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Students Experience Spiritual Growth During College UCLA Study Reveals Significant Changes in Undergraduates' Values & Beliefs

While attendance at religious services declines, college students nationwide show significant growth in a wide spectrum of spiritual and ethical considerations during their first three years of college, according to a UCLA study, the first longitudinal research project of its kind.

Compared to when they were entering freshmen, college juniors are more likely to be engaged in a spiritual quest, are more caring, and show higher levels of equanimity and an ecumenical worldview. While 41.2 percent of freshmen in 2004 reported they considered developing a meaningful philosophy of life “very important” or “essential,” just three years later in 2007 a 55.4 percent majority of those same students agreed. Additionally, “attaining inner harmony” was reported as “very important” or “essential” by 48.7 percent when they were freshmen in 2004, and jumped to 62.6 percent by 2007.

“Many students are emerging from the collegiate experience with a desire to find spiritual meaning and perspective in their everyday lives,” said UCLA Emeritus Professor Alexander W. Astin, Co-Principal Investigator for the project. “The data suggest that college is influencing students in positive ways that will better prepare them for leadership roles in our global society.”

The first longitudinal study to examine empirical evidence of a subject often considered controversial in higher education, “Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” examines data collected from 14,527 students attending 136 colleges and universities nationwide, and documents students’ spiritual development as undergraduates. Researchers at The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA surveyed students as entering freshmen in the fall of 2004 and again in the late spring of 2007 at the end of their junior year. In addition to rating college students’ spiritual values, the study explores changes during college in students’ religious beliefs and commitment, political orientation and attitudes, and health and well-being.

Spiritual Values

After three years of college, students are more engaged in a spiritual quest than they were as entering freshmen. Students rated as “very important” or “essential” several key life goals, with marked increases emerging in what they reported as juniors:

- “Integrating spirituality into my life” (41.8 percent in 2004 to 50.4 percent in 2007)
- “Seeking beauty in my life (53.7 percent to 66.2 percent)
- “Becoming a more loving person” (67.4 percent to 82.8 percent)

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Growth in students' spiritual values also extends to an "Ethic of Caring." While 62.1 percent of entering freshmen rated "helping others in difficulty" as very important or essential, significantly more of those same students agreed – 74.3 percent – in 2007. "Reducing pain and suffering in the world" was endorsed by 54.6 percent of students in 2004, compared to 66.6 percent in 2007.

An increasing sense of "Equanimity" is suggested by the increasing percentages of students who see themselves as "being thankful for all that has happened to me," which grew from 52.0 percent in 2004 to 61.2 percent in 2007.

Growth in what the researchers call an "Ecumenical Worldview" is revealed in an increasing majority of students' endorsement of several key values, including a commitment towards "improving my understanding of other countries and cultures," which 42.0 percent of students endorsed as freshmen in 2004, and 54.4 percent of students did so in 2007. And 53.4 percent of students in 2004 supported "improving the human condition," which grew to 63.8 percent in 2007.

UCLA Emeritus Professor Helen Astin, Co-Principal Investigator on the project, stated: "Looking towards the future, we can envision a college educated workforce that is more inclusive and accepting of persons from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, and at the same time more caring and more collaborative. These qualities are critical to an effective workforce of the future."

Religious Observance

While their attention to spiritual and ethical values show marked increases, college students' attendance at religious services indicates a steep decline: the rate of frequent attendance drops from 43.7 percent in high school to 25.4 percent in college, and the rate of non-attendance nearly doubles, from 20.2 percent to 37.5 percent.

"Student interest in spirituality and religion is at a level not seen since perhaps the 1950's," said Colgate University President Rebecca Chopp, a scholar of religion and American culture.

"Religion and spirituality are important aspects of well being and character development and colleges need to support the growing interest and activities of our students."

Political Orientation and Attitudes

Students become more liberal in their political ideology and attitudes toward socio-cultural issues:

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2007</u>
Political orientation: Liberal/far left	28.6%	34.3%
Conservative/far right	26.6%	25.1%
Middle-of-the-road	44.7%	40.6%



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Health and Well-being

While students grow spiritually over the first three years in college, their psychological well-being declines. The number of students who indicated, “my life is filled with stress and anxiety” moved from 26.0 percent in 2004 up to 41.5 percent in 2007. And in three years, those who feel “overwhelmed by everything I have to do” jumped from 31.8 percent to 46.3 percent. Those who characterize themselves as “depressed” grew from 9.2 percent to 12.3 percent.

The Higher Education Research Institute

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Along with the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), HERI was co-founded by Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, and is housed at UCLA’s Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

The research study, “Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” is a multi-year project funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, 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 details about the project, “Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” visit: www.spirituality.ucla.edu

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