

FOR MANY YOUNG ADULTS, the transition from secondary to higher education is a time of significant personal growth,

with new friends, new experiences, and new opportunities to explore and reflect upon the values and beliefs that will guide them forward. In an effort to better understand how the undergraduate college years influence students' perspectives on spiritual and ethical matters, researchers at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA conducted the first longitudinal study to document changes in these perspectives between the freshman and junior years.

Funded by the John Templeton Foundation, "Spirituality in Higher Education: Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose" examines data collected from 14,527 students attending 136 colleges and universities nationwide. The students first responded to the survey as they began their freshman year, and then again at the end of their junior year, thereby presenting researchers with an unprecedented opportunity to document how the college experience may influence students' perspectives about spiritual issues over time.

College is a Spiritual Quest for Many Students

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The study also explores changes during college in students' religious beliefs and commitment, political orientation and attitudes, and health and well-being. The study finds that, while they attend fewer religious services after three years in college, students undergo significant spiritual growth, as indicated by:

A growing ethic of caring... By their junior year, nearly 75 percent of students rate "helping others in difficulty" as being very important or essential, compared to 62 percent of those who said this as freshmen, and 67 percent say they strive to "reduce pain and suffering in the world," compared to 55 percent who said this as freshmen.

A need for reflection... "Developing a meaningful philosophy of life" is very important or essential to 55 percent of junior year students, compared to 41 percent who said the same as freshmen. Also among juniors, 61 percent say they are "thankful for all that has happened to them," compared to 52 percent who said this as freshmen.

A strong sense of purpose... Half of all junior year students participating in the study say it is very important or essential to "integrate spirituality" into their lives, compared to

42 percent who said this as freshmen, while 83 percent are striving to "become a more loving person," compared to 67 percent who stated this as freshmen. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of juniors say they will work to "improve the human condition," compared to 53 percent who said this as freshmen.

The study also revealed growth in what the researchers call an "ecumenical worldview," with 55 percent of juniors saying they are committed to "improving my understanding of other countries and cultures," compared to 42 percent who said the same as freshmen. The majority of juniors are also open-minded about the religious values of others, with 91 percent agreeing that "non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers," compared to 83 percent who said this as freshmen.

MANY STUDENTS are emerging from the collegiate experience with a desire to find spiritual meaning and perspective in their everyday lives. The data suggest that college is influencing students in positive ways that will better prepare them for leadership roles in our global society.

—UCLA Emeritus Professor Alexander W. Astin, Co-Principal Investigator

Implications for Colleges and Universities

While students' perspectives on spiritual matters will continue to evolve as they transition to professional life, their spiritual growth and interest in ethical matters during the undergraduate years has the potential to dramatically influence society in the United States and around the world in the years to come.

Despite this high level of interest in spiritual engagement among students, however, the researchers have found that few colleges or universities are actively encouraging students to explore these issues, and there are few academic or campus programs to support these interests. Most students (60 percent) report that their professors never "encouraged discussions of religious/spiritual

More College Students Seeking Spiritual Answers



matters," and only 20 percent report that their professors "frequently encouraged exploration of questions of meaning and purpose."

So what can colleges and universities do to provide a culture more conducive to spiritual exploration and growth? Working collaboratively, representatives of 10 public and private higher education institutions participated in a 2006 National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education to develop recommendations on how colleges and universities can provide more curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to explore spiritual issues during the undergraduate years. These recommendations included:

- **Offering opportunities for spiritual reflection and discussion** during initiatives such as student orientation and programs targeting students during their first year and sophomore years
- **Using new faculty orientation as an opportunity** to discuss ways to attend to students' spiritual development in the classroom and beyond
- **Creating professional development programs** to prepare staff, faculty and peer leaders to participate in and facilitate discussions on spiritual issues
- **Creating places for reflection** and quiet dialogue on campus
- **Creating inter-faith forums** on spirituality and religious diversity
- **Developing guiding principles to facilitate** conversations on spirituality
- **Integrating discussions of spirituality** in living/learning communities and residence halls
- **Hosting guest speakers and forums** to encourage discussions on spirituality
- **Incorporating spirituality into campus mission** and vision statements

Students Become More Spiritual and More Liberal During College, Survey Suggests

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