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College Students Show High Levels of Spiritual and Religious Engagement *But New Study Finds Colleges Provide Little Support*

There is a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, with more than half placing a high value on “integrating spirituality” in their lives, 77% saying “we are all spiritual beings,” and 71% saying they “gain strength by trusting in a higher power,” according to a groundbreaking study released today. But most professors provide little opportunity to discuss spirituality in class, and many institutions do little to foster or encourage students’ interest.

Among the third-year college students surveyed at a diverse group of institutions nationwide, three in four say they pray, that religion is personally helpful to them, and that they discuss religion and spirituality with friends.

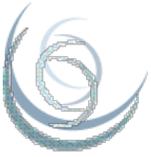
Even though 76% of the students report they are “searching for meaning and purpose in life,” more than half say that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of the students say professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters. While 39% say their religious or spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by “new ideas encountered in class,” 53% report the classroom has had no impact. Only 55% are satisfied with how their college experience has provided “opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection.” And, while seven students in ten attended a religious service within the last year, the portion who attend frequently has dropped significantly since they entered college.

The study was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA as an initial part of a project called “Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose.” Last spring 3,680 students from 46 colleges and universities completed the survey. The multi-year project is studying the trends, patterns and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students, and how the college experience influences spiritual development.

Some of the key findings include:

- 78% discuss religion/spirituality with friends
- 77% report that they pray
- 71% find religion to be personally helpful
- 73% said their religious/spiritual beliefs helped develop their identity
- 62% report their professors never encourage discussions of religious/spiritual issues

(more)



“Higher education needs to explore how well it’s meeting the great traditions at the core of a liberal arts education, grounded in the maxim, ‘know thyself,’” said UCLA Professor Alexander W. Astin, HERI’s Director and the Co-Principal Investigator for the project. “The survey shows that students have deeply felt values and interests in spirituality and religion, but their academic work and campus programs seem to be divorced from it.”

Although students report a high level of spirituality, they are very tolerant of non-religious people. Seven in ten agree that most people can grow spiritually without being religious, and 88% say that non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as religious people.

The survey also revealed changes between the student’s freshman (2000) and junior (2003) years in college. One of the most dramatic changes occurred in attendance of religious services. Over half (52%) reported attending religious services frequently the year before they entered college, but less than one-third (29%) attend frequently by their junior year. Only 9% report that their “religiousness” is much stronger since entering college, and only 13% say their spirituality is much stronger.

But the study showed a rise in the number of students who say it is “very important” to integrate spirituality into their lives (from 51% in 2000 to 58% in 2003), develop a meaningful philosophy of life (43% to 52%), and help others who are in difficulty (60% to 74%). The comparisons are derived from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual Survey of Entering Freshmen completed by these same 3,680 students three years ago.

“College students are very much engaged in spirituality and religion,” Astin said. “Clearly, it’s far more important to them than most people in higher education may assume, and there are indicators that institutions are simply not encouraging students to delve into these issues and not supporting their search in the sphere of values and beliefs.”

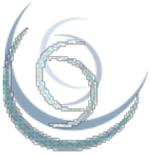
The survey also reveals how students view their own spiritual qualities and define their spiritual “quest.” And it delineates differences between academic majors, religious affiliation, ethnic groups, and types of institutions.

The project is led by Co-Principal Investigators Alexander W. and Helen S. Astin, and Project Director Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm. A revised survey will be administered to a more comprehensive sample of entering freshmen at a nationally representative sample of 150 colleges and universities during Fall 2004. The project is funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation

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

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

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Spirituality in Higher Education

Preliminary Survey Highlights

Overview

- 77% agree that we are all spiritual beings
- 58% say integrating spirituality in my life is “very important” or “essential”
- 71% say they find religion to be personally helpful

Religious Engagement

- 77% pray
- 70% attended religious service in the past year
- 78% discuss religion/spirituality with friends

Higher Education Experience

- 55% were satisfied with “opportunities for religious/spiritual development” provided by their college experience
- 62% report that professors never encourage discussions of religious/spiritual matters; only 8% report that their professors frequently encourage such discussions
- 39% say their religious/spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by “new ideas encountered in class; 53% report the classroom has had no impact
- The number of students attending religious services frequently dropped by 23% (52% to 29%) from when they entered college to their junior year

Spiritual/Religious Development

- 65% question their religious and/or spiritual beliefs at least occasionally
- 73% say their spiritual/religious beliefs have helped them develop their identity
- 74% say those beliefs provide strength, support, and guidance
- 9% of students report that their “religiousness” is “much stronger” since entering college
- 86% say that an “essential” or “very important” goal in life is attaining wisdom; 84% rate becoming “a more loving person” that highly

Tolerance

- 88% agree that non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious people
- 70% agree that most people can grow spiritually without being religious

Religious/Spiritual Skepticism

- 21% agree that in the future, science will be able to explain everything
- 27% say that whether or not there is a Supreme Being is a matter of indifference to me
- 31% say it is futile to try to discover the purpose of existence