

Roger Sublett, President, Union Institute & University

A Concerned and Caring Civic Leader

Sean Joseph Creighton

This profile is part of the Kettering Foundation's project on "[College Presidents on Higher Education and Its Civic Purposes](#)." The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, "What does it take to make democracy work as it should?" The author, Sean Joseph Creighton, Ph.D., is the president of the [Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education](#) (SOCHE) and the principal investigator for a learning agreement between Kettering and SOCHE.

In 2015, the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE) entered into a learning agreement with the Kettering Foundation to contribute research to the foundation's initiative concerning the role of college and university presidents in advancing the public purpose and civic mission of higher education. Over the last year and a half, SOCHE held discussions with presidents at its member institutions, as well as conducted survey research to better understand their perspectives on community engagement and leadership. In addition, our research included interviews with select presidents to deepen our understanding on the subject, as well as take a personal look at presidential leadership.

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting down for a one-on-one interview with Dr. Roger Sublett, president of Union Institute & University, at the university's main campus in Cincinnati, Ohio. In advance, I prepared a series of questions that focused on understanding Dr. Sublett's personal and professional background, people who influenced him as a university leader, and his views on the public purpose of higher education. More specifically, we talked in depth about the role of the university president in advancing civic engagement. The set questions guided the conversation, and gave insight into Dr. Sublett's leadership path and how rural America shaped his concern and care for others.

Dr. Sublett was named Union Institute & University's fifth president in April 2003. Union Institute & University, now in its 53rd year, specializes in providing higher education degrees for adults nationwide, offering bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs. Considered a pioneer in adult higher education, Union Institute perfected the hybrid model of education, a blend of traditional classroom instruction and online learning. As well, the university has maintained a focus on interdisciplinary studies and student-centered education with a social justice mission. While the main campus is in Cincinnati, Union Institute has additional locations in California, Florida, and Vermont, and has graduated more than 15,500 students.

The campus, like its president, is imbued with charm and hospitality. During my visit, several members of Roger's team members went out of their way to say "Hi" and engage in casual conversations, taking a brief break from preparing for an upcoming accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission. You could tell that Roger's leadership style, with a focus and deep understanding that "leadership is relational," permeated the halls. Further, our meeting, originally set for an hour-and-a-half, turned into nearly three hours of rich discussion. It

concluded with Roger giving me a personal tour of the historic main building. Roger filled the tour, as you can imagine, with animated stories of the people, places, and events whose pictures blanketed the university walls.

Roger's entry into higher education began more than 55 years prior to our conversation. Like many students before him, college had a profound impact on Roger. It "opened (him) up to a global world" and played a huge role in his life, as is demonstrated by the fact that it became his vocation. Roger majored in history at the University of Arkansas, earning undergraduate and graduate degrees, and completed a Ph.D. in American History at Tulane University. He started his teaching career at Oakland City University in southern Indiana, and then accepted a teaching position at the University of Evansville in Indiana. That position led to several promotions over the years at the University of Evansville, including dean in the College of Alternative Programs, dean in the College of Graduate and Continuing Education, associate vice president for Academic Affairs, and executive vice president for the Association of Continuing Higher Education. Roger reflects on the experience fondly, a journey along which he matured into a successful academic and administrative leader in higher education.

After immersing himself in academia for more than 15 years at the University of Evansville, Roger left the university to take a position at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, where he eventually became the director of the Kellogg National Fellowship/Leadership Program. As the director, he dedicated himself to an effort to create a "common vision of a world in which each person has a sense of worth; accepts responsibility for self, family, community, and societal well-being; and has the capacity to be productive, and to help create nurturing families, responsive institutions, and healthy communities." Both the University of Evansville and the Kellogg Foundation contributed significantly to Roger's professional growth, and certainly influenced and helped fine-tune his views on leadership. They also prepared him to lead Union Institute through turbulent times in its history and make the necessary organizational changes to bring the university to a place of stability again, all while remaining steadfast in its commitment to a social justice mission, and educating and graduating students dedicated to "transforming lives and communities." All this said, in talking to Roger, I learned that the foundational qualities that shaped his character as a leader with an inherent commitment to civic responsibility began much earlier in life.

