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From the Selected Works of Frank Shushok Jr.

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University of Maryland Baltimore County President Freeman Hrabowski Talks with Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr. about Higher Education's Potential

Frank Shushok, Jr.



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Freeman A. Hrabowski III shares his perspective from many years as President of
The University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

University of Maryland Baltimore County President Freeman Hrabowski Talks with Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr. about Higher Education's Potential

Freeman A. Hrabowski III has served as President of UMBC (The University of Maryland, Baltimore County) since 1992. His research and publications focus on science and math education, with special emphasis on minority participation and performance. He chaired the National Academies' committee that produced the 2011 report, *Expanding Underrepresented Minority Participation: America's Science and Technology Talent at the Crossroads*. He was named in 2012 by President Obama to chair the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for African Americans. His 2013 TED talk highlights the *Four Pillars of College Success in Science*. In 2018, he received the American Council on Education's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Shushok: *I would like to begin with a question I ask all those I interview for About Campus concerning how they have changed. I would value you reflecting about the ways the 25-year-old Freeman is different from the 45-year-old-Freeman and the Freeman I am*

talking with today. What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

Hrabowski: I notice you are trying to be kind by not giving my current age! I say I am 65 plus and I leave it there. One of the themes I always think about when considering the aging process is the notion of knowing one's self—how well we know ourselves. One of my advisors once said, "You really get to know yourself in times of tragedy or challenge." In each part of my life, there have been different challenges, and at each time, I have been allowed to know more about myself. I understood what it was to have solid character in all those cases. I would say that at age 25 I thought I knew everything. By the time I was 45, I realized there were some things I did not know. Now I realize that I know very little. What I am getting to is this: The main difference is my appreciation of the value of humility. I think more about lessons learned from my parents, from being in church, and I realize the most basic of



FREEMAN HRABOWSKI POSES FOR A PHOTO WITH STUDENTS ON CAMPUS AT UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND-BALTIMORE COUNTY (PHOTO CREDIT: UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND-BALTIMORE COUNTY OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT)

things have become important to me as I have gotten older. My grandmother had a sixth-grade education, and the stories and lessons she taught me are just as much a part of my philosophy at work when I think about what is happening in higher education. In the end, it is all about how we treat people. I have appreciated the need to be as authentic with people as possible, but I have also come to understand what my mother, an English teacher, once said, when she quoted Emily Dickinson: “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” It is an interesting notion—if you beat someone over the head with something, they cannot handle it. However, if you plant a seed or raise a question and give them time to talk about it, you can bring them into that truth. It took me a while to appreciate the difference between being right and being wise. I am hoping as time goes on that I understand that it is much more important to be wise and humble and to understand how people receive information.

Shushok: *I am interested in hearing more about your thinking around the ideas of humility and*

character. Especially when you have experienced so much success, how did humility develop for you?

Hrabowski: I will start by saying each of us is the product of our childhood experiences, and I was so fortunate to grow up in a home with two Christian parents, grandmothers, family members, and church family members. My faith has always been important to me, number one. Number two, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, who was such a wise woman, and as I have gotten older, I have been using one of her stories to make my point. When she was proud of me, she would say, “Freeman, you are going to go far because you work so hard, and you are kind to people. But I want you to stay on your knees for two reasons. The obvious one is you need to be humble and pray, but the other reason is just as important. As you go up the ladder, you are going to meet many people. If you stay on your knees and you remain humble, when you fall—because you are going to fall in life—you will not have to fall too far.” Humility means that if I have treated people the right way on my way up, I will be okay when I come down. I have learned over the years that students, faculty, and colleagues appreciate genuine humility. The older I get, the more success I have, the more vulnerable I realize human beings are. The more I appreciate my mortality. The more I realize that

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (fshushok@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

tomorrow may be my last day, and I have no way of knowing how long I will be here. I need to show people what I think is important, and humility is one of those traits.

Shushok: *What are your thoughts about the role colleges and universities should play in teaching values?*

Hrabowski: In the early years of my role as UMBC president, I was participating in a retreat where some of my engineering colleagues said, “We are a public university—we cannot talk about values.” I said wait a minute—Do we all believe in honesty? Do we all believe in seeking the truth? Do we believe in treating people fairly? Do we believe that we should be committed to excellence? Even those not committed to talking about values in a public setting realized that whether we say it or not, we are demonstrating our values through our actions.

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When we talk about values, when we give students opportunities to lead, when we invite people to be involved in challenging situations, when we learn from our mistakes, we are helping people reflect upon, and learn about, their character. It is in these conversations, in the acting, and in the reflecting, that we are able to highlight what matters most. In Eric Weiner’s book *The Geography of Bliss*, he says, “Culture is the sea we swim in, and we really don’t appreciate it until we get out of it and look back at it.” I mention this because values are a major part of a culture, of a society, of a university, and it is important to get out of that culture and look at ourselves. We need to analyze what we say and what we do. This can assist us in understanding if what we report we will do is what we are actually doing.

