The "Interior" Lives of American College Students: Preliminary Findings from a National Study

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"What is the meaning of college?" "What am I going to do with my life?" "How will I know I am going the 'right' way?" "What kind of person do I want to be?" "How is everything I've worked for up to this point going to contribute back to society?" "How am I going to leave my mark when I finally pass away?"

These were the life questions noted most frequently by the undergraduate students we interviewed recently as they reflected on what are currently the most salient "spiritual" issues in their lives. Indeed, for traditional-age college students, the undergraduate years are commonly characterized as an intensive period of cognitive, social, and affective development.[1] As they refine their identities, formulate adult life goals and career paths, test their emerging sense of self-authority and interdependence, and make decisions that will significantly impact their own and others' lives, young adults often grapple with issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and spirituality.

That students' religiosity generally tends to decline during the undergraduate years has been well documented empirically.[2] However, some researchers have found that commitment to spiritual growth among traditional-age students may actually increase during college.[3] While existing research sheds important light on the spiritual/religious

dimension of college students' lives, there remains much to learn about students' spiritual development during their undergraduate years. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected as part of an ongoing national study on college-student spirituality, this chapter provides an overview of preliminary findings on the perspectives and practices of undergraduate college students within the United States today.

Defining Spirituality

The word *spirituality* originated from a merging of the Latin word for breath, *spiritus*, with the concept of enthusiasm, from the Greek *enthousiasmos*, meaning "the God within." The resulting word, spirituality, "captures the dynamic process of divine inspiration, or 'the breath of God within.'"[4] While the semantic interpretation of the word spirituality is clear, its meaning in operational terms is more ambiguous. Traditionally, the construct of spirituality has been closely aligned with religious beliefs and convictions. Current conceptions, however, are becoming much broader. Although for many, spirituality remains closely linked with religion, we are seeing today a growing number of individuals who identify their spirituality as either loosely or not at all associated with an established religious tradition.[5]

Whereas religion is characterized by "group activity that involves specific behavioral, social, doctrinal, and denominational characteristics,"[6] spirituality points to our interiors, by which we mean our subjective life, as opposed to the objective domain of material objects that one can point to and measure. In other words, the spiritual domain has to do with human consciousness—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness. Spirituality also has more to do with our qualitative or affective experiences than it does with reasoning or logic and relates to the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us.[7] As Astin has explained, spirituality also encompasses aspects of our experiences that are not easy to define or talk about, such as intuition, the mysterious, and the mystical. Others have described spirituality as an energizing force: a source of inner strength; a way of being in the world; and a "dynamic expression" of who we truly are.[8]

Essentially, at its core, spirituality involves the internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness; transcending one's locus of centricity; developing a greater sense of connectedness to self and others through relationships and community; deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in life; exhibiting openness to exploring a relationship with a higher power that transcends human existence and human knowing; and valuing the sacred.[9] While religious values may be connected to these key facets, spirituality may well exist apart from religion altogether.

Irrespective of the presence or absence of clearly defined linkages between spirituality and religion, to ignore the role of spirituality in personal development and professional behavior is to overlook a potentially powerful avenue through which people construct meaning and knowledge.[10] Indeed, it is the spiritual component of human beings that gives rise to questions about why we do what we do, pushes us to seek fundamentally better ways of doing these things, and propels us to make a difference in the world.[11]

Examining the Intersections Between Spirituality and Higher Education

Within American society, the spiritual dimension of our lives has traditionally been regarded as intensely personal, an innermost component of who we are that lies outside the realm of appropriate discussion or concern within business and nonsectarian academic contexts. However, in an era that some social and political scientists have characterized by its spiritual "poverty," we have seen a growing societal quest for ways of fostering spirituality and an associated hunger for spiritual growth.[12] In 1998, for example, 82 percent of Americans expressed a need to "experience spiritual growth," up from 54 percent just four years earlier.[13] In recent years, there has also been increasingly widespread recognition of what seems to be an inherent disconnect between the dominant values of contemporary American society and the perspectives and practices that will enable us to respond effectively not only to our individual needs but also to local, national, international, and global challenges.

While many of the core literary and philosophical traditions that make up the liberal education curriculum are grounded in the maxim, "know thyself," there is generally little attention paid in today's secular colleges and universities to facilitating student development in the inner realm of self-understanding.[14] Whereas spiritual aspects of student development were cornerstones of early American college curricula, En-

lightenment ideals, positivistic modes of thinking, and scientific worldviews, which began to exert a powerful influence on American thought in the late nineteenth century, have continued to dominate societal values and individual goal-orientations.[15] Rather than providing a developmental context characterized by self-reflection, open dialogue, and thoughtful analysis of alternative perspectives, many of today's college and university environments mirror instead the strong societal emphasis on individual achievement, competitiveness, materialism, and objective knowing.

