

Suffolk University Sawyer Business School
Class of 2023 Commencement
Sunday, May 21, 2023
Leader Bank Pavilion
Commencement Speaker
Abraham Ceesay, MBA '05

Good morning. Greetings to the Sawyer administration and faculty, honored guests, and the members of our extended Suffolk community. It is wonderful to be here with you on this very special occasion. And to the assembled graduates and your families, I am beyond humbled to share this joyful day with you. Congratulations. [APPLAUSE]

[00:30] It's impossible to stand before you as we mark the end of this chapter of your Suffolk journey and not flash back to my own arrival. It was a little over 20 years ago. At that point, I'd spent most of my life in New York. I'd considered a few different career paths, settled on none, and came to Suffolk intent on following my curiosity wherever it led me. Here I joined a community animated by possibility,

[01:00] people driven by big ideas, motivated to push boundaries. As a new arrival, the buzz of Beacon Hill and the energy of early morning downtown had great resonance for me. But to be completely honest, it also intimidated me. On those sidewalks, everyone seemed to know exactly where they were going, and I didn't. In certain moments I'd let self-doubt creep in, and question my decisions to come here.

[01:30] Hindsight is a wonderful thing. As life goes on, you continue to accumulate it. You're storing more of it every minute. Hindsight tells me that my early days arriving here, the main question I had was, Do I belong? What does it mean to belong? Is it about feeling welcome, about having the transcript that stands up to the person next to you? Is it about passing the eye test

[02:00] of what we assume everyone in this community thinks is somebody who fits? Belonging is not a fact. It's a feeling. It's blood pressure, heart rate. Belonging is ease, comfort, and relatability. When you feel you belong, you don't have to perform. When you have a sense of belonging, you can be your most authentic self. Most people would say that the place where they feel most at home is, very simply,

[02:30] home. About 300 miles separate my home of Binghamton, New York, from Boston. Not a lot relatively speaking. But when I decided to come here to study for my MBA, I had the sense of a great cultural distance that I would have to traverse. I was wary of Boston. I had my doubts, my suspicions. I had an inkling that I might not belong. We don't need to labor over the reasons or get the history department involved.

[03:00] But I'll say this. As a son of an African father from the Gambia, and a Caucasian mother who grew up on a rural farm in upstate New York, I didn't figure on meeting many people who would qualify as a close peer of mine. And as a student who had been earnest but not exceptional, I certainly wondered if I'd be able to run at the same speed as my peers. Two decades ago, I made my journey here, and part of the baggage

[03:30] I brought with me was unintentional bias taking root in my mind. It told me that Boston was a city that kept outsiders at arm's length, a city that was a place, if you weren't from here, you would never truly be home here. Now, I've made my way. I became part of Boston and the surrounding community just as it has become a part of me. The same goes for Suffolk.

[04:00] I was outside, but like so many of you, I did the work to get inside. It certainly wasn't easy. A slight case of impostor syndrome hounded me. But I stayed curious, tried to work hard, had tough conversations. I allowed myself to be vulnerable, get to know people, find people who saw opportunity in the world, who felt excitement about the same things that excited me. And bit by bit, this community

[04:30] took hold of me, as I'm sure it's taken hold of you. A community is not demographics. It's not a number, for sure. Don't get caught up in percentages or thresholds. Communities are about shared values and interests, experiences that bind memories together, moments that make change, ideas we're still debating, and emotions we're still feeling after we're

[05:00] talking about the basic facts. Some of you will start new companies from the ground up. Others will breathe new air into existing enterprises. You'll take organizations through milestones and occasional bumps in the road. Wherever the road takes you, consider your role in building and sustaining communities. Think about how you can be the connective tissue that brings people together.

[05:30] When I was invited to speak to you, my first impulse was to talk to you about the value of giving back to your community, how to extend your success in business to efforts and activities that get the people in your orbit working together for the greater good. This is incredibly urgent. Think about the broader community outside of this one that you are entering. Consider the problems that remain unresolved and seem unsolvable,

[06:00] anxieties and tensions that fray our communities and set people against one another, people living under the burden of poverty, disease, and injustice. You may go and do well for yourself and be able to provide a buffer between yourself and these realities. Resist that impulse. I believe that as a society, we must reestablish that our primary role in this world and our communities

[06:30] is not about what we receive or how we progress individually, but more importantly, how these individual gains can improve the lives around us. Suffolk provided me, and I'm sure has provided you, with the practical knowledge and necessities to succeed. You've been exposed, as I was, to disruptive thinkers whose teaching about business's inner machinery will be relevant to the present world you are graduating into.

[07:00] Importantly, your Suffolk education has been layered with an appreciation for how our broader society is evolving. Many of you have come here in search of a career, to gain skills that you can apply to a job, hopefully a good one. What I hope you come away with is a sense of purpose. A sense of purpose will guide you. It will signal to followers with a like mind but in need for leadership. It will establish a North Star

[07:30] to others not yet in the fold that they can set their maps to. One of the conversations we are currently having in the business community is about the perceived conflict between doing well—as illustrated by the balance sheet—and doing good. I'm here to tell you that these are not conflicting ideas. At Suffolk, in courses in conflict and negotiation and business ethics, I learned that there is tremendous upside

[08:00] in fostering, protecting, and elevating the greater good. This attention to positively affecting the lives of others is a great motivator. It attracts talented people who want to fall asleep at night knowing that the work they do is meaningful. So what does it mean to give back? You may put a generous check in the mail to support a cause. You may roll up your sleeves for a few Saturdays at a homeless shelter

[08:30] or a food bank. These are important ways to contribute. But giving back can also mean working on the most pressing challenges facing our communities now and in the future. Climate change, equity in all forms, social justice, improvements in education and healthcare. As someone from a family that benefited greatly from community support, I decided early in my life that given the opportunity and the resources, I'd dedicate

[09:00] a portion of my life and myself to giving back in a way that would benefit others and contribute to the greater good. And I will grant you, this is not easy. It takes tremendous effort to make the right connections, to put the right people together and orient everybody in the direction of change. But it must be done. I urge you to embrace this, not as an additional demand on your time, but a responsibility that is core to

[09:30] who you are. Because no matter where you came from, or how you got to this day, you're blessed, and somebody has helped you get here. What's been instilled to you at Suffolk to help you succeed in business can be applied to help others. Use your powers to affect people, how people think, learn, change, and go forward. Where a network is required to drive action, but none exist, be the start of one. Where there is an issue

[10:00] to which little attention is paid, shine a light. Identify outsiders and transform them into insiders. I wish you all success. A common note played on occasions like this is that you are not at the end of anything, but rather at a new beginning. We know you'll accomplish great things. But know that your achievements and your ability to create a sustainable financial future for yourself will be the outputs of what

[10:30] you give and continuing to believe that you are part of something greater than yourself. Those that harness that belief are the people who define success in our society. So please, go out and build communities. Set your sights on huge challenges. Be ambitious. Do work that excites

you and inspires you, while also thinking beyond the boardroom and the budget sheet to see what you can do to excite and inspire others,

[11:00] to provide opportunities where there are few, instill hope where there is none, and spend your days giving meaning to your life and the lives of others. Thank you, and congratulations once again. [APPLAUSE]