

OC14004

Is the American Dream Dead Among College Students?

August 2013

Kristin Scott
Minnesota State University

Kathryn Olson
Minnesota State University

Extended Abstract

The American Dream is thoroughly woven into the fabric of everyday life and has had the most dramatic influence on our individual and collective lives as Americans (Samuel 2012). At its heart, the American Dream represents opportunity and prosperity. Regardless of circumstances of birth, each person's station in life is earned rather than inherited and each citizen has an equal opportunity for an upward mobility which is achieved through hard work. While the term "American Dream" wasn't coined until 1931, its origins can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence in which it states, "All men are created equal" and have equal rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Ultimately, this pursuit of happiness has become dependent on procuring monetary wealth, and has created a materialistic society where having a big house, a car, and home appliances have become the measure for one's success and social class standing.

Because of our current state of economic and environmental conditions, new ideas of what the American Dream should be are emerging. Organizations such as The Center for a New American Dream (<http://www.newdream.org>) are dedicated to "helping Americans to reduce and shift their consumption to improve the quality of life, protect the environment, and promote social justice." The organization is focused on upholding the spirit of the traditional dream, but with a new emphasis on sustainability and trying to break the mold of more, into a desire for things that matter. The organization encompasses three programs: Changing the Dream, Beyond Consumerism, and Collaborating Communities. The Changing the Dream program concentrates on inspiring consumers to re-examine their idea of "the good life", and the never-ending economic growth ideology by teaching Americans how to better their lives, communities, and environment by reconstructing their consumption limits. The Beyond Consumerism program

educates people to take control of the market place and the Collaborative Community program aims to help communities actively accept the responsibilities, and act on the shifting environmental, economic, and social issues to help build a sustainable society.

Because of the environmental and financial impact of the American Dream, what constitutes valuable life goals in society may be changing, especially among the younger generation. The current research examines this hypothesis and attempts to answer the question, “Is the American Dream dead among college students?”

Answers to this question were assessed through both open and close-ended questions. For the open-ended questions, results demonstrated differences between what respondents saw as the traditional American Dream and what their individual Dream was. Respondents saw the traditional American Dream as having a family, having wealth, freedom/opportunity, and having the opportunity for college and a job. For their own individual Dream, having a family, having the opportunity for college and a job, happiness, and wealth were mentioned most often. For both answers, family was the number one response indicating the importance of this aspect although it is not necessarily highlighted in the traditional American Dream. The fact that both questions indicated the opportunity for college and having a good job as part of the Dream makes sense given the sample of currently enrolled college students.

The close-ended questions depicted a similar view of the American Dream. Results showed that the majority of respondents believed that older generations had an American Dream that was different than their own but they did not believe that the traditional American Dream was outdated. This finding is consistent when respondents were asked about their own American Dream. The overwhelming majority of students still agreed with some aspects of the traditional American Dream. However, results showed that other topics should also be included in the

definition, including “happiness and personal fulfillment” and “family and community.” The idea that sustainability issues should also been included in the definition was not as popular but still supported by the majority of respondents. Overall, these findings suggest that the American Dream should not be discount but should instead be revised to include other pertinent topics to this generation.

Predictors of the traditional American Dream were also assessed. Materialism was positively related to having a more traditional American Dream while environmental concern and stewardship were negatively related to the traditional American Dream. These results suggest that certain values concerning the importance of possessions and natural resources impact the appropriateness of the traditional American Dream. One aspect of frugality, tightwad, was not significantly related to having a traditional American Dream. This aspect of frugality deals with saving and using money wisely. It may be that this individualistic behavior does not impact the aspirations or dreams that a person has. For example, a person may not be very good with money (e.g. impulsive, not saving) but still desire wealth in their future. Future research may want to investigate other values or individual difference variables. One limitation of the current research is that a traditional scale development methodology was not followed to develop a scale for the American Dream. Although the current scale had adequate reliability, future research could develop a more robust scale to measure this construct.