

The Spiritual Life OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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

Executive Summary



Higher Education Research Institute
Graduate School of Education & 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 examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. Funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the study is designed to enhance our understanding of how college students conceive of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students' spiritual development.

As the project's Co-Principal Investigators, Alexander Astin 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.**

THE RESEARCH

This report summarizes findings from a survey of 112,232 entering first-year students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities across the country. The fall 2004 College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey was administered to entering first-year students as a two-page addendum to the traditional four-page freshman survey conducted by UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). The 2004 CIRP/CSBV freshman survey included approximately 160 items that pertained directly to students' perspectives and practices with respect to spirituality and religion. An initial pilot survey of 3,680 third-year students at 46 colleges and universities was completed in 2003. (Additional information on the methodology is available in the full report, or at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.)

A follow-up survey, which will be administered to this year's first-year 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 postsecondary education. Its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual Survey of Entering Freshmen initiated in 1966 is one of the most widely used sources of information about colleges and college students in the nation. HERI's research program covers a variety of topics including the outcomes of postsecondary education, leadership development, faculty performance, federal and state policy, and educational equity.

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

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

Executive Summary

What is the meaning of college?
What am I going to do with my life?

How will I know I am going the 'right' way?

What kind of person
do I want to be?

How is everything I've worked for up to this
point going to contribute back to society?

How am I going to leave my mark
when I finally pass away?

— Student Voices¹

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA launched a major, multi-year program of research to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. The study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is designed to enhance our understanding of how college students conceive of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students' spiritual development. Given the broad formative roles that colleges and universities play in our society, higher education represents a critical focal point for responding to the question of how to balance the "exterior" and "interior" aspects of life more effectively.

Building on the growing interest on college campuses to include spiritual development as a core component of a liberal arts education, the study employs a multi-institutional and longitudinal design to identify trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students.

This executive summary provides a brief overview of key findings based on data collected in late summer and early fall 2004 from more than 112,000 students attending a national sample of 236 colleges and universities. Students responded to a six-page survey that queried their backgrounds, educational and occupational aspirations, and values and beliefs with respect to spiritual and religious matters.

The study reveals that today's college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They are also very engaged and involved in religion, reporting considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices.

As they begin college, freshmen have high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development. They place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality.

¹These are reflections of students during focus group interviews.

SPIRITUAL SEARCH AND RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

College students report high levels of spirituality and idealism. They espouse many spiritual and religious values and virtues.

- ▶ College students show a high degree of spiritual interest and involvement. Three-fourths say that they are “searching for meaning/purpose in life” or that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends, and similar numbers have high expectations that college will help them develop emotionally and spiritually. Many are engaged in a spiritual quest, with nearly half reporting that they consider it “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually.
- ▶ Eight students in ten attended religious services during the past year and similar numbers discussed religion with both friends and family. More than two-thirds pray, and four in ten consider it very important that they follow religious teachings in their everyday life.
- ▶ Almost eight students in ten believe in God, with more than half perceiving God as “love” or as the “creator,” and about half experiencing God as a “protector.”

- ▶ Students get a great deal of comfort from their spiritual/religious beliefs, with more than two-thirds reporting that they derive strength, support, and guidance from such beliefs. About two-thirds say that they gain spiritual strength by trusting in a Higher Power, and close to one-half say that they “frequently” feel loved by God.

- ▶ When asked about their spiritual/religious views, four students in ten indicate that they feel “secure,” one in four says they are “seeking,” one in four reports being either “conflicted” or “doubting,” and one in seven is “not interested.”

MEASURING SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS

Spirituality and religiousness are multidimensional, finding expression in a variety of beliefs and everyday practices.

- ▶ For this study, HERI researchers developed three measures of spirituality (Spirituality, Spiritual Quest, and Equanimity), five measures of religiousness (Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Religious Skepticism, and Religious Struggle), and four other dimensions that were expected to be related to spirituality and religiousness (Charitable Involvement, Compassionate Self-Concept, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview).

Indicators of Students’ Spirituality

| Indicator | Percent |
|--|----------------|
| Believe in the sacredness of life | 83 * |
| Have an interest in spirituality | 80 * |
| Search for meaning/purpose in life | 76 * |
| Have discussions about the meaning of life with friends. | 74 * |
| My spirituality is a source of joy | 64 ** |
| Seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually | 47 *** |

* Describes students to some or a great extent

** Agree strongly or somewhat

*** Consider it essential or very important

- ▮ Students who are strongly religious also tend to be highly spiritual. However, Spirituality is much more closely associated with Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, Compassionate Self-Concept, and Ecumenical Worldview than is either Religious Commitment or Religious Engagement. Religious Commitment and Engagement, on the other hand, are much more closely associated with Religious/Social Conservatism and (negatively) with Religious Skepticism.

POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ATTITUDES

While there is a political divide on some issues between students at different levels of Spirituality and Religious Engagement, there is also convergence on a number of social concerns and on the ideals, virtues, and values that students espouse.

- ▮ Among students who show high levels of Religious Engagement, conservatives outnumber liberals by better than 3 to 1. Conservatives also outnumber liberals among students with high scores on Spirituality, although the differences are not as large.
- ▮ There are roughly equal numbers of conservatives and liberals among students who earn high scores on either Charitable Involvement or Compassionate Self-Concept. However, liberals substantially outnumber conservatives among those with high scores on Ethic of Caring (2 to 1) and Ecumenical worldview (3 to 1).
- ▮ Issues such as abortion, the legalization of marijuana, casual sex, and the legal sanctioning of same-sex relationships are highly divisive for students who fall at the extremes of spirituality and religiousness. Thus, students who are highly engaged religiously, compared to their classmates with low levels of engagement, are much less likely to support keeping abortion legal, engaging in casual sex, allowing same-sex couples to have legal marital status, and legalizing marijuana. Religiously engaged and, to a lesser extent, highly spiritual students also take relatively conservative positions on issues such as military spending and taxation.

- ▮ Highly religious and highly spiritual students do not, however, subscribe to a uniform set of conservative viewpoints. Thus, while support for affirmative action and opposition to the death penalty have typically been considered “liberal” positions within the current national political discourse, highly religious and highly spiritual students actually assume relatively liberal perspectives on these two issues. Further, highly spiritual and highly religious students do not differ appreciably from their low-scoring counterparts when it comes to the issues of race, criminals' rights, the role of women, and gun control.
- ▮ Highly religiously engaged and highly spiritual students support greater involvement by campuses in curtailing racist/sexist speech as well as in banning extreme speakers.

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGIOUSNESS, AND WELL-BEING

While spirituality and religiousness generally relate to physical well-being, the relationships with psychological health are nuanced and complex.

- ▮ Highly spiritual students are not immune to the psychological stressors of life: When compared to their less spiritual classmates, highly spiritual students are slightly less likely to exhibit positive psychological health. On the other hand, highly spiritual students are much more likely than less spiritual students to evidence Equanimity, a trait defined by qualities such as “being able to find meaning in times of hardship” and “feeling at peace/centered.” In other words, although Spirituality and psychological distress are positively linked, so are Spirituality and mechanisms for coping with hardship.
- ▮ A nearly identical pattern—greater psychological distress combined with the ability to find meaning in hardship and a sense of peace—is also evident for those students whose spirituality manifests itself in being committed to Charitable Involvement, exhibiting an Ethic of Caring, and holding to an Ecumenical Worldview.

- ▶ In contrast to Spirituality, general psychological health shows either no relationship, or a slightly positive relationship, to Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement.
- ▶ Both spirituality and religiousness generally show positive associations with various measures of physical well-being. Specifically, highly spiritual and highly religious students are more likely than their least spiritual and religious classmates to abstain from alcohol and cigarettes, to maintain a healthy diet, and to report “above average” physical health relative to peers.
- ▶ By contrast, students who are experiencing significant Religious Struggle, compared to those reporting little or no struggle, are more likely to drink, smoke cigarettes, stay up all night, and miss school because of illness, and less likely to maintain a healthy diet and to rate their physical health as “above average.”

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE

There is a wealth of diversity in students' religious beliefs and practices.

- ▶ Students' religious preferences were classified into 19 different categories. The highest percentage of entering freshmen is Roman Catholic (28%), followed by mainline Protestant faiths (17%), “None” (17%), Baptist (13%), and “other Christian” (11%). About one-fourth (26%) say that they consider themselves to be born-again Christians.

- ▶ There are at least two clear-cut clusters of religious preferences. The first—including Mormons, 7th Day Adventists, Baptists, and “other Christians”—is strongly spiritual, religious, and religiously/socially conservative and expresses little Religious Skepticism. The second—including Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, Episcopalians, Eastern Orthodox and Jewish students—tends to score low on religiousness and high on Religious Skepticism, Ecumenical Worldview, Ethic of Caring, and Charitable Involvement.
- ▶ Mormons receive the highest scores of all groups on five of 12 measures and above average scores on three more. Students with no religious preference show a pattern that is the reverse of Mormons, offering a sharp contrast on most measures. Unitarians produce the most distinctive pattern, earning high scores on Spirituality, Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview and low scores on Religious Commitment and Engagement.
- ▶ Baptists tend to score high on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Spirituality, and Equanimity, while having the lowest score on Ecumenical Worldview. The “other Christian” group is virtually identical to Baptists.
- ▶ Roman Catholics tend to score below the overall average on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, and Religious Skepticism.

**A copy of the full report is available at www.spirituality.ucla.edu,
or by contacting us at heri@ucla.edu or 310.825.1925.**

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www.spirituality.ucla.edu

Phone: 310.825.1925

E-mail: heri@ucla.edu