In summer 2007, I returned home from my freshman year at Brown University to the new house my family had just bought in Florida. It had a two-car garage. It had a pool. I was on track to becoming an Ivy League graduate, with opportunities no one else in my family had ever experienced. I stood in the middle of this house and burst into tears. I thought: *We’ve made it.*

That moment encapsulated what I had always thought of the “American dream.” My parents had come to this country from Mexico and Ecuador more than 30 years before, seeking better opportunities for themselves. They worked and saved for years to ensure my two brothers and I could receive a good education and a solid financial foundation as adults. Though I can’t remember them explaining the American dream to me explicitly, the messaging I had received by growing up in the United States made me know that coming home from my first semester at a prestigious university to a new house meant we had achieved it.

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[**I spent the last 15 years trying to become an American. I've failed.**](http://www.vox.com/2015/6/23/8823349/immigration-system-broken)

And yet, now six years out of college and nearly 10 years past that moment, I’ve begun questioning things I hadn’t before: Why did I “make it” while so many others haven’t? Was this conventional version of making it what I actually wanted? I’ve begun to realize that our society’s definition of making it comes with its own set of limitations and does not necessarily guarantee all that I originally assumed came with the American dream package.

I interviewed several friends from immigrant backgrounds who had also reflected on these questions after achieving the traditional definition of success in the United States. Looking back, there were several things we misunderstood about the American dream. Here are a few:

**1) The American dream isn’t the result of hard work. It’s the result of hard work, luck, and opportunity.**

Looking back, I can’t discount the sacrifices my family made to get where we are today. But I also can’t discount specific moments we had working in our favor. One example: my second-grade teacher, Ms. Weiland. A few months into the year, Ms. Weiland informed my parents about our school’s gifted program. Students tracked into this program in elementary school would usually end up in honors and Advanced Placement classes in high school — classes necessary for gaining admission into prestigious colleges.

My parents, unfamiliar with our education system, didn’t understand any of this. But Ms. Weiland went out of her way to explain it to them. She also persuaded school administrators to test me for entrance into the program, and with her support, I eventually earned a spot.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that Ms. Weiland’s persistence ultimately influenced my acceptance into Brown University. No matter how hard I worked or what grades I received, without gifted placement I could never have reached the academic classes necessary for an Ivy League school. Without qthat first opportunity given to me by Ms. Weiland, my entire educational trajectory would have changed.

The philosopher Seneca said, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” But in the United States, too often people work hard every day, and yet never receive the opportunities that I did — an opportunity as simple as a teacher advocating on their behalf. Statistically, students of color remain [**consistently undiscovered**](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/10/upshot/why-talented-black-and-hispanic-students-can-go-undiscovered.html?_r=0) by teachers [**who often**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/04/22/how-does-a-teachers-race-affect-which-students-get-to-be-identified-as-gifted/), intentionally or not, choose [**mostly**](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/why-are-there-so-few-black-children-in-gifted-and-talented-programs/424707/) white, high-income students to enter [**advanced or “gifted” programs**](https://www.noodle.com/articles/data-show-race-gaps-in-gifted-and-special-ed-teaching239), regardless of their qualifications. Upon entering college, I met several students from across the country who also remained stuck within their education system until a teacher helped them find a way out.

Research has proved that these inconsistencies in opportunity exist in almost every aspect of American life. Your [**race**](http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/11/lessons-white-privilege-poc/) can determine whether you [**interact**](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/us/justice-department-to-release-blistering-report-of-racial-bias-by-baltimore-police.html) with police, whether you are [**allowed to buy a house**](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/12/business/economy/discrimination-in-housing-against-nonwhites-persists-quietly-us-study-finds.html?_r=0), and even whether your doctor believes you are [**really in pain**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/04/04/do-blacks-feel-less-pain-than-whites-their-doctors-may-think-so/). Your [**gender**](http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/160-examples-of-male-privilege/) can determine whether you receive [**funding for your startup**](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/technology/18women.html?_r=0) or whether your attempts at professional [**networking**](http://www.triplepundit.com/2013/12/wall-streets-frat-boy-culture-planet/) are effective. Your [**"foreign-sounding" name**](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ruchikatulshyan/2014/06/13/have-a-foreign-sounding-name-change-it-to-get-a-job/#6fcfa8b15f21) can determine whether someone considers you qualified for a job. Your family’s income can determine the [**quality of your public school**](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/06/inequality-public-schools/395876/) or your odds that your [**entrepreneurial project succeeds**](http://www.gemconsortium.org/report).

