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America Needs to Reclaim Status as 'Land of Opportunity'

By Erin O'Flaherty
UCF Forum columnist
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If America really is the “land of opportunity,” then it is only fair that everyone truly should have equality while on life’s endeavors. Sadly, however, when I reflect on the evolution of our great country, I don’t believe we are the land of promise we once were. With the world so full of discrimination, the term “land of opportunity” often gives people false hope.

The American Dream is not as accessible as it is made out to be, with true opportunities for many being far and few between.

In today’s world, many people discriminate against anything that seems to differ from them. Many have naturally selfish dispositions and are unwilling to listen to opposing beliefs or opinions. As a result, biases, discrimination and a halt of progressive cultural evolution occur. It seems as though people discriminate against anything to help their view or side.

Nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, political views and social status seem to be among the most prevalent forms of discrimination. While nearly everyone is affected by discrimination at some point in life, not enough of the population is willing to accept diversity as a necessary proponent in the beneficial evolution of our culture. Many people are stuck in the past.

America is set up to be a melting pot of diversity, where everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the American standard. From the outside, this melting pot of diversity seems to bring our country together, upholding the “stand” part of our motto: “United we stand, divided we fall.” If those on the outside can accept this diversity, why is it so hard for us to do so?

The “land of opportunity” is far from what it seems. While I whole-heartedly attest to the fact that this country offers more freedoms than most, equal opportunities are not showered upon every member of society. The word “opportunity” can mean something different to everyone. It could mean money and jobs, class mobility, or even freedom, the basis on which this country was born.

As far as job opportunities, discrimination plays a huge role in actively diminishing opportunities that should be available to everyone. The gender-wage gap continues to be wide, and while we have nondiscrimination and equal-employment opportunity laws in an attempt to abolish discrimination within the workplace, many of those are ignored. Many employers and hiring managers continue to turn away more-qualified people and hire less-qualified people with similar views of the manager. When people are close-minded like this, it inhibits the growth of our wonderful country. People become angry, and at a certain point, everyone’s opportunities are lessened by ignorance.

We are so fortunate to have class mobility, a freedom that few countries have. We have the lower, middle, and upper classes as well shades in between. Through class mobility, it is possible for anyone to move between the classes as a reflection of their success, whatever that may be, and monetary value. The principle of this system affords many the hope of changing their lives if they are not happy with their social status. If someone is born poor it does not mean they have to be poor for the rest of their life. Moreover, if someone is born rich, they generally are expected to work (in most cases) to keep their money and status.

But even though we hear of success stories within class mobility, opportunities are surely not equal as promised. It usually takes years of higher education to be offered what would be considered a lucrative job. When people who are born poor cannot afford this education or don’t have access to helpful resources, they are almost automatically ruled out of “moving up” in terms of class mobility. This shows that opportunities are not equal, as the “land of opportunity” hints.

The opportunities in America are abundant, but the fine print of these opportunities is that they are not easy to come by without connections or a stable network, which can take decades to build. Americans, of course, have freedom to find these opportunities, but even the freedom is hindered by discrimination and holes in the system.

I love my country and I love that our mission has been to be a land of opportunity for all. But our growing population, political movements and unfair biases have offset that goal.

I hope we all can open ourselves up to more diversity and acceptance, and return from our current status as the “land of unequal and biased opportunity, mostly for those with connections” back to the “land of opportunity” that we are known for around the world.

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