If we say that we care about students succeeding, have we thought about what success means beyond graduation rates and grades? Have we thought about the difference we make in the lives of students? Are students leaving us feeling the same way about everything as they did when they first came to college? For me, it is about moving beyond ourselves and asking these hard questions in order to identify those values that we consider most important.

Shushok: *One thing that I think is interesting is how people experience failure in leadership. What does failure feel like for you? How do you interpret and respond to it?*

Hrabowski: I have had the privilege of teaching a seminar to new presidents at Harvard for about 15 years—and they always ask: “What’s the most important thing to take away?” One, you have to take care of your health—emotional, spiritual, and physical. Two, you have to keep your integrity intact. If you ever lie to people, they will have a hard time trusting you in the future. It is much more important to tell the truth when you make a mistake. Moreover, let me say, I have made many mistakes! I have a way of saying “folks, I blew it” and it goes like this: “I was doing my best, it did not work out, I need your help, and I’m sorry.” In 99% of the cases, people will say Freeman, you are human, let us work on this. Nevertheless, if I am arrogant, or if I try to hide my mistake, the reaction is quite different.

What people want to know is what is in your heart. People want to know that you are doing your best. We learn much more from our failures than we do from great successes. This is true in science, and it is true in life. The outcomes are far better if we have the right attitude about failure and embrace it in order to learn from it. Our Chesapeake Bay retriever, our mascot, is named True Grit. Years ago, I would say UMBC is a place where it is cool to be smart. Several people challenged me and I have shifted my thinking. If you have a “smart group,” what are you telling the other people? What are they? Therefore, my idea has shifted to be more in line with what Carol Dweck calls “mindset” or Angela Duckworth calls “grit.” We say work hard, never give up—but most important—when you fall down, get back up and try again. The idea is that we can get better by getting up when we fall down and learning from our falls. We are all going to fall down. The question is when you fall down, what do you do?

Shushok: *I recently read your book Holding Fast to Dreams: Empowering Youth from the Civil Rights Crusade to STEM Achievement. I was taken especially with your chapter, Standing Up for Justice. I know About Campus readers would relish hearing your thoughts about what “standing up for justice” looks like practically for those of us working on campuses.*

Hrabowski: There are several levels of justice seeking I can talk about—one of which involves community service and helping our students to learn to work with people from less fortunate backgrounds, whether those are children, senior citizens, or others. Students need to learn how to tutor, how to mentor, how to build relationships, and to understand that so many young people, in Baltimore, for example, do not have the privileges of my students. For me a just society is constantly thinking about giving others support, at the socioeconomic level and in other ways.

As part of teaching students about citizenship, we should ask what should be expected of ourselves as citizens. I like to start with the idea of students reaching toward those they can help at some level, including helping each other on campus. I have been using the work of Frederick Lawrence, secretary of Phi Beta Kappa, who says there are three important roles of an educated citizen: (1) we have to be able to present arguments while backing them up with evidence; (2) we have to listen carefully to other points of view and remain calm to understand what others are saying; and (3) we should learn how to find the common ground. I am delighted that my Democrats, my Republicans, my Independents, and my Progressives sponsor forums together and bring in speakers with a diversity of perspectives, some quite controversial. We have one rule: People will disagree but we will learn how to agree to disagree agreeably. In the best circumstances, this happens. There are times, however, when we have challenges, but part of seeking justice is to help students learn how to express themselves in ways that promote civility. Teaching students about the important role of voting in our society is essential. Of course, the most important role in our society is creating responsible, educated citizens who will be convinced that they can make a difference in the lives of their families and thrive in our society.

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Shushok: *I had the privilege of being in the room when you received the 2018 ACE Lifetime Achievement Award. As part of your response, it seemed especially important to you to remind the audience why higher education matters. In the day-in and day-out trials and*

tribulations of working on a college campus, it can become all too easy to “forget” what we’re really doing. Can you remind us?

Hrabowski: Everyone is asking that question, yet we seem uncomfortable answering it with confidence. I have never met a family of any race, of any background, who once one person goes to college, would not want others in their family to go to college. As I said at ACE, if you look at professionals and educators, ask this question: Where would you be if you had not had the privilege, the blessing, of going to college? We all know our lives would be so different if we had not had the good fortune of getting that education. We have the responsibility to do two things: first, be proud of the families and the people, the first in their families, to go to college. We need to talk about the difference that education has meant! Second, we must expose the large percentages of families who have not had anyone go to college, to that possibility. If you have never had someone in your family go to college, you likely have never had the experience of knowing that it makes such a difference. You develop habits of mind, you develop the skills to get a good job, and you can take care of your family.

