At 56, J. Keith Motley, the chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Boston since July 2007, modestly shrugs off accolades from fellow college and university administrators that he has pioneered unique and wide-followed philosophies on building diverse campuses. He is UMass Boston’s first African-American chancellor, a fact that by itself makes him a pioneer.

"Keith has the ability to compel people and groups to think about the world differently than how they’re accustomed to doing," says David G. Carter, recently retired chancellor of the University of Connecticut system.

"I can tell you that universities and university presidents watch him closely because he has so expertly moved the conversation forward — especially in recent years — on how we define and seek to increase diversity," Carter adds.

By the numbers, 41 percent of UMass Boston’s nearly 16,000 students are ethnic minorities or students of color, and they hail from more than 80 countries, making it the most diverse university in Massachusetts and one of the most diverse public universities in the United States.

Under Motley’s leadership, the share of people of color in executive administration roles has grown, as has the percentage of minority graduate students, with students of color now making up 53 percent of UMass Boston’s STEM majors.

While he’s proud of the numbers, Motley encourages a more expansive view of diversity, and has charged his new Office of Diversity and Inclusion with sussing out student, faculty, and staff perceptions of the campus environment that will help guide a strategic plan for diversity.

"I think this office was crucial to fostering a learning atmosphere, as the very definition of diversity continues to grow beyond the things we’ve known for centuries, like skin color," Motley says. "I believe diversity has as much or more to do with experiences, habits, likes and dislikes, philosophies and personal belief systems, lifestyle, and so much more."

His forward-thinking philosophy has simple roots that go back to Pittsburgh, where Motley was born and raised.

"I lived in a working-class neighborhood, where there was a common denominator among the residents," he says. "That common denominator was not our race or skin color. We had black and white, African-American, Asian, Latino, German immigrants, Russian immigrants, lots of Italian-Americans. The commonality was that we were all working-class families. And sharing common needs and goals for success bonded us."

— James H. Burnett III