

Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences Commencement

Sunday, May 18, 2014

Blue Hills Bank Pavilion, Boston

Commencement Speaker

Kate Walsh

Boston Medical Center President & CEO

Good afternoon, President McCarthy, members of the board of trustees, faculty members, and other distinguished guests, and a very special welcome to the families and friends and members of the class of 2014. Congratulations on all your accomplishments. I am very honored to be your graduation speaker.

I'm here because one of the Suffolk trustees, Roger Berkowitz of Legal Seafoods fame, called me to ask me to serve as your commencement speaker, and I was very flattered, but a little bit daunted. But Roger said one thing that really caught my attention. He said, Kate, Suffolk is a great place. We call it the university for the unentitled. And I thought, OK, that could work. I run a hospital for the unentitled. So I said yes, and here I am. And I started thinking about that word, entitled. In my world, entitlements are programs like Medicare and Medicaid that help patients access health care. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, transportation vouchers, school lunch programs, an entire array of entitlement programs for families who are challenged by any number of social and medical issues. Entitlement programs for people who are, by definition, unentitled. As you've heard, I'm the CEO of Boston Medical Center, and most of the patients we serve benefit in some way from entitlement programs. And like Suffolk University, we are a very important civic institution within Boston, a city I know you've grown to love during your time at this great university.

I'll come back to tell you a little bit more about our hospital in a moment, but first let me describe what it's like to write a graduation speech for people you really don't know, although you seem like a very friendly bunch. Writing a speech like this is challenging even if you do what I do, which, I give a lot of speeches, but I sincerely doubt you guys want to hear about the implications of the Affordable Care Act for safety net hospitals. That's a speech I can and, in

fact, have given in my sleep. But I'm also equally certain you don't want to hear the classic graduation speech. You might not know this, but there are tons of websites out there about how to write a commencement address, which encourage the writers to avoid clichés, even as they list topics like pay it forward, dream big, or my favorite, follow your passion, which can sometimes be mistaken for stalking your ex. These websites tell you to exhort the graduates to embrace change or give it a hug every so often, or reach for the stars, so when you miss, you land on the moon, or maybe it's the other way around. At any rate, there are many uplifting and inspiring graduation speeches out there. This is not one of them. So, please Google one of them if you're feeling the need for encouragement.

I'm more of a practical sort, and I'm a mom, so I'm going to talk about how to get and keep a job, and how to try to balance work and family, which I can only do because my family isn't here to heckle me about this. And I'm going to come back to that question of entitlement and your role in making sure that you do everything you can to live in a world where you and the rest of our species are entitled to basic human rights, basic human dignity, and basic human kindness.

So, soon you will have graduated. Tonight you'll celebrate a bit with your family, and then you'll head out with your friends and celebrate a bit more, if I don't miss my guess. Tomorrow you will wake up someplace. I'm not going to ask where, with a gnawing sense that something's changed. Something's commenced or begun. You are a college graduate. Many of you have great jobs, fellowships, travel plans, or plans to marry for money. You can check your texts now. This part of my speech is not for you. But for the rest of you, the people who have to get and keep or a job or find a job, keep the job and hopefully, love that job, listen up, this is for you. The first thing to remember is you are prepared. You have graduated from a university with over 80 different majors, minors, concentrations in multidisciplinary programs. You have graduated from a university with a superb local reputation and a national and international reach. The class of 2014, over 1,000 strong, comes from 30 states and 55 countries. Each of you has a great toolkit, writing skills, presentation skills, analytic skills, and great friends. But more important, I hope you still have a great imagination. How many of you fantasized about transferring to Hogwarts when you were in middle school? I know you have great ideas, and I think imagination

and ideas are what make work fun and interesting. They engage us in our work life and in our profession.

So let me tell you a little bit about some of the great ideas our team members at Boston Medical Center, people just like you, have developed to get people healthy and to keep them well. In a city blessed with great hospitals, Boston Medical Center stands out. We are Boston's hospital or medical center in many ways. Sixty-seven percent of our patients come from Suffolk County. Fifty percent of our patients are low income, and we conduct over 200,000 translator-assisted medical encounters each year. We are the region's leading trauma center. We have the busiest emergency department. We're the primary teaching affiliate for the BU School of Medicine. We train hundreds of interns and residents each year. We have great radiation therapists, some from the Suffolk program, physical therapists, nurses, pharmacists, and even a few business people. We also own and operate an insurance company which provides peace of mind and access to health care for over 350,000 low-income customers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. We are big and very busy place.

But we are a much better place because of the imagination and ideas of our staff. And I'll give you two examples. First, I'll tell you about a program developed by the nurses, child life specialists, and social workers in our pediatric emergency room. They realized the children were often sent urgently into foster care from our ED with only the clothes or pajamas on their back. They couldn't go back home for a change of clothes, or for a beloved stuffed animal. So these great people imagined a better way, and they came up with a great idea. They put together age- and gender-appropriate backpacks for kids with pajamas, clothes, a stuffed animal, a toy or a video game. So when their patients go into foster care, they go with something to call their own. We call this program, Pieces of Home.

