



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Supporting South African Higher Education Through Student Access and Success

April 17, 2012, address in Johannesburg marks the relaunch of Kresge grantmaking in South Africa.

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Thank you, Shelagh, for that very kind introduction, and good evening to all of you.

As always, we at Kresge cannot thank enough Shelagh Gastrow and all of her team at [Inyathelo](#) for all of their hard work putting this event together this evening, and for the years of extraordinary work they have done as one of our strongest partners anywhere. We could not have achieved the success of the past several years without you. Thank you.

Thanks to all of you, too, for taking time out of your impossibly busy schedules to join us this evening to help us relaunch Kresge's grantmaking in South Africa. I am very pleased to see so many old friends, including Brian O'Connell, vice chancellor of the [University of the Western Cape](#); Cheryl de la Rey, vice chancellor of the [University of Pretoria](#); Loyiso Nongxa, vice chancellor of the [University of Witwatersrand](#); and many others.

And, finally, I want to thank Bill Moses of our staff, whose passion for South Africa led Kresge to create this initiative. We would not be here except for Bill. I am deeply grateful to have such a committed, talented and decent person to shepherd this work for the foundation. Bill and I are joined on this trip by Caroline Altman Smith, a senior program officer who has been integral to developing Kresge's approach to higher education grantmaking in the United States.

I want to touch on four topics very briefly this evening:

- A quick fly-over of our work in South Africa over the past several years.

- A note about how Kresge has changed.
- Some observations for how we see the possibilities and challenges in South Africa today.
- And a preview of our path forward.

I. Our Original Work in South Africa

Just months before I joined Kresge in July 2006, our board of trustees approved Kresge's first proactive initiative outside of the United States. I had never been to South Africa and wasn't familiar with the context for our commitment, so it struck me as prudent to visit. Within three months, I did. I can't begin to describe what an impression it made on me:

- To be sure, there was the country's sheer physical magnificence.
- More profoundly, there was the dignity, spirit and resolve of the South African people – working to set in place and cement the necessary building blocks of a robust democratic order.
- My impressions were, to be sure, tempered by a realization of the staggering challenges you faced. Overcoming apartheid's legacy. Eradicating the crushing weight of poverty. Fighting HIV/AIDS. Creating a shared sense of what it means to be a South African.
- But coming from a country like the United States, where our politics have become cynical and our methods of nation-building have too often sacrificed the aspirational for the expedient, it was uplifting to watch South Africa craft a trajectory of creativity, idealism and steely determination.

In my five visits since then, I have become even more deeply humbled and moved by what you have accomplished and what you will yet accomplish. It is a profound privilege to be associated with all of you in however small a way.

Kresge has made grants in South Africa since 1989. Like the work that once defined us in the United States, our early South Africa grants were challenge grants for important new buildings on campuses.

Our grants over the next 15 years showed that although it was *possible* for a South African university to raise private funds for needed projects, it was extraordinarily difficult to do. In many cases, our early grantees had minimal advancement staff, and that staff had little or no prior experience or training. And, of course, many South Africans were unfamiliar with the concept of giving their own private funds to support a university. Most of the South African proposals we received were, sadly, not competitive with our broader applicant pool.

These realities raised a series of difficult questions for our staff – and for Inyathelo. Could we strengthen the capacity of South African universities so that they could better compete for our grants? Could South African individuals be persuaded to support universities?

We concluded that the answer to both questions was “yes.” So in 2006, we launched a \$10.5 million initiative, the [Kresge Special Initiative in South Africa](#), to strengthen philanthropy and private giving at South African universities.

Working with Inyathelo, we mapped out a five-year strategy to see what could be done with training, coaching, international exchanges, internal reorganizations and operating and bonus grants. The results exceeded our wildest dreams.

Working with the [Cape Peninsula University of Technology](#), the Red Cross [Children’s Hospital Trust](#), University of Pretoria, the University of the Western Cape and, eventually, Wits, we saw real change. In the first year of the initiative, the original grantees raised a total of 76 million rands per annum. By the end of the initiative in 2010, the original grantees were raising nearly 200 million rands per annum – a nearly threefold increase.

