

History Electives in High School: Making Social Studies Engaging

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Abstract

The majority of public high school students in California are missing out on history. Many students may not see it that way, but that is because they have little understanding of what it means to appreciate history. The traditional high school history survey courses, US History and world history, provide an overview of “everything that ever happened,” while going into very little detail regarding the people, controversies and rationales behind the events that shaped our nation and the world. High school students do not realize that studying history is more than sweeping overviews and general knowledge. Providing students with an eclectic choice of in-depth history electives would alleviate this misconception. Elective courses on themes such as women’s history, US immigration, and local history open the idea of specific areas of interest and expertise in social studies. Simply the availability of these classes, even for the students who choose not to take them, can show students they can study, learn and focus on a myriad of specific topics, opening up a world of interests that they may have never otherwise considered.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

It took me a long time to realize my passion for history. Like many high school students in California, I found the topics boring, insignificant and isolated from the events we were studying. Many people attribute this common attitude to disengaged and jaded teachers, or the ineffectiveness of traditional teaching methods. I contend that if high school students were offered a variety of history elective courses, interest and performance in these new classes would be very high, as well as causing a spike in performance in required survey history courses.

It has been my experience, both as a student and educator, that the high school curriculum and standards for history classes were not created to build a foundation of interest or foster a passion for American history. Rather, it seems that the intent by textbook publishers and those who create the content standards is to present history as a linear line toward progress, devoid of moral and ethical conflict. This presentation of history as an unwavering march forward into a better future leaves students without a sense of the realism of history. They may not consciously comprehend the classroom omissions and “miss-facts,” but on some level students pick up on the monotony regarding American history, viewing it as a list of rights and wrongs, good guys and bad, concluding that the all mistakes were just misunderstandings by American leaders who meant well.

Mandatory courses are often too broad. Textbooks frequently and by design downplay controversy and overlook conflicting views that helped shape our country and the world. I don't think it needs to be this way, I think that more classes and adjustments to the high school standards and curriculum would build a genuine intellectual interest in the American past (Loewen, 2007).

### Statement of Problem

The only history requirement established by the California Department of Education (CDE) is that high schools include survey courses in United States and World history. Many students never get the chance to choose a specific topic of history to explore. In my classroom experience, I have found that nearly half of my students were not aware that college history courses can be entirely based on specific time periods, cultures, or events. Often, students think that studying history means glancing over the complete history of an entire nation or, in some cases, the whole world. Survey courses can only provide vague overviews and lack the time and focus to investigate the reasons, ideas, controversies and personalities behind events that shape nations. Not having the option to study specifics short-changes both the student and history itself. Evans (2004) believes that a difference of opinion among board members, politicians and faculty members within schools and districts accounts for the lack of elective history. He says the competing political beliefs, ideologies and educational theories provide the red tape to keep teachers from designing and offering elective courses.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to bring attention to a flaw in California public school education. Survey courses in United States and world history fall short of allowing in-depth and analytical study of specific events. California's educational leaders need to recognize the importance of expanded social studies courses in high school. Offering elective history courses might help students cultivate an interest in history and open them up to the idea of specific history courses and developing an expertise in certain areas.

### Research Question

How would students benefit from expanded social studies curriculum to include history electives? What kinds of courses would generate increased interest among high school students?

### Theoretical Rationale

The motivation and ideas that have led to this project fall under the educational Theory of Engagement. The Schechty Center (2009) describes it as follows: The Theory of Engagement focuses attention on student motivation and the strategies needed to increase the prospect that schools and teachers will be positioned to increase the presence of engaging tasks and activities in the routine life of the school. This theory states that for students to be engaged, they must find the material personally meaningful and the tasks associated with the lessons must carry an extrinsic value. This means that students must *want* to know what is in the lesson. This is rarely the case in high school survey courses. If students have always been fascinated by Native American history, a United States history survey course will do very little to foster this interest. If students knew that as a senior they could take a course that chronicles Native Americans, not only would they enjoy that course, but they would work harder and do better in the United States survey course.

Another basic principle of the Theory of Engagement is the element of choice for students. Students who have the opportunity to choose the nature of an assignment or the lesson structure will invariably take pride and find a sense of ownership in it, a connection to the class. The result may be that students develop a vested interest in the class, and are motivated to do well.

