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# Baltimore

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## Great Fall Escapes

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E X P A N D I N G  
H O R I Z O N S

INTERVIEW WITH FREEMAN HRABOWSKI  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID REHOR

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County has earned accolades as a diverse institution of higher learning. We asked UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski about the school's commitment to diversity and its significance for the region.



**In Baltimore, as in many parts of the country,** people tend to think of diversity strictly in terms of black and white. It's a notion that is much too narrow in light of national trends—from the rapid increase in America's Hispanic population and growing immigrant groups to the increasing recognition of people with different perspectives and lifestyles. As a result, we at UMBC are cultivating a much broader view of diversity, while continuing to focus on the longstanding issues involving race. ¶ Our students have come from approximately 150 countries and all 50 states. More than a third are minorities and arrive on campus from a variety of backgrounds in terms of culture, income, geography, and age. Suburban students here mix with students from urban centers; students from India and China spend time with thirtysomething Marylanders returning to finish degrees; and the children of affluent professionals live on campus with first-generation college students.

It is a guiding principle here that living, studying, and interacting with diverse groups strengthen us as people, prepare us for America's emerging demographic reality, and break down barriers that inhibit possibilities for all.

I'm not suggesting that our campus is nirvana; we have issues arising from our diversity that need constant attention. But we have cultivated an atmosphere that encourages the discussion of such issues—and this is hard work. Because many students still come to campus from homogenous backgrounds, we challenge them to reach beyond their comfort zones and connect with others different from themselves.

Like most American children in the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up in a homogenous community, in segregated Birmingham, Alabama. In numerous ways, the larger society bombarded our black community with the message that we were second-class citizens. Notwithstanding this message, we children were guided by caring adults—parents, teachers, ministers, local civil rights leaders like Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and “outsiders” like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Andrew Young from Atlanta, who taught us that knowledge is power. They had the ability to think clearly, speak eloquently, and act confidently. They told us that education creates opportunities and makes



the difference between success and failure. And my parents constantly told me that I did not have time to be a victim.

In 1963, as a ninth-grader, I led a group of children to jail as part of a major civil rights protest under Dr. King's direction. With the nation watching, we marched from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church toward downtown, planning to kneel on the steps of City Hall. My heart was pounding and my head was swimming with fear. As we reached the steps, however, we were stopped by the Birmingham police. "Bull" Connor, the notorious police commissioner, halted us and asked me, "What do you want, little niggra?"

As I replied, "We want our freedom," my fellow demonstrators and I were shoved into paddy wagons. It was a painful, yet transforming, experience to go to jail, and at some level it steered me for my life ahead.

I went on to college at Hampton Institute in Virginia, and eventually earned a Ph.D. at the University of Illinois. To no one's surprise, least of all my parents, who were teachers, I gravitated to the field I loved most—education.

## We cannot make assumptions or draw conclusions about others without getting to know them and, in the process, broadening our own personal world and perspective.

In 1977, I came to Baltimore to serve as dean at Coppin State, which focused heavily on the needs and aspirations of inner-city residents. And in 1987, I arrived at UMBC, a remarkable place with an outstanding faculty, but also a history of racial tension. Unlike most universities, it had been founded at a time when qualified students from all racial backgrounds could attend, but also a time dominated by racial tension throughout the country.

UMBC is a work in progress, and I firmly believe that our hard work and experience can offer guidance to the Baltimore region as it considers how to embrace diversity as a source of strength, while focusing on related challenges.

Visitors readily appreciate the diversity of our 12,000-student campus; it reminds me of the United Nations Plaza. Our enrollment is 14 percent African-American, 17 percent Asian-American and 3 percent Hispanic and Native-American. Most important, UMBC has no significant differences in retention and graduation rates among students of different races—a distinctive achievement. Our graduates regularly go on to Stanford, Hopkins, Duke, and the Ivies. And we are having tremendous success attracting increasing numbers of women into the sciences and engineering. Through rocky

*Previous Page:* Members of the incoming freshman class at UMBC, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary. *Right:* Hrabowski emphasizes diversity as a "source of strength."

