



Proven success

Frank's story of the Not-for-Profit
Certificate programs in action
at Sikich LLP

"A more informed client is
a better client in every way."

— Frank Jakosz, CPA, CGMA
Partner in Charge,
NFP and Higher Education
Sikich LLP
Naperville, IL



Firm leverages competency tools to build not-for-profit practice area

It was June of 2015 when Sikich, a top-30 accounting firm, first embraced the American Institute of CPAs' (AICPA) Not-for-Profit (NFP) Certificate programs to enhance training for its 40 professional staff members, managers and partners who serve NFP clients. Soon a recurring conversation emerged within the firm: "If only our clients had the skills taught in the certificate program, our job would be so much easier."

"Clients already liked the fact that our staff were certified," says Frank Jakosz, CPA, CGMA, partner in charge of Sikich's Not-for-Profit and Higher Education practices. "So, when we began incentivizing them to get their key staff certified, it was an immediate hit."

Specialists required

According to Frank, who has been serving nonprofit clients for over 40 years, the greatest misconception about serving the NFP sector is that it's simple, and any CPA can do it. "NFPs today are more complex, and they expect our staff to be experts on NFP issues."

Nonprofits face the challenge of attracting financial experts and other experienced directors to their boards. "The certificates emphasize governance because this is an area where NFPs may be at a disadvantage compared to other businesses," says Frank. "NFP boards are tasked with a lot of work for little or no compensation, so NFP staff often have to train directors who support the cause but may not have robust experience in NFP governance."

When it comes to accounting and financial reporting, NFPs are tasked with applying new FASB standards, including revenue recognition guidance, to situations unique to nonprofits, such as accounting for pledges and restricted vs. unrestricted donations. "People think of colleges as large organizations, and they are, in terms of cash flow," says Frank. "But you'd be surprised how lean their finance operations are — where a comparably sized for-profit business would have sufficient internal resources, they require help in implementing new guidance."

Training firm staff

Sikich made the NFP Certificate I mandatory for professional staff who serve NFP clients. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. With 40 hours of CPE credits for the NFP Certificate I and 30 hours for the NFP Certificate II, each program goes a long way toward helping CPAs meet their CPE requirements.

"But the real benefit is that we're all studying the same material and it prompts conversations," says Frank. "Even experienced managers and partners tell me they 'really didn't understand *blank*' until working through a module."

Staff also appreciate the flexibility of the program that allows them to complete the modules in the order they choose. "Often the order people choose to go through the modules is driven by questions and concerns that come up in the course of performing engagements," says Frank. "If you haven't done something in a while, it can be a good refresher in a format that many people find easier to digest than the Audit and Accounting Guide."

Training clients

Sikich found that promoting the certificate program to train the staff of its nonprofit clients immediately benefited the firm in multiple ways, from promoting client loyalty to improving audit quality and efficiency. "A more informed client is a better client in every way," says Frank. "Nobody makes money on over-budget audits, and audits can go bad quickly when people aren't properly educated."

Because Sikich staff are intimately familiar with the certificate programs, they can quickly point clients to modules that will help them when problems arise. "Before we had the certificate programs, we would recommend clients go to the Audit and Accounting Guide," says Frank. "We still do that, but we've found that the programs help clients understand the guidance whereas the guide alone might be too difficult for them."

The firm found that clients appreciate the help the certificate programs offer. "The response has been overwhelmingly positive," says Frank. "We know they're studying because we can see the results. We wouldn't continue to do it if it wasn't working. We wouldn't continue to spend the money."

Growth forecast

Sikich has identified the NFP sector as one of three focus areas for strategic growth. "We're seeing strong results, and I'm hoping to double the size of our NFP practice over the next five years," says Frank. "I tell our staff they need to recognize that earning a certificate is the beginning, rather than the end — we've got to keep learning and we believe the marketplace will reward us for that."

AICPA Not-for-Profit Certificates

The AICPA NFP Certificate programs offer a convenient and accessible way to get high-quality, comprehensive training in NFP accounting, financial reporting, tax compliance, governance and assurance. Available in two levels, these focused CPE/CAE-eligible programs give professionals in the not-for-profit space the targeted knowledge and marketable skills needed to show donors they have achieved a level of distinction.

More information on the AICPA

Not-for-Profit Certificates:

[NFP Cert.AICPAStore.com](https://www.aicpa.org/ce/CAE/Not-for-Profit-Certificates)



© 2017 Association of International Certified Professional Accountants. All rights reserved. AICPA and American Institute of CPAs are trademarks of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and are registered in the United States, European Union and other countries. The design mark is a trademark of the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants. 22599-CAP