9 University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Charisma and the Power of We

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) is a public research university in the city of Catonsville, Maryland – a midsized suburb 8 miles east of the seaport city of Baltimore and a forty-five-minute drive northwest of Washington, DC, bordering the lush woods of Patapsco State Park. Although UMBC has 14,000 students, it has the feel of a tight-knit community (UMBC, n.d.a). It is the kind of university where students, faculty, staff – and even the president – stop to say "hello" and hold doors open for one another. The 500-acre campus is bedecked by yellow banners reading "Welcome to our community of inquiring minds." It contains over forty buildings, including the original three constructed for its opening in 1966 alongside more recent additions featuring state-of-the-art LEED-certified designs (UMBC, n.d.i).

UMBC was founded in the 1960s as the twelfth university in the State of Maryland's public higher education system (Hrabowski, 2019). It has the distinction of being the first member of the Maryland system to have commenced as an institution serving students of all races. At the time, postsecondary enrolment was booming, the civil rights movement was burgeoning, and federal and State policies favored the expansion of the American public higher education system. UMBC was born with the vision

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of supporting the growing scientific industries in Maryland while serving the needs of an increasingly diverse population, including many first-generation and commuter students. It faced some significant challenges in its early years – threats of closure by the State due to the slowing of regional enrolments, significant problems with graduation rates, racial incidents, and leadership turnover. Nevertheless, UMBC endured, and in many ways its legacy can be summed up by a motto the university formally adopted on its fiftieth anniversary: "Grit and Greatness" (Hrabowski, 2019). Through the years, when faced with both short-term and perennial challenges, the UMBC community and leadership persisted, and this persistence paid off.

Today UMBC is recognized as a national leader in undergraduate teaching and a pipeline for scholars of color, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. It is the number one US institution for graduating Black undergraduates who go on to complete an MD/PhD, and a top producer of talent for the national intelligence community, some of which is headquartered nearby. In 2021, the university enroled almost 2,100 first-year undergraduates – the most in its history (McCaffrey, 2021). In 2022, UMBC was granted Research 1 status by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education – a competitive delegation recognizing higher education institutions with very high research activity (Winnick, 2022b). Hundreds of new businesses and thousands of jobs have come out of UMBC's research and technology park initiative, BWTech, since its opening in the 1990s. UMBC is known for its innovation and fostering civic engagement and community. It consistently ranks among the "Great Colleges to Work For" by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Mastrola, 2021). While today's accolades are numerous, UMBC is young enough that the institutional community knows what it took to get here: visionary leadership, deep culture change, cultivating a distinctive identity, and a lot of patience.

EVOLUTION OF THE INSTITUTION

In 1966 UMBC began with an undergraduate enrolment of 750 and a faculty and staff of 80. It was charged with supporting the growing scientific industries of the region. Although it opened during the three-decade "golden age" of American higher education enrolment, by the late 1960s the market was beginning to slow – an issue the founders would soon have to grapple with (Cohen, 1998; Mince, 2022). The promise of this new institution to meet regional science industry needs and to expand opportunity for students – combined with its

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location near Baltimore and Washington, DC, and a tight academic job market – meant that UMBC was unusually well positioned to attract a highly qualified, dedicated faculty. As a current UMBC leader explained, faculty "came from places like Penn, and they wanted high-quality education, but for students of relatively wide backgrounds. They didn't want an elite institution only available to a small segment of the population." At the time, UMBC's level of State funding reflected its regional status; its budget was modest as compared to its University of Maryland system peers like the University of Maryland, Baltimore, or the State's flagship, the University of Maryland College Park. The founding UMBC faculty understood that State support would be limited and that "the only way we were going to make UMBC great was we were going to have to do it ourselves." As the vice president of institutional advancement recounted:

> It wasn't going to be that the state was going to say, "Alright, we're going to establish you as a peer of [University of Maryland] College Park" . . . We weren't going to get that level of designation . . . at the faculty level and at the staff level, there has been this sort of sense that if we're going to do it, we've got to do it.

From the beginning, there was a high degree of enthusiasm and willingness to do the work necessary to provide academic and scholarly rigor while increasing postsecondary equity, access, and success. As early as 1969, the first chancellor of UMBC, Albin O. Kuhn, formed a committee to focus on making UMBC a racially inclusive campus (Beck & Loeper, 2016a). However, Kuhn soon realized that achieving this aspect of the vision for UMBC was going to be challenging. The separate but unequal race-based schooling was failing students of color and affecting the pool of potential applicants of color. It would take UMBC decades (and many generations of leadership) to achieve its aims. In 1969, less than 3 percent of undergraduate students enroled were Black, a number that increased only marginally to 8 percent under Chancellor Kuhn's four-year tenure. Subsequent chancellorships and presidencies continued to encounter hurdles to increasing representation among student, faculty, and leadership populations and often erred in their approaches, inciting protests of discrimination. UMBC's second chancellor, Dr. Calvin B. T. Lee (1971–1976), was the former president of Boston University and the first Asian American to lead a university in the Maryland system. His term proved somewhat controversial, ending with a vote of no confidence; but, under Lee's leadership, the student body, faculty, and administration grew and diversified. In an annual report to the president of the University of Maryland system, Lee set out a vision for an expanding

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UMBC and highlighted a growing "Afro-American [*sic*] Studies program" (Beck & Loeper, 2016b).

