

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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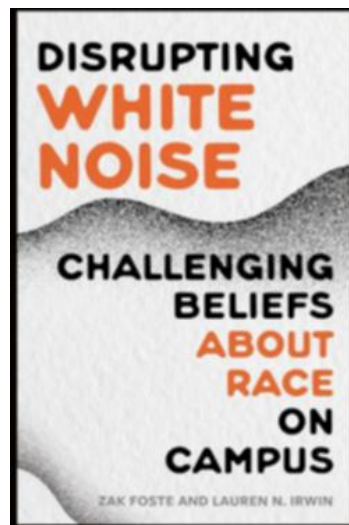
Foste, Z., & Irwin, L. N. (2026). *Disrupting white noise: Challenging beliefs about race on campus*. Harvard Education Press.

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Disrupting White Noise offers a compelling examination of how colleges and universities often reproduce, rather than disrupt, the racial worldviews of students who identify solely as white. The authors critique a deeply embedded assumption in higher education, which they term the empty vessel hypothesis—the belief that white students arrive on campus as racially blank slates—offering a conceptual contribution to the study of race in higher education and a timely challenge to practitioners seeking to move beyond diversity initiatives that leave whiteness fundamentally undisturbed.



Foste and **Irwin** ground their argument in three qualitative studies conducted across multiple institutional contexts, drawing on interviews, observations, and institutional documents to examine how white students' racial understandings are shaped before college and reproduced throughout campus life. Together, the studies build a cumulative argument that the reproduction of whiteness is neither isolated nor incidental but embedded within the ordinary structures and everyday practices with higher education institutions. Across six chapters, the book introduces the empty vessel hypothesis, traces how white students' pre-college racial socialization is reproduced through residence life, leadership education, classrooms, and peer networks, and concludes with recommendations for institutional change.

The Empty Vessel Hypothesis

The book's most distinctive contribution is the empty vessel hypothesis, named in the first chapter and critiqued throughout those that follow. The empty vessel hypothesis is a pervasive belief among higher education professionals that because white students enter college lacking structured

race talk or sustained interracial contact, they arrive as blank slates. Echoing Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education, wherein knowledge is deposited into students rather than constructed through critical reflection and dialogue (Freire & Ramos, 1970), this assumption positions diversity initiatives, multicultural coursework, and interracial engagement as mechanisms for supplying racial knowledge presumed to be absent. Foste and Irwin argue, however, that this premise fundamentally misdiagnoses the problem. White students do not arrive on campus racially unformed; they bring durable racial understandings shaped by years of socialization in families, schools, neighborhoods, peer networks, media, and other predominantly white social environments. What appears to be an absence of racial knowledge is, instead, the presence of deeply embedded racialized assumptions that institutions too often fail to recognize and disrupt.

From Pre-College Socialization to Institutional Reproduction

Foste and Irwin begin with the racial socialization that precedes students' arrival on campus. The authors argue that white students enter higher education after at least two decades of racial socialization fostered by families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, peer groups, and media environments. Drawing on 40 participants' narratives from life history interviews, Chapter 2 is an illustration of how these individuals, spaces, and institutions collectively cultivate racial understandings even in the absence of explicit conversations about race. Many students described growing up in environments where race was rarely discussed and interracial interaction was limited, yet this silence itself functioned as a powerful form of racial socialization, normalizing whiteness, reinforcing racial boundaries, and encouraging color-evasive understandings of racial inequality. The chapter thus provides the empirical foundation for the book's central claim: colleges cannot disrupt racial worldviews they first fail to recognize.

Foste and Irwin then turn to the residential environment. Residence halls, often considered "neutral" living spaces, emerge as sites where institutional priorities surrounding whiteness, belonging, and comfort are enacted through everyday policies and practices. Housing decisions at the pseudonymous Rural State University communicate whose comfort is prioritized and whose belonging is presumed. The authors' comparison of the newly constructed Pollard Hall—known on campus as the residence hall for white students and described by one administrator of color as "the Vermont of residence halls"—with the aging Towers residence halls, where students of color disproportionately reside, demonstrates how differences in facilities, maintenance, and institutional investment actively reproduce racialized patterns of belonging. Student testimonies further illustrate how residential spaces reinforce racial boundaries through the policing of who belongs, allowing whiteness to remain the unmarked norm while students of color are more likely to have their presence questioned or scrutinized. Ultimately, white comfort emerges less as an individual feeling than as an institutional value, one embedded in housing policies, resource allocation, and the everyday organization of campus life.

