



UMBC

**UMBC Bold: Campus Conversations
Committee Co-Chair Report
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The UMBC Bold: Campus Conversations initiative was launched in January 2023 by Dr. Valerie Sheares Ashby to empower the campus voice and inform a future strategic planning process.

The initiative framed the following three questions to the UMBC community:

1. What achievements and core values should we celebrate and nurture?
2. What challenges might hinder our ability to advance our mission and vision?
3. What are your bold aspirations for the future of UMBC?

UMBC Bold was designed to introduce these questions to the broadest range of the UMBC community, including faculty, staff, students, alumni, community partners, parents, and more. To achieve this ambitious goal and ensure that the questions were framed in a variety of contexts relevant and important to UMBC's future, UMBC Bold identified 11 sub-committees to facilitate this dialogue. Sub-committee co-chairs – approved by Dr. Sheares-Ashby and the campus deans – hosted two sessions each between February 27 and April 4, 2023, with one session hosted in-person and the other hosted virtually via Webex. Individuals were also invited to submit responses to the questions anonymously on the UMBC Bold website. Collectively, the sessions hosted 1,300 participants and collected 154 electronic submissions.

This report summarizes key themes identified during the UMBC Bold conversations. The summary is based on reports submitted by co-chairs of each subcommittee, and the observations made by the authors of this report. In addition to the summary, we have added appendices that include those reports with additional materials (e.g. surveys, notes, images) when provided by the subcommittee chairs. We have also included the electronic submissions.

We recognize that the perspectives, ideas, concerns, and aspirations presented by the UMBC community during these conversations are as rich, diverse, and compelling as the community

itself. This summary is comprehensive but not exhaustive. We have attempted to summarize key themes that emerged during the conversations – especially those that were raised in the context of multiple subcommittees.

I. Achievements and Core Values

UMBC Bold consistently emphasized that UMBC is a unique and vibrant community. Individuals build relationships with one another across units, departments, and roles. They truly care for each other, celebrate accomplishments of students, alumni, faculty, and staff, and provide support in times of crisis. From these conversations, it is clear and significant that the commitment to community extends beyond the campus' immediate geography. The [UMBC Vision](#) states that the university will “advance knowledge, economic prosperity, and social justice by welcoming and inspiring inquisitive minds from all backgrounds.” The university endeavors to make real-world positive impacts in our local community and beyond, leveraging mutually beneficial partnerships with industry, the public sector, and neighboring communities. There are myriad examples of UMBC community members who use our geographic location to build partnerships and initiatives that drive economic impact and address social challenges. Tangible examples of the impact of this commitment to community can be seen in community engaged scholarship, the university’s Carnegie Engaged Campus designation, UMBC’s Choice Program, bwtech@UMBC, and the university’s participation in Catonsville’s designation as Baltimore County’s first Arts and Entertainment district among others.

In 2022, UMBC achieved the Carnegie Research 1 classification, placing us among fewer than 150 universities nationwide recognized for the depth, breadth, and quality of its research portfolio. The commitment to world-class, innovative research and creative achievement across all disciplines is a deeply held value that was echoed throughout UMBC Bold: Campus Conversations. Additionally, participants recognized the support of research centers and outstanding library faculty, and identified entrepreneurship, community-engaged scholarship, and interdisciplinarity as distinguishing characteristics of UMBC’s unique strengths in research and creative achievement.

Another widely recognized value of UMBC is our commitment to inclusive excellence. The success and national renown of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program and other scholar programs across disciplines is a point of pride. The Meyerhoff program is a national model that illustrates how individuals from all backgrounds can be successful with support, resources, effort, and empathy, and the success of this model has led to its adoption at other institutions.

Other values that we acknowledge include commitment to student success, interdisciplinarity, innovative teaching and course design, and shared governance. Shared governance is seen as “part of our DNA” with “...students, faculty, and staff co-creating this thing we call UMBC.” In combination, these factors led UMBC to be recognized as a “Top Workplace” by *The Baltimore Sun* eight times since 2013, as well as a “Great College to Work For” by The Chronicle of Higher Education for [12 consecutive years](#).

