

Lee Pelton

Lee Pelton, who was recognized in 2024 by *Non-Profit Times* on its list of America's 50 most powerful and influential non-profit leaders, is the CEO & President of The Boston Foundation, one of the nation's leading philanthropic organizations with \$2.2 billion in assets. He joined the Foundation in June 2021, after serving as President of Emerson College (2011-2021) and Willamette University (1998-2011).

Pelton has positioned The Boston Foundation, one of the nation's first and most influential community foundations, as an agent for social change by centering equity in its programs, grantmaking and civic leadership. Under his leadership, the Foundation's defining ambition is to achieve equity, which first involves acknowledging and then seeking to eliminate the structural and underlying causes of outcome disparities for historically marginalized communities.

A signature Boston Foundation program is its Racial Wealth Gap Partnership, established in late 2022, as part of the Boston Foundation's commitment to close wealth gaps in Greater Boston and the region by expanding homeownership in underserved and highly marginalized communities. The Partnership is a broad-based group of more than 40 members representing several sectors, including banking and finance, housing, issue advocacy, government, healthcare, life sciences and education.

As a college president for 23 years, he led with a core belief that higher education must serve to deepen students' appreciation of humanities. He believes that the nation still looks to colleges and universities to solve its most pressing problems and, as such, college and university presidents have an

obligation, in addition to the broad mission-driven duties on their campuses, to engage in the larger society. To Pelton, nurturing the humanistic spirit also goes hand in hand with confronting and trying to solve the urgent moral, economic and social problems of the moment.

Pelton has combined authentic leadership, civic engagement and a deep commitment to social justice with his skill and vision for growing institutional capacity and effectiveness. The result has been a legacy of stronger, more diverse institutions that have expanded opportunities for students. Along the way, Pelton often has been recognized as a civic and education leader, both regionally and nationally.

While a college president, Pelton emerged as a powerful national voice on social issues and the value of liberal arts education. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook mass shooting, he gathered over 250 college and university presidents to sign a letter asking President Obama to assist in establishing common-sense gun legislation. He has been active nationally and written widely in support of affirmative action, beginning with the 2003 Michigan University and Law School Supreme Court cases, as well as publicly disputing the 2023 Supreme Court decision that race-conscious admission programs at two elite universities – the public University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the private Harvard University – were unconstitutional and, therefore, unlawful. Pelton has advocated for college in prison initiatives, seeing firsthand the effectiveness of Emerson College’s prisoner undergraduate degree program.

Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Pelton’s essay *America is on Fire*, reflected powerfully on the significance of Floyd’s death with a frank and honest reference to his own experiences in America. His essay quickly

and widely spread, reaching an audience of more than 6 million people around the globe. *Forbes Magazine* placed it at the top of its list of the five most noteworthy writings that appeared after the George Floyd incident.

Pelton began his academic career at Harvard University, where he earned a Ph.D. in English literature with an academic focus on 19th-century British prose and poetry. He taught English and American literature at Harvard University, Colgate University, Dartmouth College and Willamette University. He served on the Harvard Board of Overseers and as vice-chair of its executive committee. After Harvard, Pelton served as dean of the college at Colgate University and Dartmouth College. He graduated from Wichita State University, located in his hometown of Wichita, Kansas.

In 2024, he was awarded the Harvard Medal, the highest honor bestowed on a Harvard Alum.

He is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He serves as one of five advisors to the Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery Project at Harvard University.

In January 2024, he co-curated with Peggy Fogelman, Norman Jean Calderwood Executive Director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Steve McQueen's *Lynching Tree* exhibition at the Gardner.

In April 2025, he was a cast member in the Boston Lyric Opera's production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's famed musical, *Carousel*, at the Colonial Theatre in Boston, on the 80th anniversary of its 1945 pre-Broadway premiere at the Colonial.

He has been awarded three honorary degrees..

Called by Boston Magazine a “true renaissance man,” he perennially ranks in the top ten on *Boston Magazine’s* annual list of the most influential people in Boston, most recently at #5 in 2025, #6 in 2024 and #3 in 2023.

He enjoys a very long list of awards and recognitions for educational excellence and social justice, including, most recently:

- Harvard University, Harvard Medal, 2024
- Lifetime Achievement Award, Annual African American Ball, 2025
- Keeper of the Flame Award, Lawyers for Civil Rights, 2024
- Global Citizenship Award, Arts Resource Collaborative for Kids, 2024
- Massachusetts College of Art and Design Godine Medal, 2024
- Power of Home Award, The Community Builders, 2024
- Charles Rogerson Civic Leadership Award, 2024
- Maurice Donahue Public Service Award, UMASS Donahue Institute, UMASS Amherst, 2024
- Wichita State University, Fairmount College, Alumni Hall of Fame Award, 2024
- Boston Magazine 150 Most Influential Bostonians — #6 in 2024 and #3 in 2023, behind Governor Maura Healey and Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley
- Lifetime Achievement by the Boston Arts Academy in 2022
- Named as a Living Legend by the Boston Museum of African American History in 2021.
- Inducted by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce into its Academy of Distinguished Bostonians in 2020.
- Leader of Change Award from Trinity Boston Connects (2021)

- Governor's Award from Mass Humanities (2020)
- Robert Coard Distinguished Leadership Medal (2021)
- Honored by the Eos Foundation with a \$100,000 racial justice grant in his name (2020).
- UAspire, First One Award (2022)
- Boston's 100 Most Influential People of Color (Get Konnected!, 2016)
- The Rosoff Award 20/20 (The Ad Club, April 2016)
- The Diversity Leadership Award (The National Diversity Council, October 2015)
- The Sabra Award (Israeli Stage, November 2014)
- Boston 50 on Fire, recognizing 50 leading innovators in Boston (November 2014)
- Speak the Truth Award (Student Immigrant Movement, December 2014)
- Champion of Freedom Award (Freedom House, March 2012).

He sits on the Boards of The Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Chamber of Commerce (executive committee), WGBH, a preeminent national radio and media outlet, The Green Ribbon Commission, a climate and environment nonprofit, The Barr Foundation with \$2.6 billion in assets, and the Urban Institute (Washington, D. C.).