

220+ Law and Economics Professors Urge Congress to Reject the TPP and Other Prospective Deals that Include Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS)

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Dear Member of Congress:

Last March 2015, members of the legal community wrote to congressional leaders and administration officials to oppose the inclusion of Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) provisions in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). We write now to express our extreme disappointment that the final text of the TPP that was finally made public in November 2015 did not heed those warnings about this controversial provision's negative consequences for our legal system. Those concerns expressed in the 2015 letter were based on past agreements and leaked texts from the TPP negotiations. Unfortunately the final TPP text simply replicates nearly word for word many of the problematic provisions from past agreements, and indeed would vastly expand the U.S. government's potential liability under the ISDS system.

We therefore urge you to protect the rule of law and our nation's democratic institutions and sovereignty by rejecting this TPP as long as ISDS is included. While there is still time, we urge you to pressure the United States Trade Representative (USTR) to change course in the TTIP negotiations and in negotiations of other prospective agreements, such as the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) between the United States and China, to ensure that ISDS is not included in any of those pacts.

ISDS grants foreign corporations and investors a special legal privilege: the right to initiate dispute settlement proceedings against a government for actions that allegedly violate loosely defined investor rights to seek damages from taxpayers for the corporation's lost profits. Essentially, corporations and investors use ISDS to challenge government policies, actions, or decisions that they allege reduce the value of their investments.

The problem with ISDS is not that it allows private corporations to sue the government for conduct that harms the corporations' economic interests. Indeed, U.S. domestic law already

recognizes the importance of granting private citizens and entities (including foreign corporations) the power to take legal action against the government in order to help promote effective implementation of the law and adherence to the Constitution. Over the past two centuries, the United States – through citizens, elected representatives, and courts – has established a framework of rules that govern such lawsuits against the government and continually refines those rules through democratic processes. These include rules on court procedures and evidence, which are designed to ensure the fairness, legitimacy and reliability of proceedings; rules on who may bring lawsuits and under which circumstances, which are designed to balance the right to sue with the need to ensure that government regulation in the public interest is not made impossible due to unlimited litigation; rules on the power of courts, which are designed to ensure that judges do not overly intrude on legitimate policy decisions made by elected legislatures or executive officials, and to ensure that federal judges do not unduly interfere with state law and policy; rules on appropriate remedies, which are crafted to achieve diverse policy aims such as deterrence, punishment, and compensation; and rules on the independence and accountability of judges who decide cases against the government.

Through ISDS, the federal government gives foreign investors – and foreign investors alone – the ability to bypass that robust, nuanced, and democratically responsive legal framework. Foreign investors are able to frame questions of domestic constitutional and administrative law as treaty claims, and take those claims to a panel of private international arbitrators, circumventing local, state or federal domestic administrative bodies and courts. Freed from fundamental rules of domestic procedural and substantive law that would have otherwise governed their lawsuits against the government, foreign corporations can succeed in lawsuits before ISDS tribunals even when domestic law would have clearly led to the rejection of those companies' claims. Corporations are even able to re-litigate cases they have already lost in domestic courts. It is ISDS arbitrators, not domestic courts, who are ultimately able to determine the bounds of proper administrative, legislative, and judicial conduct.

This system undermines the important roles of our domestic and democratic institutions, threatens domestic sovereignty, and weakens the rule of law.

In addition to these fundamental flaws that arise from a parallel and privileged set of legal rights and recourse for foreign economic actors, there are various flaws in the way ISDS proceedings are meant to be conducted in the TPP. In short, ISDS lacks many of the basic protections and procedures of the justice system normally available in a court of law. There are no mechanisms for domestic citizens or entities affected by ISDS cases to intervene in or meaningfully participate in the disputes; there is no appeals process and therefore no way of addressing errors of law or fact made in arbitral decisions; and there is no oversight or accountability of the private lawyers who serve as arbitrators, many of whom rotate between being arbitrators and bringing cases for corporations against governments. Codes of judicial conduct that bind the domestic judiciary do not apply to arbitrators in ISDS cases.