II. Challenges to UMBC's future success

UMBC has experienced significant growth over the past three decades – a point of pride throughout these conversations. This growth has created tensions and challenges that can impede further progress if not addressed in meaningful, scalable ways.

Our steady growth has stressed the human capital that drives the institution, as well as the physical infrastructure that is necessary to do the work. Faculty and staff consistently acknowledged overwhelming responsibilities and service requirements that limit ability to feel successful. Faculty struggle to balance research and creative achievement with teaching, mentoring, and other required service responsibilities. In many units, staff capacity is “one-deep,” which can disrupt business processes in many circumstances along with loss of institutional knowledge. Salaries are perceived to be below-market across the campus, and roles often lack meaningful pathways to career growth. It is important to note that adjunct faculty feel these issues acutely as well. Despite the commitment to community, these factors – combined with outdated business processes and unevenness in how performance management processes are delivered – can lead to uneven performance, inequity in compensation, and career advancement, as well as feelings of isolation or people being “siloe” from other individuals and units.

It is important to note that financial health has frequently been connected to enrollment growth, and the last few years have seen record enrollments in first-time, full-time, and incoming graduate students. However, this growth is also producing pressures across campus, as it is disproportionately landing in fewer departments, leading to imbalance in research, teaching and learning resources, service course requirements, and new faculty hires. It puts the campus at great risk if market forces put downward pressure on disciplines or fields currently experiencing growth – a grim reality given the often-referenced “enrollment cliff,” coupled with public sentiment about the value of public higher education. This reflects the need to continue to foster a holistic campus identity across arts, humanities, and STEM disciplines.

The success of many of our students and programs has been nationally recognized. Students affiliated with scholars programs, athletics, or similar initiatives have very strong experiences that support their success. However, participants shared that many students do not have access to the mentoring, resources, or support needed to propel them to be their very best. Overall, the participating students emphasized the need to look out for all students – graduate and undergraduate – in a “holistic way.” Some participants shared the need for more financial aid, improved mentoring and advising, increased resources for mental health and food insecurity, and more informal meeting spaces. These needs were echoed by graduate and international students alike, who also sought more “campus life,” especially during breaks and between semesters when much of the undergraduate population is not present. It is significant that many participants highlighted the increased challenges associated with the rise in mental health challenges of faculty, staff, and students. Support for mental health needs of students was highlighted as a strength at UMBC, although current staff is overwhelmed, leading to delays in service. Rising incidences of the mental health needs of faculty and staff was raised, with concerns about how those needs are being met.

UMBC Bold: Campus Conversations voiced consistent concern about challenges in the physical infrastructure. Participants shared that there is not enough lab space to support existing work, much less to attract and retain the high-quality, diverse faculty that will be required for continued success. Equipment and core facilities are lacking, as is financial support needed to keep those facilities current and functioning. The campus has limited space to meet the unique needs of student groups, and also lacks a meaningful amount of flexible event space to support meetings, conferences, social events, faith-based gatherings, and community-engagement activities. Participants also emphasized a need to add office space for our growing faculty. Consistently, participants framed the need for lab and classroom space to be added and/or reimagined to meet the cutting-edge, contemporary teaching and research needs of our faculty and students.

It is significant that these conversations also recognized the Research 1 designation as a meaningful milestone, several voiced that the university does not have a cohesive research identity. With respect to the Research 1 designation, many participants admitted to a lack of understanding of what it means, how to optimize this designation, and how to retain it. The discussion about this designation acknowledged many tensions, including disparity between STEM disciplines and our humanities, arts, and social sciences with respect to funding, recognition, and support. Additional concerns were raised about support for graduate students. The number of graduate assistantships, the compensation associated with them, and clear and consistent expectations on how to be successful as a graduate student were all issues identified as challenges. Support for pre- and post-award activities is not scaling to the needs, and administrative responsibilities are limiting the time that faculty could be directing towards research and teaching. Library faculty and the resources they administer – recognized earlier as a strength – were seen as at capacity and at risk of being unable to support future growth.

