

Felice Nudelman, Antioch University
Be True to Yourself

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.

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 Felice Nudelman, former chancellor and current chief global officer at Antioch University. We found ourselves conversing over a delicious lunch at one of the new eateries in the charming village of Yellow Springs, home to Antioch University. In advance, I prepared a series of questions that focused on understanding Felice's personal and professional background, people who influenced her, and her views on the public purpose of higher education. The conversation gave insight into Felice's leadership path and how her childhood and college experiences influenced her professional focus and commitment to social and equal justice. Further, we talked in depth about the role of university leadership in advancing civic engagement.

Felice grew up in New Jersey, just across the river from New York city. Her dad, Irwin Nudelman, the republican in the household, worked in the garment industry as a salesman before

opening a transmission shop in the area, while her mom, Judith Nudelman, the democratic in the house, stayed at home to take care of the family. Only one of Felice's parents attended college. For quite some time, Felice was undecided about whether she would go to college. However, she recalls cultivating a strong interest in the arts at a young age. She loved ballet, literature, music, and museums, and became a self-described voracious reader, devoting time to books and then independent films. Further, she was introduced to the importance of volunteerism watching her mom's service on the board of trustees for the local library. Felice reflects fondly on her mom's community engagement, and her grandfather's sense of social justice as a strong influence on her own civic development.

Felice's decision to go to Allegheny College, a small liberal arts college in northwestern Pennsylvania, opened a world of learning that blended her passion for the arts with civic engagement and social justice in new and powerful ways. Having established influential connections with several professors, she found herself in an academic environment where she could blend literature, fine art, and philosophy, and develop a fervent interest in politics. At Allegheny, Felice had the opportunity to join several projects, including one that worked with women to help build the first shelter for abused women in the Allegheny region. In addition to providing direct services to the women and working with local police, the position challenged her to think about society's larger role in addressing community issues. Also, it moved her to think about the collision of art and policy in supporting driving civic outcomes; how you can create art that invests in ideas and opinions that inspire people and, ultimately, political action that leads positive societal change. This interest would remain central to Felice's thinking, education, and professional work in graduate school at the Pratt Institute; then Bloomfield College, an equality and access college, where she would remain for 17 years; then Pace University as Executive Director of the School of Education; and, ultimately, The New York Times, where she became the Executive Director of Education. Felice's civic work became focused on "education as social justice."

Felice found a perfect opportunity at The New York Times to link the interest of private business and public good without diluting or corrupting either. A simple motto drove the linkage— "do well by doing good." In other words, private sector companies could profit from their commitment to

improving society. At The New York Times, she translated this linkage into substantial growth for The New York Times education division. She engaged with campuses around increasing their national and global awareness of political issues, societal challenges, and arts and culture through the delivery of relevant content and resources. The New York Times became a valuable classroom resource unlike ever before in its history. Her efforts extended beyond college to K-12 through strategic partnerships, including a partnership with the state of Texas that involved the entire system for more than 1 million students and over 100,000 teachers. These efforts aligned with her deep belief that “education is social justice” as continued to develop new partnerships, including one with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).

Under Felice’s leadership, The New York Times worked with students and presidents at AASCU members to develop the American Democracy Project (ADP). Launched in 2003, today ADP remains as strong as ever and has become a national network of more than 250 public colleges and universities, working to prepare future generations of engaged citizens. At its heart, ADP is an education initiative aimed and providing students with the knowledge and skills to become productive members of their communities, to protect and lead America’s democracy, and address social injustices. Its current core programs focus on economic inequality, political engagement, and stewardship of public lands. ADP is exemplary of combining education and civic engagement, and notably an initiative that reflects Felice’s values, passion, and tireless commitment to fight injustice.

The launch of ADP was informed by Robert Putnam’s watershed book *Bowling Alone*, as well as Tom Ehrlich’s *Educating Citizens*. ADP was led by George Mehaffy, a vice president at AASCU, and focused on the civic value of the member institutions, as “Stewards of Place,” a concept that inextricably links public education with civic engagement for the betterment of society. The work was a unique opportunity for Nudelman to be engaged at a national level with educators who truly valued the core purpose shared by both The New York Times and education institutions to protect and continually renew our democracy.

After reflecting on the glory days that led to the creation of ADP, Felice and I turned our conversation to the current challenges facing higher education. In short, Felice acknowledged

that higher education has become “suspect” in the eyes of the public, having lost the trust and the public’s high regard it held for centuries. Further, as a result of the 2008 recession, policymakers created intense pressure for higher education to develop the workforce, overshadowing higher education’s civic purpose. The media fueled an increasing public distrust by questioning the value of higher education and whether a college degree provided a good return on investment. Felice recognizes that higher education has failed to come up with a strong counter argument to amplify its public purpose and public good. This has posed a bigger challenge to higher education presidents, who already are faced with insurmountable challenges pertaining to enrollment, fundraising, finance, student success, Title IX, academic relevancy, and the list goes on and on. In many cases higher education institutions struggle to showcase how they are a steward of place and an integral part of a community’s fabric, contributing to the welfare of our society. The issue is more about a failure to “tell the story” with evidence rather than a story of a decline in community engagement. By its sheer existence, higher education provides good to the public by anchoring itself in a community and, consequently, contributing to the educational and economic prosperity of a region. In addition, higher education is a center of arts and culture for the communities it serves. Whether private or public, educational institutions are driven by a higher purpose to create an educated and engaged public. Felice believed future presidents will need to be committed to developing cross-sector partnerships that focus on tackling local community problems; such commitments will help strengthen community goodwill.

In closing, when asked about giving advice for future higher education leaders, Felice shared a thought that reflected her authentic leadership. From those early days in New Jersey, for Felice it has always been about finding your fit where your passion and purpose meet. This nexus is where you can “be true to yourself.” She recognizes that college presidents are expected to be super heroes nowadays, but that no one person can be a super hero. Higher education’s future will be dependent upon leadership that is thoughtful and collaborative, and driven by a vision of leading for the public good.