



UMB News

Schmoke, Jarrell Discuss the Power of Opportunity

April 29, 2021 | By [Jen Badie](#)

University of Baltimore President Kurt L. Schmoke, JD, had opportunity when he was growing up in West Baltimore that he tried to bring into the lives of children and other residents of his hometown when he was mayor from 1987 to 1999.

Schmoke discussed wide-ranging topics from education, housing, systemic racism, and drug decriminalization with [University of Maryland, Baltimore \(UMB\)](#) President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, on April 28 during the President's Panel on Politics and Policy. The conversation, titled "Social Justice and Structural Racism in Baltimore," repeatedly came back to opportunity.

Schmoke attended kindergarten in city schools the year they were integrated by the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. He said he had supportive parents, was involved in the Lancers Boys Club, and attended Douglas Memorial Community Church.

"I have been blessed by having a lot of people encouraging me at a very early age to achieve more than I thought I could achieve," he said. "And when you think about that, so many of our young people growing up now don't have that kind of encouragement, and they end up drifting off into bad activities. If they had that kind of encouragement, we would probably see more productive citizens from them."

Schmoke, who was state's attorney for Baltimore before becoming the city's first African American elected as mayor, said education was the key issue for him because he wanted to create those opportunities for students.

"I tried to get lessons from the five years that I was state's attorney. As you looked at the people who were coming through the criminal justice system, one of the things that you saw was huge deficits in their education," Schmoke said. "I wanted to be the education mayor and ran on a platform of making Baltimore known as 'The City That Reads' to encourage people to be involved in lifelong learning."

He said he thought if he could improve elementary and secondary education as well as the Enoch Pratt Free Library and Baltimore City Community College, "it would have a huge impact on opportunities for young people, and my hope was that it would also lead to fewer and fewer people engaged as a part of the criminal justice system."

Schmoke lamented that while he was able to make some improvements during his three terms, it was not the lasting change he had wanted. "By the time I left office, I wanted our public education system to have excellence as the rule, not the exception," he said. "There are still some really exceptional schools, exceptional instruction, but, unfortunately, we did not make the complete structural change that I had hoped for."

Schmoke, who was praised in the 1990s by then-President Bill Clinton for his programs to improve public housing and enhance community economic development, also discussed the high-rise housing complexes, including two in West Baltimore near UMB, that were often viewed as "warehouses of poverty."

“President Clinton saw the city as the center for expanding opportunity and urged us to be creative in thinking about how to address the problems, particularly these high rises,” Schmoke said. “We were able to tear down the high rises [during his administration and his successors’] and create nice neighborhoods. Near UMB’s campus, now you have two nice-looking communities rather than these hulking high rises that were attracting all kinds of criminal activity. So it did make a difference, and it continues to make a difference.”

He pointed out that the city doesn’t have the resources to solve problems on its own and needs to partner with the federal and state government. He said he told current Mayor Brandon Scott, “You’ll have more will than wallet.”

In discussing structural racism, Jarrell said UMB has been working to identify structures and policies that disadvantage certain groups such as changing the composition of admissions committees to address bias. Schmoke praised Jarrell and UMB for facing structural racism head-on. He recommended hiring people who are committed to achieving the University’s goals and to make those issues part of annual performance reviews.

“It is one of those issues that won’t be resolved, that there’s no final victory on it, but a commitment by everybody who’s a part of the institution is what has to be encouraged,” said Schmoke, who has been the University of Baltimore president for almost seven years. “I think that you’re taking a huge step in doing that, and I know that in our institution that is so vital to assuring some success in these areas.”

Schmoke also took audience questions, many focused on decriminalizing drugs. As mayor, Schmoke first spoke out in 1988 about decriminalizing drugs and said he’s satisfied at the pace the discussion is going now, adding that “the war on drugs should be a public health war rather than a criminal justice war.”

He was asked about Marilyn Mosby, the city state’s attorney, and her recent decision not to prosecute arrests for drug possession.

“I think State’s Attorney Mosby is trying to get us to distinguish between people who are hooked on drugs and those who are hooked on drug money, because the sellers are still a serious problem for our whole community,” he said. “And that’s where her attention is at this point.”

He cautioned that the country needs to move at a slow pace with legalizing marijuana, for example, because society doesn’t want underage children to abuse it.

“I’m pleased to see that more and more elected officials are talking about treatment alternatives or the use of public health initiatives,” he said. “We still have a long way to go. Slow but sure steps are being taken, and I do think that the community is going to be better off.”

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

The University of Maryland, Baltimore is the founding campus of the University System of Maryland.
620 W. Lexington St., Baltimore, MD 21201 | 410-706-3100
© 2021 University of Maryland, Baltimore. All rights reserved.