## Assumptions

Current California high school curriculum and standards for history classes were not created to build a foundation of interest or foster a passion of history. They fall short, and are inadequate for preparing high school students for further study. Students are disengaged with history, and generally dislike history courses. By adding classes and making changes to the high school standards and curriculum, students would have a chance to discover a genuine intellectual interest in the United States, local and world history.

Creative and relevant elective history courses might promote hard work and interest in both the new classes and the traditional history courses. In addition to the benefit for students, history teachers might benefit from being able to teach college style, history electives in their field of expertise.

## Background and Need

Students complain that history is boring and that what happened in the past is irrelevant to the world they are inheriting. Loewen (2007) believes this is partly due the mundane, and often inaccurate, nature of the most common textbooks used in US schools. Textbooks often report the past as a linear series of events devoid of controversy. Particularly when discussing events of American history, textbooks present actions by US leaders as the right and ethical decision. As educated citizens we know this not to be the case. Every decision and action brought forth by any world leader has several factors and circumstances. Presenting US history to students as straight line toward progress and morality is robbing them of the most interesting part about history: debate.



Zinn (2003) argues that it is the perspective from which we report history to students that alienates them from the past. He reports history from the viewpoint of the oppressed, rather than the oppressor. For instance he tells a story of a slave revolt from the perspective of the fugitive slaves, or a story concerning labor disputes in during the industrial revolution include the quotes and speeches from labor leaders. He tells American history through the eyes of everyday Americans, as opposed to relaying facts of events and quotes from politicians. This brand of American story telling creates realism and provides a connection that is sorely lacked in high school textbooks.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Research

### Introduction

Elective courses have the focus of much of the academic research on teaching history. Experts examined the benefits of, and need for elective course. Although the majority of this research is conducted in regard to art and music electives, the importance of academic electives has not been overlooked. Select researchers in the field of teaching social studies are leaders in the movement to expand and update the curriculum.

Evans (2004) suggests that while social studies education was once designed to create good and responsible citizens, the past few decades have turned toward a knowing for the sake of knowing approach, where curriculum is deeply influenced by commissions and committees. These groups design the curriculum to ensure that all students learn the same facts and focus on the same issues. This leaves little room to teach to student interest, much less room to focus on the teacher's area of expertise.

The primary concern in this field has been that US history courses in public high schools provide only a general and superficial understanding of the events and people that shaped our nation. The short length of the semester, speed of the course, and content that must be covered to abide by the curriculum standards, does not allow for an in-depth understanding of any of the lessons. There is simply too much to learn in too little time. The make-up of the courses does not allow any kind of understanding of the back story behind the people and events being studied. This section addresses in further detail the problem at hand and the research that establishes the foundation for this paper.

## Historical Context

Students graduate from California public high schools having never chosen a history elective. Many students do not know that there are college courses, fields of study and careers that deal with specific periods, places and events in history. Those students, who do not go on to college, never learn that studying history can open up one particular aspect that interests them. High school students need this exposure to eclectic history. They need to know that there is more than a series of wars and movements and changes in power. Students that do not choose a history elective also can benefit simply from knowing that there is more to history than a cursory review of events.

Ross (2006) states that social studies are lessons designed to prepare young men and women for active participation in our society. This has been the goal since colonial times. During the years following the American Revolution, religious education gave way to nationalistic education in order to develop a generation of loyal patriots. The omissions and inaccuracies that are found in the most common United States History high school text books can attest the fact that nationalism and blind patriotism are still the primary goals of social studies education. The writers of textbooks and developers of social studies curriculum would have one believe that critical thinking, understanding complex historical figures, and investigation of paradoxical moral and ethical behavior by American heroes is out of reach for “active participants” in our democracy.

Stanley (1994) offers a dynamic and well received framework for the purposes of social studies in school curriculum. Stanley states that social studies are designed to emphasize cultural transmission, or provide a critical reflection of it. This, in turn, results in either promoting social adaptation, or social transformation, respectively. Current social studies textbooks seem to have

all the controversy and American mistakes censored. As Loewen puts it, “Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation. Students exit history classes without having developed the ability to think coherently about social life.” He goes on to say, “Even though courses bulge with detail, even though the courses are so busy they can rarely reach 1960, our teachers and our textbooks still leave out most of what we need to know about the American past” (Loewen, 2010, p. 214). We cannot possibly promote critical reflection of the past, or accurately transmit the culture of a nation if students are not learning relevant or accurate history.