Given the broad formative roles that colleges and universities play in our society, higher education represents a critical focal point for responding to the question of how we can balance the "exterior" and "interior" aspects of our lives more effectively. Existing research indicates that developing people's abilities to access, nurture, and give expression to the spiritual dimension of their lives impacts how they engage with the world and fosters within them a heightened sense of connectedness that promotes passion and action for social justice.[16] Spirituality has also been positively linked with physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being.[17] Consequently, some have argued that spirituality is an essential aspect of lifelong learning and, as such, that it should play a significant role in the teaching/learning process.[18]

Although we have witnessed an increasing interest recently in issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and spirituality within the higher-education community, relatively little empirical research has been conducted on these topics specifically within campus contexts.[19] In this chapter, we highlight selected findings from the 2003 College Student Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Pilot Survey and related interviews with eighty-two students who were sophomores, juniors, or seniors during the 2003–2004 academic year. Attention is focused primarily on how students conceive of spirituality, their levels of religious and spiritual engagement, their spiritual struggles, and their perspectives on addressing issues of meaning, purpose, and spirituality within the campus environment. Individual differences on selected dimensions of spirituality are also considered.

Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

A team of researchers at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is currently exploring the trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students, and how the college experience influences—and is influenced by—spiritual development. The study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, and directed by Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm, is designed to enhance our existing understanding of how college students conceive of spirituality and the role it plays in their lives. Subsequently, we will consider how colleges and universities can be more responsive in facilitating student development in this realm. We are guided in these efforts by a nine-member Technical Advisory Panel and an eleven-member National Advisory Board. This multifaceted, longitudinal project addresses the perspectives and practices of students as well as faculty. The student-centered aspect of our research is guided by the following questions:

1) How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues and questions such as the meaning of life and work?
2) How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities such as compassion, honesty, optimism, and humility?
3) What spiritual/religious practices (e.g., rituals, prayer/meditation, service to others) are students most/least attracted to?
4) How do spiritual/religious practices affect students' academic and personal development?
5) What is the connection between traditional religious practices and spiritual development?
6) What in the undergraduate experience facilitates or hinders students' spiritual/religious quest?

In spring 2003, third-year undergraduate students attending forty-six diverse four-year colleges and universities across the country completed the CSBV survey, which was designed in consultation with members of the project's Technical Advisory Panel. The four-page, 234-item CSBV Pilot Survey was designed as a longitudinal follow-up of a selected sample of twelve thousand third-year undergraduates who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey when they first entered college in fall 2000.[20] Approximately 3,700 students ultimately completed and returned CSBV questionnaires.

Following the 2003 CSBV survey administration, the UCLA-based project team performed a number of analyses in order to determine the

feasibility of developing "scales," which would combine several items with similar content. For these purposes, we relied on the technique of factor analysis, a procedure that examines the correlations among a set of variables (in this case, questionnaire items) with the aim of reducing the variables to a smaller set of more general "factors." In many respects, this was a trial-and-error process in which we sought to identify clusters of items that had consistent and coherent content and that simultaneously demonstrated a high degree of statistical internal consistency. In total, nineteen scales were established, twelve of which are addressed in this chapter. In subsequent analyses, we employed a multistage weighting procedure to approximate the results that would have been obtained if all third-year, full-time students at each of the forty-six participating institutions had responded to the survey.[21]

This phase of our quantitative research provided us with preliminary insights regarding the *what* of students' spiritual perspectives and practices. However, we were also interested in talking with students directly to understand better the *how* and *why* elements related to their beliefs and behaviors. Consequently, in association with the 2003 CSBV survey, we also conducted ten focus-group interviews at six institutions around the country to examine in greater depth how students conceive of spirituality, what role (if any) spirituality plays in their lives, how they perceive their campus environments and current life circumstances to facilitate or hinder their spiritual development, and what (if any) aspirations they have with respect to spiritual growth. The students we interviewed—all of whom had completed at least one year of college—attended a diverse group of institutions with respect to geographical location, size, type (universities, liberal arts colleges, religiously-affiliated institutions), selectivity (based on the average composite SAT score of the entering class), and control (public versus private). The information we have gleaned to date from these two components of our research is the primary focus for the remainder of this chapter. Future phases of the project and associated goals are also described. Subsequent to providing brief historical context using data collected as part of the Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program, this chapter is specifically responsive to four questions:

1) What meaning does spirituality have in undergraduate students' lives?
2) How do students experience spirituality within the context of their daily lives?
3) To what extent does spirituality make a difference in students' lives?
4) Do undergraduate students perceive their college campuses as being responsive to their spiritual development needs?

Notable Trends in the Values and Beliefs of Entering College Students

Each fall since 1966, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has collected survey data to profile the background characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and future goals of new students entering colleges and universities across the United States. The trend data generated by these consecutive annual surveys not only reflect changes that directly affect higher education, but also can be viewed as indicators of how American society is changing.[22] Trends on selected items that have been included on the CIRP Freshman Survey over the years provide useful context for examining the spiritual/religious development of today's undergraduate college students.

