

Suffolk University
Sawyer Business School
Commencement 2026

Honorary Degree Speaker
Robert C. Lamb, Jr.

Good morning. It is an absolute honor to be with you today.

To the parents, spouses, partners, children, friends, and family members of the graduating class, congratulations. As your loved ones cross the stage shortly to receive their diplomas, you have much to celebrate.

Thank you to Justice Nechem for that wonderful introduction. I do appreciate the planes going over, because it gives me a chance to pause. Thank you to President Kelly, Provost Oches, Dean Zeng, all members of the Sawyer Business School faculty, the administrators and staff of Suffolk University, and the entire Board of Trustees. Year after year, you continue to improve our world by educating, inspiring, and launching exceptional graduates to face the challenges of our world head on.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, as I face my upcoming 71st birthday, I find that I have senior moments more often than I used to. Something tells me there's one other group I should mention, but for the life of me I can't remember who this is. Hopefully before I finish, I'll remember who I'm forgetting.

I understand that Commencement speakers are expected to share brilliant insights, amazing lessons to live by, and priceless advice to take to heart, and to remember forever. To be clear, this is not going to happen today. Let me explain.

As I sat down to put some thoughts together and trying to be a modern man, I called up two AIs and tasked them with the requirement to draft a Commencement address for a business school. Within ten minutes, I had two speeches. As I read through them, and I thought about them, I

immediately graded them as failures. And the more I thought about, and the questions they raised, I asked myself, why anyone would take advice from someone or something they knew nothing about.

So today I do not plan to give you advice. Instead I thought I'd share a couple of personal experiences. If you want to think about them later, great. If not, good for you, since my first conclusion is, do not take advice from somebody you don't know. There's a fine line between giving advice and making suggestions. And while I will not give you advice, here's a few things I've learned along the way.

My first suggestion is, keep your options open. And keep pushing back against silos.

Forty plus years ago, my wife, Maureen, and I were considering our future. And we decided that I would leave the Army. While I was proud of six years on active duty, had enjoyed my final assignment teaching at West Point, and thankful that I had a chance to serve our great nation, I wanted to try a new path forward. As with all smart decisions, this was a joint one. And so we embarked on a new journey.

Looking back, while I had an MBA degree, I really did not know much about how the business world operated. We had no money, no place to live, and as we were both the oldest in large families, there was no room for us to move back. We had much debt. And we were the proud parents of a beautiful baby girl, Christine. What could go wrong?

After attending a couple of job fairs, it was obvious that every interviewer was trying to lock me into a specific and narrow role, say, a salesperson, an operations manager, or a production supervisor, just to name a few. I then tried to predict where those opportunities might lead, and I could only think it would be more of the same. I decided that since I needed to learn much about the business world, I would not accept a silo job. So when I interviewed for a wide-ranging financial consultant role with a Big Eight accounting firm, I knew I had found my next opportunity.

That position was in New England, close to our families. It was supporting a Navy research lab that required me to work with large commercial defense firms. It gave me great visibility into complex global businesses. It was with a firm with an international reputation. And best of all, no one outside of the firm really knew what I did. I thought that this gave me a great opportunity to learn about business while keeping my future options open. And as you will hear, it worked out pretty well.

As you continue our searches, I think that keeping your options open while maintaining career flexibility is very helpful. I continue to be amazed at the changes I've seen in the last 50 years. And I know that change continues to accelerate. So my question to you is, how do you prepare yourselves for jobs that have not yet been created? Can you understand why I'm reluctant to give you advice?

I think that watching emerging trends closely, preparing for new challenges, and continuing to add to your skills and capabilities are essential steps to take. I must confess, I'm excited about what you face, a little jealous about your opportunities, and without a doubt, I'll bet on your future success.

So my second suggestion, don't fear risk. It can actually be your friend.

