



# SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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

## **A Summary of Initial Findings**

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 to  
encourage or inhibit students in this quest?

Higher Education Research Institute  
Graduate School of Education and Information Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles

## The Project

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA began a major, multi-year research project to identify and study spiritual development among college students, with a particular focus on how the college experience influences that development. The study is funded through a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

As the project's Co-Principal investigators, Alexander and Helen Astin, wrote, "The 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...we have increasingly come to neglect the student's inner development – the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding."<sup>1</sup>

## The Study

This report summarizes findings from a 2003 pilot survey of 3,680 junior year students attending 46 colleges and universities across the country. Since the students surveyed had previously completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey in 2000, it was possible to assess changes over time.

A revised survey was administered to 120,000 entering freshman at a diverse sample of 240 colleges and universities in Fall 2004. A follow-up survey, which will be administered to these students in Spring 2007 when they are juniors, will be used to study changes in these students' spiritual/religious development during their undergraduate years. Faculty perspectives on spirituality and the undergraduate curriculum will also be examined.

## Higher Education Research Institute

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, it serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

UCLA Professors Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin are Co-Principal Investigators of the Project. Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm is the Project Director. Alyssa N. Bryant is a Postdoctoral Fellow, and Katalin Szelényi and Shannon Calderone are Research Analysts.

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1. *The Dallas Morning News*, November 29, 2003



## The Spiritual and Religious Life of College Students: A Summary of Findings

The findings of an initial survey of students at a sample of 46 diverse colleges and universities help higher education institutions not only understand today's students better, but also explore how well they are meeting the great traditions at the core of a liberal arts education, grounded in the maxim, "know thyself."

Results showed that students have deeply felt spiritual and religious values, are very much engaged in spiritual and religious pursuits, and that such pursuits are far more important to them than most people may assume. But there are clear indications that institutions are not encouraging students to delve into these issues, and academic and campus programs do not seem to support these interests.

The study examined influences on students' spiritual/religious growth, including the effects of peer interactions and involvement in certain activities. The research also demonstrated differences in spirituality and religiousness across college majors and political views, as well as between women and men.

### High Levels of Spirituality and Religiousness

Today's college students have a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment, with more than half placing a high value on "integrating spirituality" in their lives, 77% saying "we are all spiritual beings," and 71% indicating they "gain strength by trusting in a higher power." Three-quarters report that they are "searching for meaning and purpose in life." And substantial numbers, upwards of 84%, have had a spiritual experience at least occasionally.

Other perspectives, experiences, and practices include:

- 78% discuss religion/spirituality with friends
- 77% report that they pray
- 71% find religion to be personally helpful
- 70% have attended religious services during the past year
- 73% say their religious/spiritual beliefs helped develop their identity

**"College is the most likely place for people to find out about themselves. One of the biggest things we face as students is forming our identity, and religion can play a major part of this."**

*Ben Burns, University of Wisconsin sophomore, The Badger Herald, December 1, 2003*

**“There is a growing number of university students who think it is important to integrate spirituality into their lives.”**

*San Diego Union Tribune, April 15, 2004*

About three-quarters of the students say their religious/spiritual beliefs give them “strength, support, and guidance,” while two-thirds say these beliefs give them meaning or purpose in life. More than half of the students say “believing in the sacredness of life” describes them “to a great extent,” while 41% say “having an interest in spirituality” is also a significant self-descriptor.

Through a variety of indicators, a significant number of students describe themselves as being on a spiritual quest. And nearly seven-in-ten students say they are having discussions about the meaning of life with friends.

Although students report high levels of spirituality and religious involvement, they are very tolerant of non-religious people. Seven-in-ten agree that most people can grow spiritually without being religious, and 88% say that non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as religious people.

## **Skepticism and Struggles**

While today’s college students are generally very spiritually engaged, a significant minority – at least one-in-five students – show a high degree of skepticism about religion and spirituality. More than one-in-four (27%) say they are indifferent about whether there is a “Supreme Being,” and a similar number report that they have never felt a sense of “sacredness.”

Another notable proportion face challenges and struggles in their spiritual and religious development. Two-thirds question their beliefs at least occasionally, and three-quarters have “struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death.” Nearly half have at least occasionally “felt angry with God.” Close to 40% of students report feeling “disillusioned with my religious upbringing” at least “to some extent.”

