

A Reflection on the Spirituality in Higher Education Project: An Interview with Alexander Astin

By Alexander W. Astin

At the close of the Spirituality in Higher Education Project, Astin, Co-Principal Investigator, shares his reflections on the Project contributions to deepening the body of research on college students' development as well as increasing spiritual capital within higher education. Astin also offers additional pathways for future related researcher to continue this important work.

What has it been like to study such a broad, and often ambiguous, topic like spirituality? Please share any significant experiences over the seven years on the Spirituality in Higher Education Project team.

When we began this work, we approached studying the concept of "spirituality" with an open mind. We quickly became involved in an exploratory journey to better understand what spirituality means and to determine if it is something in college undergraduates' development that can be measured. For years we had been exploring how students' beliefs and values change in college and what significant experiences impact their development, so now we were seeking to learn more in a related area.

Studying spirituality has been somewhat of an adventure for us because we had no formal background in this field; it's been a major learning experience for the research team to see what other people have done and to try and understand what we can use from previous work to build upon as we enlighten ourselves about students' spiritual lives.

As we engaged ourselves in a real open-ended inquiry, we found that many previous measures, such as psychologist Gordon Allport's pioneering work with religious values, focuses on what we have come to call *religious commitment*, which covers a very important but extremely narrow aspect of spirituality. We knew we wanted to create something that was more inclusive of all beliefs and practices that would capture a broader conception of students' inner lives.

The resulting five qualities of spirituality we developed – [Equanimity](#), [Spiritual Quest](#), [Ethic of Caring](#), [Charitable Involvement](#), and [Ecumenical Worldview](#) – are unique in the sense that there is little precedent for such measures in previous research. I feel particularly proud of these five measures because they capture critical aspects of spiritual development that need to be looked at in our undergraduate programming. On a practical level, researchers have another tool that they can use; and on a more subtle level, simply having a concrete means by which educators can consider students' spiritual development by using the five measures to help them work with students and develop educational programs.

The more we work with these measures and look at the longitudinal findings, the more convinced we are that they can be used for a variety of purposes, even outside of education. Our measures reflect some of the conceptions of spirituality found in other fields, such as Business, Psychology, and Health, among others, especially the notion of connectedness to other people that is represented in Ethic of Caring, Charitable Involvement, and Ecumenical Worldview. I think we're really on to something here. It's reassuring to realize that this is not just some idiosyncratic study that's been done that will be left on the shelf.

Please discuss the significant contributions the Project has made to increasing knowledge and practice around spirituality on campus.

The first and maybe most important Project contribution has been to put the spotlight on an aspect of students' lives that we've been largely neglecting. There has been some attention placed on spirituality by a few individuals in religiously-affiliated colleges, but this work has been sporadic and is often focused on a particular religious belief system so that students who don't identify with that particular religious tradition find it difficult to relate to.

We hope that focusing educators' attention on something like spirituality – which, as we have defined it, is something that all students experience at some level and that affects many of their major life decisions – will contribute to our understanding of students' lives and enhance educational programming for the benefit of students. This work also encourages all of us to take a much more holistic perspective with respect to undergraduate student development.

Another potential consequence of our research is that it will encourage educators to consider the importance of students' spiritual development when they develop academic and co-curricular programs. We have been fortunate to engage with many colleagues across the country and even internationally who have a deep concern for this work and are already creating institutional initiatives to support students' spiritual development.

This is also the topic of our forthcoming institutional guidebook on Promising Practices for integrating spirituality into higher education. Two other prime examples of how we have engaged our colleagues at various institutions include the [National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education](#) that we hosted at UCLA in Fall 2006 and the [Research Symposium](#) that we recently sponsored.

The Project has found a new common ground for diverse professionals who work with students, from service learning advocates to those who manage study abroad programs or leadership programming. These professionals can take some reassurance and support from our findings, since we've been able to show that these practices are helpful to students in their spiritual quest in college.

One relevant initiative that many campuses are engaged in currently include service learning which can provide students with a chance to engage with others who possess different values and beliefs, while intentionally reflecting on their experience and on what they have learned. Another such initiative would be capstone experiences that integrate what students have learned throughout their undergraduate years in a coherent way with some sort of community engagement or theoretical undertaking; capstones also lead students in the direction of seeking and questing in order to make sense of their experience.