For example, in examining data collected over the past thirty-eight years, we see contrasting trends in the respective emphasis that entering college students have placed over time on "being very well-off financially" and "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." The shifting emphasis on these two pursuits began in the early 1970s, crossed paths in 1977, and reached opposite extremes in the late 1980s (see figure 1). Since then, they have largely maintained their respective positions, with a slight increase in the "well-off financially" value and a slight decrease in the "philosophy of life" value. In fact, in 2003, the "philosophy of life" value reached an all-time low, with just 39 percent of incoming freshmen indicating that this pursuit is "very important" or "essential" to them, compared with an all-time high of 86 percent among the freshman class of 1967. By contrast, in 2003, "being very well-off financially" reached its highest point in thirteen years, with 74 percent of entering freshmen espousing financial success as personally "very important" or "essential."

Over the history of the survey, the number of students claiming "none" as their religious preference has also nearly tripled, reaching a

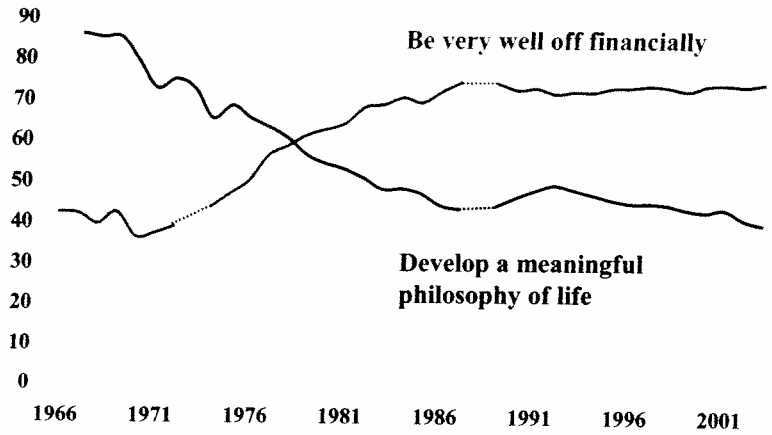

Figure 1. Contrasting value trends

Source: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA

record high of 17.6 percent in 2003 compared with 17.2 percent in 2002 and a low of 6.6 percent in 1966 (see figure 2). The percentage of students indicating that their parents have no religious preference also reached record levels in 2003, with 14 percent of fathers and 9 percent of mothers reportedly identifying with no religious preference. Since the survey began, there has been a twelve-point decline (from 92 percent in 1968 to 80 percent in 2003) in the percentage of freshmen who attended religious services "frequently" or "occasionally" in the past year. The 2003 figure represents the lowest in the history of the survey.

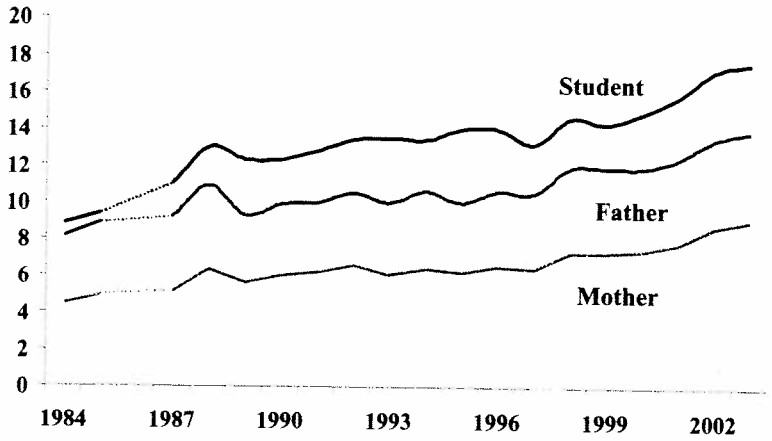

Figure 2. Growing numbers of people with no religious preference

Source: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA

Nonetheless, with 80 percent of incoming freshmen still indicating that they attended services during their last year in high school at least occasionally, it is clear that overall levels of religious service attendance among the country's high school students still remain high.

Related trends are also evident with respect to students' engagement in prayer/meditation and their self-rated spirituality. For example, since 1996, the first year an item querying the time students devote to prayer or meditation was added to the survey, the percentage of entering freshmen who engage in such activity on a weekly basis has declined from 67 percent to 64 percent. In 2003, the percentage of incoming freshmen who rate their level of "spirituality" as "above average" or "highest 10 percent" among their peers dropped for the fourth consecutive year to 38 percent, compared to a high of 46 percent in 1999 (this item was also added to the survey in 1996).

