

## **Northwestern Michigan College Commencement (June 9, 1991)**

### **Opening Remarks**

Thank you,...

I am delighted and honored to be here in beautiful Traverse City  
to celebrate this graduation with you.

My warmest greetings to today's 540 graduates  
and 34 who have earned Certificates of Achievement  
and to their faculty and friends.

Greetings, too, to members of the Board of Trustees,  
Presidents Quinn, Tanis, Popovich,  
and my distinguished predecessor President Hatcher  
and to Lt. Governor Binsfield and Senator McManus  
honored friends and guests.

Let me extend a special word to the families of today's graduates.,  
You are the ones who have cared and worked and provided;  
you have loved and hoped, helped and sacrificed  
to bring these students to this moment.

The selflessness that family life requires  
might seem a bit out-of-fashion of late.

But all the while, families like yours just kept going,  
struggling and striving to give these students,  
and through them, our society, a better future.

Feel proud. This is really your day.

You have earned the gratitude and respect of everyone here..

### **Happy Birthday...**

Let me also convey congratulations to Northwestern Michigan College  
for three decades of excellence...and of leadership...in education.

This is particularly appropriate, since there is a strong bond between  
our institutions.

Actually, the story begins in 1947 when Les Biedermann,  
one of the great leaders of Northern Michigan,  
approached UM's President Ruthven on behalf of the Traverse City  
to encourage UM to establish an extension center in Traverse City.

It took several years, but in 1950, President Hatcher approved the offering of English to Traverse City residents at your high school. The University sent Dr. Ellis Wunsch from the English department to teach the classes and represent the University in helping local community... and he later became the first director and then dean of instruction.

### **How to Give a Commencement Address**

Giving a commencement address is a forbidding challenge because graduation is such a significant event in anyone's life. It is a rite of passage. A moment of high and proud achievement. The culmination of dedication and lots of hard work, often of sacrifice. It is the fulfillment of lifelong dreams, not just for the graduates, but also I have have noted, for their families. But I have learned over the years that however hard it is to prepare a commencement speech, it is far easier than listening to one on such an exciting day! Because you see, there is really only one commencement address... And although it has been given thousands of times... in thousands of different ways... The basic message is still the same... First you tell the graduates that their education has prepared them to go forth into a world in which they, and they alone, will have the power to control their own destiny. Then you throw in some advice on how to go about doing this... although, of course, it is traditional for graduates to totally ignore this advice... Actually, this is a good thing because every new generation must discover its own genius, its own way of addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of its time. Indeed, given the pace of change today,

it becomes harder and harder for one generation to advise the next.  
Hence I will try to keep my advice to the minimum  
and most important of all I will be to try  
and to keep it all under 15 minutes!!!

So here goes. (*glancing at my watch*)

## **Introduction**

Today I want to talk to you about the future....  
about your future, about our future as a society,  
a state, a nation, and a world.

This graduation provokes a certain feeling of nostalgia in me  
since it was just about a quarter-century ago  
that I graduated in the midst of the turbulent '60s.

When I think back to those years, I remember a  
time of great optimism in America...  
the glow of Camelot, of the Kennedy administration,  
still lingered with us.

There were great causes to take up .....

...world peace...  
...the conquest of space  
...the Civil Rights movement

I was swept along by this spirit...

...my first job was to build a nuclear rocket engine  
designed to power the first manned mission to Mars.  
(Incidentally, we actually managed to build that rocket engine...  
...but shortly after America stepped on the moon,  
it stepped out of manned interplanetary flight...)

My Class of '64 graduated feeling boundless confidence  
in ourselves, our country and our future.

But already there were clouds gathering on the horizon during my senior  
year

that suggested things would be not quite so simple,  
that dramatic changes were coming...

John F. Kennedy was assassinated during the fall of my senior year...  
The Cold War had begun to heat up with the Cuban Missile Crisis

A few people were talking about a distant war in a place called Viet Nam

The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley was revealing a new spirit of student frustration and anger on the campuses.

