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Equal Pay Day Conversations Remind Me That All Voices Should be Heard

By Barbara E. Thompson
UCF Forum columnist
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Equal Pay Day this year was just reached on April 10. This day symbolizes how far into the current year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year. For women of color, the dates for Equal Pay Day are even more dramatically different, and for the most part go much further into the year.

The observance was originated by the National Committee on Pay Equity in 1996 to illustrate the gap between men's and women's wages. According to recent census data, on average a woman earns 80.5 cents for every dollar a man earns, and women's median annual earnings are \$10,086 less than men's.

At the University of Central Florida, offices, departments, colleges, and student organizations held events to increase awareness about the gender pay gap. Equal Pay Day stickers funded by the Student Government Association were distributed, activities were hosted, and information was disseminated to more than 1,200 students, staff and faculty at four different locations.

I have been involved in the Equal Pay Day awareness events at UCF for the past two years. It is a busy and rewarding day filled with conversations about pay inequities and approaches to eliminating the gap. This year, as I was busily passing out Equal Pay Day stickers in the Student Union atrium, I noticed with admiration the efforts of the representatives from NOW at UCF, LEAD Scholars, and the various departments and colleges working the event.

All of these individuals were passionate about our efforts to educate the UCF community about this important and continuing issue. From my college days in the 1970s at Florida Atlantic University – when I was working tirelessly to obtain signatures on Equal Rights Amendment petitions – to the present, I have respected and supported efforts to help women gain the same opportunities as men.

The recognition of Equal Pay Day on April 10 represents a view of my past, my present, and, at least for the time, my future. Although I understand that change takes time, I struggle with the rumblings in my head that say, "Really! How much time is enough?"

On April 10, however, my focus was on the work going on around me. Despite being in a hurry to get to lunch, go to a class, or attend a meeting, many of the individuals I approached with an Equal Pay Day sticker in hand were willing to give up a few minutes to chat about the issue.

Some individuals were well aware of the inequities in pay, some had no idea that a gap existed, and still others were skeptical that men and women received different pay for the same work. A couple people denied the differences between men's and women's wages.

All of these conversations reminded me that what is necessary in a diverse society that values the inclusion of all of its members is the creation of opportunities where all voices can be heard. This is what happened at the Equal Pay Day event. My friends and colleagues involved in the tabling were some of the strongest voices present at that moment in time, but none of us set out to silence the views expressed by others. We listened with interest and respect to various perspectives and then likewise shared our views.

People were having conversations, and it was exciting to be a part of what was happening.

On some aspects of diversity, from the standpoint of accomplished social change, we have at least a partial history of demonstrating sharing and listening to multiple perspectives. But from what I have witnessed in my lifetime, change with respect to how we relate to one another is never fully accomplished.

We must continue to make strides where efforts already have been made, but also must be willing to engage in additional conversations. This involves overcoming our personal fears of hearing a view that conflicts with our own. Instead of seeking validation for what we believe, we should challenge ourselves to listen to a variety of views on a topic.

Perhaps this represents education in its purest form – learning about the people around us and how they think about our shared time on this shared planet.

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