In 1977 as Dr. John Dorsey began his tenure (1977–1986) as the third chancellor, UMBC's enrolment of African American students reached 21 percent of undergraduates (Hrabowski, 2019). Chancellor Dorsey led several important achievements for UMBC. He undertook a restructuring of the university's administrative structure and enhanced UMBC's graduate programs to improve the university's operations and status (UMBC, n.d.c). By the 1980s, the golden age of higher education was over, and declining enrolments presented a significant threat to all US colleges and universities. The system needed to carefully consider its operational capacity, and the State Board of Higher Education proposed closing UMBC as its youngest campus. However, Dorsey ardently and successfully fought this and kept UMBC's doors open. Yet Dorsey's leadership wasn't all successes. Student complaints of institutional racism arose, particularly from Black students who argued the university wasn't providing adequate support to its students of color. In the last few months of his chancellorship, the issue climaxed; however, instead of addressing it, Dorsey passed the issue along to the incoming chancellor, Dr. Michael Hooker (UMBC, n.d.c).

A critical moment in UMBC's journey towards successfully realizing its vision to serve diverse student populations began under the leadership of Michael Hooker. The former Harvard philosophy professor, Johns Hopkins, dean and president of Bennington College, became the fourth chancellor and president of UMBC in 1986. By this time UMBC was two decades old, and Hooker saw its potential to become "a model university for the twenty-first century and the best research university of [its] size" (Hrabowski, 2019, p. 70). However, there was a lot of work to be done to get there. At the time, UMBC's six-year graduation rate was 35 percent across undergraduates and 25 percent for its African American students (Hrabowski, 2019, p. 99). Clearly UMBC was failing not only its Black students but also all its students when it came to completion. UMBC also needed to revisit its admission practices. As Hrabowski described, "In our early years, we admitted most students who applied. However, we expected them to perform at a high level once they arrived. There was a disconnect. A joke about our campus – that we had an Ivy League faculty and a community college student population – summed up the problem" (2019, p. 75).

In conceiving a path forward for UMBC, Hooker was also realistic about the areas he lacked experience in and began to recruit leaders to his team accordingly. Ensuring the success of UMBC's Black undergraduates was one

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of these areas. Following the recommendations of a local legislator, Hooker reached out to Dr. Freeman Hrabowski. At the time, Hrabowski was a mathematics professor and vice president of academic affairs at Coppin State University, a historically Black university in the Maryland system. Hrabowski's dissertation research compared Black undergraduate graduation rates at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and primarily White institutions (PWIs) and was published in the *Journal of Higher Education*. He had also coauthored a 1986 Association of Governing Boards report titled *Meeting the Needs of Minority Urban Students* and was beginning to be viewed as an expert on supporting racially minoritized undergraduate student populations (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977; Hrabowski, 1975; Hrabowski & Johnson, 1986).

President Hooker set up a meeting between Hrabowski and UMBC's provost at the time, Adam Yarmolinsky, a former Kennedy administration "Whiz Kid," lawyer, and public policy professor. During this meeting, Hrabowski made it clear to Yarmolinsky that he was not interested in being purely an administrator. First and foremost, Hrabowski identified as an academic. He believed that the issue of student success – particularly the success of historically marginalized student populations – required an empirical approach. It was a phenomenon that needed to be investigated, understood, and acted on. They reached an understanding, and soon after Hrabowski was named vice provost for undergraduate experience at UMBC, reporting to Provost Yarmolinsky.

In this new role, Hrabowski began to build relationships across the campus, with the intent of developing a collaborative group of colleagues who could collectively turn things around for UMBC's student success. Championed by President Hooker and a new community of colleagues, Hrabowski framed the issue as an empirical research question: "What would it take for a predominantly White university to educate large numbers of students of color in STEM?" He had first-hand experience with HBCU practices and had come across the work of Uri Treisman, who was supporting historically marginalized students in math at UC Berkeley. However, there was no exact model that fit the quandary at UMBC (Hrabowski, 2019). So, Hrabowski and Hooker decided to answer this inquiry themselves with a bold, visionary experiment: the Meyerhoff Scholars Program.

In 1988, with USD 500,000 startup funds from local philanthropists Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, the program got launched (Hrabowski, 2019). The idea was to admit a small cohort of talented African American students interested in STEM, provide them with top financial and academic support during their

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undergraduate studies, and through this experiment develop a learning model that would enable historically marginalized students – and, by extension, all students – to realize successful academic careers in STEM fields. Initially there was some pushback from faculty who believed it unfair to limit participation in the Meyerhoff program to Black students. To this argument Hrabowski countered, "Show me one Black [student] who's ever earned an A in an upper-level science course at UMBC?" and continued to advocate for prioritizing this student population first at UMBC. The Meyerhoff program challenged extant paradigms about rigor and success that guided STEM education at the university. Rather than engaging in "weeding out" less academically prepared students and using elimination strategies to surface "cream of the crop" students, Hrabowski argued that the success of *all* students was the sign of a thriving, robust STEM curriculum. As one senior leader recalled, the Meyerhoff initiative was about "developing a sense of community where . . . like Freeman says, 'Look to your left, look to your right. If one of you isn't there, we've all failed.'" Instead of framing race-based student achievement at UMBC as the product of individual students' performance or dedication, the Meyerhoff program focused on implementing the structural, programmatic, and organizational culture changes required for UMBC to ensure the success of this population of its students.

