Greetings, WASFAA members. Is everyone ready to come up for air yet? Based on the experiences I have heard from colleagues around the region, the start to this academic year has been especially challenging for many of us. Most certainly, for those members affected by the fires burning throughout the WASFAA region, but most devastatingly in California, Oregon and Washington state where many lives have been lost and entire communities have been displaced as some towns have been completely destroyed. In addition, the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic has only made our complicated jobs even more difficult as most of us have been able to provide limited, if any, in-person services to our students. I think it is during these one-on-one interactions when we are best able to reassure our nervous first-year students, or thoroughly dig in to all the questions a parent has, or fully take in the appreciation felt by our customers when they smile and say, “thank you.” Similarly, it is often during those informal moments shared with co-workers in the hallway or after an in-person meeting when ideas flow and collaboration happens. With the awkwardness of social distancing and mask wearing, even if you are working on campus it does not seem like business as usual. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are reported by those not used to remote work, and anxiety by those who are working on campus under potentially risky conditions. On top of it all, in many areas our usual outlets for recreation, rejuvenation and stress relief continue to be restricted or unavailable entirely.

What is good in all of this? We have each other. Financial aid administrators in general, and WASFAA members specifically, are among the most helpful and sharing professionals in the higher education community. It seems we almost can’t help ourselves from helping others. However, helping ourselves is another thing. Often we are all too willing to forgo that in order to help one more student, process one more application, or review one more appeal. It is so important, especially during this time of heightened uncertainty, anxiety and stress, to remember to put on your own mask before helping others with theirs. Make it a habit to schedule time for yourself – easier said than done – or at least don’t begrudge yourself the moments of reprieve you find throughout the day. Maybe even more importantly, keep reminding yourself that as long as it takes to get through this crisis, it will end eventually. In the meantime, reach out to others who can lend a sympathetic ear, help think through a problem, or just remind you that you can do this.
In the absence of the in-person WASFAA events that usually draw us together during the fall, the committees have been busy planning some exciting opportunities to learn and engage with each other. On October 19-22, the Training Committee is partnering with NASFAA to provide a 4-day online training series for new aid administrators.

NASFAA staff will deliver 90-minute webinars followed up by 30-45 minute Zoom meetings led by WASFAA trainers for additional discussion or learning activities and networking. Details and registration will be available very soon. In November, the annual Jerry R. Sims Management & Leadership Institute will go virtual over the course of 4 days. New and aspiring directors will together explore topics around change and transition management of a team, strategic planning, professional development, and working through difficult situations with those whom they supervise. At the same time, we will launch the first yearlong Rebekah Hoppel Salcedo Leadership Development Program, which will provide training and mentorship to the next generation of leaders within our profession. Program chair Kay Soltis, former WASFAA president, honorary lifetime member, and recipient of at least six other awards including the NASFAA Regional Leadership Award, is happy to report that we have applications from each state in the region, and the successful candidates who will comprise the inaugural class are being notified. We look forward to meeting them with you in future newsletter editions.

Even if you are not able to join us for these or other future WASFAA events, please do take advantage of your membership to volunteer or just reach out to someone you met at a prior event. If you don’t have someone in the profession you can contact, please drop me a note at president@wasfaa.org and I’ll help you get connected. Finally, I would like to thank you for everything you have done to assist students this fall. Our efforts often go unnoticed in the larger landscape of higher education, especially when we are doing our jobs well and things are going smoothly – and when things do not go well we can be the focus of extreme scrutiny and frustration. Regardless, thank you and know you are making a difference in students’ lives. We can all get through this together.