In 2010, a year in which the United States economy was still slowly recovering from one of the worst economic downturns since the Great Depression, one in every 50 dollars produced by Americans was donated to charities – totaling over $290 billion. Over 64 million Americans over the age of 16 volunteered, 26.8 percent of the population. Within a month after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in early 2010, more than three-quarters of a billion dollars had been donated for the relief effort in the United States, about as much as was contributed after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in a comparable period of time. Examples of American generosity such as these are not hard to find and usually stand in sharp contrast to how people in other countries behave. This course will examine why Americans care as much as they seem to, the various ways in which philanthropy in the United States occurs, what it has accomplished, and the challenges it faces. Readings will be drawn from a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines and a comparative perspective used to highlight significant differences (and similarities) with other countries. Students will be expected to complete an original term paper or project on an aspect of American philanthropy, as well as write short essays.

The instructor, Leslie Lenkowsky, is professor of public affairs and philanthropic studies at Indiana University, an associate with the Center on Philanthropy. His career has included serving as chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Federal government organization which sponsors AmeriCorps.