

## **Not My Fault: An open letter to our new HSU president: hope for the best and plan for the worst**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
Posted May 30, 2019

A week ago Tuesday, I had the pleasure of meeting the new HSU president Dr. Tom Jackson Jr. and his wife Mona at a reception for students, faculty and staff. The reception was unprecedented in the CSU system. It was the first time a new president visited his/her campus on the same day that their position was announced. And it wasn't as if the Jacksons were right around the corner. They had to get here from South Dakota.

I take Dr. Jackson's eagerness to visit us as a great sign. He gave a few remarks at the reception but his main purpose was to meet and listen to all of us who came. He emphasized communication and how much they are both looking forward to being a part of the campus and the North Coast community.

He will be getting plenty of advice over the next weeks and months from people above and below him in the CSU structure. I want to make sure safety is near the top of his list. Here are my two cents on what every new resident to our area, whether student, University President or anyone else should know about keeping safe and being aware of the regional hazards.

Welcome to earthquake country. I'm sure you know something about seismically active areas, coming from Seattle and having lived and worked in several California cities. There are similarities and differences between the North Coast and other seismic regions.

We have more and larger earthquakes than any other part of the contiguous 48 states. The reason is our geology. The same forces that created Humboldt County's beautiful coastline, trigger nearly half of the total seismic energy release in the US mainland. When the ground starts shaking here, do the same thing as anywhere else – Drop, Cover and Hold On. The most important thing is to resist the temptation to bolt for the door. The primary cause of injuries in California earthquakes is moving while the ground is shaking. The further you try to move, the more likely you are to get hurt.

Once the ground shaking has lessened enough that you can safely move, our recommendations might be a bit different than in Seattle or San Luis Obispo. Pay attention to your surroundings as our earthquakes sometimes bring an unpleasant bonus – tsunamis. Check out the Entering and Leaving Tsunami Zone signs on roads and highways in the area or Google 'humboldt tsunami app', to recognize safe areas, and where you should try to reach if you are at the beach. Go on foot - every step inland or higher increases your chances.

Historically, Humboldt has been a pretty good place to weather earthquakes. Wood-frame construction means that our buildings keep standing even in very strong shaking. But it's easy to become isolated. Steep, unstable terrain is vulnerable to landslides and bridges are easily compromised during shaking, creating pockets of population that are separated from one another – and also from utilities such as water and electricity, gas stations and markets. Stocking up on food and supplies is essential.

Earthquakes aren't the only things Mother Nature may throw our way. Atmospheric rivers can dump large amounts of rain in a short period of time causing flooding and triggering landslides. Wildland fires, although not as prevalent in coastal Humboldt County as other parts of California, do happen, and at least two large fires in the last century made it all the way to the coast.

As president of HSU, you set the tone for campus preparedness. In 1987, I was part of a team studying how public schools performed during the 1987 Whittier earthquake. We looked at how the schools had handled the earthquake and the immediate aftermath. The results surprised me. I expected that affluence would play an important role. But it was a large elementary school in South LA that was the most impressive and several of the "rich schools" that had no or few plans. The most important factor in how well the school did was the priority the school principal or an upper level administrator made for preparedness activities. These key individuals made sure every class and every teacher participated in reducing hazards and informed both students and parents how the school would respond to different situations.

The good news about preparedness is that almost everyone can support it and taking on one hazard, such as earthquakes, can prepare you for other hazards, including those caused by the actions of people. Building a culture of preparedness brings people together even when there is no crisis and is something that everyone can get behind.

You've got great people in Risk Management who can let you know about campus resiliency efforts, but the big challenge to make it a priority for every member of the campus community.

I really hope that there are no significant campus emergencies – either of the natural or human caused variety – during your tenure. But planning, planning, planning, is the way to insure that if something happens, the risk is minimized, we can respond efficiently and recover quickly. Please feel free to pick my brain and I will be glad to buy you a coffee.

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Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email [Kamome@humboldt.edu](mailto:Kamome@humboldt.edu)

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