Born and raised in rural Arkansas on a family farm, Roger was one of four children and grew up the son of a coal miner and a typesetter. Like many in rural Arkansas, his parents, Marshall Harley Sublett and Elise Irene Sublett, never attended college and he was not raised in a family of academics or in a college-going town. A first-generation college student, Roger recalls leaving the farm to attend the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville and feeling like "a fish out of water." He speaks of his days on the farm as idyllic, raised in a supportive environment, and one where his mom had her "heart set on education" for her kids. Plus, as Roger shared, "Cleaning the chicken pits on a steamy Arkansas summer day gives a person perspective on hard work," and is a motivational experience to go to college. (We both chuckled at this as I, too, had a similar "hard labor" story, but different setting, that motivated me to go to college).

Undoubtedly, Roger learned from his mom, Elise, the importance of helping others. Elise set a foundation for his civic responsibility. Roger described his mom as a very important and

influential role model. Growing up, he watched her actively involved in church work, dedicating her time, energy, and passion. She also helped locally with community food banks. Not only did Roger witness firsthand his mom's passion for helping people, he saw how her community engagement activity created a network of relationships. In reflection, Roger recognized those days of watching and learning from his mom influenced his own personal development, views about leadership, and belief that good leaders are "relationship builders."

Roger's interest in community work persisted and expanded at the University of Arkansas. The history faculty were very active in the community, and he had the opportunity to participate in various forms of outreach and charity. These service experiences expanded his understanding of the positive impact of university community engagement and strengthened his on the responsibility of higher education providing public good. Further, as a director at the Kellogg Foundation, Roger participated firsthand in community engagement projects around the world. Coupled with his upbringing and developing views on community work, his travels continued to influence and shape his perspective on leadership and community engagement. He recalls an experience during a Kellogg Foundation visit to Mississippi in which a skeptical, elderly gentleman from the local community told him, "If you are coming here to listen to our needs, we welcome you with open arms." Can you guess what the gentleman's follow-up sentence would have been if Roger and the Kellogg Foundation had not planned to listen to the community?

During that trip, Roger became convinced that citizens of a community truly know best what needs to be done to address their own community's issues. "You must prioritize in community work by listening to the unheard voices," Roger commented. Fortunately, that specific project resulted in the Kellogg Foundation funding the creation of listening teams in that community and other communities as the foundation sought to strengthen community development. This "listening" approach reinforced his already deep-seeded belief in the importance of building relationships through genuine engagement. Further, at Kellogg he connected "building relationships" with "people solving their own community problems."

When reflecting on the public purpose of higher education, Roger, without hesitation, said he believes the "purpose of higher education is to produce better citizens." He added, "Unfortunately, much of higher education has lost this higher sense of purpose, and does not seem to be driven by the goal of developing leaders who continue to serve others." As a result, the decline in widespread community engagement is contributing to a loss of confidence and trust between higher education and the public. I asked, "How do you rebuild the trust?" In answering the question, Roger shared a story about the new chancellor at the University of Arkansas, Dr. Joseph Steinmetz. From the start, Dr. Steinmetz set out to rebuild trust with the people of Arkansas. One of the first things the chancellor did was take a bus tour around the state, holding meetings in many different communities where he asked the same question: "What can the University of Arkansas do for you and the people of your community?"

Roger shared the story to illustrate the point that the university must remain cognizant that "it is a resource for the public and the public's good." He added, "A university must be in touch with its public, listening to the needs of local citizens and communities. This level of engagement helps a university build and sustain trust with its public." When he spoke about the *university*, it became clear that he meant a university's *leadership* must demonstrate "listening" to citizens.

