

## **An Open Letter to President Biden:** Scholars support your promise to cancel student debt

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Dear President Biden,

We are scholars who study student debt, higher education, and racial inequality. We write to urge you to use your executive authority to cancel student debt as soon as possible. Doing so will address racial debt disparities, provide urgent economic relief for all Americans, further stimulate the economic recovery, and right a series of wrongs.

Among students who began college in 2003-2004, Black borrowers still owed 113 percent of their original loan after 12 years due to compounding interest – compared to 83 percent for Latinx students and 65 percent for white students.<sup>1</sup> Black women are the most impacted group of borrowers.<sup>2</sup> The prospects for ever repaying these debts have worsened during the severe economic downturn triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. And without debt cancellation, borrowers will struggle to recover from the Covid19 pandemic.

Some have focused their efforts on Income Driven Repayment (IDR) plans, instead of debt cancellation. Unfortunately, many low-income borrowers currently are not benefiting from Income Driven Repayment (IDR) plans. As of 2020, around 50 percent of borrowers with low incomes and large loan balances still had not enrolled in IDR.<sup>3</sup> And fewer than 20 borrowers have had their debts cancelled under IDR programs.<sup>4</sup> Debt cancellation is far simpler than mobilizing millions of borrowers to enroll individually in IDR. And, borrowers who have already missed payments can be barred from IDR. Borrowers themselves have documented the difficulties of enrolling in IDR; it is a common topic found in the complaints database of the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau.<sup>5</sup> In short, IDR programs are no substitute for debt cancellation.

Acting swiftly and decisively to cancel student debt will result in a progressive policy. We also believe that canceling debt through an executive order is the only way to avoid unnecessary compromises that would lead to regressive policy outcomes. Here's why.

Student debt cancellation would be highly progressive. The reason for this progressivity is simple: poor students borrow and rich students do not. Among students from households with less than \$30,000 in income who began college in 2012, 61 percent left school with Title IV federal student loan debt.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, only 30 percent of students from households with over \$200,000 income left school with such debts. Reflecting racial differences in income and wealth, 74 percent of Black students leave school with such debts compared to 55 percent of white students. The 70 percent of wealthy students who leave college with no debt would receive zero dollars from debt cancellation.

Debt cancellation also would benefit disproportionately those students who have lower income jobs after college. Among the students who began college in 2012, 55 percent of those with incomes below \$30,000 in 2017 had debt compared to just 28 percent of those with incomes above \$125,000 that year.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, one survey found that 49 percent of retail workers have

student debt.<sup>8</sup> We lack comparable data for investment bankers or hedge fund managers. But we do know that high earners in those professions graduate disproportionately from top private universities where an average of just 18 percent of all undergraduates borrow at all.<sup>9</sup> This disparity in student debt is why debt cancellation is supported by SEIU, the nation's largest service workers union, but not the American Bankers Association.

Using an executive order would ensure that student debt cancellation is accomplished in a progressive way. An executive would avoid asking student borrowers to jump through unnecessary hoops, to complete yet another round of paperwork, and to endure the humiliation of being treated as if they are trying to acquire something they don't deserve. With a design focused on fairness and dignity, the only thing debtors would have to do is receive notification that justice has been done, that they need not do anything unless they want to opt out. In this way, everyone will be doing better and feeling better about it.

Separate tax reform legislation from Congress could "claw-back" income gains from the cancellation of any debt made to wealthier borrowers. A more progressive tax code is a more effective and popular way to assure a progressive income distribution than through financial aid policy.

A strong majority of Americans support student debt cancellation.<sup>10</sup> It is not always the case that the majority speaks out in favor of righting a past injustice. When they do and the evidence is also on the side of right, justice should no longer be deferred.