Spirituality and Religiousness in the Lives of Today's College Students

Despite declines over time in the religious/spiritual inclinations of the country's entering college freshmen, we find that the majority of 2003 CSBV survey respondents—all of whom were third-year undergraduate students at the time they were surveyed—indicate an awareness of, and connection with, the spiritual dimension of their lives. For example, 77 percent agree that "we are all spiritual beings"; 71 percent "gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power"; and 58 percent indicate that integrating spirituality into their lives is "very important" or "essential." Moreover, substantial numbers of students (upwards of 84 percent) report that they have had what they consider to be a spiritual experience (e.g., while witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature, listening to beautiful music, etc.). While students' survey responses indicate that spirituality likely plays an important role in their lives, the question remains of what, precisely, they mean by "spirituality."

Defining Spirituality

The students we interviewed, all of whom had completed at least one year of college, commonly conceived of spirituality in terms of people's "ultimate beliefs," "morals," or "philosophy of life"; it is re-

garded as a core "part of who you are" and the "values that you live by." As one man shared: "[Spirituality is all about] why we're here, what we should be doing with our lives, and what's right and what's wrong." Inherent in most students' constructions was a largely self-focused element, a sense that spirituality is an "individual thing" with strong components of "self-reflection" and "internal conversation." Others conceptualized spirituality in terms of "what you're experiencing from the world and how you process that and send that back out into the world."

While an individualistic theme was prominent, there was also a strong, commonly expressed sentiment that one's individual connection with his or her spirituality has important implications for connecting with others. Equally prevalent was the notion that spirituality is heavily process-oriented and tightly linked with "asking questions about who you are and what you believe." For many students, the time and energy expended on getting to know oneself better is linked inextricably with one's ultimate capacity to better understand others. As one woman shared:

> I think one aspect of [spirituality] is just really learning how to interact with people and respect people and another aspect is really learning the meaning of your life and what you were placed here for and the ability to put everything into the correct perspective, including yourself . . . you know, putting yourself in perspective with everyone else around you.

How do students perceive the relationship between spirituality and religion? For a few of those we interviewed, the two constructs are largely inseparable. In the words of one woman,

> For me, [spirituality] has always been religion-based or focused. I personally feel spiritual when I'm praying, or if I need to call on God for myself . . . that's when I would feel spiritual.

However, the vast majority perceive distinct differences between spirituality and religion and viewed the relationship between the two as highly variable. As one man explained:

> When I first think of spirituality, I usually connect it with thinking about the way you were raised . . . with some kind of religious background . . . but there are a lot of people who consider themselves to be spiritual without a religious affiliation.

Regardless of their religious faith, or lack thereof, students tended to view spirituality as an integral, "everyday" part of one's life that encompasses "emotional feelings" and an "individual connection" to "an intangible something larger than yourself," a "power beyond man." Religion, on the other hand, was commonly perceived as focusing more on "group concerns" and "doctrinal points" and conjured up for many students the image of a place where people may go to worship on a regular, or occasional, basis. Nearly all participants across institutional types agreed with the sentiment that people can be spiritual without considering themselves religious. As one man said:

> I think a lot of people have some involvement with spirituality without adhering to any particular religion. There are a lot of people out there who are just kind of into the spirituality thing. Just [being] connected outside yourself and caring for your own soul, your own spirit . . . I think a lot of people these days are realizing that is an important thing to do.

Another woman shared similar sentiments:

> Spirituality doesn't necessarily mean religion to me, it means that you believe in a higher being than yourself. Spirituality to me is my hope and my faith and it's something that keeps me sane and keeps me going and reaching a specific and a higher goal for myself.

For some students, like this woman, the link between spirituality and religion is tenuous at best:

> [When I hear the word "spirituality"], I don't really think of religion that much. I [think more of] being out in nature, away from society and all the worries in the world. . . . You just feel free . . . and I don't really think that has anything to do with religion at all.

Generally speaking, today's college students tend to be fairly tolerant of divergent perspectives. For example, 88 percent of 2003 CSBV survey respondents agree that "nonreligious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers" and 70 percent agree that "most people can grow spiritually without being religious." In fact, some students, like this woman, openly questioned why people *really*

attend religious services and doubt whether spiritual growth necessarily occurs as a result of such attendance:

> Just because you participate in a religious service does not mean that you are a spiritual person. It could just mean that you're going through the motions. . . . It could be traditional reasons why you go to church. . . . It could be habit. The spiritual aspect is something that you have to seek out. It doesn't just happen because you go to church.

Interestingly, nearly without exception, participants reported having experienced a change in their perspectives on the association between religiosity and spirituality since entering college. In describing their views, many students, like this man, spoke of a change over time in how they define these two constructs and the relationship between them.

> I think [the distinction] is something unique to actually being at college. I never heard anyone distinguish between spirituality and religion when I was back home at my high school and junior high. They were always the same thing. Then I got to college, where you are allowed to be more freethinking or whatever. . . . That's when I started to see that there could be a difference between the two.

