



MIKE SALSBUURY/The Columbian:

Freeman A. Hrabowski III, center, awaits his introduction at Thursday's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration at Clark College. At left is Clark President Wayne Branch and at right is Deloris Johnson, former teacher at Martin Luther King Elementary School in Vancouver. The president of a Maryland university, Hrabowski extolled the necessity of math skills, calling them an essential "civil right" in the 21st century.

Living King's dream

University
president
urges Clark
audience
to support
education

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of dreams, and helped give millions the chance to pursue them. He also knew the way to fulfill them: education.

And as America's economic future rests on the ability to compete in science and technology, mathematics skills have taken on greater weight in the life prospects of its students, whatever their background.

In the 21st century, "math has become a type of civil right," the keynote speaker

told a Gaiser Hall crowd at Clark College on Thursday night, highlighting a King Celebration event.

Freeman A. Hrabowski III, a Maryland college president directly linked to 1960s civil rights struggles, has made it his mission to inspire African American men and women to excel in mathematics.

But his message crosses all cultures today, he said, noting the sheer volume of U.S. doctorate candidates today from China and

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Did you know?

■ Born Aug. 13, 1950, in Birmingham, Ala., Freeman A. Hrabowski III is a great-great grandson of a Polish-born plantation owner who left his land and his name to his slaves. He joined Martin Luther King Jr.'s children's crusade for civil rights, was jailed at age 12 and was a schoolmate of a girl killed in a 1963 church bombing.

■ In 1992, Hrabowski was named president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He has led the 40-year-old suburban campus into becoming a fast-growing research university, and helped create a program for African American students who excel in math and science.

King:

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India. Americans simply need to do better in expecting, encouraging and supporting their children to gain critical math skills — required for work in science, physics, medicine and more fields than most people can imagine, Hrabowski said.

"We send messages to our children all the time that they're not good at math. If you don't get it like *that*," he said, snapping his fingers, "you're not good enough. They get frustrated and give it up."

That's in stark contrast to what he's witnessed in other countries during his own advanced studies, where patience by parents and teachers produces amazing results. It's a lesson Americans need to absorb, especially minority parents whose children may face additional hurdles.

"You are special — and you can be even better" is the mantra he suggested. "You will get it; you may take longer, but you will get it."

"It is amazing how much we can support people going to the next level," he added. He urged adults to point out to children how math surrounds us all in a multitude of ways.

"In all of their lives, they will be using math more than they can imagine," he said.

Hrabowski also stressed the essential link between reading skills and math comprehension: Solving math problems, something he said "gives me goosebumps," means understanding the question at hand. And more than anything, reading fosters understanding, he said.

"The most important thing to do in the summertime is reading books, reading novels," he said. During the school year, he said, teachers should offer extra problems; SAT-caliber questions are available through the Internet and other means any time of the year.

A dynamic author of two books on raising academically successful black boys and girls, Hrabowski arrived in Vancouver eminently qualified to reflect on King, his civil rights legacy and its impact on minority students. Street credentials? The 55-year-old Birmingham, Ala., native, the only son of two school teachers, grew up in the epicenter of conflict sweeping the South.

By the early 1960s, the steel city was dubbed "Bombing-ham," as black homes were firebombed with regularity. When street protests fizzled, King launched a children's campaign, hoping to put marches and arrests on page one. The 12-year-old Hrabowski took part and spent five days

in jail. He was spit on by infamous police Chief Eugene "Bull" Connor, who aimed attack dogs and fire hoses on protesters.

And he laughed with his schoolmate and friend Cynthia Wesley two days before she and three others were killed when Ku Klux Klan members bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church one Sunday morning in 1963.

He recounted that era, appearing in Spike Lee's 1997 documentary, "Four Little Girls," which exposed the church killings' critical role in galvanizing national support for civil rights.

In 1950s and '60s Birmingham, black parents and teachers expected children in segregated schools to aim high, despite the obstacles. Hrabowski did just that, skipping ahead in years to graduate from high school at age 16.

He graduated with honors with a mathematics degree at the Hampton Institute, before earning advanced degrees at the University of Illinois. It was there he found himself the only black student in higher math courses, something he committed to changing as he scaled the academic career ladder.

By age 41, he won the president's job at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, or UMBC. It was there that he met Clark College President Wayne Branch, a local community college president, who helped arrange Thursday's visit. At Clark, minorities comprise about 17 percent of students taking math, science and engineering courses.

Hrabowski has led a mammoth capital fund drive to boost research work, while crafting a special math and science program to attract and motivate talented black students. At UMBC, academics, rather than athletics, earn the spotlight, whether it be a winning chess team or research breakthroughs. Several campus programs also reach out to schoolchildren.

"We talk about the life of the mind," Hrabowski said of his holistic approach to learning. "Even more than teaching it, I wanted to excite people — get people excited about mathematics."

And he credits his mother, Maggie, a one-time maid who became a schoolteacher, taught English for years, then returned to college so she also could teach math, as his chief inspiration. "Reading allowed me to dream about the possibilities," she told him.

He challenged the educators, parents and students in Gaiser Hall to live up to the dreams of King and Maggie Hrabowski. "You have the chance to lead. You have the chance to narrow the gap. That's your motivation."