With urgency,

**332 total signers as of 11:40 am, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.**

[54 INITIAL SIGNERS – subsequent signers listed after endnotes]

Fenaba Addo, Associate Professor of Consumer Science, University of Wisconsin  
Elizabeth Armstrong, Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan  
Nina Bandelj, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Irvine  
Amy Binder, Professor of Sociology, University of California, San Diego  
Raphaël Charron-Chénier, Professor of Justice and Social Inquiry, Arizona State University  
Christina Ciocca Eller, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Harvard University  
Matthew Desmond, Professor of Sociology, Princeton University  
Rachel Dwyer, Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University  
Charlie Eaton, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
Claire Edington, Assistant Professor of History, University of California, San Diego  
Neil Fligstein, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley  
Joan Fujimura, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
Benjamin Gebre-Medhin, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Mount Holyoke College  
Kim Geron, Professor of Political Science, California State University East Bay  
Jonathan Glater, Professor of Law, University of California, Los Angeles  
Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor of Sociology and Medicine, Temple University  
Adam Goldstein, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs, Princeton University

Laura Hamilton, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
Darrick Hamilton, Professor of Economics, The New School  
Daniel Hirschman, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Brown University  
Jason Houle, Associate Professor of Quantitative Social Science and Sociology, Dartmouth College  
Lilly Irani, Associate Professor of Communication and Science Studies, University of California, San Diego  
Dalie Jimenez, Professor of Law, University of California, Irvine  
Shamus Kahn, Professor of Sociology, Princeton University  
Greta Krippner, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan  
Ken-Hou Lin, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Texas, Austin  
Christopher Loss, Associate Professor of Education, Vanderbilt University  
Isaac Martin, Professor of Sociology, University of California, San Diego  
Myra Marx-Ferree, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
Tressie McMillan Cottom, Associate Professor of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
Toby Merrill, Senior Clinical Instructor & Lecturer on Law, Harvard University  
Megan Neely, Assistant Professor of Organisation, Copenhagen Business School  
Pamela Oliver, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
Michael Olneck, Professor Emeritus of Educational Policy Studies and Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, San Diego  
Elizabeth Popp Berman, Associate Professor of Organization Studies, University of Michigan  
Sarah Quinn, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Washington  
Francisco Ramirez, Professor of Education, Stanford University  
Victor Ray, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminology, University of Iowa  
Daisy Reyes, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
Joel Rogers, Professor of Law, Political Science, Public Affairs, and Sociology, University of Wisconsin  
Tobias Schulze-Cleven, Associate Professor of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University  
Louise Seamster, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Iowa  
Thomas Shapiro, Professor of Social Policy, Brandeis University  
Sheila Slaughter, Professor of Higher Education, University of Georgia  
Mitchell Stevens, Professor of Education, Stanford University  
Lillian Taiz, Professor of History, California State University Los Angeles  
Chloe Thurston, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Northwestern University  
Lisa Wade, Associate Professor of Sociology, Tulane University  
Margaret Weir, Professor of Political Science and International and Public Affairs, Brown University  
Frederick Wherry, Professor of Sociology, Princeton University  
Emily Zackin, Associate Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University  
Naomi Zewde, Assistant Professor of Health Policy, City University of New York  
Kathrin Zippel, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Northeastern University

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Fenaba R Addo, Jason N Houle, and Daniel Simon, “Young, Black, and(Still) in the Red: Parental Wealth, Race, and Student Loan Debt,” *Race and Social Problems* 8, no. 1(2016): 64–76; Judith Scott-Clayton and Jing Li, “Black-White Disparity in Student Loan Debt More than Triples after Graduation,” *Economic Studies*, Volume 2 No. 3, 2016; Ben Miller, “New Federal Data Show a Student Loan Crisis for African American Borrowers” (Washington, DC, 2017); Louise Seamster and Raphaël Charron-Chénier, “Predatory Inclusion and Education Debt: Rethinking the Racial Wealth Gap,” *Social Currents* 4, no. 3 (2017): 199–207.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aauw.org/resources/research/deeper-in-debt/>

<sup>3</sup> Nadia Karamcheva, Jeffrey Perry, and Constantine Yannelis, “Income-Driven RepaymentPlans for Student Loans: Budgetary Costs and Policy Options.,” Congressional Budget Office, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Seth Frotman and Christa Gibbs, “Too Many Student Loan Borrowers Struggling, NotEnough Benefiting from Affordable Repayment Options.” Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> This does not include parent borrowing. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/17).