University leadership must learn how to show “genuine concern and care for the public.” Presidents must hold in trust higher education’s purpose of creating “a healthy and just society.”

Additionally, Roger believed, “Universities cannot survive isolated from their communities in which they reside.” This reinforced the point that the university and its communities are in a reciprocal relationship. Ideally, it is a healthy and mutually beneficial relationship, which is the result of a university living its civic mission and its leadership making a demonstrated commitment to community engagement. Union Institute & University is driven by its mission to “engage, enlighten, and empower adult learners to pursue professional goals and a lifetime of learning, service, and social responsibility” which makes it a very good fit for Roger to call home. In talking about engagement strategies that are best for building the bridge between a campus and its communities, Roger stressed several common practices in higher education, including service learning, co-curricular programs, and community-based research. Roger acknowledged that Union Institute, like many other universities, can always increase its civic work and he would challenge himself and Union Institute to deepen its “symbiotic relationship” with its communities. He also acknowledged the global impact Union Institute graduates were making as change-agents for social justice, which was an important point to showcase the ripple effect of a university with a resilient civic mission. In fact, among its 15,500 alumni are 26 current or former college/university presidents, thousands of faculty and administrators, leaders of non-profit organizations, educators at all levels, counselors and psychologists, a longtime U.S. congressman, and the first female prime minister of Jamaica.

In speaking about future university presidents and their leadership role in advancing community engagement, Roger paused and quietly reflected before answering. Earlier in our conversation, we both noted that the role of the president has changed over the years as the internal and external challenges increased and university priorities shifted. We both acknowledged an “idyllic” view of the past when a university president served as a thought leader on issues affecting society. After his pause, Roger said, “Today’s and tomorrow’s presidents need to look deep inside and understand what is important to them, see the best of the human spirit, and free the human spirit to make a difference for others.” His insight identified the challenge of being a president. There has been a loss of the human part of being a president over the decades, and the measurements for a president’s success had moved away from supporting the civic mission of a university. “Presidents need to be in touch with their human side and, by doing so, help students develop the skills to become active contributors to society,” he believed. Referencing author and educator Parker Palmer, Roger challenged future presidents to reflect on the question: “Is the life you’re leading the life that wants to be led in you?”

Roger added that presidents needed to take responsibility for rebuilding the trust with the American public writ large. “We are the wealthiest nation in the world and our citizens deserve a great education that prepares them to make our communities better.” Presidents need to lead by example, increase their public presence civic role, and re-commit to a civic agenda in higher education. At Union Institute, everything the university does focuses on advancing social justice and creating responsible community connectedness. This focus is the life worth leading.

Toward the end of our interview, I asked Roger to expand on the story he alluded to earlier about his dad, Marshall, and his first leadership experience or lesson. Roger smiled and shared:

As a nine-year old growing up on a farm in western Arkansas, we regularly baled hay each summer for our livestock. On a particularly hot, muggy afternoon, my father, after work, thought it was going to rain, and he arranged for some teenage boys to help him get the hay bales off the field and into the barn prior to the rainstorm. I asked my father if I could go with him to the hay field, and he said *yes*. Unfortunately, the young men did not show up, and it was only my Dad and me and our truck there in the field. My Dad asked me, “Son, do you know how to drive the truck?” At nine, I had never driven any of our farm equipment except a riding lawnmower. I asked, “What do I need to do?” He showed me how to shift gears, apply the brakes, and gently depress the gas pedal. Then, he said, “Just don’t run over the bales.” We cleared the field of the hay prior to the storm, and I was able to avoid the bales!

After telling the story, Roger added, “As leaders, I think we always have to remember not to run over the bales as we make decisions both personally and professionally. That lesson at age nine has stayed with me throughout my adult life and my professional career.”

Even during these turbulent times in higher education, Roger Sublett continues to lead Union Institute & University with a focus on its social justice mission, as well as remaining an active and engaged participant in his local community and beyond. It was a pleasure speaking with him about community engagement, higher education, leadership, and life.