After three years as a consultant, I felt ready to try something new. I had been lucky in the firm in that I had learned much about how business operates, how senior executives thought, strategized, and evaluated. And while I had been promoted twice in three years, I was not satisfied with being a consultant.

I really missed being part of the team responsible for implementing strategies and seeing if they succeeded or failed. In short, I wanted to be the owner of the results. For that reason, I decided to bet on myself again, and Maureen agreed with this decision. So I decided to take a big leap of faith.

A close friend sitting behind me collects works of art in the form of decorative ceramic frogs. When Maureen and I had a chance to visit him and his wife, his wife pointed out a large statuette titled Leaping Frog. She mentioned that she had bought it for her husband after he often told her that he discussed the topic of career and personal risk, encouraging his colleagues to bet on themselves by taking a leap of faith. So let me tell you about my next leap of faith.

After almost a year of searching and evaluating different opportunities, I accepted a position as the controller of a data processing subsidiary for bank holding company. If you have any doubts about how long ago this was, the term data processing might give you a clue. [LAUGHTER]

As is the usual practice, I prepared a resignation letter and met with my supervisor, Larry, to discuss why I was leaving.

Larry asked the usual questions, and when I told him that I'd be responsible for all financial and accounting matters for this company, including developing strategic plans and reporting to the board of directors, he had a surprising reaction. He said, "But you don't know how to do these things. You have never done them." Now Larry's not one what I'd call a supportive boss, but he was an honest boss. And I will tell you that he was correct. But he didn't understand the value of betting on yourself or taking a leap of faith.

I immediately looked at Larry and said, "You know this, and I know this, but *they* don't know this. Give me 30 days, and I will figure it out."

In hindsight, I'm thrilled that Larry questioned me. It made me more determined to succeed. And I needed to succeed. Since our departure from the Army, we had been blessed with our second beautiful daughter, Annette, and our debts continued to mount.

I survived the first 30 days—and you knew I was going to say that, because if I didn't survive, I was not going to include this talk, this experience in my comments today. But I worked with a great team of people. They added much to my knowledge, and I brought some new contributions to our discussions. In short, we succeeded, and I was presented with numerous opportunities for

career growth and learning as the parent corporation grew. As Justice Nechtem mentioned, 18 years later, when I left the corporation, which was sold to a large competitor, it had grown to become the seventh largest bank holding company in the United States, and I was EVP and corporate chief financial officer reporting directly to the chairman of the board. Please realize, I know my success was not only due to my efforts. I had great teammates, and we worked well together to make sure that the organization succeeded.

I must confess that I look back and realize how lucky I was that I did not listen to either my fears or Larry's concerns. While I understand that failure will always be a possibility, I think that not taking risks has its own risks. In your case, I would hate to think that our world, which needs your talents and dedication desperately, might be missing out on all that you can bring to make our world better. That would be a tragedy. You have the power to make a difference.

In my experience, success in life and business requires you to take risks. Trying to stay hidden and unrecognized is as risky, if not more so, than taking a chance, or as I like to think about it, betting on yourself. Risk is unavoidable, and you have a great advantage over many others. Let me explain.

As you look at the faculty members behind me, you are fortunate to have been pushed, stress tested, taught, and inspired by an amazing and dedicated group of professionals who care deeply about you and your future. For decades, this group has educated and graduated amazingly successful Suffolk alums. Their results cannot be doubted. So, my friends, do not doubt yourselves. And when you can, take a leap of faith, get comfortable betting on yourselves.

My third suggestion is, celebrate your village today and work to strengthen it always.

Today is a high point for you and your families. You have accomplished something major, and I hope you take the time to look back and to celebrate this day and what you achieved. Well done.

I know that your village—that group of loving family members, caring and close friends, and extended members of the Suffolk community who contributed to make this day happen—

celebrates you today and will do so always. Thank them and let them bask in your accomplishments.