As a secondary aim of the program, Hrabowski hoped to disrupt biases, held by many faculty at the time, that UMBC students, particularly students of color, were not cut out for success in STEM. When some of Hrabowski's colleagues expressed doubt about the true effect the program could have given the significant challenges some students faced (e.g., generational poverty, inadequate academic preparation), Hrabowski argued, "I thought that we scientists believe in waiting to draw conclusions until we have the evidence." His empirical approach ultimately struck a chord with faculty, and Hrabowski continued to take a scientific angle throughout the development and implementation of the program, documenting the work and even producing several articles on the model. In 1990, the program began admitting African American women as well (UMBC, n.d.g).

A few years into his time at UMBC, with Meyerhoff underway and already showing promise, President Hooker called Hrabowski to his office and broke the news that he was leaving to take the helm at the University of Massachusetts. Hrabowski had originally intended to move from his UMBC position to an HBCU presidency. However, President Hooker argued that Hrabowski's work at UMBC had positioned him well to be the next leader of the institution and that he could make a significant impact at an

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institution like UMBC. Hrabowski took Hooker's words to heart, applied, and in 1993 assumed the presidency of UMBC. That same year, the first class of Meyerhoff scholars graduated, and the early results of the program were clear: It was a powerful model and response to the original inquiry of what was needed to enable Black students to succeed in STEM at a PWI. Graduates were admitted to top STEM doctoral programs across the nation, and in 1996 the program was expanded to include "people of all backgrounds committed to increasing the representation of minorities in science and engineering" (UMBC, n.d.e). The university was also recognized as one of the first of six postsecondary institutions across the United States to be awarded the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring by President Bill Clinton (UMBC, n.d.e).

By the ten-year mark of the Meyerhoff program, national data showed that of the sixty-seven African Americans in the country with a bachelor's degree in biochemistry, one-third came from UMBC. In 2013, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute granted UMBC, the University of North Carolina (UNC), and Penn State University (PSU) $8 million so that UNC and PSU could begin their own versions of the Meyerhoff program (Hrabowski, 2019). In addition to having a significant impact on the lives of UMBC students and positioning the institution as a leader in equitable STEM education, the program established a model of organizational change and innovation that the newly appointed President Hrabowski could replicate: identify a critical institutional problem to be addressed, frame a researchable question, design an intervention, garner financial and community support, implement the program, measure its impact, learn, and adjust.

In the following decades under Hrabowski, this approach was used to achieve other critical goals at UMBC, such as increasing gender diversity of faculty in STEM and promoting greater faculty diversity across all academic departments. As one administrator involved with faculty-focused initiatives reflected:

> That approach [Hrabowski] took with creating the Meyerhoff at first – over here and protected – and then building that out to become the thing that UMBC was known for, allowed him to begin to make changes across the campus . . . And I just watched him over the decades making these moves . . . He kept taking the Meyerhoff model and empowering people like me and others to then [ask] "What will we do with it in this area? And what would we do with it in that area?"

This change model became a part of UMBC's institutional culture and was engaged at departmental levels as well. When undergraduate chemistry

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failure rates reached concerning levels in the early 2000s, the chemistry department examined the failings of extant pedagogical models and developed a new pedagogical model called "Discovery Learning" and an accompanying Chemistry Discovery Center in 2005 (Ott et al., 2018). This student-centered, collaborative learning approach "cut the chemistry failure rate in half," according to Hrabowski. As with the Meyerhoff program, the creation of the Chemistry Discovery Center initiated a campus culture change towards more engaged or active learning, particularly in foundational science, math, and psychology classes. In the 2010s, the College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences (CNMS) created an active learning space shared across many foundational courses in the science college. In subsequent years, as new constructions or renovations took place, an intentional effort was made to create more active learning spaces across campus spaces and disciplines, including in the new performing arts building, the new interdisciplinary life sciences buildings, and the renovated fine arts building.

Over the nearly three decades that Hrabowski served as president, these successes continued. An institutional culture and change process developed, which Hrabowski would, in his coauthored 2019 book, denominate as "empowered." According to Hrabowski, "When we say the 'Empowered University,' it's empowered to look in the mirror and be honest" and to "not only identify and name the problems but also be committed to working together to develop policies and programmatic initiatives to address them" (personal communication; Hrabowski, 2019, p. 231). In addition to addressing issues related to the student and faculty experience at UMBC, this ethos and approach was instrumental in improving the university's administrative operations. In 2005, when the university's vice president for finance and administration was brought on as an external hire, she encountered an institution with an academic quality that was "fabulous" with regard to its academic work, but its fiscal and budgetary processes left a lot of room for improvement. For some time, UMBC had been on something of a fiscal rollercoaster, where year-end deficits and subsequent million-dollar budget cuts were the norm. According to the vice president, "my first goal was to just get us on a steady footing, which everybody was so ready for." Working with about thirty other individuals from across campus, she spearheaded an effort to increase fiscal responsibility, noting: "We had to tighten our belts for a while . . . putting us on firm financial footing. And that allowed the university to do even more things that have been wonderful for the last 15 years."

