

2011 Commencement Address
Humboldt State University
Robert C. Thomas, University of Montana Western

You might have been expecting the Matchbox Twenty guy, but you did better. You got one of your own, a Humboldt graduate - geology, 1985. I've done a few things since then, but nothing matches how I feel standing here today, sharing bragging rights with hundreds of my fellow Humboldt graduates. What a great day!

I think this university is extraordinary, and I'm going to make my case. Many years ago, I distinctly recall geology professor, Bob Stuart saying "we should burn these buildings down and buy vans." He wasn't advocating arson, he wanted us to learn by doing, and that is exactly what we did. We hiked into the Grand Canyon, we scaled the cliffs at Patrick's Point, we collected fossils at Scotia Bluffs, we mapped the mountains; we got dirty learning geology.

This approach to learning is fundamentally important. It's aboriginal; deeply rooted in our evolutionary history. Most universities use a mass production system. The professor standing at the pulpit tells you what's important in that book and you write it down, memorize it and regurgitate it. All you need to do is add a little beer and circus into the mix, and everyone is happy with a broken educational system.

I'll admit that I like the pulpit. I love the sound of my own voice and I am certain that my words hold deep meaning. I'm thinking that if I'm talking, you should be taking notes! You're thinking that guy is talking in my sleep. This paradox came to a head for me about 18 years ago when I overheard students dividing up classes to get the notes, so I vowed to change it.

Inspired by Humboldt Bob, I helped my campus to become an experiential-learning college where students focus on a single class at a time. Bob's vision made me the national poster child for innovative teaching, got me into Playboy Magazine and landed me this gig with you today! Inspiration from Humboldt State University – priceless!

Lecture does have value. It is as an efficient means of transferring information, but it can't stand alone. You have to apply what you hear to learn it. It doesn't matter if it's in the field, in the lab, in the studio, on the stage, or in the community; theory without practice doesn't stick. You memorize to pass, but you learn to understand.

This was my experience in geology and I'll bet it was yours as well. Think about it, during your time here you have likely made art, played music, danced or acted, wrote creatively, got wet in a tide pool, managed wildlife, studied in the forest, sailed on the Coral Sea, helped at the hatchery, tinkered in the chemistry lab, developed alternative energy, gardened for the hungry, wrote a business plan, educated kids, studied abroad or mapped rocks, just like I did.

Experiential learning still happens at Humboldt in a big way, and these people are all fighting to keep it going despite fiscal pressures to succumb to the mass production model. It's hard to

appreciate the effort it takes to not lecture, but be assured that your professors run the gauntlet of a risk-adverse system to make it happen. It's the right thing to do and they know it.

So, why does higher education find itself under the bus these days? Some policy makers seem convinced that we are up to something. Well, we are up to something, and it is off-the-charts good, because when we are at our best we help you to be responsible, creative and contemplative; for life! What more could society want for its investment?

Something is not working, however, because each year we reduce investment and access to higher education. As a kid who survived at Humboldt on low tuition, Pell Grants and Toni's frozen pizzas, I do not want to see people from my economic bracket forced into educational steorage. This is simply bad for society, not because the nation might fall behind China or India, but because we live better when we are aware of our diversity and crave a creative life.

Uncertainties aside, I remain optimistic because education is a transformative experience. I left Humboldt a totally different person; I was more open-minded, more flexible and I craved a creative life. Most importantly, I learned enough to know that I didn't know very much, and I wanted to know more. This is the hallmark of a great education; a Humboldt education.

On this day, the professors and staff need to know how important they are to the graduates. Because of you, we have learned to take creative risks, focus on what is worth doing and achieve results as a team. You teach us to be passionate, responsible and to press on in the face of adversity, just like my mentor, Bud Burke. We graduates are proud of this place; forever.

On this day, the graduates need to know how important they are to their professors. You motivate them and keep them interested and creative. You are their legacy, so stay in touch because they are proud of you and your accomplishments.

Twenty six years ago, I sat where you are now and I did not want to leave Humboldt State University. After walking around this beautiful campus over the last two days, reconnecting with my professors and reabsorbing the beauty and energy of this place, I am wondering when I might return. So, if you are feeling the same way, it's because the hard-working faculty and staff did their jobs. So, be sure to tell somebody...they are up to something!

I'll close your last lecture with a quote from John Lennon. He wrote that *living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see*. Well, if Humboldt opened yours eyes, choose to live hard. All the best...

Robert C. Thomas, Ph.D.
Professor of Geology / Regents' Professor
Environmental Sciences Department
The University of Montana Western