## **Spirituality in the Classroom**

Despite the high levels of interest, commitment, and engagement among students, it appears that colleges and universities are doing little to help students explore these issues and support their search in the sphere of values and beliefs. Thus, there is a sharp divide between students’ interests and what happens in classrooms.

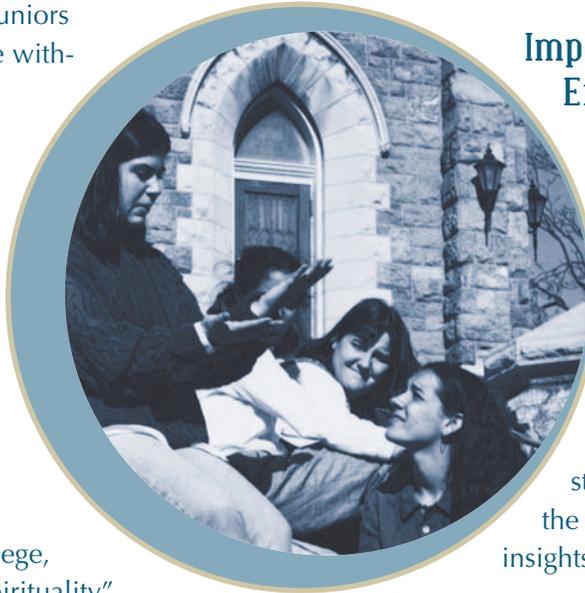
More than half of the students say that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds say professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters. While 39% say their religious or spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by “new ideas encountered in class,” 53% report that the classroom has had no impact. Nearly half (45%) report dissatisfaction with how their college experience has provided “opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection.”

## Changes During College

The survey reveals some demonstrable changes between the students' freshman and junior years in college. One of the most dramatic shifts is in religious service attendance. While more than seven-in-ten college juniors attended a religious service within the last year, the portion who attend frequently has dropped significantly since they entered college. More than half attended religious services frequently the year before they entered college, but less than one-third (29%) are attending frequently by their junior year. Only 9% say their "religiousness" is stronger since entering college, and only 13% say their "spirituality" is much stronger.

But the study reveals growing numbers of students who say it is "very important" to integrate spirituality into their lives (increasing from 51% to

58%), develop a meaningful philosophy of life (from 43% to 52%), and help others who are in difficulty (up from 60% to 74%). Likewise, after three years of college, students are less concerned with becoming well-off financially, declining from 71% to 63%.



## Impact on the College Experience

One of the most critical questions posed by this study is how spirituality affects other aspects of the student's college experience. While more definitive answers to this question will be found in the larger longitudinal study now underway, data from the initial survey provided some insights about the possible effects.

Students who report rising levels of spirituality during college are also more likely to engage in discussions with their peers about the "meaning and purpose of life" and about other spiritual issues, and more likely to engage in

**"An unfortunate finding is that more than half of the students reported that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life or religious/spiritual issues, despite their interest and the value of such discussions and learning opportunities."**

*Jack Calareso, President, Ohio Dominican University, Columbus Dispatch, January 10, 2004*



religious/spiritual activities, such as prayer. Conversely, students who spend more time partying show larger-than-average declines in attendance at religious services during the first three years of college.

Using a variety of factors, we can hypothesize that spirituality has certain effects on several aspects of a student's life.

- **Physical and psychological health:** Spirituality is positively associated with self-esteem and self-rated physical health, but is also positively associated with both psychological distress and spiritual distress.

- **Optimism and a sense of personal empowerment:** There is a clear-cut correlation here, with spirituality strongly associated with equanimity (feeling good about the direction of one's life, feeling at peace and centered, seeing each day as a gift and so forth), and negatively associated with the belief that "realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society."
- **Civic responsibility:** Spirituality is strongly associated with both charitable involvement and social activism.
- **Empathy:** There is a strong, positive correlation between spirituality and seeing the importance of reducing pain and suffering in the world, feeling a strong connection to all of humanity, perceiving oneself as compassionate, helping and understanding others, believing in the goodness of all people, and improving the human condition.
- **Racial/ethnic awareness and tolerance:** Spirituality is associated with being committed to promoting racial understanding, the ability to get along with people of different races/cultures, and growth in tolerance during college.