We found that Kresge’s original investment helped to leverage more than half a billion rands to the South African higher education sector. This provided significant support for bursaries, new facilities, administrative costs and research. The initiative helped our grantees link advancement to strategic planning and made fundraising and advancement a priority for our grantees and their leadership.

In addition to our work with Inyathelo to promote advancement, Kresge also invested in higher education more broadly:

We helped to fund the first purpose-built science building at UWC – which should be required visiting for anyone who doubts the transformational alchemy of a visionary vice chancellor, a state-of-the-art physical plant and a first-rate faculty.

We have invested in the new School of Public Health building now rising from the ground at Wits.

At [Rhodes](#), we supported the recruitment and training of new more diverse faculty.

At the [University of Cape Town](#), we helped the SALDRU quantitative-methods summer program stabilize its funding with an endowment.

At [Stellenbosch](#), we funded greater efforts to forge stronger connections between the university and its community.

All in all, between 2005 and 2011, Kresge stretched beyond its initial \$10 million commitment to invest \$19 million in South African higher education.

It is deeply gratifying to know that what began as a rather modest inspiration – the hope that we could help make South African universities more competitive when they apply for our grants – has blossomed into the kind of comprehensive and systemic change that so many of our grantees have seen.

II. How Kresge Has Changed

Since 2006, we at Kresge have changed as well. We now seek to use our own legacy more creatively and ambitiously.

Today, our main focus at Kresge is not buildings, but in the building blocks of a vibrant, just and equitable society, particularly in cities, where most Americans live.

Among our most significant changes has been in [our support of higher education](#). Where we once concentrated on the construction of student centers, gyms and administrative buildings, we now focus on expanding the access of low-income, underrepresented and first-generation students to postsecondary institutions and investing in their success once they're there.

It is a change guided by the fundamental principle that university degrees matter. Better-educated people live longer, are more economically productive and are the lifeblood of a vibrant democracy and civil society.

Higher education rates have plateaued in the United States, opening the door for the rest of the world to catch up to us – or, seen differently, for us to fall behind. And indeed, that has happened, with the attendant reality that far too many Americans are excluded from the economic and educational mainstream. Indeed, today's young Americans are actually less well educated than their parents.

In a way that is unprecedented in United States higher education, we are seeing a clear movement to increase college achievement for *all* Americans. It is increasingly seen as vital both to our national security and essential to helping low-income people chart a different life course.

Kresge's contribution to that movement takes two forms.

First, we support pathways to and through university: We want to help historically underrepresented students know how to get into a university, access financial aid, tap other supports and complete a degree. Second, we want to build the capacity of institutions that focus on underrepresented students as their primary mission, such as community colleges and historically black colleges and universities.

Our interest in promoting postsecondary access and success is increasingly joining a wave of interest from all corners of American society. The Gates and Ford foundations have made it a priority. So too have leading business groups. And President Obama has made improving student outcomes a signature element of his education policy.

III. The Relationship of Kresge's Work in the United States to South Africa

It would probably be useful if I took a breath and described how this relates to South Africa.

When our initial five-year commitment drew to a close last year, Kresge had to face a difficult conversation about our future intentions in South Africa. Five years is a long time, and \$19 million is a lot of money. And looking forward, there was no lack of competing demands for our attention.

But I continued to believe that the South African circumstance of my 2006 visit was every bit as complex, robust and compelling in 2011. We realized, however, that for our board of trustees to fully embrace that belief, we had some work to do. We accordingly brought two of our trustees to the country to expose them to the vibrancy and promise of South African life. We arranged multiple conversations with you and others about how we might refine our past approaches to continue contributing to South African progress, while exploring new ones that held the potential for making inroads to the most intractable challenges you face. We asked Bill to lay out to our full board the case for recommitting our institution to your work.

It was no contest. Our trustees voted unanimously last December to recommit to South Africa, approving an investment of no less than \$15 million in South African higher education over the next five years.

The trustees remain convinced that South Africa reflects many of the 21st century's most critical issues: the growing divide between rich and poor, particularly along racial lines; the transition to democracy in formerly repressive societies; the effect of globalization on developing countries.

South Africa also offers to the world the preliminary outlines of how these issues might be combated. Once seemingly destined for an intractable civil war, your country has done the miraculous, managing not only to end apartheid, but also to adopt one of the planet's most progressive constitutions. You have become a beacon of hope around the world.