We have many natural allies in the field of higher education – from both student affairs and academic affairs – who can join in our effort to put more attention on students' spiritual development, given that our data support many of their curricular and co-curricular practices. In the long run, expanding the use of such practices will help students become more caring and responsible citizens, parents, and community members with a broader conception of the world's problems and issues, people who are better able to cope with stress in their lives and meet the challenges of life with more equanimity.

How can Project findings be applied to enhance spiritual capital in higher education?

Spiritual capital, in my mind, has to do with the student's capacity to deal with stress, empathize with others, examine their values, and recognize the importance of grappling with life's big questions such as "Why am I in college?" "What do I want to do with my life?" and "What kind of person do I want to become?" By concentrating more of our energies on helping students ask and begin to answer some of these big questions,

educators can contribute to students' spiritual capital and enrich the overall college experience.

Spiritual capital can be enhanced simply by helping students become conscious of the fact that they are on a "spiritual quest," that they need to nurture that process of self-discovery, and that there are resources on campus and in the community that can help them through this journey. Our project has identified some of the tools that we and our students can utilize to contribute to this growth in spiritual capital, including meditation and self-reflection, study abroad, interdisciplinary studies, service learning, and the like. All of these practices and more can be integrated into existing programs and services or implemented on campus in order to foster a spiritually-infused campus climate.

What work is left to be done with regard to exploring and fostering spiritual capital and the connection to higher education now that the project is coming to a close?

Engaging in this work for a number of years has convinced me that there are many related avenues of research that we can undertake to further expand our understanding of students' spiritual exploration and development. Take the connection between religion and politics. We tend to think in stereotypes when we think about this issue, even when we know stereotypes don't hold up very well given a closer look.

For example, when we tested the hypothesis that people who are highly religious also embrace a very conservative political ideology, we found some notable exceptions, particularly when it comes to the death penalty: those who profess a strong religious faith express less support for the death penalty than do people in general, and much less support than do people who are on the far political right. This interesting and provocative finding shows the selective nature of the alignment between religion and politics; obviously this is an area that can be explored further in much greater depth.

Also, gaining a deeper understanding on how the pace of our postmodern lifestyle impacts our spiritual development is a crucial area for further study. Today we're so inundated with propaganda to buy and do everything under the sun that we don't know how to slow down. One of our wonderful human capacities is the ability to be self-reflective, to look inward to consider our lives and to imagine possibilities. This is a unique ability that we don't want to lose, but I'm afraid that the busyness of life in modern society has reached an unprecedented level that has limited our ability to look inward and be reflective – the core things our study has shown to foster spiritual development.

Our human ability to be reflective and look inward has been compromised over the decades first by TV, then video games, and now computers and the internet – devices that draw our attention outward in a way that precludes reflectiveness. Understanding the impact of this "electronic revolution" on our sense of mindfulness and living an integrated life is a major issue. Students today are so "plugged in" to cell phones, iPods, and other devices that can lead to an even more fragmented lifestyle where interpersonal interactions are often mediated by technology. This also may be one of the reasons why

volunteerism declines between high school and college: the added academic and social demands and the preoccupation with gadgetry make it harder for students to make time to be reflective and process their experiences.

Additionally, we also haven't explored what happens to students once they graduate from college, and we know very little about this regarding religiousness and spirituality. We wonder if this growth in spirituality during the college years that is exhibited through our data continues after graduation, or if it stabilizes or reverts back to pre-college levels. One would hope that it continues, but this remains to be seen.

And then the question is, what kinds of post-college experiences affect spiritual growth, experiences like getting married, going to graduate school, working in a particular kind of job, or living in a certain region or community, among others? Are some post-college experiences more helpful or harmful to individuals' spiritual growth? While we can make some educated guesses about these questions, a specific study that addresses post-college experiences hasn't been done to measure spiritual development in young and middle adulthood.

These are just a few possible directions for further research. There are many, many more ways to consider the impact of spirituality on our lives. It seems to me that higher education can broaden its conception of what they're doing and what's important simply by familiarizing themselves with where their students are spiritually and what resources are available to help them grow and develop in college.

Our study shows that spirituality is a critically important aspect of students' lives that we need to be keeping in mind as we develop educational programs and examine what we're doing in terms of educational improvement and reform. Now the rest is up to us as we foster the spiritual development of our students now and for generations to come.

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