

Curriculum and Suggested Research Topics

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In this section we present a number of thematic categories useful for educators creating lesson plans, students conducting research, and anyone else interested in investigating the historical development of diversity and pluralism where they live.

Following our chronological-integrative approach, the topics presented here are intended to be applicable to any locality and inclusive of any and all racial, ethnic, religious and/or cultural groups. For instance, a discussion of settlement patterns, departures and arrivals, and the evolving ethnic character of a particular location does not limit us to a certain time period or to any one ethnic group. In place of “Connecticut River Valley” one could easily write “central Texas,” “the Pacific Northwest,” or “Memphis.” Similarly, consideration of the economic life of any town or neighborhood would address matters of social class, family life, technology and workplace arrangements that are not limited to the experiences of any particular group in society. In accord with our general approach, we wish to illuminate both the shared *and* unique experiences of all Americans.

For each topic below, there is a short discussion of key ideas plus several questions useful for either classroom discussion or for research projects. The five topics presented here are Departures and Arrivals, Cultural Geography, Economic Life, Political Culture, and Cultural Arts. Of course, the categories are not mutually exclusive, and any combination of ideas and questions regarding social and cultural diversity in the U.S. will enhance understanding of Our Plural History. A Student Research Guide is also available in the Resources section of the website.

DEPARTURES & ARRIVALS

Everyone but the indigenous First Peoples came from somewhere else. Native Americans constitute distinct ethnic and cultural groups forced by European immigrants to migrate from their home territories and resettle in other places. How were Native American cultures affected by the arrival of Europeans?

The slave trade maintained by Europeans created a forced migration of Africans to the Western Hemisphere. Notions of race and exclusion were present from the earliest days. How did the idea of race shape “American” identity?

Later arrivals came from all over the world, motivated by both “push” and “pull” factors. What particular political, economic or religious circumstances led people to leave their home country and choose an uncertain existence in the U.S.? What drew immigrants and migrants to the Connecticut River Valley? What artifacts, hopes and aspirations did they bring with them? What aspects of culture have been obstacles to the incorporation of new groups?

The Connecticut River Valley played a crucial role in the Underground Railroad. Where were slaves escaping from? What happened once they made it here? What did they bring with them?

During the Great Migration, many African-Americans left oppressive conditions in the Jim Crow South for other parts of the country. What were their expectations? What did they leave behind? What conditions, welcomes, or resistance did they encounter upon arrival in a new place? How were new communities created?

Immigrants from around the world continue to come to the Connecticut River Valley. How are the experiences of later-arriving immigrants similar to or different from the experiences of earlier-arriving immigrants?

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Cultural geography considers how culture is linked to the ways that people organize themselves in a particular place, how ethnic groups situate themselves in relation to other groups, and how questions of national origin, language, religion and race shape the landscape.

How have human cultures been shaped by the physical environment? How have people changed the landscape or physical environment?

Where did different ethnic communities and immigrant groups settle in the Connecticut River Valley? How did they interact with other groups? What made certain locations inviting? Were some places off-limits to certain groups? Where do new groups go when they come here? Which factors help immigrants create new communities away from their homeland? Is it a matter of location, particular gathering places, cultural traits, economic resources?

Particular places in the Connecticut River Valley came to be associated with certain ethnic or immigrant groups. How did this happen? What forms of expression—signs & symbols, building types or street scenes—distinguish one ethnic neighborhood from another? How do identifiably ethnic neighborhoods interact, change identities over time, or last from generation to generation? How have the processes of cultural diffusion (spreading out over time) and acculturation (adopting some aspect of another culture) played out in the Connecticut River Valley? How do cultural landscapes overlap and interact?

ECONOMIC LIFE

For many, the American Dream connotes the opportunity to achieve economic security, even prosperity, regardless of one's origins or background. Americans value social mobility more highly than inherited status, and the class system in the U.S. has always been fluid. Nonetheless, ethnic minorities and immigrant groups have frequently found themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, excluded from opportunities by prejudice, discrimination, "covenants" and codes.

Many immigrants did make the transition from the margins to the mainstream, from the working class to the middle class. Second- and third-generation immigrants often enjoy better living standards as a consequence of their parents' and grandparents' hard work.

