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### Humans of Vanderbilt: Exploring the American Dream on a Modern Day College Campus

For my final project, I created the Facebook page entitled “Humans of Vanderbilt.” As I discussed in my midterm project pitch and also in my final presentation, my motivation for my social media page is Brandon Stanton’s *Humans of New York*. This phenomenon began as a collection of pictures of people in New York City, but quickly grew to a vibrant blog, gained millions of followers on social media, and is now a New York Times bestseller. How Stanton’s hobby quickly grew to a movement in my generation caught my attention; precisely, how did his catalogue of strangers’ pictures and stories become so wildly popular in American pop culture? After working on my own social media page with personal interviews and pictures, I think one possible answer lies in the nature of our experiences as Americans. Although we pride ourselves on our right to individuality and personal freedoms, the American Dream has existed as an underlying common thread to individual stories since our Forefathers declared independence from Great Britain centuries ago.

The goal for my project was to use the experiences of people I interviewed to investigate the aspects of that common thread on Vanderbilt’s campus. I explored the American Dream through the collection of experiences and the interaction of social media to see which ideas resonated the most with the greater Vanderbilt community. My initial thoughts for my project included inquiring if facets of the American Dream from the 20<sup>th</sup> century still influence people’s aspirations today. Specifically, I was seeking to find if people still approach America as the land of opportunity and set their goals on achieving economic stability through hard work as American immigrants had in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If not, I was curious to see if people, specifically students, feel that success in America is unattainable, similar to how many Americans felt in the disillusionment following the World Wars.

Although I did not exclusively converse with students, the most interesting common theme I found was the generational tension between students and their parents, especially with their goals for success. Most students spoke of their hope for a successful life as one defined by personal fulfillment. Despite their parents hopes for them to have a direct course of study here at Vanderbilt leading to a career and financial stability, students seem to be seeking passions and personal interests, sometimes at the expense of having a clear career path and ensured financial stability. This concept was reinforced by the Facebook page. By far the most “liked” and “shared” photo was one of three elderly women who had come back to Vanderbilt for Homecoming weekend. Although all three may have been financially or academically successful in their lives, their story of lifelong friendship was the highlight of our conversation. The popularity of this picture on Facebook shows that success defined by personal fulfillment resonates strongly with the greater Vanderbilt community.

Another interesting theme I found in my project arose from my conversations with two foreign students, one in the graduate divinity school and one in the undergraduate engineering program. Both spoke enthusiastically about their love for America and the opportunity this country has provided them. However, instead of economic opportunity that immigrants sought in

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both of these men expressed a strong appreciation for the intellectual opportunity in each of their respective fields.

Overall, it was such a joy to work on this project this semester. It forced me to break out of my comfort zone on many levels. I only wish I would have had the time and the resources to fully develop the Facebook page. I hope to continue “Humans of Vanderbilt” by collaborating with the “Humans of Vanderbilt” Instagram account and the many other students who have expressed an interesting in helping. Just as Stanton’s *Humans of New York* rapidly gained popularity, the Facebook page “Humans of Vanderbilt” has sparked interest too because the common thread that connects all of our stories, a thread I believe is the modern day American Dream.