Getting UMBC's administrative processes and finances in order at this time was also a boon as the institution entered the Great Recession in 2008. As was

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the case for other US postsecondary institutions, this economic downturn came with many challenges and tough decisions at UMBC. However, there were notable differences in how UMBC as a community handled decision-making compared to other institutions with similarly limited resources – most notably the tendency of UMBC's academic leaders to look beyond the needs of their specific areas and to allocate resources based on the emergent consensus of what institutional priorities ought to be. In sum, the well-being of the institution and its commitment to serving its students came first.

Like other universities, UMBC had to make significant budget cuts. However, the administration, faculty, and staff agreed to two principles that would guide UMBC's response to these budget challenges: protecting our people and the primacy of the academic enterprise. Using this collective and collaborative approach, UMBC was able to avoid layoffs and maintain and strengthen the university's academic programs. As one senior administrator recalled:

> When we were going through the Great Recession, I was hearing that my colleagues at other universities were fighting and scraping for money. At UMBC the conversations were all "What is best for the university?" So, we all presented what would be the impact of a cut on our unit . . . and we made decisions about what is best for the university because we had to have cuts in order to keep doing strategic investment. And there wasn't a lot of fighting about it. People said, "This is the right thing to do, and we want to do it together." Everyone had an opportunity to be heard. And, yes, some people were cut more than others, and they said, "I understand why we have to do that."

UMBC's provost at the time pushed the group to agree on overarching strategic priorities prior to annual budgeting. This began to shift the nature of conversations from what individuals could do to improve their units to what the group could do to advance the institution. As another leader described:

> There was a very clear sense of the greater good . . . even in budget talks, which are the most cantankerous of all, there was a sense of "What do we allocate funds to as a group of people that is for the greater good? For our students? For our university? For our faculty?" It wasn't, "Well, I want this for my little silo, and if I don't get it, then . . ." It was a very different discussion than I had ever heard . . . And everybody was okay with that.

Shared priorities and collaborative processes became characteristic of UMBC and Hrabowski's leadership. These values also contributed to innovation.

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Hrabowski and his colleagues noted that at UMBC, "because of our size and role in our state, we may be forced by circumstances to innovate when others are not" (2019, p. 183). Yet innovation does not happen simply because it is required; under Hrabowski, the conditions for innovation at UMBC were cultivated through the empowering of those willing to innovate. In 2009, to celebrate his twentieth year as president of UMBC, Hrabowski donated $750,000 from leadership awards he had received from the Carnegie Corporation and the Heinz Foundation in order to endow an innovation fund, for UMBC faculty, staff, and students. The fund was named in his honor. The UMBC community simultaneously raised USD 3 million to contribute to the endowment (Hrabowski, 2019). To this day, the Hrabowski Innovation Fund annually provides awards ranging from USD 3,500 to 25,000 to UMBC campus members for projects that involve innovation in teaching, research, or campus operations (UMBC, n.d.f).

In 2012, UMBC created another funding stream, this time to support the campus community in advancing UMBC's commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. The Breaking Ground initiative in UMBC's Center for Democracy and Civic Life was founded to provide small grants to UMBC faculty, staff, and students to develop courses and programs with a focus on community engagement (UMBC, n.d.b). This effort built upon ongoing work championed by Hrabowski and other UMBC leaders to empower students to lead, innovate, and engage in the campus and broader community. As UMBC's director of civic engagement stated, "Students sense that this is a place that, it's not just a place you show up and accommodate yourself to and pass through. It's changing and I [as a student] can change it." The choice for UMBC to financially commit to initiatives like this has been intentional and key to ensuring lasting institutional and campus–community commitment to these values.

By the time UMBC reached its fiftieth anniversary, there were numerous signals the institution was on a path of realizing the vision of its original founders and becoming the twenty-first-century model university Hooker had envisioned. The graduation rate had improved almost twofold since the 1980s, with 69 percent of undergraduates graduating within six years (UMBC, n.d.h). In 2017, UMBC was designated a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), and by 2022 it reached an enrolment of 51 percent minority students across its undergraduate and graduate programs (31% White, 20% African American, 19% Asian American, 16% Hispanic, 6% "Other," and 8% international) (UMBC, n.d.a). It had secured national and international recognition for the caliber of its teaching and research and got placed in the top five in categories like the

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Times Higher Education ranking for global social and economic impact (McCaffrey, 2020). Just as all institutions' operations were affected by the pandemic, UMBC also had to navigate the significant challenges presented by this novel crisis. However, it was able to boast coming out of the pandemic with the largest class size ever in 2022. Furthermore, the technology developed by one of UMBC's very own Meyerhoff scholars, Kizzmekia Corbett, was used in the creation of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, and she made history as the first Black woman to have developed a vaccine. As vaccines became available and the uncertainty of the pandemic began to recede, it was evident that Hrabowski and his team had successfully steered UMBC through one of the most significant crises facing higher education in the twenty-first century. After over thirty years of revolutionary leadership at UMBC, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski was ready to pass the torch.

