

Cultural Studies Strand Descriptions

Geography, Place & Culture:

This strand explores the “cultural production” of place and space. In other words, rather than simply thinking of physical places, landmarks, areas, and regions as “natural” geographical spaces, students are instead encouraged to consider the complex ways in which particular spaces and places assume and produce identities (often marked by forms of power and exclusion), how boundaries and borders are produced and policed, and which groups are included or excluded, literally or symbolically, from belonging to those spaces. For example, think of the very different connotations and associations that come to mind when we think of “East Austin” or “West Austin.” Space, as the French theorist Henri Lefebvre once said, is a product filled with ideologies; thus students in this strand are encouraged to consider questions of power, movement, culture, and identity in relation to geography and place. Examples of past Connecting Experiences in this strand include:

- Internships at the Harry Ransom Center.
- Research on modern Dia de los Muertos celebrations and their place in Mexican and Mexican American communities.
- Internship at the Texas State History Museum.
- Research on the architecture of the Mission Nuestra Senora de la Limpia Conception del Socorro and its impact on Native American Piro culture.

Popular Culture:

This strand explores the politics, meanings, and significances of popular culture in the lives of individuals, groups, and communities. Students are encouraged to think critically about the competing definitions of “the popular” and “popular culture.” Popular culture is often positively associated with that which is well-liked by many people—popular music, for example, or Hollywood films. Yet it also has negative associations when the very popularity of popular culture means it is accorded less worth and value because it is seen to be ephemeral and shallow as compared to “more serious” high cultural forms. This way of thinking about popular culture raises a number of questions for students in this strand, such as who creates and profits from popular culture; the relationship of popular culture to commercial culture; the effects of industrialization, globalization, and technological change on popular culture; and the ideological or political role of popular culture within wider society. The study of popular culture includes the practices of everyday life such as television, popular music, fashion, romance novels, sport, and film. Examples of past Connecting Experiences in this strand include:

- Internships on a film production crew.
- Research on media portrayals of Chicano/Chicana culture.
- Research on the cultures of food in the US South.

Identities & Communities:

This strand focuses on the importance of a sense of belonging in the modern world, or put another way, the ways in which we construct, perform and maintain identities and communities. Social theorists have argued that modernity creates an increased sense of isolation and individualism, meaning that we increasingly view ourselves as self-contained, autonomous individuals, rationally pursuing our self-interested and directed goals. But we are also social animals who often need and require social interaction with others. We form complex group formations from families and friendship circles, through to larger communities such as generational subcultures, ethnic groupings, sporting and music affiliations, and even national identifications. It is through our cultural practices (the things that we do) and our cultural representations (the words, images, and thoughts that we use to make sense of the world) that we create our identities, that are both partly given to us from our society and partly shaped by our own motivations,

ambitions, and goals. Identity, then, is not a simply a matter of describing who we are but also a political question and site of contestation and struggle in suggesting who we might become. Examples of past Connecting Experiences in this strand include:

- Textual analysis of Tea Party identity.
- Internship with Center for Sex and Culture in San Francisco.