If the residential environment shows how institutions materially reproduce white students' comfort, leadership education reveals how that same logic shapes what students are invited to learn. Drawing on data from the pseudonymous Eastern Public University's Leadership Education Program, Foste and Irwin demonstrate how race and racism are frequently omitted from leadership curricula not because they lack educational relevance, but because institutions anticipate the discomfort such conversations may provoke among white students. Consequently, leadership education often emphasizes communication, teamwork, and individual development while avoiding sustained engagement with structural racism, whiteness, and systems of power. This prioritization extends beyond the curriculum to the design of leadership opportunities themselves, where seemingly race-neutral features such as program fees, selective participation, and early-arrival experiences inform not only who gets access to leadership development, but who is considered worthy of it. The omission of race from leadership education is thus not merely a curricular gap but an institutional decision about whose comfort defines the limits of learning.

The authors next examine whether meaningful racial learning can occur within classrooms, academic majors, and students' broader peer networks. Returning to the life history interviews, the authors show that diversity coursework can produce genuine shifts in how white students understand race, particularly through sustained engagement with topics such as structural racism, redlining, and the historical production of racial inequality. Yet these intellectual gains often remain confined to the classroom. Outside of class, students return to predominantly white residence halls, majors, laboratories, Greek life organizations, and friendship networks that continue to normalize whiteness and reinforce the racial assumptions they brought with them to college. Racial learning thus remains abstract rather than relational, producing cognitive awareness without fundamentally reshaping students' everyday relationships or social worlds. Chapter 5 offers the book's clearest demonstration that higher education cannot meaningfully disrupt whiteness through isolated interventions while the broader institutional environment continues to reproduce the very frameworks those interventions seek to challenge.

The book concludes by explaining why many well-intentioned diversity initiatives ultimately reproduce rather than disrupt whiteness. When colleges mistakenly assume white students arrive as racial blank slates while organizing campus environments around protecting their comfort, opportunities for meaningful racial learning are constrained from the outset. Rather than calling for more diversity programming alone, the authors urge institutions to reconsider the assumptions underlying those efforts and examine how institutional policies, resource allocation decisions, residence life practices, leadership program design, and institutional messaging collectively shape students' racial learning. Particularly compelling are their recommendations for moving beyond performative institutional commitments toward structural changes that acknowledge whiteness as an organizing feature of campus life rather than an individual disposition. In so

doing, the authors challenge colleges and universities to move beyond simply exposing students to diversity toward creating educational environments capable of sustaining the discomfort that meaningful racial learning often requires.

Disrupting White Noise offers a useful lens on the contemporary socio-political landscape surrounding race in higher education. Much public discourse frames anti-DEI legislation and educational gag orders (i.e., legislative restrictions on race-related teaching) as external attacks on institutions that were previously advancing racial equity. Foste and Irwin's analysis complicates this narrative: many colleges and universities were already reproducing whiteness through assumptions embedded in their own policies and practices, such as privileging white students' comfort in residence life and sidestepping race in leadership curricula. Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding "divisive concepts" rests on the very premise the book identifies: that students, particularly white students, should be protected from discomfort when learning about race. Read through this lens, recent legislative efforts restricting race-conscious educational practices such as Mississippi's HB 1193, New Hampshire's HB 2, and West Virginia's SB 474/HB 2005, along with the U.S. Department of Education's Dear Colleague Letter, do not so much introduce a new institutional logic as formalize one the book argues has long existed: the prioritization of white students' comfort over sustained engagement with race and racism. This interpretation does not diminish the significance of contemporary political attacks on higher education. Rather, it suggests that institutions' rapid accommodation to these pressures reflects the durability of the assumptions the book so effectively critiques.

