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Correction Appended

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**HEADLINE:** UMBC nears the head of the class, shedding 'commuter school' label;  
Growing reputation lures top students, teachers

**BYLINE:** Alec MacGillis

**SOURCE:** SUN STAFF

**BODY:**

Scott Nicholson wasn't surprised that his friends hadn't heard of the college he had chosen to attend, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. After all, he hadn't either until deep into his college search.

"They didn't even know what I was talking about. They said, 'University of Maryland, basketball, awesome!'" said the junior from Los Angeles, recalling how his friends confused UMBC with the state's flagship campus at College Park. "But now, that's changing a little bit."

And how. These days, the school with the ungainly initials attracts widespread notice that eluded it for decades.

Evidence abounds that Catonsville's best-kept secret is finally out. Last fall, Newsweek included UMBC on its list of 10 "hot schools," alongside far older and better-known institutions such as Boston College and George Washington University.

The school's omnipresent president, Freeman A. Hrabowski III, appeared recently on the Today show, The O'Reilly Factor and Newshour with Jim Lehrer.

The best proof of the school's increasing popularity, though, lies in the hundreds of individual decisions being made this month, as high school seniors weigh which college's offer of admission to accept. More and more top students, many from out of state, are choosing UMBC over bigger or better-established rivals, college officials say.

UMBC has received 6 percent more applications this year than last, but those from students with SAT scores of 1,300 or higher are up 34 percent. In 1993, the average freshman SAT score was 1,083; last fall, it was 1,213. Applications from out of state have risen 45 percent over the past decade and account for about 20 percent of the total.

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Those increases parallel upward trends at the College Park campus, whose reputation also has risen in recent years and where the average SAT score is about 40 points higher than that at UMBC.

Rivalry develops

When it comes to wooing top students, a rivalry has developed between the two schools 20 miles apart on Interstate 95, and UMBC, despite being a third the size, seems to be holding its own.

UMBC officials point proudly to students who have chosen their school over College Park, even as acceptance to College Park has become increasingly coveted.

Those students often give the same reason for their decision. UMBC, they say, offers the best of both worlds: It is a research university with a top-flight faculty but, with about 8,000 undergraduates, retains the feel of a midsize college where students don't have to worry about getting lost in the mix.

"I like colleges that are UMBC's size," said Sarah Husain, a freshman from Rockville who chose UMBC after receiving one of its full-ride scholarships for humanities students.

UM College Park "seems so big and sprawling, like the size of a small city - a place I'd need a car to get around."

Students also are drawn by UMBC's reputation as a school that takes studying seriously.

UMBC has no football team, the basketball team toils in the obscurity of Division III, and the party scene is famously mild. Though the school has added an activities center and increased the number of students living in dormitories to 3,200, the modernistic, ivy-less campus - as visually inspiring as an office park - can still feel empty on weekends.

But mostly, students say they don't mind what they're missing by not being at a larger or more socially active school. There are fewer distractions, and they don't feel that they have to apologize for working hard.

"I'm more or less a homebody, and I have no problem staying in on weekends and playing board games or going to (the student union) and playing pool," said Asynith Palmer, a freshman from Severna Park and a recipient of the humanities scholarship.

'Cool to be smart'

Hrabowski "says that it's cool to be smart, and there's more of a focus on education than partying," she said.

Some of UMBC's best features have won recognition for years, including its Meyerhoff scholarships, geared toward minorities studying science and engineering, and its champion chess team. Only more recently has word spread about other strengths, such as its opportunities for undergraduate research and its success in getting students into top graduate schools.

Erica Danna, a senior biology major, said she chose UMBC over UM College Park only because the smaller school gave her more financial aid. But since then, she has warmed to the school for other reasons.

She has spent two years in a laboratory conducting breast cancer-related research into the effects of tumors on animals' immune systems. In the fall, she'll enter the immunology doctorate program at Stanford University in California.

'Great things to offer'

"UMBC has great things to offer, especially in the sciences," said Danna, who is from Howard County.

Hrabowski, in his 11th year as president of the school, which was founded in 1966, attributes the university's growing appeal to its faculty. The school has a reputation for hiring talented young teachers and researchers, who in turn

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draw other strong faculty members and students, he said.

"The part that is most encouraging to me is that the culture of the campus focuses on high achievement among students and faculty," he said. "And smart people attract smart people."

Faculty members agree, saying that from its founding, the school has hewn to high standards in hiring and tenure decisions. History Professor John W. Jeffries recalls that when he was hired in 1973, the college was denying tenure to half of the eligible candidates in his department.

"They really do insist on performance when it comes to teaching and scholarship," he said.

If the faculty has stood out since the school's creation, UMBC veterans say it's only in the past 10 years that the university has fully capitalized on this, thanks to Hrabowski's talent for promoting the campus. UMBC, they say, is finally drawing students whose caliber matches their teachers'.

"I remember thinking 20 years ago that we suffered from invisibility, that if only people could see what we had, it would be so much easier to attract students," said biology professor Lynn Zimmerman.

Hrabowski also deserves praise for keeping the school's focus on academics, said Tom Field, director of UMBC's Center for Humanities. "He says, 'We like nerds here.' I don't know how many presidents would say that," Field said. "He doesn't talk about Ultimate Frisbee; he talks about hard work. What's striking is that people here do like hard work."

Funding cuts worrisome

Not that there aren't problems at the school. University officials are worried about the effects of state funding cuts. Many faculty and staff members are highly critical of large pay raises in recent years for top administrators, something the history faculty questioned in a letter sent to Hrabowski last week. And members of the humanities faculty say they are shortchanged in favor of science and technology programs.

Word of UMBC's rising appeal hasn't reached everyone. Palmer said some of her teachers and classmates at Severna High School questioned her decision to go to UMBC, saying they had little knowledge of the nearby school.

"One kid said, 'Why aren't you going to College Park? More people go there, and it's a better school,' " she said.

Nicholson got a similar reaction three years ago when he was looking for colleges in the Washington area. When he toured UM College Park, he found it too large and asked his guide whether there were smaller schools in the area. The guide, he recalls, mentioned UMBC but dismissed it as "just a little commuter school."

That attitude lingers at College Park. When UMBC landed on the Newsweek list in the fall, the UM student newspaper, The Diamondback, ran an article expressing shock. The headline said, "College Park is king, right? Then why does UMBC have bragging rights?"

Hrabowski tries to play down talk of a College Park-UMBC rivalry. But he talks excitedly of a new marketing campaign that has soda delivery trucks carrying the UMBC logo on their rounds in Montgomery County, the heart of UM College Park's customer base.

"It's the coolest thing going on right now," he said. "It says 'UMBC, a Hot School' on the back of all the trucks. It's great."

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A Page 1A article yesterday incorrectly reported the affiliation of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County's basketball team. It is a member of the Northeast Conference in the NCAA's Division I. The Sun regrets the error.

**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s), Students who have been accepted by UMBC attend a meeting designed to persuade them to attend the school. The number of applications from students with high SAT scores has soared.; CHIAKI KAWAJIRI :  
SUN STAFF

**LOAD-DATE:** April 18, 2003