Spiritual/Religious Engagement and Struggle

In conducting the 2003 CSBV survey and talking with undergraduate students, we were also interested to learn more about their levels of religious engagement. We find that although just 29 percent of respondents had attended religious services frequently during the past year, 78 percent said they discuss religion and spirituality with their friends and 77 percent indicated that they pray. Specifically with respect to discussing issues related to religion and spirituality with friends, those we interviewed overwhelmingly concurred that although they do reflect privately on this dimension of their lives—in some cases very often—actual conversations with others tend to take place only when "upsetting" things happen. As one man shared:

> For me, it's interesting because conversations with my friends don't start with anything really spiritual. But, you know, when something bad happens, that's when you tend to talk about stuff. . . . You know, a relationship ends or somebody's relative dies or somebody gets severely injured or something. . . . That's when this talk tends to come up with me and my friends.

Indeed, albeit a minimally discussed aspect of many students' lives, their religious beliefs and spiritual considerations are often very important. For example, roughly three-quarters of CSBV survey respondents (74 percent) indicated that their spiritual and religious beliefs provide them with strength, support, and guidance. A similar percentage feel that their spiritual and religious beliefs have helped them develop their identity (73 percent), while two-thirds say that their beliefs give meaning and purpose to their lives (67 percent). One woman's remarks offer summative insight into how those we interviewed commonly contextualize their spiritual and/or religious beliefs:

> I don't have any answers about how spiritual I am or how spiritual I should be or anything like that, but I still feel that regardless of what I believe, there has to be something or else, you know, we're all in trouble.

Among those we interviewed, there was also a recurrent theme of wanting to "figure out" personal perspectives in relative independence from any proscribed set of beliefs. One man stated his feelings very directly:

> My spiritual ideologies are something that I want to acquire on my own, as opposed to either being given [them] or having them shoved down my throat.

While many undergraduate students forego regular engagement in structured religious activities, findings from the 2003 CSBV survey revealed that a notable proportion of third-year college students are nonetheless actively struggling with what they consider to be spiritual issues. For example, two-thirds (65 percent) of those surveyed report that they question their religious/ spiritual beliefs at least occasionally (18 percent frequently), while 68 percent indicated that, at least "to some extent," they are "feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters." Moreover, 76 percent say they have "struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death" at least occasionally and 46 percent have, at least occasionally, "felt angry with God." One-third (38 percent) feel "disillusioned with my religious upbringing" at least "to some extent."

Indicative of the spiritual struggles that some college students are experiencing was what one woman shared with us:

> I think I have a hard time believing in God or a Higher Power because you see so much suffering everywhere. You wonder if someone is in charge and, if so, why would He . . . or She . . . do this? Why would some people be suffering while other people have all the riches in the world? Why am I fortunate, but they're not? But at the same time, I feel I'm not fortunate because I have feelings that other people don't. I think it's just a big cycle that gets you . . . at least it got me . . . into disbelieving that there's something out there.

Some of the students we interviewed were also struggling with reconciling the teachings of their religion with their own evolution of beliefs, particularly because, as one woman noted, "once you're exposed to [other beliefs], you can't really ignore them." Indeed, for many students, exposure to "the other" and resulting realizations that what they once believed to be the absolute, unquestionable "truth" about some aspect of their own or others' lives is not necessarily the only "right" way prompts much questioning and self-reflection. As one man explained:

> Somebody says, "So do you think I'm going to be damned because I'm an atheist? And then you think, "Well, I don't know." I really don't know how to respond. I am thinking in my religion, [the answer] is "yes," but I really don't feel that way.

Some of the doubts the students we interviewed have experienced are very profound, as were this man's:

> I'm praying to God and at the same time, I'm questioning whether He even exists. I'm a scientist first and so [those beliefs] directly contradict my religious beliefs. My belief in God . . . I keep it there just in case . . . because nobody can tell me for sure how man was created. So I have a couple of options lying there, just in case.

A related struggle for many students is reconciling a perceived conflict between personal needs and faith expectations. Should issues of faith and doctrine always come first or does dealing effectively with the demands of everyday life need to take precedence? For students like this woman, the question is a source of conflict:

> I am not really thinking about how my life right now is going to help out the people in my religious community. I'm more worried about myself and my family and I think that in my religion, that's [viewed as being] selfish. . . . You are supposed to look out for everyone else. Well, I am caring about myself and my family. In my religion, they're always talking about how God comes first, but I just don't see that happening in my life. That's somewhere below school and my family and paying the bills. . . . Then I can go to church, when those things get done.

Not surprisingly, the most prevalent struggles voiced by participants relate to deciding what they want to do with their lives after graduating, considering what kind of people they hope to become, and determining how they should best go about creating a life that is personally meaningful, professionally rewarding, and that, ultimately, contributes to society. For many, like this woman, thinking about these issues perpetuates constant questioning and related self-doubt:

> Most of the time, I'm questioning myself, like, "What's the point of life?" or "What is my mission in life?" I've been raised that everybody has a mission in life. But most of the time, [I'm] like, "What is my mission?"