California public schools have content standards for social studies that were last updated in 1998 (CDE, 1998). Nowhere in content guidelines for high school students do we find any form of local or state history, nor do we find any form of history more specific than that of an entire nation. Survey courses in American and world history fall drastically short of providing the kind of depth of study necessary to truly analyze, reflect and understand the events and people that have shaped our culture, society and the role we, as a nation, play in the world.

#### Review of the Previous Research

Elective classes have long been an integral part of secondary school curriculum. However during the late 1970s and 1980s many electives were cut as national school leaders launched a “back to basics” campaign on education. A national fear of losing ground in education to other nations caused a cut back of many non-essential courses, including everything from physical education and music programs to advanced history and English courses. Instead, more effort was put into expanding math and science, as these areas have become the standard by which nations compare education with one another. After No Child Left Behind passed in 2001, even more electives were eliminated so that more resources could be put into the core classes. State and federal funding increasingly depended on standardized tests (Hu, 2008).

Deveci (2007) cites that time restrictions and student indifference are the primary causes for the lack of attention on current events in social studies classrooms. He states that current events can be beneficial in tying historical events to the lives of the students. Expansion of the curriculum to include more courses might allow for the time needed to include how history has shaped and continues to shape the world today. Student indifference derives from the survey courses lacking depth and causation. Classes that have the time and lesson structure to include cause and effect on today's world would go a long way in helping students understand what history is and why it is important.

Much of the debate about high school electives is associated with two competing theories in education: Ericsson's theory of expertise and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Ericsson's theory of expertise, in educational practice, requires deliberate practice of specific skills over time that challenges both cognitive and physical skills. Ericsson believes that to build an expertise, aptitude for certain fields must be identified early in education and students must be allowed and encouraged to focus on that precise field (Ericsson, 1991).

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences states that people derive learning through a multitude of approaches and topics and that help students learn in ways that are comfortable to them (Armstrong, 1998). Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has not been readily accepted within academic psychology. However, it has met with a strongly positive response from many educators. It has been embraced by a range of educational theorists and, significantly, applied by teachers and policymakers to the problems of schooling. A number of schools in North America have looked to structure curricula according to the intelligences, and to design classrooms and even whole schools to reflect the understandings that Howard Gardner develops. The theory can

also be found in use within pre-school, higher, vocational and adult education initiatives (Smith, 2008).

Another area of research to consider is the notion of developing student's general abilities and specific abilities. Theiler (2003) describes these approaches, "The *general abilities* approach professes that general yet innate abilities such as intelligence and personality allow one to achieve at different rates or levels than others in most, if not all, areas... The *specific abilities* view places its focus on innate abilities as well, but this point of view does not generalize abilities to all areas. Instead, the specific abilities view states that a person possesses innate abilities in a certain domain or domains. For example, Mozart, according to this perspective, possessed innate abilities in the domain of music, however he may not have possessed equal nor basic innate capabilities in other realms" (p 14). The general abilities approach lends itself to my ideas about expansion of electives to foster growth in a variety of academic areas.

Taylor (2004) reports on the International Academy, a high school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. *Newsweek* ranked the academy number 1 in the nation based on student achievement during and after high school. Much of the school's success is attributed to the extensive social studies program. "In their history courses, students are challenged to explore and weigh evidence, to defend their ideas, and create projects with real-life applications" (p 517). Because they take more history classes, the students are able to examine the events and people with greater detail and explore the causation of the past. The International Academy boasts a student body not only knows more history but one that has also developed a stronger appreciation for it.

In recent years electives in all academic areas have seen a rise in interest from faculty, students, and parents. This rise is in part to round out transcripts for elite colleges and also as a

chance for students to focus on specific interests, thus making academics more enjoyable.

Students tend not to skip electives, as they have chosen these classes (Hu, 2008).

Loewen (2010) presents an example of the kinds of critical questions students should be asking themselves following a survey course in American history: “The job [of teachers] is to bring into being the America of the future. At the end of the course, teachers can turn students loose to start doing that job. On what topic do they want to work? What defect in our society do they want to remedy? What policy-- public or private -- needs reversal? What issue do Americans need to rethink, aided by new information? How is history relevant to this topic?” (Loewen, p. 211).

