

Deep Discussions around Broadband as an Equity Issue, Driving for Equity in the Talent Pipeline and Bridging Gaps in Education and Opportunity at HEAF's 2020 Gala

Robert F. Smith presents Gala Honoree Eric Schmidt in discussion with Fareed Zakaria about Innovation and Education

Ursula Burns, Roger Ferguson and Darren Walker discuss Equity and Equality in Education and the Talent Pipeline

HEAF Board Member and Gala Honoree Alexandra Alger discusses Bridging Academic Disparities with Gale Reeve, former New York City Department of Education Superintendent

New York, NY – November 4, 2020: School has been interrupted, but learning and fundraising have not. The Harlem Educational Activities Fund ([HEAF](#)) marched onward with its first virtual Gala to celebrate the contributions of education's innovators and discuss disruptors that have the potential to roadblock vulnerable learners.

2020 Gala Honoree Eric Schmidt, former Chairman & CEO of Google and Co-Founder of [Schmidt Futures](#), was introduced by 2019 Honoree [Robert F. Smith](#), Founder, Chairman and CEO of [Vista Equity Partners](#). Fareed Zakaria, Washington Post columnist and CNN commentator, interviewed Schmidt regarding his current and future projects.

Roger W. Ferguson, Jr., President & CEO of [TIAA](#), was joined by Ursula Burns, former Chairman & CEO of Xerox and VEON, Senior Advisor at [Teneo](#), and Darren Walker, President of the [Ford Foundation](#) for a discussion on shattering norms in order to meaningfully diversify the talent pipeline.

HEAF Board Member and 2020 Gala Honoree Alexandra Alger, [Alger Funds](#), addressed bridging academic inequities for students from underserved communities with Gale Reeves, retired New York City Department of Education Superintendent.

[Smith, the philanthropist](#) whose contributions to education include support of HEAF in addition to his Morehouse College announcement in 2019, welcomed into the fold new Honoree Schmidt, who one year ago launched Rise, a \$1 billion initiative to find and connect exceptionally talented young people world-wide to provide them with the resources they need to serve their communities.

In his introduction to Schmidt, Smith brought up a key topic: the digital divide. The subject is one of which the HEAF community is acutely aware: the growing gap in opportunities for families that are connected versus those that are not.

“This is especially true in the Black community, where one-third of all households still have no broadband or internet. In the age of 5G, lacking internet means lacking opportunity and falling behind the competition,” Smith said.

Roger Ferguson also underscored how the pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide in his conversation with Ursula Burns and Darren Walker, commenting: “I do think this set of pandemics/crisis has shed a new light on inequities and inequalities on the campus. As schools have gone remote there are stark distinctions between those who have more and those who have less.”

Zakaria asked for Schmidt’s insights from his work with the Reimagine New York Commission, which is seeking solutions to disruptions caused by the pandemic. Schmidt offered three points, the first of which he called the primacy of broadband.

“We are looking at a scenario where children are going to lose a whole year of their education, especially in underserved communities because of a lack of access to broadband,” Schmidt said. Research showed families across the state were living in crowded apartments, often with one slow performing computer access point which family members had to compete to use. Students were often unable to complete homework.

But, Schmidt stated the research also showed him that “New York City will come back stronger than ever.”

Burns, Ferguson and Walker were featured in a separate conversation, an honest and in-depth discussion about racial inequity and socio-economic disparities contributing to gaps in education from the earliest grades through to leadership opportunities in business.

Ursula Burns said, “From the corporate perspective, we are at a very important inflection point where companies are starting to fundamentally question their approach to DE&I from a positive perspective, reaching out to diverse leaders to get input and insight”

In the same conversation, Ferguson said, “We are standing on the broad shoulders and bent backs of our predecessors but yet here we are. This is a time for a cautious and realistic optimism. HEAF is making education open to thousands who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to advance”

Alexandra Alger and Gale Reeves discussed the opportunities that HEAF provides to its students.

Reeves said, “I think about the students who never thought that there was a possibility for them to thing about entering the more competitive colleges and through HEAF’s work , it is creating the vison of opportunity for them”

“HEAF closes these opportunity gaps” – Alexandra Alger

Zakaria and Schmidt also touched on this during their discussion. Regarding access and opportunity for talented minority students. Both Schmidt and Smith are committed to the idea that talent and hard work should be rewarded with a fair chance at success.

Schmidt offered advice to HEAF scholars saying that they should try to master calculus or at the very least they should understand analytics, because these skills can lead to interesting careers and high paid opportunities.

“Like me, he believes that connectivity is an equalizing force,” Smith said of Schmidt in his introduction, “He understands the risk inherent to a world where technology means promise for some but barriers to others.”

Darren Walker also talked about the importance of bridging the education gap saying, “we share the story of mobility through education, we were lucky to live in this country at a time when our nation was investing heavily in the public assets that made it possible for us to get on the mobility escalator.”

View the timely panel discussions on HEAF’s [YouTube](#) channel.

Connect:

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