But even with these warning signs, we were not prepared for, indeed, never could have imagined at the time, the dramatic crises and confrontations, the great transformations that would reshape America and our institutions in the years immediately following our graduation...

- the war in Vietnam that so profoundly affected all of our lives...
  - ...both those who served and those who protested...
- the eruption of assassination and terrorism which robbed us of our heroes---perhaps of our ability to trust in heroes
- the racial conflict that tore apart our cities
- the emergence of the drug culture...
  - as more people turned on and tuned out...
- Watergate, and the crisis in confidence in our leaders and our institutions.

These may all seem be ancient history to you  
but 25 years isn't really so long as history goes  
Yet it it has been a tumultuous period and  
it has marked a disheartening shift in our national outlook.  
In a sense, during the decade following my graduation,  
America lost its innocence...

In many ways, my class was the last generation  
to be unreservedly optimistic about the future...  
to welcome its challenges and to feel fully equal to them.

### **Changed world**

The French poet Paul Valery remarked that  
"The trouble with our times  
is that the future is not what it used to be."  
And if this was true for my generation,  
it is even more true for yours.

Your future will be

a time of accelerating change and transformation  
of our economy, society, polity, culture.

You are graduating at a truly extraordinary time.

I believe you and your generation are the ones who can reclaim  
that American birthright of optimism and confidence in the  
future.

I believe that once again we can look forward  
with excitement and the knowledge  
that we have what it takes to succeed  
and shape a new century  
to better serve human and planetary life.

We have the strength and talent we need to build a better future  
The only question is whether we have the will.

Of course we have lots of doubters and pessimists among us,  
people who can only see the negative side of change.

And it is true that change is unsettling, even frightening at times.  
It can be painful.

Undoubtedly some of the trends we are experiencing are difficult.  
But we can also see them as opportunities  
opportunities to build a better, more democratic, more just,  
more peaceful and creative society and world community.

### **Themes of Change**

Let's look at some of the changes a bit more closely.  
to see what they might hold for you.

#### **1. Demographic Change**

America's people are changing rapidly...

We are an aging society.

Indeed, today there are more people over 65 than teenagers in  
this country,

and this situation will continue for many decades.

Further, the growth rate in both our population and workforce is  
is declining to the lowest level in our nation's history.

America will simply not be a nation of youth again in your lifetimes.

What does this mean for you?

Probably you will find more jobs available

but you might have to work longer before retiring

because you and your generation will have to support more medical care and other benefits for senior citizens who are living longer

and whose numbers and political influence are growing.

But there is an even more profound change occurring in the population of our nation.

America is rapidly becoming the most pluralistic, multicultural nation on earth.

Women, minorities, and immigrants already account for about 85% of the growth in our work force.

By the year 2000, they'll represent 60% of all of our nation's workers!!!

Indeed, those groups we refer to today as

minorities will become the majority population of our nation in the century ahead...just as they are today throughout the world.

In addition, women are already the predominant gender in our nation and our institutions, but the difference now--and a very splendid difference it is--the difference is that they are rapidly taking up their rightful place as leaders of our society.

What do these changes mean for you.

You will need to be able to work, cooperate

and communicate effectively with people

from many different backgrounds, to value their contributions.

You as a person and we as a society

will have to leave our prejudices behind us.

We can't afford them any more.

Your challenge will be to help build the common bonds and

values that unite us as a democratic society,  
even as we learn to respect and value our differences.

The growing pluralism of our society is perhaps our greatest challenge as a nation...yet it is also among our most important opportunities, since it gives us an extraordinary vitality and energy to be able to draw on the talents, experience, ambition, and leadership of many groups in our society.

It will be you and your generation that can, and I believe will, build the kind of culture that thrives on the strengths of diversity,

even as it strives to find the values that bind us together.

## **2. The Internationalization of America**

The reality of the second major change was signaled by an event that happened almost exactly two decades ago when Apollo 11 set down on the Sea of Tranquility to put man on the moon.