Another great idea I'll briefly tell you about is our therapeutic food pantry and demonstration kitchen. Over 10 years ago, our pediatricians noticed that many families were reporting hunger or food insecurity when they came to the emergency room or to their pediatric practices. Our doctors and nurses actually started stocking canned goods and crackers in their cabinets. Elaine Ullian, my predecessor, imagined that a hospital could create a food pantry to help address this

problem. And she had the idea that a hospital could also nourish patients. And she devoted her considerable persuasion skills to convincing philanthropic leaders around Boston, and she partnered with Catherine D'Amato from the Greater Boston Food Bank, who was last year's honoree at Suffolk's commencement, by the way. They created and sustained the only hospital-based food pantry and demonstration kitchen in our country. The pantry is therapeutic. You get a prescription for food. The prescription goes into your medical record, and so, the people in the food pantry know if you have diabetes or food allergies, if you need extra protein because you're getting cancer treatments. We think this reduces the stigma of the need to seek food assistance because we connect food, we connect health and nutrition and because of our partnership with the Greater Boston Food Bank, we can offer our patients choice.

We also have a demonstration kitchen so our patients learn how to cook healthy food. Imagination and a great idea created a national model. It started out serving 500 families a month, and now serves over 7,000 patients each month. In BMC's therapeutic food pantry and demonstration kitchen, we see a great idea, a great example of innovation propelled forward by many disciplines. We saw pediatricians, nutritionists, a professional chef, fundraising professionals and even a hospital executive come together to make a great idea a reality.

And it is this practical and multidisciplinary and entrepreneurial spirit that I think characterizes your Suffolk experience as evidenced by the many interesting academic offerings. Forensic science anyone? And any number of multidisciplinary programs. And your university is making a major investment in science and education in their new building on Somerset Street. Another great idea. And I would add that it no doubt takes great imagination for Suffolk to even think about how to build another building in a very congested area. And undoubtedly, many great scientific discoveries will emanate from there.

But imagine for a moment about the leverage and investment of this kind creates. The kinds of jobs it can create, the kinds of careers it can foster. There are many disciplines you'd expect to be involved. Folks who need lab sciences to graduate, like majors in radiation therapy or biology. But let's think for a moment about all the other disciplines and interests that this building will feed. Researchers in this building could have a breakthrough discovery. These discoveries could

become medicines. Those medicines have to be priced, all you financing and accounting majors. Packaged, graphic design. Sold, marketing and communication majors. Distributed, you get my point. And delivered ultimately to patients.

And as a society, we have to think about the cost and benefits of discovery. We're seeing this every day in my hospital. Lifesaving therapies, some developed right here in Boston. But they are very expensive. Very expensive. Like \$1,000-a-pill expensive. And you need to take these pills every day for a very long time. So, in addition to the careers, or dare I say, jobs, that can be created by scientific discovery, there are other career opportunities you might ... not think of. We need people who can devote their lives and their careers to helping us understand what medical interventions we're entitled to. There's that word again. And who pays for them. We need economists and we need ethicists. We need government majors and journalists to help our society effectively understand innovation and channel discovery to where we need it most. So if you don't have a job yet, don't despair. As I've said, you are very well prepared, and there are so many interesting and exciting careers out there.

I've talked today about some of the jobs that surround health care, and I haven't even mentioned direct patient care. You will follow many other Suffolk alums into any number of interesting careers. If I knew something about it, I could have spoken about the number of jobs generated by the sustainable energy industry, or by the flash mob shopping site, Rue La La, or by Google, or by government. In each of these industries, you would find Suffolk grads who have joined dedicated teams of people working with imagination and fervor to create excellence. I hope that each of you has the opportunity to find a job where your imagination is appreciated and your ideas are welcome. Because if that happens, you'll love your job, and let's face it, we all spend a lot of time at our jobs.

In truth, we all spend too much time at our jobs. And so, my second thought and hope for you is that you are blessed with the right life partner. I hope you have the wonderful challenge of balancing your life and your work. Both are really important. Life is hard. Balancing work and family is hard. You know, we give lots of advice to young graduates about how to structure your careers, how to find a mentor, how to advance. And I don't think we devote enough time or even

brain space into how to structure our lives. Who you marry or live with or commune with, or whatever you do, matters. We are social creatures, and our social connections matter. So pay attention to the people you hang out with. Find ways to create connections. And I don't mean Throwback Thursdays on Instagram. Or BuzzFeed surveys where you find out which Scandal character you are most like. Although I have to confess, I took that survey and I was Jake. I really don't know what that says about me.

So, please be the person who arranges birthday dinners or pickup basketball games. Show up, help clean up, look up and smile. As humans, we crave, and dare I say, we are entitled to a human connection. Be deliberate about this. Seek out good friends. Find the right partner and build your life. You know, I'm 58 years old and I don't know much, but I know one thing. Your life is not on your phone screen. So please stop looking there. You can glance at your phone every so often. I was about to tell you you could glance at your phone screen just to see if she texted back. That's OK. But please look up, look around, appreciate the world around you, and take the time to build your life, even as you go out to build your career. Because we are entitled as people to a few unalienable rights as the framers of the Declaration of Independence put it. We are entitled to live with whomever and wherever we choose. We are entitled to access to high-quality education, health care, public transportation, and public safety. Shout out to the criminal justice grads out there. My dad was a policeman. I had to do that. If you build your career with wisdom and hard work and you build your life with care and commitment, you won't have a perfect life. But you will live the life you're entitled to.

So, to the graduates of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University, the university of the unentitled, please go out there and make your families and all of us proud, as you help build the world you are entitled to. Congratulations.