THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Expanding opportunities in America's cities

Speech by Rip Rapson:

How Higher Education Can Work With Foundations to Meet the Needs of America in the 21st Century

Address to the Council of Independent Colleges, New York.

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Good morning. Thank you for such a kind introduction.

Your institutions have changed our nation. Inspiring young people to a different set of aspirations. Opening their awareness to their God-given gifts. Teaching them to dream. Giving them the tools to succeed.
It is an honor to be here with you.

I'd like to talk this morning about the educational challenges swirling around us – us, philanthropy; us, independent colleges; us, the broader society. I'll divide my remarks into three sections:

First, the transformations in the broader higher education environment; and

Second, the shifts we've made at Kresge in the last five years and the implications they may hold for independent colleges;

Third, the possibilities that the environment presents for reform.

I. The Changes in Kresge's Grantmaking

For most of our foundation's history, independent colleges have been the bread and butter of Kresge capital-facilities challenge grants. Over the last 40 years, some 428 Council of Independent Colleges schools in almost every state received more than 1,400 capital grants from Kresge, totaling more than $330 million – a third of a billion dollars. These grants went to build or renovate student centers, science labs, libraries,

gymnasiums and classrooms – a recognition that having up-to-date facilities is an important part of meeting academic mission.

This is a proud legacy. We've been able to contribute materially to vitally important projects on your campuses. We've helped strengthen your development departments. And we've underwritten a variety of longer-term capacity-building measures.

Since my arrival, however, we've navigated away from capital challenge grants as our sole tool in helping institutions of higher education. Indeed, we've made only a single such grant this year – to Spelman College. Partly, because we heard from those institutions that they had needs – capital and otherwise – that extended far beyond a particular building project. Partly, because the field has changed with more robust individual donors and more sophisticated means of raising capital funds.

But mostly, because we believe the needs and opportunities of the field have changed – profoundly and enduringly. Hilary Pennington (of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) covered this territory thoroughly and thoughtfully in her earlier remarks, but let me offer three punctuation points – three aspects of those changes strike us as most compelling.

First, the ever-clearer imperative to increase college achievement rates.

As Hilary so eloquently noted, the evidence is overwhelming: college degrees matter.[1] Higher education attainment rates in America have plateaued, opening the door for the rest of the world to catch up to us – which they have, with almost a dozen nations leapfrogging over us. With far too many Americans excluded from the economic and educational mainstream, we need strategies to open pathways into college and to achieve success once a student is there.

The second aspect is the need to serve a broader cohort of students.

In our old world, Kresge excluded community colleges from our eligibility criteria. And yet, approximately half of all students pursuing postsecondary education are doing so at community colleges. The student bodies of those institutions increasingly comprise a disproportionate number of low-income and underserved people, and we know that we won't be able to significantly boost the nation's college attainment rate without focusing on populations of students that have not been historically well-served by higher education. To wall off our funding from community colleges seemed at jarring odds with Kresge's

long-standing commitment to promoting diversity and increasing opportunity. We've accordingly opened our doors more widely to let these institutions in, with half of Kresge's education-related grantmaking now supporting them.

The third change has been the elevation of college access and success onto the radar of key national philanthropic institutions – Gates, Lumina, Wal-Mart and Ford in particular.

Kresge's relatively small education budget is dramatically enhanced by the ability to work with other thoughtful, effective philanthropic partners. The presence of these other foundations in the educational attainment space also creates a platform for cross-foundation learning – making each of us a little bit smarter, more contextual and increasingly strategic.

These three changes have contributed to what we fund and how we fund it. You can read all about our new approach on our website, but our course change away from capital challenge grants and toward promoting postsecondary access and success for low-income, first generation and underrepresented students is so fundamental as to require a few words of explanation.

We have three main strategies. If they seem like an echo chamber after hearing about the Gates Foundation's expansive and compelling work, this is entirely intentional. The two foundations entered this realm of work at almost exactly the same time, and Kresge continues to be inspired by our larger sister institution.

The first strategy is supporting pathways to and through college.

This includes building a college-going culture in schools and communities, supporting students to apply to college, helping them to access financial aid and, once they get into college, ensuring their persistence and timely graduation.

The second strategy is to build the capacity of institutions that focus on low-income, underrepresented and first-generation students.

Every college in America serves students with this profile to some degree, but we want to strengthen those institutions whose primary mission it is to focus on these students – not just community colleges, but also minority-serving institutions and Title III and Title V institutions.

And the third strategy is to increase productivity and innovation in higher education, braiding this work through the other two strategies.

