

**Suffolk University Sawyer Business School Commencement**  
**Saturday, May 22, 2021**  
**Fenway Park**  
**Commencement Speaker**  
**Dr. Karen DeSalvo**  
**Google Chief Health Officer**

Thank you Dean Zeng and trustees for the invitation to come back to my alma mater and be part of this historic graduation. And I mean, wow, what a view.

As an undergrad alumna of Suffolk University I have a deep gratitude and love for the school. I have many fond memories of the people I met, those who taught me, and the overall experience of being a wide-eyed undergrad in Boston. Suffolk gave me the foundational education and the flexibility I needed to develop personally and professionally. It helped shape me for a life of giving back to the community, not only through medicine, but also through efforts to achieve equity.

We are in this historic place today for graduation because of this historic COVID-19 pandemic. I want to take a moment to acknowledge that everyone has been impacted in significant ways, some people in communities disproportionately. It's been extremely disruptive in all facets of life, education, work, and our personal lives. But one thing I have learned in life is, even the most catastrophic disruption can bring opportunity, opportunity to make lasting and meaningful change, change that can improve the quality of life for everyone.

The pandemic has impacted every sector of the economy, leading to not only disruption, but also reflection about what a return to the new normal will look like. From learning to work remotely to leveraging digital tools, so much has radically changed in the world.

Watching the innovation emerging from this crisis is a reminder to all of us that from tragedy can come opportunity, and not just new business or care models, but opportunities to reimagine. I anticipate that coming out of those pandemic, we will, and should, take advantage of what we've learned to make positive changes across many sectors.

This pandemic hasn't just made everyone an amateur epidemiologist, it's pulled back the curtain on a host of inequities in our health, social and financial systems — inequities that warrant systemic improvements.

We have also learned that as the community goes, so, too, we as individuals and organizations go. We are all interconnected.

Graduates, you are now among the elite. Only about a third of the US population attains a college degree. That puts you in a very privileged position, and I firmly believe that with privilege comes responsibility.

Yes, you should use your Suffolk education to make a better life for yourself, but I also hope that along the way, you use it to help others make a better life for themselves. It will bring a different kind of reward, one that I have found to be meaningful and lasting more than any other, especially after the challenges of the pandemic. Many of us have discovered that helping others, and allowing others to help us, can be hugely impactful and empowering.

My own life has been quite full of this kind of reward. Throughout my career, I've been blessed with opportunities to support others, partner with great minds, and scale solutions that address some of the biggest problems and inequities we face, including this past year at Google, where we worked hard to amplify the important messages of public health, to see that people get the right information at the right time to save lives.

I love being part of Google, because it's a place that believes in partnering for good. And that approach has helped us make a real difference throughout the pandemic. Millions of people around the world come to Google every day on Search, Maps, and YouTube to find out about health information. And COVID-19 massively multiplied those queries. The scale still astounds me.

On YouTube, for example, our public health messages pointing people to the World Health Organization had 500 billion impressions. So far we've invested nearly a billion dollars to help end the pandemic. We're currently very focused on COVID-19 vaccinations using tools such as ads grants and directly funding community-based organizations to help high-risk populations get vaccinated. It's been a meaningful time to be at Google doing this work.

For me, it comes down to uniting my vocation with my avocation to fight inequities, a mission that's especially urgent during moments of crisis like this, when the world shifts, and we have opportunities to build movements that drive lasting change.

Engaged citizenship aimed at giving back has been a common theme throughout my career, from caring for patients as a doctor, teaching medical students, and to public service. It's all about what we do for our community to pay forward what we have received. Suffolk

strengthened this ethos in me. It's a place where students with modest roots and remarkable potential can reach for the stars.

Hard work met with strong mentorship can make a world of difference. That's my story. I came from humble beginnings, raised by a single mother below the poverty level and literally grew up on a dirt road in Texas. Mama taught us that education was our ticket out of poverty. And she also made sure we knew that even though we were disadvantaged, there was always someone who needed help more than we did. She lived those words, and somehow found time to volunteer, even if she went without sleep, made other sacrifices, all while raising me and my two sisters alone. She was a wonderful role model, reminding me by her actions that giving back is core to our humanity.

When it came time for college, I knew that I wanted to be a doctor. But as the first person in my family to go into medicine, I had really no idea about the path to get there. All I had for reference was a medical TV show called "St. Elsewhere," which was set here in Boston. So I thought, well, I'm going to go to Boston because that's where doctors are made. I was that naïve.

But it turns out my instincts were spot on. I made my way to Boston, and in fact, it was my first plane flight ever. I arrived without a clear plan for college. But I had to pay the bills, and was fortunate to get a job with the state in the McCormack Building on Beacon Hill, right across the street from Suffolk.

One of my colleagues was a Suffolk student, and she encouraged me to enroll. I did, and that was a life altering choice. Suffolk was the perfect school for me. The University and faculty understood about working students and gave me the flexibility I needed to thrive in my studies and survive in the world. Suffolk also offered a wonderful intercultural experience. Having barely ventured outside of Texas as a kid, it was my first chance to meet people who were first generation, and people from all over the world. The experience opened my eyes to the power of diversity and how exposure to different life experiences and perspectives can help us ask better questions and find better answers to complex global problems.

It seems like as Sawyer students you've had the same experience many decades later. Though a lot of you are from around here, many of you, and your faculty, are from all over the world. And that's by design.

