

The Dallas Morning News

Dallas, Texas, Saturday, November 29, 2003

Are students on a spiritual quest?

What role does spirituality play in the lives of today's college students? What is the connection between spirituality and religion? How many students are actively engaged in a spiritual quest? What are colleges and universities doing that either encourages or inhibits students in this quest?

These are just a few of the questions being explored by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute in a new project, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," supported by a \$1.9 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

This project is based in part on the realization that the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities devote to the "exterior" and "interior" aspects of students' development has gotten out of balance. While we academics can be justifiably proud of our accomplishments in the fields of science, medicine, technology, and commerce, we have increasingly come to neglect the student's inner development — the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding.

The development of self-understanding, in particular, receives very little attention in our schools and colleges, even though most of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim "know thyself."

Self-understanding is a necessary prerequisite to our ability to understand others and to resolve

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**ALEXANDER W. ASTIN
and HELEN S. ASTIN**

conflicts. This basic truth — which lies at the heart of our difficulty in dealing effectively with problems of violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and religious and ethnic conflict that continue to plague our country and our world — was also dramatically and tragically illustrated by the events of Sept. 11.

The sense in which the study defines spiritual development is broad: how students make meaning of their education and their lives; how they develop a sense of purpose; the value and belief dilemmas that they experience; the role of religion, the sacred, and the mystical in their lives.

Spirituality also involves aspects of our students' experience that are not easy to define, such things as intuition, inspiration, creativity, and their sense of connectedness to others. Each student, of course, will view his or her spirituality in a unique way. For many, traditional religious beliefs and practices may form the core of their spirituality; for others such beliefs and practices may play little or no part.

How students define their spiri-

tuality, or sense of meaning and purpose in life, is not at issue, but rather the fact that academic culture has for too long caused its staff and students to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives, where people act either as if they are not spiritual beings, or as if their spiritual side is irrelevant to their vocation or work. Academic work thus becomes divorced from students' most deeply felt values, and students hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, wholeness, and fragmentation with each other and especially with faculty.

What have we learned so far? Results from a preliminary survey of 3,780 college juniors at 46 public and private institutions across the country show that two-thirds express a strong interest in spiritual matters. A similar number demonstrate a substantial level of religious commitment and engagement. However, well over half of the students report that their professors never encourage discussions of religious or spiritual matters, and about the same proportion reports that professors never provide opportunities to discuss the purpose or meaning of life.

Next fall we're going to follow up on these findings with a larger-scale survey of 90,000 students at 150 institutions.

By raising public awareness of the important role that spirituality plays in student learning and development, by alerting academic administrators, faculty, and curriculum committees to the importance of spiritual development, and by identifying possible strategies for enhancing that development, it is

our hope to encourage institutions to give greater priority to these spiritual aspects of students' educational and personal development.

As Wellesley College President Diana Chapman Walsh, a member of the advisory board for the project, expresses it: "We can create time and space ... for faculty, students, and staff to honor their inner lives, when, if, and how they choose. ... The freedoms we scholars treasure need not be threatened by opening ourselves to the spiritual dimensions of teaching, learning, and knowing, need not deny the possibility of a kind of knowing that comes from heart and soul. These forms of knowing should be sought not instead of the intellect but in partnership with the intellect, in all its beauty and power."

Alexander and Helen Astin are director and associate director, respectively, of the UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and co-principal investigators of the spirituality project. For more information, visit the project Web site at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.