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Dispelling the Meritocracy Myth: Lessons for Higher Education and Student Affairs Educators

Lorri Anne Alvarado

“Just work hard and you will succeed.” This phrase and others like it represent the belief in meritocracy, which is repeated and perpetuated in our society by role models, friends, government, media, and ourselves. The myth of meritocracy is a part of the utopian belief in the American Dream, which continues to be an active narrative in Americans’ lives that many do not realize is simply a dream and not based on reality. As educators, how do we confront the meritocracy narrative and better understand how it affects our work and our impact on students? This article updates professionals on current literature and the myth’s effect on higher education. Recommendations on how to challenge and change our views on meritocracy are offered for higher education and student affairs educators.

The United States (referred to as America for the purposes of this article) is seen as the “land of opportunity.” Anyone who comes here has the opportunity to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and succeed as long as they work hard and persevere; you get out as much as you put in. This belief is one aspect of the American Dream, the belief that anyone in the United States has the equal opportunity for prosperity. Those who are most worthy of America’s bounty are the meritorious. This social ideal promulgates the belief that, “those who are the most talented, the hardest working, and the most virtuous get and should get the most rewards” (McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009, p. 4). Contrary to widespread societal belief, American society is not a meritocratic system, but continues to be presented as one. It is my hope to make our individual meritocratic beliefs more visible, especially the tenet of hard work, and display how these beliefs affect our work as higher education and student affairs educators.

This article will summarize the roots of the idea of hard work within meritocracy and the American Dream as a determining factor in one’s future and dispel the

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myths that are associated with those ideas, especially in higher education. The article will conclude with recommendations for higher education and student affairs educators to prevent the myth of meritocracy from perpetuating within our institution and with our work with students.

The American Dream

The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it.
—George Carlin (2005)

The term American Dream was first used in James Truslow Adams' 1931 best-selling book, *The Epic of America*. Adams defined the concept as “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (p. 404). This term is rooted in the United States' history as a country of immigrants, and characterizes the hopes of those immigrants who escaped countries that were ruled by money and family aristocracies, to pursue individual freedom, and the chance to succeed in the New World.

What does the American Dream entail? Hochschild (1995) identified four tenets:

1. Everyone regardless of origin or status can attain the American Dream (Who)
2. The American Dream is a hopefulness for success (What)
3. The American Dream is possible through actions that are under the individual's direct control (How)
4. Because of the associations of success and virtue the American Dream comes true (Why)

These tenets are deeply ingrained in the American consciousness. It is most often agreed that people are rewarded for intelligence, skill, and effort. In other words, the hardest working, smartest, and most talented people will succeed in life; these people have the merit and deserve to fulfill the Dream.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy was first used in Michael Young's book *Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). In the book, Young described a society where those at the top of the system ruled autocratically with a sense of righteous entitlement while those at the bottom of the system were incapable of protecting themselves against the abuses leveled by the merit elite above. Instead of a fair and enlightened society, the meritocracy was cruel and ruthless. This original meaning has evolved to a radically different interpretation. Today, meritocracy is often used with a positive connotation to

describe a social system that allows people to achieve success proportionate to their talents and abilities, as opposed to one in which social class or wealth is the controlling factor. Young's book was intended to be a satire on the basis of a society where people understood, good or bad, they were getting what they deserved, meaning their status was *merited*. In contrast, today's interpretation refers to the other definition of merit that means a person's ability and achievement.

American society functions closely with the ideal of the American Dream and meritocracy. Meritocracy answers the question of who and how one achieves the American Dream. According to the American Dream ideology, America is a land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can achieve as much as their own merit allows. Merit is generally defined as a combination of factors including "innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character and integrity" (McNamee & Miller Jr., 2004, para. 1). If a person possesses these qualities and works hard, they will be successful. "Americans not only tend to think [meritocracy] is how the system should work, but most Americans also think that is how the system does work" (Ladd, 1994). This article will focus on the aspect of hard work and its association with success. However, as this article will go on to examine, this assumption is not always true.

Hard Work

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.

– Unknown author, well-known American idiom

Hard work is seen as a powerful factor in meritocracy and the third tenet of how individuals achieve the American Dream. In the formula of getting ahead, hard work is prominently seen as a major factor in Americans' minds (New York Times, 2005). National surveys have found that hard work consistently scores among the top three factors necessary for success, "usually alternating between the first and second ranks with education and knowing the right people as its closest competitors" (McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009, p. 38). Americans agree knowingly and approvingly whenever the importance of hard work is mentioned in association with the likelihood of success. About 77% of Americans believe that hard work is often or very often the reason why people are rich in America (Longoria, 2009). But what does working hard really mean?

As Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) found when she spent a year doing menial jobs in a participant observation study, often the hardest working Americans are those who get paid the least. Whether it is the waitress, secretary, house painter, construction worker, or janitor, these individuals represent the foundation of the American *working class*. The hard work that is associated with success is the effort individuals place in creating a future for themselves, but additional hard work of

their kind, is unlikely to result in any significant upward social mobility.

