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Elevating Critical Thinking Through Social Media

David Campbell's "Philanthropy and Civil Society" course at SUNY Binghamton University is all about cultivating the decision making of grantmaking into a thoughtful, reflexive process. His students—like Celine Nehme, a senior in the public administration program—are tasked with granting \$10,000 by the end of the semester to local organizations.



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Celine, who took the course in her junior year, relates, "I decided to take the course because I was interested in learning about nonprofits in a hands-on way." Since 2009, students have given away more than \$100,000. For the approximately 25 students who take the course each semester, there are two main components. The first is dedicated to reading about topics in philanthropy, and the second is focused on the grantmaking process. Students start by focusing on building their knowledge of the nonprofit sector.

One way that students are invited to stay up-to-date on what's happening in the sector is through Twitter. David explains, "When Twitter was becoming more widely used, my colleagues and I began to brainstorm about how to use it effectively in the classroom. I immediately saw that it was a great place to quickly amass a breadth of information about a given topic. It's an effective way to stay up-to-date with philanthropic trends and to keep a finger on the community pulse." For any grantmaker, staying informed is key.

However, Celine shares, this isn't the only use for Twitter in the classroom: "We use Twitter for a weekly contest; the person who authors the best tweet each week gets to choose where to give a donation." She explains, "We have an alumni donor who matches an optional contribution made by the students and Professor Campbell. So each week there is about \$75 to give away." David hopes that by engaging in the larger conversation about philanthropy on Twitter, and then by deciding how to donate the contest winnings, "students are simultaneously asked to think about their giving and decision-making styles." Additionally, he explains, "I want my students to practice using social media in a professional way," which he hopes



will “organically elevate students’ understanding of the field to a higher level of awareness.”

The reflection doesn’t stop there; each time a student wins the contest, they’re required to write a blog post to share their thought processes in deciding where their donation will go. Celine recounts, “The blogs became especially useful during the decision-making part of the grantmaking process. Students used the blog posts as a platform for advocating their perspectives and opinions about organizations and issues.” Since the goal of the course is ultimately to come to a collective decision about which organizations to fund, David explains, “I wanted to give students multiple platforms to think about these decisions. Students have large and small group conversations in class, but for those ideas that don’t come as quickly,

they have the blog as another place to think and engage.” Celine agrees, “Some students were more comfortable writing, some speaking, but either way, there was an extra space for dialogue which added more voices to our in-class conversations.”

 Tip: Follow conversations in #philanthropy and #youthphil on Twitter and blog about your grantmaking experiences!

By adding Twitter and blogging to the usual research, site visits, lectures, and group discussions, students are able to incorporate new voices into what ultimately becomes a \$10,000 conversation.



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This case study was written by Kylie Musolf and developed for Foundation Center’s Youth Giving project. Visit youthgiving.org to view other free resources related to engaging young people in grantmaking.
