



Education Review

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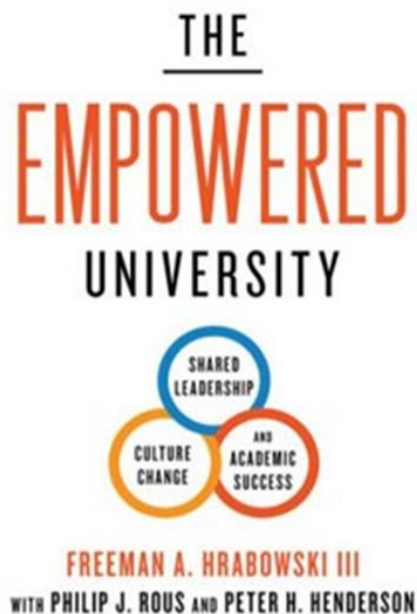
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Hrabowski, F. A., III, Rous, P. J., & Henderson, P. H. (2019).
The empowered university: Shared leadership, culture change and academic success. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Reviewed by **Marsha V. Krotseng**
HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College
United States

What does it take to transform a university into “one of the most innovative schools in the country, especially when it comes to getting students into math and science and keeping them there” (Schneider, 2011) and a “Great College to Work For” for 11 consecutive years (McCaffrey, 2020)? The transformation begins with authentic leadership grounded in the principle that “It’s not about me. It’s about us” (Hrabowski et al., 2019, p. ix). It’s also about listening and gaining trust. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, author of this volume, voices these words in his narrative, and more importantly, has put them into action time and again as President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), along with his co-authors Philip J. Rous and Peter H. Henderson. As a case in point, they actively sought and incorporated the observations and recollections of UMBC campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students in developing this book. Its dedication reads, *To our UMBC colleagues.*



At the helm of UMBC since 1992, Hrabowski has become a major force in higher education. His service in that role far exceeds the 6.5-year average tenure of today’s college president (ACE, 2017). When Hrabowski speaks, it is well worth paying attention. This insightful, informative volume is valuable for the window it opens into UMBC’s planning, decision making, implementation, and crisis management processes over several decades. The work deftly accomplishes its purpose of chronicling how “empowering talented colleagues through a deliberate strategy of cultivating shared leadership and culture” fostered shared values that advanced a university and increased academic success (p. ix). Of particular relevance to university administrators and scholars of leadership,

governance, and organizational change in higher education, its concrete examples of successfully addressing challenging campus issues and enacting change make the book equally compelling for a wider audience, including faculty, staff, students, and trustees. These powerful real-life illustrations demonstrate positive “ways in which leaders can shape campus culture” (p. 29).

In the late 1980s, critical issues confronting UMBC and many other higher education institutions included the average GPA and persistence of students, especially Black students, in the natural sciences. Hrabowski, then vice provost, analyzed data; held focus groups with students; met with department chairs, program directors, and faculty in the natural sciences; and conversed with admissions office staff and other academic administrators. These actions led to the design and implementation of a new program in 1989 that would produce successful minority students in STEM fields, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program. Interestingly, the program was first proposed as an “experiment,” engendering the support of enough allies to move forward. As the authors relate the logic,

We have identified a problem. We have a hypothesis describing a solution that will work. Let’s try it, collect data, and evaluate it . . . as we would in experimental scientific research. If it works, we will have proof of concept and a potential national model. (p. 103)

Affirmation of this national model came in 2002 when a study by the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology ranked UMBC second nationally in the number of chemistry and biochemistry bachelor’s degrees awarded to minority students and first in the number awarded to African Americans (Windsor, 2002). Hundreds of successful program alumni have earned a PhD, MD, or MD-PhD degree, including African-American viral immunologist Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett whose research at the National Institutes of Health produced a vaccine to fight COVID-19 (Ihejirika, 2021).

The Meyerhoff “experiment” helped set in motion UMBC’s transformation from a commuter school into a residential “midsized research university with a reputation for innovation” (p. 70). This transformation reflected a profound, but incremental, culture change centered around elevated expectations, reliance on data, shared leadership responsibility, inclusivity, collaboration for enhanced teaching and learning, student success, and inclusive excellence. These elements characterize what Hrabowski, Rous, and Henderson refer to in the book’s title as *The Empowered University*.

