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Dynamic President Has Driven Boom at UMBC

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BODY:

In his 15 years as president, Freeman A. Hrabowski III has so transformed the University of Maryland Baltimore County with his exuberant, forceful character that people on campus invented a word for it: Freemanized.

Once an afterthought even within the state, a commuter school overshadowed by other campuses, UMBC now grabs national attention. Hrabowski has elevated research and entrepreneurialism on campus and helped lift minority and low-income students, especially black math and science majors, to the highest levels of academic achievement.

With about 12,000 students, a third of them the first in their families to go to college, UMBC is a national leader in graduating minority science students who go on to earn doctorates and medical degrees.

"It's hard to imagine another school that has come as far in the last 15 years as UMBC," said Terry Hartle of the American Council on Education.

"It's extraordinary," said William Brody, president of Johns Hopkins University. "People from all the major colleges and universities across the country are coming to UMBC to see what Freeman has done."

Hrabowski helped turn UMBC into a residential campus, launch two research parks and catapult the amount of research dollars the school receives from \$10 million in 1990 to \$85 million in fiscal 2006. Since 1990, 15 buildings have gone up, including five dorms.

Along the way, Hrabowski's following has continued to grow. "I think UMBC will be at the epicenter of a change that happens nationally," said alumnus Kafui Dzirasa of Silver Spring, who just earned a doctorate at Duke University and is finishing his medical degree. "One way or another, he's going to change the world."

Stephanie Nunez of Bowie, who turned down Princeton University for a UMBC scholarship, said, "He has this charisma and aura about him that draw people towards him."

And Vice Provost Diane Lee said, "He's the kind of leader who elevates everyone around him."

Hrabowski's story has permeated the culture at UMBC: As a child, he was deeply involved in the civil rights struggle in the South, marching and going to jail for the cause. And even when he was going to segregated schools, he was determined to continue his education to the highest level possible.

More than a few prestigious schools have tried to snag Hrabowski over the years, but he has stayed at this school in Catonsville for 20 years. "This is a place where people at all economic levels and all races have a chance to excel, to be the best," Hrabowski said. "We are the new America -- the America this country wants to become."

Hrabowski talks like a preacher, thinks like a scholar, has boundless energy -- he typically sleeps four hours a night. He fills a room, grabbing shoulders, spreading his arms, shouting with laughter. He knows everyone, remembers everything, expects extraordinary things. He bursts out with things such as: "I get goose bumps from math problems -- goose bumps!"

He laughs about fostering a nerdy-is-cool culture, brags constantly about his students and faculty and might break into a U-M-B-C! chant at any moment, pounding on his desk. "This is a place that enjoys reading and thinking and writing and talking about ideasssss," he said, savoring the last word.

The most successful team has been chess -- the school took heat several years ago for luring top players, older than the typical college student, with fat scholarships.

Many say they can't imagine the school without him. But Hrabowski is in constant demand as a speaker nationally, the president of Johns Hopkins has been asked to try to talk him into presidencies elsewhere, and when the queen of England visited Washington, Hrabowski was invited to her table for dinner.

"Who would have imagined that a little black kid from Birmingham. . . ." he said with his booming laugh.

He was born in 1950 in Alabama, growing up in a neighborhood of black families who valued education, church and hard work. He moved quickly through the grades.

By the time he was 12, the city had had more than a dozen bombings in black neighborhoods. After Martin Luther King Jr. was sent to jail for organizing demonstrations, children joined the protest. The first day, Hrabowski's parents wouldn't let him go. They saw fire hoses turned on children, dogs snarling at the crowds.

He said he told them, "I got to go. I got to go."

He marched with hundreds of children to city hall, he said, singing, "I ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. . . ."

"It wasn't that I was that courageous," Hrabowski said. "I was just a fat little kid who wanted a better life. Believe me, my knees were shaking."

After five days in jail, the children were set free.

But a few months later, there was a bombing at a nearby church.

Four little girls were killed. One of them, Hrabowski said, was his friend.

He was 13 when he met his first PhD, he said, at a National Science Foundation program. The mathematician wrote a problem on the board that no one could solve. Hrabowski was fascinated, trying for days to puzzle it out. "I wanted to be someone to do that -- think of questions, encourage people to think."

He started college young, finishing Hampton University when he was 19. Then he earned a doctorate in mathematics at the University of Illinois. There were no black faculty members. No one would study with him.

Now he's president of a predominantly white university. "That's just how far we've come as Americans," he said. He immediately added the flip side: the inequities still out there. "That's the challenge we face as we think of UMBC as a place anybody can come and excel. The problem is so many children are not prepared."

He worked with faculty and donors to create a program that would encourage students, particularly black men, to become scientific researchers. The Meyerhoff Scholarship Program, open to all races and genders but primarily for underrepresented minorities, puts top students into research labs as undergraduates. "It's amazing how people rise to expectations," Hrabowski said.

At UMBC, he has been working to attract top faculty. He instilled a culture of high expectations coupled with nurturing. Professors expect students to do well and are ready to offer extra help if they're struggling; students are encouraged to study in groups and pull one another along.

Hrabowski has taken criticism at times for cutting programs after state funding dropped, but he has been selective about defining UMBC's identity by choosing areas in which to excel. He has created a donor base at a 41-year-old school without the older alumni and history other institutions rely on by cultivating relationships with businesses and getting people to buy into his vision and fund projects.

He tells people he has no idea what his next career move might be; he's still having fun at UMBC.

"We're on the edge," he said. "We're doing so well. We're running. We're about to lift off." He lifted his arms in the air, smiling. "We're getting ready to fly."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

GRAPHIC: IMAGE; By Marvin Joseph -- The Washington Post; At UMBC's graduation, Freeman A. Hrabowski III laughs at a joke told about him. He has led the school for 15 years.

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