In this unit, a heterogeneous group of 11th grade students will examine the origins of the Constitution of the United States. This unit works well when students have completed a unit on the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution. At the completion of the unit, students will have learned about the events that propelled the leaders of the Revolution to abandon the Articles of Confederation and establish a new government that sought to correct its weaknesses. They will compare and contrast the structural framework for the distribution of power in the Articles and the new Constitution. Students will identify the key principles embodied in the Constitution and working with primary documents, will reenact the debate on ratification between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists.

Historical Background:

The national government created by the Articles of Confederation successfully concluded the Revolution and established the Northwest Ordinance. It soon became clear, however, that this new government was woefully inadequate. The Founding Fathers were so suspicious of the centralized authority they experienced under the British crown that they created a weak national government and placed most power in the states. The national government could not regulate trade and lacked both the authority to tax and the ability to establish a common currency. Conflicting claims to the unsettled lands in the West almost drove several states to arms, and there was no national judiciary to regulate disputes. The Articles did not provide for a separate executive to carry out the laws and the Congress was crippled by rules that required super majorities to enact laws or to amend the Articles. The national government was so weak it was unable to face threats from home and abroad; Indian uprisings, the British refusal to remove their troops, and the closing of the port of New Orleans by Spain. The fledgling nation was ridiculed in Europe. It was a chaotic time and the government seemed paralyzed to act.

These were serious problems, but the catalyst for the Constitutional convention was Shays’ Rebellion (1786-87). Several sections of the new nation were plunged into a recession after the war and angry farmers, burdened with debt and facing foreclosures, stormed a Massachusetts courthouse to prevent seizure of their property. The rebellion was quickly suppressed by a volunteer army, but the impact of the revolt crystallized a growing fear among the leaders of the Revolution that what they had so bravely achieved would drown in disorder and the right to property would be lost to democratic excesses.

In 1787, delegates met in Philadelphia to try to revise the weak Articles but decided instead to write a new Constitution. The presence of George Washington brought
credibility to the Convention and James Madison, a student of government, brought a depth and understanding of political theory that laid the basis for the underlying principles embodied in the Constitution. Whereas the Declaration of Independence was a clarion call for liberty and revolution, the Constitution was a calming call for order and stability. What form of government would consolidate the rights fought for in the Revolution and simultaneously establish a strong government that could curb mob violence and unify the nation to insure domestic tranquility? The Constitution they wrote separated and divided power in such a way as to create a system that would first “enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” Drawing ideas from the enlightenment, a long British tradition, and state Constitutions, a federal system was created dividing power between a central government and the states and within the national government, separating power among three branches. This document is the oldest written Constitution in the world and serves as model for many developing nations. Its durability rests on its ability to adapt to changing times and it serves as unifying national symbol for a diverse nation.

Major Understanding(s):

The Constitution of the United States was framed by a small group of gifted leaders from the American Revolution to restore order and stability in a climate of economic and political uncertainty that the Articles of Confederation seemed incapable of addressing. The Founding Fathers crafted a document that balances competing centers of power and endures today as a revered symbol of national unity.

Objectives: Students will:

1. Recognize the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and the events that led to the drafting of the Constitution by reading primary sources from Shays' Rebellion and excerpts from Federalist # 15.

2. Interpret primary sources to understand how the conflicting sectional and class interests as well as those of small and large states were resolved through compromises.

3. Explain how the Constitution consolidates the liberty won in the Revolution by restoring order and balancing competing centers of power through the underlying principles of limited government, federalism, separation of powers, checks & balances.

4. Analyze and interpret documents written by Federalists and Anti-Federalists to understand the differing perspectives regarding the issues surrounding the Constitution.

5. Debate the issues surrounding the ratification of the Constitution.

6. Understand that the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution began a long historical process of expanding the political and civil rights of Americans.

7. Explain why our enduring Constitution has become a model of stability and
adaptability in the world today.

**Standards of Learning:** The Student will:

**Skills**
VUS.1. The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis, including the ability to
- identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary source documents, records, and data, including artifacts, diaries, letters, photographs, journals, newspapers, historical accounts, and art to increase understanding of events and life in the United States;
- evaluate the authenticity, authority, and credibility of sources;
- formulate historical questions and defend findings based on inquiry and interpretation;
- communicate findings orally and in analytical essays and/or comprehensive papers;
- develop skills in discussion, debate, and persuasive writing with respect to enduring issues and determine how divergent viewpoints have been addressed and reconciled;
- interpret the significance of excerpts from famous speeches and other documents.

**Content**
VUS.5a. Demonstrate knowledge of the issues involved in the creation and ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America and how the principles of limited government, consent of the governed, and the social contract are embodied in it by
  a. Explaining the origins of the Constitution, including the Articles of Confederation.
  b. Identifying the major compromises necessary to produce the Constitution, and the roles of James Madison and George Washington.
  c. Describing the conflict over ratification, including the Bill of Rights and the arguments of the Federalists and Anti-federalists.