In April 2022, former dean and chemistry professor at Duke University, Dr. Valerie Sheares Ashby, was named the second African American and first female president of UMBC. A year into her presidency, Sheares Ashby observed that Hrabowski's skilled leadership carried over into his approach to the UMBC presidential transition. In an *Inside Higher Ed* interview, she described him not only as a great leader but also as a "good leaver," preparing the campus community and fully stepping back to allow Sheares Ashby to take the lead: "I have my voice instead of his, my presence instead of his personality, my way of thinking instead of his, it's a big deal after 30 years. For him to actually give me that moment and time and distance is a tremendous gift" (Lederman, 2023). Just like her predecessor, President Sheares Ashby cited inclusive excellence as a central tenet of her leadership and goals for the future of UMBC and US higher education. She reflected: "That's our work. It's an exciting moment to me, and I'm grateful to be at this institution that has already decided that these are its values" (Lederman, 2023).

HALLMARKS OF THE INSTITUTION: UNIQUELY UMBC

A notable feature of UMBC is its pride in the distinctiveness of its institutional and community characteristics. When asked about the current student population at UMBC, the vice president of enrolment answered:

> Our students tend to be very quirky, and unapologetically quirky. They are okay with being different, and I think it's that sense of self . . . and the fact that you're at a place that welcomes and embraces who you are for whoever you are . . . I just

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> think it's being okay in who you are . . . I think it is an important character of students who do well here.

In the words of Hrabowski, "We like being a nerdy place." For most of its history, UMBC's chess team has been better known than its more traditional sports teams, winning the 1996 Pan-American Chess Championsips and going on to bring home ten championships over the following two decades (UMBC, n.d.d). In a 2011 segment about UMBC on the nationally broadcast television news program *60 Minutes*, a student interviewed said, "Let me be honest with you, when I came here, I thought this was the most boring place I'd ever been. But it hit me after one semester that the party at UMBC is in the library." Students have a tradition of rubbing the nose of the bronze sculpture of UMBC's Chesapeake Bay Retriever mascot, True Grit, for good luck on final exams, not football games. In 2018 when UMBC's men's basketball team made it to March Madness and beat the number-one-seeded University of Virginia basketball team in 2018, it came as a surprise to all and brought so much national attention from people who had never heard of UMBC that the spike in internet traffic seeking its homepage caused the school's servers to crash. As Hrabowski and UMBC responded to this attention, they were intentional about leveraging this opportunity to share UMBC's academic success. Players' responses also echoed these institutional and cultural values. As Hrabowski recounted:

> It was so funny because the greatest two lines when they asked the basketball players, "What are you going to do now?" One kid just said, "I got to go back to my room and study for a test." I loved that. And the [other] kid said with tears in his eyes, "We stand on the shoulders of our chess team." And he was serious because we are very good at chess.

UMBC hasn't always felt pride in what makes it unique though. As one administrator and alumus of UMBC described:

> We went from being this apologetic, kind of, you know, "We're *just* UMBC. We're just this little regional campus," to being unapologetic, embracing who we are . . . this is what we are, and this is what we do, and we're very proud of it. And it's not a secret. I remember at one point people used to call us "The best kept little secret," you know. I think we just grew up and matured and just stood on our own and was unapologetic about it and felt good about it.

Another longtime UMBC faculty and administrator reflected on how this pride and confidence in their identity as an institution took time:

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> When I came to UMBC, we spent a lot of time sort of sitting around worrying about our name, Baltimore County, and we should really change our name because no university has "county" in its name. And I think a lot of that had to do with this sort of lack of confidence in the institution. It was a very young institution. It was a pretty rough time, back in the '80s it was almost closed down because of enrollment . . . And I think we sort of lacked confidence in the institution itself, which is very natural. It has an unusual name, it was a young university, it wasn't fully developed like many of the universities we [faculty] went to. And the difference between that and now is there is so much confidence in what this institution does.

Some of this lack of confidence came with the growing pains of being a younger, regional institution working to realize its own vision of the kind of institution it was meant to be. Part of the issue was establishing whether it was going to focus on teaching, given its situation within the University of Maryland system and State, or whether it was going to focus on research as UMBC had the faculty skills and public mission to realize impactful scholarly contributions. UMBC also had a STEM focus in combination with a strong commitment to the humanities and liberal arts. It took time for these elements to cohere and coalesce into a consistent institutional identity. As one leader recalled, "There was definitely a campus dialogue or argument or tension going on about whether this was going to be a teaching place or a research place. And that has really, over time, fused and settled. As we've seen, teaching and research are very much intertwined."

Another leader described this organizational process as a maturing of the institution and a bucking of postsecondary trends typically constraining institutions to prioritizing teaching or research:

> When you're a young university, you tend to wonder which one of your parents you're going to grow into, right? Are you going to grow into a big research university or the small liberal arts [model]? That's a tension that's occurred at the university over the years. What's happened, I think, is that we realized that actually we don't need to grow up into one of those. We've got our own thing going on.

Recognizing what UMBC's "own thing" was going to be and committing to it represented a new stage in UMBC's growth and development. It also marked the fulfillment of early aims to carve out a niche for itself. During UMBC's opening, the first chancellor, Albin Kuhn, reflected: "Just like a youngster, we

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don't have all the answers, but we do want to develop our own personality and become part of the Baltimore metropolitan area" (UMBC Magazine, 2016). By deeply committing to teaching, research, and service and investing in their most innovative and unique initiatives, UMBC has carved out a distinctive identity within the University of Maryland system and nationally.

