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## Minimal Debt Is Advised

**Financial aid adviser turns personal debt mess into her message.**

*Story by Kelsey Allen*

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**W**hen CortneyJo Sandidge was a student at MU, she was able to pay off all of her credit cards and send in her rent check six months in advance. But she was paying those bills with money she received from student loans. Essentially, Sandidge was just transferring her debt from one servicer to another.

“I didn’t use a lot of wisdom in my borrowing,” she says. “I borrowed way more than I needed.”

While growing up in Kansas City, Mo., Sandidge was around people who occasionally wouldn’t have electricity because they hadn’t paid their bills. That

never happened to her, but she was worried that it might. So she made sure she had enough money to feel secure.

“I borrowed a heck of a lot, and now I’m in a lot of debt,” Sandidge says. “But there is this saying that your mess will become your message. That’s what I feel like my mission is. I made a mess in a sense, and now it’s my message to help educate students the best I can so they don’t get in that position.”

Sandidge, BA ’06, MS ’11, is assistant director of the MU Student Financial Aid Office. She started there as a student worker in the financial aid office when she was a sophomore. She eventually worked her way up, from a financial aid adviser to a senior adviser to overseeing the staff of advisers.

When talking to any number of the 30,000 out of 34,748 MU students who receive financial aid, Sandidge is comfortable sharing her story so students avoid the trap she fell into. She recalls a conversation she had with a student interested in applying for another loan.



CortneyJo Sandidge started working at the Student Financial Aid Office as a sophomore. Now as assistant director she uses her personal story with loan debt to help MU students avoid the same mistakes she made. Photo by April Mason.

“I remember talking about the fact that because of the student loan debt that I have, it is delaying me from purchasing a home,” Sandidge says. “I’m in a financial position where, gratefully, I have a job and my husband has a job. We can pay those loans, but it’s going to take us a long time.”

To educate the more than 5,000 MU students who graduated in mid-May, the financial aid office partnered with the Office for Financial Success to offer exit loan counseling. During a six-week period, 19 peer counselors in the College of Human Environmental Sciences met with more than 500 graduating students for 30-minute one-on-one counseling sessions. Students received their detailed loan history, and advisers worked with them to determine which loan repayment option worked best.

With the average student leaving MU with \$19,265 in student loans — or a monthly payment of \$221.70 for 10 years — Sandidge says these meetings helped students understand the impact of their debt on their future.

“What we learned from these exit counseling appointments is that students didn’t realize they had borrowed so much, and they weren’t really thinking about how much it would be monthly [to repay the debt] and how that would affect so many different things,” she says.

For MU's newest alumni who didn't sign up for exit loan counseling, Sandidge recommends they connect their with loan servicer, making sure their address information is updated, determine which repayment plan will work best and set at least three financial goals.

“I wish I would have done things differently,” she says. “I would tell myself to have a budget and some financial goals. I probably would have realized that I didn't need to borrow as much. I really want to help students not have that same issue. Now it's my passion.”

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