

I: INTRO

Thank you to:

- President Rollin Richmond
- Emeritus President Alistair McCrone
- Dean Steve Smith

Congratulations to 2014 Graduating Class of HSU! I'm honored to be a small part of one of those huge days that you'll remember in vivid detail for the rest of your life.

28 years ago, I donned a cap and gown just like yours for my commencement ceremony at UCSB. I remember it was hot under those robes; I remember a lot of people had hangovers. I remember being surrounded by family and friends, the bittersweet mix of celebration and finality. But for all the vivid details I remember, I cannot for the life of me remember who my commencement speaker was or what they said. It could have been the Poet Laureate of the United States, or an Astronaut – I have no idea!

To spare you that kind of embarrassing memory gap, I want to just introduce myself again: “I'm Jared Huffman – *your Congressman!*”

Now perhaps you'll remember me years from now when you might be called upon to give a commencement address of your own. At the very least, perhaps you'll remember me 2 weeks from now when you go to vote in the June 3rd primary election!

Unless you are offended by my remarks today – in which case, you should feel free to forget who your commencement speaker was. Maybe it was the Poet Laureate, maybe it was an Astronaut, I don't know...

Despite the fact that you are graduating from HSU's College of Natural Resources and Sciences, I know there may be family members, faculty and

students here with conservative political views. And you may have been worried when you heard that a liberal Democrat Congressman was giving this commencement address. Well, I just want to put you at ease. You won't hear anything today that is any more liberal than what you might hear, say, on the Rachel Maddow show, or at an ACLU meeting.

But let's start with something everyone agrees on.

I have the best congressional district in America.

Maybe even the best congressional district since the whole process began back in 1790, with the first United States Census. Every 10 years since then, our government has conducted the Census – the official count of people living in this country. Using this data, the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are apportioned to the various states based on their share of the population; and the states then draw up district boundaries for the congressional seats they are awarded.

Our current districts, based on 2010 census data, each include about 700,000 people. As you might imagine given the diverse distribution of people, some districts are very compact and urban; some are rural and spread out over a huge area. There are congressional districts of every size, shape and character. I'm sure they're all special in their own way. But only one district can be the best. That's us.

Why am I telling you this? Because in a few weeks I'm going on the Stephen Colbert Show to be interviewed for his "Better know a district" segment. I want him to know, if he's listening, that I'm ready to defend California's "Fighting 2nd District"!

When I describe my district to my colleagues in Washington – this incredible stretch of land from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Oregon border – they tend to agree that this is one of the most remarkable places on earth. We've got one-third of the iconic California coast, amazing rivers and salmon fisheries, the world's biggest trees, some of the finest wine country on Earth, and yes, here in Humboldt County – the heart of the Emerald Triangle -- we're renowned for something else....

I'm talking about Humboldt State University, of course. All of us associated with HSU have a lot to be proud of. This university has produced an impressive array of leaders – and yes, that does include the creator of "SpongeBob Square Pants," Stephen Hillenburg. But it also includes countless foresters, oceanographers, fish biologists and other scientists who are at the very top of their fields; artists, educators, business leaders and high-ranking state and federal officials.

What makes HSU special is that the education you get here is not just about some degree or credential; it's about combining academic rigor, and innovation, with a commitment to improving the community and the world -- especially in the areas of science and sustainability. HSU is producing exciting results and putting Humboldt County on the map for something other than weed.

That's why the U.S. Department of Energy recently turned to HSU, and its renowned Schatz Energy Research Center, to help solve an old problem in forested areas like the North Coast: what to do with debris left over from timber harvesting and forest restoration.

With a **\$5.8 million federal grant**, the professors and students here at HSU, working with a broad group of state, federal and private organizations, will study ways to reduce the fire risk from this debris, while making our forests healthier and more resilient. Their work could lead to new methods to convert logging slash and wood chips into biofuels onsite -- before it is shipped out of the forest. What has historically been treated as "waste" can become valuable renewable energy -- a win-win for the environment and the economy!

So if you feel proud today about graduating from Humboldt State's College of Natural Resources and Sciences, you should! This is a great university and a great program. And through all your hard work these past several years, you've accomplished something truly important that will serve you well for the rest of your lives.

I know your families are *very* proud of what you've achieved. I wish you could see the faces of your parents back there, beaming with pride and relief. By the way, this is a really good time to ask them for money!

In preparing my remarks for your commencement, I wanted strike a theme that would be appropriate for this moment -- something that would motivate and inspire you; something that would help you with that difficult transition from college, back to your parents' house.... But when I considered the usual themes you hear in commencement addresses, none of them felt right.

Take the theme of "individuality." It's awkward to tell a group of 500 people

dressed in identical caps and gowns and lined up in perfect rows, just like every college graduate since the dawn of time, they should “dare to be different.”