If the TPP text were approved by Congress, we would not only be entrenching this inherently flawed mechanism, but significantly expanding it. While the first investment treaty with ISDS was concluded in the late 1960s, investment treaties with ISDS were not widely negotiated until the 1990s, and ISDS claims only emerged in earnest in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, we really only have roughly 15 years of experience with this mechanism. Additionally, the United States has only one investment treaty in force with a major capital exporting state, Canada, meaning that only a relatively small share of foreign direct investment in the United States – roughly 10 percent – is protected by a treaty with ISDS. The TPP would double the percentage of covered investment in the United States, and if included in the TTIP as well, the amount of covered investment in the United States would rise significantly to approximately 70 percent; that would be a seven-fold increase in U.S. exposure to costly litigation and liability.

Before we further entrench and expand this relatively new area of law, the legal and policy communities must reflect on this experiment.

In recent years, corporations have challenged a wide range of environmental, health, and safety regulations, fiscal policies, bans on toxins, denials of permits including for toxic waste dumps, moratoria on extraction of natural resources, measures taken in response to financial crises, court decisions on issues ranging from the scope of intellectual property rights to the resolution of bankruptcy claims, policy decisions on privatizations of prisons and healthcare, and efforts to

combat tax evasion, among others. Nearly 700 cases have been filed against approximately 100 governments over the past few years. There were 50 known ISDS cases launched in the regime’s first three decades combined. But the number of cases has soared in recent years. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in 2015 alone, 70 ISDS cases were launched – more than in any previous year.

Fundamentally, the United States has typically only agreed to supranational adjudication in exceptional and justified cases and after resolving a range of complex legal and policy concerns about the scope and depth of supranational review and authority over domestic policies and decisions, the role of public, private and affected stakeholders in the legal process, and the available remedies to aggrieved parties. ISDS – and its expansion through the TPP and TTIP – brushes aside these complex concerns and threatens to dilute constitutional protections, weaken the judicial branch, and outsource our domestic legal system to a system of private arbitration that is isolated from essential checks and balances.

For the above reasons, we urge you to reject this TPP as long as it includes ISDS and ensure any future investment treaty, such as the TTIP and the BIT with China, excludes ISDS.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

1.	Laurence H. Tribe	Carl M. Loeb University Professor	Harvard Law School*
2.	Joseph Stiglitz	Nobel laureate in economics, University Professor	Columbia University
3.	Jeffrey D. Sachs	Director, Earth Institute, Columbia University	Columbia University
4.	Cruz Reynoso	Professor Emeritus	University of California, Davis, School of Law
5.	Dani Rodrik	Professor of International Political Economy	Harvard Kennedy School
6.	Lisa E. Sachs	Director, Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment	Columbia University
7.	Alan B. Morrison	Lerner Family Associate Dean for Public Interest & Public Service Law	George Washington University Law School
8.	Amy Kapczynski	Professor of Law	Yale Law School

* Organizational affiliation for all signatories is included for identification purposes only; individuals represent only themselves, not the institutions where they are teaching or other organizations in which they are active.

