



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **South Texas College Wins Leah Meyer Austin Award for Increasing Student Success**

*Rapson honors recipient of Kresge-sponsored prize.*

February 7, 2013

It's an honor for Kresge to sponsor the Leah Meyer Austin Award this year. None of us would be here tonight if it weren't for Leah's creativity, passion and determination that led to the creation of Achieving the Dream. There are almost 1,600 of us in the room tonight – a record number of participants. We wouldn't have gotten so many people into the room if Leah wasn't deeply committed to the transformative power of accessible and high-quality postsecondary education. Thank you for coming.

Thank you to Bill Trueheart and his exceptional staff and board for leading this charge. [Achieving the Dream](#) confirms, day in and day out, the power of community colleges to provide pathways of opportunity to students from all walks of life and, in the process, to define an arc of aspiration that holds the power to transform this nation's educational and economic future.

I also want to acknowledge the superb team we have working on these issues at Kresge: Bill Moses is our program director; Caroline Altman Smith, our senior program officer; Joe Swickard, our communications liaison; and, in absentia, Julian Haynes, our program associate.

And a final introduction that is particularly gratifying. We are joined tonight by 16 special guests from the South African higher education system. This is the third year we've been joined by a South African delegation, but this year has particular meaning. South African universities are just coming off a path-breaking conference organized by the University of Pretoria that focused on access and success and the parallels between South Africa and the United States, including an extensive immersion in the philosophy, architecture and machinery of Achieving the Dream.

The delegation is too large to introduce individually, but let me acknowledge just a few. The extraordinary leader of the [University of Pretoria](#), Cheryl de la Rey. Francois Strydom is leading 13 representatives from the [University of Free State](#) in the nation's midsection. And Shelagh Gastrow heads [Inyathelo](#), the South African Institute for Advancement, which has worked hand-in-glove with Kresge and other American foundations to build the capacity of South African nonprofit organizations, particularly higher educational institutions. Let me ask our friends from South Africa to please stand. I hope all of you will seek them out and give them the warmest welcomes. (Learn about the Kresge Education Program's focus on [promoting access and success at South African universities](#).)

## **A Word About Kresge**

Just a word about Kresge. Based in Detroit, we were founded almost 90 years ago. We have invested deeply in our hometown and are beginning to see the outlines of a re-imagined, newly vibrant city. We also work nationally across six program areas to improve opportunity structures for low-income people in American cities. Our [Education Program](#) is woven from that cloth as well. As do all of you, we believe a well-educated nation can fuel a new, education-led era of national prosperity and help low-income people change the trajectory of their lives.

We are accordingly committed to improving pathways to and through college for low-income and underrepresented students and to strengthening institutions, such as community colleges and minority-serving institutions, that focus on the needs of those students.

Supporting Achieving the Dream has become one of the pillars of this strategy. Over the last six years, we've supported ATD in three main ways:

First, by underwriting the participation of almost 20 colleges in California, Florida, Maine, Michigan and Washington, D.C.

We're particularly proud to support the Los Angeles Community College District, about which you've already heard. Not only is LACCD the nation's largest community college district, but only 5.6 percent of all adults in South Los Angeles hold an associate's or bachelor's degree, the lowest level in the country. And yet, even though this is ground zero for U.S. college completion, every single college in the district is now participating in ATD. A spectacular accomplishment.

The second way we're supporting Achieving the Dream is to invest in its national office.

We should never take for granted what President Bill Trueheart and his staff have accomplished. What began a number of years ago as an informal partnership between several national nonprofits has blossomed into a thriving, independent organization which has grown that partnership into a network that now touches 30 states of the union and includes one out of six of the nation's community colleges.

And the third way we support Achieving the Dream is by underwriting the New College Leadership Project, which seeks to recruit and prepare the next generation of community college leaders.