Hochschild (1995) and McNamee and Miller Jr. (2009) identified that in meritocracy, hard work is the main aspect an individual has control over. In our individualistic society, when people are asked to state their reason(s) for success, they almost always provide an individualistic answer. People claim they deserve their success because they work hard. Yet, “deservedness is not equivalent to hard work, and it has been repeatedly shown, that many people who work hard are not especially successful” (McNamee & Miller Jr., p. 39).

Side Effects of the Meritocracy Myth

Young (1958) examined the harsh side effects of meritocracy. For some, there is the erosion of the sense of self-worth for those at the bottom of society, as defined by the individual. When these people believe that their current status in society is due to their lack of talent or hard work, they blame themselves. “They can easily become demoralized by being looked down on so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves . . . No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that” (Young, 2001, para. 12-13).

As Paulo Freire (1970) explained in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the internalization of the oppressor’s opinions, one of the inherent elements of meritocracy, causes their self-depreciation. They “so often hear that they’re good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (para. 59). This can also be applied to those that are working toward achieving their ideal American Dream and not quite getting as far as they aspire to; this process can also cause them to doubt their self-worth and decrease their self-confidence. To an extreme, the pressure to achieve in combination with self-depreciation can lead to generalized anxiety disorder and/or depression, especially in late adolescence (Harter, 1993; Valas, 1999; Wilburn & Smith, 2005).

Most Americans may not be aware of their own value conflicts when issues of merit are raised. A review of the theoretical literature shows that there are many values that come into direct conflict when one thinks about meritocracy. Longoria (2009) stated several examples of conflicts that may come up:

Working for what one has may conflict with rewarding intelligent people because natural intelligence is not earned. Giving everyone an equal opportunity may conflict with the notion that parents should favor their own children over the children of others. Favoring the intelligent and hardworking will create an unequal society and, if one supports genetic superiority arguments, lead to a caste system without social mobility. Allowing wealthy

individuals the freedom to spoil their offspring conflicts with the ideal that every child should start life with the same chance to succeed. And support for democracy may mean that we should not elevate the smart and hard-working above the common person. (p. 28-29)

Unfortunately, many Americans never become aware of the internal conflict of values, especially when it comes to the notion of meritocracy. For example, Longoria (2009) asked undergraduate students in his political science courses, “Do you believe people should work for their money?” and then “Do you think that wealthy people should be allowed to pass on their money to their children?” (p. 11). For both questions the overwhelming majority agreed. One astute student revealed the inherent contradiction: “If we think that smart, hard-working people should have more money than others, then we can’t also have a system that gives money to people who haven’t demonstrated that they’re smart or hard-working” (p. 11). Answers to questions about their beliefs can often be contradictory.

Applications to Higher Education

Americans continue to follow the advice of Benjamin Franklin in making “the proper education of youth” the most important American social policy (as cited in Hochschild, 2003, p. 9). Education is the American answer to all the issues in the country, from waves of immigrations to the abolishing of subordination based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized groups. Although public schools in the United States are expected to accomplish a lot for their students, “underlying all of these tasks is the goal of creating the conditions needed for people to believe in and pursue the ideology of the American Dream” (p. 9). Americans want the educational system to help translate the American Dream from vision to practice.

Today, higher education is depicted in American culture as a panacea for some of the most significant problems in our society. This past year, one of President Obama’s initiatives to help with unemployment and the declining economy mainly focused on increasing United States college graduates. He “asked every American to complete at least one year of higher education or vocational training” (Swami, 2009, para. 1). As of 2005, after accounting for the differences between those who go to college and those who do not, the premium for a year of college education was about 13-14% of an individual’s weekly wage (Winters, 2009). Just a decade ago, a high school education was enough to succeed in the job market and going to college would make a person competitive. Today, a college education is required in order to be considered a competitive candidate. Higher education is now understood as a way to realize the American Dream.

As described above, the American Dream is understood to follow its first tenet that every American has the equal opportunity to attain success. But contrary to this belief, the principle of equal opportunity does not apply to higher education. Higher education in the United States has a history of racial and class-based exclusion that continues to effect education today (Rudolph, 1991; Thelin, 2004). This is also the case for K-12 education, in that it is uneven on lines of race and class so that those in low-income neighborhoods have schools that have fewer resources than their higher-income counterparts.

These inequalities are carried over when these students apply to colleges and universities, the majority of which base their decisions heavily on academics and standardized test scores. Some may argue that admissions decisions based on a student's academic record and test scores is educational meritocracy (Stevens, 2008), but in the larger scheme of things, does everyone have the equal opportunity to work hard and do well in high school and on standardized tests? The fact is that the affluent can afford the infrastructure necessary to produce that accomplishment in their children: academically excellent high schools, rich with extracurricular programs; summer sport camps and private tutoring; "service" trips to Israel or Guatemala; and, of course, the time and money to invest in the elaborate competition for seats at selective institutions. Not everyone has the opportunity to apply or even attend college, which puts many at a disadvantage in our society; it is not merely the hard work one puts in but rather the status that one has.