For many of us, the liberal arts approach is the best. I think leaders most often have been educated broadly. Even when we look at engineering, which is important on your campus and mine, when you look at accreditation standards, they talk a great deal about the humanities, social sciences, and ethical questions of life and living. In addition to insisting that people look at higher education in the traditional sense, we need to broaden our thinking to realize that some students do not want traditional higher education immediately, and there should be other post-secondary opportunities for them, not because they might not want to ever go to college, but because sometimes they need that time to mature, to build skills, or to take care of their families before going to college. I would say higher education matters, post-secondary education matters for everyone, and we want as many well-educated people as possible.

Shushok: *Another thing you have been passionate about conveying is the need for higher education to reach toward those “outside our culture” to let them know we care. Can you share a bit about your thinking and why we should ask the question you posed: “In what ways might we seem arrogant or condescending to other people?”*

Hrabowski: I am at an age that I can speak the truth as I see it, and I do not have to give you the slant. I can just tell you! We in the academy are far more arrogant sometimes than we even realize. We are experts in our field, and once we have those PhDs we too often think we are experts in all sorts of things. If we are not careful, we can become isolated in such a way that we become accustomed only to working with people with that same level of education. I think there is a significant

danger here. We need to understand more about the broader world—children, senior citizens, people who have not come from our background. I think the more enlightened people are, the more they want to understand about people different from themselves. In recent times, as we have more division in our society, I have seen many of my friends who are quite well educated speak condescendingly about people who think differently. And I have said this: We may disagree with people, but people can have wonderful hearts and want to do the right thing. However, if they have not had the chance to learn how to think critically or their experiences have not taught them that education matters because they have not had one, we need to think about how we can reach people to give them these opportunities.

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People can tell what you think of them. We on the East Coast tend to be confident that we are the most enlightened. Particularly when we are from certain kinds of circumstances. And it is so easy to give someone from a rural town, or a town where education is not the most important thing, the impression that we think we are better than them, or that we are able to come to conclusions that are quite frankly superior to theirs. It may be that there are some scenarios where we do have excellent points, but if we come across as arrogant and superior, people will say what they are saying right now: forget you all. The world is about more than these enlightened liberals. I think it is so important that we reach out to people and find common ground—to help people dream about the possibilities for their children. I am arguing that we need to look in the mirror and answer that question—to what extent does arrogance play a role? There's a big difference between confidence and arrogance.

Shushok: *Do you have a sense of some practical ways we could do what you just described?*

Hrabowski: I've been working on them on my own campus because we have people from very different points of view, sometimes people who are from homogenous communities, who are worried about mixing with others here on campus and who have what we would describe as very conservative points of view. After the last election, some students thought for some reason that I would be either their enemy or I would not care about them. They knew I was chairing one of the Obama commissions and I was close to the last president. In different ways, they were showing me they were certain I could not care about them. Their actions led me to become even more humble, and to say come and talk to me. When they came, they were worried that I was going to punish them in some way, as if they had been summoned to the principal's office. They have come, and we have had the most revealing and enlightening conversations for me—and for them. The approach I always use is to ask questions. I start by saying you need to know I care about you, and you have a right to believe what you want to believe, to vote for whomever you want. We are Americans—this is a democracy—and regardless of who you vote for, I love you. You are my student. And when you say it with sincerity, people start to melt.

It is also important to have questions you ask. For example, I am interested in understanding what people believe and why. I was amazed by how many people said, well you know, we believed in that person you were working with (President Obama), but nothing changed for my family. It is a powerful statement, it really is, because whether we believe something good happened in the last administration or not, there is a message that people do not understand that no leadership or administration can dramatically change their lives in four years or eight years. For the experts in policy, one of our shortcomings is that we have not helped the public to understand that it takes years to put in place policies that can be felt by the average person. There is so much that it takes years and years to work on—and that is for any administration. Presidents have to know a lot of people well from every party, and their donors are probably split down the middle. If I am the president, I have to sit down at their kitchen table, and I am the mediator between husband and wife when they are from different parties. When I tell my students that I have best friends from any group, they are always surprised because they think that all my friends think the same way. They think all my friends are probably from minorities; they think most of my friends have PhDs. They make those assumptions, and I want them to know I know people of all types, people with whom I agree and disagree, and I love them all. It is my own way of showing how I live my life, and still showing

authenticity. A student or colleague can tell when you mean what you say and say what you mean.