We want to help colleges lower the cost of delivering an education while maintaining or improving quality – for example, through the lower operating costs that result from environmental sustainability efforts such as those undertaken by signatories to the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment.

Half of our grants still go to four-year institutions or to organizations that support them. But we are looking for institutions that focus primarily on first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students. We also typically prefer to work with institutions that are sufficiently large, or broadly networked, to have a meaningful impact on college achievement numbers. Small institutions seeking support for boutique programs that serve a low number of students have a harder sell, even if those programs are very effective.

This has been one of the most difficult aspects of our change – there are countless examples of extraordinary innovation, community engagement and cutting-edge practice being carried on by college and university campuses throughout the country. We are always open to taking a look at those, of course – and some cases may simply be so iconic or work at such a potentially large scale that supporting an individual campus may be the only sensible course. But the rule is otherwise. We will instead seek to scale up our potential impact by working with networks.

II. A Changing Landscape

I figure I have two choices at this point. I can sit down and thank you for listening politely to one foundation's change of direction that may have little bearing on your future. It reminds me of what Robert Kennedy once told an audience: "I have a speech which it is my responsibility to give, and you have a responsibility to listen to it. If you finish before I do, however, please let me know." Same rule this morning.

The alternative is to invite you to help me think though how the broader imperatives of education reform can tie back to small independent colleges and universities. I'd like to follow that course, if you don't mind. To do that, however, requires that we telescope out the conversation and ask how the challenges of a reordered world alter the rules of the road for independent educational institutions.

I don’t have to detail for this audience the disruptive power of the changes that have ricocheted through our social, political and economic systems over the last half-dozen years:

The economy seized up by ineffable international instabilities and by domestic consumer and business retrenchment.

Entire neighborhoods painstakingly built up layer by layer over decades through community sweat and treasure devastated by the mortgage crisis’ cancer of greed and overreach.

The crystallization, and politicalization, of ideological difference over the purpose and reach of the public sector.

Accelerating rates of poverty and income polarization jeopardizing the tenets of opportunity at the heart of our nation’s democratic heritage.

A dizzying pace of technological advance that challenges long-held cultural assumptions about how people relate to one another.

A public sector frozen in its tracks by dwindling tax receipts, eroding pension funds and the specter of bond defaults.

It’s tempting to think that private liberal arts colleges are immune to these societal tsunamis. But, of course, you aren’t. The cumulative impact of these changes nests your mission and your operations in a completely different ecology, bearing on how your students view the purpose of their education, shaping the composition of your student body, affecting your relationships with the broader community.

Private liberal arts colleges have taken justifiable pride in arming students with the balanced exposures and deep, critical-thinking skills necessary to carry them through complexity and adversity. Your educational purpose, in the words of the mid-century educator Robert M. Hutchins, is “to unsettle their minds, widen their horizons, inflame their intellects, teach them to think straight, if possible.” And you have done that, generation after generation.

You have also greatly expanded your reach to draw in students of increasingly diverse ethnic, racial and economic backgrounds. Nearly 50 CIC schools, for example, have student bodies with particularly high

concentrations of underrepresented students.

You have pioneered new ways of connecting with your communities. For example, Kresge's arts, community development, environment and education teams recently made a joint grant to Oberlin College's Oberlin Project, which aims to turn a 13-acre piece of land in downtown Oberlin into a fully carbon-neutral community – a project that promises to be as much a model for other 21st-century colleges as was Oberlin's commitment in the 19th century to nonracial education.

But – and it is a big but – the changes we are witnessing are so profound that I fear we will have no choice but to innovate far beyond what we have done before. Early on in the economic contraction, there was an argument about whether its effects would be short- or long term, about whether we could simply limp through to a resumption of what we've come to understand as normalcy. No longer. We are indisputably in the midst of profound structural shifts that will impose deep and enduring effects. All levels and sectors of society will be impelled to manage more aggressively against enduring scarcity. All will need to recalibrate their attitudes about how we pursue economic opportunity, maintain safety net services and safeguard informal structures of mutual support and assistance.[2]

One of the nation's great stateswomen observed:

> We are a people in a quandary about the present. We are a people in search of our future. We are a people in search of a national community. ...
> Many fear the future. Many are distrustful of their leaders, and believe that their voices are never heard. Many seek only to satisfy ... private interests.
> But this is the great danger America faces. That we will cease to be one nation and become instead a collection of interest groups: city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual.
> If that happens, who then will speak for America?
> Who then will speak for the common good?

My strong bias is that we can transport that challenge directly to your doorsteps – even though it was issued by Congresswoman Barbara Jordan some 36 years ago. If, in fact, our deepest communal values – based on solid American concepts of public responsibility for the common good – have shifted underneath us, your institutional voices need to be enlisted to help bend the curve toward a re-imagined national social and political ethic.

