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A Day in the Life of Virginia Foxx

By Kelly Field, The Chronicle of Higher Education

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In the office of U.S. Rep. Virginia Foxx, the incoming chair of the House of Representatives education committee, there's a desk plate with this simple exhortation: Trust God, Work Smarter, Work Harder.

It's a motto that has guided the conservative lawmaker from North Carolina throughout her life — from a hardscrabble childhood in Appalachia through seven years spent working her way through college, two decades as an instructor, administrator, and college president, another decade in the North Carolina Senate, and finally, since 2005, in the U.S. Congress.

Even today, at 73, she works 16-hour days, arriving at the U.S. Capitol building at 7:30 and staying until midnight to answer constituents' letters. When we met at 11 a.m. on a recent Wednesday, she had already done two radio interviews, attended the weekly women's prayer breakfast, and participated in a round table on the "sharing economy."

As we race off to a Red Cross Christmas-card signing, Ms. Foxx says she wishes she didn't have to sleep, so that she could stay on top of the reading that keeps piling up on her desk.

"People ask me: 'What do you take? I want some of that,'" she says.

(For the record: It's coffee brewed in a small Mr. Coffee she keeps in her office, with "lots of Splenda, real cream, and raspberry flavoring." She says it doesn't keep her awake, though — she just likes the sweetness.)

At the signing, a Red Cross employee leads the congresswoman to a table covered with cards that read "We love our troops." Inside, in looping cursive, Ms. Foxx writes, "Dear Patriot. Thank you for your willingness to serve your country in the military. May God continue to bless you and your family."

Things don't slow down for the rest of the day, as Ms. Foxx rushes from meetings in her office to speeches on the House floor to hearings elsewhere in the Capitol building. It's a schedule that would tire much younger lawmakers, but it's "a fairly light day for her," her press secretary says. The pace will really pick up in January, when she takes over the education committee and

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gets to work dismantling President Obama's education agenda and reducing the federal role in higher education.

Her first target: an Obama-era rule that would make more salaried employees on college campuses and elsewhere eligible for overtime pay. (A federal judge has blocked the rule, but the administration has appealed that decision.) After that, she'll try to overturn a slate of regulations that increased federal control over for-profit colleges and teacher-preparation programs and that expanded loan forgiveness for students who are victims of fraud.

Ultimately, she hopes to pass legislation that will prevent any administration — Democratic or Republican — from governing by executive fiat.

"Congress has awakened to what it has done in leaving these giant loopholes out there for the executive branch to drive through," she says. "We've got to get back our Article I authority," she adds, referring to the legislative powers given to Congress in the Constitution.

In an ideal world, she'd love to abolish the Education Department altogether, sending the money — and decision-making authority — to the states, and "phasing out" federal support over time. But Ms. Foxx realizes that isn't politically possible, even with Republicans in control of Congress and the White House, so she'll be looking for more-tailored ways to scale back federal spending on education and give states more of a say in how the money is spent.

She'll also look for evidence that the American public is getting a good return on its investment in student aid.

"We are spending a lot of hardworking-taxpayer dollars on education," she says, "and the public wants to know if that money is being well spent."

Up by Her Bootstraps

Most conservatives will tell you that hard work, not government support, is the key to lifting people out of poverty. For some of them, it's a governing philosophy. For Ms. Foxx, it's a conviction born of personal experience.

Raised in the Blue Ridge Mountains in a home without power or running water, she started working as a weaver at age 12 to help support her family. In the mornings, before school, she'd milk the cows, carry water, and bring in wood for the fire. After school, she'd do it all again.

"You didn't relax, there were always things to do," she says in a conversation in the House gallery, where she's waiting to deliver a "one minute" floor speech on the importance of the Constitution. "We were basically trying to survive."

Then, as now, she leaned on God for support. Though baptized as a Roman Catholic, Representative Foxx grew up attending a Baptist church because her family didn't own a car and the Catholic church was too far to walk.

After high school, she worked her way through college, typing papers for fellow students and working as a waitress, store clerk, and secretary. She married at age 20 and had her only child, a daughter, while still in college. It took her seven years to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Her perseverance paid off. She got a job as a secretary at her alma mater, and went on to Appalachian State University, where she taught and held several administrative posts. Eventually, she became president of Mayland Community College. She was elected to the North Carolina Senate in 1994 and to the U.S. House of Representatives 10 years later. Along the way, she got a master's degree in sociology from Chapel Hill and a doctorate in higher education from UNC-Greensboro.

On her website today, Representative Foxx expresses sympathy for students who are struggling to cover the ever-rising costs of college.

"From personal experience," she writes, "I know that paying for college is hard work."

But her own background has also made Ms. Foxx impatient with students whom she sees as overly dependent on the government dime. She firmly believes that students can still graduate from a four-year public college without debt — provided they're willing to start at a community college, and work as they go — and is troubled by tales of students borrowing to "buy cars and go on trips to Europe."

Four years ago, Ms. Foxx sparked a minor controversy when she told a radio host that she had "very little tolerance" for students who take out debt loads of \$80,000 or more "because there's no reason for that."

"I never borrowed a dime of money," she said at the time. "We live in an opportunity society, and people are forgetting that. You don't sit on your butt and have it dumped in your lap."

Still, it's a lot harder to work your way through college now than it was when Ms. Foxx was an undergrad. In the 1967-68 academic year, her last at Chapel Hill, a year of tuition and fees for an English major like Ms. Foxx was just \$327.50, or \$2,367 in today's dollars. Nearly 50 years later, tuition and fees at Chapel Hill are \$8,834 for North Carolina residents — that's below average for a state school, and does not include living expenses.