9.	Jose Antonio Ocampo	Professor	Columbia University
10.	David Singh Grewal	Professor	Yale Law School
11.	Peter Halewood	Professor of Law	Albany Law School
12.	Stephen E. Gottlieb	Jay and Ruth Caplan Distinguished Professor of Law	Albany Law School
13.	Gregory S. Munro	Professor, Retired	Alexander Blewett III School of Law, University of Montana
14.	John Willoughby	Professor, Department of Economics	American University
15.	Maria Floro	Professor, Department of Economics	American University
16.	Robert A. Blecker	Professor, Department of Economics	American University
17.	Robin Broad	Professor, School of International Service	American University
18.	Ann Shalleck	Professor of Law and Carrington Shields Scholar	American University Washington College of Law
19.	Brandon Butler	Practitioner-in-Residence, Intellectual Property Law Clinic	American University Washington College of Law
20.	Michael W. Carroll	Professor of Law and Director, Program on Information Justice and Intellectual Property	American University Washington College of Law
21.	Peter Jaszi	Professor of Law	American University Washington College of Law
22.	Sean Flynn	Associate Director, Program on Information Justice and Intellectual Property Professorial Lecturer in Residence	American University Washington College of Law
23.	William John Snape, III	Fellow in Environmental Law and Practitioner-in-Residence	American University Washington College of Law
24.	T. J. Davis	Attorney and Professor of History	Arizona State University, Tempe
25.	Helen de Haven	Associate Professor	Atlanta's John Marshall Law School
26.	Joseph Ricciardi	Associate Professor of Economics	Babson College
27.	William Van Lear	Professor of Economics	Belmont Abbey College
28.	Bryan Snyder	Senior Lecturer, Economics	Bentley University
29.	Susan P. Koniak	Professor of Law	Boston University
30.	Jeanne Koopman	Visiting Researcher of Economics	Boston University African Studies Center
31.	Dr. Kevin P. Gallagher	Professor of Global Development Policy; Research Director, Center for Finance, Law & Policy	Boston University, Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies
32.	Matías Vernengo	Professor of Economics	Bucknell University
33.	Mayo C. Toruño	Chair, Department of Economics; Professor of Economics	California State University, San Bernardino
34.	Aydin Cecen	Professor of Economics	Central Michigan University
35.	Andrew Friedman	Lecturer in Law	Columbia Law School
36.	Jeremy K. Kessler	Associate Professor of Law	Columbia Law School
37.	Spencer J. Pack	Professor of Economics	Connecticut College
38.	Angela B. Cornell	Clinical Professor of Law	Cornell Law School
39.	Lourdes Beneria	Professor Emerita	Cornell University
40.	K. Babe Howell	Associate Professor	CUNY School of Law

41.	Pamela Edwards	Professor of Law	CUNY School of Law
42.	Jennifer Olmsted	Professor of Economics and Director of Middle East Studies	Drew University
43.	Jedediah Purdy	Robinson O. Everett Professor of Law	Duke University School of Law
44.	Paul DeWitt Carrington	Harry R. Chadwick, Sr. Professor Emeritus of Law	Duke University School of Law
45.	William Moner	Assistant Professor	Elon University
46.	David S. Levine	Associate Professor; Affiliate Scholar; Fellow	Elon University School of Law; Stanford Law Center for Internet and Society; Princeton Center for Information Technology Policy
47.	Liza Vertinsky	Associate Professor	Emory Law School
48.	Maritza Reyes	Associate Professor of Law	Florida A&M University College of Law
49.	Antonio Callari	Sigmund M. and Mary B. Hyman Professor of Economics	Franklin & Marshall College
50.	Sean Flaherty	Professor of Economics, Chair of Economics	Franklin & Marshall College
51.	Susan K. Sell	Professor of Political Science and International Affairs	George Washington University, Elliott School of International Affairs
52.	Adam Levitin	Professor of Law	Georgetown University Law Center
53.	David Luban	Professor of Law and Philosophy	Georgetown University Law Center
54.	Yaniv Heled	Assistant Professor of Law	Georgia State University College of Law
55.	Paul Hancock	Professor Emeritus of Economics	Green Mountain College
56.	Laurie Nisonoff	Professor Emerita of Economics	Hampshire College
57.	Christine Desan	Leo Gottlieb Professor of Law	Harvard Law School
58.	Duncan Kennedy	Carter Professor of General Jurisprudence, Emeritus	Harvard Law School
59.	Gerald Frug	Louis D. Brandeis Professor of Law	Harvard Law School
60.	Lucie White	Louis A. Horvitz Professor of Law	Harvard Law School
61.	Martha Field	Langdell Professor of Law	Harvard Law School
62.	Martin Melkonian	Adjunct Associate Professor of Economics	Hofstra University
63.	Richard W. Wright	University Distinguished Professor and Professor of Law	Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law
64.	Lea Shaver	Professor of Law and Dean's Fellow	Indiana University McKinney School of Law
65.	Shaianne Osterreich	Associate Professor Economics	Ithaca College
66.	Anton Korinek	Assistant Professor	Johns Hopkins University
67.	Marie Christine Duggan	Professor of Economics	Keene State College
68.	Steve Cohn	Charles W. & Arvilla S. Timme Chair in Economics	Knox College
69.	James DeVault	Professor of Economics, Department Head	Lafayette College
70.	Thomas Masterson	Research Scholar and Director of Applied Micromodeling	Levy Economics Institute of Bard College

