

INNOVATION IN ACTION

REACHING THE WORKFORCE

2025 Gateways Higher Education Faculty Forum | Speaker Biographies

AMANDA QUESENBERRY is a Professor at Illinois State University in the School of Teaching and Learning. Dr. Quesenberry has over 20 years of experience working in the field of early childhood special education. She received her Ph.D. in Early Childhood Special Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2007. Her research interests include young children's social and emotional development, educators' professional development, international programs, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and policy. Dr. Quesenberry has presented conference and poster sessions at numerous local, state, and national conferences on and is involved in multiple local, state, and national organizations.

CARRIE NEPSTAD is a Professor and the coordinator of the Child Development program at Harold Washington College, City Colleges of Chicago where she has taught for over twenty years. Carrie has an interest in the assessment of student learning and has served in various leadership roles for the institution's assessment committee and as coordinator for the institution's reporting to the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). She has served as a peer reviewer for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and is currently serving on the NAEYC Commission on the Accreditation of Early Childhood Higher Education Programs. Her research interest is in the preparation and ongoing professional development of early childhood teacher educators. She is also interested in the importance of play, self-care, and mental health in early childhood.

CATHERINE MAIN is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Early Childhood Education in the College of Education at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). She has more 30 years of work on behalf of young children and their families. Her work at the UIC College of Education has included innovative and responsive program development and coordination in Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education. Currently she is the PI on a Department of Labor (DOL) Apprenticeship Building America (ABA) to implement a pilot apprenticeship program. She regularly presents her work at national conferences and as an invited speaker at local conferences. She is the past-President of the Illinois Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators and a member of the board for Chicago Youth Centers.

CHRISTI CHADWICK is the Project Director, Early Childhood Consortium with the Illinois Board of Higher Education and has spent over 25 years focused on advancing high-quality early learning opportunities for young children, particularly those from under-resourced communities. She currently serves as the Project Director for the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, an initiative to support seamless higher education pathways and opportunities and supports for the early childhood workforce to access and complete credentials and degrees. Prior to her work at IBHE, Christi worked in roles in Colorado and Illinois where she focused developing, strengthening, and better compensating the early childhood workforce in positions such as Workforce Development Policy Director in the Illinois Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development and Early Learning Policy Director in the City of Chicago Mayor's Office, where, among other things, she directed the start-up of the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship, designed to provide funding and wrap around supports for increased higher education access and completion. Additionally, Christi worked in higher education, serving as District Director for Child Development at City Colleges of Chicago, where she led the restructuring of five urban child development laboratory centers and supported academic programs to become NAEYC accredited. Christi began her career teaching kindergarten and has experience teaching college and mentoring student teachers. Christi received her bachelor's and master's in early childhood education from the University of North Texas, and her Master of Public Policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago, where she was an Irving B. Harris Child and Family Policy Fellow.

DEBBIE LESLIE is Director of Education Outreach and Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at UChicago STEM Education. After graduating from Yale University with a BA in Molecular Biochemistry and Biophysics, Debbie received an MST from the University of Chicago and loved being an early childhood classroom teacher for 11 years. At UChicago STEM Education, Debbie draws on her interests and expertise in early childhood, professional development, classroom coaching, curriculum development, organizational leadership, and family supports to work on a wide range of projects. Recent projects include collaborating with UChicago faculty on a family-facing early math website and an early math assessment, developing and supporting early childhood STEM programs for teachers and families, and partnering with MathTalk PBC on their public installations and apps. She is also Co-PI and lead coach for the Active Playful Learning project, and she leads the early childhood author team for the *Everyday*.

ELIZABETH WHITE is a Professor of Child Development in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. Dr. White earned her Ph.D. in Education with a focus on Child Development from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2012. Her research interests include children's civic engagement, teachers' civic practices, culturally responsive teaching, and pre-service teacher preparation. Dr. White formerly taught elementary school in Atlanta, GA.

FLOR E. CARABEZ is the Director of Adult and Online Student Experience. In this role she serves as the chief advocate for the support of adult and online students to increase persistence and expedite their path to graduation. This includes efforts in credit for prior learning and competency based learning. Dra. Carabez holds her Doctorate of Education in Higher Education Leadership from NLU, a Master of Education in Youth Development from the University of Illinois in Chicago, and a Bachelor of Science in Community Leadership and Civic Engagement from Northern Illinois University.

FLORENSIA SURJADI is an Associate Professor in Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS) at Northern Illinois University. Her research focuses on family relationships, the influence of community and family on child health and well-being, and the application of quantitative research methods, particularly in longitudinal data analysis. Dr. Surjadi's work explores how family dynamics and community contexts shape child development and health outcomes. She holds a Ph.D. in HDFS with a minor in Statistics from Iowa State University, where she also earned her M.S. in HDFS with a specialization in Early Childhood Education and a minor in Statistics.

