What Happened to the American Dream?

Date: Tuesday, March 4, 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.
Location: Sedona Public Library
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

5:30 p.m. Welcome and Introduction
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

6:15 p.m. Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy
- What does the American Dream mean to you?
- Is the American Dream harder to achieve now than it once was? If so, for whom?
- Should the American Dream define success?

7:20 p.m. Recap of discussion

Contact us: 928-523-8339  nau.ppi@nau.edu  nau.edu/ppi

The Hot Topics Cafe is made possible by the Arizona Humanities Council, the McKenzie Endowment for Democracy, and the SBS Compassion Project.
What does the American dream mean to you?

The meaning of the phrase “The American Dream” varies across generations, races, and economic classes. The term was popularized by James Adams 1931, but the idea has been in our country long before then. America is often described as a melting pot of cultures, held together by the promise of opportunity to achieve the American Dream. The Dream has been used to describe everything from the chance to harvest fertile farmland to freedom from religious persecution to winning the lottery. Conceptions of the Dream have evolved alongside the people of the country that it represents. However, every conception of the American Dream has two parts:

1) What a realization of the Dream looks like. (the end of the dream)

2) How one would best go about achieving it. (the means to the end)

Is the American Dream harder to achieve now than it once was? If so, for whom?

The American Dream is often associated with the idea that, in America, upward mobility is available to everyone. This is especially important in the case of immigrants. America has long been idealized as a place where immigrants and others can start poor but change their fate through hard work.

There is a growing belief in America that upward mobility has declined; politicians from Paul Ryan to Barack Obama echo this sentiment. However, a 2013 study at Harvard and Berkley found evidence to the contrary. Researchers studied the chances that a child can escape from poverty. They found that upward mobility has not changed over time. Some factors do influence a person’s chances for success, however. For example, a child’s ability to escape poverty later in life was dependent largely on where they were born. The places that offered the best chances to escape poverty shared five characteristics: better schools, less segregation, greater social capital, more stable families, and less income inequality.

Should the American Dream define success in America?

Achieving the American Dream is sometimes taken to be the paradigm of success in America. There are, however, concepts of success and fulfillment other than what traditionally constitutes the American Dream. People value creativity, adventure and things other than the financial success commonly associated with the American Dream.

In addition, the possibility that hard work will lead to success regardless of the situation you are born into is not unique to America. In fact, according to a 2006 study, a child born into a family that earns in the bottom 20 percent has a worse chance of escaping to higher earnings bracket and better chance of staying where they are in America than they do in the UK, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. If we are not the most upwardly mobile country in the world, can we define success in our country by a phrase that relies on it? Should we look to other, non-fiscal metrics to determine success in America?
This map shows the average percentile rank of children who grow up in below-median income families across areas of the U.S. (absolute upward mobility). Lighter colors represent areas where children from low-income families are more likely to move up in the income distribution.

This figure plots the difference in average income percentiles for children born to low vs. high-income parents in each year from 1971-1993. On average, children from the poorest families grow up to be 30 percentiles lower in the income distribution than children from the richest families, a gap that has been stable over time. For children born after 1986, estimates are predictions based on college attendance rates.
"That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." — James Truslow Adams

"The American Dream is knowing that you can create the life you want on your own terms. The American Dream is not about how much money you acquire—it’s about reaching the pinnacle of success, waking up every morning with a smile on your face and looking forward to the day.” —Mark Cuban

“The American Dream used to be the opportunity to freely create your own life and to honor the rights of all others to do the same, while understanding that to do so fairly there can be no guarantee for success. To live unshackled from the desires of those individuals who seek only guarantees so as to ensure the success of their desires. But the American Dream has changed—now I believe it’s a wish for freedom at no cost, an existence devoid of scarcity and free from judgment of any kind.” —Kurt Russell

Sources


http://www.verisi.com/resources/prosperity-upward-mobility.htm

http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org
Hot Topics Café Community Committee

The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members representing diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

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Owner, La Posada; Founder, Winslow Arts Trust; Former Mayor, City of Winslow; Board Member for: Arizona Town Hall, Arizona Citizens for the Arts

Joe Boles  
Professor Emeritus, Northern Arizona University

Scott Deasy  
Deacon of Epiphany Episcopal Church, semi-retired OB/GYN

Coral Evans  
Flagstaff City Council

Jean Friedland  
Compassion Project

Patty Garcia  
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Jacque Gencarelle  
Prevention Program Manager, Northern Arizona Regional Behavioral Health Authority

Wayne Ranney  
Geologist, Author, Grand Canyon river and trail guide, Board Member for: Flagstaff Festival of Science, Grand Canyon Historical Society (President), and Museum of Northern Arizona (Emeritus)

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Dean, NAU Franke College of Business

Michael Vincent  
Dean, NAU College of Art and Letters

Randy Wilson  
Editor, Arizona Daily Sun

Harriet Young  
President, Flagstaff AAUW

Sedona & the Verde Valley

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Executive Director, Imagiventure Foundation

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Board and past president of the Democrats of the Red Rocks, Board Member for: Arizona Planned Parenthood and Keep Sedona Beautiful

Barbara Litrell  
Sedona City Council

Elemer Magaziner  
Sedona Citizens for Civil Dialogue

Dan McIlroy  
Sedona City Council

John Neville  
Executive Director, Sustainable Arizona

Judy Reddington  
NAU’s Arts and Letters Advisory Council, Board Member for: Museum of Northern Arizona, Sedona International Film Festival

Doug Von Gausig  
Mayor of Clarkdale, Executive Director of Verde River Institute

Del Weston  
Marketing, Hypertherm, Inc., Board Member for: Sedona Y.M.C.A.

Jessica Williamson  
Sedona City Council

Ex officio

Robert Breunig  
Museum of Northern Arizona

Andrea Houchard  
NAU, Philosophy in the Public Interest

Ron Hubert  
Hozho International

Scott Sanicki  
Sedona Public Library

Robin Weeks  
Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Yavapai College, Sedona Center

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Next Sedona Hot Topics Café:
How should we compensate “women’s work?”

Date: Tuesday, April 1, 2014  
Time: 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.