

“We Have To Do Better Than This”: An Interview with Sara Goldrick-Rab

Sara Goldrick-Rab is the Founding Director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and Professor of Sociology & Medicine at Temple University. She is the recipient of the William T. Grant Foundation’s Faculty Scholars Award and the American Educational Research Association’s Early Career Award, and in 2016 POLITICO named her one of the top 50 people shaping American politics. Her latest book, “Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream” (University of Chicago 2016), won the 2018 Grawemeyer Award, and was featured on *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* calls her “a defender of impoverished students and a scholar of their struggles”; she is ranked sixth in the nation among education scholars according to *Education Week*; and in April 2018 the Carnegie Corporation awarded her the Carnegie Fellowship. Goldrick-Rab was the opening plenary speaker at the 2019 AACRAO SEM Conference in Dallas, Texas. To learn more, visit: saragoldrickrab.com and thefastfund.org.

Tremblay: So Sara, you are the founding director of The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University in Philadelphia. Why did you establish the Hope Center?

Goldrick-Rab: Students are dropping out of college despite evident talent and hard work. We need evidence-based solutions that are sustainable and scalable. I believe that requires a new kind of applied research center—one that takes science, practice, and communications seriously. Most of all, we need a center that believes in students.

Tremblay: Thank you for creating a center that focuses on students. What did it take to create the Hope Center?

Goldrick-Rab: More hard work than I ever imagined possible. I had to literally move my family and my job across the country navigating new bureaucracies, hire and build an entirely new team, and endure the growing pains associated with doing something that feels foreign to academia. I have depended on a tremendous staff, great advisory board, deeply committed funders, and supportive colleagues. And my family has had to give up a lot. I work constantly.

Tremblay: You have been identified as one of the “top 50 people shaping American politics.” Wow. What does that mean to you?

Goldrick-Rab: Seems like ancient history now...it meant that once upon a time people in Washington, D.C. listened to science.

Tremblay: You were also named “6th in the nation among education scholars.” How can you use that for good in the United States?

Goldrick-Rab: The Hope Center is how I am using it. I have a platform and privilege to influence how colleges think about what it means to be a student-ready college.

Tremblay: In 2016, you were on *The Daily Show*. What was that like?

Goldrick-Rab: Shocking. Terrifying. I shook the entire time from the pressure to perform in front of millions, delivering my message: there are homeless college students right here in the USA and we have to do better than this. You can watch that four-minute clip online.¹

Tremblay: You are fighting for a financing system. What is your ideal model of a financing system that provides every American a right to a high-quality college education?

Goldrick-Rab: Free and adequately funded public higher education.

Tremblay: Tell us more about your book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. What’s the overall message, and why should people read it?

Goldrick-Rab: The current financial aid system has failed students for decades because it is based on a set of outdated assumptions; students need money so it must be rehailed. Anyone who cares about the future of this country has to care about the human and economic consequences of paying the price for the current system.

¹ See <[cc.com/video-clips/ah40j7/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-sara-goldrick-rab---paying-the-price-for-higher-education](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah40j7the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-sara-goldrick-rab---paying-the-price-for-higher-education)>.

Tremblay: Since 2013, you have secured more than \$18 million in funding to do your work. How did you do it? How have you used that funding to accelerate your impact?

Goldrick-Rab: One grant at a time. I have been writing grants since I was a graduate student. I explain our work clearly; we make good and high impact use of dollars; and we deliver on our promises. It is very hard to break open a new field so whenever I can, I seek flexible funds and penny pinch to invest in those new areas. Also, I make sure everyone learns from our work; knowledge dissemination accelerates impact.

Tremblay: What is higher education “doing right”?

Goldrick-Rab: Enrolling students from all walks of life.

Tremblay: Thinking about the future, what’s on the horizon for you?

Goldrick-Rab: Another book. Scaling my Hope team, our work at [Edquity](#), and the nonprofit I founded, [Believe in Students](#), which offers emergency aid via [The FAST Fund](#).

Tremblay: Given this important cause, what keeps you up at night?

Goldrick-Rab: Work. Not enough hours in the day. Worrying that we aren’t helping enough students. Burning out my team because we are underfunded relative to the demands on our time.

Tremblay: Switching gears, what do you do for fun?

Goldrick-Rab: Anything and everything with my kids and my husband, especially travel.

Tremblay: Thinking back many years ago, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Goldrick-Rab: President

Tremblay: Which is more important in your work: metrics or message and why?

Goldrick-Rab: Both! My message is about impact, and that is measurable.

Tremblay: At present, you hold multiple active titles: Professor of Sociology & Medicine, Temple University; Founding Director, Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; Chief Strategy Officer for Emergency Aid, Edquity; Founder of Believe in Students and The FAST Fund. Which of these titles holds the most meaning to you and why?

Goldrick-Rab: I cannot choose, but my favorite title is Mom.

About the Author

Christopher Tremblay, Ed.D., is Editor-in-Chief of *College and University* as well as Director of Strategic Engagement for the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) and Director of AACRAO’s Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Endorsement Program. Tremblay has nearly 25 years of experience in college admissions and enrollment management, having served as vice chancellor for enrollment management at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, associate provost for enrollment management at Western Michigan University, and assistant vice chancellor for enrollment management at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, among other positions. Tremblay earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Western Michigan University. He has a post-master’s certificate in enrollment management from Capella University, and doctorate of education in educational leadership from the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

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