Media, Culture & Identities strand descriptions

Media & Everyday Life:
This strand explores the significance of the media in our everyday lives. "Media" is defined in a very broad sense to include the both the traditional forms of media, such as broadcast (radio and television) and print media (newspapers and magazines), as well as the new forms of mobile and online media such as social media platforms and the internet more generally. The media thus play an important role in our everyday lives. The media provide information about the world, they provide messages about how we should behave and act, and they also entertain us. Who owns and works in the media, what messages are contained within media texts, and how audiences make sense of and decode the media are key questions for this strand. The media can be analyzed from a number of perspectives, including looking at the history of media industries, through to analyzing specific media texts, to understanding how people use media technologies in their daily lives. The media are not neutral channels through which meaning is produced and messages communicated, instead they play a more fundamental role in shaping our understandings of how the world works and our place within it.

Identities, Communities & Place:
This strand focuses on the importance of belonging in the modern world. Social theorists have argued that modernity creates an increased sense of isolation 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 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 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. Identity, then, is not a simply a matter of describing who we are but also a political question and site of struggle in suggesting who we might become. In this context "where we're from" becomes an important question of identity. Rather than simply thinking of physical places, landmarks, and regions as "natural" geographical spaces, students are encouraged to consider the complex ways in which particular spaces and places 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. Space, as the French theorist Henri Lefebvre once said, is a product filled with ideologies thus students on this strand are encouraged to consider questions of community and identity in relation to geography and place. Examples of student work 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
- Textual analysis of Tea Party identity
- Internship with Center for Sex and Culture in San Francisco

Popular Culture & Power:
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 (including television, music, fashion, romance novels, sport, dance and film) is often positively associated with that which is both well liked by many people, pop music for example or Hollywood films. Yet it also has negative associations when the very popularity of popular culture means it is accorded less 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, 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 role of popular culture within wider society. These are all ways to think about power within society. Who has the ability to influence the actions of others, how is this achieved, and the role of popular culture in reproducing and challenging dominant relations within society are key questions for this strand. Examples of student work 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