

# SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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

Higher Education Research Institute  
University of California, Los Angeles

## THE PROJECT

What is the level and intensity of spiritual experiences among today's college students? How are spiritual searching and behavior changing on campus? And what does this mean for higher education institutions and students?

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA is conducting a major new program of research to track the spiritual growth of students during their college years.

Building on an abundance of anecdotal evidence suggesting that there is growing interest on college campuses to reassert the significance of religion and spirituality 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. Entitled "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," the study is designed to:

- ▶ Generate empirically based insights on the trends, patterns, and principles of spiritual growth during the college years;
- ▶ Widely disseminate the findings of the study to stakeholders throughout higher education as well as to opinion leaders in the mainstream media;
- ▶ Involve and engage colleges and universities interested in expanding and enhancing opportunities for college students to grow spiritually and religiously.

Following the pilot survey, a comprehensive questionnaire will be administered to entering freshmen at a nationally representative sample of colleges and universities. Individual participants will be followed throughout their college years to chart changes in their spiritual development.



## THE SURVEY

A pilot survey was completed in Spring 2003 by approximately 3,700 juniors at a representative sample of colleges and universities that participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual Survey of Entering Freshmen three years earlier. These longitudinal data will provide information on how the college experience impacts students' spiritual life and development.

A revised survey will be administered to entering freshmen at a nationally representative sample of 150 colleges and universities in Fall 2004. The long-range design of the project anticipates additional longitudinal follow-ups and new freshman surveys to be conducted every three years to track students' spiritual growth and assess changes and trends.

The study also includes a qualitative component designed to assess the spiritual life of college students in more depth by conducting individual and focus group interviews.

Data collected in 2004 will be released in Spring 2005.

## WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality points to our interiors, our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of material events and objects. Our spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals we hold most dear, our sense of who we are, where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here – the meaning and purpose we see in our lives – and our connectedness to each other and the world around us.

Spirituality also captures those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such as inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical. Within this very broad perspective, we believe spirituality is a universal impulse and reality.

We acknowledge that each student will view his or her spirituality in a unique way. For some, traditional religious beliefs will significantly form the core of their spirituality; for others, such beliefs or traditions may play little or no part. What the research program aims to discern, however, is the level and intensity of spiritual experience among college students.

**This breakthrough study, exploring new territory, is much needed because college students are the leadership of the future and will set the moral tone of society in the years ahead.** ”

**George Gallup, Jr  
Chairman, George H. Gallup  
International Institute**



## WHAT WE'RE ASKING

The following is a brief sampling of research questions guiding the study:

- ▶ How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues and questions such as the nature of God/Divine/Universal Spirit and the meaning of life and work? What kinds of curricular and co-curricular experiences facilitate this spiritual quest?
- ▶ How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities or virtues such as compassion, honesty, optimism, and humility? How is their academic and career development affected by such self-perceptions?
- ▶ What spiritual/religious practices and behaviors (e.g. rituals, prayer/meditation, service to others, etc.) are students most or least attracted to? How do such practices relate to other aspects of students' academic and personal development?
- ▶ What is the connection between traditional religious practice and spiritual development?
- ▶ What effect does religious doubt have on students' spiritual development?
- ▶ What most gets in the way of students' spiritual/religious quest (e.g. peer pressures, school pressures, work commitments, etc.)?

## PROJECT DESIGN

The survey is designed to ensure that all students – regardless of their particular theological/metaphysical perspective or belief system – are able to respond in a meaningful way. Survey questions cover 11 broad areas:

- ▶ Spiritual outlook/orientation/worldview
- ▶ Spiritual well being
- ▶ Religious/spiritual practices and behaviors
- ▶ Self-assessments of spirituality and related traits
- ▶ Spiritual quest
- ▶ Spiritual/mystical experiences
- ▶ Attitudes towards religion/spirituality
- ▶ Religious affiliation/identity
- ▶ Theological/metaphysical beliefs
- ▶ Facilitators/inhibitors of spiritual development
- ▶ Compassionate behavior

How often do we encounter a research program that addresses a set of questions so central, so pivotal, so critical, and in retrospect, so obvious, that we wonder aloud why no one thought to ask these questions before?

Lee S. Shulman, President  
The Carnegie Foundation for the  
Advancement of Teaching

## RESEARCH TEAM

The project's Co-Principal Investigators are UCLA Professors Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, directors of HERI. Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm is the Project Director. Alyssa N. Bryant, Heesun K. Hall and Katalin Szelényi are Research Analysts.

A National Advisory Board is providing general oversight for the entire project. A Technical Advisory Panel is assisting in the development of the survey instruments.

HERI, housed at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, is one of the premiere research and policy organizations studying 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.

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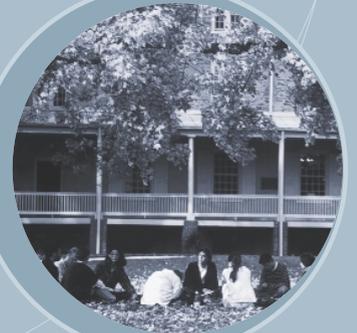
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