Even if the playing field were level in K-12 education and all students had the monetary means to pay for college, admissions is highly competitive. Chad Alde-
man (2009) referred to college admissions as a lottery:

Each year, thousands of qualified applicants bombarded the admissions office, and, even after setting a relatively high standard, the admissions office had far too many qualified applicants to choose from, and very little time to do so. ... At many institutions, in other words, it is a far more random process than colleges would like students to believe. The myth of a meritocracy, on which the selective admissions system is built, is substantially a lie. (para. 5-6)

Similar to hiring and promoting, acceptance to college is not merely about merit, but may seem like a random decision from an outside perspective. In other words, the most academically, hard-working students will not all be accepted to an Ivy League school. An example of this is the reality that not all high school valedictorians who apply to Harvard will be accepted. They may have the same qualifications and characteristics, but there is far greater demand to attend Harvard than there are available seats. Although the meritocratic utopian idea of

higher education is that everyone has an equal opportunity to attend, this idea has proven to be as mythical as the American Dream.

Recommendations

This article attempts to expose higher education and student affairs educators to the meritocracy myth, especially the tenet of hard work, with a summary of its historical roots and effects. With this knowledge and connections between the myth and higher education, we must become more aware of our beliefs and the myth's potential to affect our work, especially with students. As educators, we have the special role of being leaders on our respective campuses. In *Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change*, Astin and Astin (2000) defined *leadership* as comprising the following assumptions:

- Leadership is concerned with fostering change.
- Leadership is inherently value-based.
- All people are potential leaders.
- Leadership is a group process. (p. 9)

As leaders, we have the potential to promote social change in our communities. Whether or not professionals demonstrate transformative leadership depends, in large part, on their beliefs about what leadership role they might be able to play. Especially for student affairs educators who are often told that they should leave teaching to academic faculty members, affecting the culture of the institution is the responsibility of all members of the community. Another way of looking at these issues would be for educators to ask themselves the following questions: How can we fully empower our students, if we do not fully empower ourselves? Is it enough to merely encourage and support leadership development in students, or do we need to model it within the institution in new and creative ways, whether in our role as educators or as participants in governance?

If we want to make societal change, we must first work on ourselves before attempting to change other areas that are affected by the meritocracy myth. In other words, before we can help others, we must address our own beliefs and how they may affect our behaviors. To begin to address our socialized beliefs, consider these guiding questions:

1. Beliefs on Meritocracy
 - a. What aspects of meritocracy do you believe to be true for yourself and others that you know?
 - b. How did you get to your current career position? Socioeconomic status? Lifestyle?
 - c. How did your parents/guardians get to where they are now?

- d. How did your best friend get to where he/she/ze is now?
- e. If you have or want to have children, what will/would you pass on to your children? How will that affect their future?
- f. How are the reasons you gave different and similar?

2. Conflicting Meritocracy Values

- a. Which conflicting values of meritocracy do you agree with?
- b. In what ways do they affect how you see yourself and others?
 - i. natural intelligence vs. hard work
 - ii. equal opportunity vs. internal hires, nepotism, legacies, etc.
 - iii. earning a living vs. inheritance
 - iv. book smart (intelligence) vs. street smart (experience)
 - v. achievement vs. ascription

3. Meritocracy's Effects on Behavior

- a. How have you perpetuated meritocracy in your work?
- b. What judgments have you made about students, coworkers, administrators, faculty members and their "success"?
- c. What kind of advice have you given to others when asked about trying to succeed or reaching goals?

4. Action Plan

- a. What action steps can you take to stop this cycle?
- b. What can you do to change the behaviors exhibited in your answers to question three?
- c. How can you take an active role as an educator?
- d. How can you take an active role in the governance of your institution?

The best way to enact change, especially for our students, is through our many opportunities to *model* beliefs and actions. We all must realize our "full potential as initiators and participants in institutional change efforts" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 67). Once we are able to reflect and make change within ourselves, the next step is to make an effort to change our surrounding communities.

Conclusion

According to the ideology of the American Dream, meritocracy is the belief that individuals get out of the system what they put into it. The system is seen as fair because everyone is assumed to have an equal, or at least "fair," chance of getting ahead. In America, the land of opportunity, the "sky is the limit," you go as far as your individual talents, abilities, and hard work can take you. These side effects of the meritocracy myth reveal that the American Dream does not

become reality despite its influence on Americans' beliefs, actions, and judgments on others' worth.

This article is not intended to suggest that merit is irrelevant or that merit has no effect on life successes. Rather, despite the pervasive rhetoric of meritocracy in America, merit is only one factor among many that influence who ends up with what; non-merit factors are also at work. Pure meritocracy is unlikely to ever occur within the United States, but perhaps some of the detrimental side effects caused by the myth can be ameliorated by making our academic institutions more fair, open, and transparent. This is possible by dispelling the meritocracy myth and allowing individuals to change themselves and the communities around them.

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