

**LESSON**

# Many Voices, One National Identity

## Overview

### About This Lesson

The goal of this final lesson is to provide a bridge from the examination of individual identity in prior lessons to the study of the history, literature, or civics of the United States with which students will engage throughout the rest of the year.

Students will start the lesson by considering the idea that nations, like individuals, have identities. They will also consider the relationship between a nation's identity and the identities of the individuals who comprise that nation. Then they will look at evidence of the changing demographics and increasing diversity of the United States and analyze what that information suggests about the complexity of the country's national identity. Finally, students will respond to the idea that a cohesive national identity requires knowledge and values shared by all individuals in a nation, and they will consider a variety of ideas about the knowledge and values that unite Americans.

In this lesson, and through the course that follows, students will discover that the identity of the United States is the product of interactions between many different groups, or communities, and many different types of people. Thus, the choices people make about their identities, and the way they live with others, all contribute to the national narrative as well as to the national identity. Students will also discover that, because people with so many different backgrounds have contributed to the identity of the United States, the ways that people think about the United States often vary and sometimes conflict with one another. That tension itself might be part of how one defines American identity.

As students continue to study American history, literature, or civics, they will hopefully be able to recognize some of these themes of identity: the choices, the labels, and the legacies that inform what the United States of America has been and continues to become. More important is the hope that they will be able to recognize their part in the narrative of the United States and their ability to influence the next part of the story.

### Essential Questions

- Where does a nation's identity come from? How can individuals with so many different identities come together to form a national identity?
- What is the national identity of the United States, and how does it relate to each of us as individuals?

## What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials, which you can access from this [Google Folder](#).

- Video: **American ID: Three Words**
- Reading: **Shifting Demographics in the United States**
- Reading: **What Does It Mean to "Be American?"**

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### 1. Begin an Identity Chart for the United States

This activity introduces students to the concept of national identity. Students then draw upon their initial thoughts about American identity from the beginning of the unit to begin an identity chart for the United States.

- Explain to students that just like individuals have identities, so do nations. Ask students to think or write quietly about the following questions: Where does a nation's identity come from? How can individuals with so many different identities come together to form a national identity?
- Next, start an [identity chart](#) for the United States. Ideally, you can create the identity chart on a large piece of paper that can be posted in the classroom. You will return to the chart throughout this lesson.
- Ask students to recall the first lesson in this unit, when they drew pictures to illustrate an "American" and analyzed the **Flag of Faces**. (You might even show this image again now.) Ask students what words, phrases, or images should be added to the class identity chart for the United States based on this initial thinking.
- Then ask students to brainstorm in their journals any other words or phrases that come to mind that they think describe the identity of the United States.

#### 2. Gather Additional Evidence about the Identity of the United States

Students will watch a short video and use a report on the changing demographics of the United States to identify additional words and phrases to add to their identity chart for the United States.

- Show students the video [American ID: Three Words](#). Ask students to write down three to five words used in the video to describe American identity. Then lead a class discussion about the video, using the following questions:
  - What common themes did you notice in the video related to how people around the world view American identity?

- Where do you think people’s ideas about American identity come from?
  - What are some of the labels people use to describe the United States? What are some of the assumptions they make?
  - Which labels and assumptions from the video ring true, based on your own experience? Which feel untrue to you?
  - Which words and phrases from the video should we add to our identity chart for the United States?
- Share with students the reading **Shifting Demographics in the United States**. The data in this reading will help to illustrate the complicated relationship between individual and national identity in the United States. Read it together as a class, and clarify language and statistics for students as necessary.
  - Divide the class into pairs or small groups, and assign one paragraph of **Shifting Demographics in the United States** to each group. It will be each group’s task to dig into their assigned paragraph, discuss its meaning, and use it to come up with another item to add to the identity chart for the United States. Each group’s item might be a statistic or direct quotation from their paragraph, or they might come up with their own word or phrase that summarizes their understanding of the paragraph.
  - After groups have completed their tasks, ask a member from each group to add their group’s item to the class identity chart.
  - At this point in the lesson, lead the class in a short discussion to take stock of the characteristics on the identity chart. What conclusions can they draw so far about the national identity of the United States? What questions do they have?

### 3. Explore Common Knowledge and Values among Americans

In this activity, students will be introduced to the idea that a national identity is more than a list of diverse qualities and characteristics of the citizenry; it is also a collection of knowledge and values shared across the nation. This idea sets up a tension between the identities of individuals and the collective identity of a nation.

- Now that students have begun the process of characterizing a national identity for the United States, share with them the following quotation from author and educator Eric Liu:

The . . . challenge, for Americans new and old, is to make a common culture that’s greater than the sum of our increasingly diverse parts. It’s not enough for the United States to be a neutral zone where a million little niches of identity might flourish; in order to make our diversity a true asset, we need those niches to be able to share a vocabulary. We need to be able to have a

broad base of common knowledge so that our diversity can be most fully activated.<sup>1</sup>

- Have students work with a partner to answer the following questions:
  - What is Eric Liu saying about national identity in the United States? Explain this quotation in your own words.
  - Do you agree with Liu? Why or why not?
- Pass out the reading **What Does It Mean to “Be American?”** The reading includes quotations from a variety of people saying what they think are examples of the common knowledge and values that unite individual Americans in the identity of the United States.
- Students will individually read through the quotations and choose one that they have a strong reaction to. They should copy the quotation into their journals. (If it is especially long, they might simply copy the first sentence.) Then they will respond to the quotation. Do they agree with it? Is it consistent with their experience of the United States? Or do they think it is incorrect or misguided? Why?
- Students will then share and discuss the quotations they chose and responded to in small groups, using the [Save the Last Word for Me](#) strategy.
- Once the small group discussions are complete, bring the whole group together to debrief the activity with the following questions:
  - What characteristics do you want to add to the identity chart for the United States? Are there any you want to remove?
  - How has your thinking about the national identity of the United States evolved?
  - What did you learn from each other in your discussions? What ideas from your discussions especially resonated with you?
- If possible, keep the identity chart visible in the classroom throughout the year. The class can return to it and discuss ways they might revise it based on what they learn about the United States throughout the course.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Liu, “What Every American Should Know,” *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2015.