

Philanthropy and Civic Engagement
Prof. Victoria Rosner
IDSEM-UG 2206
Fall 2026
Mondays & Wednesdays: 9:30 to 10:45am
Room 801, NYU Gallatin

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Gallatin 802

Office Hours: Monday 4:30-5:30 pm and all other dates by appointment through

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Course Assistant: Ariana Oliver, ao2928@nyu.edu

Course Description

Is philanthropy a powerful tool for justice or a symptom of systemic failure? Or both? This course functions as both a humanities seminar and a real-world grant-making lab, where students move between the philosophical "why" and the practical "how" of giving. We'll learn about different approaches to philanthropy and explore its history to learn how factors like ethics, nationalism, and enterprise influence the philanthropic redistribution of wealth.

This is not a simulation: operating as a collective board of directors, the class will research, debate, and ultimately distribute class funds (upwards of \$40,000) to organizations selected by you, the students. Across the semester, students will transform theory into action, deciding together how to shift resources from the classroom into the community. Moving from Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth" to contemporary calls to "decolonize wealth," we will investigate the history and culture of American giving.

We will read across the humanities and social sciences—from Virginia Woolf's critiques of patriarchal capital to Edgar Villanueva's figuring of philanthropy as medicine to Janet Poppendieck's analysis of U.S. reliance on volunteer-driven emergency food distribution to Peter Singer's paradigm of "effective altruism." How do we balance sustainability with productive disruption? How do we weigh immediate needs against systemic change? By the end of the term, you will have moved beyond the role of a student and into the role of a practitioner, making final, important investments in the future of our community.

Course Objectives/Learning Goals

- Students understand the history and culture of US philanthropy
- Students will reflect on their own relationship to giving practices, past, present and future
- Students will learn how to frame and define complex problems and integrate knowledge from disparate fields.
- Students will learn how to advocate for their ideas in ways that respect others.

- Students will acquire skills in grantmaking, teambuilding and collaboration, communication, and research.

Required Texts - you are required to purchase hard copies of the following books

Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1935)

ISBN: 978-1543100716

Carnegie, Andrew. *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (1889)

ISBN : 979-8596094138

Poppendieck, Janet. *Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (1999)

ISBN: 978-0140245561

Schiller, Amy. *The Price of Humanity: How Philanthropy Went Wrong and How to Fix It* (2023)

ISBN: 978-1685890223

Singer, Peter. *The Most Good You Can Do* (2016)

ISBN: 978-0300219869

Walker, Darren. *From Generosity to Justice: A New Gospel of Wealth* (2021)

ISBN: 978-1633310773

Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas* (1938)

ISBN: 978-0156901772

Assignments

All assignments should be submitted electronically through Brightspace.

Assignment 1 (individual): Identification of needs. In about 2-3 pages, what do you think are the most important needs that philanthropy should address and why? What is your criteria for identifying those needs? How can and should philanthropy address them? You must draw on at least three sources, which can include course readings, news stories, academic essays and books, or interviews with professors or other experts. **Due September 21.**

Assignment 2 (group): After discussion of each group member's version of Assignment 1, produce a collaborative document of 3-5 pages outlining your group's goals and philosophy. This document will be your roadmap as you select and research organizations to receive class funds. Recognizing the many different kinds of organizations and approaches to addressing needs, you will need to make specific priorities that are practical and attainable. Not all goals are compatible with each other. If you do not find yourself making difficult choices, you are missing something. In evaluating this assignment, know that I will look for logical consistency! Include at least three examples of organizations that would align with your group's goals and philosophy. **Due October 7.**

Assignment 3 (individual): Philanthropic autobiography. In 3-5 pages, write the story of your life as a giver and a recipient of philanthropic gifts. What kinds of giving/receiving experiences have you had? How have these shaped your goals as a giver? What kinds of organizations are most important to you and why? Are there philanthropists who serve as models for you? Your essay should also look to the future. How do you understand your relationship to your community? Do you see philanthropy as playing a role in your adult life? Note: this statement

does not require you to make any specific commitment about giving; it is an exercise in reflection. Your paper should make reference to at least three course readings. **Due November 2.**

Deadline to post Giving Pledge to unlock course funds: November 4.