### Special Collections

Private high schools often have the resources and freedom to design and implement their own courses that build upon survey courses. One private high school in Marin County offers several history electives that students find relevant and fascinating. Some examples of those courses are: American Cinema, South American History, The Arab world, Roots of Civilization, Modern Africa, Renaissance and Reformation, Cuban History, History of American Labor, Golden Ages, and Modern Ireland.

I spoke to a student who graduated from this high school, Kate Daley, a pseudonym (personal communication, April 27, 2011). Kate told me about the excitement students felt for these history electives and how much under-classmen looked forward to taking them. She mentioned that students worked hard in the survey courses as preparation for the electives. The history electives served Kate and her classmates as motivation and an incentive to study history. Students at this school are fortunate to have the opportunity to pick topics in history that have

particular meaning to them. Kate went on to say that she couldn't imagine high school without these electives and credits them for opening a world of historical interests to her.

### Summary

I argue that expanding the social studies curriculum in California public schools to include history electives specific to controversial issues or geographical regions allows students to narrow their focus and develop a clear understanding of history. Adding classes to the curriculum also puts into perspective that the mandated US History class is a survey course, that is to say, a very general overview of American history designed to give students the outline of our past, so that they can now fill in the details with specific courses and in-depth study.

There are many public and private schools in California that use the mandatory US history survey course as an appetizer to studying history. In those schools, students understand that there is so much more to history than general accounts and timeline of events that make up the majority of American history textbooks. It is the follow-up elective courses where students can truly develop a relationship to the past. Whether it is a course in the civil rights movement, a chronicle of immigration into the US, or Native American history, it is these types of courses that encourage further study after high school.



## Chapter 3 Method

### Description of Method

This study contains qualitative research interviews. This method is designed to cover a factual base from an expert in the field of study, as well as provide meanings and central themes in what the interviewee says (Kvale, 1996). As interviews are a personal form of data collection, they rely on discussion and opinion to clarify information.

### Sample and Site

One expert interview was conducted during this project. I spoke at length with a social science department chair from a public school that does not offer history electives. We discussed the possible benefits of such courses.

### Ethical Standards

This study adheres to ethical standards in conducting research on human subjects, following the policy established through the American Psychological Association. Additionally the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, approved, and assigned number 8275.

Data has been collected from the willing participant. The demographic information is accurate to retain the integrity of his thoughts and opinions and the perspective they come from. The participant was informed of the purpose of this research. The researcher has disguised all personally identifiable information, specifically the real name and school where he is employed.

### Access and Permissions

The department chair interviewed is an acquaintance of the author. The interview was conducted in accordance with all rules and regulations set forth by the Dominican University of California.

### Data Gathering Strategies

An interview was conducted in person in a conversational approach. I met with the interviewee and posed five questions. I used those questions as a starting point for dialogue on the topic. I recorded the interview and provided a transcript in this body of this report.

### Data Analysis Strategies

In going over the interview transcripts, it is important to look for common themes in responses.

Once common themes are identified, deviations and outlying answers should be considered to determine how they strengthen or weaken the common themes. Consideration of the participants' background and experience and that could affect their answers and attitudes.

Evaluation included whether the answers strengthen or weaken my own hypothesis and whether they result in the need for additional research or follow-up interviews. Going through the answers carefully is important to ensure that all important ground was covered and all of the questions were clearly stated and understood. A clear and concise conversation and email exchange is necessary for an effective use of the information obtained during the interview (Berkowitz, 1996).

## Chapter 4 Findings

### Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The interview I conducted was with Edward Coil, a pseudonym (personal communication, March 20, 2011). I interviewed Mr. Coil in his classroom at a public school in the northern part of the San Francisco Bay Area. Mr. Coil is the social science department chair and teaches mostly advanced placement and honors classes. He also teaches a psychology course which is an elective available for upper classmen. Mr. Coil is 50 years old and holds a Master of Science in psychology and counseling. He has been teaching for thirteen years, eight of those in the social sciences.

### Interview with Expert

The following is a written transcript of the interview with Mr. Coil:

Me: Does your school, a public school in Marin County, offer history elective?

Mr. Coil: If you call the AP [advanced placement] classes an elective, then yes. We offer an AP Euro. That is an alternative to world history for high achieving students. Junior year we offer AP US history. And for seniors the required government and economics courses have AP alternatives as well. And we offer psychology, which of course is not a history. That is only “elective” elective that our department offers other than APs.

Me: These classes all follow either state or district standards?