71.	Mark A. Peterson	Clinical Professor of Law (retired)	Lewis & Clark Law School
72.	Lauren E. Willis	Professor of Law	Loyola Law School, Los Angeles
73.	Imre S. Szalai	Judge John D. Wessel Distinguished Professor of Social Justice	Loyola University New Orleans College of Law
74.	M Isabel Medina	Ferris Family Distinguished Professor of Law	Loyola University New Orleans College of Law
75.	Cynthia Ho	Professor of Law	Loyola University of Chicago
76.	Cecilia Ann Winters	Professor Emerita	Manhattanville College
77.	Michael Waxman	Professor of Law	Marquette University Law School
78.	Paul M. Secunda	Professor of Law and Director, Labor and Employment Law Program	Marquette University Law School
79.	Jonathan Hersh	Lecturer	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
80.	Sean A. Pager	Professor	Michigan State University College of Law
81.	Christoph Henkel	Professor of Law	Mississippi College School of Law
82.	Eva Paus	Professor of Economics	Mount Holyoke College
83.	Shahrukh Rafi Khan	Visiting Professor of Economics	Mount Holyoke College
84.	Carlin Meyer	Emeritus Professor of Law	New York Law School
85.	Frank W. Munger	Professor of Law	New York Law School
86.	Brook Baker	Professor	Northeastern University School of Law
87.	Dan Danielsen	Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor of Law	Northeastern University School of Law
88.	Karl Klare	George J. & Kathleen Waters Matthews Distinguished University Professor	Northeastern University School of Law
89.	Thomas Lambert	Assistant Professor of Public Administration and Policy	Northern Kentucky University
90.	Douglas Donoho	Professor of Law	Nova Southeastern University
91.	Joel A. Mintz	Professor of Law	Nova Southeastern University
92.	Joseph Harbaugh	Professor Emeritus and Dean Emeritus	Nova Southeastern University College of Law
93.	Jon M. Garon	Dean and Professor of Law	Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
94.	Timothy A. Canova	Professor of Law and Public Finance	Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
95.	Micah Berman	Assistant Professor of Public Health and Law	Ohio State University
96.	Amy Cohen	Professor of Law	Ohio State University Moritz College of Law
97.	Mary C King	Professor Emerita, Economics Department	Portland State University
98.	Anca Voicu	Associate Professor	Rollins College
99.	Avraham Izhat Baranes	Visiting Assistant Professor	Rollins College
100.	Benjamin Balak	Associate Professor of Economics	Rollins College
101.	Charles P. Rock	Professor of Economics	Rollins College

102.	Harry Kypraios	Associate Professor of Economics	Rollins College
103.	Kenna C. Taylor	Professor of Economics	Rollins College
104.	Philip Kozel	Professor of Economics	Rollins College
105.	Beth Stephens	Professor of Law	Rutgers Law School
106.	James Gray Pope	Professor of Law & Sidney Reitman Scholar	Rutgers Law School
107.	Paul Tractenberg	Professor Emeritus	Rutgers Law School
108.	Yana van der Meulen Rodgers	Professor	Rutgers University
109.	Nina Shapiro	Professor of Economics	Saint Peter's University
110.	Tracey M. Roberts	Visiting Professor	Samford University, Cumberland School of Law
111.	Kathleen McAfee	Professor of International Relations	San Francisco State University
112.	Philip Jimenez	Professor of Law	Santa Clara University
113.	Charlotte Garden	Associate Professor	Seattle University School of Law
114.	Tayyab Mahmud	Professor of Law	Seattle University School of Law
115.	Jon Romberg	Associate Professor	Seton Hall University School of Law
116.	Tai Young-Taft	Assistant Professor of Economics	Simon's Rock College
117.	Jerome Joffe	Assoc. Professor (retired)	St. John's University
118.	Michael Asimow	Visiting Professor of Law	Stanford Law School
119.	Mateo Taussig-Rubbo	Professor of Law	State University of New York-Buffalo
120.	Athena D. Mutua	Professor of Law, Floyd H. & Hilda L. Hurst Faculty Scholar	SUNY Buffalo Law School
121.	Martha T. McCluskey	Professor of Law	SUNY Buffalo Law School
122.	Ted P Schmidt	Associate Professor	SUNY Buffalo Law School
123.	Howard Botwinick	Associate Professor of Economics	SUNY Cortland
124.	Edith Kuiper	Associate Professor	SUNY New Paltz
125.	Brishen Rogers	Associate Professor of Law	Temple University Beasley School of Law
126.	David Kairys	Professor of Law	Temple University Beasley School of Law
127.	Peter K. Yu	Professor of Law	Texas A&M University School of Law
128.	Barry Herman	Visiting Faculty	The New School
129.	Michael Cohen	Professor of International Affairs	The New School
130.	Sakiko Fukuda-Parr	Professor	The New School
131.	Ellen E. Deason	Joanne Wharton Murphy/Classes of 1965 and 1973 Professor in Law	The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law
132.	Margot E. Kaminski	Assistant Professor of Law	The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law
133.	Thomas Michael Power	Professor Emeritus of Economics	The University of Montana
134.	Cynthia Nance	Nathan G. Gordon Professor of Law & Dean Emeritus	University of Arkansas

