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Strong Majority of College and University Faculty Identify Themselves as Spiritual

Views on Role of Spirituality on Campus Divided, Vary Widely By Academic Fields

Four in five faculty on college campuses (81%) consider themselves to be spiritual persons, according to a major new study released today. The national survey also shows that more than two-thirds of faculty (69%) are actively seeking out opportunities for spiritual development, and that a similar number (70%) embrace “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an essential or very important personal goal.

Conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA, the study surveyed 40,670 faculty at 421 colleges and universities nationwide, as detailed in a report “*Spirituality and the Professoriate*.” The study was designed to discover how college faculty view the intersections between spirituality and higher education, and how their perspectives and practices may influence the spiritual development of students during the undergraduate years.

Spirituality in the Academy

Faculty are divided over the role of spirituality in higher education. According to the report, a majority of faculty believe that their own spiritual lives do have a place in the academy, with 57% *disagreeing* with the notion that “the spiritual dimension of faculty members’ lives has no place in the academy.” And while only 30% agree that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development,” more than half believe that each of the following should be among the “essential” or “very important” goals of an undergraduate education:

- Enhancing students’ self-understanding (60%)
- Developing moral character (59%)
- Helping students develop personal values (53%)

These findings generally compare well with the expectations of entering college students, but not necessarily with the actual experiences of students during college. A recent survey of 112,000 new college freshmen conducted by HERI found that more than two-thirds say that it is “essential” or “very important” that their college experience 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. However, in another HERI survey of 3,700 college juniors, 62% reported that their professors never encouraged discussions of spirituality or religion, and 56% reported that their professors never provided opportunities to discuss the meaning or purpose of life.

“While many students would like the college experience to encourage them in their spiritual development, we now know that relatively few students have actually received such encouragement from their professors,” said Alexander W. Astin, a Co-Principal Investigator for



the project. “These results are beginning to provide us with a much more complete picture of spirituality in academia, and it would appear that there is much more that colleges can do to facilitate students’ spiritual development.”

Academic Fields and Institutional Type

Faculty members’ academic fields play a significant role in their views on facilitating students’ spiritual development. The highest levels of agreement with the statement that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development” are found among professors in the health sciences (41%) and humanities (40%), while the lowest levels are found among professors in the biological sciences (22%), social sciences (24%), physical sciences (24%), and agriculture/forestry (25%). Institutional type also plays a role, with faculty in “other religious” colleges (68%) and Catholic colleges (62%) showing the highest levels of agreement, and faculty in public universities (18%) and public colleges (23%) showing the lowest levels.

Differences among academic fields are also seen when responses to the statement “the spiritual dimension of faculty members’ lives has no place in the academy” are examined. At least half of faculty in all academic disciplines disagree with this view, with the highest levels occurring in the health sciences (67%), education (65%) and business (60%), and the lowest levels occurring in the social sciences (51%), physical sciences (50%), and biological sciences (49%). Differences by type of institution are even larger, with the highest levels of disagreement in “other religious” (79%) and Catholic (71%) colleges, while the lowest level is found in the public universities (49%).

Spirituality and Religiousness

While faculty are more inclined to describe themselves as spiritual (81%) rather than religious (64%), religion still plays an important role in many faculty members’ lives. Overall, more than three in five college professors (64%) say that they consider themselves to be “a religious person,” either “to some extent” (29%) or “to a great extent” (35%). A similar number (61%) report that they pray/meditate. About one-third of the faculty (37%) say that they are “not at all” religious.

The report also notes that highly spiritual professors are likely to employ “student-centered” approaches to teaching, such as student self-evaluation, reflective writing, cooperative learning, student evaluations of each other’s work, and community service. They also hold a more positive outlook than other professors about their jobs and their lives in general.

“These findings suggest that highly spiritual faculty, compared to their less spiritual colleagues, are not only more likely to employ teaching methods that directly engage their students, but have also been better able to integrate their personal and professional lives,” said Astin.

Gender and Race Differences

Both women and African American faculty are more likely to describe themselves as spiritual. Eighty-seven percent of female faculty consider themselves to be spiritual persons while only 78% of male faculty characterize themselves in this way. This gender difference in spirituality is seen across the board with other indicators of spirituality, including integrating spirituality in life (54% women, 42% men), engaging in self reflection (74% women, 64% men), developing a meaningful philosophy of life (73% women, 68% men) and seeking opportunities to grow



spiritually (76% women, 65% men).

African American faculty show the highest level of spiritual self identification with 66% characterizing themselves as spiritual “to a great extent.” By contrast, Asian American faculty show the lowest level of spiritual self identification with only 37% describing themselves as spiritual “to a great extent.” Other groups with high levels of spiritual self-identification include American Indian/Alaska Natives (60%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders (59%), Puerto Ricans (57%) and Mexican American/Chicanos (53%). White/Caucasians (48%) and “other” Latinos (45%) were among the faculty with the lowest levels.

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Funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the UCLA study is part of a multi-year project examining how college students think of spirituality, its role in their lives, and how postsecondary institutions can better facilitate students’ spiritual development.

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.

More information on the project – and a copy of the full report, *Spirituality and the Professoriate* – is available at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.