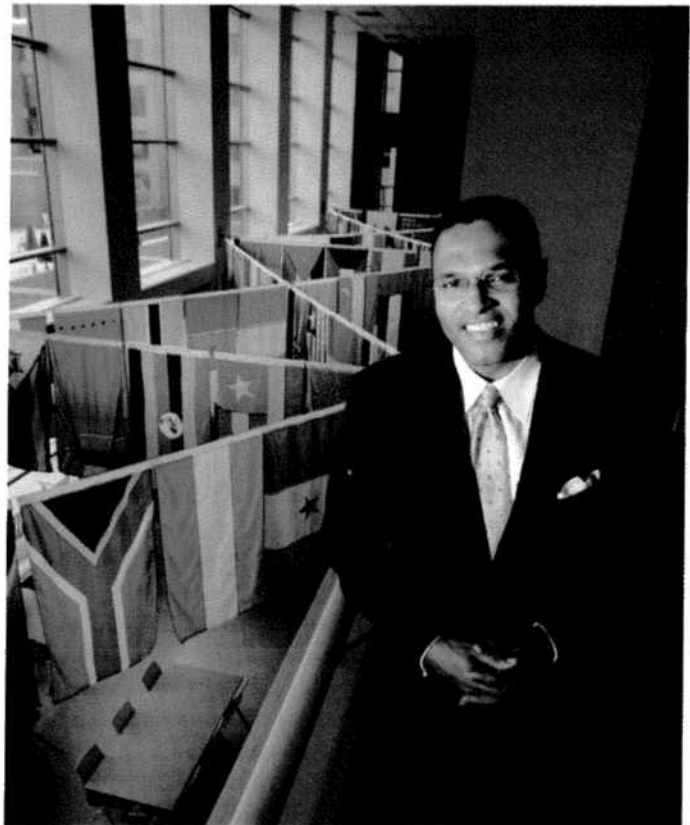
times and good times, through times of tension across the races and times of model collaboration, we have continued to grow, becoming stronger and better.

Each year, I encourage our freshmen to take advantage of the campus's diversity by getting to know people here from all over the world. We can never assume that we know where people are from based on their appearance. A person may be from anywhere in the world and may have lived in several different countries, or she may have spent her entire life in Baltimore. We cannot make assumptions or draw conclusions about others without getting to know them and, in the process, broadening our own personal world and perspective. Through honest conversation and interaction, we come to realize that there is so much more to know about other people. At UMBC, we foster such conversations and opportunities to learn about others—and ourselves.

We also promote diversity in instruction and research by connecting various disciplines to create new approaches to issues we face. Our faculty and students are combining disciplines in interesting ways, whether linking computing and visual arts, marrying music and technology, or integrating philosophy and science. We always want to push the envelope to achieve new insights into old problems.

Most Americans are reluctant to talk about the "sticky" issues of the day—race, gender, religion, poverty, sexuality, terrorism—which remain the focus of the hardest, most uncomfortable conversations we have in this country. At the University, we have created an environment that allows those conversations to take place.

Our campus creates an environment that attempts to de-emphasize "winning" the point, focusing instead on trying to understand the other person's perspective. We encourage people



## Scholars Across The Spectrum

**UMBC students bring** both diverse backgrounds and diverse interests to the campus, and their curiosity is supported by scholarship opportunities in a wide array of majors ranging from the arts, humanities, and social sciences to the sciences, engineering, and education.

**Sondheim Public Affairs Scholars Program** Established to honor the civic example of Baltimore's Walter Sondheim Jr., the program prepares gifted undergraduate students to become effective leaders in government, nonprofits, corporations, and the community. The program combines merit scholarships, service learning, internships, and intensive mentoring to engage students in the challenges and opportunities facing the City of Baltimore.

**Linehan Artists Scholars Program** The program, named for founders Earl and Darielle Linehan, offers merit scholarships to UMBC undergraduates with exceptional artistic and intellectual abilities. Within a liberal arts setting, Linehan Artists Scholars receive an honors education in their discipline while benefiting from close contact with other artists and the opportunity to perform or exhibit their work in a range of venues.

**Meyerhoff Scholarship Program** Established in 1989 through a gift from the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Foundation, this program was originally intended to address the underrepresentation of African-American men in the sciences and engineering. It now includes men and women from a broad range of backgrounds who share a common interest in advancing minorities in the sciences. More than 90 percent of graduating Meyerhoff Scholars have immediately gone on to attend top professional and graduate schools, including Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Johns Hopkins.

**Sherman STEM Teacher Training Program** Beginning in Fall 2006, the Sherman "STEM" initiative will provide scholarships for undergraduate students and fellowships for recent graduates who will be teaching science, technology, engineering, or math in at-risk schools in Baltimore City and throughout Maryland. The program, named for founders George and Betsy Sherman, is also open to mid-career professionals pursuing UMBC's Master of Arts in Teaching.

### **CWIT Scholars**

The Center for Women and Information Technology (CWIT), a program dedicated to achieving full participation for women in all aspects of information technology, offers merit scholarships for talented undergraduates majoring in computer science, computer engineering, information systems, or a related program at UMBC.

to go beyond what is simply politically correct. If people can't say what they think, how will they ever change what they think? People committed to diversity need to open their minds and try to appreciate others' points of view, no matter how "wrong" they may seem. Often an exhilarating synergy develops from hearing different perspectives. A big part of our job as a university is preparing people to live in a world that will be far more diverse and complicated than we ever would have ever imagined just a few years ago. Being comfortable with others who are different from ourselves increasingly reflects what it means to be an educated citizen of the world.

Right after the terror of 9/11, the university community gathered for a candlelight vigil. It grew out of an instinctive need to come together as a community, people of all backgrounds—Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and others. We talked respectfully about what the attacks meant to each of us, Americans and international students and faculty alike. Many on campus went out of their way to support people who were experiencing prejudice simply because they looked Middle Eastern. We all talked about what it should mean to live in America.

We were at our best that night—as a "historically diverse" institution and a model of how American society might develop.

It's a model that is also applicable to the Baltimore region. The reason UMBC is able to focus on diversity and high achievement is that we attract well-prepared students of all races. We decided we would set the bar high in terms of admission standards and expectations of all students—something we need to do for all children.

In addition to promoting cross-cultural dialogue and experience, emphasizing high achievement and hard work in our schools is the key to building a stronger future here in Baltimore. To reach that goal, we need to take several steps. Let's begin with more emphasis on parental responsibility. Families must focus on the basics—a love of reading, diligently doing homework, truly appreciating the value of education. We must also provide more opportunities for supplemental education—structured after-school programs and serious work for more students in the summer. Our public schools must become places where it's "cool" to be smart, to learn, and to explore—just as we do at UMBC.

At the same time, we must recognize that many young people of color and poor white children are underprepared, and that we must work to strengthen some of the most underperforming and underfunded schools in the Baltimore region. We need to increase the pool of academically well-prepared students of all types and to give support to the region's neediest children. For example, the UMBC Shriver Center Choice Program serves hundreds of children in the criminal justice system and attracts multi-million dollar National Science Foundation grants for work with elementary and middle school math and science teachers and students.

*Right: The flags of various nations hang in the UMBC student commons area.*



## Being comfortable with others who are different from ourselves increasingly reflects what it means to be an educated citizen of the world.

As the Baltimore region moves forward, we must focus even more attention and resources on eradicating the challenges associated with racial and economic differences. As Americans, we would be naïve to think these differences do not play a role in our lives. But I believe that most Americans are fair and want to do what's right as they interact with people who may look, think, and act differently from themselves.

From our research and experience, we know that the presence of students from diverse backgrounds benefits everyone. We also know that first-generation American and international students are among our hardest-working, and other students benefit from seeing such a strong work ethic.

I remember sitting with a group of students from Maryland, other states, and several other countries, and asking them about their study habits. From their responses, it was clear that the international students were generally more accustomed to studying longer hours than the American students.

And when I asked all the students why they thought that was the case, a young woman from Jamaica gave the most telling answer. It was her impression, she said, that American students go to college because it's what their parents expect them to do. In contrast, she came to UMBC with a definite purpose in mind—to excel so that her younger brothers and sisters would have sufficient

food. It seemed to her that college was the “icing on the cake” for many Americans, but that for her, it was the “bread of life.”

I get goose bumps when I think of that young woman. And when students, in general, hear those kinds of stories and see the obstacles that others must overcome to get to college and succeed academically—and as they themselves go through the college experience—they come to understand the power of education to transform lives. They also realize how fortunate so many of us are in America.

UMBC's success in linking both diversity and high achievement can inspire progress in the region, and our graduates are playing a leading role in that progress. More than 30,000 of them, from all sorts of backgrounds—including doctors, lawyers, judges, elected officials, teachers, scientists, engineers, artists, and entrepreneurs—now live in the Baltimore-Washington area.

They learned many lessons at UMBC and are applying those lessons every day in the region. They know, firsthand, that we must embrace diversity because it is a unifying source of strength. They know that we must connect with others who are different from ourselves—to know, appreciate, and benefit from their stories.

Only by connecting in this way can we see that we are all very much the same. Only then, can we move forward together, inspiring and supporting one another for the good of all. ■

