

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE  
'AN AMERICAN'**

Leslie Gally and Connie Flanagan  
Penn State University

In posing the question, 'what does it mean to be American', we were interested in understanding what young people believe are the principles that define our character and bind us together as a people. The responses of 450 adolescents from African-American, Arab-American, Latino-American, and European-American backgrounds were analyzed. The adolescents' responses reflected the following themes:

- Freedom and Individual Achievement
- Equality and Constitutional Guarantees
- Freedom AND Equality

These views were related to the adolescents' attitudes towards immigrants and to their personal values. Youth who focused solely on freedom and individual achievement as the essence of the American character felt that immigrants posed a threat to American life style and culture. They also endorsed self interest and materialism as their personal values.

Conversely, those whose concept of 'being American' included freedom as well as characteristics such as equality and constitutional guarantees of free speech and assembly felt that immigrants enriched American culture and should be encouraged to maintain

Constance Flanagan (cflanagan@psu.edu)  
336 Ag. Admin Bldg.  
Penn State University  
University Park, PA 16802 - 2601  
814 863 7425

Research funded by:  
William T. Grant Foundation  
Carnegie Corporation of New York

their traditions. This group also had higher public interest goals including patriotism, public service, and promoting tolerance.

Constance Flanagan (cflanagan@psu.edu)  
336 Ag. Admin Bldg.  
Penn State University  
University Park, PA 16802 - 2601  
814 863 7425

Research funded by:  
William T. Grant Foundation  
Carnegie Corporation of New York