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HUBweek forum highlights economic inequality



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By **Matt Rocheleau**

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At one point, the crowd was addressed by Drew G. Faust, president of Harvard University, the world’s richest college, with a \$37.6 billion endowment. Valerie R. Roberson, president of Roxbury Community College, a school with an endowment of about \$3.4 million, spoke moments later.

The contrast was not lost on at least one audience member at the forum on inequality, who asked how the state school could offer its students the same education as a much richer school like Harvard?

“The simple fact is community colleges are asked to do more with less resources,” Roberson responded. “There need to be changes in how community colleges are resourced so we can be more successful.”

The stark divide between haves and have-nots was on display throughout the discussion, entitled “Economic Growth for All,” which was hosted by the US Conference of Mayors as part of HUBweek, an ongoing weeklong festival of science, art, and technology.

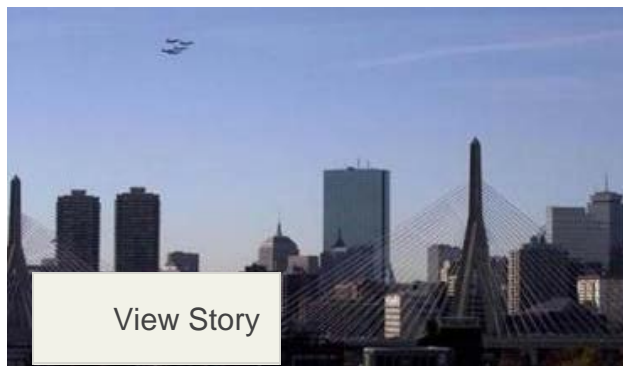
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Setti Warren, mayor of Newton, a city with a poverty rate of just over 4 percent, sat on the panel two seats from Ashley Swearegin, mayor of Fresno, Calif., a city with a poverty rate of 26 percent.



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“The status quo is not OK. We have to be hungry for change,” Swearegin told the crowd at Roxbury Community College.

“It takes very, very intense collaboration,” she said. “Sadly ... there becomes this sort of sub-industry of people who benefit from things not changing much. So when you want to disrupt that and you want to talk about transformational shift, you run into some of the fiercest politics that I’ve encountered.”

US Senator Elizabeth Warren, who appeared in a videotaped statement, said “the right kinds of investments need to be made.”

“Investments in things like education, infrastructure, innovative research,” she said. “The kinds of investments that give families a real opportunity to build a future for

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themselves and their kids.”

Before the panel was introduced, remarks were made by representatives from two key corporate sponsors of the event, Bank of America and Wells Fargo, a pair of financial mega-institutions that were both accused of contributing to the reckless lending that ignited the recent recession and which both required government bailouts.

Panel member Richard V. Reeves, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institute, said, “What’s essential to the American Dream is that where you’re born doesn’t determine where you end up.”

But, he said, statistics show that is increasingly not the case. “I know with statistical precision what your chances of being stuck at the bottom are,” Reeves said. “Born poor and born black, you have a 50 percent chance of staying there as an adult.”

Brian McGrory, editor of The Boston Globe, which was one of the sponsors of HUBweek, moderated the panel. He asked speakers if they were bothered by chief executives who make more in a single day than their average employees do in a year. After a series of measured responses, McGrory pressed them.

“You guys are giving reasoned answers,” he said. “Nobody’s ready to pound the podium on this and say that it is absurd that somebody is making in a day what most people make in a year?”

Later, Greg Fischer, mayor of Louisville, Ky., said, albeit in a mild tone, he was outraged.

“In America, we have lost a common purpose. It’s very clear to me,” he said. “There will someday be an awakening that our country has. I just don’t know how long it will take.”

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