Who better than your faculty and your students, your trustees and alumni, your executive leadership and community partners, to help the nation understand how best to balance the virtue of long-term investment with an insistence on minimizing tax payments? How best to fight the dangerous and increasingly common perception that higher education is a private good, as opposed to a public one? How best to preserve a civic architecture of compassion for those less fortunate while honoring the accomplishments of those who have achieved positions of economic and political power? How best to return vibrant social and economic activity to disinvested cities without ignoring the laws of market forces?

John Gardner said, "History never looks like history when you're living through it." But we are. So let me turn next to what we might make of the situation.

III. An Inflexion Point for Reform

I realize that all this talk about redefining the common good can sound pretty naïve when the higher education establishment is facing the here-and-now challenges of decreasing endowments, tuition discounting, affordability, enrollment increases, plagiarism and underprepared students – to say nothing of faculty parking disputes. And add to that critics like Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, who argue in their book "Academically Adrift" that many college students graduate without gaining the analytical skills they need.

But my remarks about the current state of affairs set the stage for the John Gardner argument – that we are at an inflexion point in this nation's higher education trajectory. With all the historians in the audience, I want to suggest that we take our bearings from another era where education reform was center stage.

Indeed, this is hardly the first time educators have faced tectonic shifts in their terra firma. At the dawn of the 20th century, an entire generation of academic leaders and thinkers confronted an era of industrial and social upheaval whose scope and complexity were analogous to our own. Waves of immigrants from cultures with different religious and social traditions. A revolution in the means of production. New transportation and communications technologies. Bellicose nationalistic behavior. The upending of privilege. And much more.

The ferment of thought among educational reformers was widespread and formative.

Charles Eliot was named president of Harvard in 1869, at the advanced age of 35. He was preoccupied by the degree to which the social change ushered in by the industrial empires of Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, Carnegie, Mellon and others of their generation outstripped the responsive capacity of educational institutions of the time. With their focus on classical and religious studies, those institutions eschewed the kinds of subjects that were underpinning the emerging industrial order – science, modern languages, political economy and others.

In his four decades as president, Eliot recast Harvard – and in so doing, he redirected the course of American higher education. He created electives, highlighted the relationship between academic freedom and enterprise, reorganized faculty into schools and departments, attracted scholars from all over the world and advocated racial equality. Many argue that his reforms still provide the backbone of higher education today.

For John Dewey, working in the wake of Eliot's reforms, the task of reimagining educational institutions was inseparable from the energies that needed to be devoted to broader social reform. Indeed, schools were vehicles through which that broader reform should occur. Dewey observed that "education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness ... and the only sure method of social reconstruction."[3] The role of institutions like yours was accordingly not to impart a predetermined set of skills, but instead to enable the realization of one's full potential to serve the greater good.

Booker T. Washington took a parallel route. Assuming the presidency of the newly created Tuskegee Institute in 1881 at age 25, Washington called upon his students to build on the site of a former plantation their classrooms, as well as the farms for the school's crops and livestock. He argued that it was essential for African Americans of the Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South to master both the trades and academic skills – the course he felt would give African Americans the best shot at being accepted by white society and contributing to black self-determination. The thousands of schools that Washington birthed, particularly in the rural South, helped define the quality of life for generations of southern African Americans. His contribution to reform was, in his words, to commit the educational enterprise "to the small things, rather than to the large things; to the everyday things nearest to us rather than to the things that are remote and uncommon."

Very different philosophies each from Eliot, Dewey and Washington, with a healthy dose of critique and contribution thrown in by W.E.B. Du Bois and others. Yet, they contributed to a vortex of innovation that redirected education theory and practice for a century. Distilled to their essence, these acts of creative

transformation have direct parallels today. At the risk of telling you what you already know far better than I, let me suggest four.

First, both then and now, higher education institutions can help shape a fresh civil discourse.

I've already suggested that we are living through the rewiring of the circuitry that holds us together as a nation, a circuitry that will define our shared values and normative behaviors for decades to come.[4]

Just a further word about the role of independent colleges in that process. On one hand, we can fall back on the first principles of a liberal arts education in thinking about how you will contribute to that rewiring. Steven Muller, then-president of Johns Hopkins, put it in the following terms: "Education is an asset to the fullness of life beyond the workplace, and liberal arts education in particular builds a foundation for a society in which culture and civilization can flourish alongside the productive economy." A powerful construct, but ultimately a passive one.

