

***“Nothing great in the world has ever been accomplished  
without passion”***

~Hebbel

**“Success Is Never Final - Dreams Fulfilled”**

**An Interview with Freeman Hrabowski,  
President, UMBC**



**Few individuals have had an impact on higher education and on the lives of thousands of students, faculty, and staff as Dr. Freeman Hrabowski.**

**And what an incredible run Dr. Hrabowski has had. Founder of the nationally recognized Meyerhoff Scholars Program, named President of UMBC in 1992, named #1 up and coming university in America, whose graduates are pursued by Harvard, Princeton and Yale...**

**In 2008, US News and World Report named him one of America's Best Leaders. In 2009, Time Magazine named him one of the Top Ten College Presidents and in 2012 Time Magazine named Dr. Hrabowski one of the top 100 Most Influential People in the World.**

**We sat down recently- actually we spoke on the phone, as he was in his car, out and about "telling and selling" one of the greatest stories in higher education- UMBC. This is the conversation that followed.**

**Thank you, Freeman!**

**Mike Gill,  
President & Chairman, Evergreen Advisors**

**Mike Gill (MG):** You arrived at to UMBC in 1987 as Vice Provost and you became President in 1992. What were your expectations when you first arrived at UMBC?

**Freeman:** When I moved to UMBC as Vice Provost, I had been an academic vice president but UMBC was a research university and a larger institution. I needed to see if I was a fit. It never occurred to me that I would be President one day. It's significant that Michael Hooker, who was President at the time, told me my first day on the job, "**one day you will be President here.**" And my response was RIGHT! It was amazing that he had that kind of confidence in me after just a few conversations. I had no idea what the future held.

**MG:** It was a new chapter starting for you when you became president. What do you remember?

**Freeman:** I was very impressed with the faculty at UMBC. I saw a lot of brain power and it was clear that people were very smart; but at the same time I could tell there wasn't the right fit between the faculty and the students. The best students were good, quite good, but there were a lot of students who didn't have the background to do great work. My question to everyone was, "**Do we understand what background our students need in order to succeed at the University?**" We started looking at the match of high academic standards and the necessary background the student needed in order to succeed.



**MG:** *"It's cool to be smart"*. How did you come up with that?

**Freeman:** For years I have seen a lot of students in the younger generation be embarrassed when they are smart. I wanted people to think about the need to help America's youth feel good about working hard and to think about what it means to be smart. My message and the message of my campus became - smart isn't necessarily what you are born with. It's how hard you work, how excited you are about learning, how hard you are willing to work to succeed, to excel. And when you do excel, it's really cool.

**MG: You were not yet the President when you co-founded the Meyerhoff Scholar Program in 1987. What inspired you to pursue such an audacious idea?**

**Freeman:** Bob Embry from the Abell Foundation talked to me about the concern I had that a lot of students were not doing well in science. He suggested I go and talk with Bob Meyerhoff. Bob was especially interested in the challenges of young men of color, young black men. He said everything he saw on TV except sports was negative. He wanted to make a difference. So we married the two ideas of helping the kids do well in science with Bob's idea of helping young guys out who weren't doing well in general. We figured out how to create a program that says "you can find young people from all backgrounds who can excel in school and in the areas that are consistently the most difficult, science and engineering."

**MG: What has been a significant surprise to you that you couldn't possibly have foreseen twenty-five years ago?**

**Freeman:** I would have never believed the level of support we get from the Ivy's, from Harvard to Princeton. These institutions are very interested in UMBC graduates of all backgrounds and so we are sending students to Harvard regularly- Harvard, Yale, Princeton. Several years ago when Harvard gave me an honorary degree it was because of UMBC, not because of me. The fact is when I stood, Drew Faust, the president of Harvard said this, "When it comes to the UMBC graduates who come to Harvard, from sciences to the humanities, there are two words we use "**Consistently Superb.**" It doesn't get better than that.

I could not have predicted twenty-five years ago that the most prestigious universities in the country would be interested in recruiting our students to graduate and professional programs. That's been the best surprise of them all and giving them scholarship money to be able to attend those schools.

