Tulane students rethink philanthropy with trust-based model

January 16, 2026 9:00 AM Jackson Jones
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Tulane School of Liberal Arts students celebrate with grant recipients Andrea Peoples and Dana Reed after awarding a $10,000 performing arts grant through a trust-based philanthropy model.

Tulane University students set aside the traditional rules of grantmaking and put trust at the center of their philanthropic work in Professor Leslie Scott's Philanthropy and Social Change course in the School of Liberal Arts.

The students had a $10,000 performing arts grant to award using a trust-based philanthropy model, bypassing the lengthy application processes common in nonprofit funding. After a semester of research, discussion and debate, the class voted to split the grant between local nonprofit Upturn Arts and individual artist Andrea Peoples.

Rather than asking organizations to compete through paperwork, students took on the full responsibility of grantmaking themselves. Acting as researchers, advocates and decision-makers, they evaluated community needs, built relationships with artists and organizations, and made funding decisions from start to finish. The approach was designed to reduce the administrative burden that often disadvantages smaller nonprofits — particularly in the performing arts sector, where limited staffing and tight budgets are common.

Early in the semester, students met one-on-one with representatives from their assigned organizations at coffee shops across New Orleans. They arrived prepared, having conducted background research and developed thoughtful questions to respect the time and expertise of their community partners. These conversations became the foundation of each student's advocacy work, allowing organizations to remain largely hands-off after the initial meetings.

Even with minimal follow-up, students observed how demanding traditional grant requirements can be. Many performing arts nonprofit leaders rely on secondary income, which can delay responses to emails and meetings — underscoring how a 20-page grant application can pull time and energy away from mission-driven work.

Trust-based philanthropy prioritizes relationships and flexibility over rigid reporting requirements, often providing unrestricted support that allows organizations to respond to changing needs. By shifting labor from applicants to funders, the model seeks to create a more even-handed and effective approach to giving.

Through the course, students gained firsthand experience with an alternative philanthropic framework — and a deeper understanding of the power dynamics embedded in traditional funding systems. In awarding funding to Upturn Arts, represented by Dana Reed, and individual artist Andrea Peoples, students engaged in a process grounded in mutual respect, shared accountability and trust, demonstrating how reimagining philanthropy can lead to more meaningful impact.