To succeed in life and to live it to the fullest, we all need a village. I suggest that you find someone to love and to laugh with. While I was born into a large family, I found the most important member of my village in high school, and a week ago, Maureen and I celebrated 48 years of marriage. [APPLAUSE] Yes. I know how lucky I am. Today many members of my village are here, including Maureen, our daughters, Christine and Annette, our sons-in-law, Tom and Chad, and our two oldest grandchildren, David and Elizabeth.

I hope that your lives contain many peaks, but through experience, we all know that you will encounter some valleys. It's a probability thing. Your village can make your peaks better and your valleys less troubling. I also believe that one of your responsibilities is to help other members of your village get through their valleys.

In discussing this concept with another close friend, who is also sitting behind me today, she observed, "It's important to know where to turn to in moments of triumph and tragedy." I might also ask, "Are you the person others turn to during their moments of triumph and tragedy?"

You see, villages are two-way streets. We give, and we receive. I'm fortunate to have a large village, and I've worked to build it over time. It takes care and much work, but it's a valuable effort. My relationship and involvement with my village is one of the best and most important things in my life. Suffolk University is now and forever part of my village and yours. I suggest that your village should always be a focus in your life.

My final—yes, I'm glad to be there, too—suggestion: Don't worry about how long it takes you to succeed. If the goal is worthy, keep at it until you succeed. I've been attending Suffolk commencements as the board chair since May of 2016, but my connection to Suffolk started much earlier.

As you know, I grew up in South Braintree, and neither of my hardworking parents had the chance to attend college. There never was any extra money, but my parents found a way to meet our needs. From a young age, I knew that all eight of us were expected to go to college.

As Justice Nechtem mentioned earlier, I only applied to two schools, and Suffolk was one of them. I still remember the evening in the spring of 1973, when that letter from Suffolk arrived. We had a tradition that important subjects were discussed over dinner.

I opened the letter, read aloud that I had been admitted to Suffolk with a partial scholarship, and I will never forget two things. The first is the look my parents exchanged and the small smile that came to their faces. I interpreted this to mean that they knew they had achieved the American Dream: Their oldest was going to college. They then looked at my seven siblings, and I interpreted that look as, you all *will* go to college. And I was glad I was not included in that look.

My parents achieved the American Dream by watching all seven of us who survived to adulthood graduate from college. My brother and two of my sisters graduated from Suffolk, and our son-in-law, Tom, who's here today, graduated from Suffolk Law School. While it's taken me over 50 years to fully thank Suffolk University for this priceless memory, I remain forever grateful for the joy my parents experienced.

I'd like to congratulate all parents in the audience for achieving the American Dream. I'm thinking of my parents, who would have loved to see me become a Suffolk alumnus today.

Speaking of Suffolk alumni, for ten years I've attended and spoken at numerous Suffolk University events in this country and in many others. In all of my comments or remarks, I've happily congratulated Suffolk alums and taken great care to mention my admiration while admitting, I do not have a degree from this wonderful and vital university, with which I have fallen in love.

I could not be prouder that going forward I can state that I am a Suffolk alumnus, and most importantly, that I received my degree with my classmates in the Sawyer Business School Class of 2026.

Ladies and gentlemen, I realize that I have forgotten to recognize one last group in my opening comments. And while it really was not a senior moment, may I ask that everyone that is able to do so, loudly congratulate my classmates in the Sawyer Business School Class of 2026.

[APPLAUSE]

To my classmates, wow. For the rest of my life, I'll be happy that when I received my degree from Suffolk, it was with you on your day. I'll continue to think of you often and look forward to hearing how you're continuing to succeed.

I leave you with a couple of suggestions. Push back when others try to limit you. Do not let anyone tell you that you cannot do something. Take risks on betting on yourselves, or leaps of faith. Always keep building out and growing your village, and from a very slow marathon runner, don't worry about how long it takes you to reach your goal on the finish line. If your goal is worthwhile, keep going, succeed, and then look forward to celebrating with your village.

Thank you again, best wishes, and God bless. [APPLAUSE]