

**Suffolk University Sawyer Business School Commencement
Sunday, May 19, 2019
Rockland Trust Bank Pavilion
Commencement Speaker
Gene Lee
President and CEO
Darden Restaurants, Inc.**

Dean O'Neill, President Kelly, Chairman Lamb, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, parents and families, fellow alumni, and most importantly, to the members of the class of 2019, congratulations from me.

And thank you for that kind and generous introduction.

Growing up about 20 miles west of here, this knucklehead from Framingham never imagined he would be standing before you this morning.

I would also like to thank my wife Amy for her love and support through the last 28 years. I would not be here today without you, and to my two daughters, Samantha and Jamie, for their love and support and understanding the demands of my job. It's been great to watch you both grow and become the wonderful young ladies you are today.

And, if I am being honest, this isn't the first time I have been in a situation that my younger self would find difficult to comprehend. My journey to becoming the president and CEO of Darden Restaurants was anything but traditional.

Like many of you, I grew up in a blue collar, lower middle-class family with loving parents who never prioritized their own formal education – but had very high expectations when it came to my education. I was an average student. Okay, maybe a little below average. But I never applied myself and the harder my parents pushed me, the more I ignored them.

See, for as long as I can remember, my priority was sports. All I wanted was a ball in my hand – a basketball, a football or a baseball. Like so many kids, I believed my future was on a field or a court. Reality hit me hard when I was 16. I was cut from my high school basketball team. I was crushed. The final harsh realization that I was not going to be a professional athlete.

So, where does a 16 year old boy turn when his dreams are shattered? My parents hoped this would be the jolt I needed to focus on studying and improve my grades. I had a different idea. I was going to get a job. If I wasn't going to play organized ball, I was going to make some money and buy a car. Truth be told, I really wanted to make money to buy beer. And this was the beginning of my restaurant career. I started as a busboy at York Steakhouse in Natick, Massachusetts, that winter.

And while I got off to a slow start – I almost quit or got fired multiple times in the first couple of months – I quickly climbed the ranks as my managers gave me more and more responsibility. I worked a lot in my senior year in high school. I even skipped school to work, which right now makes no sense to me, but I had finally found something I was really good at. I found I could still be part of a great team working toward a common goal.

I went off to college that fall, but it wasn't for me. So, at the end of my freshman year, I decided to take a break from school and join the management training program at York Steakhouse. I vividly remember telling my dad I was leaving school. It was the first time I knew I had truly disappointed him. But he never gave up. For the next ten years he would find every opportunity to remind me that it wasn't too late to go back to school and then get a real job.

But I had found a home in the restaurant industry. I began to have success. I quickly moved up the corporate ranks in the industry, eventually becoming vice president of operations for Pizzeria Uno. But I came to realize that if I wanted to continue to grow professionally, I needed a formal education. That's when I discovered Suffolk. In the fall of 1994 I entered the executive MBA program. I owe this university a debt of gratitude. They took a chance on an unproven student. It was a wonderful experience. I had great professors and a smart, engaged, thoughtful cohort. The professional success I have achieved would not have been possible without the foundation I received here at this great institution.

I will be forever grateful to Suffolk, and I am proud to see that students are still afforded the opportunity to receive a world-class education based on their potential success.

I have had a wonderful career and I'm an example of what you can accomplish with hard work, perseverance, and a little luck along the way. I'm an optimist and still believe the American dream is alive and well. I'm excited for you as you enter the next chapter of your life. Don't listen to those who tell you that opportunities don't exist anymore. We have been here before. This country has survived the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, and now the information revolution. As the world continues to evolve, there will be plenty of opportunity for those who are able to find their place and work hard.

I have learned a lot over my 30-plus year career. And as I reflect on what has made the difference for me, three things come to mind. One, a passion for lifelong learning; two, an ability to prioritize; and three, the critical importance of trust in building relationships. I hope that sharing my thoughts on these important topics will help guide you as you begin the next phase of your lives.

Let's start with the topic of lifelong learning. You leave Suffolk today with the foundational knowledge you need to begin your journey, and there will be countless opportunities to continue to learn and grow. But I want to focus on experiential learning. Without exception, you have grown and matured during your time at Suffolk, but it's important to acknowledge that you are relatively inexperienced in all facets of life, especially business. When I reflect on my own career, I realize just how unprepared I was for the responsibilities I had. But back then, I thought I knew everything. As I continued to learn and have different experiences, I realized how little I really did know. Today, the more I learn through my experiences, the more uncertain I am of the answers to the questions I was sure I had the answers to when I was younger.