Others, like this man, talked more explicitly about specific issues they are wrestling with and expressed frustration that their soul-searching has not yet led them to find definitive answers:

> I'm just trying to figure out what the next stage in my life is. I really don't know what the hell I should be doing or what I shouldn't be doing. What I am actually doing is just going to school right now. I have no idea whether that's the right thing to do and spirituality isn't really helping me and neither is religion.

Some students struggling with self-described "big" questions also found themselves reflecting often on the meaning of their education and life after college. One woman described her experience in grappling with the specific goals of college attendance:

> A question I've been dealing with [that is] kind of indirectly related to spirituality is the point of college. Like the fact that we're

paying for this education so that we can make money later in life. . . . What does that have to do with the grand scheme of things? Is that really important when you compare it to the meaning of life . . . of love . . . of friendship . . . of all these higher ideas? Like, "What are we doing here?"

A man at a different institution shared similar sentiments:

A lot of times, I find myself wondering why are we in class . . . why are we in school . . . why do I want to have a job? What would I have accomplished if I died tomorrow . . . going to school for three years? Just going through it, as opposed to actually living and spending time with my family or my friends. . . . I feel like sometimes I miss out on connections because I'm too busy getting all wrapped up in society and the world I'm supposed to live in, and my culture, and all the junk that I'm supposed to get done before I graduate when I feel like I should really be spending my time with my friends . . . or just making connections.

With respect to long-range spiritual goals, most interview participants aspired to establish a more readily accessible connection with their spirituality and to build lives in which they balance well their multiple, and sometimes seemingly conflicting, roles and responsibilities. One man's remarks capture well a sentiment commonly expressed by his peers:

I'm still at the point where it's a conscious effort sometimes to observe some of the values that I do really want to embody and my hope is that, with time, those actions will become more natural. . . . I won't have to consciously think about doing them.

While the majority of those we surveyed and interviewed indicated their interest in, and engagement with, the spiritual/religious dimension of their lives, we would be remiss to overlook the significant minority of students who are less spiritually and religiously devoted. Approximately 25 percent of students evidence a high degree of religious/spiritual skepticism as indicated by their agreement with the following statements: "It is futile to try to discover the purpose of existence" (31 percent); "whether or not there is a Supreme Being is a matter of indifference to me" (27 percent); "I have never felt a sense of sacredness" (24 percent); "believing in supernatural phenomena is foolish" (22 percent); "in the future, science will be able to explain everything" (21 percent); and "the universe arose by chance" (19 percent). Moreover, 12 percent of CSBV respondents indicated explicitly that they do not consider themselves to be on a spiritual quest.

Spirituality, Religiousness, and Well-Being

In conducting the CSBV survey, we were also interested to learn the extent to which students' spirituality/religiousness impacted their physical and psychological well-being. Overall, undergraduates' sense of personal well-being was found to decline significantly during the college years. Fully 77 percent of the college juniors who responded to the 2003 CSBV Survey reported feeling depressed either "frequently" or "occasionally" during the past year, compared to 61 percent when they first entered college. During the same three-year period, the number of students who rated their emotional health as either "below average" or in the "bottom 10 percent" relative to their peers doubled (from 6 to 14 percent), and the number who frequently "felt overwhelmed by all I have to do" also increased (from 33 to 40 percent). Roughly one student in five reported seeking personal counseling since entering college.

Relative to their more nonreligious peers, however, those who are highly involved in religion are less likely to experience psychological distress (e.g., feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do or that their lives are filled with stress and anxiety) and less likely to report poor emotional health. For example, compared to nonparticipants, students who frequently participate in religious services show much smaller increases in frequently feeling overwhelmed between their freshman and junior years (+2 percent versus +14 percent). Similarly, students who do not attend religious services, compared to those who attend frequently, are more than twice as likely to report feeling depressed frequently (13 versus 6 percent) and to rate themselves "below average" or in the "bottom 10 percent" in emotional health (21 versus 8 percent). Moreover, only 20 percent of highly religiously involved students reported high levels of psychological distress, compared to 34 percent of students with low levels of religious involvement—indicated by the reading of sacred texts; attendance at religious services; attendance at a class/workshop or retreat on matters related to religion/spirituality, etc. Similar findings emerged with respect to religious commitment—characterized, for example, by their seeking to follow religious teach-

ings in their everyday lives, finding religion to be personally helpful, and gaining spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power. Only 23 percent of highly religiously committed students reported high levels of psychological distress, compared to 33 percent of students with low levels of religious commitment.