On the other hand, a bit more Dewey may be in order – the time seems ripe for our nation's independent colleges to find their collective voice in asserting even more forcefully than in the past the imperative of balanced, tolerant and informed democratic inquiry and discourse – for you to offer a partial antidote to a civic climate that too frequently substitutes brittle and unyielding ideologies for nuanced and flexible critical thought.[5] This hardening of public discussion undermines the long-standing principle that democracy is a serious business, to be undertaken with an attitude of objectivity, an openness to new and differing perspectives and an ability to step outside one's immediate experience.

A second parallel is the formative role higher education will play in carving out different pathways of social and economic mobility.

Booker T. Washington saw in trade education a pathway for African American social mobility. Our challenge today is not so terribly different – education is the most important driver for opportunity and achievement in our knowledge economy, just as it was, albeit in different form, 100 years ago.

At a macro level, the challenge is to build an educational scaffolding that launches as many citizens as possible into the economic mainstream. No matter how cataclysmically the economy shakes up our established ways of working, we can't, as a nation, revert to reserving quality educational opportunities to the wealthy alone. We all know that. The question is what to do about it.

Increasing college access and success, as President Obama has urged, is pivotal to that end. It is why Kresge and Gates and Lumina and others have chosen to focus so tightly on that goal.

But there are other pathways to that end. Independent colleges have wide berth to help us understand what they might be. Some examples come readily to mind:

- All of you likely provide your students with the opportunity to participate actively in the global environment – through independent work-study projects, study abroad or expanded international or foreign-language course offerings.
- Many of you are pursuing cutting-edge curricula that equip young people to think differently about the centrality of new technologies to their career path.
- Others of you are exploring ways to reduce the cost of educational delivery to benefit more students and still retain high quality – blended online education, creative scheduling and building use, cost-sharing with nearby institutions and a variety of other steps that will undoubtedly have implications for the field as a whole.
- Virtually all of you reach out to disadvantaged students through admissions, high school outreach and other programs.
- A great number of you are rethinking how to support community college transfers, including both low-income students and many middle-class students who previously would have gone straight to four-year institutions.
- And many of you are revisiting mission in ways that may attract nontraditional students. When Walter Kimbrough arrived at Philander Smith, for example, he took an institution that was financially at risk and rearticulated its mission to focus on social justice – not without controversy, to be sure. But a distinctive model that may have appeal to other small colleges.

Each of these examples has the potential to cross-fertilize practice in other parts of the postsecondary system. And there are other sources of reform that hold the potential to migrate across institutions.

For example, the Carnegie Foundation is seeking to remake developmental math through its comprehensive Quantway/Statway project. Developmental math is often cited as the most significant hurdle underprepared students have to overcome if they hope to earn a degree, and in some community colleges, as many as 95 percent of all students need to take developmental math before they can move on to credit-bearing courses. Working with mathematicians, community colleges and technology experts, Carnegie is trying to establish a new way to teach developmental math to create a syllabus that is relevant, accessible and rigorous for the

21st-century student.

In a similar vein, researchers at Carnegie Mellon, led by Candace Thille, have developed the Open Learning Initiative, which uses sophisticated artificial intelligence-based software to create a blended model of online education and classroom lectures and seminars, resulting in even better educational outcomes than online or lecture-only courses alone.

At first blush, both the Quantway project and the Open Learning Initiative may seem better suited to the large-university setting. On closer look, however, both would appear to have broader application to institutions of all sizes and kinds. They promise the kind of educational reform that could be every bit as responsive to the needs of 21st-century industry and civil society as Eliot's reforms were more than a century ago. And I have no doubt that innovation will flow in both directions, as many of your institutions evolve in imaginative, creative ways.

A third parallel between the two eras is the imperative to break down the "town and gown" dynamic by linking the campus to its broader community and to the fiscal and social pressures facing cities and towns.

One of the first visits I made after arriving at Kresge was to meet with President Edward Ayers on his second day on the job at the University of Richmond. President Ayers was enthusiastic about all things at his university, but he became particularly animated when discussing his plans to integrate the campus more fully into the life of the city of Richmond through the Richmond Promise – which extended from traditional community service and internship efforts to a far-reaching series of social leadership projects.

Now, President Ayers is an extraordinary, visionary leader, but his commitment to community is not unique. I saw it again when I visited Benedict College in South Carolina, where President David Swinton is presiding over a $50 million campus improvement that pivots on the redevelopment of dilapidated properties in the adjacent community. And again, when I toured colleges and universities like Dillard and Xavier that were engaged in the Herculean efforts to rebuild New Orleans after Katrina.[6]

This is the spirit that animates so many of your institutions today – in particular those of you have been designated under the Carnegie Foundation classification list as Community Engagement colleges. It is a spirit that must be tapped if communities across America are going to survive the kind of public-sector retrenchment that will inevitably cascade to real people living in real places in the aftermath of unprecedented budget cuts.