Then there’s the Pollyanna speech – expressing irrepressible optimism about everything. Who would I be kidding? It’s rough out there and most of you are feeling some fear – for good reason. The job market is not great, student loan debt is rising and those loans are going to start coming due very soon. As smart and determined as you were to make it to this point, in today’s economy a college degree – even a science-related degree from a great university like HSU – does not guarantee a good job, much less a successful career.

Meanwhile, everyone is asking you “What’s next?” “What are you doing after you graduate?” “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?” “What’s your *plan*?”

Maybe a few of you know exactly what you want to do. You’ve known your entire lives and you have a PLAN – you’re going to be a doctor, you’re going to open a craft brewery, you’re going to be a conservative political pundit on cable TV (and if there’s anyone with that plan, I just gotta warn you, the competition out there is *crazy*). Or maybe you’re going to study why the Antarctic Icefish evolved without red blood cells or hemoglobin.

To any of you who have the next phase of your life all mapped out — congratulations. You’re freaks of nature.

But for the 99% of you who haven’t mapped out the next decade of your life; who worry about the unknown; who are shifting uncomfortably in their seats because they’re **unsure of what they want to do...** you are not alone.

I can’t remember who my commencement speaker was, but I vividly remember feeling that same FEAR most of you are feeling right now.

Of course, I was fortunate to have anticipated the critical importance of science.

Long before people were talking about gene splicing, nanotechnology, or smartphones, I saw it coming, just like Al Gore... That's why I donned my lab coat and pocket protector, and earned my degree in ... *Political Science*.

With a Political Science degree, you have *options*. Two, to be exact. Law school, or unemployment.

So, after a few glamorous months as a travelling salesman selling coupon books – I was stiffed by my employer who went out of business. And after an admittedly cool stint playing volleyball on the US National Team – because I thought perhaps I might want to keep pursuing the sport that had helped pay my college tuition... I found my way to law school. And despite my share of false starts, bad decisions and painful failures along the way – things have worked out for me.

It sounds like a Will Ferrell movie. There I was at my commencement 28 years ago: hot, a little hungover, and scared, just like most of you. Now here I am: proudly serving in the least productive Congress in American history!

I could turn that into one of those Pollyanna speeches about irrepressible optimism: “you too can be in the United States Congress if you just play enough volleyball!”

But that's not where this is going. There's too much sobering reality all around us.

The truth is we face enormous challenges at every level. Here on the North Coast, we're struggling with high unemployment, rural poverty– and building a sustainable natural resource economy while continuing to address serious environmental damage -- from the prior generation's short-sighted timber practices, to the current generation's destructive marijuana growing practices.

As a country, we're already struggling with the highest national debt in 60 years, and the Baby Boomers – your grandparents' generation -- are retiring at the rate of 10,000 every day, straining the Social Security and Medicare system like never before – and underscoring the pressure to get our country back to full employment, reduce healthcare costs, and find ways to keep our commitments to seniors while also investing in the future – education, research, and infrastructure.

We remain the strongest nation in the world. But we are vexed by challenges of how, when, and if to use our military might in a world that is no longer defined by the strategic military balance between superpowers – where the world's economies are more interconnected than ever, and where conflicts are being driven by religious, ethnic or tribal disputes in which our security interests are not always clear.

And if all of that isn't sobering enough, we face a *global* challenge greater than anything human beings have ever faced. You're scientists, and you know that the science is clear: our planet is warming, sea levels are rising, our weather patterns and the chemistry of our oceans are changing. We are losing biodiversity. An alarming number of species are going extinct. And all of this is happening at an accelerating rate. Our challenge is whether we can find a way to live in harmony with this planet – with other species and the habitats and natural systems they depend on; with the fragile balance in our atmosphere and in our oceans that we need to continue to have a stable, livable climate.

These are serious times. And with all this hanging over our heads, none of the standard commencement themes really seem to work.

So I started thinking about what was different between your graduating class and mine, 28 years ago. Turns out, 28 years is almost exactly the measure of a generation based on current data and trends. That makes me feel old, but it's true. You and I are exactly one generation apart.

Since the founding of our country, there have only been about a dozen generations in total.

The one immediately before me was called the Baby Boomers. They had the best music ever. They questioned authority, defied their parents and reshaped society...before selling out, cashing in, and wondering what's wrong with the kids of today. But they did make a difference. The Baby Boom generation was defined by its struggle to achieve peace and social justice. It was a dangerous and transformational time. People put their life on the line. They left big shoes for the next generation to fill.

That would be me. My generation was dubbed Generation X, beautifully capturing our *lack* of definition. While we have our own notable achievements, including huge advances in medicine and technology – including all those electronic devices you guys are so connected to -- Gen X has been criticized for being self-absorbed and short-sighted.

