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THOMAS, Scott L.**Abstract:** The article discusses the Kresge Foundation's charitable giving to U.S. higher educational reform to improve college access to low-income and first-generation students and other broad goals such as college degree completion, according to its director Rip Rapson. Other U.S. foundations mentioned include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation. Comments are included by Scott L. Thomas of Claremont Graduate University on higher education philanthropy.**Full Text Word Count:** 495**ISSN:** 0009-5982**Accession Number:** 89333694**Database:** Academic Search Complete**In the Foundation 'Echo Chamber'**

Major grant makers have synchronized their goals for higher-education reform.

In an October 2011 address to the Council of Independent Colleges, Rip Rapson, president of the Kresge Foundation, described its new strategies for higher-education philanthropy.

"If they seem like an echo chamber after hearing about the Gates foundation's expansive and compelling work, this is entirely intentional," he said, referring to earlier remarks by Hilary Pennington, who was then head of the postsecondary program at Gates.

Mr. Rapson went on to describe Kresge's decision in 2007 to abandon its longstanding support for capital projects on campuses. Kresge decided instead to focus on getting students--particularly low-income and first-generation students--to and through college, and on increasing colleges' "productivity" while lowering "the cost of delivering an education."

Kresge is one of several major foundations thinking along the same lines as Gates and the Lumina Foundation about college reform. Between 2000 and 2009, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation also altered their strategies and the issues they supported to "emphasize broad-scale higher-education issues such as completion, productivity, and technology," according to research by Scott L. Thomas, dean of Claremont Graduate University's education school, and Cassie E. Hall, now the registrar at Carroll College. Over the same decade, the researchers found, the number of foundations investing significantly in higher education shrank from nine to five.

And money from the two largest philanthropic supporters of higher-education reform, Gates and Lumina, tends to converge on the same group of recipients. These include colleges, like the competency-based, online Western Governors University (the recipient of \$8-million in grants from the two foundations); nonprofits like Jobs for the Future (\$59-million from both) and Complete College America (\$10-million); and research shops, like the Institute for Higher Education Policy (\$10-million) and the New America Foundation (\$4-million).

What does that coalescence of mission mean for colleges and universities? Some prominent experts in higher education and philanthropy say the narrow focus will lead to positive change. "We're seeing an emerging network of organizations thinking that the issue of success for minority and low-income students is crucial," says Jorge Balan, who oversaw grant making in higher education at the Ford Foundation from 1998 to 2006. "What's wrong with that?"

Ms. Hall and Mr. Thomas, who edits *The Journal of Higher Education*, agree in their paper that by circling around the same issues the foundations are "drawing attention to important problems and creating a sense of urgency," while expanding reforms to a level where they may result in real change. On the other hand, they cite concerns that the foundations are "stifling innovation by promoting large-scale, prescriptive grants," while undermining the public's trust in colleges and universities, and perhaps "giving states an excuse to 'slack off' in their role as primary providers of higher education."

"What will happen when foundations get tired of these issues?" they write.

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By Jennifer Ruark

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