Mr. Coil: Psychology is whatever I want to do. I use the standards of the psychological association...what they recommend as far as teaching the standards for high school students. For the AP courses, the standards come from the AP board. And they align well enough with state standards that it works for them.

Me: So the only history electives are AP course. Does that come from the district?

Mr. Coil: No, that is my marketing. I get a pat on the back from the district for offering so many APs. When the private schools have so many AP courses, we need to have as many as possible. So part of it is my marketing and part of it is because I enjoy teaching them. It is great to have an outlet to teach the advanced kids. If we were to offer an elective, it probably wouldn't be something that (another local public school) offers. I think they offer women's history. It's never been proposed that we do it at this school, and budget cuts obviously make it impossible to execute such a thing. Someday it could happen that we have women's history or California history, but that will not be in the immediate future. A few people in my department have shown interest in teaching something such as anthropology.

Me: What do you think is the general feeling among the student body regarding history? I know you teach mostly AP students, but I am looking for the general population.

Mr. Coil: Right, the general population is going to be a bell curve of interest. I get some students that love it and don't want to work that hard, and of course the opposite is true. Some students hate it and think it's boring. So my job is, as a high school teacher, to engage all the kids, and try to make it interesting to all the kids, including those that come in thinking it isn't interesting. So that's part of the gig, part of teaching a regular history class. Teaching AP classes, or one reason or another, most of the students are already highly motivated which allows the class to cover more ground. No big problems with engagement there.

Me: As far as reaching kids with less interest, do you think more of those electives like women's history, California history would benefit those students and raise the interest in the core survey history courses?

Mr. Coil: I think it would be a motivator if it went the other way. Let me explain what I mean. If they could take [an elective] history course as a freshman or sophomore, something that they found really interesting, they would find that they like it and come into US history with a greater attitude. So I think if it was offered earlier it would help in the regular class. What I have seen with those, that's not usually the reason they are given. They are given because both the teacher and the students have shown an interest in that specific elective, rather than to have an influence on the general US history course. Since it's never been done in this school, I don't know for a fact but I imagine it couldn't hurt and only help raise the interest and performance in the core classes.

Me: Do you think the elective course has a higher potential for getting the attention of the lower end students that go into history assuming they won't like it?

Mr. Coil: I think so. Of course this is theoretical for me because it hasn't been done, but yes I think it certainly has the potential to make the students think history is interesting and even exciting.

Me: Thank you very much for your time Mr. Coil.

#### Summary of Interviews/Findings

Mr. Coil made it clear that he thinks elective history course would benefit both the student body and the faculty. Currently, advance placement history classes are the only option for deviating from the state mandated content standards. And this simply covers more history in the same survey style course that lacks in-depth analysis and study of the controversy behind the history. This leaves students and faculty very no opportunity to learn or teach relevant, engaging courses that go beyond broad historical themes.

Mr. Coil believes that providing relevant elective history courses to under-classmen, freshman and sophomores, would stimulate the interest in history and would lead to higher achievement and engagement in the survey courses. With the limited resources a public school has, Mr. Coil feels that advanced placement courses are important for college applications. Plus the district gives a “pat on the back” for providing AP courses. This helps the school district market itself against the private schools the area. To maintain higher enrollment, the public schools must contend with the number of advanced placement courses offered in the private schools, this leaves little or no room for diverse history courses.

Curricular restraints in the public schools prevent teachers from designing more history courses. Mr. Coil agrees with me that if these courses were made readily available to students, the interest in both those courses and the core survey courses would rise significantly.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

This research has reinforced my passion to create engaging, diverse history courses in secondary schools. The conclusions in this field of study are that survey courses fall short of exposing students to the intricacies of our nation's past. Of course it is necessary for high school students to learn the expansive curriculum in the United States history survey course, but to leave their history education at that is a shame. It is clear that this survey course should provide a general understanding of the timeline of the American tradition. Students can build upon this understanding to continue to study in depth.

The need for relevant and personal history is obvious. In describing this need and directing a call to all aspiring history teachers Percoco (1998) says, "Clearly, a dynamic approach to presenting the past to our students can provide them with not only the story of what, why and who have gone before us, while permitting them to discover their own place in the pageant of the human experience, but it can open our students to a world of opportunities never before imagined. Students will come away from your classes with a recognition that studying the past is indeed a window to the present as well as offering a greater understanding of themselves" (p 131). I believe the first step in this mission is the creation of diverse history elective courses.

