

# San Jose Mercury News

## Faith & Spirituality

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### 'Spiritual quest' on campus

TWO SURVEYS FIND STUDENTS SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN LIFE

By Justin Pope  
Associated Press

They are often tarnished with labels like "self-absorbed" and "materialistic." But young adults are actively engaged with spiritual questions, two new surveys suggest, even if they are not necessarily exploring them through traditional religious practice.

One of the surveys, of more than 100,000 freshmen who started college last fall, found four in five reporting an interest in spirituality, with three in four searching for meaning or purpose in life, and the same fraction discussing the meaning of life with friends. The incoming freshmen also reported high expectations that their colleges would help them develop spiritually.

#### Spirituality surprise

"The first surprise for all of us is we didn't expect the students to be in that much of a spiritual quest," said Helen Astin, professor emeritus of higher education and a senior scholar at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, which produced the survey. "We had focused on the materialism of students, the 'me' generation, only focusing on their jobs and the future."

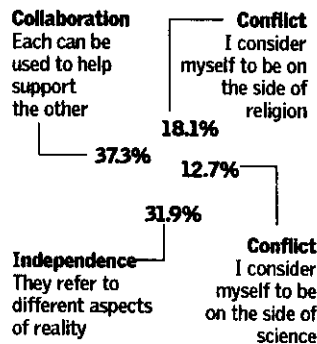
Previous, smaller studies by HERI have found students' participation in formal religion fell during their college years. The University of California-Los Angeles plans to check back in with its broader group of freshmen in a few years to see if that pattern holds.

A separate survey of 1,325 18- to 25-year-olds released earlier this week by Reboot, a Jewish networking group, and several collaborating organizations, emphasizes the degree to which young people are confronting religious issues informally, through conversations and even Christian rock music rather than formal

### Young adults and spirituality

Additional findings from a survey of more than 100,000 freshmen who started college last fall.

For me the relationship between science and religion is one of...



Source: Higher Education Research Institute

religious practice.

While 44 percent of respondents called themselves "religious," 35 percent said they are "spiritual but not religious" and 18 percent said neither.

#### 'Shotgun approach'

At Roanoke College, in Salem, Va., where he has been chaplain for more than 20 years, Paul Henrickson said "spiritual but not religious" is the category in which many students put themselves.

"You have a lot of kinds that understand in their hearts that there is a mystery about life that is larger than they are and larger than they understand, and they would call that 'spiritual.' And they are very interested in that," Henrickson said.

But, he added, "they pursue that in private ways" and "in kind of a shotgun approach. They'll look at all kinds of things from Eastern religions to yoga to New Age stuff to the standard Christianity."

Among the 112,000 incoming students at 236 colleges responding to the UCLA survey, those exhibiting a high level of religious engagement

Do you pray?

Yes 68.9% No 31.1%

Do you believe in God?

Yes 78.5%  
Not sure 14.9%  
No 6.6%

Most or all of your close friends ...

Share your religious/spiritual views  
45.7%

Are searching for meaning/purpose in life  
35.7%

Go to church/temple/other house of worship  
45.4%

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were three times more likely to exhibit conservative political tendencies than liberal ones on such issues as gay marriage and abortion.

But other issues defied political labels. And liberal and conservative students were equally likely to exhibit high levels of charitable involvement.

"It's very difficult to put people in boxes," Astin said.

Chris Smith, a University of North Carolina sociologist who was a technical adviser to the survey, said one difficulty is that spirituality means different things to different people.

Some, like those calling themselves "spiritual but not religious," view it in opposition to traditional religious practice. Others consider it an element of their faith and practice.

Compared to teenagers, college students "are starting to branch out," Smith said. "We found very little spiritual questing and exploring in middle school and high school."

#### IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

See [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu) and [www.rebooters.net](http://www.rebooters.net).