



College Boards Need to Make a Mission Check

Posted to [Education](#) April 04, 2024 by [Stephen F. Gambescia](#)

Stephen F. Gambescia is a professor of health services administration at Drexel University in Philadelphia. He is also author of the book “Every Child, No Matter How Many, Is Special.” He wrote this for InsideSources.com.

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Recent calls to [investigate colleges’ fidelity to their historical mission](#) and possibly [revoke their nonprofit status](#) are fair and responsible.

A review of a nonprofit’s mission by those the organization serves — the public, government and, most important, the Board of Trustees — should not be a superficial act. Ensuring a nonprofit is true to its mission and integrated into all aspects of its operations, especially its core programs and services, is one of the most critical responsibilities of a Board of Trustees.

Nonprofits are an essential and equal contributor to improving the human condition. Along with government and private for-profits, nonprofits are part of the triad sectors in our society. Our government looks favorably toward nonprofits

since they can effectively and efficiently provide much of what is needed to support our health, education, safety, welfare and wealth. The more nonprofits can do, the less the government needs to do to provide staff and other resources to the public.

Nonprofits are evidence of a founding principle of the [American Spirit: fraternity](#). As a people, we generally believe we are our brother's keeper. The fraternal spirit is operationalized via nonprofits, most often through charity. While nonprofits exist in other countries, known as non-governmental organizations, the extent and nature of nonprofits in America are remarkable. Nonprofits are here for the people in almost all endeavors, from supporting the arts to maintaining public zoos.

Nonprofits in the United States have much more latitude and less government oversight than other countries, which may not be such a good thing. Most nonprofits must file an [IRS 990 form](#) that asks them to account for their good works, money raised, assets, governance, expenditures and some general operational questions.

In exchange for their nonprofit designation, most nonprofits are exempt from corporate tax, real estate tax and sales tax, and, in most cases, allow individuals and organizations to "write off" donations made to the organization. At a minimum, the government, those the nonprofit serves, and the public expect the nonprofit to be true to its mission. While it is unusual for a nonprofit to lose its designation, some have lost their way.

Some state legislators, and, more recently, employers and the public are growing concerned that colleges are engaged in mission creep. Historically their mission has been knowledge generation and dissemination, and the transfer of knowledge to students, as well as quality job and career preparation, for which parents, students and the government pay "good money."

Evidence is growing that [added to this mission, and possibly replacing it in part](#), is the cultivation or indoctrination of student political and socio-cultural activists for the pet causes of the faculty and, more recently, the college administrators.

Traditionally, the public has given faculty and students much latitude in what they consider a sacred space for the free market of ideas. However, [campus protests by students, faculty and others against the conflict between Hamas and Israel](#) morphed from the obligatory "give peace a chance" to screams to eliminate the Jews, which is a stark reason to suspect that "the kids are (not) all right."

[Three “top” university presidents](#) could not muster an unequivocal response to members of a congressional committee that their schools’ student codes of conduct do not condone calls for the genocide of Jews. Understandably, college boards of trustees at these three schools, and likely more across the country, will be asked if they have been paying attention to their most important fiduciary responsibility to ensure the mission of the college is integrated into all aspects of its core functions: Teaching/learning and scholarship/research.

Expect a clash of mantras between the faculty’s “curriculum belongs to the faculty” and the nonprofit board orientation manual’s “board members are not to micromanage the organization.” Both are true. However, board members of nonprofit colleges do have the ultimate responsibility to hire or fire the president, strategic planning, ensure legal compliance, ethical conduct and assurance of mission integration, especially within its core “deliverable” — teaching/learning, research and select service.

Nonprofit colleges have choices for their legal status, including being a for-profit entity. There are several types of nonprofit categories. Not all need to be 501(c)3 and charitable. The IRS allows nonprofits to be [politically engaged](#), if they request such status. Much focus on the concerns for what is being taught in the curriculum, co-curriculum and hidden curriculum on our college campuses will be on the [disillusionment of donors](#) who have been true to their schools. The more salient focus should be on Boards of Trustees ensuring colleges are true to their mission in all aspects of their enterprise.

About the Author



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