These days, Ms. Foxx acknowledges that "there are valid reasons for borrowing a lot, when you look at professional degrees."

But she insists that "it is absolutely possible to get a four-year degree without borrowing."

Though she majored in English herself, she thinks too many students are getting liberal-arts degrees. Some of them, she says, should be steered toward more-vocational degrees, or community college. And she'd like to see more states embrace early-college programs in which high-school students can earn college credit as a way to reduce the cost of a degree.

Pell Grants weren't around when Ms. Foxx was a student (the program was created in 1972), but her father benefited from the GI Bill, and she witnessed the impact that federal student aid can have on low-income students' lives back when she directed the TRIO college-prep programs at Appalachian State, in the mid-1970s.

Even so, she isn't sure that the success stories justify the billions the government spends on Pell Grants and the TRIO programs. She says she wants to see more evidence that the programs are worth their cost.

"Are Pell Grants making a difference? For the students I worked with, financial aid made a huge difference. But were all of them responsible? No. Did all of them make the best of their opportunities? No," she says.

"When the TRIO people come to me with anecdotal stories, I say, 'Show me the data. Show me that the result wouldn't happen without the investment.' I know that it happens sometimes, because I saw it, but is it happening at a level that justifies the expenditure?"

And Ms. Foxx isn't convinced that federal student aid doesn't contribute to rising college costs, either.

"I keep hearing from colleges that tuition isn't going up because of all the money we're giving them, but because of regulations," she says. "Maybe it's both."

A Missionary Zeal

As chairwoman, Representative Foxx plans to test that explanation, working with her Senate counterpart, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, to roll back many of the regulations imposed on colleges by the Obama administration. Chief among them is the gainful-employment rule, which cuts off federal aid to programs whose graduates have high debt-to-income ratios. While the rule applies to all vocational programs, it is expected to hit for-profit institutions harder than community colleges because the for-profits tend to cost more.

In between meetings and votes, Ms. Foxx says that the rule is a poor measure of institutional quality, since colleges can't generally limit how much their students borrow, or control whether they get jobs that will allow them to repay their debt.

"You evaluate the things you can control — you don't evaluate what you can't," she says.

She has offered legislation that would repeal the gainful-employment rule, along with rules that established a federal definition of "credit hour" and expanded state oversight over distance-education programs.

Passage of that bill would be welcomed by many nonprofit colleges, which tend to see the rules — and their many reporting requirements — as a costly intrusion into academic affairs. And it would be a major reprieve for for-profit programs that are on the brink of becoming ineligible to receive federal student aid.

But a repeal would be highly unpopular with student and consumer advocates, who argue that the measures have already helped stem fraud and abuse in the for-profit sector. Asked if she was worried that rescinding the rules could open the doors to more misrepresentation by for-profit colleges, Ms. Foxx says, "I worry about students in all aspects of education."

For-profit colleges favor Republicans in their campaign contributions, and they have been generous to Ms. Foxx, the chair of the higher-education subcommittee in the session that ends this month. Employees of Full Sail University, which was a major contributor to Mitt Romney's failed 2012 presidential bid, have given her more than \$36,000 over the course of her congressional career, including \$15,000 in her most recent campaign, making it her 11th biggest lifetime donor, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

In the 2016 election cycle, the employees and political-action committees of five for-profit companies were among the top 20 donors to the congresswoman's leadership PAC. Employees of American Career College, Capella Education, and ECPI College of Technology each contributed the maximum of \$5,000. Employees of the American Public University system and the Universal Technical Institute's PAC kicked in \$1,750 and \$1,500, respectively.

Like many Republicans, including Mr. Alexander, Ms. Foxx believes that accountability is best served through simple transparency, not complex regulation. If parents and policy makers have good information, she believes, then they will make good decisions.

To that end, she wants to streamline federal reporting requirements, and ensure that accreditors are gathering the most-useful information on costs and student outcomes. But she opposes federal mandates on accreditors, and led the successful effort to ban the creation of a federal unit-record system for tracking individual students through college, citing privacy concerns.

"We held 17 hearings on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and one of the things we heard over and over was that we're drowning in data, but we don't have enough information," she says. "We need to simplify. We have too many bureaucrats asking for things to justify their existence."

Still, she's intrigued by Mr. Alexander's talk of "risk sharing" and "skin in the game" — phrases that could mean the government forces colleges to bear some of the cost when their students drop out or default. She plans to meet with the senator to discuss their priorities for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the major law governing higher-ed policy, after the holiday recess.

Now entering her seventh term in Congress, Representative Foxx has come a long way from her childhood in Appalachia. But she's kept the work ethic and sense of frugality that she learned in her youth. She shops at thrift stores, uses water recycled from her washing machine to water her plants, and takes food from receptions back to her office for lunch. During the week, when she's in Washington, she lives in a 500-square-foot apartment.

And she remains deeply religious. She reads the Jesus Calling devotional daily, attends the women's prayer breakfast weekly (she always makes the coffee), and recently published a collection of essays titled *God Is in the House*, in which members of Congress in both parties reflect on their Christian faith and how it guides them as lawmakers.

At one point during the busy day, I ask what drives her to keep up her punishing schedule. Her answer is simple.

"I love what I do," she says. "Someone told me a long time ago I was a missionary at heart. I guess that's true."

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