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.nclc.org/images/pdf/student\\_loans/foia-1776-response-from-drt-and-servicing.pdf](https://www.nclc.org/images/pdf/student_loans/foia-1776-response-from-drt-and-servicing.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012/17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:12/17).

<sup>8</sup> [www.commonbond.co/post/retail-employees-need-student-loan-benefits-but-companies-have-been-slow-to-act](http://www.commonbond.co/post/retail-employees-need-student-loan-benefits-but-companies-have-been-slow-to-act)

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Eaton and Albina Gibadullina. “The Social Circuitry of High Finance: Universities and Intimate Ties Among Economic Elites,” UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education Research and Occasional Paper Series. 2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/527464-poll-60-percent-support-biden-cancelling-up-to-50000-of-student>

## [SUBSEQUENT SIGNERS]

Melissa Abad, Research Associate/ Sociologist, Stanford University

Alexandrina Agloro, Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and Innovation in the Borderlands, University of Arizona

Barbara Aguirre, Administrator, Mexican American Civil Rights Institute

Alan Aja, Professor of Public & Urban Policy/Puerto Rican & Latino Studies, Brooklyn College (CUNY)

Laurie Alfaro, Assistant Professor of Computer Information Systems, Wilbur Wright College

Tennille Allen, Professor and Chair of Sociology, Lewis University

Paul Almeida, Professor, UC Merced

Camila Alvarez, Assistant professor of sociology, UC Merced

Anthony Alvarez, Associate Professor of Sociology, California State University, Fullerton

Nathan Andersen, Professor of Philosophy, Eckerd College

Joel Neville Anderson, Visiting Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies and Film, Purchase College, State University of New York

Abigail Andrews, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California-San Diego

Hannah Appel, Associate Professor of Anthropology & Global Studies, UCLA

Juan Carlos Arango, MSW Social Worker, Northeastern Illinois University

Natalie Avalos, Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of Colorado Boulder

David Backer, Assistant Professor of Education, West Chester University

Jennifer Bagneris, Dr. Bagneris, Vanderbilt University

Crystal Baik, Associate Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies, UC Riverside

Javiera Barandiaran, Associate Professor of Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

Cassie Barnhardt, Associate Professor of Higher Education, University of Iowa

Bernadette Barton, Professor of Sociology, Morehead State University

Pinar Batur, Professor, Vassar College

Irene Beattie, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced

Emmaline Bennett, Graduate student in Social Studies Education, Columbia Teachers College

Janel Benson, Associate Professor of Sociology, Colgate University

Ryan Bergstrom, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Minnesota Duluth

Asmeret Asefaw Berhe, Professor of Soil Biogeochemistry, University of California, Merced

Lucy Bernholz, Senior Research Scholar, Stanford University

Frank Biafora, Professor of Sociology, University of South Florida

Daniel Birchok, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan-Flint

Jalil Bishop, Postdoc Scholar, University of Pennsylvania

Heidi Blocker, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Eastern Oregon University

Courtney Boen, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania

Abigail Boggs, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Wesleyan University

Jennifer Brady, Associate Professor of Spanish, University of Minnesota Duluth

Andrew Brake, Associate Professor of Social Work, Northeastern Illinois University

Christof Brandtner, Assistant Professor, EM Lyon

La Mar Brazile, Adjunct Professor of History, Chicago City Colleges

Akissi Britton, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Hana Brown, Associate Professor of Sociology, Wake Forest University