A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

A key characteristic of UMBC is its collaborative culture. Underlying the administrative work of the institution is a shared understanding of its priorities. UMBC's current senior leadership team consists of the president, vice presidents, and the deans of the colleges. Many of the individuals who sit on this group spoke about their shared desire to move the institution forward and to avoid turf battles. One vice president remarked:

> We have a group of twelve people and we have worked very hard over the years to become cohesive, to develop a shared vision for what we want to do and to rise above our unit priorities – to think about the institution as a whole. It doesn't mean we don't disagree. We do. But I always feel like everybody's pulling in the same direction.

In addition to benefiting budgeting decisions, this collective approach also came through in UMBC's most recent accreditation process. One interviewee recalled that the accreditation teams described a consistency in what campus members across UMBC said, signaling that the campus community has a clear understanding of what the institution stands for. This consistency, in combination with a culture of collaboration, makes institutional processes and decisions more effective and efficient. As one dean shared, "There's a really close relationship between the academic deans and the vice presidents at UMBC. We work together on problems. I need money, I go to Greg in OIA. I have a student affairs problem, I'll talk to Nancy. We work across the boundaries to find ways to be successful." There is also a belief espoused by senior leadership that working together produces more effective institutional action and solutions. In our interview, the provost said:

> I tell people, you know, I serve as provost, and I hope I have a relatively clever brain. But that's nothing compared to the sort of intellectual horsepower that you have in a university, hundreds and thousands of people are really smart. And you'd be really stupid if you believed that your one brain could solve everything.

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> And the extent to which you can, this is the great thing about universities, you have the ability to harness the entire intellectual power of the community.

Similarly, another senior leader reflected:

> We're a place that is trying to think about how you do teaching and learning, how you do research, and how you connect to the economic vitality of a region, in a way where everybody can participate, regardless of where you come from, regardless of what you look like. And how do you, if people are willing to do the work and be part of a community, then how can we show people that we're capable of far more together than we'd ever be individually? Right, that's really what this place is about.

Through all the years, UMBC has also made efforts to strengthen its system of shared governance. Since the early 1990s when Hrabowski became president, UMBC has held annual retreats with over 200 campus members (leaders, faculty, and staff); when it comes to strategic planning, taking time and designing for inclusion is valued over efficiency (Hrabowski, 2019). The University Steering Committee consists of the heads of all UMBC's governing bodies (faculty, professional and nonexempt, and student, undergraduate, and graduate senates) and meets monthly to allow various constituents to have a voice – a voice, although not always a vote. While UMBC and Freeman Hrabowski have not been immune to disagreement and dissent, by and large, UMBC has a strong degree of cohesiveness and trust in Hrabowski. As one dean explained, "I tell people 'This guy thinks like me.' Or is it we think like Freeman? We sit around the table, and we may have differences, but I think everyone can feel the good of the university . . . what's best for the students . . . It leads us to have one voice."

CONTINUITY OF LEADERSHIP

As conversations with current senior administrators, faculty members, and staff members from across the campus suggested, there is a consistent reverence for the powerful presence and influence of Freeman Hrabowski. He served as president for thirty years (1992–2022), which is more than half of UMBC's history. Many of UMBC's vice presidents and deans who have been at the institution for decades have known no other leader. There is a shared recognition of how special this is, especially given the average university presidential tenure was 6.5 years in 2016 (Gagliardi et al., 2017). As one senior

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leader reflected, "rarely do you get someone like Freemen who you both want to stay and then stays." Although Hrabowski intentionally frames UMBC's success as the result of collective efforts, as a leader his impact on the culture and institution is undeniable. As one vice president described:

> You can feel it. You walk in and the students are kind, and the faculty are kind and the administration and faculty get along. It's a wonderful place to be and a very genuine place because Freeman is genuine. He's a visionary leader . . . He is humble and charismatic. You always feel better leaving than you did coming, and he's set the tone . . . This is his body of work.

Many of the key practices of the institution can be traced back to Hrabowski and were possible because of his lasting commitment to UMBC: a relentless concern for all students; treating institutional problems as investigations requiring scientific and data-driven inquiry; launching initiatives that challenge prevailing institutional norms; setting common priorities and using those as the touchstones for decision-making at key institutional committees. As one senior leader reflected, "The UMBC story is also about stability of leadership. The fact that Freeman has been here for thirty years, and he's such an amazing human being, has really allowed us to be this institution." This longstanding dedication to UMBC is not limited to the presidency – it is a common theme across UMBC's leadership and the campus community. A majority of the senior leadership team has been at UMBC for over fifteen years, and multiple interviewees spoke about the lasting connection people make with UMBC. According to Hrabowski, "People, they love being here . . . [and] the people who have moved on are still in contact with us all the time, for all kinds of reasons. We like saying once you've been here, you've got that stamp. You always have it, you're always a part of the extended UMBC family."

