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OUR VIEW: UMBC'S RECOGNITION IN MAGAZINE RANKING IS WELL DESERVED

BODY:

Freeman Hrabowski III is a hard-charging, competitive guy. The president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County plowed past naysayers more than a decade ago to build a research park on campus. He cried publicly last year when the school's basketball team, long overshadowed by campus chess jocks, clinched its first bid to the NCAA tournament.

And when UMBC found itself last week deadlocked with another school in one of the most cutthroat competitions in all of academia - U.S. News & World Report's annual college rankings - Hrabowski happily shared the spotlight.

The reason? UMBC was tied on the magazine's list of national universities most committed to teaching undergraduates, with Stanford.

"It's a delight to be tied with Stanford," he said.

The same U.S. News issue put UMBC atop a list of "up-and-coming" national universities.

We can debate how much stock to put into the magazine college rankings, whose criteria can be as inscrutable as financial aid forms. But recognition for UMBC is well deserved if not overdue.

UMBC has come a long way since it sprang up on Catonsville farmland in 1966. There were 750 students that first year. Today, there are 12,000, about 3,000 of them graduate students.

Average SAT scores have risen from 879 in 1977 to 1190 for last year's freshmen. Forty-three percent of students go on to graduate school; six of them in the past year headed for doctoral programs at Cambridge, in subjects ranging from gravitational physics to medieval literature. Universities from around the county have come to campus to learn about its Meyerhoff Scholars program, which seeks to attract minority students to the sciences. The University of Michigan, for one, is replicating it.

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"What's especially exciting is that the best graduate schools in the country compliment us regularly on how well-prepared our students are," Hrabowski said in an interview last week.

Hrabowski's energetic, able leadership has helped UMBC transform itself from academic start-up to nationally respected research university. He rightly gives much credit to state leaders who, over the decades, have poured money into higher education.

The state's financial woes this year will put a crimp in UMBC's budget to the tune of at least \$3.4 million. Along with other state universities, it is bracing for the possibility of further cuts that could be announced by Labor Day.

That can't be good news for UMBC's continued progress, but we have no doubt Hrabowski will keep the place thriving.

For all of UMBC's progress, it is sometimes mistaken, even in its own backyard, for a quiet commuter school. About half of full-time undergrads, and most freshmen, live on campus. The majority of students are Marylanders, but their classmates hail from every state in the nation and 150 foreign countries.

The U.S. News ranking might help dispel that image, which some have blamed on having the word "county" in the school's name.

In the mid-1990s, the school toyed with changing the name. The university's marketing director told The Sun at the time that the school was the only four-year university with the word "county" in its name. Ultimately, the university opted to keep the name, but market itself by its initials, UMBC, adding the subtitle: "An honors university in Maryland."

Skeptics wondered if the acronym would ever catch on. Hrabowski knew it would. Like UCLA, he told them. Like USC.

Now he's thinking bigger, beyond acronyms. Like Stanford.

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