That is highlighted most starkly in the challenges facing nonprofit organizations providing front-line human services. The new fiscal environment is a Humpty Dumpty scenario for nonprofits. We're not going to be able to put them back together in any form recognizable to those of us who have worked in community for the last 30 years. It is a question not only of preserving the safety net, but also of maintaining civic balance – of safeguarding the cultural, physical and environmental building blocks necessary for healthful, vibrant places.

Your ability to apply your resources – financial support, student internships, faculty applied research, leadership on environmental sustainability efforts and many others – could make an enormous difference. History is replete with examples of the power of your institutions to anchor, stabilize and promote the social and economic health of your surrounding communities. The history we are writing today calls out for you to step forward again.

The fourth parallel is using colleges and universities as active agents in facing down the most pressing and intractable issues of our time.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, then-president of the University of Chicago, observed: "It is not so important to be serious as it is to be serious about the important things. The monkey wears an expression of seriousness which would do credit to any college student, but the monkey is serious because he itches."

If you were to take up the challenges of promoting a more reasoned civil discourse, creating new on-ramps to economic opportunity and contributing to the health and vitality of your surrounding community, I have every confidence that you would not disappoint Hutchins. But in case that's not enough for you to do, let me mention just one more – climate change.

Independent colleges and universities are in the vanguard of determining how the nation can help identify, and advance, strategies that will both mitigate the effects of climate change and contribute to thoughtful and prudent long-term adaptation to those effects. By greening your buildings and your daily routines through climate action plans. By redesigning curricula. By creating sustainability institutes. By imbuing your students with a passion for environmental stewardship.

Many CIC leaders have been exemplars – Beverly Tatum at Spelman, Michael Lomax at the United Negro College Fund, David Shi at Furman, Mitch Thomashow at Unity and others.

Kresge has sought to support these efforts. It has, for example, made multiple grants to UNCF and the nonprofit organization Second Nature to advance sustainability in the American higher education sector. Our grants are providing technical assistance to historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges, Title III and V institutions and community colleges to construct and renovate campus buildings in ways that save money, reduce negative health impacts and serve as community models for environmentally sustainable construction.

The bad news is that so much of the canvas of necessary environmental action remains unpainted. But that is also the good news. Your leadership is already making a difference – on your campuses, in your communities and in the broader civic dialogue. The potential to amplify that influence is considerable.

IV. Conclusion

We are extraordinarily proud of our partnerships over the past 50 years with so many of you. We know that our changes over the past few years may not fit all of you well, but we hope that you share our vision of an America that is better educated, more globally competitive and participates more fully in the architecture of social justice.

I've tried to suggest ways in which your institutions can build on their extraordinary legacies to contribute to a new age of educational reform. As much as anything, I've tried to underscore the need for you to take risks, look around the corner, search beyond your envelope of comfort. Let me return to John Dewey, who said: "Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving. ... Conflict is a sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity."

A little constructive conflict may be just what our larger social, economic and political systems need. I'm confident that you will enter into it with the same courage, integrity and effectiveness you have demonstrated throughout your institutions' history. Our country needs it.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you, and the work you do on behalf of our nation and its students. I wish you well going forward.

[1]Tony Carnevale, T., "The College Payoff."

[2]See generally Morino, M., “Chairman’s Corner: The innovation Imperative,” Venture Philanthropy Partners, (April 2009).

[3] Dewey, J., My Pedagogic Creed (1897).

[4]A half-dozen years ago, pollster Dan Yankelovich wrote in The Chronicle of Education: “The threat, as I see it, is an impending crisis in this nation’s powerful, if unwritten, social contract. Higher education is becoming the main battleground in a national struggle over how to keep faith with this contract.” Yankelovich, D., “Ferment and Change: Higher Education in 2015,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, November 25, 2005.

[5]See Skloot, E., “Philanthropy’s Role in Building an Effective Citizenry,” Opening Plenary Remarks at inaugural “PACE – Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement” conference, May 2, 2005, reproduced in Edward Skloot, Beyond the Money: Reflections on Philanthropy, the Nonprofit Sector, and Civic Life, pp. 98-115 (Surdna Foundation: 2007).

[6]Still more of you have been involved in the CEOs for Cities Talent Dividend, where colleges and universities, community colleges, K-12 systems, local philanthropy and the business community are working together to improve college achievement rates in 57 metropolitan areas.