135.	Michael Reich	Professor	University of California, Berkeley
136.	Pamela Samuelson	Richard M Sherman Distinguished Professor of Law	University of California, Berkeley
137.	Pranab Bardhan	Professor of Graduate School	University of California, Berkeley
138.	Charles L Knapp	Professor of Law	University of California, Hastings College of the Law
139.	Mark N. Aaronson	Emeritus Professor of Law	University of California, Hastings College of the Law
140.	Naomi Roht-Arriaza	Distinguished Professor of Law	University of California, Hastings College of the Law
141.	Catherine Fisk	Chancellor's Professor of Law	University of California, Irvine
142.	Erwin Chemerinsky	Dean of the School of Law, Distinguished Professor of Law, Raymond Pyke Professor of First Amendment Law	University of California, Irvine
143.	Chiara Piovani	Assistant professor	University of Denver
144.	Haider A. Khan	John Evans Distinguished University Professor	University of Denver
145.	Tracy Mott	Associate Professor, Economics	University of Denver
146.	Karin Wedig	Assistant Professor	University of Denver, Josef Korbel School of International Studies
147.	Annecoos Wiersema	Professor of Law	University of Denver, Sturm College of Law
148.	Paula R Rhodes	Associate Professor	University of Denver, Sturm College of Law
149.	Stephen L. Pepper	Professor of Law	University of Denver, Sturm College of Law
150.	Maxine Burkett	Professor of Law	University of Hawai'i
151.	Annemarie Bridy	Professor of Law	University of Idaho College of Law
152.	Ariana Levinson	Associate Professor of Law	University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law
153.	Frank Pasquale	Professor of Law	University of Maryland
154.	Marley Weiss	Professor of Law	University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law
155.	Peter Spiegler	Assistant Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts
156.	Gerald Epstein	Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
157.	J. Mohan Rao	Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
158.	James K. Boyce	Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
159.	Mwangi wa Githinji	Associate Professor, Economics Department	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
160.	Robert Pollin	Co-director and Distinguished Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Amherst
161.	Arthur MacEwan	Professor Emeritus of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Boston
162.	J K Kapler	Associate Professor	University of Massachusetts, Boston
163.	Julie A. Nelson	Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Boston