Spirituality (e.g., believing in the sacredness of life, seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually, believing that we are all spiritual beings), on the other hand, appears to have a mixed relationship to psychological health. Highly spiritual students, for example, are prone to experience spiritual distress (e.g., questioning one's religious/spiritual beliefs; struggling to understand evil, suffering, and death; feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters): 22 percent of highly spiritual students reported high levels of spiritual distress, compared to only 8 percent of students with low scores on spirituality. Highly spiritual students are also slightly more likely than students who score low on spirituality to report high levels of psychological distress (26 versus 21 percent). On the other hand, spirituality is positively related to both self-esteem (e.g., intellectual self-confidence, social self-confidence, self-rated courage) and feelings of equanimity (e.g., feeling good about the direction in which one's life is headed, feeling at peace/centered, seeing each day as a gift). While self-esteem and equanimity are also positively associated with both religious commitment and religious involvement, the associations with spirituality are stronger.

In addition to declines in self-perceived psychological health during college, students show a net decline in their self-rated physical health: the number who rate their physical health as either "above average" or in the "highest 10 percent" drops significantly between college entry and the end of the junior year (from 57 to 45 percent), while the percent rating their physical health as either "below average" or in the "bottom 10 percent" doubles (from 5 to 10 percent). Declines in self-rated physical health may be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that students tend not to be as physically active after they enter college. For example, the number of hours per week devoted to exercising or playing sports declines substantially during the first three years of college. Those devoting more than ten hours per week to such physical activity decreases by more than half (from 35 to 14 percent), while the number devoting less than six hours per week increases from fewer than half (44 percent) to two-thirds (68 percent). For traditional-age college students, spirituality and religion do not appear to have much impact on physical health. Attendance at religious services, for example, shows little relationship to self-rated physical health, nor does spirituality. Similarly, religious and spiritual involvements bear little relationship to exercising or participating in sports.

Students also show marked increases in the frequency of alcohol consumption during the first three years of college. While only 17 percent of 2003 CSBV survey respondents reported drinking beer "frequently" when they entered college as freshmen, the rate of frequent beer drinking increases to 29 percent by the end of the junior year. Similarly, the number of students who report drinking wine or liquor frequently more than doubles (from 11 to 24 percent) during the first three years of college, while the number who abstain from wine or liquor declines by more than half (42 to 19 percent).

Being religiously involved, however, appears to decrease the likelihood that nondrinkers will become involved with alcohol during college. Among students who abstain from drinking beer prior to entering college, three-fourths (74 percent) continue to abstain during college if they are highly involved in religious activities. By comparison, fewer than half (46 percent) continue to abstain if they have little or no involvement in religious activities while in college. Similar differences relating to degree of religious involvement occur among students who abstain from drinking wine or liquor prior to college. Alcohol consumption is also less likely to occur among students who are highly spiritual and religiously committed, but the negative relationship to beer drinking was found to be strongest among the religiously involved: only 9 percent of highly religiously involved students reported drinking beer "frequently" during college, in contrast to 41 percent of those who had little or no religious involvement. The rates of total abstinence from beer drinking for the two groups were 60 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

Overall, our findings reveal that religiousness appears to have a readily discernible relation to select dimensions of undergraduates' well-being. In particular, relative to their less religious peers, students who are highly religious are less likely to report poor emotional health and to experience psychological distress. Compared with students who score low on spirituality, highly spiritual students also tend to indicate high levels of self-esteem and equanimity. Perhaps reflecting their active engagement in questioning and refining their beliefs, highly spiritual students are also comparatively more inclined than their less

spiritual peers to experience both spiritual distress and psychological distress. Finally, neither spirituality nor religiousness were found to have a broad impact on physical well-being. Highly religious students, however, were more likely than their less religious counterparts to abstain from drinking.

Individual Differences

Thus far, this chapter has focused on how undergraduates, as an aggregate, view spirituality and its role in their lives. How does spirituality differ across various student populations? Here, we highlight selected key distinctions divided by gender, academic major, and political orientation/engagement. Future analyses that our project team plans to conduct will focus, in greater depth, on the origins and outcomes of these differences. We will also examine additional dimensions of individual differences, including race/ethnicity and religious affiliation.

Gender Overall, and in keeping with the results of previous studies,[23] we find that college women exhibit greater commitment to spirituality and religion than men. Among CSBV survey respondents, 37 percent of the women and 25 percent of the men were high scorers on religious commitment. Women are also more inclined than men to view themselves as being on a spiritual quest (defined by having goals such as attaining inner harmony, searching for meaning/purpose in life, and becoming a more loving person) and to classify themselves as highly spiritual. However, our behavioral measure of religiousness—religious engagement—evidences less gender differentiation, with 22 percent of women and 18 percent of men scoring high on this scale. Men, however, show higher levels of religious skepticism overall—on the order of one in five men being highly skeptical, relative to one in ten women. Women are also more likely than men to experience spiritual and, especially, psychological distress, with about one-third of the women surveyed (32 percent, compared to only 20 percent of the men) reporting high levels of psychological distress during their third year in college. Finally, high levels of charitable involvement—performing volunteer work, participating in community food and clothing drives, participating in community action programs—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.

