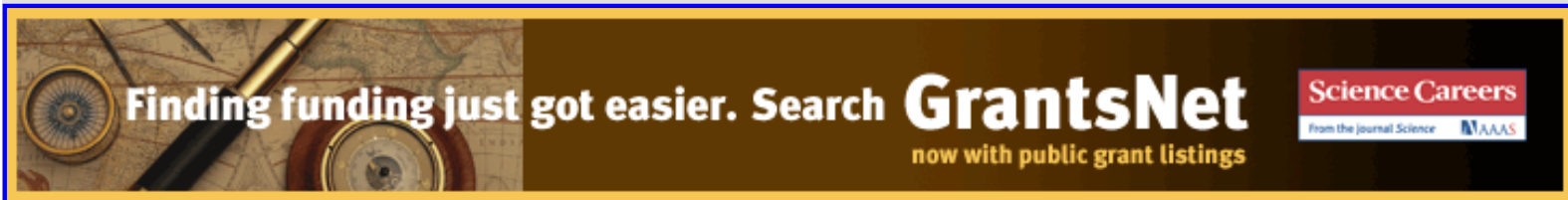


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UMBC President, Freeman Hrabowski

For the past 17 years, the Meyerhoff Program has been enriching the lives of minority students interested in a career in the sciences by preparing them to pursue graduate and professional degrees.

Fulfilling the Expectation of Excellence

Clinton Parks
United States
5 August 2005

Although many more students of color are pursuing graduate degrees in science and technology than 30 years ago, the stereotype that minorities aren't successful in these fields remains, according to LaMont Toliver, director of the [Meyerhoff Scholars Program](#) at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC). UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski (left) created the program in 1988 to address the shortage of minorities in the sciences using a grant from the Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Foundation.

For the past 17 years, the Meyerhoff Program has been enriching the lives of minority students interested in a career in the sciences by preparing them to pursue graduate and professional degrees. Before the program, a minority student getting a B or a C in a science class was seen as "wondrous," according to Toliver. Now receiving an A is routine, as are minority-student appointments to doctoral programs at elite universities. Today, 180 Meyerhoff Scholars are enrolled at UMBC, and the program is open to all high-achieving high school seniors, regardless of race, who have an interest in pursuing doctoral study in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), computer science, and related fields.

Thinking of a Master Plan

Aware that even the most talented students failed to receive Ph.D.s and find employment in science and engineering, Hrabowski created a system in 1988 to mold high-achieving minority high school students into elite researchers. He had always envisioned having a program at his institution that would address the shortage of minorities in science. "The purpose of establishing the Meyerhoff Program was to help African-American students succeed in science to the point where they would be interested in pursuing research careers in science and engineering," he says.

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Hrabowski studied various minority programs in creating his curriculum, including similar programs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Uri Treisman's methods, which have improved calculus scores for African Americans at UC-Berkeley. Hrabowski also used his personal experience as an undergraduate at Hampton University, a historically black university, and as a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

He eventually developed the Meyerhoff Program, which provides financial support (including full scholarships for tuition, room, board, and books), personal mentoring, group study, tutoring, year-round research, and an atmosphere that emphasizes achievement and support.

Developing Top Talent

The Meyerhoff Program is open to all high-achieving high school seniors attracted to research careers in science and engineering and the Meyerhoff selection process is highly competitive. Toliver: "Meyerhoff students are recruited like star athletes." Two-thousand students apply and 200 are brought in for interviews over a two-weekend period in June to vie for 50 to 60 openings. Many students who could attend Ivy League schools choose UMBC during these recruiting weekends because the program traditionally sends students to "some of the best universities in the country and in other countries to pursue Ph.D.s and M.D./Ph.D.s," Hrabowski says. "Once they come for the weekend, they see the sense of community among hundreds of students of all races who have a common purpose--that of pursuing research careers--and who believe in supporting each other."

Value in the System

But, Toliver says, "Scores and merit will only take you so far," so the program applies a blend of nurturing and discipline. Before the start of the school year, Meyerhoff freshmen participate in the Summer Bridge Program. This "boot camp" introduces them to the program's "value system." Boot camp is also where older students tout the advantages of working in groups, an integral part of the Meyerhoff program "They police themselves," adds Toliver.



2000 Meyerhoff Scholars Program Reunion with Dr. and Mrs. Hrabowski far left and Mr. and Mrs. Meyerhoff far right.

When student support isn't enough to help a struggling student, Toliver and faculty members act as mentors, making sure the student stays on track. Toliver, who describes himself as "an equal opportunity butt-kicker" and meets with first-year students monthly, encourages them early to select

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mentors who provide "tough love mentoring" and "intrusive advising."

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Tracking student progress and helping them improve their grades is part of Toliver's job. He also meets with upperclassmen to identify and work toward meeting individual goals. If a student is interested in Harvard's doctoral program in genetics, for example, Toliver compares the student's record, including GRE scores, GPA, publications, and recommendations with past Meyerhoff students who've been accepted into the same program. He uses a similar hands-on approach when advising them about summer research opportunities, encouraging students to tackle projects that continue the research they've been doing during the year to improve their chances of publishing their findings.

Evidence of Impact

The Meyerhoff program boasts a 95% retention rate, and the number of Meyerhoff students entering science Ph.D. and M.D./Ph.D. programs has grown steadily. Today, according to Toliver, nearly 80% of the program's graduates go to graduate and professional school immediately after finishing their undergraduate degrees. All 61 of this year's graduating seniors were placed in graduate and professional schools. Five were inducted into the prestigious national academic honor society [Phi Beta Kappa](#).

An analysis done by Hrabowski and UMBC psychology professor Kenneth Maton compared African-American Meyerhoff students to African-American STEM majors who declined Meyerhoff scholarships. Their findings, published in *American Psychologist* (September 2004), demonstrated that although those who declined enrollment in the Meyerhoff Program often attended highly regarded HBCUs and Ivy League institutions, they were significantly less likely than Meyerhoff students to pursue and complete science Ph.D.s or M.D./Ph.D.s. "If current Ph.D. receipt rates of program graduates continue," Hrabowski says in *American Psychologist*, "UMBC will in all likelihood become the leading predominantly white baccalaureate-origin university for black STEM Ph.D.s in the nation."

Clinton Parks is a staff writer at MiSciNet and may be reached at cparks@aaas.org.

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