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College Students Report High Levels of Spirituality and Religiousness

Major Study Has Implications for Colleges, Health, and Politics

Today's college students show a very high level of interest and involvement in spirituality and religion, are actively engaged in a spiritual quest, and have high expectations for the role their universities will play in their spiritual and emotional development, according to a major new study released today. Four in five students have an interest in spirituality, three-fourths say they are "searching for meaning or purpose in life," and more than three-quarters believe in God.

These are some of the key findings of a survey conducted last fall of 112,232 freshmen attending 236 colleges and universities. The study, carried out by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), also analyzes how varying degrees of spirituality and religiousness translate into differences in students' political and social attitudes, psychological and physical well-being, and religious preference.

Some of the findings include:

- 80% are interested in spirituality
- 76% are searching for meaning/purpose in life
- 74% have discussions about the meaning of life with friends
- 81% attend religious services
- 80% discuss religion or spirituality with friends
- 79% believe in God
- 69% pray

According to a report on the survey, entitled *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, students "are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community."

Despite their strong religious commitment, today's students are very tolerant of the non-religious. More than eight in ten (83%), for example, say "non-religious people can be just as moral as religious believers," and nearly two-thirds (64%) say that "most people can grow spiritually without being religious."

High Expectations for Colleges

The students have "high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development," according to the report. More than two-thirds (69%) consider it "essential" or "very important" that their college enhance their self-understanding and a similar proportion (67%) rate highly the role they want their college to play in developing their personal values. Nearly half (48%) also say it is "essential" or "very important" that colleges encourage their personal expression of spirituality.



“College students appear to put a premium on their spiritual development,” said Alexander W. Astin, the Co-Principal Investigator for the project. “They are clearly very interested in these larger questions in life, and many of them hope that the college experience will support them in their spiritual quest. The challenge for higher education is to understand the priority young people place on these issues and explore how well they are supporting their students’ quest.”

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.

Political Orientation and Attitudes

The study found striking political differences between students at the high and low ends of spirituality and religious engagement, but also a “convergence on a number of social concerns and on the ideals, virtues, and values that students espouse.”

Among the most religious students, conservatives outnumber liberals by more than three to one. Conversely, liberals outnumber conservatives by a similar margin among highly skeptical students. Highly spiritual students are also likely to be conservative, but more liberals than conservatives are on a spiritual quest, espouse an ethic of caring, and embrace an ecumenical worldview. Similar proportions of conservatives and liberals exhibit high levels of charitable involvement and compassionate self-concept.

There are also sharp differences on political and social issues when students who are at high and low ends of spirituality and religiousness are compared. Some of these differences correspond to general population trends. For example, students with high levels of religious engagement are far less likely to believe abortion should be legal, think casual sex is ok, support same-sex marriage, and endorse legalization of marijuana than students are with low levels of religious engagement.

The largest differences on issues between students with high levels of religious engagement and those with low levels are:

- 54 points – legalized abortion (23% of highly engaged support vs. 77% of low)
- 52 points – casual sex is ok (15% of high vs. 67% of low)
- 48 points – support same-sex marriage (28% of high vs. 76% of low)
- 30 points – support legalizing marijuana (19% of high vs. 49% of low)

But attitudes don’t always correspond to what might be assumed. According to the report, highly religious students “clearly do not subscribe to a uniform set of conservative viewpoints, and actually assume relatively liberal perspectives on [some] issues.”

Very religious and spiritual students, for example, are more likely to oppose the death penalty and less likely to oppose affirmative action than students who show low levels of spirituality and religious engagement. Of highly spiritual students, 42% support abolishing the death penalty, while only 26% of those with low levels of spirituality do.

Highly spiritual or religious students don’t vary appreciably from their low-scoring counterparts on issues of race, the rights of criminals, women’s roles, and gun control. Three-quarters of



those with high levels of religious engagement say government should do more to control handguns, compared to 78% of those with low levels of engagement.

Relationship to Psychological and Physical Health

The relationships between spirituality/religiousness and “psychological health are nuanced and complex,” the report says. While there is a positive correlation between being more spiritual and having more psychological distress, there is also a positive link between being highly spiritual and attributes for coping with hardship.

There are much stronger positive associations with various measures of physical well-being. Highly spiritual and highly religious students are more likely to abstain from alcohol and cigarettes, maintain healthy diets, and report better physical health than their less spiritual or religious peers. Three-quarters of students with high levels of religious engagement say they never consume beer, for example, compared to 44% of those with low levels. And 66% of the highly engaged, versus 39% of low-engagement students, abstain from wine or liquor.

Religious Diversity

The study also looked at characteristics of 19 different categories of religious preferences. The largest percentage of students is Roman Catholic (28%), with another 17% choosing one of the mainline Protestant faiths (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran). Other sizable groups include Baptist (13%) and “other Christian” (11%). Another 17% say they have no religious preference. About one-fourth (26%) say they are born-again Christians.

The survey analysis reveals two clear-cut clusters of religious preference. One, involving Mormons, 7th Day Adventists, Baptists, and “other Christians,” is strongly spiritual, religious, and religiously/socially conservative. The second, involving Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, Episcopalians, Jewish students, and members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, tend to score low on religiousness, and high on such traits as religious skepticism, ecumenical worldview, ethic of caring, and charitable involvement.

Roman Catholics, the largest group, tend to score below the overall average on religious commitment, engagement, and skepticism, as well as on religious/social conservatism. With the exception of religious skepticism, Baptists and the “other Christian” group tends to score high on all of those dimensions.

Mormons receive the highest scores on five of 12 measures and above average scores on three more, while students with no religious preference show a reverse pattern. Unitarians exhibit the most distinctive pattern, with high scores on spirituality, spiritual quest, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview and low scores on religious commitment and engagement.

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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.