵

Disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.”¹⁶ The public interest in how Ms. DeVos is running the Department is plentiful.¹⁷ The American people deserve to know how the Department is handling potential conflicts of interests and whether any outside individuals or groups have had an outsized influence on our educational policy.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁸ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight will use the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight will also make materials it gathers available on our public website and promote their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁹ One example of American Oversight’s demonstrated public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content is in its recently launched “Audit the Wall” effort, where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²⁰

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

¹⁴ 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(a).

¹⁵ 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(a).

¹⁶ 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(a)(1), (b)(1)-(4).

¹⁷ See, e.g., *supra* notes 1-3; Erica L. Green, *Betsy DeVos Calls for More School Choice, Saying Money Isn’t the Answer*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/us/politics/betsy-devos-education-school-choice-voucher.html>; Patrick Wall, *How Betsy DeVos Could End the School-Integration Comeback*, THE ATLANTIC, Mar. 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/how-betsy-devos-could-end-the-school-integration-comeback/520113/>; Valerie Strauss, *Did Betsy DeVos Just Ask States to Ignore Part of Federal Education Law?*, WASH. POST, Mar. 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/03/14/did-betsy-devos-just-ask-states-to-ignore-part-of-federal-education-law/?utm_term=.02171e242f01.

¹⁸ 34 C.F.R. § 5.33(c)(1)-(2).

¹⁹ American Oversight currently has over 10,400 page likes on Facebook, and over 13,500 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Apr. 11, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER (last visited Apr. 11, 2017).

²⁰ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Sara Creighton at foia@americanoversight.org or (202) 869-5246. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight