The Social Impact of UMBC: A Journey Over Three Decades

By Freeman A. Hrabowski III, Peter H. Henderson, and Anthony T. Lane

In the mid-1980s, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) was still a young campus, evolving both its academic programs and its role in the Baltimore metropolitan area. At his installation as chancellor in 1986, Michael Hooker saw that the University, founded just 20 years earlier, could become a force for addressing social problems and supporting economic development. He urged the University to grow, achieve excellence in key areas, embrace the community, and build partnerships across the region.

UMBC turned to Ernie Boyer, the former State University of New York (SUNY) chancellor who was then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to guide this work. Embracing Boyer’s call for a “New American College” focused on addressing societal problems, UMBC developed a range of influential initiatives centered on engaged scholarship and community partnerships.

Now, at a time when society’s problems appear more pressing than ever, Boyer’s call remains relevant and important. The health and economic challenges of the past year have illustrated in dramatic ways how the burdens of societal upheavals are disproportionately borne by people of color and low-income families.

Reflecting on three decades of this work on the UMBC campus and in the community, we recognize the wide-ranging benefits of this engaged, solutions-oriented approach to education and community building. In what follows, we discuss the work to effect change for our students and our community through initiatives focused on academic success, systemic racism, economic opportunity, health inequities, and civic participation. We share lessons learned as a guide for other like-minded institutions.

Academic Success for African Americans

The state of Maryland established UMBC in the 1960s, the only one of Maryland’s public universities founded after Brown v. Board of Education, and therefore open to students of all races from its start. From the beginning, UMBC has been an experiment in “inclusive excellence,” the notion that one campus could be built to support the academic success of students of all backgrounds.

As our campus evolved, we continued to assess opportunities and challenges as we developed new approaches. Campus protests in the 1980s by Black students and their allies provided evidence that we weren’t meeting the needs of all of our students. While these protests were connected in some cases to specific racial incidents on campus, we discovered through a series of focus groups with students that academic frustration was the fundamental issue. In the late 1980s, our six-year completion rate for all students was 35%. For our Black students it was just 25%. Most students were simply not realizing their academic dreams.

In response, UMBC implemented simultaneous initiatives to improve teaching and learning for the student body as a whole and dedicated initiatives to support the success of Black students, particularly in the natural sciences and engineering, which were the fields in which they were least likely to complete majors. To increase the academic success of our students, we recognized that granting access was not enough. We needed to ensure that we were admitting students who were prepared for college-level work and who could succeed, particularly
if provided with support. We also recognized that we needed to change our culture to provide that support through a student-centered approach to learning, persistence, and completion. For example, we instituted a first-year experience that includes small seminars, a course on navigating college, and living-learning communities. Many of our faculty have also re-designed their courses — particularly introductory courses — to include such successful pedagogical strategies as group, problem-focused, and experiential learning.

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program, focused on increasing the diversity of research scientists, has been central to this work. Freeman Hrabowski had envisioned a program to support Black students in the sciences and partnered with Bob Meyerhoff, a Baltimore businessman and philanthropist who shared this interest. The program’s structured approach involves high expectations, financial and academic support, building community, early exposure to research, and continual evaluation. Over time, it broadened to include high-achieving undergraduates of all races interested in issues of diversity. As a result of the Meyerhoff Program and other initiatives on our campus, the six-year degree completion rate has doubled, and for Black students it is now about the same as it is for the student population overall.

UMBC welcomed the first class of Meyerhoff Scholars in 1989, and the Meyerhoff Program, which recently welcomed its 32nd class in the fall of 2020, has become a national model for supporting diversity in the natural sciences and engineering. UMBC is now second in the country in terms of producing Black bachelor’s degree recipients who complete STEM PhDs and leads the country in the number who complete MD-PhDs. Current students and alumni are inspired by the example of other Meyerhoff Scholars, including Kizzmekia Corbett, the scientific lead of the NIH Vaccine Research Center’s coronavirus team, the work of which has been critical to the development of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. Dr. Corbett is the first Black woman to have played such a leadership role in the development of a vaccine, and she attributes her success to mentors supportive of her and her work at each step of her education and professional development.

The Meyerhoff Program has been replicated on other campuses, including Penn State and UNC-Chapel Hill, with support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institutes (HHMI), and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative is supporting replication efforts at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, San Diego. Experience has taught us that the success of these programs is closely tied to the strength of relationships developed between leaders of the partnering institutions, along with the commitment to rigorous evaluation and ongoing engagement with faculty and academic administrators.

The Meyerhoff Programs’ success has also inspired faculty and staff to think more deeply about how to improve teaching and learning. The Hrabowski Innovation Fund, established in 2012 in recognition of Freeman Hrabowski’s 20th year as President, now provides ongoing resources and support for course redesign and other academic initiatives.

Educational Excellence in our Community

UMBC has come to see the Meyerhoff Scholars Program as both an approach to improving academic success within our campus and an approach to supporting the educational success of underrepresented minority students in our region. Our Meyerhoff Foundation partnership and the structure of the program have served as a template for other initiatives, including several initiatives that integrate the work of our campus with K-12 educational partners.

In the early 2000s, George Sherman, a corporate executive with a background in engineering, and his wife, Betsy, started supporting our Meyerhoff efforts. Betsy Sherman had been a teacher at a school that served a predominantly minority population. She and George believed that teachers of any race could be effective with students of any race if given the proper support, and they were particularly concerned about the shortage of STEM teachers with the skill and commitment to teach and thrive in under-resourced urban schools.
Determined to make a difference, the resulting Sherman STEM Teacher Scholars Program launched in 2006 with a focus on this problem of too few STEM teachers, particularly at the middle school level. To date, this Program has produced nearly 120 teachers with STEM expertise, almost all of whom went on to teach at under-resourced schools.

In recent years, the program has expanded its efforts and impact by deepening partnerships with a consortium of local schools. The work has focused on understanding and responding to each school’s needs, with an emphasis on professional development for teachers and providing extra resources, including teams of undergraduates, coordinated through the Shriver Center, who work with small groups inside classrooms as “math coaches.” Progress at schools in the consortium has been significant, and even dramatic. For instance, at Baltimore’s Lakeland Elementary/Middle School, the percentage of students passing the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exam in math and reading grew by more than 20 points during the five years the standardized test was administered in Maryland.

The effort has also led to other social impact initiatives in the community, including the Lakeland Community and STEAM Center, which represents the convergence of long-standing partnerships with the Sherman family and the Northrop Grumman Corporation. The Northrop Grumman Foundation provided significant funding to establish the center, which serves as a hub for teaching and learning in STEM and the arts, and as a setting for community gatherings and programs offered by the city of Baltimore.

Recognizing the importance of foundational skills for success in school, UMBC and the Sherman family established the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities. Led by Dr. Mavis Sanders, professor of education, the Center focuses on children ages 3-8 and provides professional development for teachers, supports early learning research, and partners with local elementary schools. In partnership with the Center, UMBC undergraduates, again coordinated through the Shriver Center, work with first and second-grade students on reading skills.

While the Sherman Center’s support extends through the second grade, a flexible approach to partnering has presented additional opportunities. For instance, when the principal of Baltimore’s Maree G. Farring Elementary reported that many of the older students were making slower progress than expected in reading given earlier support, the Center mobilized other resources. Now the Wisdom Institute, an association for retired UMBC faculty and staff, is expanding support by pairing its members with these students for one-on-one reading time.

**Community Engagement**

Though the Shriver Center was established on UMBC’s campus in 1993, we came into contact with the Shriver family years earlier through Mark Shriver, Sargent and Eunice Shriver’s son. In 1987, he had started the Choice Intensive Advocacy Program in Baltimore, with the goal of reducing the number of Black children and teenagers getting caught up in the criminal justice system. The program aimed to provide supervision and support for young people after they had been charged with a crime, allowing them to stay at home and in school, and out of juvenile detention.

Mark Shriver looked for an institutional home that could help build and sustain the new program. He worked with John Martello, a UMBC administrator and faculty member whose responsibilities centered on service learning in support of the local community. They brought the Choice Program to UMBC’s campus in 1988. Since then, we’ve refined the program’s model of structured support and added programs focused on job training and academic preparation. We’ve worked with about 25,000 Maryland families over the program’s history, helping thousands of teenagers and young adults develop important life skills and avoid further contact with the juvenile justice system.
The program also has been replicated in such cities as Syracuse, Hartford, and San Diego. It has endured in some cases and become inactive in others; in San Diego, it was recently restarted using the basic model that involves staff members staying in daily contact with a caseload of youth and families. The sustainability of UMBC’s program is tied to its integration into the university and also our close relationship with the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. The latter relationship has grown stronger over the years as staff and mentors with the Choice Program have gone on to work for the Department.

After UMBC established the Shriver Center in the 1990s, the Choice Program became one of its signature initiatives, alongside the Shriver Peacemaker Fellows Program, which supports returned Peace Corps volunteers for two years of graduate study, community service, and leadership development. At the heart of these programs, and a range of other community-focused initiatives based in the Shriver Center, are strong and enduring community partnerships.

For the Choice Program, the trust developed over a long history working with the Department of Juvenile Services served as the basis for a broad new initiative announced this past August. At a time when the devastating killing of Black community members by police officers captured public attention and increased awareness of the reality of structural racism in this country, the State pledged to apply the Choice model as widely as possible in an effort to keep young people out of the state’s jails and detention centers.

We have continued the pattern of responding and reacting to changing circumstances. For example, in the spring of 2015, after Freddie Gray died from injuries he sustained following his arrest by Baltimore police, the city erupted in protests and calls for reform. We took stock of our connections in the city and counted 140 programs and initiatives focused on such problems as hunger, poverty, and homelessness. We committed to do more for our city and our state. A planning team was already making preparations for UMBC to host the annual national conference “Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life” in the fall. The event became an occasion to celebrate Baltimore, reflect on recent events and their roots, and focus on engaged scholarship and pedagogy.

We have also advanced this work through the establishment and growth of our Center for Democracy and Civic Life, which aims to empower students as citizens, community members, and agents of change. The center’s activities include student leadership programs, a broad initiative to infuse civic engagement into course offerings, and a student-led spring break option focused on service. It also encourages civic engagement through voting drives and civil, political conversations.

**Economic Development and Health Disparities Before and During COVID-19**

The campus’s efforts to rethink its economic development role in the region led to the establishment of our research park in 1989. The vision was that the research park, which would be called bwtech@UMBC, would raise the University’s profile and ability to attract resources while providing internship and job opportunities for students, access to faculty expertise and technology transfer opportunities for companies, and an economic boost to the region.

Achieving that vision took several years and involved the development of new partnerships at the state and county levels. Now, we can see the ways that the park has exceeded expectations. Home to almost 140 companies -- a significant proportion of which have women (30%) or minority (25%) CEOs -- it offers a range of support and business development services, as well as targeted incubators for start-ups in cybersecurity, government services, and the life sciences. As a whole, the park hosts about 1,700 jobs, and its annual economic impact from income and business sales exceeds $600 million.
The park has also supported University priorities and enhanced partnerships in unexpected ways. In 2010, Northrop Grumman, a major recruiter of UMBC graduates in information technology (IT) and other areas, established at bwtech the CYNC program for early-stage companies developing cybersecurity technology for use in the defense industry. The relationship deepened with the success of the CYNC program, and the company subsequently provided funding to establish the UMBC Cyber Scholars Program, started in 2013 with a focus on preparing women and students from underrepresented groups for careers in cybersecurity, as well as support for the Lakeland STEAM Center.

The park’s cybersecurity emphasis is closely tied to our longstanding relationship with the National Security Agency (NSA), which is headquartered just 15 minutes from campus at Fort Meade. NSA employs more than 1,100 of our graduates and maintains extensive research facilities at bwtech. NSA also provides funding to support the Meyerhoff Scholars Program and such initiatives as a “Mind, Body, and Coding” camp to introduce girls in grades 3-9 to IT concepts and potential career paths.

In healthcare, campus leaders used a similar approach, partnering with the Maryland Department of Health in 1994 to establish what was then called the Center for Health Program Development and Management, and later became The Hilltop Institute. Hilltop worked with the Department of Health to launch the state’s Medicaid managed care program, which currently provides health care for 1.5 million low-income Marylanders. Nationally recognized as an exemplary state-public university partnership, Hilltop provides critical data-driven research and policy analysis to the Medicaid Administration and a range of other state agencies to support healthcare financing and delivery system reform in Maryland.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health called on Hilltop to draft guidance for health care providers, monitor hospital surge capacity and telehealth utilization, and generate data on COVID testing and immunizations. The campus’s broad commitment to health policy has also allowed us to produce large numbers of graduates who have been important partners during the pandemic period, including such local figures as Letitia Dzirasa, Baltimore’s Health Commissioner, and national leaders, including Jerome Adams, former Surgeon General, and Sylvia Trent-Adams, who served until recently as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health.

Reflections and Lessons

Looking back on three decades of this work to build partnerships and address societal problems, we see clear evidence of the impact, both within our academic community and in the neighboring communities in and around Baltimore. The work has fundamentally changed our institution and the way we approach a range of challenges involving race, opportunity, and equity.

And yet the reality is that this work is never easy. We state this in blunt terms in our recent book, The Empowered University: Culture change is as “hard as hell.”

In each case described in this article -- approaching academics from the standpoint of inclusive excellence; working to solve problems in our community and the nation; and broadening our economic impact -- we encountered resistance, on campus and off.

When the Meyerhoff Program was proposed, some colleagues thought it was unfair to support a particular racial group. With the Choice Program, some raised concerns about bringing youthful offenders to campus, or questioned how that program aligned with our academic mission. Some faculty argued against the research park, saying it would siphon resources from the University’s teaching mission, and some in the neighborhoods surrounding campus spoke out against the effort, fearing extra traffic or the possibility that companies
conducting biotech research could unleash germs or other hazards. And with each new proposal, there was always the argument that we did not have the resources to succeed.

In each case, we eventually succeeded by engaging our campus to change attitudes about what we could and should be doing. We had tough conversations about race, academic performance, and our role in building the economy or supporting the state. By raising additional resources, often through philanthropy, we were also able to address the zero-sum argument about resources. Once programs were established and they demonstrated success, we won additional converts. We also acknowledge that culture change is an ongoing process. As we learn and make progress in some areas, we also remind ourselves that we must stay vigilant, so we do not revert to old ways of doing things.

At this challenging moment in our nation’s history, this work has never been more important. As we think about the role that universities should be playing, a part of our responsibility is to look for ways to engage an ever-widening circle of people and institutions in this work. At a time when the divisions in our society along racial, political, and economic lines seem wider than ever, we must be empowered to take a critical look at ourselves and our institutions and commit to putting all of our collective resources behind tackling these fundamental challenges affecting us all.

We know such honesty can be difficult, and yet our experience and progress have taught us that commitment to this work leads to institutional and community-wide transformation.
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