



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **Re-Visioning the Student-Success Ecosystem in South African Higher Education**

*Jan. 22, 2013, address at University of Pretoria touches on common challenges faced by the U.S. and South Africa.*

January 23, 2013

I'm deeply grateful for the leadership that Bill Moses provides to Kresge's work in South Africa. He is passionate about this country and profoundly committed to having our foundation play a beneficial role in its progress.

Let me reiterate our thanks to the [University of Pretoria](#) for putting together this conference. It is inspiring to watch such a gifted and committed leader as Vice Chancellor [Cheryl de la Rey](#) guide this great university as it does its part in tackling South Africa's education challenges.

It's a pleasure to be in South Africa again. Each time I have visited – every year since 2006 – I have become more impressed with your nation's resolve to realize the full promise of a fully realized post-apartheid democratic order.

I've had the enormous privilege to get yearly snapshots of your path from Kresge's relationships with some of the finest of South African higher education, health care and social service organizations. In the process, I've been blessed to meet leaders of the very first order – leaders driving your civil society toward innovation, excellence and resilience. My overarching impression is that your institutions and leaders are up to the task you have set yourselves. That is a remarkable and noteworthy thing.

This conference is emblematic of that. We are honored to be a very small part of it. Thank you for the opportunity.

I want to say just a word about what Kresge does, why we work in South Africa and why Kresge supports South African postsecondary access and success.

## **Kresge's Grantmaking**

The Kresge Foundation focuses on expanding economic opportunity for low-income and underserved people and strengthening the communities where they live.

- In [Arts & Culture](#), we seek to elevate the role that arts and culture play in revitalizing urban neighborhoods that have suffered from neglect and the withdrawal of investment.
- We are investing deeply in our hometown, [Detroit](#), to return that once-great American city to health and stability. We are helping to build a public transportation system, to restructure public elementary and secondary education to create an infrastructure that will support entrepreneurial activity and to re-imagine how vast tracts of abandoned land can once again become productive landscapes.
- Our [Environment Program](#) seeks to mitigate future effects of climate change, particularly as they affect people living in low-income communities, and help them adapt to the unavoidable effects of those changes.
- Our [Health Program](#) is working to improve the conditions that lead to poor health outcomes for residents in low-income neighborhoods – whether the lack of fresh food; the absence of recreational opportunities; the presence of toxins in the land, air and water; or the unavailability of high-quality, community-based health care.
- Our [Human Services](#) team seeks to strengthen the basic supports that low-income people need if they are to enter the economic mainstream – housing, job training, financial skills and many others.
- Our [Education Program](#) seeks to promote postsecondary access and success for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students in both the United States and [South Africa](#). And it is this dual commitment that has brought us to South Africa today.

## **Why Kresge Has Chosen to Work in South Africa**

I continue to be asked why Kresge, which concentrates its efforts in the United States, has chosen to work in South Africa. There are two broad reasons.

The first is historical.

We have worked in South Africa since the late 1980s, when we made a grant to the [University of Cape Town](#) to build one of the first purpose-built nonracial residence halls. One of our other early grants was right here at the University of Pretoria, to help construct the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute.

Some six years ago, we launched a more concerted effort that sought to add an international dimension to the mainline work of the foundation – which was to help build the fundraising capacity of nonprofit institutions. That took the form of the five-year Kresge Special Initiative in South Africa, which sought to build the advancement capacity at five South African institutions.

Working with our local partner, Inyathelo, we supported the University of Pretoria, the [University of Witwatersrand](#), [University of the Western Cape](#), [Cape Peninsula University of Technology](#) and the Red Cross [War Memorial Children's Hospital](#) to professionalize and strengthen their advancement capacity. It was an unadulterated success. Between 2006 and 2010, those institutions tripled their private fundraising and significantly increased individual giving. These efforts have helped to strengthen the hands of vice chancellors and councils to ensure that South African universities have the capacity to stay both at the cutting edge of international research and relevant to local concerns.

This historical explanation, however, is only a partial answer to why we work in your country.

The second reason gets us closer to a full answer. And that is that the values that shape and propel post-apartheid South Africa are deeply resonant with the work Kresge seeks to do to improve the life opportunities of low-income people in the United States.

To observe the conditions and challenges playing out in South Africa is to hold up a mirror to the most important, intractable issues the world is facing: transitions to democracy in formerly repressive societies, the effects of globalization on developing countries, changing urbanization patterns and the growing divide between the rich and poor, particularly as refracted through the lens of race. As your tourism promoters once observed, “A world in one country.” Indeed.

But South Africa is not simply emblematic of the world's challenges; it is equally powerfully a vessel of hope. There is no question that this nation can claim one of the greatest miracles of the late 20th century.

Once seemingly destined for an intractable civil war, you managed to negotiate one of the world's most progressive constitutions, begin the methodical redesign and reconstruction of the institutions of civil society and develop a nonracial democracy based on justice, diversity and human rights.