The first section of five chapters lays the groundwork for understanding the game-changing programmatic and policy initiatives designed and implemented at UMBC. In this section, the authors briefly highlight the public’s changed perceptions of the university since its opening in 1966. Introducing data and analyses that demonstrate the imperative of higher education in today’s society, the authors address the complexity of changing an institution’s culture; the demands of university leadership; the role of shared governance and difficult conversations; the intentional creation of empowerment settings on campus;

strategies that proved crucial to changing UMBC's culture; and the "grit" or persistence required to effect and sustain that change over time.

Building on this foundation in the remaining eight chapters, Hrabowski, Rous, and Henderson support their contention that "[A]lmost anyone on campus can and should be a critical agent of change" (p. 52). They cite specific changes initiated by UMBC students, faculty, and staff and provide tangible case studies that illustrate how empowering the campus community enabled it to identify and successfully tackle recognized challenges that confront higher education. Among these examples are programs that increased student persistence and graduation overall and notably for STEM majors; enhanced support for minority and first generation students; assisted first-year and transfer students in their transition to the University; supported faculty in redesigning courses, curricula, and pedagogies to deepen student learning; infused courses with entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and service learning; and increased the number of female and minority faculty members in STEM and other fields through intense focus on recruitment, selection, hiring, mentoring, and advancement policies, processes, and practices. Clearly woven throughout all these examples is a data-informed and evidenced-based approach to project initiation and evaluation, just as the Meyerhoff Scholars Program was first conceived as an "experiment."

Perhaps the most timely, compelling, and instructive passages in the book address the UMBC leadership's responses to separate student protests against racism and sexual assault on campus. With regard to the former, the text includes the prompt and effective statement Hrabowski and Provost Rous issued to the campus citing the need for "us all to work together to uphold and reaffirm our community values" (pp. 108-109). The latter case details Hrabowski's systematic engagement with more than 100 angry students filling his conference room. To shift the situation "from 'conflict' to 'conversation'" over the course of a week, he employed the techniques of listening respectfully, engaging productively, balancing the students' demands with protecting confidentiality, communicating clearly, and acting collectively (p. 267). As a result, the leaders and students enumerated eight positive practical outcomes that could be implemented immediately.

Both of these accounts, like other cases featured in the book, incorporate crucial lessons learned. The authors also note when and why circumstances led them to change course as certain projects evolved and what the new trajectory allowed them to accomplish. These important strengths of the book will be of particular value to new and aspiring college presidents. In addition, a listing of strategic questions to apply to academic programs and community engagement (pp. 59-60), along with an extensive Notes section, provide a wealth of resource material for those interested in more in-depth study.

Published prior to the global pandemic and Black Lives Matter demonstrations against systemic racial injustice in 2020, the lessons of *The Empowered University* remain fresh and relevant. But how easily will they translate

to other campuses with their own unique cultures? The authors acknowledge the vital role major grant awards played in initiating and expanding some of UMBC's signature programs. Moreover, UMBC is a relatively young institution. The incremental changes that have led to its culture of empowerment and inclusive excellence began more than 30 years ago and have been in progress for longer than half of the University's 55-year existence. Such transformational change can be more difficult for universities with more deeply-rooted histories and cultures. Yet, the present moment of evolution in higher education affords both the opportunity and the obligation to explore new approaches. Initiatives that create a welcoming environment for minority and female students, faculty, and staff are more vital now than ever.

A key take-away from the book for all institutions is the importance of shared leadership and collective action. Even absent significant external funding, colleges and universities can revisit existing policies and practices to increase equity and inclusion for all students, faculty, and staff and apply the lessons learned from UMBC's efforts. They also can respond to challenging situations by employing the modeled strategies of embracing difficult dialogues, listening attentively, analyzing the data, identifying the needed change, creating buy-in from stakeholders for a potential solution, developing allies, and beginning with small steps as proof of concept, coupled with accountability. Then they must be prepared to demonstrate patience, endurance, and hard work to realize and sustain the desired change over time, never taking an achieved goal for granted. "Success," as Hrabowski, Rous, and Henderson so aptly remind us "is never final" (p. 262). It is an ongoing process that demands the constant attention of everyone on campus and leads to continuous improvement throughout the institution as a whole.

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About the Reviewer

Marsha V. Krotseng, Ed.D., is a member of the Board of Trustees of HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College and a former President of Bluefield State College. Her career spans more than 30 years in higher education strategic planning, policy, and executive leadership roles and includes experience at the institution and state system levels. She is committed to fostering success and a sense of belonging for all students and to increasing the number of women and people of color in college and university senior leadership positions.




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