The experience of ethnic minorities and immigrant groups in American economic life is broad and varied, from factory labor to the professions. Itinerant Jewish peddlers share experiences with migrant farm workers, teachers and doctors bridge different communities. Technological developments and industrialization opened the door to new opportunities but also displaced and divided communities and towns. More recently, the loss of manufacturing jobs has hit some communities particularly hard.

The establishment of ethnic neighborhoods and enclaves allowed many to open businesses that primarily served local communities. Grocery stores, delis, restaurants, saloons, barbershops and nail salons became de facto meeting places and community centers.

The household became and remains a locus of economic activity. The cult of domesticity defined the private sphere as primarily feminine, but women of all ethnicities have been able to extending the boundaries of women's work while sustaining family life and preparing children for coping with life's circumstances, economic and otherwise. Cooking and crafts, education and cultural instruction reflect the influence of women on the lives of family members and the larger community.

Who participates in the economic life of the city or community? How are the forms of economic life shaped by ethnic, racial or religious factors? How did industrialization and technological change produce divisions between cultural groups in the United States? How does economic life bring together people of different cultural backgrounds?

POLITICAL CULTURE

Who is an "American?" The answer to that question has changed over time. The debate over who is and who is not "American" reflects ideas of culture, ethnicity, race and social class. The history of the U.S. reveals a tension between America's dedication to universal principles of freedom and democracy and the sense that "Americanism" must be defended against alien influences.

Many argue that citizens are bound together by a belief in the American Creed, laid out by the founders in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and recognized in practice by Tocqueville and others: a faith in liberty, constitutionalism, the rule of law, democracy, individualism, and cultural and political egalitarianism. Yet, as the United States expanded its territory, struggled with the legacies of slavery, incorporated some immigrants while excluding and restricting others, and sought to insure civil rights to all of its citizens, notions of American identity have evolved.

The American Creed has always coexisted with its antithesis: nativism and ethnic anxiety, a strong sense of White identity and violent hostility toward other races, recurrent cultural panics with

ethnic and racial overtones, a feeling of dispossession and alien occupation and the theme of “Taking Back America.”

Social Darwinism—the idea that the members of some cultural groups are superior to members of other groups—is as American as the belief in ethnic, racial and cultural egalitarianism. How have racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants been defined at various times in opposition to “American” identity?

In the American context, “freedom” is a value whose meaning and scope has been contested over time, shaped not only in congressional debates and political treatises but also on plantations and picket lines, in barrooms and churches, by politicians and former slaves, union organizers, freedom riders, and suffragettes. Democracy not only permits but encourages the promotion of particular interests and the demand for inclusive rights.

How have ethnic minorities and immigrant groups asserted their right to participation and representation in the political arena? People participate in the political process not only through elections but also through protest and the mobilization of local organizations and interest groups. What forms have political participation and representation taken in the Connecticut River Valley? How have ethnic communities and immigrant groups attained a voice in the American system? What have they fought for? What have they fought against?

CULTURAL ARTS

Taking art as “the representation of experience”: What can painting, sculpture and handicrafts, poetry and prose, music and song, foods and fashion tell us about the people who produced it?

How have issues of diversity and pluralism been depicted in American literature, art and music? How have men and women from different backgrounds and experiences presented their particular visions of American society and culture? Do writers and artists from different ethnic, racial or religious backgrounds speak with different voices? What forces guide particular modes of expression and the uses of language, both written and oral?

What is the relationship of language to culture? How are issues of literacy, dialect and slang related to issues of ethnicity, race, religion and social class? What is the function of language within immigrant communities? What is the function of language for the larger society? How is language (or music, art or fashion) related to “identity”?

Mass media and the entertainment industry also constitute cultural arts and the representation of experience. How have ethnic communities and immigrant groups used these forms—newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, film, performance, dance—to articulate their experiences? How have ethnic minorities and immigrant groups been portrayed in the mass media?

How does the interaction of multiple languages, religions, and ethnicities shape popular culture? What is more American than pizza, falafel, and llapingachos?