Under our watch, with plenty of help from the Baby Boomers, income inequality has grown, the middle class has been eroded through globalization, and speculation and corporate greed crashed the global economy. The planet has begun warming. Our economic system has become skewed to make super-rich people even richer, and for some reason, people are still fighting *against* affordable health care.

We're sorry for all that.

But that brings me to you: The Millennials: The generation that turned over the

odometer.

When I heard that the folks at Pew Research Center have been compiling all sorts of data and research about Millennials, I decided to take a look. What I found out about you was fascinating...

First, you should take pride in being by far the most diverse, and the most educated, generation in American history.

You're the most technologically wired and inter-connected generation in history too. But that doesn't mean you're hard-wired: 41% of Millennials don't use a landline phone. And your mobility doesn't depend so much on driving: the number of young adults with a driver's license has plunged 25% in just the past 8 years.

You're a bit wary of other people. Maybe it's due to protective parents, or the age of terrorism, but two-thirds of you agree with the statement, "You can't be too careful when dealing with people."

But you are *less* skeptical than your parents and grandparents when it comes to government. Millennials overwhelmingly believe government should take a more active role in solving problems. More Millennials self-identify as "liberals" than any previous generation.

And you vote: 61% of you believe it's your duty as a citizen to always vote. That's up from 47% just seven years ago.

All of which is bad news for anti-government Republicans.

Although, Democrats don't exactly have a lock on you: After voting in record numbers for President Obama in 2008, Millennials' support for the President and for the Democratic Party has been *declining* since 2010.

You're surprisingly optimistic in some ways. Despite the magnitude of our economic and other problems, you are more upbeat about your own economic future – and about the overall state of our nation – than your parents and grandparents are.

And despite the shortcomings of Generation X and the Baby Boomers who came before you, Millennials don't judge their parents and grandparents harshly.

In fact, the data shows you care more than previous generations about your elders. More than six-in-10 Millennials say families have a responsibility to have an elderly parent come live with them if that parent wants to. When you ask that question of people over 60, fewer than four-in-ten agree that this is a family responsibility.

Millennials care much less about money, home ownership, and even marriage than previous generations – but you care more about quality of life and helping other people.

Yours is a generation that has grown up with diversity, inclusion and compassion. You don't seem to worry about who other people choose to love. You don't define people by their economic class. You don't care about their skin color or country of origin.

More than any prior generation, you've been driven to excel in academics and test scores. Yet, you accept people with physical, intellectual and social disabilities. You honestly wonder what the fuss is all about.

And that's how it should be. But trust me; it's an incredible change from the world in which many of us grew up.

My generation has saddled you with great expectations and demands, and measured you against a competitive global workforce that never sleeps.

How do you respond to that? Well a lot of Millennials I've met simply redefine success. At the end of the day, it's not only about a job that pays well, it's also about life well lived.

As Millennials have come of age, we see more companies and organizations doing more meaningful work than ever. And if you don't want to work for them, you can start your own company, on a laptop at "Los Bagels" with someone you just met. Whatever you do, chances are you won't measure success by money. You will measure it by the people you work with and the goals you share. Millennials work for change: you think globally, act locally and *text constantly*.

83% of you sleep with your smartphone for God's sake!

So what does all this mean? I know that as part of the "older generation," it's my job to do what everyone in history has done before me: wag my finger at those younger than me and call them lazy, shallow, selfish and entitled.

But when I add it all up and consider who you are as a generation, I think you guys might be exactly what the world needs right now.

Now to be fair, there are a few disturbing things in the research on Millennials. You have a lot of tattoos, and nearly one-in-four of you have a piercing in some place other than your earlobe. We need to talk about the wisdom of that.

But the overall picture seems like a great fit for our times. The education,

innovation and diversity you bring to the table? We need that right now. Your compassion, social consciousness and connectivity? We need that right now. Your tempered optimism? Totally. Living life to make a difference and having meaning, instead of just making money – a different definition of success? We need that right now.

You can't overstate the challenge we face. One of our great environmental leaders Paul Hawken sums it up this way: "*civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.*"

The world really needs something like you, and fast.

My generation is not done yet – we've got some smart, well-meaning people and we're going to keep working to help fix this mess.

Our problems didn't happen overnight, and solving them will be an inter-generational challenge.

For you entomologists, think of the migration of the monarch butterfly – where each generation hands off to the next, and no one gets to experience the entire journey. That's how it's always been.

I for one am glad you're picking up the next leg of this journey.

By the way, this would be a good time to thank your parents, who, knowing you as well as they do, might share my hopes for the future. But their expectations probably came with a tuition check. So before you save the world, please get all your junk out of their garage.

It has been an honor and a privilege to address the Humboldt State class of 2014, here in the heart of the best congressional district in America.

I will remember every moment in vivid detail, and hope you do, too.

Congratulations!