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Most College Students Searching for Meaning and Purpose in Life *Students on a Spiritual Quest Have Different Expectations for College*

Today's college students have a very high level of interest and involvement in spirituality and religion. The majority (76%) also report that they are searching for meaning and purpose in life, according to new research released today. Only 17% of students report that they do NOT consider themselves to be on a spiritual quest.

This survey of 112,232 students at 236 colleges and universities also found that large numbers of students are having discussions with friends about the meaning and purpose of life (74%). Other evidence of students' spiritual quest is provided by the substantial percentages endorsing each of the following life goals as either "essential" or "very important":

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| • Attaining wisdom | 77 % |
| • Becoming a more loving person | 67 % |
| • Seeking beauty in my life | 54 % |
| • Improving the human condition | 54 % |
| • Attaining inner harmony | 49 % |
| • Finding answers to mysteries of life | 45 % |
| • Developing a meaningful philosophy of life | 42 % |

Researchers developed a "Spiritual Quest" scale by combining students' answers to these life goal questions with their answers to the questions concerning meaning and purpose and being on a spiritual quest.

"These results show that students are clearly very interested in these larger life questions, and are exploring them while in college. The challenge for higher education practitioners is to understand the priority young people place on these issues and to consider how students can best be supported in their questing efforts," said Alexander W. Astin, the Co-Principal Investigator for the project.

Religious Differences

The study found that there is a relationship between students' religious preference and whether or not they are on a spiritual quest. Among those with the highest scores on Spiritual Quest are students indicating their religious preference as Unitarian, Mormon, Islamic, Buddhist, Eastern Orthodox, and 7th Day Adventist, Students who identify as Lutheran, Quaker, or Jewish, or who indicate "none" as their religious preference are among the lowest scorers on Spiritual Quest. A breakdown follows:

<u>Percentage of “High” Scorers on Spiritual Quest</u>		<u>Percentage of “Low” Scorers on Spiritual Quest</u>	
Unitarian	39	None	31
Mormon	39	Lutheran	27
Islamic	36	Quaker	26
Buddhist	34	Jewish	24
7 th Day Adventist	33		
Eastern Orthodox	32		

Being on a spiritual quest is not synonymous with being settled in one’s religious beliefs. When asked to characterize their current beliefs, 36% of high scorers on Spiritual Quest report that they are “seeking,” compared to only 12 % of low scorers. At the same time 19% of high scorers, compared to only 12% of low scorers, say they are “conflicted.” Similarly, more high scorers (11%) than low scorers (9%) say they are “doubting.” On the other hand, those who are high scorers on Spiritual Quest are more likely than their low scoring peers to say they are “secure” in their religious beliefs (48% vs. 40%) and to report that they pray (39% vs. 15%) or meditate (10% vs. 1%) on a daily basis.

Gender Differences

Perhaps not surprisingly, more women than men are on a spiritual quest.

- 79% of women vs. 72% of men are searching for meaning and purpose in life;
- 74% of women vs. 58% of men are striving to become a more loving person;
- 59% of women vs. 48% of men are seeking beauty in their lives;
- 58% of women vs. 49% of men consider it very important to improve the human condition; and
- 52% of women vs. 45% of men are striving to attain inner harmony.

Views, Struggles and Motivations: Snapshot of Students on a Spiritual Quest

Motivations for Attending College

Findings also show that students’ Spiritual Quest inclinations may affect their motivation for attending college. Among freshmen who score high on Spiritual Quest, 71% indicate that “finding my purpose in life” is an “essential” or “very important” reason for them to go to college. Only 30% of low scorers indicate the same. Similar patterns are evident when researchers compare the percentages of high and low Spiritual Quest scorers who believe that it is “essential” or “very important” for their campus to enhance their self understanding (90% of high scorers vs. 41% of low scorers); provide for their emotional development (85% of high scorers vs. 38% of low scorers); and encourage personal expression of spirituality (73% of high scorers vs. 23% of low scorers).

Views of the World

How do students on a spiritual quest view their place in the world and their relationship to others? Researchers found that they exemplify an “Ethic of Caring” (commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and making the world a better place); hold an “Ecumenical Worldview” (interest in different religious traditions, seeking to understand other countries and cultures, and believing that love is at the root of all the great religions); and demonstrate a sense of “Equanimity” (feeling at peace/centered, being able to find meaning in times of hardship, and feeling a strong connection to all of humanity).

Internal Struggle

As they search for the meaning and purpose in life, some of these students also experience struggles that reflect internal concerns about spiritual matters. For example, one-fourth report that they experience some conflict or have some doubts about spiritual/religious matters. Moreover, 11% score high on “Spiritual Struggle,” a scale composed of items that reflect questioning of one’s religious/spiritual beliefs; struggling to understand evil, suffering and death; and feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing.

The Study

These findings on students’ spiritual quest are part of HERI’s multi-year study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, which examines how college students conceive of spirituality and its role in their lives, as well as how postsecondary institutions can better facilitate students’ spiritual development.

In April 2005, HERI released a major report based on the survey findings entitled, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, which indicated that students “are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community.”

In addition to documenting high levels of interest and involvement in spirituality and religion, the study showed that students have high expectations for the role that colleges and universities can play in their spiritual and emotional development. More than two-thirds say that it is “essential” or “very important” that their college enhances their self-understanding and rate highly the role they want their college to play in developing their personal values. Nearly half also say that it is “essential” or “very important” that colleges encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

Note: The “scales” or “factors” described in this release measure various aspects of students’ spirituality and religiousness by combining a number of questionnaire items with similar content.

The Higher Education Research Institute

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, the Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

The project is funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which was established in 1987 by philanthropist and renowned international investor, Sir John Templeton, to encourage a fresh appreciation of the critical importance---for all peoples and cultures---of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Templeton Foundation seeks to act as a critical catalyst for progress, especially by supporting studies that demonstrate the benefits of an open, humble and progressive approach to learning in these areas.

For more information, please visit the project Web site at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.