INNA N. DOLZHENKO is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education and interim chairperson of the Department of Education Studies. Dr. Dolzhenko has served as the department's program assessment coordinator and principal investigator for the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) grant program. Her primary research interests are focused on issues related to integration of social-emotional learning strategies in the teacher education programs, as well as curriculum and management in diverse early education settings. Dr. Dolzhenko is the author of *Understanding teachers' cultural competencies: Supporting the development of teachers' self-awareness and social awareness*.

JOANNA SKOURLETOS is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Illinois Chicago's (UIC) Collaborative for Young Children and Families. She brings extensive experience in early childhood education, having worked as a preschool teacher in community-based organizations before moving into roles in coaching, research and higher education instruction. Her work focuses on early childhood workforce support and development through research-driven initiatives. Dr. Skourletos holds a Ph.D. from the hybrid Child Development program between Loyola University and Erikson Institute, an M.S.Ed. in Early Childhood Education from Dominican University, and a B.A. in Applied Psychology from UIC.

KATE VAREY is an Assistant Professor at Harry S. Truman College: City Colleges of Chicago in the Education, Human Development and Family Studies Department. Dr. Varey is a seasoned plurilingual educator, having worked with diverse students, families and communities for almost two decades in the early childhood, elementary, high school, and college context. Her educational core values are rooted in reciprocal relationship building, inquiry and responsive approaches to teaching and learning, ethics of care, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) both inside and outside the classroom. Her research interests include nature-based play and education, wellness, environmental affordances, and cross-cultural studies' impact on learning, development and education.

KENDRA NENIA is a Higher Education and Workforce Development Navigator at 4-C: Community Coordinated Child Care in DeKalb Illinois. Prior to working at 4-C, she spent the last 20 years working at NIU's Child Development and Family Center and has 30 years of experience in a wide variety of roles related to Early Childhood Education.

KIMBERLY GARRETT is currently an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Chicago State University. Dr. Garrett's research agenda includes teacher identity development, MotherScholarship and culturally relevant pedagogy, with a focus on designing culturally sustaining curriculum. Dr. Garrett has a passion for mentoring preservice and novice teachers through clinical supervision, and informally through student-created learning communities.

JOYCE GRONEWOLD is an experienced and dedicated administrator with over 20 years working in schools across Illinois. As a school psychologist, Joyce served central Illinois school districts including Pittsfield, Mount Sterling and Quincy, Illinois. Upon obtaining her Master of Education degree in General Administration, Joyce served as a special education supervisor and later Assistant Director of Specialized Student Services for School District U46 in Elgin. She then served as the Director of Student Services in Harvard, Illinois in McHenry County. Currently, Joyce Gronewold proudly serves districts as the Executive Director of Specialized Instruction at the Illinois State Board of Education. During her free time, Joyce enjoys traveling and spending time with her husband and 3 children who are away at college.

JUDSON CURRY is Dean for Liberal Arts and Sciences at Kishwaukee College (Malta IL), where he has worked with the Early Childhood Education program for 6.5 years. Prior to arriving at Kishwaukee College, Jud worked with programs for adult, nontraditional, and graduate students at Aurora University (Aurora) and North Park University (Chicago).

KAREN YARBROUGH is the Director of Policy and Strategy at UIC's Collaborative for Young Children and Families. Karen's career has focused on the intersection of research, policy, and practice – helping organizations incorporate research-based practices; ensuring that public policy is responsive to the science of early learning; and advocating for adequate public funding and science-based policy to support the needs of young children and their families. She has over 25 years of experience building and managing strong partnerships across the public and private sectors and mentoring high-performing teams in a fast-paced environment. Her expertise and leadership have resulted in numerous appointments to state advisory bodies and she regularly presents at state and national conferences. Karen holds a master's degree from the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at the University of Chicago and a bachelor's degree in Sociology and Anthropology from Lake Forest College. Karen lives Oak Park, Illinois with her three boys and two cats where she has made her home after enjoying an upbringing that ranged from America's south to Europe and the Middle East.

LESLIE LAYMAN is the Director of Strategic Initiatives for the McCormick Institute of Early Childhood Education at National Louis University. In this role she supports ECE workforce development alignments between training and higher education systems. She teaches in the Competency Based B.A. ECE Program. She enjoys collaborating with faculty and students to create unique learning experiences, developing and aligning curricula, and systems level higher ed work. She is involved in many ECE workforce advocacy projects and ECE higher education initiatives. She has a special interest in equity and inclusion in early education, and in all things play.

LINDA RUHE MARSH is the Director of the ECE Online Workforce Program at Illinois State University in the School of Teaching and Learning. Dr. Marsh has been in the field of early childhood education for over 30 years. She received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in 2012 and M.Ed in Early Childhood Education. Her experience includes teaching at the university level, supervising student teachers, consulting with schools and non-profit organizations as well as working directly with children and families as an early childhood special education teacher and an early interventionist. Dr. Marsh also formerly taught kindergarten, 2nd grade and served as the Early Head Start Director of a large urban community action agency.