I don't mean to idealize your struggles or to paper over the brutally difficult realities of the path you have chosen. We understand why your country's citizens are concerned about the future. And we realize that the exuberance of 1994 has tempered over the years. Progress in creating a just and opportunity-filled society will necessarily proceed in fits and starts, accompanied by all the political discomfort, social tension and civic uncertainty you have experienced.

Your democracy – and your economic health – is by no means assured. It will be necessary for this nation to pioneer ways to tangibly, meaningfully accelerate the progress you are making on so many fronts: in reducing the number of citizens living with HIV/AIDS, in cutting your high levels of illiteracy, in cracking through persistent levels of formal-sector unemployment, in making inroads into the continuing specter of violence and crime.

But as you do this – and you don't need me to tell you that you will – you will reset the international thermostat about the trajectory of opportunity in 21st-century Africa. Beyond the political miracle you've engineered, think about what you've already accomplished. You have, against all imaginable odds, sustained two decades of peace. You've created the finest system of higher education on the continent. You've produced new housing for millions of your citizens. You've even established the gold standard for what it means to host international sporting events.

You have every right to be proud, at the same time you are concerned about what comes next. You have every right to be hopeful, at the same time you know you have to be realistic.

It is inspiring. So the question is not why Kresge would want to work here, but, rather, what foundation would not.

### **Why Higher Education?**

That brings me back to question of why we have chosen to concentrate our South African commitment in the realm of higher education when so many other needs are present. Again, two reasons.

First, America has its own challenges in addressing postsecondary access and success for low-income and underrepresented students, and we believe that South Africa has a great deal to teach us – and that we might have something to offer to you.

Whether because of climate change, international terrorism, social networking, popular culture or the increasing interdependence of the international financial system, people around the world are, for better or worse, less isolated than ever before. In this context, a problem, or a solution, is just as likely to develop thousands of miles away as it is to happen down the street. The kinds of innovative pragmatism this conference will highlight bear strong parallels to our work in the United States. We look forward to understanding what you're trying, how well it's working, what needs to be added to the mix and how can we all migrate our work back and forth for maximum mutual benefit.

The second reason we've chosen higher education is its centrality to virtually every dimension of improving the life prospects of a nation's citizens – and, indeed, its centrality to securing a nation's economic competitiveness.

As in the United States, South African universities play the critical role of educating a workforce, providing important research – especially about local needs and conditions – and serving as an independent voice in society. Without strong universities serving as an engine of growth and a bulwark of civil rights, South Africa's second miracle – a prosperous democracy in a country of stark extremes – will not succeed.

And yet, again as in the United States, success will be long-fought and slowly accomplished.

Although the doors of South African education have opened considerably since 1994, the number of students completing their degree continues to be disappointingly low, with dramatic differences between white and black students. I don't need to go into detail about the how and why – you know the reasons for this far better than do we.

The larger question is what can be done and who is going to do it. This is the challenge Vice Chancellor de la Rey so eloquently laid out. What can South African universities, higher education leaders, the business community, ordinary citizens and government do to help create an environment where all students succeed? And what role can donors like Kresge play?

Of course, South Africans, including many of you in this room, have been working on these issues for decades. The conference promises to cast in bright relief the many ways you have developed sophisticated and effective academic development programs and explored other innovative efforts to increase the likelihood that underrepresented students will succeed.

We view our role at Kresge as supporting these and other efforts you believe hold the greatest promise of making real and enduring progress.

We've taken some very preliminary steps in that direction. Providing support for this conference is one small step. But in the past year, we've also funded the expansion of the South African Survey of Student Engagement at the [University of the Free State](#) and have begun to map access and success programs in the country, which should be done by year end.

I want to be crystal clear about our intentions. We seek to support, not to prescribe. The best ideas for how to address South Africa's success gaps will come from within South Africa. They will come from scholars and front-line teachers and academics who have been quietly working on the front lines for years.

That is not to say that good ideas worth exploring won't come from other sources. This is an issue countries across the globe are wrestling with, and all of us need to maintain an open portal for ideas that may enhance our work.

Some of those ideas may come from the United States. We certainly hope so. Bill mentioned just one example, in which American community colleges, through programs like [Achieving the Dream](#), have used data-driven policy changes to improve outcomes. It's not a panacea. It is instead one interesting approach to how a diverse, complex and autonomous network of institutions can make systematic changes in how postsecondary students realize higher levels of success.

I hope this conference will be every bit as productive, provocative and thought-provoking as Vice Chancellor de la Rey described. I fully expect that we will emerge from the experience a little closer to answering how South African higher education can revision its student success ecosystem, who will be the champions for change, how you will move toward your goals and what strategies might best work for you. I wish you the very best and thank you again for the privilege of being able to join you.

Thank you.