Multiple leaders noted a relationship between UMBC's culture of long-term commitment and its high degree of trust and innovation. As one senior leader reflected, this continuity of leadership "creates a sort of sense of stability that allows people to take risks, to do some things that maybe don't pay off immediately, but more in the long term, and to feel supported in doing that." Another senior leader expanded on this notion, attributing UMBC's success with innovation not solely to longevity but also to the exceptional level of trust among staff, faculty, and senior leaders. He described this trust as being cultivated by leadership and strong shared governance:

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> The fact that shared governance leaders ended up becoming deans, provosts . . . has really sort of built a level of trust that allows you to actually take risks. Because, in essence, higher ed, a lot of the limitations of risk is the fact that people don't trust you . . . And so you're more constrained in what you can do. So, I think the positive, virtuous cycle that we've created, an emphasis on shared governance, has really been one of those facilitators of being able to continue to take risks.

This trust is also amplified by an intentional approach to lower the risk to innovation. As the provost explained, when a department approaches him for resources to substantially redesign a program, "They need to know that if it doesn't work out the way it should, the provost is not going to come, knock on their door and say, 'Why did you waste my $10,000?' . . . If you want innovation, you've got to lower the risk. This is not about failure; it's about trying something then revising it."

Although faculty and senior leaders expressed sadness and some concern about Hrabowski leaving, there was also confidence that his legacy and the collaborative culture that UMBC established under his leadership would continue. As one leader shared, "We've been saying for, you know, ten years, how much longer is Freeman going to be with us? But it feels like at UMBC we are positioned where we need to be for whoever comes next. You can't be hired to be a president at UMBC without being ready to do this work." Articles announcing the appointment of Dr. Valerie Sheares Ashby to the presidency affirm that, despite the leadership shift, there will be a continuity of values. Hrabowski responded to the news of Ashby's appointment with: "My colleagues and I are thrilled . . . We are very fortunate to have attracted such a talented visionary executive." The University System of Maryland board chair remarked, "Dr. Sheares Ashby is clearly the impressive scholar and dynamic leader we need to build on the strong foundation of inclusive excellence at UMBC . . . The Board of Regents knows this [Hrabowski's leadership] legacy will be in good hands" (Winnick, 2022a). In response, incoming President Shears Ashby expressed: "To follow President Freeman Hrabowski is a distinct privilege, as he has been a role model for so many . . . including myself . . . His extraordinary leadership and dedication to UMBC ensures that I am arriving at a university that is already performing at a very high level. There is no ceiling on what we can achieve from here" (Winnick, 2022a). There is a good deal of confidence in the future of UMBC under Dr. Shears Ashby and beyond; however, with the tenure and significance of Hrabowski's leadership at the university, it is hard not to wonder what would happen to a university when a leader like him leaves.

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CHALLENGES

New presidential leadership is not the only unknown for UMBC going forward. Like in most US postsecondary institutions, leaders, faculty, and staff have some ongoing concerns about what the future holds for the institution. Many of these relate to students. There is a keen awareness of the forthcoming enrolment challenges, which are only going to be exacerbated by demographic shifts reducing the numbers of traditionally aged students in the State and nation (Grawe, 2021). Although the graduation rate has improved significantly, some feel that current retention and graduation rates are still not good enough. As one leader shared:

> We have to move to be able to hit roughly 80 percent for six-year graduation rates in the next ten years. If we're not there we're, I think, going to be in a bad spot. Because the challenge that I see as I've looked at this is if people come here and they get washed out in some of our majors and then they leave UMBC, that's leaving a bad reputation. They're not going to send their siblings here, they're not going to do this. And so, you know, if we're prepared to admit them and they're strong enough students to be admitted, we ought to be able to get them through.

Another discussed a pattern of student attrition of about 12 percent in the first year and 10–12 percent in the second year, with "close to 25 percent of students gone by the end of their sophomore year." Simultaneously UMBC is working with a large transfer student population, which also has struggled with timely graduation. Another leader noted that if these issues are not addressed, they could negatively affect the positive profile that UMBC has developed: "Our challenge with the success rate of our transfer students, which is almost half of our students, we haven't figured that out. And if we don't, I think that our reputation as this incredibly diverse, successful institution is not gonna make it."

In keeping with the national postsecondary trends of institutions strategically investing in expanding graduate and adult programs (EAB, 2022), UMBC also has worked to increase its proportion of graduate students to 25 percent of the student body. UMBC is close to reaching this goal, with 24 percent of the total fall 2022 student body (13,991) constituting graduate students (3,366). However, one graduate studies administrator noted that there are limitations to UMBC's ability to keep expanding these programs from a market and institutional capacity standpoint. Graduate enrolments seem to have plateaued, and there are some concerns about UMBC's financial capacity to

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support a larger graduate student population. With the continued emphasis of attaining and maintaining Research 1 university status, there was also a question about how to keep the historic focus on students. One leader asserted that UMBC and its faculty should "never forget that you're here for the students, so everybody that comes in has to have a teaching philosophy, everyone that comes should want to mentor undergraduates and graduate students. If you want to work in only research . . . this is not the place for you."