By 2016, nine out of 10 of today's community college presidents will retire. In partnership with the Aspen Institute, Achieving the Dream is creating alternative leadership-recruitment and development models, and piloting a new professional development forum for Leader College presidents. This effort also aims to inform relevant decision-makers about what skills successful, 21st-century community college presidents need – whether an entrepreneurial mindset, a propensity for data-driven decision-making or an unwavering focus on student success.

### **The Leah Meyer Austin Award**

Achieving the Dream established the Leah Meyer Austin Award, or the "Leah," in 2008 to recognize community colleges whose practices, policies and institutional culture have generated exemplary, measurable progress in increasing student success, particularly among low-income students and students of color.

The award is named for the woman whose leadership helped launch ATD. I've never met anyone for whom an award was named, but as luck would have it, Leah and I were both scheduled to speak at the University of Pretoria conference I mentioned earlier.

What a pleasure that was. After about 17 seconds with Leah, I understood exactly why this award could be named for nobody else. It wasn't just the talk she gave, in which pieced together the case for how we can, and must, overcome the community college system's diversity, autonomy and disconnection to build the machinery of student success. It was the indefatigable energy and profound passion with which she spoke to everyone she met about the importance of building a movement. A movement based not just on technical fixes, but on social justice and personal opportunity. A movement based on data and demonstrated results,

not on hunches and anecdotes. A movement that focuses first, foremost and, ultimately, on serving the needs of students.

Nelson Mandela once said, “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” Well, ATD isn’t yet done, but thanks to Leah, and to so many of you in this room, the challenge of dramatically improving community college student success doesn’t seem quite so impossible anymore. We’re seeing not only that we can raise the aggregate graduation numbers, but that we can do that in ways that reflect the distinctive personalities of every corner of the higher education system, whether on the Rio Grande border or in the Mississippi Delta, this great state of California or my home state of Michigan.

### **The Award Recipient**

Selecting this year’s Leah recipient was especially tough. The accomplishments of so many people inside and outside of this room are ever-more impressive. As a result, the Leah selection committee actually asked ATD to provide two awards.

The first is a special recognition of the [Community College of Baltimore County](#) for its remarkable success in improving developmental-education success rates. I’d like to invite Leah Austin and Bill Trueheart to join me on stage to present the award to CCBC’s president, Dr. Sandra Kurtinitis.

CCBC has invested heavily in professional development and has expanded its Accelerated Learning Program, which allows students who place into upper-level developmental writing courses to enroll concurrently in English 101, a gateway credit course. This approach has now been adopted by almost 100 colleges across the country, and has been implemented statewide in several places. The selection committee voted to award CCBC a \$10,000 check to support their continuing student success work. Congratulations, Dr. Kurtinitis.

The second award is, of course, the 2013 Leah Meyer Austin Award. I’m absolutely delighted to announce that the winner is [South Texas College](#) in McAllen, Texas.

South Texas College is the largest, fastest-growing college south of San Antonio. It is led by Dr. Shirley Reed, STC’s founding and current president. STC serves two counties along the U.S.-Mexico border, where almost all of its students are low-income and Latino, and more than 70 percent are first-generation college students.

As South Texas College comes to the stage, let me describe why it's receiving the award.

STC has been a standout success through its use of student-centered and data-driven innovation. In a state that prides itself on doing everything bigger, STC runs Texas' biggest dual-enrollment program and has seen impressive results in both access and success. The faculty and leadership have mobilized to create a college-going culture in the community and increased the college readiness of incoming students.

The results have been spectacular. In a region where 40 percent of all adults have no high school diploma or graduate equivalency degree, STC's enrollment has increased by 75 percent between 2004 and 2012, and its community engagement and other efforts have almost cut its developmental-education rates nearly in half, from 31 percent to 17 percent. It has improved its three-year graduation rate by 7 percentage points since 2007, helping to make STC fourth in the nation in awarding associate degrees to Latino students and ninth nationally in awarding associate degrees to minority students.

Please join me in congratulating STC's president, Dr. Shirley Reed, and her team, for a job well done.