



SCHOOL of INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY • WASHINGTON, DC

SIS349-001 Philanthropy Lab (3 credits)

Fall, 2026

Tuesdays/Fridays, 9.45-11am

Section 1: Faculty Information

Stephanie Fischer

Executive-in-Residence

Executive Director, Experiential Learning

Email: fischer@american.edu

Office: SIS 222

Office Hours:

You are welcome to connect with me in person, by phone or on zoom. To book your time, please sign up at <https://fischer1.youcanbook.me>.

In addition to making an appointment to meet with me during or outside office hours, you can reach me by email. If your email brings up a question requiring discussion, I will ask you to schedule a meeting. I will respond to emails within 24 hours during the week and potentially less frequently over the weekend.

Teaching Assistant: Rosalie Daval

Email: rd6454a@american.edu

Section 2: Course Information

Course Description

Philanthropy has played and continues to play a key role virtually every aspect of international service. Foundation and individual giving built and supported the United Nations, funded the development of the rice variety that makes up 60 percent of the world's rice production, and invests in climate change mitigation technologies and services for victims of hate crimes. Philanthropic giving can also create negligible or even adverse effects that are often not considered or mitigated. In this course, you will gain a deep understanding of strategic, impactful philanthropy and develop the skills and competencies required to make thoughtful and informed funding decisions. Thanks to the generous support of a donor, you will bridge theory and practice through the experiential component of the course. The culminating activity will involve student teams directing approximately \$40,000-\$50,000 in grant funding to nonprofits you have strategically selected and carefully vetted.

Our grant recipients will be 501c3 nonprofit organizations established at least two years ago.

You will participate in three different philanthropy scenarios throughout the semester:

1. **Giving Circle¹Team**- researching problems and approaches to those problems
2. **Independent Foundation Team**-finding, vetting and recommending organizations
3. **Family Foundation**- making final grant decisions

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, you should be able to:

¹ <https://philanthropytogether.org/what-is-a-giving-circle/>

- Reflect on and explore philanthropic values.
- Identify the key historical influences, trends and approaches of contemporary philanthropy.
- Recognize community needs and approaches employed to address them.
- Identify, research, and evaluate nonprofit organizations.
- Develop persuasive, evidence-based communication materials and presentations to advocate for specific nonprofits organizations.

Section 3: Grading & Assessment

Assignments and Due Dates

Component	Assignment	Due Date	
<i>1) Learning about Philanthropy and Your Role in It</i>	Journal Reflections Midterm	10/13	10%
	Journal Reflections Final	12/1	10%
	Final Exam: Philanthropy Consultation and Evaluation Plan	December 18 (can be arranged to be taken earlier)	10%
<i>2) Grant Making Experience</i>	Issue Brief (Individual)	9/20/26	10%
	Response Brief (Individual)	10/11/26	10%
	Grant Guidelines (Giving Circle Team)	10/25/26	10%
	Organization Preparation Materials (Foundation Team)	11/1/26 and 11/8/26	5%
	Recommendation Brief (Foundation Team)	11/22/26	10%
	Recommendation Review- Pros, Cons and Questions (Individual)	11/29/26	5%
	Recommendation Presentations to Class (Foundation Team)	11/20/25	10%
<i>3) Operations and Admin</i>	Philanthropy Lab Portal Tasks- (must complete all) Grant Letter Review and Pre-Course Survey Post-Course Survey, Giving Goal	throughout semester	5%
<i>4) Participation and Feedback</i>	Peer Feedback	10/26, 11/23, post grant decision	Plus or minus half grade
	Participation and Attendance (individual)	Ongoing	10%

Assignment Overview (additional Guidelines available on Canvas)

1) Learning about Philanthropy and Your Role in It

- **Journal Reflections (Individual)**

Thoughtful preparation for class and reflection will give you and your classmates a more interesting, enjoyable and impactful learning experience. During the semester, there will be frequent journal reflections related to readings and other prompts, some of which you will post on Canvas by Sundays at midnight. You will also use your journals for in class note taking and reflections. You will submit your journal for review and grading at the semester midpoint and end. Your journal grade is based on the following:

- Reading reflections should demonstrate your grasp of the reading, and a thoughtful consideration of the question posed.
- Class notes should demonstrate engagement with the discussion and extraction of ideas.
- Timeliness - full credit for completing by the deadline, as evidenced by Canvas submission and reduced credit for submission prior to the next class when you provide additional reflection based on the class discussion. Responses submitted one week late receive no credit. Missing one entry will not detract points.

- **Final Exam (Individual)**

The final exam will provide you the opportunity to reflect on what you learned and apply it to a real-life scenario. While notes will not be allowed, the exam prompt will be given two weeks prior to the exam so you can prepare. Your notes on readings and class discussion will help you prepare, so stay on top of the class content and ask questions when you are confused. Ask me if you want to take the exam early and we can arrange a time.

2) *The Grantmaking Experience*

- **Issue Brief (Individual)**

You will explore the causes and impacts of a problem relevant to your Sustainable Development Goal that you care about using credible sources. This is an exercise in journalistic writing to make a case about the importance of a problem, using data to tell a story.

- **Response Brief (Individual)**

Your Giving Circle Team will select one problem based on the team's assigned Sustainable Development Goal. You will likely pick a problem that has been the focus of one teammate's issue brief or perhaps an intersection of multiple team member's issues. This paper will identify the responses to this problem (explaining relevant theories of change), efficacy of the response and actors involved.

- **Grant Guidelines (Giving Circle Team)**

Acting as a group of people that care about this issue and understand the background of "what works," use your values and what you have learned about philanthropy (e.g., effective altruism, trust-based philanthropy) to outline the type of work you would want to fund (the "what" and the "how") and attributes of the organization that you think would be effective in doing that work.

- **Organization Preparation Materials (Foundation Team)**

You will be assigned to work as a program officer of a Foundation centered on one Giving Circle Grant Guidelines

document. Your team will identify and research a range of organizations, then select three organizations to visit (in person or virtually). Preparation and professionalism are key to treating these organizations with care and respect and providing a thoughtful resulting recommendation. Each team member must participate in at least two site visits and there must be at least two students on each visit.

- **Recommendation Brief and Presentation (Foundation Team)**

These reports and presentations will share with the other teams your journey to your recommendation, providing data, your critical thinking process and results. They will also be new assets for the organizations to use for their own fundraising purposes.

The book should include the following components:

- The problem or opportunity, supported with evidence.
- The specific framing of the issue you have chosen, along with the evidence that supports it.
- Assessments of the organization finalists and why you are recommending your chosen organization.
- A process for evaluating the grant two years later.

Your presentation should provide a synopsis of your report.

- **Recommendation Brief Review- Pros, Cons and Questions (Individual)**

After reviewing the other teams' recommendation briefs, you will provide pros, cons and questions regarding each recommended organization. This is not to be a "gotcha" opportunity, but rather consider what more you would need to know about this organization to either vote for or against it.

3) Operations and Administration

On the first week of class you will sign up for the portal of Philanthropy Lab, our funder. There are tasks required to receive our funding at the end of the semester, including reviewing our grant letter, completing a pre- and post-course survey and submitting Giving Goals at the end of the semester. All must be completed to earn the 5% component of your grade.

4) Participation and Feedback

- **Peer Reviews (Individual)**

Giving and receiving feedback well are important drivers of teamwork, project management and personal development. The goals of the peer reviews are beyond rewarding good performance within your team and creating accountability for low performance. I hope this aspect of the course promotes enriching the work of others, participating effectively and respectfully in a community and gaining insight into how you could be a better member of that community. As such, your grade is based both on the quality of the feedback you give as well as your performance noted by your teammates. I reserve the right to alter the grade you receive on a team assignments for low performance identified in peer reviews.

- **Giving Circle Team Reflection/ Review-** You will reflect on your own team work and provide feedback on each of your teammates in your Giving Circle regarding what they are doing well and what they could do more or better to be an even better teammate in the future. Consider both what they are doing and how they do it. Also reflect on your own performance – what you should continue doing as well and

what you should stop or change. Allocate 100 contribution points among you and your peers to represent the level of work each member of the team did for the grant guidelines.

- **Foundation Team Reflection/Review-** You will identify what you and each member did well, areas of improvement you and they should consider when working on teams in the future and allocate (again) 100 “contribution points” among all team members, including yourself.
- **End of Semester Reflection/Review-** Briefly identify what went well and what could have been improved from you and your classmate’s actions and behaviors. Consider your contributions in substance and style (what you contributed and how you did it). Who else in class do you think stood out in being a great member of this final process? What did they do that was so helpful? Were there actions or behaviors that were counter productive in any way? What could those people have done differently to have a better result?

- **Preparation, Participation and Attendance (Individual)**

Because this is a highly interactive seminar, your preparation, attendance, and participation are crucial to your learning and to the experience of your classmates. Missing class and not participating will reduce your participation points and quality participation will increase them.

- **Preparation and Participation:** Do the readings and class assignments on time and have something thoughtful and insightful to say about them. Participation quality and quantity are important. I expect students to contribute relevant comments that build on and elevate our discussion while making space for others’ ideas and perspectives. Our final donation deliberation is a great time to improve your participation grade. Additionally, each student should volunteer to facilitate one guest speaker session or class discussion. We will have sign-ups on the first day of class to pick your week. Good facilitation includes preparation (e.g., doing research about the speaker or having some questions to spur our discussion) and engaging meaningful with the speaker or reading.
- **Attendance:** An absence without accommodation will result in the reduction of your Participation and Attendance grade. Joining class late will also adversely affect your grade. Note: If you will be late or absent from class, please email me before class.

Grading

Specific criteria for evaluation will be specified when assignments are given. Instructions for all assignments will be posted on your course page on Canvas. I will post updates or clarifications of assignments as needed, so please don't hesitate to ask if you are unclear about expectations or need extra guidance. Late assignments will be reduced one half grade for each day late. Extensions will only be granted in extenuating circumstances.

Course Grading Scale

Percentage	Mark	Description
100 – 95	A	Excellent
94 – 90	A-	
89 – 87	B+	

86 – 83	B	Very good
82 – 80	B-	
79 – 77	C+	
76 – 73	C	Satisfactory
72 – 70	C-	
69 – 67	D	Unsatisfactory / Poor
Below 67	F	Unsatisfactory / Fail

Decimal points at or above .56 will be rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Section 4: Weekly Schedule

WEEK 1 · Introduction to Philanthropy Lab and Philanthropy Ethics	
Tuesday — Sept 1 Class 1: Introduction to the Course	Friday Lab — Sept 4 Class 2: Ethics, philanthropy, democracy, and wealth Assignment: Reading Reflection
WEEK 2 · Justice and Contemporary Philanthropy Strategies	
Tuesday — Sept 8 Class 3: Effective Altruism, justice and modern-day philanthropy Assignment: Reading Reflection	Friday Lab — Sept 11 Class 4: Preparation for issue brief and intercultural experience Assignment: \$10 Challenge
Individual Assignment: Issue Brief, due Sept 20, midnight	
WEEK 3 · Direct Giving, Strategic Philanthropy, and Trust-Based Philanthropy	
Tuesday — Sept 15 Class 5: Introduction to strategic and trust-based philanthropy Librarian Visit: Shaunda Vasudev, AU Librarian Assignment: Reading Reflection	Friday Lab — Sept 18 Class 6: COIL Launch; \$10 Giving Challenge
WEEK 4 · Values, Theories of Change, and Personal Philosophy	
Tuesday — Sept 22 Class 7: Values and theories of change Assignment: Reading Reflection Guest Speaker: Andrew Peters, Children's Equity Fund	Friday Lab — Sept 25 Class 8: Giving Circle team formation, pick problem, intro to response brief
WEEK 5 · Understanding Nonprofits: Case Study and Site Visit Preparation	
Tuesday — Sept 29 Class 9: Preparation for response brief; case study — hunger in DC Assignment: Reading Reflection	Friday Lab — Oct 2 Class 10: Getting to know nonprofits as a funder — DC Central Kitchen (Alex Moore) Assignment: "Site visit" questions for Alex
WEEK 6 · Donor Approaches	
Tuesday — Oct 6 Class 11: Organizational decision making	Friday Lab — Oct 9 Preparing for response brief
Individual Assignment: Response Brief, due Oct 11, midnight	
WEEK 7 · Identifying Organizations — Leveraging the Work of Network Organizations	
Tuesday — Oct 13 Guest speakers: GlobalGiving, Ashoka, and TBD Assignment: Review organizational websites and prepare questions for each speaker	Friday Lab — Oct 16 No class — Fall Break
WEEK 8 · Evaluating Impact	

Tuesday — Oct 20 Lab: Developing grant guidelines	Friday Lab — Oct 23 Philanthropy Lab 2024 evaluation presentation
Team Assignment: Giving Circle Grant Guidelines, due Oct 25, midnight Individual Assignment: Self and Peer Review, due Oct 26, midnight	
WEEK 9 · Understanding Nonprofit Finances	
Tuesday Lab— Oct 27 Foundation teams meet	Friday Class — Oct 30 Guest Speaker: Julie Jones, Nonprofit Finance Expert Assignment: Review the 990 of an organization you are considering and identify three questions
Team Assignment: Organizational Background Materials 1, due Nov 1	
WEEK 10 · Grantmaking Decisions and Bias	
Tuesday — Nov 3 Grantmaking decisions Assignment: Reading Reflection	Friday Lab — Nov 6 Foundation teams meet
Team Assignment: Organizational Background Materials 2, due Nov 8	
WEEK 11 · Reflections on Practice	
Tuesday — Nov 10 Foundation teams meet: possible site visits	Friday Lab — Nov 13 Guest speaker: Mailee Walker, Claniel Foundation
WEEK 12 · TBD	
Tuesday — Nov 17 TBD	Friday Lab — Nov 20 TBD
Team Assignment: Recommendation Brief, due Nov 22 Individual Assignment: Self and Peer Review, due Nov 23	
WEEK 13 · Grant Selection Preparation	
Tuesday — Nov 24 Zoom class: preparing for presentations Assignment: Outline of presentation	Friday Lab — Nov 27 <i>No class — Thanksgiving</i>
Individual Assignment: Recommendation Briefs — pros, cons, and questions, due Nov 29	
WEEK 14 · Grant Selection: Foundation Presentations and Class Grant Selection	
Tuesday — Dec 1 Presentations	Friday Lab — Dec 4 Class deliberations (may require additional class time)
Final Self and Peer Review, due Dec 6, midnight	
WEEK 15 · Giving Ceremony	
Tuesday — Dec 8 Giving Ceremony	Friday Lab — Dec 11 Giving Ceremony
Exam: Dec 18 (with opportunity to schedule earlier)	

Section 6: Course Expectations, Requirements, and Policies

Class Expectations:

Be professional, respectful, engaged and curious: we will talk about what this means on the first day of class and develop our group norms.

A note on AI: This class is about reflection, growth and learning about a field. If you are stuck, reach out to our TA or me for help rather than asking AI. If you think there is a way that AI would help you in any component of the course, ask me if I think it is an appropriate use and document the use. If you want to use Grammarly or another AI platform for editing purposes- you must provide your original draft before using the platform. Submitting any AI generated writing as your own is a violation of the academic integrity code.

Section 7: University-Wide Policies

Academic Integrity Code

Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the university's [Academic Integrity Code](#). By registering for this course, students have acknowledged their awareness of the Academic Integrity Code, and they are obliged to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should violations occur. This includes cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism.

A [short guide for students](#) on how to meet the expectations of the AU's Academic Integrity Code.

Diversity and Inclusion

American University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, pregnancy or parenting, age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, personal appearance, gender identity and expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, veteran status, an individual's genetic information or any other bases under applicable federal and local laws. The University expressly prohibits any form of discriminatory harassment including sexual harassment, dating and domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and stalking.

Faculty members are required to report discrimination, harassment or sexual misconduct to the Office of Equity and Title IX if they witness it or become aware of it. There are four confidential resources on campus if students wish to speak to someone who is not required to report: Counseling Center, victim advocates in OASIS, medical providers in the Student Health Center, and the Chaplain in the Kay Spiritual Life Center. For more [information](#) or to [directly make a report](#), please visit the [Office of Equity and Title IX website](#).

Review the complete [Discrimination and Non-Title IX Sexual Misconduct Policy](#).

Student Code of Conduct

The central commitment of American University is the development of thoughtful, responsible human beings in the context of a challenging yet supportive academic community. The [Student Code of Conduct](#) is designed to benefit the American University community and to assist in forming the highest standards of ethics and morals among its members. By registering for this course, students have acknowledged their awareness of the Student Code of Conduct, and they

are obliged to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code.

Additional Student Policies

For a comprehensive list of policies involving students, [click here](#).

Section 8: Academic Support Services

Academic Alerts

Each instructor's objective is to do what they can to support you and the Academic Alert is one way to do this. The Academic Alert system is not punitive and does not appear on your transcript or academic record. Academic Alerts are intended to alert you of potential problems while you still have an opportunity to address them. It's a mechanism by which instructors connect students through their academic advisor to university support resources that may be of help (e.g., tutoring, academic coaching, etc.). It is also an opportunity for faculty to let you know what changes you can make to achieve success in the course and engage in a learning partnership with them. This is a way to open conversation between you, the instructor, and the advisor so that together you can work out how you can achieve your educational goals.

Please know: Academic difficulty is common, and these interventions can help you improve your performance!

Academic Support and Access Center

The [Academic Support and Access Center \(ASAC\)](#) supports the academic development and educational goals of all American University students and is committed to providing access for individuals with disabilities within the university's diverse community.

Academic Support and Learning Resources

The ASAC also hosts a variety of supports for students such as:

- [Academic Coaching](#): 1-on-1 studying and planning strategy sessions.
- [Academic Resource Library](#): Tips for learning, studying, and more.
- [Writing Center](#): Offers skilled peer to peer coaching for students at any point in the writing process.
- [Supplemental Instruction](#): Academic peer support from students who have already excelled in difficult classes current students are taking.

Library Resources

All Bender Library resources can be accessed [here](#). The library offers tutorials and access to research librarians. Please contact Associate Librarian Shaunda Vasudev (svasudev@american.edu) who specializes in International Studies if you want help with researching a topic or assignment or would like an orientation on how to find resources in the library. You can book an appointment with her [here](#).

Get Help from a Research Librarian: A research librarian can help you find high-quality information for your research projects and can save you time. For a quick question, librarians are available on chat 24/7. You can also [request a](#)

[personal meeting](#) with a subject specialist librarian.

Section 9: Student Support Services

Center for Diversity & Inclusion (CDI)

CDI is dedicated to enhancing LGBTQ, multicultural, first-generation, and women's experiences on campus and to advancing AU's commitment to respecting and valuing diversity by serving as a resource and liaison to students, staff, and faculty on issues of equity through education, outreach, and advocacy. It is located on the 2nd floor of Mary Graydon Center (202-885-3651, MGC 201 & 202).

The Office of the Dean of Students

[The Office of the Dean of Students](#) supports student learning through programs and services that promote growth and development, communicate the values and standards of the AU community, and advocate for students' needs.

Services offered:

- Help with personal difficulties such as hospitalization, injury, extended illness, family problems or mental health concerns that affect one's academic success. Students wishing to take a medical leave of absence must provide documentation to the [Dean of Students Office](#) supporting such action and must also meet with the Dean of Students prior to returning from a leave of absence.
- Free and confidential [Psychological Services](#) for a wide variety of concerns as well as [Group Therapy](#) options.
- [You@american](#) is American University's student portal for mental and physical health. Find tips and tools for everything from your mental and physical health to friendships and finding balance.
- [Well-Being programs and services](#) to support responsible decision-making and healthy lifestyles. Programs on important issues facing students such as alcohol and other drugs, sexual assault, body image, stress management and civility are being offered.
- Referrals to campus resources to support academic and personal success.

Disability Accommodations

To access academic accommodations due to a disability, students must follow [a three-step documentation process](#). Please note the priority deadlines for submitting accommodation requests and more information about [general documentation guidelines](#).

Call 202-885-3360 to schedule an appointment with an ASAC Counselor.