

Embargoed For Release:
July 28, 2004

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College Students' Spiritual and Religious Life Varies According to Political Beliefs, Gender

Study Shows Strong Effects of Religion on Politics, Gender Gap

Strongly religious college students tend to identify themselves as politically conservative and hold conservative views on issues of sex, abortion, gay rights, and drugs, but they lean in a liberal direction when it comes to issues such as gun control and the death penalty, according to new research released today by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

The analysis, part of a national study of 3,680 third-year college students at 46 diverse colleges and universities, also shows that women report significantly higher levels of spirituality and religiousness than men. The largest differences are greater charitable involvement, religious commitment, equanimity, and spirituality among women.

About one-fifth of college students are "highly religious," while about the same number have low levels of religious engagement, which is defined as a pattern of behavior that includes such things as attending religious services, reading sacred texts, attending religious/spiritual workshops or retreats, and joining a religious organization on campus.

Sharp Differences on Social Issues

Students who are highly engaged religiously differ from their less religious classmates in their attitudes about a number of social issues. The largest gap is in views about casual sex, with only 7% of highly religious students (compared to 80% of the least religious students) agreeing with the proposition that "if two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time."

The most and least religious students also differ substantially in their rates of agreement with legalized abortion (24% versus 79%) and legalization of marijuana (17% versus 64%). And when it comes to "laws prohibiting homosexual relationships," highly religious students are much more likely to support such laws (38%) than are the least religious students (17%).

A very different pattern emerges, however, when it comes to attitudes on gun control and the death penalty. More of the most religious students (75%) than of the least religious students (70%) agree that "the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns," and the most religious students are substantially more likely than the least religious students are to support abolition of the death penalty (38% versus 23%).

(more)



“The nation’s cultural and political divide is on college campuses too,” says Alexander Astin, co-principal investigator on the project, “but the study also shows that there is no simple, one-to-one relationship between religious and political beliefs. While highly religious students tend to be more ‘conservative’ than less religious students on certain issues, they can also be more ‘liberal’ on other issues.”

Conservatives versus Liberals

Students who identify themselves as politically “conservative,” compared to those who self-identify as “liberal,” are substantially more likely to show high levels of religious commitment (50% versus 18%) and religious engagement (37% versus 10%), and also more likely to show high levels of equanimity (35% versus 23%) and self-esteem (37% versus 29%). Liberal students, by contrast, are more likely to express high levels of religious skepticism (23% versus 7%) and to be engaged in a spiritual quest (33% versus 27%).

Gender Differences

High levels of charitable involvement are shown by 21 percent of the women, compared to only 8 percent of the men. By contrast, 33 percent of the men and only 12 percent of the women show little or no charitable involvement.

Women are also more likely than men to experience spiritual and especially psychological distress, with about one-third (32%, compared to only 20% of the men) reporting high levels of psychological distress during their third year in college. Men, by contrast, show higher levels of self-esteem and religious skepticism. One in five men (20%), for example, show high levels of religious skepticism, in contrast to only one in ten (10%) of the women.

Benefits of Political Engagement

Political engagement is only weakly related to religious engagement and unrelated to religious commitment. However, students who are highly engaged politically, compared to politically disengaged students, show much higher levels of charitable involvement, social activism, growth in global/national understanding, and self-esteem, and are much more likely to be engaged in a spiritual quest. “Political engagement” is defined by behaviors such as voting in student elections, frequently discussing politics, wanting to influence the political structure, and participating in student government.

Few Differences by Social Class or Parental Education

“Social class,” which was defined by combining the income and education levels of the students’ parents, is unrelated to most measures of spirituality and religiousness. The only exceptions are that students from the highest social class level show more religious skepticism, higher self-esteem, and less psychological distress than do students from lower levels.

“In effect,” says Astin, “this means that students show pretty much the same degree of spiritual/religious interest and involvement regardless of their social class level.”



While the level of education of the students' parents is also unrelated to almost all measures of spirituality and religiousness, students from the lowest income levels tend to show greater religious engagement, religious commitment, equanimity, spirituality, and spiritual growth and to be more involved in a spiritual quest than are students from higher income levels.

These findings are part the Higher Education Research Institute's project, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." Designed to look at students' spiritual and religious development, this groundbreaking study employs measures of spirituality, religious commitment and engagement, equanimity, charitable involvement, spiritual quest, spiritual distress, and other qualities related to the students' spiritual and religious life.

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.

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The project, which is funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, is led by Co-Principal Investigators Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin and Project Director Jennifer A. Lindholm. A revised survey will be administered to a more comprehensive sample of 100,000 entering freshmen at a nationally representative sample of 200 colleges and universities during Fall 2004.

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 and Information Studies at UCLA, HERI serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.



Some Key Findings on College Students' Views

Political Identification

Liberal or far left:

Highly religious (15%)
Least religious (35%)

Middle-of-the-road:

Highly religious (44%)
Least religious (56%)

Conservative or far right:

Highly religious (41%)
Least religious (9%)

Social and Political Issues

Agree that the Federal Government should do more to control handguns

Highly religious (75%)
Least religious (70%)

Agree that homosexuality should be outlawed

Highly religious (38%)
Least religious (17%)

Agree with keeping abortion legal

Highly religious (24%)
Least religious (79%)

Agree that casual sex is OK

Highly religious (7%)
Least religious (80%)

Agree with abolishing the death penalty

Highly religious (38%)
Least religious (23%)

Agree that marijuana should be legalized

Highly religious (17%)
Least religious (64%)

Gender and Income

High Scores on Religious Commitment

Women (37%)
Men (25%)
High parental income (27%)
Low parental income (35%)

High Scores on Spiritual Quest

Women (33%)
Men (24%)
High parental income (27%)
Low parental income (36%)

High Scores on Charitable Involvement

Women (21%)
Men (8%)
High parental income (14%)
Low parental income (16%)

High Scores on Equanimity

Women (31%)
Men (20%)
High parental income (22%)
Low parental income (28%)

High Scores on Spirituality

Women (26%)
Men (16%)
High parental income (18%)
Low parental income (24%)

High Scores on Psychological Distress

Women (32%)
Men (20%)
High parental income (23%)
Low parental income (30%)

High Scores on Self-Esteem

Women (24%)
Men (31%)
High parental income (32%)
Low parental income (25%)

High Scores on Religious Skepticism

Women (10%)
Men (20%)
High parental income (19%)
Low parental income (11%)