The image I have in mind is that extraordinary photo of the earth taken by Lunar Orbiter as it circled the moon...

...an image that dramatically revealed how nations and peoples are passengers together on spaceship Earth.

It was a portent of today, a time in which all aspects of American life are becoming increasingly "internationalized", in which our nation has become a member of a truly global community.

Whether through travel and communication, the arts and culture, the internationalization of commerce, capital and labor, we are becoming increasingly interdependent with

other nations and other peoples.

The world and our place in it have changed forever.

The fact is that a truly domestic US economy has ceased to exist.

...It is no longer relevant to speak of the Michigan economy, or the competitiveness of Michigan auto manufacturing,

tourism, or agriculture.

These are all affected by events and process  
far beyond our national or state borders.

We are no longer self-sufficient or self-sustaining.

We are not immune to the events occurring in once remote  
regions.

We have only to look at recent events in the Persian Gulf  
to realize the truth of this statement.

It means that American business and workers must work harder  
to keep the competitive edge and we must be prepared  
both to compete with and work cooperatively  
with people from different parts of the world.

Internationalization is having another impact on our country and  
state.

The US has become the destination of about half the world's  
immigrants

Probably 10 million this decade alone...

As we have been throughout our history, we continue to be  
nourished and revitalized by wave after wave of immigrants,  
coming to our shores with unbounded energy, hope, and  
faith in the American dream.

America is evolving into the first true "world nation",  
with not simply economic and political but also ethnic  
ties to all parts of the globe...

This suggests how important it will be in years to come  
for you to gain understanding cultures other than our own  
not only for personal enrichment and good  
citizenship, but indeed, necessary for our very survival  
as a nation.

### **3. The Age of Knowledge**

Looking back over history, one can identify certain  
abrupt changes, discontinuities, in the nature,  
the very fabric of our civilization...

The Renaissance, the Age of Discovery, the Industrial Revolution



Our society is once again undergoing such a dramatic shift in fundamental perspective and structure.

Today we are evolving rapidly to a new post-industrial, knowledge-based society, just as a century ago our agrarian society evolved through the Industrial Revolution.

We see signs of this all about us.

Industrial production is steadily switching away from material and labor intensive products and processes to knowledge intensive processes:

In a car, 40% materials, 25% labor...

In a chip, 1% materials, 10% labor, 70% knowledge!!!

(In fact, the material for computer chips is the world's most common substance...sand!!!)

High-tech industries based on knowledge--computers, semiconductors, biotechnology, synthetic materials--are replacing industries based on natural resources as the source of economic growth and strategic strength.

Indeed, already 40% of all new investment in plant and equipment goes

to purchase information technology...computers, networks...

We are in the midst of an information revolution that is changing the basis of economic competitiveness and world power.

Today information and data flow quickly around the world.

We learn about events almost as they occur. The world is linked electronically. And, as a result, the relationships between nations and the pace of change are increasing rapidly.

Indeed, if you want to know the real reason why the we are now seeing the extraordinary transformations in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, it is not due to diplomacy or economics but rather the silicon chip... that is, to modern communication and information

technology which make it impossible for totalitarian governments to isolate their societies from the rest of the world.

A fundamental transformation is underway in our economy that is reshaping virtually every product, every service, and every job in the United States.

In our country, as in all developed nations, "knowledge workers" have already become the center of gravity of the labor force.

In a sense, we are entering a new age, an age of knowledge, in which the key strategic resource necessary for our prosperity, security, and social well-being has become knowledge.

In this world, educated people and their ideas have become the wealth of nations.

What does this mean for you in the long term?

I think it means that you will need to be able to use new technologies or they will pass you and your community by taking good jobs with them.

I think it means that you can expect to have several quite different careers

over the course of your life  
that you will need to keep on learning  
formally in schools and informally on your own  
in order to keep up with changing knowledge and move ahead.

Indeed, I hope we will see some of you down in Ann Arbor for more education at some point.