MARCUS BROWN is the Deputy Director for Academic Affairs & Student Success, Illinois Community College Board. In this role, Dr. Brown is responsible for Overall administration of the Academic Affairs and Student Success Division including the approval of new units of instruction, new courses and reasonable and moderate extensions for both occupation and transfer disciplines, Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) and other articulation issues, teacher preparation, early childhood education, student services and supports, the Student Advisory Committee, and special studies related to instruction programs and/or accountability. He also works with dual credit, Transitional Instruction, student services, and works with diversity and inclusion efforts and other college and career readiness initiatives. In addition, Marcus has over 25 years of experience working in different aspects of higher learning. He has worked in recruitment and school relations, articulation, counseling and career services, student accommodations, and been a faculty member. He is a board-certified counselor. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Quincy University, a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology from the University of Connecticut, a Master of Business Administration from Millikin University, and his Ph.D. from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

MARCY MENDENHALL is the President and CEO of SAL Family and Community Services, where she has dedicated her career to advocating for high-quality early childhood education. With decades of experience as a social worker and early childhood leader, Marcy has significantly impacted both local and national communities through her work with SAL and Skip-A-Long Child Development Services. Her commitment to fostering vibrant and equitable communities is evident in her roles on the Illinois Early Childhood Education and Care Transition Advisory Committee, where she helps shape the future of early childhood education in Illinois and Professional Development Advisory Council (PDAC) tri-chair. Marcy's passion to develop and retain a skilled workforce in early childhood education is crucial. Marcy has been instrumental in initiatives like the Smart Start Early Childhood Apprenticeship Program, which helps individuals gain the necessary skills and credentials. She also supports families and young learners underscores her belief that early education is crucial for building a strong economy and a brighter future for all.

MARY QUEST is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Chicago State University. Mary's research focuses on engaging adult learners and technology mediated teaching and learning for young children and adults. She is especially interested in examining and understanding relationship-based educational approaches and the roles of individuals and groups in social learning processes.

MELISSA CLUCAS WALTER an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS) at Northern Illinois University, focuses on advancing the professional development of early childhood education (ECE) professionals. Her research aims to enhance the skills, preparedness, and methodologies of educators to foster high-quality interactions in early learning environments. Dr. Walter explores innovative approaches to ECE curriculum design, strategies for improving educator practices, and the impact of technology on early childhood experiences. She holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in HDFS, and a B.S. in Early Childhood Education Unified, all from Iowa State University.

MICHELLE WOOD is the Bureau Chief, of Quality Initiatives in the Division of Early Childhood at the Illinois Department of Human Services. Prior to joining IDHS, Michelle was a principal consultant in the early childhood department at the Illinois State Board of Education.

NATALIE VESGA is the Director of the Chicago Early Childhood Preparation and Pathways Project at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), which supports teachers working in community-based organizations and Chicago Public Schools achieve Illinois Professional Educator Licensure (PEL). In this role, she provides comprehensive and holistic support to post-baccalaureate and master's students in early childhood education, while also managing the program team.

NICOLE OFFUTT is the Student Teaching Coordinator for Illinois State University's Early Childhood Education Online Workforce Program. In this role, she designs individualized student teaching experiences that reflect the program's commitment to reducing equity and access barriers to degrees and licensure in education. Nicole has a Master's degree in teaching and is an Instructional Assistant Professor within ISU's School of Teaching and Learning.

SAMANTHA MCDAVID graduated from Knox College with a B.A. in Sociology. She operated a license-exempt family childcare for five years. She began working in an early childhood family engagement role at the DeKalb County ROE in 2018. During the first year of implementation, she was Birth to Five Illinois Region 16's Regional Council Manager. Samantha is now the Coordinator of Early Learning Programs, supervising and supporting all ROE early learning programs and coordinating the regional collaborative, DeKalb County Collaborative for Young Children.

SARAH GOWLER Professor and Program Coordinator of Early Childhood Education at Kankakee Community College She has a variety of professional experiences in the early childhood field, including roles as an educator, assistant director, director, parent educator, trainer, and higher education faculty. Creativity and playful learning experiences are foundational to my philosophy as an educator. Whether teaching toddlers or adults, Sarah believes that creativity and brainstorming help develop and apply essential skills that carry over into all areas of life.

SUSAN CARRINGTON is the Regional Council Manager for Birth to Five Illinois: Region 16 (DeKalb County). Prior to working for Birth to Five Illinois, I have spent the last 15 years working within the Early Childhood field with a variety of different roles from Teacher to Executive Director.

TANILLE ULM teaches all the Early Childhood courses at Lake Land College, but also is the owner of Zen Den studios in Charleston where we explore all types of art and yoga....even trapeze yoga.

TERESA RAMOS Prior to her appointment as Secretary of the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), Dr. Ramos served as First Assistant Deputy Governor for Education in the Governor's Office. Teresa also served as Vice President of Public Policy, Research, and Advocacy at Illinois Action for Children and as Director of Community Engagement for Advance Illinois and assisted the Governor's education transition team. Dr. Ramos holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology with a minor in Latina/Latino Studies from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.