

THE CHRONICLE

<http://chronicle.com>

of Higher Education®

April 22, 2005 • \$3.75
Volume LI, Number 33

Most Freshmen Say Religion Guides Them

But almost half describe their views as conflicted, a first-of-its-kind study finds

BY THOMAS BARTLETT

MOST COLLEGE FRESHMEN believe in God, but fewer than half follow religious teachings in their daily lives. A majority of first-year students (69 percent) say their beliefs provide guidance, but many (48 percent) describe themselves as “doubting,” “seeking,” or “conflicted.”

Those are some of the results of a national study released last week that is believed to be the first broad, in-depth look at the religious and spiritual views of college students. The study, “Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri>). Last fall 112,232 freshman were asked how often they attended religious services, whether they prayed, and if their religious beliefs affected their actions.

Among the findings was a strong correlation between students’ religious beliefs and their views on hot-button political issues. For instance, students who considered themselves religious were more likely to oppose same-sex marriage. Religious students were also less likely to believe that abortion should be legal.

On other questions, however, there was little difference between religious and nonreligious students. For instance, a majority of both groups believed that the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns and that colleges should ban racist and sexist speech on campus.

The survey also found that while

first-year students were not always sure what they believed, most of them were interested in grappling with big questions like the meaning of life.

What that suggests, according to Alexander W. Astin, director of the research center at UCLA, is that colleges should be searching for ways to incorporate spiritual and religious questions into the curriculum—even if doing so makes some professors uncomfortable.

“There’s an unwritten assumption that we just don’t talk about these issues,” says Mr. Astin. “I don’t think we’re taking advantage of the opportunity to help students explore those questions with each other and in their course work.”

That is because higher education is “a little more repressed” when the conversation turns to spiritual matters, according to Claire L. Gaudiani, a former president of Connecticut College who helped oversee the study. “For a lot of intellectuals, religion and spirituality are seen as a danger to intellectual inquiry,” says Ms. Gaudiani.

She argues, however, that dealing with questions about meaning and purpose “doesn’t have to mean indoctrination.” She compares what she calls “educating the spirit” to teaching good nutrition or physical fitness. “Right now students get the sense that we don’t do spirituality,” she says.

‘BURNING QUESTIONS’

If most professors do not “do spirituality,” then Mark Wallace is an exception. The associate professor of religion at Swarthmore College teaches a first-year seminar called “Religion and the Meaning of Life.” He agrees that many professors are reluctant to engage in what he calls “meaning teaching.” Which is a shame, he says, because meaning is exactly what students are looking for. “They hunger and crave that sort of conversation in a college environment,” says Mr. Wallace.

He also agrees with Ms. Gaudiani that it is possible to deal with religious questions without promoting a particular ideology.

What his students seem to want is an “open, safe place” for the discussion of universal issues where they won’t be “censored or yelled at or ignored.” As proof, he cites the fact that he usually has three times as many students sign up for his seminar as he can accept. “They have burning questions about life issues,” he says. “And they feel those kinds of issues get ignored in the classroom.”

Not in David K. Glidden’s classroom: The professor of philosophy at the University of California at Riverside teaches “The Care of the Soul,” a course that focuses on how to live a purposeful life. While Mr. Glidden is not sure that students will complete his class knowing how to care for their souls, he thinks such courses are a good start and should be a part of a college’s curriculum. “My sense is that the students I’ve taught are a lot like what T.S. Eliot called ‘hollow men.’ They are living in a world and they don’t know what they’re here for—they don’t know how to live their lives.”

And they want to know how to live their lives, says Richard F. Galvin, a professor of philosophy at Texas Christian University. He is part of a team-taught, freshman-level course called “The Meaning of Life.” The course has two sections of 50 students and the seats are always filled. “I can tell by talking to them in office hours, looking at their faces in class, and reading their work that it affects them,” Mr. Galvin says. “They want to talk about these issues. What I like to tell them is that there is plenty of time to be worried about their careers but this might be the last time they get to talk about big questions.”

Readings for the course include Plato’s dialogues and works by Friedrich Nietzsche and John Stuart Mill.