Site visits (group): Site visits are a required element of this course. Working in groups of at least two students, each student will visit at least two organizations, each of which needs to have been selected by you or another member of your group. No later than **November 17** please email me and **[course assistant]** with the subject line “site visit report” stating the name of the organizations you visited and the dates of the visits. Graded P/F as part of your participation/group work grade.

In-class midterm (individual): In this 30-minute, closed book midterm, you will be asked questions about the class readings to date. A blue book will be provided. **In-class November 16.**

Assignment 4 (group): Final memo. In a collaboratively written memo of at least 5 pages, each group should identify the leading organization your group has selected to move to the final round of decision-making for funding. You should describe the criteria you used to arrive at your decision, including a discussion of the organizations that were not selected as finalists, the specific merits of the finalist, and how it aligns with the giving goals and philosophy described in the first group memo. The memo should reflect serious study of your selected organization, identifying mission, program effectiveness, capacity of management and board to lead the organization, fiscal strength, etc. Students will need to interview a representative from the charity (face-to-face or over skype). The memo should identify the amount needed to make an impact at the organization, and make a convincing case for why it deserves that portion of our class’s giving dollars. At least two of the course readings should be included substantially in the discussion. **Due December 7.**

Assignment 5 (group): Group Presentations. To accompany your memo, your group should design a 10–minute presentation to share with the rest of the class. This will be your final opportunity to pitch your organization and the gift amount you think they need. **Due December 7.**

Assignment 6 (group): Gift letter. Prepare for Giving Day ceremony. As part of this work, prepare a letter to the recipient of the gift that justifies the gift to the foundation, and letters of declination to non-funded organizations that members of your group visited. Letters should be sent to the course assistant no later than (note the tight turnaround on this) **Due December 9.**

Grading

Assignment 1: 15%

Assignment 2: 15%

In-class midterm: 15%

Assignment 3: 15%

Assignment 4: 15%

Assignment 5: 10%

Assignment 6: 5%

Class participation and group work (incl. site visits): 10%

Note: there is no assignment in this class after the last day of class. Students will be invited to speak at our giving day ceremony about the class and the organization(s) selected to receive funding. Details to follow.

Attendance Policy

You are expected to attend each seminar meeting and to arrive promptly. Excessive absence or lateness will result in a lowered or even a failing grade. If you miss a class, you are still responsible for turning in any assignment due that day, and for notifying me about the absence.

You are expected to complete the assigned reading for the day prior to the start of class, and to have questions, ideas, and provocations to share with the rest of the class in discussion. You are also expected to bring a copy of the reading to the class where it will be discussed.

Electronic Devices

Research has shown that the use of laptops and tablets impedes learning. Class policy is that you may not use electronic devices in class except by special permission of the instructor, arranged in advance. You will need to obtain paper copies of all class readings and bring them to class.

Writing Fundamentals

At Gallatin, all students are asked to become familiar with and use one of three established citation styles: Chicago, MLA, or APA. In this class, I ask that you use MLA. For guidance on how to use Chicago, MLA, and APA as well as other useful tips on writing, please refer to owl.purdue.edu.

AI

AI is quickly reshaping the way that many of us solve problems and complete tasks. The question of AI's impact on education is an open one, and I invite you to join me in figuring it out. We'll talk about this in class.

Students with Disabilities

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists, scientists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)

Class schedule

Wednesday, September 2

Introductions and a challenge

Monday, September 7: Labor Day-- NO CLASS

Wednesday, September 9: Roots of Modern Philanthropy

Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (1889)

Bill Gates, "Harvard Commencement Address" (2007)*

Monday, September 14: Roots of Philanthropy part 2

Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, chps. IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, XIV.