Dean Zeng shared with me that Sawyer values cultural awareness because of the powerful impact it can have on future leaders like you. That diversity is what differentiates Suffolk students in the classroom and Sawyer alumni in the boardroom. The increasingly global nature

of business requires that the leaders of tomorrow integrate a range of perspectives and life experiences into their decision making, and that diversity of thought enables business leaders to view their work as a vehicle for not only growing our economy but also for advancing equity in our society.

That relationship between diversity, equity, and public service is something I care deeply about. In my industry of healthcare, the evidence is unequivocal. Inequities in access, quality, and outcomes are the primary barriers to achieving meaningful improvements in well-being, prosperity, and longevity.

COVID-19 is the latest reminder of this profound truth. My heart aches for those in places like India and Latin America who are struggling under the weight of COVID-19, where gaps in vaccine access and health infrastructure are driving the virus's disproportionate impact. We have a saying in public health. When you close the gap, you raise the mean. The idea is that truly eradicating disparities has the knock on effect of raising the baseline for everyone. This is true for life expectancy, disease outcomes, and quality of life.

Indeed, we've seen this play out real time during the pandemic, because health inequity is the proverbial canary in the coal mine for overall economic well-being. So while the inequities we see now may look like they're just about health and wellness, they're warning signs or underlying risk to the global economy.

As you grow into leaders, you will have opportunities to close the gap between the haves and the have-nots and raise the mean for all. That in turn will shape the virtuous cycle of prosperity that sustains communities and businesses alike. And since healthcare is the largest single employer in the US, working towards more equitable care for all will have an outsized economic impact around the globe.

As you start down that path, keep your eyes open for unexpected ways you can make a difference. Since I left Suffolk, my own path has been full of unexpected twists, turns, and opportunities. My next stop was Tulane School of Medicine, and after finishing my training, I joined the faculty and entered on the traditional track for academic medicine.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck. The levies failed under the brunt of the storm, inundating our city with water, and changing everything for New Orleans. We lost an array of services, from 911 to our transplant units, and so we had to reconstruct the entire thing from A to Z.

Some people have asked why I became so engaged in rebuilding New Orleans after Katrina. I think it had a lot to do with growing up as an underdog. I identified with the struggle New Orleans faced. The city's infrastructure had been long ignored. People often treated as lesser citizens. That resonated with me because of my own life experiences. I needed to do all that I could to restore our city and reimagine the future for a place I called home.

As we faced this almost blank canvas, we realized that we could do more than just put everything back together again the way it was before. We had a rare opportunity to reimagine the role of our local health system not only as a lifeline for our community, but perhaps as a national model for advancing health equity.

We had been knocked to our knees but chose to stand up together and build a better future. We knew that what we wanted to build would take a huge community lift. It would require perseverance and tenacity.

Though difficult, the world strengthened my resolve. In New Orleans, the health community took that moment of crisis and turned it into a movement. They're still working to improve access and better care for all. That's when I first saw the power of taking a crisis moment such as Katrina or COVID-19 and turning it into a lasting movement for change.

I also appreciate how in moments of crisis, everyone comes together to solve big problems. The pace of innovation quickens, and people, communities, and businesses work together with a shared vision and mutual resolve.

That movement for equity became a touchstone for my life. In New Orleans, I worked to address systemic issues underpinning the devastation following Katrina. And during COVID-19 I've had a similar experience working with Google and our partners. You see, I joined the company in December of 2019, just as the pandemic was unfolding across the world. I had to lean in to our company response. But I was glad I could apply my experience from Katrina to be helpful.

I'm often asked about parallels between COVID-19 and Katrina. Both were pivotal events that shifted the world on its axis. In many ways, COVID-19 has done for and to the world what Katrina did to New Orleans: It caused suffering and death, shredded healthcare services, and disproportionately impacted some of the most vulnerable populations.

Katrina had surfaced the radical injustices of inequity in health, social and financial systems. COVID-19 has highlighted those same injustices around the world. And now, as we come out of

this pandemic, just as we did after Katrina, we all have the opportunity to build a better, more sustainable, and humane system that cares for and supports people no matter who they are or where they live.

Another thing I learned during our Katrina recovery efforts was how critical strong partnership and coalitions are, especially when you want to enact significant change. Partnership is a core value for us at Google. We have partnered with universities, healthcare systems, and public health entities to collectively shape the future of health. We're working many ways with many partners to tackle inequity. It all goes back to how we engage, with each other, as local and global citizens, and through public and private partnerships.

So let's talk about your future. The weeks and years ahead of you are exciting beyond this graduation. I firmly believe that as the next generation of leaders, you don't just need to be capable, educated, motivated, and entrepreneurial. You also need to be committed to community engagement. These are the tools that will help us dismantle systemic inequity, not just in health, but in all facets of human life.

COVID-19 has changed us all. It's changed the way we learn, live, and work. Your class is entering the workforce at an inflection point in history. And I urge you to apply your Sawyer education, to turn this moment of devastation into a movement for change, changing how businesses operate to be more innovative and impactful, changing how technology works, to be more accessible and interconnected. And most of all, changing yourself to root your work in the communities you call home, whether here at Suffolk or all around the world.

Being part of the movement for equity has changed me. It's made me a better person. It's enriched my life in many ways that I will cherish forever.

And so, graduates, enjoy your achievements and embrace your new privilege, but also recognize the responsibility that comes along with it and become engaged to make a difference. Your life will be the richer for it.

Congratulations Class of 2021. You have lived through history, and now you have a chance to make it. Thank you all.