

Sawyer Business School
Suffolk University
Commencement 2025

Honorary Degree Speaker
John Fernandez, HDCS '25

I wonder who that guy was they were talking about? Thank you very much for that kind introduction!

There's a long list of people that I want to say thank you to. And I'll get to that, I promise. And I won't forget you, all that long list.

But first I wanted to jump in on a slightly livelier note, just to sort of wake us all up. I know it's early for many of you, and some of you might have been out last night, maybe, celebrating. [CHEERS] There we go. I knew there'd be somebody. As you know, in business you get started early. But if you play hard, you also have to work hard!

So students, or former students, if you would all please rise. I'm going to count to three, and all of you are going to say: "Together, we are the future." Got that? All right, one, two, three.

STUDENTS: "Together, we are the future!"

JOHN FERNANDEZ: That was pretty good! I was going to do a second round. Now I hope the audience would give the Class of '25 a big round of applause. [APPLAUSE]

Thank you. You all can be seated. I'm going to go on for a couple of hours. [LAUGHTER]

Yesterday, I was here at this great venue to watch my daughter, Dana, receive her master's degree in special education. She was so happy. My wife and I are both so proud. And now it's your turn, along with the airplanes, to be proud and happy. So to the parents, the love, the effort, the money, and whatever else it took to make it to this day, congratulations. [APPLAUSE]

Graduates, you should also be truly proud. I know for some of you it wasn't easy. Some of you don't have much family support. Some of you had to work your way through school, and [deal with] many, many other issues that come up while you're trying to get through school. Whether you're receiving a graduate degree or an undergraduate degree, congratulations. And please, just soak it in.

I considered ending my talk here—you know, drop the mic thing. But I worried that Bob or Marisa would take away my unearned, I mean, sorry, my *earned* honorary degree.

But I thought better of it. So I'm going to start by offering a few headlines. And yes, there will a quiz at the end. So I hope you pay a little attention.

Three things: Focus. GSD. (GSD stands for get stuff done, not the bad word with the S.) And most importantly, *be kind*.

I'm going to tell you a few stories from my life and learnings to bring these three points to life, and just maybe you can use some of them along your journey, whatever that journey is.

So first, which is really third, is focus. There is so much, as Marisa talked about, there is so much uncertainty in healthcare, in the broader business community, in our economy, in the world right now. I could spend half my day, every day, trying to respond to the different eventualities, worrying about the week's challenges ahead, or today's headlines.

Instead I tell my team to focus. And I tell myself to keep focus on the top priorities. And for us in healthcare, that's taking care of patients. Don't get distracted by the things you cannot control. Basically, tune out the noise.

So you might say, "How do I do that? How do I apply this to my career?" And in short, let me tell you, if all of you came to my office, here's what would happen. You would sit down and I'd say, "I want to tell you about two sides of the paper." (Now, you can tell I'm little old school,

because I said paper. But if you want to use a computer or cell phone or whatever else, you can do that.)

The concept is that one side of the paper is your personal life. And I believe that is the most important. What do you want to do with it? It's your business, not mine. So go home and write on one side of the paper how much money I want to make. Where do I want to live? I tried this on my son, actually, when he was 22, just graduating from college. Terrifying. So I said, "Do you want to get married?" He's like, "Oh, come on, Dad." So it's a little scary when you're getting out of school to take that personal side, but those things are really, really important. So I suggest, write those down or put them on your cell phone.

Then turn it over and say, "What are the things I want to do professionally?" And then work your way towards that goal. Yes, there'll be curves in the road. But if you have that plan that you can refer to every day, every week, or once a year, I promise you it will help.

So let me get even more practical. How do you stay focused day to day? Here's my recommendation. Read *The One Minute Manager*. Great book! Written by two child psychologists, by the way. So it's short. You can listen to it. You can read it. There's a new version, there's an old version. Or I would recommend today just hit your ChatGBT. It's much shorter and quicker. The book is all about setting goals, whether it's that day, that task, and being clear about them. If you don't get them right, restate and redo them, and think about setting those goals and following those goals.

Now let's move on to number two: GSD. When I was thinking about this speech, I basically said, "The Sawyer Business School is GSD University. GSDU." So all of you already have a great advantage.

What does GSD look like at Suffolk? One of the great strengths of this institution [is its] focus on the real world and immersive learning. This is a place that believes in equipping students with practical, career-ready skills. Those are the things I'm looking for when I'm running my organization, people just like that. It encourages real-life experiences, with businesses,

governments, nonprofits. In short, you have spent the years learning, thinking, reading, studying, but also *doing*. I call this GSDing. That will serve you well.

So getting stuff done requires a plan and, I repeat, implementation. A good plan without implementation or a lot of implementation without a plan doesn't usually end up so well.

Let me give you some examples of how I put that into action at Brown University Health. (It's a little dangerous up here with the wind! I've got to keep my hand on my speech.) But what we did early in my tenure a couple of years ago was, we created a chart—think of it like a matrix. So we wanted [to move] from a surviving organization to a thriving organization, from one that was losing money to meeting our 3% margin target, which was supposed to be about \$90 million.

So, you ask, what were the results, John? We lost \$56 million the year before I got there. We made \$43 million last year. So we were on the journey to meeting that \$90 million goal. We said we want to go from a local organization to a regional and national one. One of the things we did was change our name. Last October 15 we went from a very local name—no offense for any Rhode Islander's here—from Lifespan to Brown University Health, an internationally recognized university, and we did that by working out an agreement with the university.

