

Understanding the Religious & Spiritual Dimensions of Students' Lives in the First Year of College

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College is a critical time for students to search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual beliefs and values. To date, most of the literature suggests that college attendance tends to weaken students' religious attitudes and behaviors— a phenomenon that many attribute to distance from family members, certain institutional environments, and interactions with nonreligious peers and faculty. Although students' religious practices tend to decline following matriculation, their spiritual sensitivities seem to be maintained, and might even be sustained by specific types of college involvement.

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which students in their first year of college were engaged in religious practices and perceived themselves as spiritual. Based on the review of the existing literature and the issues it revealed, we arrived at four general research questions to guide the study:

- How do students change on the dimensions of religious behavior and spiritual self-identification in the first year of college?
- How do changes in religious behaviors compare with changes in spiritual self-identification?
- Among highly religious first-year students, what percentage is highly spiritual?
- Comparatively, among highly spiritual first-year students, what percentage is highly religious?
- Across various religious traditions (e.g., Catholicism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.), what percentage of first-year college students are highly spiritual?
- What percentage of those who do not affiliate with a religious tradition is highly spiritual?
- What precollege characteristics, high school activities, college environments, and college experiences predict religiousness after one year of college?
- Likewise, what precollege characteristics, high school activities, college environments, and college experiences predict spirituality after one year of college?

In this study, religiousness, a behavioral measure, was characterized by the extent to which students attended religious services, discussed religion, participated in religious clubs or groups, and prayed or meditated. Conversely, spirituality was defined as the importance to students of integrating spirituality into their lives, as well as their self-rated spirituality compared to others their age. Relative to religiousness, the spirituality construct was a measure of self-identification rather than behavior.

We traced changes in religiousness and spirituality using a longitudinal sample of 3,680 first-year college students who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey in Fall 2000 and a follow-up survey, Your First College Year (YFCY), in Spring 2001. Multiple regression analyses based on Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model were used to highlight the precollege characteristics, high school activities, college environments, and college experiences that predicted religious behavior and spiritual self-perceptions at the end of the first college year.

Although students became less religiously active in the first year of college – in terms of attending religious services, praying/meditating, and discussing religion – they became more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives. Perhaps a consequence of their declining religious involvement, students grew increasingly hesitant to classify themselves as spiritual relative to peers in the first year, despite their apparent commitment to spirituality. Further, highly religious students were typically very spiritual, and the reverse was true, but to a somewhat lesser extent. Very spiritual individuals were found across a number of religious traditions. Even among students who indicated no religious preference, more than 12% classified as high scorers on the spirituality construct.

The regression analyses demonstrated that religiousness and spirituality were highly correlated and tended to predict one another, although additional personal characteristics, institutional variables, and college experiences also were associated with the two outcomes. More specifically, students who identified themselves as conservative were more religious and spiritual after one year of college than those identifying as liberal. Connections to and cohesiveness of the family were associated with both religiousness and spirituality, as spending time with family and experiencing parents' divorce or separation were predictors in the spirituality and religiousness regressions, respectively.

Turning to college experiences, surfing the Internet tended to pull students away from identifying as spiritual, perhaps because such activities left less time for personal reflection and served to distract students from other forms of involvement that would enhance their spiritual selves (practicing religion, meditation, etc.). Civic and personal morality related to end-of-the-first-year religiousness, as participation in community service (positive predictor) and partying (negative predictor) were associated with the outcome. Two other college activities – socializing with friends and reading for pleasure– were related to religiousness, a reflection of the fact that practicing religion involves interacting with others

in a faith community and oftentimes the reading of religious texts and accompanying commentaries.

Recommendations for educational research and practice include using greater clarity in the design of items to measure elusive constructs such as spirituality and providing students with opportunities to explore their spiritual selves through religious organizations on campus and classroom dialogue.

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