164.	Philip I. Moss	Professor of Economics	University of Massachusetts, Lowell
165.	David Abraham	Professor of Law	University of Miami
166.	Elizabeth Inglesias	Professor of Law	University of Miami School of Law
167.	Thomas E. Weisskopf	Professor of Economics (Emeritus)	University of Michigan
168.	Ann Markusen	Professor	University of Minnesota
169.	Cyrus Bina	Distinguished Research Professor of Economics	University of Minnesota, Morris
170.	Mercer Bullard	Professor of Law and Butler, Snow, O'Mara, Stevens, and Cannada Distinguished Lecturer	University of Mississippi School of Law
171.	Hendrik Van den Berg	Professor Emeritus	University of Nebraska, Lincoln
172.	Kay Kindred	Professor of Law	University of Nevada Las Vegas School of Law
173.	Marcus Hurn	Professor of Law	University of New Hampshire School of Law
174.	Alfred Dennis Mathewson	Dean & Henry Weihofen Chair in Law	University of New Mexico School of Law
175.	Deborah M. Weissman	Reef C. Ivey II Distinguished Professor of Law	University of North Carolina School of Law
176.	Amitava Krishna Dutt	Professor of Economics and Political Science	University of Notre Dame
177.	Marty Wolfson	Professor of Economics Emeritus	University of Notre Dame
178.	Barbara J. Fick	Associate Professor of Law	University of Notre Dame Law School
179.	Jaime Ros	Professor Emeritus of Economics	University of Notre Dame, Kellogg Institute for International Studies
180.	James M. O'Fallon	Professor of Law, Emeritus	University of Oregon School of Law
181.	Dorene Isenberg	Professor of Economics	University of Redlands
182.	Nathaniel Cline	Assistant Professor	University of Redlands
183.	Richard McIntyre	Professor and Chair, Department of Economics	University of Rhode Island
184.	Ann C. Hodges	Professor of Law	University of Richmond
185.	Bikku Kuruvila	Visiting Scholar	University of San Francisco
186.	Tim Iglesias	Professor of Law	University of San Francisco School of Law
187.	Gregory Keating	Vice Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs and William T. Dalessi Professor of Law and Philosophy	University of Southern California Gould School of Law
188.	William E. Forbath	Lloyd M. Bentsen Chair in Law; Associate Dean of Research, School of Law; Professor of History	University of Texas at Austin
189.	Gunseli Berik	Professor of Economics	University of Utah
190.	Hans G Ehrbar	Associate Professor Emeritus	University of Utah
191.	Korkut Erturk	Professor of Economics	University of Utah
192.	Stephen C. Bannister	Assistant Professor, Department of Economics	University of Utah

193.	Elaine McCrate	Professor	University of Vermont
194.	Stephanie Seguino	Professor	University of Vermont
195.	Robert Aronson	Betts, Patterson & Mines Professor of Law Emeritus	University of Washington School of Law
196.	Charles P. Dykman	Adjunct Professor	University of Wisconsin Law School
197.	Alexia Kulwicz	Assistant Professor, Lawyer	University of Wisconsin–Extension
198.	Joel Rogers	Sewell-Bascom Professor of Law, Political Science, Public Affairs, and Sociology	University of Wisconsin–Madison
199.	Farida Khan	Professor of Economics	University of Wisconsin–Parkside
200.	Marcelo Milan	Assistant Professor of Economics	University of Wisconsin–Parkside
201.	Michael C. Duff	Professor of Law	University of Wyoming College of Law
202.	Robert N. Covington	Professor of Law Emeritus	Vanderbilt University
203.	Jennifer Taub	Professor of Law	Vermont Law School
204.	Joan Vogel	Professor of Law	Vermont Law School
205.	John D. Echeverria	Professor	Vermont Law School
206.	Liz Ryan Cole	Professor	Vermont Law School
207.	Timothy Stoltzfus Jost	Professor	Washington and Lee University
208.	John N. Drobak	Professor of Economics, and Professor of Political Economy	Washington University School of Law
209.	William Burnham	Professor of Law Emeritus	Wayne State University
210.	Julie Matthaei	Professor of Economics	Wellesley College
211.	Roger Even Bove	Retired Associate Professor	West Chester University of Pennsylvania
212.	Karl Petrick	Associate Professor of Economics	Western New England University
213.	Howard I Kalodner	Dean and Professor of Law Emeritus	Western New England University School of Law
214.	Leora Harpaz	Professor Emeritus	Western New England University School of Law
215.	John Miller	Professor of Economics	Wheaton College, Norton, MA
216.	Neil H. Cogan	Professor of Law	Whittier College
217.	Peter L. Reich	Professor of Law and Director, Environmental Law Concentration	Whittier Law School
218.	Dr. Sheila D. Collins	Professor Emerita of Political Science	William Paterson University
219.	Christopher L. Blakesley	Barrick Distinguished Scholar & Cobeaga Law Firm Professor of Law	William S. Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
220.	Jeffrey W. Stempel	Doris S. & Theodore B. Lee Professor of Law	William S. Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
221.	John Sheahan	Emeritus Professor of Economics	Williams College
222.	Paulette Olson	Professor Emeritus	Wright State University
223.	Douglas Kysar	Joseph M. Field '55 Professor of Law	Yale Law School