Lastly, GSD is about your organization, not about you. And let me give you an example of that in my career. Back about seven or eight years ago, Mass Eye & Ear, our board or trustees, and our leadership decided to be acquired by what was then Partners Healthcare. We had been a freestanding, not-for-profit healthcare organization for almost 200 years, so [this was] not a decision to take lightly. That decision meant for me personally that I was no longer going to be the CEO. The board's role would change. So we had to make those decisions about what was best for the organization, not what was best for us. And we did so, and Mass Eye & Ear is thriving today.

Now let's move on to number three—or actually my number one—which is kindness. And let me tell you a couple of stories. The first little story is what I call the harsh-but-kind interview.

I was not a brilliant student in college. I did well in the classes I liked, did not do so well in the ones that I didn't. I got my first job after graduation here in Boston because someone was kind to me—although at the same time, that person was not very nice.

Here's the story. I landed an interview with a well-connected lawyer and business person to do some networking with. And he raked me over the coals. Hmmm, he said, "Why didn't you do better in school? Why did you think you were even prepared for an economic development job? Why this? Why that?" I left there feeling like dirt, not ready for the business world and just a failure.

Then, afterwards, he did me a great kindness. He took the time, unasked, to write a letter to introduce me, connecting me to several people, and one of them was the head of a small consulting firm. And I ended up getting my first real job at that firm. To me, that is kindness.

As for my second story, there's only one person in the world that can call me Johnny, and that's my mother. But this story is "Johnny Goes to Cuba." So my [mother and father] parented by what they did, more than by what they said. This is actually amazing, given that my dad's a preacher and my mother was a teacher turned politician. So they usually had *a lot* to say.

But it's what they did for us as kids that made a lot of difference. They were public-spirited people, committed to the public good and to the inherent value of cross-cultural connections, to genuinely loving your neighbor, to caring about the entire community, not just people that looked like you or worshiped like you or spoke the language that you spoke.

I was born in Philadelphia (that's the Southern accent here) in a vibrant but lower- to middle-income, very, very urban environment. My parents did not have a lot of money. But my dad and my mom reminded me and my brothers how fortunate we were to have two loving parents, a roof over our head, and food on the table.

So when I was 11 years old, the mother of one of my really close friends, his name is Mark, called my parents and said, "Hey, there's this organization that wants to take some kids to Cuba

for a summer camp. Would John want to go with our son Mark to this international camp?” Something, by the way, if you didn’t figure this out, was actually illegal in 1976, although, of course, at 11 years old, I had no idea that it was illegal.

There were kids there from all over the world [at that camp]: The Congo, Europe, Vietnam, China, Central America, and of course, Cuba and the United States. Neither Mark nor I, despite my last name, could speak much Spanish. And most of the kids there didn’t speak the same language. However, we communicated. We learned about each other’s countries. We traded clothes. We played baseball. We swam together. And here’s a good one. We had rice and beans every day for 30 days for lunch and dinner. So I learned to enjoy rice and beans.

Although I didn’t recognize it then, these experiences were powerful and formative for me. They gave me perspective beyond myself. It prepared me for the complex world and workplace that’s made up of so many people with multiple and sometimes opposing points of view, [and taught me] to embrace it and find the value in the different talents, experiences, and opinions that people bring to the table. This was one of many ways that my parents taught kindness. It was their version of an immersive learning.

Last point on kindness—hiring for kindness. Kindness comes from a place of empathy, and offering someone your understanding and your time. It implies a deeper, more intentional practice of generosity. I try to lead with kindness. I try to hire for kindness.

Let me tell you a story. During COVID, when I was conducting interviews—it’s sort of humorous—I would say to the people on Teams or Zoom, “I hire for kindness. What does that mean to you?” And because we were on a screen, you could see their eyes start to dart back and forth, and the beads of sweat coming down. Hm. Because I could tell they were thinking, “What does this guy want? Kindness? Really?”

Of course there was no right answer. I just wanted to see how they think. I also wanted to send a message to my team and the people we were hiring that we believe deeply in kindness. A colleague of mine once said to me, “We can offer all the training in the world, but if you start

with a self-centered, irritable person, you won't get very far. Better off to hire for kindness than trying to train it into them." That stuck with me.

So the lesson here is, take time, like that lawyer did for me, take time to write that extra letter. Take time to have a cup of coffee. Take time to have a beer with someone, just to listen. Giving of your time is being kind.

So now it's the quiz. I was going to have you stand up, run around a little bit, and see if you could answer what were the three things? I'm going to make it really easy: Focus, GSD, and kindness.

Now, remember that list of people that I want to recognize for this really incredible honor? And that I said I'd get back to you? Well, I haven't forgot all of you back here. I want to start with my good friend, Chair Lamb, and the members of the Board of Trustees, some of whom I had the pleasure of serving with. To President Kelly, Provost Oches, Dean Zeng, and all the faculty and staff of the Sawyer Business School, for your stewardship of this great organization.

Most importantly, I want to thank all of you, the members of the Sawyer Business School Class of 2025, and your family, your friends, your loved ones, for listening to me this morning. Thank you for all your hard work. Thank you for your faith. Thank you for your investment in higher education, and for your willingness to take on the world's challenges. Believe it or not, the world needs you. It needs your energy. It needs your fresh perspective. It needs your drive. And most importantly, it needs your kindness. You are the future. Congratulations to all of you.

[APPLAUSE]