But you have many good alternative sources of further education in Michigan

and I hope you will take advantage of what our system has to offer you

As the number of adult students grows, our institutions will respond by adapting programs to meet needs of students who are working or parents.

Indeed, we are on the verge of a revolution in information technology

that promises to bring down the walls of higher education so that we can deliver it directly to students at home, in classrooms or in the workplace.

The soundest investment you can make in the future will be to take advantage of all educational opportunities that are offered and, as a citizen, to support education.

In this, Michigan is fortunate.

Eight generations of Michigan citizens have struggled to build one of the worlds' finest systems of postsecondary education.

Northern Michigan College is part of this system built by people of the area themselves who understand that education is critical for your future.

What you can do in return is support education recognize its importance to your own children sacrifice for it if necessary.

Nothing you do as a citizen is more critical for Michigan or our country.

than working to improve and extend educational opportunity and quality.

### **A New Kind of America**

The America of the 20th Century that I have known... was a nation characterized by a rather homogeneous, domestic, industrialized society...

But that is an America of the past.

You inherit a far different nation... a highly pluralistic, knowledge-intensive, world nation that will be the America of the 21th century

These themes of your future, the changing nature of the American population... our increasing interdependence with other nations and other peoples... and the shift to a knowledge-intensive, post-industrial society.

Are actually themes of today...  
already affecting you and your life directly  
along with that of your community.  
But they are also themes of change...  
...and I suppose this is the fourth great theme of  
the brave new world you are preparing to enter...

### **The Challenge of Change**

I can say with absolute certainty.  
That French poet really knew what he was talking about,  
The future will never again be what it used to be!!!  
New ideas and concepts are exploding forth  
at ever increasing rates...  
Indeed, in many fields, knowledge is doubling every  
few years...  
As the pace of the creation of new knowledge accelerates,  
it seems apparent that we are entering a period in  
which permanence and stability become less  
valued than flexibility and creativity...  
in which the only certainty will be the presence of  
continual change...  
and the capacity to relish, stimulate, and manage  
change becomes critical for survival.

### **Some Things Should Never Change**

Let us recognize that this accelerating change  
doesn't have to be seen as a bad or negative thing for us.  
We humans are adaptable creatures.  
We thrive on change  
Change is literally in our bones  
and it fuels our evolutionary climb.  
But we also need some anchorage to help us keep centered  
during periods of major change.  
And here is an irony for you.  
What we need to cope well with rapid change

are some good old fashioned values to hold on to.  
We need some constants in our lives to center ourselves.  
We have a deep need to hold to fundamentals.  
Our values will not only help us survive change  
Our values will give us the sense of direction and purpose we need  
to control and direct change so that it is change for the better.  
The values I am talking about,  
Values of community, family, democracy.  
Personal values of integrity and honor, caring and compassion,  
commitment to learning, self reliance, responsibility,  
hard work and self sacrifice for the common good  
are present in great abundance in communities like this.  
In these most important values, I think you are very fortunate.  
You come from a part of the country  
where they have never been out of fashion.  
This college is itself a testimony to the values of this community.  
It was built with no outside help.  
People here cared enough to sacrifice to build it  
for their children, for the future.  
And your accomplishments prove that their efforts were worth it.  
You have repaid them many times over by working hard and achieving,  
by graduating today.  
Hold on tight to this rich heritage of values and you will do just fine  
whatever changes may come.

### **Revitalization and Renewal**

As I have suggested, yours will be a future characterized  
by rapid, unpredictable, and frequently dramatic change...  
...in the nature of our people...  
...in our bonds to other societies...  
...in what we do...  
We need to see in this not a threat but a challenge  
But, most importantly, a challenge to which we are fully equal.  
Here in the Midwest, we are the bedrock of the best of American values.

And I think it is here and in your generation  
that we will find the strength of values  
to renew and revitalize,  
to take on the toughest of the challenges that lie ahead,  
to be optimistic and confident in ourselves and one another again.

Our values help us see the profound changes I have described  
as filled with opportunity to build a better community,  
a better society and a better world.

