

Can College Level the Playing Field? Higher Education in an Unequal Society

Speaker Biographies

Rekha Balu is the director of federal equity initiatives and co-vice president of the Office of Race and Equity Research at the Urban Institute, where she leads research and policy programs that deploy analytics and evidence to inform federal agencies on how to advance equity. Balu joins Urban from MDRC, where she was a senior fellow and director of the Center for Applied Behavioral Science. She launched a portfolio of studies and designed interventions tackling challenges in human services, K-12 education, and the transition to postsecondary education. She has partnered with federal agencies and grantees around the country to help them base their decisions on data and evidence. In 2019, as a fellow with the Office of Evaluation Sciences in the US General Services Administration, she developed trainings, intervention designs, and field trials for federal agencies. She has an undergraduate degree from Northwestern University, a Master of Education degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a master's degree in economics from Stanford University. She earned her doctorate in the economics of education from Stanford University.

Sandy Baum is a nonresident senior fellow at the Urban Institute and professor emerita of economics at Skidmore College. Dr. Baum earned her B.A. in sociology at Bryn Mawr College and her Ph.D. in economics at Columbia University. Dr. Baum co-authored the College Board's annual publications Trends in Student Aid and Trends in College Pricing from 2002 through 2019. She has published numerous articles on higher education finance in professional journals, books, and the trade press. She is the principal researcher on the Urban Institute's website on college affordability and her recent work includes Urban Institute briefs on income-driven loan repayment, college endowments, funding short-term certificate study, and college accountability frameworks. She is the author of Student Debt: Rhetoric and Realities of Higher Education Financing (2016) and co-author of Making College Work: Pathways to Success for Disadvantaged Students (2017) College Level the Playing Field: Higher Education in an Unequal Society (2022).

David Leonhardt is a senior writer for The New York Times. He writes The Morning, The Times's flagship daily newsletter. He has worked at The Times since 1999 and has previously been an Op-Ed columnist, Washington bureau chief, co-host of "The Argument" podcast, founding editor of The Upshot section and a staff writer for The Times Magazine. He also led a strategy group that helped Times leadership shape the newsroom's digital future. In 2011, he received the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. He is a third-generation native of New York City.

Michael McPherson served as President of the Spencer Foundation for fourteen years before retiring in 2017. Earlier he was President of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota for seven years. He is a nationally known economist whose expertise focuses on the interplay between education and economics. McPherson is co-author or editor of several books, including Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education, Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities, The Student Aid Game, and Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy. McPherson was founding co-editor of the journal Economics and Philosophy. He has been a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, at the Brookings Institution, and at the Mellon Foundation. He is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. He is currently a non-resident Fellow at the Urban Institute.

David Wessel is a senior fellow in Economic Studies at Brookings and director of the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy, the mission of which is to improve the quality of fiscal and monetary policies and public understanding of them. He joined Brookings in December 2013 after 30 years on the staff of The Wall Street Journal where, most recently, he was economics editor and wrote the weekly Capital column. He is a contributing correspondent to The Wall Street Journal, appears frequently on NPR's Morning Edition, and tweets often at @davidmwessel. David is the author of two New York Times best-sellers: *In Fed We Trust: Ben Bernanke's War on the Great Panic* (2009) and *Red Ink: Inside the High Stakes Politics of the Federal Budget* (2012). His most recent book is *Only the Rich Can Play: How Washington Works in the New Gilded Age* (2021), the story of Opportunity Zones. He has shared two Pulitzer Prizes, one in 1984 for a Boston Globe series on the persistence of racism in Boston and the other in 2003 for Wall Street Journal stories on corporate scandals. David is a member of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Data Users Advisory Committee. He also has taught in the Dartmouth Tuck School of Business Global 2030 executive education program and in the journalism program at Princeton University. A native of New Haven, Conn., and a product of its public schools, David is a 1975 graduate of Haverford College. He was a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in Business and Economics Journalism at Columbia University in 1980-81.