### Comparison of Results to Previous Literature

Similar in thought to Loewen (2007), I believe that the current content standards, and most commonly used United States history textbooks fall short of providing detailed, engaging and in some cases accurate accounts of our past. These courses cannot possibly create responsible citizens if they do not teach the controversial aspects and debatable decisions in our history.

Zinn (2003) contends that if history is not told from the perspective of the actual people, then it fails to recount the past at all. His work tells the story of American in the voice of America's women, factory workers, Native Americans, poor citizens, and immigrants. These stories and voices are those of America; it is these stories are those lacking in the US History survey courses. Students who never hear these voices are missing an essential element of the American experience.

Evans (2004) recounts the history of the battle over what to include in social studies curriculum. Which courses are necessary and what the content standards should be in each of them has been a source of contention among policy makers and boards of education since this nation's birth. The need for and debate over enriching and vibrant history courses will continue until, as Evans (2004) puts it, "The struggles over social studies deserve a full and complete airing, in a public forum—shorn of the propaganda, scapegoating, and interest group financing we have seen during the field's recent history—in an effort to advance forms of social studies practice that will contribute to the goal of meaningful learning" (p 178).

#### Limitations/Gaps in the Literature

Limitations in researching history electives were primarily due to the extensive research done in the field of non-academic electives. With budget issues across the nation forcing schools to cancel music, art, and sports programs, the majority of recent articles and journals are related to those programs. I found that I had to rely heavily on books written within the social studies field. While there is no shortage of such scholarly books, the lack of national attention made objective articles on history curriculum difficult to find.



### Implications and Significance for Future Research

As our nation ages and continues to evolve, the need for history electives will only escalate. Deep, reflective courses are increasingly necessary for students to feel connected to the past. As a nation of immigrants, we need to hold on to that heritage, teaching children not just the triumphant pageant of American leaders, but also the stories of those that fought and struggled to become Americans.

High school students can handle the truth. We do not need to teach nationalism through history. If we do, it will always be a struggle to keep high school students engrossed and engaged in history classes. If we teach them both sides of issues, we encourage critical thinking and a global perspective that will create a generation better equipped to make rationale, informed decisions for themselves and the nation. Teaching in-depth history courses allows the time to study, discuss and analyze the particulars of events and characters involved. As an example: a United States history survey courses spends about one week on Vietnam; that is not nearly enough time to process how the US ended up involved, and the effect our involvement had on society, politically and culturally. Any number of elective courses could take the time to teach this period of American history and give it the time and depth that it deserves.

Social studies education is where young men and women learn what it means to make a difference in society, to right wrongs and stand up for their beliefs. In a culture that is constantly changing, learning and adapting to new discoveries, and technologies, it is imperative to look at what and how we teach the future generations so as to prepare them to continue to progress through this experiment of American democracy.

## Appendix

### Elective History Courses

#### Introduction

I have designed and outlined curriculum for two classes to serve as examples for what I think would not only encourage students to work harder in history courses but also help them understand that their survey US history course is just that; a survey and only the very beginning of what American history has to offer. With a basic understanding and the context of specific eras and periods and historical themes, students should be encouraged to narrow their focus. Simply the availability of such courses would open a world of potential study and interest to graduating high school students.

The recommended books and assignments represent potential choices to serve as reading and an outline for courses in California and immigration history. Any textbooks, including the ones mentioned in this chapter, and other resources would need to be approved by the school and district before being used in a classroom.

#### California History

I designed this class as a spring semester elective available to sophomores, juniors and seniors. This course works best during the spring semester because in most California public high schools the spring semester is longer than the fall semester by two to four weeks. This class connects students to the geography, people and culture of California's diverse history. Getting to know the state that they reside in is both appealing to students and beneficial in connecting them to their community, family and their past.

California History, as I have designed the class, follows the ninth edition of the textbook *California: An Interpretive History* by James Rawls and Walton Bean. The first edition of this

textbook was published forty years ago and is still viewed as the most comprehensive account of California's social and cultural affairs. The authors take a balanced approach, covering the virtues and accomplishments, as well as the faults and failures of the people and leaders of California. The latest edition, published in 2008, includes coverage of the Gray Davis recall election and the recent housing crisis and environmental issues.