Disrupting White Noise makes several important contributions to scholarship on whiteness, racial socialization, and student learning in higher education. The empty vessel hypothesis's contribution lies less in the novelty of the claim than in the naming itself. By giving a familiar and nearly invisible assumption a name, Foste and Irwin turn it into something that can be seen, questioned, and held accountable—a framework for diagnosing why well-intentioned diversity initiatives so often miss their mark. The book further contributes to critical whiteness studies by demonstrating that whiteness is institutionally produced rather than merely held as an individual attitude, tracing its reproduction across residence life, leadership education, classrooms, and peer networks. Finally, by linking students' pre-college racial socialization to their collegiate experiences, Foste and Irwin challenge a longstanding tendency in higher education scholarship to treat matriculation as the starting point for racial learning, insisting instead that K-12 and higher education cannot be understood as separate sites of racial development.

The book will be particularly valuable for student affairs professionals, especially those working in residence life, leadership education, orientation, and first-year experience programs. Because Foste and Irwin locate the reproduction of whiteness within the ordinary structures of campus life rather than solely within individual students, practitioners are encouraged to

examine the policies, programs, and organizational practices over which they have direct influence. Senior administrators likewise stand to benefit, as the critique extends to institutional priorities surrounding resource allocation, campus messaging, and diversity initiatives. Scholars and graduate students will also find the book valuable, both as an empirical contribution to critical whiteness studies and as a methodological example of building a structural argument across multiple qualitative studies.

One tension concerns whose voices ultimately shape the book's analysis. Although Foste and Irwin draw extensively on scholarship by scholars of color and remain attentive to the harms institutional practices impose on students of color, the empirical narrative remains centered primarily on understanding and transforming white students' racial learning. This is especially evident in the authors' analysis of a leadership workshop facilitated by a Black woman administrator in Chapter 4. While they acknowledge the racialized constraints she navigated and recognize that her pedagogical choices may have reflected strategies for self-protection within a predominantly white environment, their critique ultimately focuses on how those choices limited white students' opportunities for deeper racial learning. This emphasis raises an important question about the balance between evaluating anti-racist pedagogy and recognizing the emotional, professional, and racialized labor required of practitioners of color who facilitate such work. Consequently, the voices of students and practitioners of color at the institutions under study occasionally feel secondary to the broader project of transforming white students' racial consciousness. Future scholarship could build on Foste and Irwin's contribution by more fully centering how those most directly affected by these institutional dynamics understand, navigate, and reshape them.

At a moment when higher education faces mounting political and legal pressures to retreat from race-conscious educational practices, *Disrupting White Noise* reminds us that racial neutrality has never been the starting point from which colleges operate. If white students arrive on campus already shaped by years of racial socialization, then avoiding conversations about race does not preserve neutrality; it preserves the racialized assumptions those students already possess. Foste and Irwin do not offer quick fixes, nor do they suggest that disrupting whiteness can be accomplished through a single course, program, or initiative. Instead, they provide something arguably more valuable: a compelling conceptual framework for understanding why so many well-intentioned efforts to promote racial learning have fallen short, and what institutions must reconsider if they hope to move beyond symbolic commitments toward meaningful change. For scholars, practitioners, and administrators alike, *Disrupting White Noise* is an important and thought-provoking contribution to ongoing conversations about race, whiteness, and higher education.

Reference

Freire, P., & Ramos, M. B. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.

About the Reviewer

Jaran Smith (he/him) is a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at the University of Connecticut. As an Educational Program Assistant in the Department of Animal Science, he supports academic programming, student success initiatives, and departmental operations. His research interests focus on whiteness in higher education, with particular attention to how organizational cultures, professional socialization, and institutional norms reproduce whiteness. He is especially interested in the organizational conditions that sustain—or disrupt—anti-racist learning and practice.



About the Authors

Zak Foste is an Associate Professor of Higher Education Administration and Department Chair of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at the University of Kansas. He received his Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs from The Ohio State University. His research examines issues of diversity and equity in higher education, with particular attention to the ways in which whiteness structures college and university campuses. This work explores both white students' relationship to, and understanding of, race and whiteness as well as the consequences of whiteness in the lives of students of color at historically white colleges and universities. At KU Zak teaches course on college student development, college access and success, qualitative research, and race and social class in higher education.



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