The Kresge trustees weighed a number of different ways they believed we might be helpful to your country's people and institutions – from health to primary education to civil society. At the end of the day, however, they remained convinced that Kresge should build on the considerable successes we had already witnessed in the South African higher education sector.

They recognize that universities are a critical driver of democracy and economic development in any country, but even more critical in a country with your history and global prominence. You have seen enormous gains since 1994. The number of students enrolled in South African universities has nearly doubled – and the student body is increasingly reflective of your nation as a whole.

Less positively, graduation rates are not where they need to be. For the nation, these outcomes pose risks to the vitality of the economy and civil society. For individual South Africans, many still in deep poverty, these outcomes undermine the opportunities that a university degree is meant to provide.

Enhancing the ability of universities in South Africa to graduate the next generation of knowledge workers – agronomists, teachers, engineers, researchers, health care providers, computer scientists – will expand your industrial base, address long-term development challenges, sustain civil society and make it possible for South Africa to compete more effectively in the global economy.

IV. Kresge's Response: Access and Success

It is one thing to share a conviction about the primacy of this principle; it is quite another to tether it to the day-to-day realities you must all confront. That leads me to my final set of remarks about what path Kresge will follow going forward.

When we sat last year with dozens of South African higher education leaders, we heard an overwhelming consensus that we could be most helpful by replicating our American focus on postsecondary access and success, but with modifications to fit South Africa's specific needs.

We also heard a desire on many of your parts for Kresge to build on our pioneering partnership with Inyathelo to strengthen advancement capacity at additional universities.

Consequently, [our new grantmaking strategy](#) has two prongs:

The first seeks to strengthen pathways to and through universities, especially for students traditionally underrepresented in South African higher education.

We've already begun planning for new grants in this area. Over the past few years, for example, we have brought to America nearly a dozen South Africans to participate in the educational reform movement known as Achieving the Dream, which seeks to improve the often disappointing graduation rates of community college students. We hope that this exposure will provide a powerful platform for South Africans to think about how to approach your university graduation rate challenges.

Future Kresge investments might include helping universities better support students not well prepared to do university-level work. Perhaps through staff training and curriculum development. Perhaps by assisting universities to use data-driven approaches to determine what interventions are most effective at improving graduation rates – and why. Perhaps through investments in the latest technological advances to reduce the cost of delivering a postsecondary education while retaining or improving its quality. Or perhaps in helping build networks of practice among universities.

The second prong of our new grantmaking strategy builds on our last five years of work – building the advancement capacity of universities so that they can focus more resources on their priorities, such as improving student outcomes.

Clearly, the defining activity of a university is to deliver qualified graduates. And clearly the highest priority in South African higher education is improving graduation rates. Yet, in an environment of declining government support, cultivating private donors enhances a university's ability to serve students better. Stronger advancement skills are critical.

Building on our earlier partnership with Inyathelo, we will fund a second round of the original Kresge Advancement Initiative in which we will offer training and challenge-grant support to universities seeking to strengthen their advancement capacity. As in the past, we will select four universities through a competitive national process.

Beyond those four additional universities, we will also provide modest incentives for previous grantees to set and meet annual advancement benchmarks, and to serve as mentors for the new cohort.

And finally, we are already supporting a budding partnership between Inyathelo and Rhodes University to develop a postgraduate diploma in advancement.

Conclusion

With the Department of Education reviewing strategies through the Green Paper, we know this is an exciting and important time for South African universities. The time is right to highlight the importance of your students successfully navigating the completion of their degrees. The time is right to elevate promising practices that are percolating throughout the sector. The time is right to create appropriate mechanisms for cooperation, mutual support and exchange among you. The time is right to engage all sectors – government, higher education, philanthropy, business – in the task of improving higher education outcomes.

We are deeply heartened that so many in this room tonight are committed to this course. We have every confidence that your efforts will be pivotal to ensuring that South Africa meets the promise that so many of you fought for.

Just as we could never expect our advancement initiative of five years ago to bear such remarkable fruit, we hope that our renewed commitment to South African higher education will generate results far beyond what any of us can tonight predict. I think that is exactly what will happen. We look forward to working with you to make sure that it does.