**MG: What is UMBC's potential and are you there yet?**

**Freeman:** Oh no, we never arrive. Anytime an institution thinks it has arrived it will begin to go backwards. The fact that we are the #1 up and coming university in the country has everything to do with people respecting us as one of the most academically innovative places. We are constantly experimenting; looking in the mirror to see how we can do things better. We are always going to be on that path, on that journey, and that's what makes us different. We are hungry and young, confident but humble, and wanting

to partner with the corporate world, with the foundation world, and with the national agencies. Our capacity to keep growing is enormous because we are so hungry.

**MG: Being “Hungry” has become part of your DNA at UMBC:**

**Freeman:** Hungry and entrepreneurial. We’ve got a hundred companies on campus right now.

**MG: It’s 2023, how will higher education look different than it does today?**

**Freeman:** Universities and colleges will be doing the kinds of things that we are doing right now at UMBC. We are moving away from basic lecturing and focusing on group work, collaboration, heavy use of technology and what we call “blended” instruction. Part of the time, a faculty member might talk, but much of the time will be spent using technology, while students learn on their own with faculty facilitating the conversations. Some will be in person, some will be online. It will be the combination of online instruction, instruction in the classroom, but not the traditional lecture. We are going to be getting away from that more and more.

**MG: How about the institutions that struggle to change, if not resist it?**

**Freeman:** Resisting change is not an option. You look at people who are solving problems, whatever the problems are, they are learning to solve them in groups. From science to economics, they are using the technology and the emphasis is on empowering people to learn themselves. You will continue to see boundaries knocked down between universities and companies, so that people in companies can come back and forth and have more flexibility in the classes they take. You are going to see more of the universities immersed into the community and that’s what we are doing right now whether we are working with companies like Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin or with the National Security Agency.

**MG: How do you see online learning evolving in universities?**

**Freeman:** We have engineering courses that have been flipped completely, which means that students have to do a lot of the listening to a video and trying to solve problems before coming to class. The faculty member watches what they do using the Blackboard course management system and then she does maybe 15 minutes of lecturing based on what she thinks will work with them and what they don't understand. Then they do more problem solving. Another example, for anyone who is teaching writing we have now moved away from lecture. Using technology, students can critique each other's writing in groups and the faculty member can watch what they are doing on her display. The chemistry of the groups and of discovery is amazing. We have all kinds of different forms of learning and the use of technology.

**MG: You are a member of the board of directors of both T. Rowe Price and McCormick, two great companies, both headquartered in Maryland and both having a history of great leadership. Alan Wilson is the current CEO of McCormick and Brian Rogers and Jim Kennedy are the co-leaders of T. Rowe Price. What qualities of leadership do you observe in these individuals?**

**Freeman:** You just named some of the best in the country and beyond. First of all, they never take credit for things themselves. They always put the emphasis on the quality of people at both those companies. They are always working to empower people, to give as much as they can, and to help solve problems. They emphasize the important role that the company plays in helping clients in a range of ways, whether its individuals or institutions. Emphasis on the people and the process and the culture is very important. Mr. McCormick and Mr. Price were very respectful of each other and their people. Current leaders of these companies understand the importance of bringing the smartest people together and giving them support and taking their time in giving the best possible service. It's never about a fad; it's always about focusing on high quality.

**MG: You run a major university. You have been on many boards and commissions and are sought constantly by people and organizations that want your counsel and advice. How do you bring your "A" game every day?**

**Freeman:** Great question- two or three things I think about. Number one- attitude is so important; another thing, hard work. I'm going to work as hard as possible to understand the challenges I am facing, I'm going to make sure I'm listening to really smart people around me. I'm always going to be passionate about my work-whatever it

is. The combination of being able to be analytical, to think things through, and to bring passion to the work can build excellence. And that's the approach I use.