These opportunities make a difference. They have created a society where [**most every American is working hard**](https://20somethingfinance.com/american-hours-worked-productivity-vacation/) and yet only a small segment are actually moving forward. Knowing all this, I am no longer naive enough to believe the American dream is possible for everyone who attempts it. The United States doesn’t lack people trying. What it lacks is an equal playing field of opportunity.

**2) Accomplishing the American dream can be socially alienating**

Throughout my life, my family and I knew this uncomfortable truth: To better our future, we would have to enter spaces that felt culturally and racially unfamiliar to us. When I was 4 years old, my parents moved our family to a predominantly white part of town, so I could attend the county’s best public schools. I was often one of the only students of color in my gifted and honors programs. This trend continued in college and afterward: As an English major, I was often the only person of color in my literature and creative writing classes. As a teacher, I was often one of few teachers of color at my school or in my teacher training programs.

While attending Brown, a student of color once told me: “Our education is really just a part of our gradual ascension into whiteness.” At the time I didn’t want to believe him, but I came to understand what he meant: Often, the unexpected price for academic success is cultural abandonment.

In a piece for [**the New York Times**](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/opinion/why-poor-students-struggle.html), Vicki Madden described how education can create this “tug of war in [your] soul”:

To stay four years and graduate, students have to come to terms with the unspoken transaction: exchanging your old world for a new world, one that doesn’t seem to value where you came from. … I was keen to exchange my Western hardscrabble life for the chance to be a New York City middle-class museum-goer. I’ve paid a price in estrangement from my own people, but I was willing. Not every 18-year-old will make that same choice, especially when race is factored in as well as class.

So many times throughout my life, I’ve come home from classes, sleepovers, dinner parties, and happy hours feeling the heaviness of this exchange. I’ve had to Google cultural symbols I hadn’t understood in these conversations (What is “Harper’s”? What is “après-ski”?). At the same time, I remember using academia jargon my family couldn’t understand either. At a Christmas party, a friend called me out for using “those big Ivy League words” in a conversation. My parents had trouble understanding how independent my lifestyle had become and kept remarking on how much I had changed. Studying abroad, moving across the country for internships, living alone far away from family after graduating — these were not choices my Latin American parents had seen many women make.

An official from Brown told [**the Boston Globe**](https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2015/04/09/what-like-poor-ivy-league-school/xPtql5uzDb6r9AUFER8R0O/story.html) that similar dynamics existed with many first-generation college students she worked with: “Often, [these students] come to college thinking that they want to return home to their communities. But an Ivy League education puts them in a different place — their language is different, their appearance is different, and they don’t fit in at home anymore, either.”

A Haitian-American friend of mine from college agreed: “After going to college, interacting with family members becomes a conflicted zone. Now you’re the Ivy League cousin who speaks a certain way, and does things others don’t understand. It changes the dynamic in your family entirely.”

A Latina friend of mine from Oakland felt this when she got accepted to the University of Southern California. She was the first person from her to family to leave home to attend college, and her conservative extended family criticized her for leaving home before marriage.

“One night they sat me down, told me my conduct was shameful and was staining the reputation of the family,” she told me, “My family thought a woman leaving home had more to do with her promiscuity than her desire for an education. They told me, ‘You’re just going to Los Angeles so you can have the freedom to be with whatever guy you want.’ When I think about what was most hard about college, it wasn’t the academics. It was dealing with my family’s disapproval of my life.”

We don’t acknowledge that too often, achievement in the United States means this gradual isolation from the people we love most. By simply striving toward American success, many feel forced to make to make that choice.

**3) The American dream makes us focus single-mindedly on wealth and prestige**

When I spoke to an Asian-American friend from college, he told me, “In the Asian New Jersey community I grew up in, I was surrounded by parents and friends whose mentality was to get high SAT scores, go to a top college, and major in medicine, law, or investment banking. No one thought outside these rigid tracks.” When he entered Brown, he followed these expectations by starting as a premed, then switching his major to economics.

This pattern is common in the Ivy League: Studies show that Ivy League graduates gravitate toward [**jobs with high salaries or prestige**](http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/out-of-harvard-and-into-finance/) to justify the work and money we put into obtaining an elite degree. As a child of immigrants, there’s even more pressure to believe this is the only choice.

