

SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is conducting a major new research program supported by the Foundation to track the spiritual growth of students during their college years. The study builds on an abundance of anecdotal evidence that suggests growing interest on college campuses to acknowledge religion and spirituality as core components of a liberal arts education. The project employs a multi-institutional and longitudinal design to identify trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students.

Spirituality points to our interiors, our subjective life. . . . The spiritual domain thus has to do with human consciousness—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness. . . . [It is concerned] with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us.” This is part of the HERI project’s working definition of spirituality. College students who are beginning to wrestle with spiritual questions in new ways—or perhaps for the first time—are a fitting population for such survey research, yet very little previous developmental research has focused on students’ spirituality. That which exists has been conducted at single institutions or usually at religious-affiliated colleges.

When broadly conceived, “spirituality also connects us to those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred and the mystical.” As the authors of the HERI study observe, “When viewed within this very broad umbrella, spirituality is, we believe, a universal impulse and reality.” Their project—“Spirituality in Higher Education:

A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” – will track trends, patterns, and principles of spiritual growth during the college years. The data and insights may prove useful to colleges and universities interested in enhancing opportunities for college students to grow spiritually and religiously. College is a critical time for students. They enter as fledgling adults still growing in skills and maturity. Their worldviews are largely inherited from their parents; often their values are vague or as yet untested. Yet it is precisely at this point in their history when life-changing decisions come one after another—the choice of a college, a major, a career, and even a spouse. The bewildering array of important decisions causes many students to reflect on what they want out of life and what kind of contribution they will make to the world. This research is the first in a series of reports on a national study of college students’ spiritual development.

The first stage—a pilot survey—was completed in the spring of 2003 by approximately 3,700 juniors at a representative sample of colleges and universities participating in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual survey of entering freshmen. The 2003 study discovered a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students: more than half placed a high value on “integrating spirituality” in their lives—“77% saying we are all spiritual beings” and 71% saying they “gain strength by trusting in a higher power.” However, at this critical juncture in their lives, college students find themselves largely on their own. More than half report that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life, and nearly two-thirds say their professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters. “The survey shows that students have deeply felt values and interests in spirituality and religion, but their academic work and campus programs seem to be divorced from it,” says Alexander W. Astin, the coprincipal investigator of HERI’s Spirituality in Higher Education research project, director of HERI and the Allan M. Carter Professor of Higher Education at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“Higher education needs to explore how well it's meeting the great traditions at the core of a liberal arts education, grounded in the maxim, ‘know thyself,’” says Astin, who is also the founding director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, an ongoing national study of some ten million students, 250,000 faculty and staff and 1,500 higher education institutions.

Colleges and universities have historically addressed education holistically, integrating the academic, spiritual, and even physical education of their students. Most of America's great universities, including Harvard and Yale, have religious charters and were launched with strong spiritual emphases. But these ideals have been set aside. "If we just teach students how to make money or become rich and famous we are not fulfilling our responsibility as educational institutions," says Astin. It's completely understandable...to keep religion and academic study separate." Astin says. "But spirituality is a much more generic concept that for many students doesn't necessarily mean religion, and all students are on some kind of a spiritual development path. We can do a lot more to assist them."

"One of the most important things about spirituality is that it touches directly on our sense of community," says the HERI project report. "Giving spirituality a more central place in our institutions will thus serve to strengthen students' sense of connectedness with each other, their faculty and their institutions."

The report and Astin's comments have found strong support in the preliminary study.

Early Findings

The national study is based on the 2003 survey of 3,680 students from 46 colleges and universities. A first step in an ambitious multiyear look at spirituality among college students, the study assesses how the college experience influences spiritual development.

The survey was guided by the following questions:

- How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues and questions such as the nature of God/Divine/Universal Spirit and the meaning of life and work? What kinds of curricular and cocurricular experiences facilitate this spiritual quest (e.g., community service work, "peak" experiences, peer relationships, campus ministry, particular courses or particular faculty members, etc.)?
- How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities or virtues such as compassion, honesty, optimism, and humility? How is their academic and career development affected by such self-perceptions?
- What spiritual/religious practices and behaviors (e.g. rituals, prayer/meditation, service to others, etc.) are students most or least attracted to? How do such practices relate to other aspects of students' academic and personal development?
- What is the connection between traditional religious practice and spiritual development?
- What effect does religious doubt have on students' spiritual development?
- What most gets in the way of students' spiritual/religious quest (e.g. peer pressures, school pressures, work commitments, etc.)?

Key findings in the first study show clearly that college students are concerned about spiritual matters:

78% discuss religion/spirituality with friends.

77% pray.

71% find religion personally helpful.

73% say religious/spiritual beliefs help develop their identity.

62% report their professors never encourage discussions of religious/spiritual issues.

Concern about religion and spirituality, however, does not appear to be associated with intolerance.

88% agree that nonreligious people can be just as moral as religious people.

70% agree that most people can grow spiritually without being religious.

The data also shows a modest increase in the number of students who say it is "very important" to integrate spirituality into their lives, develop a meaningful philosophy of life, and help others who are in difficulty. Despite a decline in some of the traditional modes of religious expression, students are indeed using their college years as a time of spiritual reflection.

65% question their religious and/or spiritual beliefs at least occasionally.

73% say their spiritual/religious beliefs have helped them develop their identity.

74% say those beliefs provide strength, support and guidance.

9% of students report that their "religiousness" is "much stronger" since entering college.

86% say that an "essential" or "very important" goal in life is attaining wisdom; 84% rate becoming "a more loving person" highly.

The study also compared changes in the outlooks of the polled students from their freshman year to their junior year. One of the most dramatic changes was the drop-off in attendance of religious services: 52% reported attending religious services frequently the year before they entered college, but only 29% said they did the same by their junior year.

The percentage of students who say it is "very important" or "essential" to integrate spirituality into their lives, however, climbed from 51% in the poll three years ago to 58% in the current survey. Over the same period the percentages of students who consider it very important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life climbed from 43% to 52%, and those believing it is very important or essential to help others who are in difficulty rose from 60% to 74%.

College students are very much engaged in spirituality and religion," says Astin. "Clearly, it's far more important to them than most people in higher education may assume." Astin and his colleagues hope that the multiyear longitudinal study will contribute to much-needed benchmarks in higher education benefiting both the students and the institution. "The long-term interest here is in helping people become more engaged citizens, more responsible parents, better neighbors. All of these are legitimate goals for an educational institution. But if you ignore a major part of a student's inner development, then you are going to have a hard time doing this," Astin says.

The next stage of research will survey 90,000 college freshmen in the fall of 2004, then follow up with selected surveys and interviews in the spring of their third year.

The Project Directors

Alexander W. Astin has written 20 books and more than 300 other publications. He is the most-frequently cited author in the field of higher education. He shares the leadership of the project with Helen S. Astin, also a director of HERI, and Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm.

Helen S. Astin is Professor of Higher Education and Associate Director of HERI. She has published numerous articles and 11 books, and has won numerous awards for her work on leadership and spirituality in higher education.

Jennifer A. Lindholm is Associate Director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at HERI. Her scholarship focuses on professional behavior of college and university faculty, issues related to institutional change and undergraduate students' personal development.