

NCHE's Vital Themes and Narratives

Civilization, cultural diffusion, and innovation:

The evolution of human skills and the understanding of nature and people; the cultural flowering of major civilizations in the arts, literature, and thought.

Human interaction with the environment:

The relationship between geography and technology and the effects of each on economic, social, and political developments; The choices made possible, or limited, by climate, resources, and location, and the consequences of such choices.

Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions:

The basic principles of influential religions, philosophies and ideologies; The interplay among ideas, moral values, and leadership, especially in the evolution of democratic institutions; The tensions between freedom and security, liberty and equality, diversity and commonality in human affairs.

Conflict and cooperation:

The causes of war and the approaches to peace, and the human consequences of both; The relations between domestic affairs and foreign policy; Choices made between international conflict and cooperation, isolation and interdependence.

Comparative history of major developments:

The forces for revolution, reaction, and reform across time; Imperialism, ancient and modern; Comparative instances of slavery and emancipation, feudalism and central government, economic expansion and penury, growth of cities and their characteristics.

Patterns of social and political interaction:

Change and continuity of class, ethnic, racial, and gender structure and relations; Migration, immigration, forces for social mobility and immobility; the conditions and aspirations of common people, and those of elites, and their effects upon political power and institutions.

NCHE's History's Habits of the Mind

Courses in history, geography, and government should be designed to take students well beyond formal skills of critical thinking, to help them through their own active learning to:

- Understand the significance of the past to their own lives, both private and public, and to their society.
- Distinguish between the important and the inconsequential, to develop the “discriminating memory” needed for a discerning judgment in public and personal life.
- Perceive past events and issues as people experienced them at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.
- Acquire at the same time a comprehension of diverse cultures and shared humanity.
- Understand how things happen and how things change, how human intentions matter, but also how their consequences are shaped by the means of carrying them out, in a tangle of purpose and process.
- Comprehend the interplay of change and continuity, and avoid assuming that either is somehow more natural, or more to be expected, than the other.
- Prepare to live with uncertainties and exasperating, even perilous, unfinished business, realizing that not all problems have solutions.
- Grasp the complexity of historical causation, respect particularity, and avoid excessively abstract generalizations.
- Appreciate the often tentative nature of judgments about the past, and thereby avoid the temptation to seize upon particular “lessons” of history as a cure for present ills.
- Recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference in history, and the significance of personal character for both good and ill.
- Appreciate the force of the non-rational, the irrational, and the accidental, in history and human affairs.
- Understand the relationship between geography and history as a matrix of time and place, and as a context for events.
- Read widely and critically in order to recognize the difference between fact and conjecture, between evidence and assertion, and thereby frame useful questions