Shushok: *I want to go back to your comment on becoming wise with age and feeling emboldened to say what you really think. What else are you feeling more confident to say?*

Hrabowski: Number one, that this job (being a college president) is much harder than I ever thought it would be! You would think that after 25 years, I would be saying this is a piece of cake, but not at all. I can say this with clarity—any campus is just one letter or one incident from major challenges. I do not care how well things are going, I do not care how much people like the president. One incident or one person doing the wrong thing and it all changes. You all know this at Virginia Tech—you have acted with dignity on your campus through tragedy. When a president thinks about that, when a vice president and others think about that, for me it gives me more humility, because when it is a good day I am thinking to myself—this is wonderful. You never know when you have to go through the storm. The storm comes up just like that, and that is the way life is and that is the way it is on our campuses. You have to be able to toughen yourself, and to be prepared for the unexpected, because the unexpected is a given. It is going to happen.

Shushok: *So why do you do it?*

...have we taught them to have a habit of mind of questioning, of being curious, of listening to other perspectives, as I said, and quite frankly never stop learning?

Hrabowski: Because I love my students. Because I love education. Because I love ideas. Because I love learning. Because I know nothing can be more important than changing the minds and developing the minds and the hearts of our students. What I say to college presidents when we all criticize Congress, is do not forget almost all of them are our alumni. And people look at them and say, “Oh my God.” But we produced them. And I say that because success is never final. We have not done the job we should have done. We have not taught the American leadership—the elite—to know how to

listen to each other. There are some in the middle who can do it if given the opportunity, but there are many who are at this point not prepared to do so. There are many reasons for that, but I think it gives us a challenge, as the academy, to ask when a student comes in with certain values, attitudes, and points of view, is that student really any different by the time she leaves the university? What difference have we really made? That is not because we want them to think just like us—but rather, have we taught them to have a habit of mind of questioning, of being curious, of listening to other perspectives, as I said, and quite frankly never stop learning? My students love the fact that I am studying French every day. When I started, they said don’t you think you are somewhat old? I said bring it on! And they speak it fluently, so they correct my pronunciation all day long. I love it. I do not know many things. I am studying the French philosophers, my family went to Paris recently, and I am loving learning another culture—but I am enjoying even more so having my students learn with me and sometimes teaching me when French is their first language.

Shushok: *What else is capturing your thinking and imagination these days? As you consider About Campus readers, what else might you want to share as we work with those of us who work with college students on a daily basis?*

Hrabowski: I am going to give you a gift—you may or may not know we are going through challenges on our campus right now with a protest, and there are some things that are so important that I am writing about them. It is so significant because in my first week here, we had a protest. We are going over the same thing 25 years later, but over different issues. This is what we learned that I think is very important: Even when we think we are doing an excellent job and we are working on behalf of our students, there is always more to do. One of the questions we need to always be asking is, have we helped our students know what we are doing to protect them? As we think about Title IX, which is what we are dealing with here, have we made sure we understand the importance of confidentiality to support people going through the process? Most important, when we go through these periods—and every campus will—how do we make sure we keep that humility that I talked about? Are we willing to say I am sorry? But also to say, you need to know we were doing our best, and yet we know we can do better. When students know you are truthful about caring, you will be okay. The other thing for staff is often students will demand things like firing people. The campus has to decide who it is. We have a way of saying we value the people here, our students, but also our faculty and staff. And while students may feel that somebody should be going, if we know the person is doing the right thing, we can never make

decisions hastily. And quite frankly, we need to respect staff and faculty so they know we care about them too. It's about caring about all the people on that campus. When you care about the campus, and the people, the people care about the university.

Shushok: *Finally, what are you dreaming about for your future?*

Hrabowski: We have students from all backgrounds at UMBC. I have always worked to support this idea of inclusive excellence. That's why we created the Meyerhoff Scholars Program focused on increasing representation in science and engineering. At first it was open only to talented kids of color, but now we bring in students of all races who are interested in issues of diversity. I've always said that my vision is for one of these students to become the first African American to get the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Right now, we are the country's

leading undergraduate origin institution for blacks who go on to earn MD-PhDs. We have produced more now than any university in the history of America. What is significant about this is that we have alumni who are doing amazing things at institutions all over the country. For instance, one of our graduates, a tenured faculty member at Duke University, is developing a device—essentially, a pacemaker for the brain—to treat bipolar disease. People are telling me that he is one of those who might one day receive the Nobel Prize. I am dreaming of the day when I go to see a student of ours get that award. I often repeat something my mother said at the end of her life: “Teachers touch eternity through their students.” I see our students touching the lives of thousands of others. This means dreams fulfilled.

Shushok: *It has been a true gift to spend this time with you.*