**MG: Give me another side to your “A” game. Talk about the good decisions you try to make in how you live your life.**

**Freeman:** For me everything comes from having an incredible wife of 42 years. Jackie is a hard worker, our home life is great, and it gives me an inner peace. We exercise often, eat the right foods, and we laugh a lot. I think it's important to have that healthy balance. I teach new college presidents at Harvard in the summer and I'm always telling them you've got to balance the personal and the professional. You cannot be your best at work if you don't get things right at home, your health, and your home life. You've got to have that together if you want to be your best when you go to work.

One more thing I have is a strong faith. I say all of the time “God help me”. It comes from childhood. And throughout the day I'm breathing deeply. I am always telling my colleagues, in the midst of the stress to take a moment to breathe deeply. Breathing deeply in the morning and making myself smile even when it's a tough day can make me feel better. I always believe, if you smile at the world, a lot of the times the world will smile at you. So even when it's a tough day, I'm smiling. Additionally, I get an amazing inspiration from my students. My students who go through all kinds of challenges in their own lives and somehow they keep pushing and keep saying “God help me” so we make it together...

**MG: Who has been an important mentor to you?**

**Freeman:** Bob Meyerhoff. Bob, for years, has been like a father and he is amazing. He has taught me that you have to balance yourself in the good times and the bad because when the good times come, it's great, but good times aren't always here and when the bad times come, remember they won't last forever. He has inspired me and supported me unconditionally for twenty five years. Whether Bob is dealing with his world renowned art collection, or dealing with horses, or working on the Meyerhoff program, he brings an analysis to everything that says “**we can do this**”. He has supported UMBC and my efforts to produce scientists. He is a very wise investor. He invests in people and ideas that have merit and he works to push and support them to do well. I give a lot of credit when I think about my success and the success on my campus, to Bob Meyerhoff.

**MG: Any other mentors you want to mention?**

**Freeman:** Rita Becker comes to mind who has helped me out so much. Also, Walter Sondheim and Willard Hackerman. The other “mentors” are my colleagues. We could not do what we do if we did not have a faculty and staff that give their lives to UMBC. These are brilliant people who could be working anywhere in the world. I’m honored that they want to be at UMBC.

**MG: So you see your colleagues as mentors?**

**Freeman:** That’s exactly right, all of them. I regularly speak at retirements of people who came to UMBC in the 60’s and 70’s. From Harvard to Yale, they came and built a great public university. It was fifty years ago that our charter was given.

**MG: If I could give you one mulligan over your years at UMBC, how would you want to use it?**

**Freeman:** I would work to find more people to give us financial support. We have more federal R&D now than places like Rensselaer or Brandeis. We are making a lot of progress, but our challenge is to continue to get people to campus so that they can say “**Wow, we’ve got to invest in this place**”. When they see UMBC they want to be involved. When they get to meet my graduates they want to be involved. We have to keep getting the word out. People know UMBC but they don’t understand our quality of education, that UMBC was compared with Yale last year. In a place that costs \$15,000 in-state to be seen at the same level of a place that costs over \$60,000 - that’s value added.

**MG: Talk about your plans for athletics.**

**Freeman** One thing that you will appreciate, in more recent years I’ve been working to build athletics. That is very different from my earlier years. In my first years I had to really establish myself as an academic president and I wanted people to know more about the quality of the academics and wanted to get support for the academic programs. We can now afford to give more attention to athletics in a responsible way. That’s what we are going to be doing.



**MG: Do you have a number one priority for athletics?**

**Freeman:** We need an event center; we need the right athletic facility, so that's what we are going to be working on. The three top sports in our conference are men's and women's basketball, lacrosse, and soccer. We've have had quite a bit of success in lacrosse and soccer. We've had great coaches. We are going to continue to support those two sports and build basketball and work to attract terrific athletes who are also good students.

**MG: Your career and accomplishments have been extraordinary. What do you still have on your bucket list?**

**Freeman:** Unlike almost any human being on this earth, I can say right now, that my dreams are fulfilled. I am so fortunate to be at a place where we are helping thousands of students. I just want to keep doing what I am doing. I have the best life one could have. Blessed with a great wife, a great son, and an incredible university. I think I have the best job in the world and can sincerely say my dreams are fulfilled.