Letisha Brown, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Virginia Tech

Bailey Brown, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Spelman College

Tyler Bruefach, Doctoral Candidate in Sociology, Florida State University

Sunny Brysch, Deaf Studies faculty, University of Minnesota- Duluth

Carson Byrd, Faculty Director of Research Initiatives, University of Michigan

Stephanie Canizales, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced

Lucia Cantero, Assistant professor of anthropology, University of San Francisco

Peter Catron, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Washington

Ben Chappell, Associate Professor of American Studies, University of Kansas

Mike Chavez, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Riverside City College

Elizabeth Cherry, Associate Professor of Sociology, Manhattanville College

Wendy Christensen, Associate Professor of Sociology, William Paterson University

Daniel Aldana Cohen, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania

Caitlyn Collins, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Washington University in St. Louis

Ryan Cook, Former Assistant Professor, Emory University

Lucius Couloute, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Suffolk University

S. L. Crawley, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of South Florida

Beatriz Cruz-Sotomayor, Associate Professor of Spanish, Universidad Ana G. Méndez  
Loan Dao, Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies, Saint Mary's College of California  
Charles H.F. Davis III, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, University of Michigan  
BreAnna Davis Tribble, Managing Associate, School readiness consulting  
Melissa Day, Lecturer, Research Associate, University System of New Hampshire  
Adrian De Leon, Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity, University of Southern California  
Kris De Welde, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology, College of Charleston  
Robin DeLugan, Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Merced  
Patrick Denice, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Western Ontario  
Kyle Dodson, Associate Professor of Sociology, UC-Merced  
Ilhan Dögüs, PhD in Economics, Independent Economist  
Sean Downey, Associate Professor of Anthropology, The Ohio State University  
Kate Elengold, Assistant Professor of Law, University of North Carolina  
Sharon Elise, Professor of Sociology, Calif State University San Marcos  
Melanie Escue, Doctoral Student in Sociology, University of South Florida  
Kathy Espino-Perez, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Western Oregon University  
Shumaila Fatima, PhD Student and Graduate Instructional Assistant, University of South Florida  
Susan Feiner, Professor of Economics, retired, University of Southern Maine  
Lisa Feldstein, Researcher, Freelance  
John Felt, Postdoctoral Fellow, Penn State  
Scott Ferguson, Associate Professor, Humanities & Cultural Studies, University of South Florida  
Steven Filling, Professor of Accounting, California State University Stanislaus  
Andrea Fitzroy, Sociology Part Time Instructor, Georgia State University  
Edward Flores, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
Cybelle Fox, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley  
Emily Fox, PhD student, UC Santa Barbara  
John Fox, Professor of Sociology, Foothill College  
Brittany Fox-Williams, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Lehman College, City University of New York  
Terri Friedline, Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Michigan  
Jennifer Friedman, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of South Florida  
Scott Fullwiler, Associate Professor of Economics, University of Missouri-Kansas City  
Christina Gallup, Associate Professor of Earth and Environmental Science, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Nicholas Garcia, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Washington College  
Judith Gerson, Associate Professor of Sociology and Women's, Gender, Sexuality Studies, Rutgers University  
Rhana Gittens, Assistant Professor of Communication, Oglethorpe University

