

The Washington Times

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2005

Most freshmen believe in God but faith is fragile

By Cheryl Wetzstein
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Eight out of 10 college freshmen "believe in God" and have "an interest in spirituality," according to a study of their religious views.

But less than half of them are

"secure" in matters of faith and follow religious teachings in everyday life.

Many American youths are "actively engaged in a spiritual quest," said researchers with the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) of the University of California at Los Angeles,

which yesterday released its study of 112,232 college freshmen.

"In some ways, the study took us by surprise," since today's youths are presumed to be self-absorbed, materialistic and apprehensive about the future, said Helen Astin, co-author of

the HERI study. The data shows the freshmen "are in a serious search for deeper meaning in their lives," she said.

Most of this generation was raised in families with mothers in the work force, noted New York University professor Claire Gaudiani. Growing up in such

busy homes — as well as in families where divorce and remarriage have occurred — may be a big reason why these teens are committed to "balancing material and spiritual interests," she said.

see FRESHMEN, page A26

FRESHMEN

From page A1

Yesterday's findings both confirm and contradict those of another survey of Generation Y released this week by Reboot, a Jewish youth network, and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, a liberal polling group.

The Reboot study of about 1,400 youths ages 18 to 25 found that 46 percent of youths were "undecided" about organized religion, and 27 percent were so disenchanted with religion that they were dubbed "god-less" by the researchers.

The HERI study also found a substantial number of freshmen who were insecure in their faith — 48 percent said they were either "doubting," "seeking" or "conflicted" about religious matters.

But the HERI study, which was crafted to examine both spirituality and religiosity, found that 42 percent of freshmen were "secure" in their faith, and vast majorities said they believed in God and the "sacredness of life." Forty percent said they follow religious teachings in everyday life.

Only 15 percent of freshmen said they were "not interested"

YOUTHFUL SPIRITUALITY

A survey of 112,232 incoming college freshmen at 236 colleges and universities finds strong interest in spirituality and religious matters.

83% believe in the sacredness of life.

83% believe that "nonreligious people can lead lives that are just as moral as ... religious believers."

82% performed volunteer work in high school.

80% have an interest in spirituality.

79% believe in God.

74% feel a "connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self."

74% discuss the meaning of life with friends.

70% are actively engaged in "trying to change things that are unfair in the world."

64% believe that "most people can grow spiritually without being religious."

61% pray at least weekly.

40% follow religious teachings in everyday life.

15% are "not interested" in spiritual/religious matters.

Source: "The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose" by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles

The Washington Times

in spiritual or religious matters.

Both the HERI and Reboot studies revealed that most of today's youths are tolerant of other religions and think that nonreligious people can also be "moral."

The HERI survey involved students from 236 colleges and universities. A follow-up study is planned for 2007 to see how the students' views change, said study co-author Alexander Astin.

Colleges and employers are

well-advised to be more responsive to this burgeoning interest in both academic excellence and "existential questions," concluded the HERI study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

However, answering religious questions may be difficult for most professors. A March study published in the online political journal Forum found that 51 percent of college faculty say they seldom or never attend church.