The textbook covers California history in six units, broken into 36 chapters. Those units and chapters are:

- California Beginnings
  - Geography and History
  - Original Californians
  - Discovery, Exploration and Founding
  - Outposts of a Dying Empire
  - A Marginal Province of a Troubled Republic
  - Infiltration of Trader, Trappers and Settlers
- The Rush for Riches
  - American Conquest
  - Gold Rush and Economic Development
  - A New State and Frontier Politics
  - Crime and Punishment
  - Racial Oppression and Conflict
  - Culture and Anarchy
- The Railroad Era
  - Building the Central Pacific Railroad

- The “Terrible Seventies”
- Political Turmoil and a New Constitution
- Economic Growth
- Culture and Oligarchy
- Politics in the Era of Railroad Domination
  
- Modernization and its Discontents
  - Labor and capital
  - The roots of reform
  - The republican progressives in power
  - The triumph of conservatism
  - New industries for Southern California
  - Controversies over land and water
  
- The State and the Nation
  - The Great Depression
  - Cultural Trends
  - Wartime Growth and Problems
  - Politics California Style
  - Industrialized Agriculture and Disorganized Labor
  - Diversity and Conflict
  
- The Challenge of California
  - A Season of Discontent
  - Culture and Identity
  - Recent California Politics

- The Environment and Energy
- The New California Economy
- Contemporary California Society

This text provides the guide to take the students through the journey of California history. But what is important for elective history courses, which do not have rigid state-issued content standards, is for the teachers to feel free to focus on the units, events and eras that they feel are most relevant to their particular student body. For instance, a school in the Central Valley at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains may want to make the Gold Rush a much longer and more in-depth unit as it directly relates to the area where the students live. Teachers in Los Angeles and its surrounding counties may want to develop the chapter on new industries in Southern California into a unit of its own.

Projects in this course may include choosing a particular region, people, or event, and researching the particulars to present to the class. Access of primary resources and historical artifacts is an important aspect to studying local history as should be a part of daily classroom experience as well as research reports. California definitely has no shortage of fascinating research topics that students will enjoy studying and take pride in sharing with their peers.

### History of US Immigration

I designed this class as a one semester class available only to seniors. An understanding of the basic outline of US history (taken by juniors) is necessary for this course, it should also be taken after or in conjunction with American Government class, a one semester required course for seniors. This course chronicles the waves of human migration from around the world to America. The units focus on the reasons that people were leaving their native countries, why America was an appealing alternative and what immigrants expected in the “land of opportunity,” the social

and political affairs of America, and the reality that immigrants found once they arrived in America.

This course follows the immigrant experience using the guideline in the second edition of the non-fiction book *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* by Roger Daniels. This book concentrates on the everyday lives of immigrants and refugees and how life changed for them and their families by risking everything to come to America. The text is full of photos, charts, tables and maps documenting the lives, culture and journey of immigrants. It is a very readable and personable account of history that students will find informative and engaging. The second edition of this book includes a new chapter on immigration trends during this new age of globalization.

This book has three units broken into 17 chapters. Those units and chapters are:

- Part I: Colonial America
  - Overseas Migration from Europe
  - English Immigrants in America: Virginia, Maryland and New England
  - Slavery and Immigrants from Africa
  - Other Europeans in Colonial America
  - Ethnicity and Race in American Life
- Part II: The Century of Immigration (1820-1924)
  - Pioneers of the Century of Immigration: Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians
  - From the Mediterranean: Italians, Greeks, Arabs, and Armenians
  - Eastern Europeans: Poles, Jews, and Hungarians
  - Minorities from Other Regions: Chinese, Japanese, and French Canadians
  - The Triumph of Nativism

- Part III: Modern Times
  - Migration in Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1921-1945
  - From the New World: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans
  - Changing the Rules: Immigration Law, 1948-1980
  - The New Asian Immigrants
  - Caribbeans, Central Americans, and Soviet Jews
  - The 1980's and Beyond
  - Immigration in an Age of Globalization

The History of US Immigration provides a wonderful opportunity for students to connect with their historical nationality and ethnicity, as well as strengthen their identity as American citizens. A wonderful and rewarding project for this course is to have students trace back their own ancestry and tell the story of how and why their family originally came to America. Some students might remember the journey themselves, while others may trace their family back to colonial America. This course can provide a revealing look into what it means to be an American. And like the California History class, it offers students a direct connection to the material and a chance to learn about themselves, their country and their peers.

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