Of course, financial considerations are necessary for survival in our society. And it’s healthy to consider wealth and prestige when making life decisions, particularly for those who come from backgrounds with less privilege. But to what extent has this concern become an unhealthy obsession? For those who have the privilege of living a life based on a different set of values, to what extent has the American dream mindset limited our idea of success?

[**The Harvard Business Review**](https://hbr.org/2014/12/rethink-what-you-know-about-high-achieving-women) reported that over time, people from past generations have begun to redefine success. As they got older, factors like “family happiness,” “relationships,” “balancing life and work,” and “community service” became more important than job titles and salaries. The report quoted a man in his 50s who said he used to define success as “becoming a highly paid CEO.” Now he defines it as “striking a balance between work and family and giving back to society.”

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[**Vox First Person: If ambition is ruining your life, you need to read Thoreau**](http://www.vox.com/first-person/2016/9/23/13027988/thoreau-walden-ambition)

While I spent high school and college focusing on achieving an Ivy League degree, and a prestigious job title afterward, I didn’t think about how other values mattered in my own notions of success. But after I took a [**“gap year”**](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/how-millennials-are-changing-international-travel/373007/) at 24 to travel, I realized that the way I’d defined the American dream was incomplete: It was not only about getting an education and a good job but also thinking about how my career choices contributed to my overall well-being. And it was about gaining experiences aside from my career, [**like travel**](http://matadornetwork.com/change/dont-women-celebrate-travel-accomplishments-way-celebrate-engagements/). It was about making room for things like creativity, [**spirituality**](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/01/should-schools-teach-kids-to-meditate/283229/), and adventure when making important decisions in my life.

Courtney E. Martin addressed this in her TED talk called “The New Better Off,” where she said: “The biggest danger is not failing to achieve the American dream. The biggest danger is achieving a dream that you don't actually believe in.”

Those realizations ultimately led me to pursue my current work as a travel writer. Whenever I have the privilege to do so, I attempt what Martin calls “the harder, more interesting thing”: to “compose a life where what you do every single day, the people you give your best love and ingenuity and energy to, aligns as closely as possible with what you believe.”

**4) Even if you achieve the American dream, that doesn’t necessarily mean other Americans will accept you**

A few years ago, I was working on my laptop in a hotel lobby, waiting for reception to process my booking. I wore leather boots, jeans, and a peacoat. A guest of the hotel approached me and began shouting in slow English (as if I couldn’t understand otherwise) that he needed me to clean his room. I was 25, had an Ivy League degree, and had completed one of the [**most competitive**](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/education/12winerip.html) programs for college graduates in the country. And yet still I was being confused for the maid.

I realized then that no matter how hard I played by the rules, some people would never see me as a person of academic and professional success. This, perhaps, is the most psychologically disheartening part of the American dream: Achieving it doesn’t necessarily mean we can “transcend” racial stereotypes about who we are.

It just takes one look at the rhetoric by current politicians to know that as first-generation Americans, we are still not seen as “American” as others. As so many cases have illustrated recently, no matter how much we focus on proving them wrong, negative perceptions from others will continue to challenge our sense of self-worth.

For black immigrants or children of immigrants, this exclusionary messaging is even more obvious. Kari Mugo, a writer who immigrated to the US from Kenya when she was 18, expressed to me the disappointment she has felt trying to feel welcomed here: “It’s really hard to make an argument for a place that doesn’t want you, and shows that every single day. It’s been 12 years since I came here, and each year I’m growing more and more disillusioned.”

I still cherish my college years, and still feel immensely proud to call myself an Ivy League graduate. I am humbled by my parents’ sacrifices that allowed me to live the comparatively privileged life I’ve had. I acknowledge that it is in part *because* of this privilege that I can offer a critique of the United States in the first place. My parents and other immigrant families who focused only on survival didn’t have the luxury of being critical.

Yet having that luxury, I think it’s important to vocalize that in the United States, living the dream is far more nuanced than we often make others believe. As Mugo told me, “My friends back in Kenya always receive the message that America is so great. But I always wonder why we don’t ever tell the people back home what it’s really like. We always give off the illusion that everything is fine, without also acknowledging the many ways life here is really, really hard.”

I deeply respect the choices my parents made, and I’m deeply grateful for the opportunities the United States provided. But at this point in my family’s journey, I am curious to see what happens when we begin exploring a different dream.