

Editors' Notes

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In this special issue of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, we turn our collective attention to one of the most complex, sensitive, and consequential areas of nonprofit practice and public service: foster care and adoption systems. These systems sit at the intersection of state responsibility, nonprofit service delivery, and community care, shaping the lives of some of the most vulnerable children, families, and caregivers. This issue invites scholars, educators, and practitioners to critically examine not only how these systems function, but also how they may simultaneously serve as mechanisms of care and sources of harm.

The focus on foster care and adoption is both timely and necessary. Across national and local contexts, child welfare systems are increasingly scrutinized for their structural inequities, historical legacies, and outcomes for children and families. Nonprofit organizations play a central role in this ecosystem—as service providers, advocates, intermediaries, and innovators—yet their work is deeply embedded within broader institutional frameworks shaped by public policy, funding regimes, and societal norms. As such, understanding foster care and adoption systems requires an interdisciplinary and critically engaged approach, one that integrates nonprofit management, social work, public administration, and community-based perspectives.

This special issue makes a unique contribution to nonprofit education and leadership by foregrounding the ethical, institutional, and pedagogical challenges associated with child welfare systems. It pushes beyond traditional managerial or programmatic analyses to engage with deeper questions of power, accountability, justice, and lived experience. In doing so, it aligns with the evolving direction of nonprofit and philanthropic studies as a field—one that increasingly emphasizes reflexivity, critical inquiry, and the centering of marginalized voices.

At the heart of this issue is the powerful framing articulated in the special editors' introduction, "Confronting Systems of Care and Harm," by Irizarry, Meyer, and Mirabella. Their work challenges us to reconsider the dual nature of foster care and adoption systems. While these systems are designed to provide safety, stability, and support, they also operate within structures that can perpetuate harm, particularly for historically marginalized communities. The authors highlight how child welfare systems are not neutral mechanisms of care but are shaped by social, political, and economic forces that influence whose families are deemed "at risk," whose children are removed, and whose voices are prioritized or silenced.

A key insight from their framing is the importance of confronting the paradox of care and harm as coexisting realities. The notion of "systems of care" must be critically interro-

gated to reveal how interventions intended to protect children may simultaneously disrupt families, reinforce inequities, and reproduce systemic injustices. This perspective calls for a shift in how nonprofit leaders, educators, and students understand their roles—not merely as service providers within established systems, but as agents capable of questioning, reforming, and reimagining those systems.

Another central theme is the need to center lived experiences, particularly those of youth, families, and communities directly impacted by foster care and adoption. Traditional academic and policy discourses often privilege institutional perspectives, data metrics, and professional expertise. In contrast, this special issue emphasizes the importance of listening to and learning from those who have navigated these systems firsthand. This shift has significant implications for nonprofit education, suggesting the need for curricula that incorporate experiential knowledge, critical reflection, and community engagement.

The contributions in this issue collectively underscore the importance of examining accountability in new and more holistic ways. In the context of foster care and adoption, accountability extends beyond compliance with regulations or performance metrics. It involves ethical responsibility to children and families, transparency in decision-making, and responsiveness to community needs and critiques. Nonprofit leaders operating in this space must navigate complex accountability relationships—upward to funders and regulators, downward to service recipients, and outward to the broader public—while grappling with the moral dimensions of their work.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this special issue offers important insights for the future of nonprofit education. It challenges educators to prepare students not only with technical skills but also with the critical capacities needed to engage with contested and complex systems. This includes fostering an understanding of historical and structural inequities, developing ethical reasoning, and cultivating the ability to work collaboratively with communities. It also calls for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge nonprofit management with fields such as social work, public policy, and human rights.

Moreover, this issue contributes to broader conversations about the role of nonprofit organizations in addressing systemic challenges. Foster care and adoption systems exemplify the ways in which nonprofits operate within, and sometimes reinforce, institutional arrangements shaped by the state. At the same time, nonprofits have the potential to advocate for reform, innovate alternative models of care, and amplify community voices. The tension between these roles—service provision and systemic change—is a recurring theme throughout the issue and one that is central to the field of nonprofit studies.

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to the special issue editors—José Irizarry, Seth Meyer, and Roseanne Mirabella—for their leadership, vision, and commitment in bringing this important issue to fruition. Their thoughtful curation and framing have created a space for meaningful dialogue and critical engagement, advancing both scholarship and practice in significant ways.

We also offer our sincere thanks to the contributing authors, whose work reflects a high level of scholarly rigor, creativity, and dedication. Their contributions not only deepen our understanding of foster care and adoption systems but also challenge us to think more critically about the role of nonprofits in addressing complex social issues. Together, the special issue editors and authors have created a body of work that will serve as an important resource for educators, researchers, and practitioners alike.

Finally, we hope that this special issue will inspire continued reflection, dialogue, and action. The challenges associated with foster care and adoption systems are profound, but they also present opportunities for learning, innovation, and transformation. As a field,

nonprofit education and leadership must continue to engage with these issues, equipping current and future leaders with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding needed to navigate and reshape systems of care.

In this spirit, we present this special issue as both a scholarly contribution and a call to action—inviting our community to confront difficult questions, embrace complexity, and work toward more just and equitable systems for children, families, and communities.

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