Tanya Golash-Boza, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
Jennifer Gomez, Professor, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Jennifer M. Gómez, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Wayne State University  
Andrea Gomez Cervantes, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Wake Forest University  
Teresa Gonzales, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Massachusetts Lowell  
Jessica Graham, Associate Professor of History, University of California, San Diego  
Susan Green, Chair of Multicultural and Gender Studies, California State University Chico  
Paula Gudmundson, Associate Professor of Music, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Katja Guenther, Associate Professor of Gender & Sexuality Studies, University of California, Riverside  
Kaaryn Gustafson, Professor of Law, University of California, Irvine  
Jaren Haber, Post-doctoral Fellow, Georgetown University  
Samniqueka Halsey, Assistant Professor of Ecosystem Health, University of Missouri  
Scott Hamilton, Lecturer, University of North Texas  
Rie Harding, PhD Candidate, University of Massachusetts Amherst  
Sydney Hart, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Wilbur Wright College  
Robb Hernandez, Associate Professor of English, Fordham University  
Luke Herrine, PhD Candidate, Yale Law School  
Jasmine Hill, Incoming Assistant Professor of Public Policy, University of California, Los Angeles  
Katherine Hilson, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Carthage College  
Heather Hlavka, Associate Professor, Marquette University  
Larisa Honey, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Queensborough Community College, CUNY  
Lisa Horton, Assistant Professor of English, University of Minnesota-Duluth  
Kevin Howley, Professor of Media Studies, DePauw University  
Kiku Huckle, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Pace University  
Alvaro Huerta, Associate Professor, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona  
D'lorah Hughes, Adj. Professor of Law/Director of Externships, University of California, Irvine School of Law  
Anneeth Kaur Hundle, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Dhan Kaur Sahota Presidential Chair of Sikh Studies, University of California, Irvine  
Josh Inwood, Associate Professor of Geography, Penn state  
Michelle Jackson, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Stanford University  
Whitney Jacobson, Assistant Professor of English, Linguistics, and Writing Studies, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Sophie James, Graduate Student, University of South Florida  
Toscina Johnson, Former student, State employee  
CW Johnson, Associate Professor of Literacy Education, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Ethan Johnson, Associate Professor of Black Studies, Portland State University  
Traci Jordan, PhD student, Indiana University  
Justin Joseph, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, University of North Alabama

Jason Kask, Instructor, University of Minnesota, Duluth  
Kim KATOR, , Southern Illinois university  
Kristy Kelly, Associate Professor of Education, Drexel University  
Bridget Kelly, Associate Professor of Student Affairs, University of Maryland  
Ivy Ken, Associate Professor of Sociology, George Washington University  
Lisa King, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Edgewood College  
Steven Klees, Professor of Education, University of Maryland  
Craig Konnoth, Associate Professor of Law, University of Colorado  
Rory Kramer, Associate Professor of Sociology, Villanova University  
Jaime Kucinkas, Assistant Professor, Hamilton College  
Richard Lachmann, Professor of Sociology, University at Albany- SUNY  
Scott Laderman, Professor of History, University of Minnesota, Duluth  
Mirella Landriscina, Professor of Sociology, St. Joseph's College  
Heather Laube Laube, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan-Flint  
Daniel Laurison, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Swarthmore College  
Elizabeth Lee, Assistant professor of sociology, Saint Joseph's University  
Jennifer Lena, Associate Professor of Arts Administration and Sociology, Teachers College, Columbia University  
Margarita Levine, Graduate Teaching Assistant, California State University, Northridge  
Amanda Lewis, Professor of sociology and Black Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Ophra Leyser-Whalen, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at El Paso  
Darryl Li, Assistant Professor, Anthropology, University of Chicago  
Jing Lin, Professor of Education, University of Maryland, College Park  
Anthony Lioi, Professor of English, The Juilliard School  
Peter Little, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Rhode Island College  
Chris Loss, Associate Professor of Education, Vanderbilt University  
Ashley Lucas, Associate Professor of Theatre & Drama and the Residential College, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor  
Aliza Luft, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles  
Sara Magin, Museum conservator, The Frick Collection  
Philip Maloney, Professor of Philosophy, Christian Brothers University  
Michelle Maroto, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Alberta  
Suzanne Martindale, Lecturer, Student Loan Law, University of California, Berkeley School of Law  
Brandon Martinez, Doctoral Candidate, University of Miami  
Laura Mason, PhD candidate, Ohio State University  
Christian Matheis, Visiting Assistant Professor of Justice and Policy Studies, Guilford College  
Janice McCabe, Associate Professor of Sociology, Dartmouth College  
Natasha McClendon, Doctoral Candidate, Georgia State University  
Elana McDermott, Research and Policy Analyst, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education



Emily Jane McTavish, Assistant Professor, Life and Environmental Sciences, University of California, Merced

Ted Mermin, Director, Center for Consumer Law & Economic Justice, University of California, Berkeley

Candace Miller, Postdoctoral Fellow, Indiana University

Matthew Jordan Miller, PhD, Provosts Postdoctoral Fellow in City Planning, University of Pennsylvania

Kat Milligan-Myhre, Assistant Professor of Molecular and Cell Biology, University of Connecticut

Amanda Mireles, Assistant Teaching Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced

Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology & Public Policy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Joshua Mitchell, Lecturer of American Studies and Ethnicity, University of Southern California

Robert Moorehead, Associate Professor of Sociology, College of DuPage

Willem Morris, YDSA Organizer, Columbia University

Patricia Morton, Associate Professor of Architectural History, University of California, Riverside

Ruby Nancy, Assistant Professor of Business Communication, University of Minnesota Duluth

Jennifer Nations, Postdoctoral Associate, Scholars Strategy Network/University of San Diego

Akasemi Newsome, Associate Director, Institute of European Studies, University of California, Berkeley

Michael Nyman, Graduate Student, University of South Florida

Kristopher Oliveira, PhD Candidate, University of South Florida

Michael Olson, Professor of Psychology, University of Tennessee

Stephen Ostertag, Associate Professor of Sociology, Tulane University

Diana Pan, Associate Professor of Sociology, CUNY - Brooklyn College

Jaime Peña, Mental Health Clinician, John F. Kennedy University

Bertha Perez, Council Woman Perez, City of Merced

Jessica Pestlin, K9 handler, UW-Milwaukee, ITT tech

Greg Petry, Instructor Environmental & Outdoor Education, University of Minnesota Duluth

Joanna Picciotto, Associate Professor of English, UC Berkeley

Whitney Pirtle, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California Merced

Mya Poe, Associate professor of English, Northeastern University

Andrew Polonsky, Assistant Professor of Computer Science, Appalachian State University

caroline ponder, assistant professor of geography, florida state university

Anna Proffit, Assistant Professor of Spanish and Humanities, Wilbur Wright College, Chicago

John Pruitt, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Stephen F. Austin State University

Sara Rafferty, Associate Professor of Art, Pratt Institute

Michael Ralph, Professor, NYU

Timothy Recuber, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Smith College

Ellen Reese, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Riverside

Adam Reich, Associate Professor of Sociology, Columbia University

Victoria Reyes, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Riverside

Jill Richardson, PhD Candidate, University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Zelideth Rivas, Professor of Japanese, Marshall University  
Yanira Rivas Pineda, Adjunct Faculty, Santa Monica College  
Shaniekqa Robinson, special education teacher, School district of Philadelphia  
Lori Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Humanities and Mexican American Studies, Palo Alto College, San Antonio, TX  
Jenevieve Roper, Assistant Professor of Health and Human Sciences, Loyola Marymount University  
Manuel Rosaldo, Assistant Professor of Labor Relations and Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University  
Vincent Roscigno, Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University  
Michael Rosino, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Molloy College  
Andrew Ross, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, NYU  
Matthew Ryg, Community Faculty, Metropolitan State University  
Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, Distinguished Medical Lecturer, CUNY School of Medicine  
Jose Sanchez, Associate Professor, Queens College CUNY  
Amber Sanchez, Institutional Research Associate, Loyola Marymount University  
Guy Sander, Assistant Professor of Chemical Engineering, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Solen Sanli Vasquez, Sociology Instructor, Santa Rosa Junior College  
Ariela Schachter, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Washington University in St Louis  
Maria Scharron-del Rio, Professor of School Counseling, Brooklyn College, CUNY  
Matthew Schneider, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Pembroke  
Kristen Schorpp, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Roanoke College  
Caleb Scoville, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Tufts University  
Jason Serrano, International Student Services Assistant, MPS Humanistic/Multicultural Education, SUNY New Paltz  
Snehal Shingavi, Associate Professor of English, The University of Texas at Austin  
Asheesh Siddique, Assistant Professor of History, University of Massachusetts-Amherst  
Leann Smith, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology, Texas A&M University  
Jenna Soleo-Shanks, Assistant Professor of Theatre, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Nicole Stevens, Graduate Teaching Associate, Ohio State University  
Abby Stivers, Adjunct Professor of Sociology, College of the Atlantic  
hephzibah strmic-pawl, Associate Professor of Sociology, Manhattanville College  
Andrew Sutton, Assistant Professor of Computer Science, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Kevin Swanberg, Instructor of Writing, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Sharon Tafolla, Consultant, University of California, Davis  
Shauhin Talesh, Professor of Law, University of California, Irvine  
Michael Teeples, Freelance, csun  
Arien Telles, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota  
James Thomas, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Mississippi

