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Colleges Rarely Delve Into Spiritual Issues, Students Say in Poll

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Most college students searching for the meaning of life are not getting direction from many of their professors, according to a survey of students at 46 colleges and universities released yesterday.

In the survey, 62 percent of students said their professors never encouraged discussions of religious or spiritual matters.

"If we just teach students how to make money or become rich and famous we are not fulfilling our responsibility as educational institutions," said Alexander W. Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, which conducted the study.

Mr. Astin said that colleges were responsible for educating the "whole student" and that he hoped the study would encourage colleges and universities to give more attention to students' personal growth.

Eighty-six percent of the students surveyed said an essential or very important goal in life was attaining wisdom, and 58 percent said integrating spirituality into their life was essential.

Only 39 percent of students reported that their religious and spiritual beliefs had been strengthened by new ideas they encountered in class, and 53 percent said the classroom had had no impact.

Still, 55 percent of the students said they were satisfied with the opportunities for religious and spiritual development provided.

Mr. Astin said there were educational techniques that colleges and universities could use to help students become more introspective.

He said one strategy was service-learning, which integrates community service with coursework. Another technique is creating a course "in which students look at the curriculum in light of their own aspirations and purposes in life" and try to create a better match between personal values and the courses they take.

Researchers surveyed 3,680 students. The project is being financed by the John Templeton Foundation.