Other challenges concern funding and infrastructure. There was an acknowledgment that, by and large, UMBC as a public institution has "been very well treated in Maryland"; however, "no matter which state you're in, state appropriations are going to drop, it's going to drop here 0.5 percent to one percent a year." According to another leader, UMBC is receiving less than it should according to State guidelines:

> Freeman [Hrabowski] has been working with state legislature and the governor on that issue for the last four or five years and has made some progress. Significant progress. In fact, I think Freeman will say that on an FTE basis, we've gotten, you know, bigger increases in terms of resources in the last three or four years . . . so that's progress. But it's still only partly getting us where we need to go. So, resources are always an issue.

To offset public funding declines, UMBC has turned to tuition. But as one administrator described, that tactic can only go so far:

> We've now gotten to a point where tuition is saturated. So now we're in a position where you're basically looking at decline in resources for public higher education, and so that's the context in which we live, and the context in which we have to adapt to, and those of us that can adapt to that type of trend will survive.

Over his tenure, Hrabowski brought UMBC's endowment up from around USD 1 billion to 105 million (UMBC Magazine, 2016) and led the institution through a very successful period of garnering federal and philanthropic monies. Yet there is apprehension about how UMBC can "remain affordable and a place of excellence." At this point, UMBC is reliant on tuition and, as one leader explained, still not the place where we could say, "Everyone who has an $80,000 income [or less] is free at UMBC." She also observed that, as a younger institution, "[UMBC] still [has] a young alumni base. I think it's getting harder and harder to raise money . . . and millennials give differently."

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While UMBC's increasing student population is noted as positive, there is a realization that this growth comes with the need for more infrastructure investments. One leader reflected:

> We have played at the kids' table, you know, for a long time in terms of infrastructure and resources. And now we're sort of at this place where it's like, if we're going to compete in this space, if we're going to compete with the big dogs, we have to have the infrastructure in place. So staffing is obviously one of them, but IT infrastructure, things like a CRM – customer relationship management system – or a content management system for your website . . . that scrappy part of us is wearing thin. Like you can only do so much bootstrap and manual . . . At some point, you're going to have to make these large-scale investments. So, I'm talking half a million, $2 million expense kind of systems.

In addition to financial investment, these kinds of changes also require investment from the institutional community and leadership. Another administrator noted that, while having a leadership with long tenures is overall a benefit to UMBC, it can also present the challenge of "trying to get that group to change." As she described:

> Things that we had in place just don't work with 15,000 students, they just don't . . . there's a lot of people who have been here a long, long time, you know twenty-plus years. And the only president they've ever known is Freeman, the only processes they've ever known is UMBC, and so they don't have a broader perspective, and even among the administration . . . Every Vice President, every Vice Provost, the Provost, everybody was internal . . . I think it's a challenge, but everybody really wants the greater good, so it's not a huge, horrible challenge.

There were also some questions about what the changes to UMBC leadership in the wake of Hrabowski's departure, and the shifts in the UMBC community more broadly, might mean for the culture of the institution and sense of community. One faculty member noted a bit of cultural difference between the latest generation and the first two generations of faculty who were very involved in the foundational decades of UMBC. The professor observed:

> Anecdotally, what I've been hearing is that the younger faculty are less . . . I'm not sure if loyal is quite the right word. They're less service oriented . . . they don't seem to quite buy into the university mission quite as much . . . it is slightly different dispositions. I think that there's also more of a sense that . . . being an academic is, it's a job, as opposed to maybe as much of a calling.

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Another senior leader talked about what increasing changes and diversification of staff, faculty, leaders, and students will continue to mean for the institution functionally, along with their conceptualization of the institution as a united community:

> The more inclusion we have, the more diversity in opinions we're going to encounter in our university. We're going to encounter more differences of opinion. And I'm not just talking about politics, but I'm talking about people coming from different backgrounds and different experiences. And so, you know, this is one of the things that a university to a certain extent is going to have to adapt to. It's a really good thing. It's what a university should be doing . . . I like really referring to UMBC as the UMBC community . . . [But] one of my colleagues in the humanities said to me, very nicely, "Well, you know, is it really a community? Or is it a set of communities?"

Finally, UMBC is constrained by its membership in a State system with eleven other colleges and universities that operate in the same sociopolitical environment. The aspirations and actions of other members of the system influence UMBC. One administrator recalled recent efforts made by its neighbor, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, to merge with the University of Maryland College Park "so that it could be a premier state institution." They described this effort as involving "getting UMBC out of the way, because . . . there's only three research institutions" and that "those sort of ambitions for College Park might impact us" when the State budget is being allocated. Similarly, UMBC's emerging status as a research institution raises the possibility that "there will be a shift in the system to downgrade us," and this could present additional State funding challenges. Despite these named concerns, by and large, the university community seems positive about and proud of what UMBC has accomplished in its fifty-five-year history, and community members remain optimistic about its future.

CONCLUSION

While there may be a temptation to ascribe the same "Cinderella story" framing to UMBC that was applied to their basketball team when they bested the University of Virginia in 2018, this would be an oversimplification of what went into UMBC to become the institution it is today. It took time and the right leadership for the university to come into its own, to mature and realize

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a unique vision and identity, and ultimately define excellence on its own terms. This case illustrates the importance of consistent and charismatic leadership, trust, and collective vision to establishing an institutional culture of innovation and equity and to making the kind of impact that goes beyond a single institution, and changes how we think about what is possible for higher education more broadly.

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