Our changing population means that we have the chance at last to fulfill  
the true promise of democracy by extending fully equal rights to all  
our people.

Pluralism in cultures and peoples can help us gain great strength  
in our culture and our economy  
and our ethnic pluralism can be seen as a key link  
in establishing bonds of understanding  
and common interest with the countries of the world.

Internationalization has brought the end of the Cold War  
and is fostering the spread of democratic governments around the  
world.

These are developments no one could have predicted only a few short  
years ago.

And this revolution has been achieved not by force of arms so much  
as by the power of the democratic ideal  
the example of our own country and its institutions.

Internationalization is also inspiring us to develop a global self  
consciousness

to help preserve and protect our planet and all its people.

Our values will help us chart the right course

to harness the power of knowledge to improve the quality of life

Our advances in knowledge and technology are bringing within our  
reach

that age old dream of freedom from harsh and menial labor.

We have already extended our lifespan and conquered

some of the most dreaded of the diseases that once plagued us .

Technology is extending our intellectual reach in all directions  
from the particles of the atom, the molecules that govern our  
heredity,

to the furthest reaches of time and space.

All the changes we are experiencing hold out great hope.

Of course, they could also carry the opposite message

--one not of hope but of disaster.

But if change turns into disaster, it will be of our own making.

There is nothing inherent in change that dictates it.

It would be a failure of vision, a failure of our values.

### **Conclusion: A Future of Hope**

Emerson once noted that the wisest council of all to the young was to

"always do what you are afraid to do."

The truth is that adapting to change and challenge

is what keeps our species evolving.

We should relish change. Welcome it. Seek it out.

Not for its own sake but for the challenge it brings  
and the possibility for progress.

We Americans have always sought, even demanded change.

We have always refused to accept the status quo.

We fled our countries of origin to get away from rigid social systems.

Then we headed West to the frontier to make new life.

We have invented ourselves as a democratic society  
now the oldest continuing democracy in the world.

and then reinvented ourselves again and again

to adapt and extend our system of freedom and justice.

Of all people, we are the most capable of revitalization and renewal.

No, our real problem is not change

Our real problem is losing faith with our values.

Our real enemy is fear and defensiveness about change.

Our problem is loss of confidence that we can control change.

This is understandable given the pace of events in your lifetime.

But hasn't the time come to renew ourselves and our confidence.

We have everything to look forward to

every reason to feel optimistic as a people.  
We need renewed faith in our basic American values.  
We should approach life as a true adventure of opportunity and risk.  
We are made for risk. We thrive on it.  
I guess I tend to be an incurable optimist.  
Maybe it is the engineer in me.  
I believe that we can be masters of our fate.  
That we can seize control of forces around us  
--most of all ourselves--  
and bring progress to the world.  
In fact, I even think that each individual  
has the possibility to change the world--  
There is an old saying that..  
"The best way to predict the future is to invent it!"..  
That is the real challenge before you!  
To go out into that exciting world full of challenge and opportunity...  
...and to invent the future!  
Indeed, it is your challenge to make absolutely certain that  
the future will not be what it used to be!  
Looking out at all of you,  
I feel great faith and confidence in your future.  
and through you, in the future of our society.  
Congratulations...  
...God-speed...  
...and dare I say it... "Go Blue"!...

### **Platform Party**

Dr. Timothy Quinn, President, Northwestern  
Dr. James Duderstadt, President, UM  
Dr. Harlan Hatcher, President Emeritus, UM  
Dr. Preston Tanis, Past President, Northwestern  
Mr. George McManus, State Senator and NMC Fellows Award Recipient  
Dr. Helen Popovich, President, Ferris State University  
(Each year the FSU president presents extension program degrees at



this

commencement)

Northwestern Michigan College Trustees:

James Beckett, Chairman ( Former Michigan Bell Executive, UM graduate )

Shirley Okerstrom, retired business person

Dr. Robert Chase, dentist

Mr. James Spenceley, retired NMC faculty member

Robert Guyot, Insurance executive

William Cunningham, businessman