While commitment to "inclusive excellence" is recognized as a shared value, participants acknowledged that there is not a shared definition of inclusive excellence, or how to monitor its health across campus. Policies and procedures need to be updated and shared, especially to improve how we recruit, hire, on-board, and retain faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds to departments across the colleges and divisions. There is a lack of transparency when it comes to demonstrating where and how we are living this value, and where we need to focus resources and accountability.

Finally, while shared governance is seen as a strength at UMBC, it was evident from the conversations that there is a need to balance shared governance with workload, and equity with respect to compensation. Several participants expressed the need to keep the model of shared governance at UMBC, while others felt the need to balance that with reasonable workload expectations and flexibility required to meet growing needs in a rapidly evolving education landscape. Communication and transparency, often viewed as an important domain of shared governance units, is seen and felt differently across campus. This contributes to skepticism about decision making and commitment to inclusion, breakdowns in customer service, limitations on innovation, and negative impacts on morale.

III. Bold Aspirations for UMBC

UMBC Bold yielded rich, thoughtful, and impassioned perspectives about our values and challenges from across the UMBC community. It is significant to note how participating alumni shared their positive experiences at UMBC. They advocated for UMBC to evangelize more throughout the state of Maryland and beyond. They aspire to see increased awareness of and visibility into the quality of research and instruction, our continued K-12 partnerships, and the growing UMBC pipeline into local businesses. There is no one aspiration that could summarize all of the feedback shared in these conversations, but the following are representative and, to our minds, exciting ones that we should endeavor towards to be a place that fully lives our mission:

- UMBC should be a campus that defines and embodies the idea of inclusive excellence, with faculty and staff that represents the broad diversity and abilities of this nation, and that works collaboratively across functions to embody world-class research and creative achievement, develop and sustain partnerships that strengthen communities, and prepare students from all backgrounds and abilities for rich, meaningful lives.
- UMBC should become a model among R1 institutions for excellence in research and creative achievement with a deep commitment to undergraduate and graduate education, and community engagement. The university should develop a well-known research identity to best position us to secure sustainable resources that will attract and retain innovative and diverse faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate students. We should also endeavor to build leadership, organizational, and management infrastructure and capacity that can scale to meet the needs of a R1 institution. Markers of this success will include full research cycle support for faculty, reasonable workload adjustments, and targeted staff support. Business processes and support services at the pre- and post-award stages will be improved to enable faculty success. Reimagined new and existing spaces and physical infrastructure, including Spring Grove, will meet evolving needs of a dynamic research community.
- As a more nationally known research identity is developed, UMBC must affirm our commitment to the arts, humanities, and social sciences as crucial to UMBC's mission and vision. The university will create a welcoming interdisciplinary environment across arts, humanities, social sciences, and STEM.
- UMBC should continue to build its national reputation as an institution that cares deeply about students – undergraduate and graduate – from diverse backgrounds and abilities. UMBC should also continue building community, connecting all parts of the campus including Shady Grove.
- UMBC should embody a “best places to work” ethic, by recognizing faculty and staff as whole individuals, with skills and abilities, professional goals, and personal lives. This culture will acknowledge the post-pandemic context, and will engage the community with a level of flexibility, while retaining – and in some cases rebuilding – the sense of connection across faculty, staff, students, and community partners. It will strive to provide equitable and market-driven salaries, staff capacity to reasonably meet the regular needs of campus and community partners, and a human relations resource to identify, surface, and raise concerns in a transparent manner and facilitate response to those concerns (e.g. an Ombudsperson). Inclusive in this aspiration are welcoming and

supportive mental health resources that can meet the post-pandemic needs of our students, staff, and faculty. Markers of success would include improved business processes, increased staff capacity and redundancy, resources to address health and wellness (including mental health), market-driven salaries, and when possible, career pathways that can help enrich campus colleagues while empowering innovation, continuous improvement, and excellence in execution.

- The university will affirm the importance of shared governance, and will provide transparency and clarity to existing senate structures. In this spirit, the university will strive for thoughtful and intentional communications that reach, inform, and engage all campus stakeholders on a broad range of issues. Done well, shared governance and effective communications can increase awareness and transparency, improve agility to innovate within programs and initiatives, transmit values and culture, facilitate interactions and collaboration, and grow awareness about UMBC's excellence on and off campus.