Antar Tichavakunda, Assistant Professor Higher Education, University of Cincinnati  
Emilia Tineo, Alumni, St. John's University  
Charles Toombs, Professor of Africana Studies, San Diego State University  
Sarah Tosh, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University  
Ha Tran, Graduate Student in Education Policy, Loyola University Chicago  
Heike Trappe, Professor of Sociology, University of Rostock  
DJ Trela, Professor of English, University of Michigan--Flint  
Joseph Trumino, Associate Professor of Sociology, St. John's University  
Stephen Utych, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Boise State University  
Nella Van Dyke, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Merced  
John VanderLippe, Professor of Liberal Arts, SUNY  
Cindy Vang, Assistant Professor of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities  
Burrell Vann Jr, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, San Diego State University  
Rachel Vaughn, Lecturer, UCLA  
Eric Vazquez, Assistant Professor in American studies and Latino studies, University of Iowa  
Bharat Venkat, Assistant Professor at the Institute for Society & Genetics and History, UCLA  
Roberta Villson, Professor of Sociology, St. John's University  
Jessica Visnesky, Part-time faculty, Criminal Justice, Northern Vermont University  
Daniel Vitkus, Professor of Literature, UC San Diego  
Alicia Walker, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Missouri State University  
Katrina Walsemann, Roger C. Lipitz Chair in Health Policy, University of Maryland  
Michael Walters, Adjunct Prof., Passaic County Community College  
Jennifer Webb, Associate Professor of Art History, University of Minnesota Duluth  
Kevin Wehr, Professor of Sociology, California State University Sacramento  
Melissa Weiner, Associate Professor of Sociology, College of the Holy Cross  
Joel Wendland-Liu, Associate Professor, Grand Valley State University  
Mia White, Assistant Professor of Geography & Environmental Studies, The New School  
Deadric Williams, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Tennessee  
Jocelyn Wills, Tow Professor of History; Director, American Studies, Brooklyn College, City University of New York  
Benjamin Wilson, Associate Professor of Economics, SUNY Cortland  
Anastasia Wilson, Assistant Professor, Hobart and William Smith Colleges  
Todd Wolfson, Associate Professor of Media Studies, Rutgers University  
Francis Wong, Lecturer Faculty, San Francisco State University  
Robert Wosnitzer, Clinical Associate Professor, New York University  
Jason Wozniak, Assistant Professor, Ed Foundations & Policy Studies, West Chester University  
Colleen Wynn, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Indianapolis  
Patricia Ybarra, Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies, Brown University  
Dominique Young, PhD Candidate, University of Maryland, College Park  
Michael Young, Assistant Professor of Education, University of Minnesota Duluth

Elizabeth Ziff, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Indianapolis

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