

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRINCETON SOUTH AFRICA STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM – 1996

John Smelcer, Class of 1998

It is hard to overstate the impact on my undergraduate experience, world view and life's path of my semester in South Africa at the University of Cape Town 20 years ago. Being 20 years old, arriving from my first years as an undergraduate at Princeton to South Africa only a few months removed from the first democratic elections in South Africa and during the Government of National Unity was a profoundly immersive, formative and impactful experience. Through Ida Cooper and her support of Princeton Students, I met and shook the hand of Nelson Mandela on the day that he voted in his first democratic local election of his lifetime. Also through Ida, I studied with the greats literally in one semester – JM Coetzee, Andre Brink, Francis Wilson, Andre du Toit. Those were my professors that semester! I met Mampela Ramphela, the Vice Chancellor of UCT and leader of the anti-apartheid movement. I experienced a societal transition that happens only once or twice a generation world wide. And I now find myself living back at the scene of it all – in a house that is a 20 minute walk from UCT, married to a woman from Lesotho who I met at UCT, raising kids in the shadow of Table Mountain and in the tumult of this young democracy and advising and working for governments and economic development companies across Sub Saharan Africa, including the government of South Africa. Truly Princeton in the service of all nations. As I write these words, I am struck by just how profound and life shaping the experience was. And it is not often those words are said without overstatement.