It's my belief the key to continuous learning is curiosity. The one characteristic I see in all successful business people is that they are extremely curious. They are interested in the why not just the what. They enjoy the process of completing the task and want to understand the details. Being curious will continue to build on what you have learned at Suffolk.

Who you work with and who you choose to be your mentors will have an impact on your learning journey. You want to work with people who involve you as much as possible. Ben Franklin said, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn." It's imperative for you to find ways to be involved and, more importantly, be the person everyone wants to involve because you add value.

As people go through their career and life, I see them make what I believe to be a big mistake. Through feedback mechanisms, annual reviews, 360-degree assessments, and other tools, people hear quite a bit about their weaknesses and not enough acknowledgement of their strengths. Don't misunderstand, it is important to acknowledge that we are not perfect, but we should learn how to minimize our weaknesses and focus time and attention on enhancing our strengths. In my 30-plus years of leading people, I have never seen anyone turn a true weakness into a strength.

Learning to deal with setbacks is an important part of life. I've dealt with multiple setbacks in my career, especially early on. There were many times I thought I should have been promoted and someone else got the opportunity. Dealing with disappointment and striving to improve my performance, I was better prepared the next time an opportunity presented itself. Now, looking back, I can clearly see why those decisions were made. Everyone will face setbacks in their career and for that matter life. How you learn to handle those situations will be defining moments for you.

I encourage you to continue to build on the strong foundation you have poured at Suffolk. Be curious, learn to love what you are good at, and embrace the inevitable challenges you will face along the way.

In my role today, the question I'm asked the most is how can I maintain balance and have the quality of life I want while having a successful career. My answer is simple, challenging, and disappointing all at the same time. The only way to achieve your

personal and professional goals is to effectively prioritize all aspects of your life. Let's unpack what it means to prioritize.

First, let's look at the definition of priority – a thing that is regarded as more important than another. So by definition, every aspect of your life can be ranked by level of importance to you. My suggestion is to break your life into three components: self-care, care of others, and career. Then rank what is most important to you. Throughout your life your priorities will change and they should change. But right now, you have to rank these areas and understand the consequences of those rankings. There is no personal or professional success without sacrifice.

However, I do believe you can find balance. The key is the effective prioritization within each component. Clearly defining for yourself what's most important to you inside these areas and managing your time effectively will lead to a feeling of balance. But, it's very important that you realize that everything can't be a priority, and you have to make difficult decisions in the prioritization process.

I learned how important this is when I began the Executive MBA program at Suffolk. I was learning a new job, I was recently married, and I was about to become a dad for the first time. It was the worst possible time for me to take on another priority. But I knew this opportunity at Suffolk was critical to my future and my family's future, so I had to figure it out. I sacrificed self-care and care of others to focus on furthering my education and ultimately my career. It was never easy, but it was the right prioritization for me at that moment in my life. It also forced me to excel at time management. Distinguishing between the important and the urgent is critical for long-term personal and professional success.

And lastly, I want to share my thoughts on trust. Building relationships is extremely important to achieving professional success and relationships need to be built on trust. Throughout your career you will decide who to trust – leaders, peers, and employees. And more importantly, through your behaviors you have to earn the trust from that same group of people.

I want to quickly share how I think about this very important word – trust. It's simple to me. Trust equals judgment plus ethics. Trust equals judgment plus ethics. For me to trust someone in my organization I need to observe sound decision making over time and see them consistently and unequivocally live our company's values.

Part of assessing whether or not someone has good judgment, is observing with whom they choose to surround themselves. I advise young leaders in my organization to assemble a personal board of directors made up of family, friends, colleagues, and mentors to act as informal advisers. And I urge all of you to do the same. Who will you choose? Who will influence you? Do these individuals reflect your personal values? Do they understand and align with your goals and dreams? Will they be truth-tellers? Will they be cheerleaders? Will they make you better?

As you navigate your journey through life, just as your priorities will change, so will your personal board of directors. Choose wisely and don't be afraid to make changes when necessary.

I may still be that knucklehead from Framingham, but even I know that brevity in this moment is appreciated. Let me leave you with one last thought.

There are three types of people in the world. Those who are wondering what's going on, those who are watching what's going on, and those who are making things happen

I hope you, the Class of 2019, will be one of those.

Now, you may not remember a word I said today, but hopefully you will remember me as the guy who bought you dinner. For all the graduates, under your chair you will find a \$100 gift card to any Darden restaurant. And for those who care, the Capital Grille is on there. The logo's not there. Fellow alumni, I wish you much success. Enjoy your journey, take care.