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Study Reveals Influences of College on Students' Spiritual and Religious Development

Analysis Shows Impact of Academic Subjects, College Activities, and Religious/Spiritual Experiences and Behaviors

Students' spiritual/religious growth during the college years is most affected in positive ways by their degree of spiritual/religious involvement and their interactions with peers, while partying appears to be a negative influence on students' spiritual development, according to new research released today.

The study also showed a wide range of differences between college majors, with fine arts students showing the highest degree of commitment to religious beliefs and Sociology majors reporting the lowest. Students in fine arts and humanities fields are about three times as likely as computer science and physical science majors to report high levels of spirituality.

This groundbreaking study of 3,680 college juniors at 46 colleges and universities is being conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, which is investigating the trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students, and how the college experience influences spiritual development.

Findings reported earlier revealed that there is a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, but that many institutions do little to foster or encourage students' interest. For example, while three-in-four students say they pray, that religion is personally helpful to them, and that they discuss religion and spirituality with friends, nearly two-thirds say that professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters.

The survey uses four key indicators to track spiritual/religious development: How students compare their own spirituality to their peers'; attendance at religious services; and changes in the importance placed on "integrating spirituality into my life" and "developing a meaningful philosophy of life."

Students who report rising levels of spirituality during college are also more likely to engage in discussions with student peers about the "meaning and purpose of life" and about other issues related to religion and spirituality, and more likely to engage in religious/spiritual activities such as prayer. Students who spend more time partying show larger-than-average declines in attendance at religious services during the first three years of college.

"College students have deeply felt values and interests in spirituality and religion, yet most colleges haven't recognized the importance of supporting these interests and how to do so," said Alexander W. Astin, HERI's Director and the Co-Principal Investigator for the project. "These findings suggest that universities should consider providing more opportunities for students to explore and pursue these interests as part of the college experience, remove barriers to doing so, and help support greater balance in the development of the whole student."

(more)



Major Field of Study

An examination of students by their major field of study shows that the way students view themselves and their own spirituality and religious commitment vary significantly between college majors.

The degree to which students are committed to religious beliefs also varies by field of study, with the highest levels of religious commitment -- finding religion to be personally helpful, gaining spiritual strength by trusting in a Higher Power, feeling loved by God, seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life, etc. -- occurring among students in the fine arts (62%), education (59%), and the humanities (57%), and the lowest levels occurring among biological science (43%), history or political science (41%), and sociology (37%) majors.

Interestingly, fine arts and humanities majors are more likely than other majors to be highly engaged in a spiritual quest (43% and 42%, respectively) and, at the same time, express high levels of spiritual distress (27% and 31%). By contrast, students in the physical sciences (19%), computer science (23%), and business (24%) are the least likely to show high levels of engagement in a spiritual quest, while especially low percentages of computer science (10%), business (15%), and education (17%) majors report high levels of spiritual distress.

Close to half of education students report high levels of religious/spiritual growth during their first three years of college. This contrasts with just one in five among physical and computer science majors and one in four among history or political science majors. Students majoring in journalism, health professions, and psychology fall in between, with about one in three reporting a high level of religious/spiritual growth during college.

When it comes to viewing oneself as highly "compassionate," students majoring in sociology (33%), health professions (32%), or education (31%) are most likely to see themselves in this way whereas, those majoring in history or political science (22%), journalism (22%), the humanities (21%), or the physical sciences (17%) are least likely to see themselves as highly compassionate.

Impact on College Outcomes

In addition to the positive and negative influences on students' spiritual development, the study identified some key ways in which spiritual growth affects other college outcomes.

"We now know more about how the college experience affects students' spiritual growth, and have some suggestive evidence on the possible impact that spiritual development can have on other important factors related to how well students perform and thrive as individuals," said Astin.

- **Academic Performance:** Earning better-than-expected grades in college is associated with higher levels of religious involvement -- reading sacred texts and other materials on religion and spirituality, going to church, and engaging in religious singing/chanting. These activities are also associated with greater satisfaction with the college experience and with higher levels of "equanimity"-- feeling good about the direction of one's life, feeling at peace and centered, and seeing each day as a gift.



- **Degree Aspirations:** Rising educational aspirations during the first three years of college are associated with attending a college where student peers are strongly committed to developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Increasing educational aspirations during college are also more likely to occur among students who exhibit a high degree of charitable involvement (e.g., participation in community food/clothing drives; doing volunteer work in general; helping friends with personal problems, etc.).
- **Self-Esteem:** Increases in self-esteem during college are more likely to occur among students who exhibit higher levels of equanimity, charitable involvement, and compassionate self-concept (e.g. self-rated scores on kindness, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, generosity, and helpfulness).
- **Psychological Distress:** Students who are on a spiritual quest -- looking for answers to life's mysteries, seeking greater inner harmony, searching for purpose and meaning in life -- are more likely to show rising levels of psychological distress during college.
- **Physical Health:** Positive growth during college in self-rated physical health is associated with a high self-rating in spirituality and a compassionate self-concept.
- **Types of Institution:** As expected, attending an "evangelical" college is associated with generally positive patterns of spiritual growth, while attending a public college or university is associated with larger-than-average declines in self-rated spirituality.

Overall Changes in College

One of the most dramatic changes between the student's freshman (2000) and junior (2003) years in college 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, which they completed three years earlier.

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

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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.



Spirituality in Higher Education

Some Key Findings on Differences Between College Majors

Levels of religious commitment

- High - Fine arts (62%), humanities (57%), and education (59%)
- Low - Biological science (43%), history or political science (41%), and sociology (37%)

Level of religious/spiritual growth during the first three years of college

- Education students (close to half report high levels of growth)
- Journalism, health professions, and psychology (about one in three)
- History and political science (one in four)
- Physical and computer science majors (one in five)

Engaged in a spiritual quest

- Most likely - Fine arts (43%) and humanities (42%)
- Least likely - Physical sciences (19%), computer science (23%), and business (24%)

Express high levels of spiritual distress

- Most likely - Fine arts (27%) and humanities (31%)
- Least likely - Computer science (10%), business (15%), and education (17%)

Sees oneself as highly compassionate

- Most likely – Sociology (33%), health professions (32%) and education (31%)
- Least likely – History or political science (22%), journalism (22%), humanities (21%), and physical science (17%)