In 2011, a year in which the United States economy was still in the aftermath of one of the worst economic downturns since the Great Depression, one in every 50 dollars produced by Americans was donated to charities totaling nearly $300 billion. Over 64 million Americans over the age of 16 volunteered, 26.5 percent of the population. In the ten days following Hurricane Sandy last year, Americans donated $174 million to help the victims; in a comparable period after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in early 2010, they gave twice as much, and after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, they contributed $740 million in the days following the storm. 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 the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, an affiliate faculty member of the School of Philanthropy. His career has included serving as chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Federal government agency which sponsors AmeriCorps.