## College Majors

Percent who experienced high levels of religious/spiritual growth during college:

46% – education	33% – psychology
40% – fine arts	28% – sociology
37% – humanities	28% – biological science
36% – business	25% – history or political science
35% – journalism	22% – computer science
34% – health professional	19% – physical science

## Political Identification and Religiousness

### Highly Religious

Liberal or far left (15%)

Middle-of-the-road (44%)

Conservative or far right (41%)

### Least Religious

Liberal or far left (35%)

Middle-of-the-road (56%)

Conservative or far right (9%)

## Student Characteristics

The survey revealed some significant variations between different types of students.

**College Majors:** There are a wide range of differences among college majors. Students in fine arts and humanities fields are about three times as likely as computer science and physical science majors to report high levels of spirituality. Fine arts and education students show the highest degree of commitment to religious beliefs, with sociology majors reporting the lowest.

Fine arts and humanities majors are more likely than other majors to be highly engaged in a spiritual quest, but they also express high levels of spiritual distress. Students in the physical sciences, computer science, engineering, and business are the least likely to show high levels of engagement in a spiritual quest.

Close to half of education students report high levels of religious/spiritual growth during their first three years. In contrast, only one-in-five physical and computer science majors, and one-in-four history and political science majors, report similar levels of growth in these areas.

**Gender:** Women exhibit greater commitment to religion and spirituality than men do. For example, 26% of women versus 16% of men are highly spiritual, and 37% of women compared to 25% of men score high on religious commitment.

Women are more likely than men to experience spiritual and psychological distress, while men show higher levels of self-esteem and religious skepticism.

**Political Orientation:** Highly religious college students tend to identify themselves as politically conservative and hold conservative views on many social issues. Only 15% of highly religious students call themselves “liberals,” while 41% say they are “conservatives.”

Conservative students are substantially more likely than liberals to show high levels of religious commitment (50% versus 18%) and religious engagement (37% versus 10%). Liberal students are more likely than conservatives to express high levels of religious skepticism and to be engaged in a spiritual quest.

The largest gap on issues is in views about casual sex, with only 7% of highly religious students but 80% of the least religious students saying it’s all right. The most and least religious students also differ sharply on agreeing with legalized abortion (24% versus 79%), legalization of marijuana (17% versus 64%), and prohibiting homosexual relationships (38% versus 17%).

But a very different pattern emerges when it comes to gun control and the death penalty. The most religious students are more likely than the least religious to support gun control (75% versus 70%) and the abolition of the death penalty (38% versus 23%).

## Media Coverage of the Initial Survey

### Select Newspaper Reports and Commentary

“Researchers decided to conduct the study after noticing a shift in the attitudes of students in the annual survey of college freshmen that the institute has administered since 1966. The results showed a sharp decline over the past 30 years in the number of students who listed ‘developing a meaningful philosophy of life’ as a primary objective.” –*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 28, 2003

““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,’ said Alexander W. Astin, director of UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute and co-author of the study.” –*Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2003

“Most college students are pondering spirituality... more than three-quarters of college juniors told researchers they discuss religion and spirituality with friends...” –*Time Magazine*, February 2, 2004

“As students express more interest in questions of values and faith - and a frustration with how little those ideas are explored in the classroom - it’s clear that college culture, at least for students, isn’t quite as secular as some assume.” –*The Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 2003

“The disconnect between students’ spiritual needs and aspirations on one hand and campus resources on the other hand is striking indeed. It is as though a whole generation of spiritually minded students has sneaked up on campus administrators and faculty who were raised in a more secular tradition.”  
–*David Davenport, Professor, Pepperdine University, Scripps Howard News Service*, February 19, 2004

“American college students show broad interest in spirituality, but their involvement in formal religious activity sags while on campus.” –*Associated Press*, November 27, 2003

“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.”  
–*The New York Times*, November 21, 2003

### Find Out More

A variety of information is available at [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu).

- Survey findings and analysis
- Project newsletters
- News releases/fact sheets
- Commentary and analysis
- Sample news coverage

**For additional information call HERI at 310. 825.1925 or E-mail [heri@ucla.edu](mailto:heri@ucla.edu).**