

# It's Time to Challenge Nonprofit Norms

Nonprofits must find a balance between organizational permanence and social change.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

**Reframing Nonprofit Organizations: Democracy, Inclusion & Social Change.** Edited by Angela M. Eikenberry, Roseanne M. Mirabella, & Billie Sandberg. Melvin & Leigh Publishers ([melvinleigh.com](http://melvinleigh.com)).

**D**o today's norms subvert nonprofits' missions? Do they sabotage the very social constructs they're intended to support?

The answer is yes, according to the authors of *Reframing Nonprofit Organizations*.

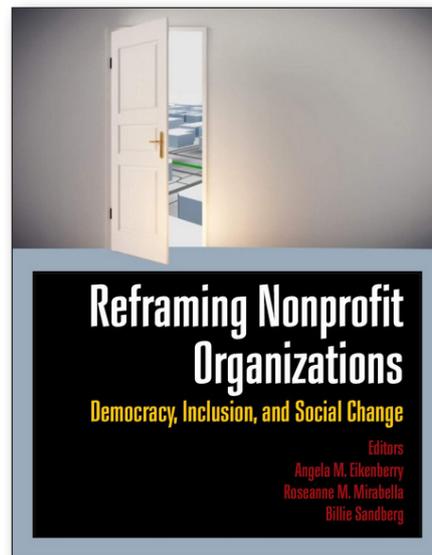
We can trace the problem to the recent emphasis on professionalism in the nonprofit sector. The focus has shifted to efficient management rather than creativity, passion, and caring.

To a growing number of nonprofit scholars, the root concern is how we perceive the world. The practices of the market environment are often mimicked in nonprofit organizations. But most nonprofits fulfill their missions better when using relational, participative, and cooperative approaches.

“Nonprofits fulfill their missions better when using cooperative approaches.”

*Reframing Nonprofit Organizations* takes critical perspectives about topics that affect nonprofits but aren't often discussed internally. These include issues such as power, commercialization, the market, the concept of association itself, assumptions about neoliberalism, and the difficulty of leading in complex environments.

Each author in this edited book goes beyond critiquing mainstream approaches and takes a hard look at the purposes behind nonprofits. The authors discuss how organizations can carry out their missions and preserve their values in a competitive society. They consider how nonprofits can improve fundraising, finances, marketing, advocacy, and more while making a greater difference for their constituents and communities.



Each chapter of the book overturns assumptions and explores essential truths. For example:

- **The teaching of management for nonprofits** must change so that it is grounded in mission accomplishment.
- **When we say we're accountable**, we must ask ourselves: Accountable to whom? Accountable in what ways? How do we convey the message of accountability to all our different audiences, including donors, staff, recipients, and other stakeholders? Accountability means very different things to different people, so it's not enough to say we're "accountable." We must spell it out in specifics for each separate group.
- **We need to analyze** the ways that racism and sexism operate in nonprofits. We must adopt a broader lens that ensures opportunities – especially leadership opportunities – for people of all backgrounds, races, and genders. We must ask, for example, why most nonprofit leaders are men when women dominate the nonprofit labor force. We must rethink how we talk and write about nonprofit leadership with these issues in mind.
- **For problem-solving to be effective**, all stakeholders must seek solutions together as genuine partners.

*Reframing Nonprofit Organizations* is an important call for critical thinking in nonprofit organizations. Anyone committed to strengthening the work of nonprofits and helping the sector achieve its full potential will find this book necessary reading. 

Terrence Fernsler, MNPL, PhD ([fernslts@jmu.edu](mailto:fernslts@jmu.edu)), a nonprofit professional for over 35 years, is an instructor and advisor, James Madison University Nonprofit Studies, and instructor in Nonprofit Management & Leadership for the Master's of Public Administration, Bush School of Government & Public Service, Texas A&M University.