Register for Philanthropy Lab Student Portal and complete pre-course survey

9/15/26 (Tuesday/no class) **Fall '26 Add/Drop Deadline**

Wednesday, September 16: Roots of Philanthropy part 3

Addams continued

Freeman, Tyrone. *Madame C.J. Walker's Gospel of Giving: Black Women's Philanthropy During Jim Crow* (Introduction and Conclusion)*

Monday, September 21:

Discussion and signing of Philanthropy Lab grant letter

Assignment #1 Due (Be prepared to talk about your paper in class.)

Wednesday, September 23: Group work begins

Guest speaker, Jarrell Daniels

Group assignments; groups discuss roles and responsibilities, and overall goals for giving. Optional: choose a name for your group.

Monday, September 28:

Groups meet with Ariana

Wednesday, September 30: Poverty and hunger

Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity*, Introduction and chs. 1, 2, 7, 8, Conclusion

Monday, October 5: Poverty and hunger part 2

Jeanette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (selections) (2006)*

A Place at the Table (dir. Lori Silverbush and Kristi Jacobson) (2013)*

Wednesday, October 7:

Guest speaker, Erika Augustine

Assignment #2 Due

Monday, October 12: **No Class**

NYU Fall Break / Indigenous People's Day

Wednesday, October 14: Monday Classes meet. Effective altruism

Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*

Singer, "What Should a Billionaire Give – and What Should You?" (2006)*

Monday, October 19:

Zoom Visit from Class evaluators

Wednesday, October 21:

Guest speaker, Beatrice Welters

Monday, October 26: Effective altruism part 2

Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, cont.

Wednesday, October 28: Evaluating Nonprofits

Workshop: How to Evaluate Nonprofit Organizations [led by Ariana]

Review <http://givingpledge.org>

Monday, November 2: Bread or roses?

Schiller, *The Price of Humanity*

Assignment #3 Due

Wednesday, November 4: Bread or roses? Part two

Schiller, *The Price of Humanity*

Post Giving Pledge in the Philanthropy Lab portal (be prepared to discuss in class)

Monday, November 9:

Guest speakers: Ann and Andrew Tisch

Wednesday, November 11: Towards social equality

Woolf, *Three Guineas*

Monday, November 16: **In Class Midterm**

Midterm

Site visit reports from groups in class

Wednesday, November 18: White Saviors

Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex” *The Atlantic* (2012)*

Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden” (1899)*

Monday, November 23: Colonization/Decolonization

Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth*, 2nd ed. (2021) (selections)*

Tsetse Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (selections)*

Wednesday, November 25: Colonization/Decolonization 2

Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth*, 2nd ed. (2021) (selections)

Tsetse Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (selections)

November 26-27: NYU Thanksgiving Recess

Monday, November 30: A New Gospel of Wealth?

Darren Walker, *From Generosity to Justice: A New Gospel of Wealth*. (2021)

Complete end of course survey by Monday, November 30 (Final deadline to complete end of course survey to unlock funding)

Wednesday, December 2: Extreme altruism and the future of kinship

Larissa MacFarquhar, “For Do-Gooders, It Is Always Wartime,” and “Kidneys” (2015) *

Richard Powers, “A Little More Than Kin” (2021)*

Monday, December 7:

Distribute group memos to the class

Groups present to the class

Final presentations

Assignment #4 and #5 due

Wednesday, December 9:

Group presentations conclude

Assignment #6 Due by 5:00 PM

Friday, December 11; Saturday, December 12; or Sunday, December 13

TIME TBD (3 hours)

Class Debate in room 801

- Read other groups’ final memos
- Vote on amounts to be given to each organization
- Groups notify selected organizations and invite them to the giving ceremony

Monday, December 14: Giving Day Ceremony

It’s the culmination of all your hard work; the chosen organizations will send representatives to receive their funding and we’ll celebrate our Giving Day as a class.

You made it! Congratulations!!