Jeffrey Sebo took Mr. Galvin’s class when he was a freshman. The senior philosophy major was intrigued by the title of the course and became fascinated by the discussions—so much so that he has returned to the class

Questions about meaning and purpose don’t

“have to mean indoctrination. . . . Right now students get the sense that we don’t do spirituality.”

Study's Findings Suggest Curricula Should Deal With Religious Questions

twice as a teaching assistant. "It was the big questions that got me hooked," he says.

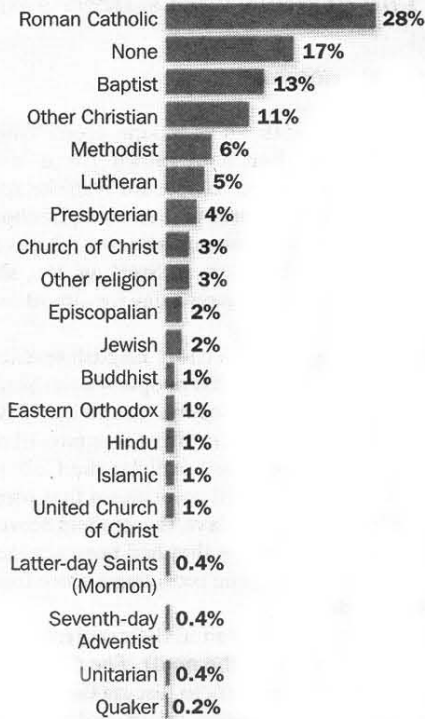
The results of the UCLA study were heartening to Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which has long advocated a more holistic and less career-centered approach to higher education. "Students are more idealistic than we thought," she says. "But what this data shows us is that we have a long way to go. Students have idealism that can be tapped but we're not doing all we can to help them connect that idealism to important challenges in the world around us."

Figuring out how to do that is not simple, but colleges need to start trying, according to Mr. Astin. "If you want to take seriously the claims we make about liberal learning, this is what you have to do," he says. "There are large numbers of students who are involved in spiritual and religious issues and who are trying to figure out what life is all about and what matters to them. We need to be much more creative in finding ways to encourage that exploration."

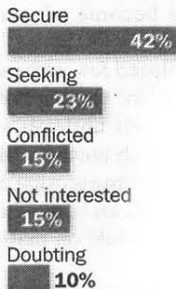
Freshmen's Views on Religion and Spirituality

Last fall the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles asked 112,232 college freshmen about their views on religion and spirituality. Here are some of the findings:

Students' religious preferences

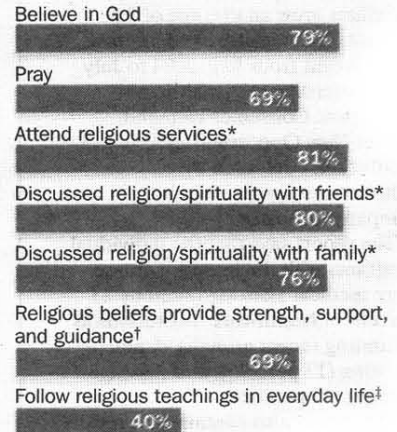


Current views about spiritual/religious matters



Note: Figures add up to more than 100 percent because students could choose more than one option.

Indicators of students' religiousness

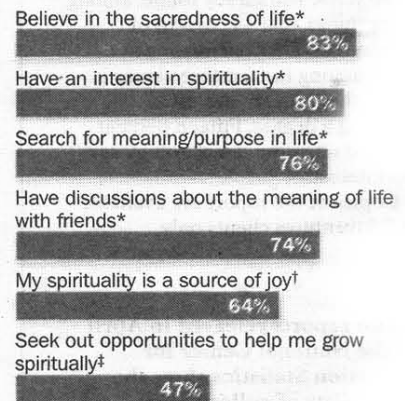


* Occasionally or frequently

† Agree strongly or somewhat

‡ Consider it essential or very important

Indicators of students' spirituality



* Describes students to some or a great extent

† Agree strongly or somewhat

‡ Consider it essential or very important

SOURCE: HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE