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A 1971 graduate of the University of Hawaii and a 1976 graduate of Yale Law School, Samuelson was a litigation associate with the New York law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher before turning to academic pursuits. From 1981 through June 1996 she was a member of the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh Law School. She has been a member of the Berkeley faculty since 1996 as well as a Visiting Professor at Columbia, Cornell, Emory, Harvard, and NYU Law Schools.