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## Guest Perspective: The Kresge Foundation

Caroline Altman Smith  
*The Kresge Foundation*, cbasmith@kresge.org

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# Guest Perspective: The Kresge Foundation

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Authored by  
Caroline Altman Smith, Deputy Director, Education

In 2010, after eight decades of making capital challenge grants, The Kresge Foundation changed directions and became a strategic grantmaker with six distinct program areas, including an Education Program. Motivated by the fact that a college degree is the closest thing there is to a silver bullet for alleviating poverty, Kresge decided to focus its education work on helping more low-income students and students of color enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Data (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998) show college graduates earn more, vote more, volunteer more, live longer and healthier lives, and have kids who are more likely to go to college. As we scanned the college access and success field, we realized many students weren't getting the support they needed to navigate the byzantine college access process. So we identified dozens of organizations across the country helping young people transition from high school to college, and doing so with creativity, passion and resourcefulness – these became some of our Education Program's first partners. We believed that providing support to these organizations to expand their operations and serve more students would be a meaningful contribution to the field.

It was certainly meaningful to the students we reached. But while Kresge funding benefited thousands of students who otherwise might not have received such college access support, before long, we began to suspect we were impacting only the lucky few.

It was a wake-up call when an internal 2015 Monitor Deloitte analysis showed that the leading 19 college access organizations, many of which receive Kresge support, were still serving only 7 percent of the young people that could benefit from their services. After years of raising awareness, after countless careers spent devoted to the cause, after all the public and private money invested, the bottom line was that effective organizations were not scaling at a rate sufficient to meet the need.

Our attention turned to helping some of our highest performing partner organizations scale their efforts. There is, of course, nothing wrong with being a well-run, high-quality, small-scale college access organization. But for those with aspirations for greater levels of impact, there are a number of interesting examples of organizations that made an intentional decision to grow and forged new partnerships designed with scaling in mind.

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Many started out providing college access services in a particular city, where they helped local kids get into college, raised funds, built partnerships, and increased the number of schools and students served. As they began to think about how to reach larger numbers of students by entering new markets, many maintained fidelity to their original model but made important adaptations suited to best fit the context of new places, to reflect new insights into their strengths, or to partner up with likeminded organizations that could improve impact and further reach. Several Kresge-supported examples include:

uAspire, a well-regarded provider of financial aid and affordability



services, began its work in Boston before expanding to several other cities. Faced with the logistical challenges of operating services in several far-flung places, the team at uAspire realized the organization would never grow quickly or sustainably enough to meet its ambitious desire to serve many thousands more students. After some soul-searching about its comparative advantage in the college access field, the organization's leadership determined that uAspire was uniquely well-positioned to train *other* college

access providers on critical elements of the not-sexy-but-critical financial aid process, including FAFSA submission and interpreting award letters. The newly-developed Training and Technical Assistance Program created a platform for uAspire to provide frontline staff of schools, community-based organizations and charter-management organizations with the knowledge and tools needed to advise students on affordability, which for most students is the primary barrier to access. This frontline staff training approach means that exponentially more students will benefit from uAspire's technical expertise. To learn more about uAspire, visit [uaspire.org](http://uaspire.org).

New York City-based iMentor matches every student in its partner



low-income high schools with a college-educated volunteer mentor. Through a hybrid online and in-person approach, the pair work through a research-based curriculum designed to help the student navigate successfully to and through college. iMentor partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) affiliates to run the program in 17 cities. This partnership was a win-win for the two organizations. BBBS needed a hook to keep teenaged youth engaged in its mentoring program, and its approach lacked a concerted focus on college access. iMentor benefited from BBBS' strong brand and significant national scale. Through this partnership,

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BBBS agencies implemented the iMentor model in their local communities, utilizing iMentor's online platform, curriculum, and best practices. By identifying a strategic partner with a much larger footprint and making creative use of a strong online platform, iMentor's program now reaches large numbers of students in new markets. To learn more about iMentor, visit [imentor.org](http://imentor.org).

College Forward, a Texas-based organization that started out providing only access services, was frustrated that so many of the high school students it advised would end up dropping out of college. The organization launched the "Success Partnerships" program to market its advising services to higher education institutions for a fee. College Forward preserves the return on investment of the students it helped get into college and enjoys a new revenue stream, the college sees improved retention rates and higher tuition revenues, and most importantly, the student is more likely to stay enrolled and complete a degree. College Forward's goal is to permanently embed the intensive coaching model within the institution over the course of a three-year contract. To learn more about College Forward, visit [collegeforward.org](http://collegeforward.org).



Improved scaling alone will not solve the college access challenge. We also need investments in areas like research to demonstrate what approaches are most effective in fostering student success, and strong policy and advocacy efforts to expand government funding of equitable financial aid programs and efforts to strengthen the capacity of institutions that serve large numbers of low-income and students of color. One piece of this puzzle that we are working more purposefully on is improving alignment between the types of institutions and systems that serve the students we care about most. Given the Foundation's overall mission of expanding opportunities for low-income people in cities, we are increasingly focusing on college access and success in urban areas. We use the concept of an "urban higher education ecosystem" as a frame for exploring ways to improve linkages between various interconnected institutions that put student needs at the center. We encourage college access organizations to participate in more cross-sector and networked partnerships to better coordinate institutions and systems that affect a student's ability to enter and succeed in college. These types of efforts will help address a number of disconnects that are serious barriers to progress: between college access and success organizations; between school districts and outside providers of college access services; between key parts of

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the education pipeline, including K-12 and higher education; and between key stakeholders in cities that all have a role to play to improve college access and attainment.

In the past decade, the discourse on college attainment has swung from a focus on access to a focus on attainment, which was an overdue acknowledgement of the fact that access is only half the battle. It is true that if we just did a better job graduating the students that already make it into college, we could significantly improve the nation's college attainment level. However, we cannot neglect the college access pipeline, and Kresge is committed to maintaining a prominent focus on college access in our work. Low-income and first-generation students still need well-trained guidance counselors, still need help filling out the FAFSA, still need college and career advice and mentors and the chance to go on college tours. We need a both/and strategy where the pipeline remains strong; we work creatively to scale approaches that are working so that even more students can help achieve their dreams of going to college; *and* we do a better job of serving students once they matriculate into college so they can earn life-changing degrees.

## REFERENCE

Institute for Higher Education Policy (April 9, 1998). *Reaping The Benefits: Defining the Public and Private Value of Going to College*. Retrieved from [ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/reapingthebenefits.pdf](http://ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/reapingthebenefits.pdf)

## ABOUT THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.6 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development in Detroit.

## FOCUS ON EDUCATION

We promote postsecondary access and success for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students living in cities in the United States and South Africa.