College Major With respect to differences between students majoring in various fields, we see that students in the fine arts and humanities are about three times as likely as physical-science and computer-science majors to report high levels of spirituality. Interestingly, fine arts and humanities majors are also more likely than other majors to be highly engaged in a spiritual quest (43 percent and 42 percent respectively) and to express high levels of spiritual distress (27 percent and 31 percent). By contrast, students in the physical sciences (19 percent), computer science (23 percent), engineering (23 percent), and business (24 percent) are the least likely to show high levels of engagement in a spiritual quest, while especially low percentages of computer-science (10 percent), engineering (11 percent), business (15 percent), and education (17 percent) majors report high levels of spiritual distress.

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

We also find that the highest levels of religious commitment—finding religion to be personally helpful, gaining spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power, seeking to follow religious teachings in everyday life, etc.—occur among students in education (53 percent) and the fine arts (48 percent). The lowest levels of religious commitment, on the other hand, are found among students in biological science (32 percent), history or political science (31 percent), computer science (30 percent), sociology (30 percent), and the physical sciences (30 percent).

Political Orientation and Engagement Not surprisingly, 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 percent of highly religious students (compared to 80 percent 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 markedly in their rates of agreement with legalized abortion (24 percent versus 79 percent) and legalization of marijuana (17 percent versus 64

percent). Highly religious students are also much more likely to support "laws prohibiting homosexual relationships" (38 percent) than are the least religious students (17 percent).

A very different pattern emerges, however, when it comes to attitudes about gun control and the death penalty. More of the most religious students (75 percent) than of the least religious students (70 percent) 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 to support abolition of the death penalty (38 percent versus 23 percent).

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

Political engagement—defined by such characteristics and behaviors as voting in student elections, frequently discussing politics, wanting to influence the political structure, and participating in student government—was found to be only weakly related to religious engagement and unrelated to religious commitment. However, students who are highly engaged politically, compared to politically unengaged students, show much higher levels of charitable involvement, social activism (e.g., aspiring to influence social values, and helping to promote racial understanding), growth in global/national understanding (i.e., self-change during college in understanding global issues, problems facing our nation, and local community problems), and self-esteem. They are also much more likely to be engaged in a spiritual quest.

Taken together, our findings to date suggest that, by and large, undergraduates are indeed engaged both spiritually and religiously. Moreover, there are notable differences in students' perspectives and practices based on individual characteristics. To be sure, our preliminary analyses of the CSBV survey and related interview data generate a wide range of questions for further research. The findings also raise questions about an often overlooked aspect of the undergraduate experience: how students perceive their campus environments with respect to promoting or hindering their spiritual development.

Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in the Campus Environment

Given the questions, struggles, and contradictions college students deal with, it is critical to understand how the college experience adds to or detracts from students' spiritual development. What are the opportunities in college for students to pursue their spiritual quests? To search for answers to their spiritual questions? To grow spiritually? Do students discuss the spiritual issues and questions they have with others on campus? Do they talk about spirituality in any of their classes? Would they welcome more opportunities for such discussions?

Indeed, we find that considerable numbers of students are searching for meaning and purpose in life (75 percent), discussing spirituality with friends (78 percent), and discussing the meaning of life with friends (69 percent). However, more than half (56 percent) said that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) said that their professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters. Moreover, while 39 percent said their religious or spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by "new ideas encountered in class," 53 percent reported that their classroom experiences have had no impact on this dimension of their lives. Overall, just 55 percent are satisfied with how their college experience has provided "opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection."

Echoing the sentiments of CSBV survey respondents, the students we interviewed had mixed experiences dealing with spiritual/religious topics on campus. The majority of students at one of the religiously affiliated institutions, for example, felt that their spirituality has been strengthened because of the culture and practices of the institution. However, there were also some students within the same institution who felt that being in an environment where everyone is of the same faith has its limitations, in that there are essentially no challenges to their existing beliefs and thus, no growth. As we heard from many students across different types of institutions, it is the diversity of faith and beliefs within the campus environment that they feel most contributes to their spiritual growth. As one man explained,

> I like having that diversity. I enjoy being able to have debates or arguments during lunch with my friends. I think questioning everything and trying to understand the other side helps me to be a lot more spiritual . . . in understanding what I really believe in . . . because, at the end, I might not agree with them at all. It helps me grow more by questioning. . . . It really helps me see why I believe what I do.

While many students were inclined to have discussions about religious/spiritual issues with their peers, we heard from them recurrently that they are "cautious" both about how they approach these conversations and with whom they engage in such dialogue. In part, these apprehensions stem from a feeling that the spiritual dimension of one's life is inherently personal. Understandably, students often do not feel comfortable "exposing" such aspects of their experience within environments where they are not secure that their perspectives will be heard without judgment and that their sentiments will be respected or, at the very least, will not be ridiculed.

Students also held diverse perspectives about whether the spiritual realm of personal development could be addressed effectively in classroom settings. Overall, with respect to their experiences discussing religion and spirituality within the classroom, while some students recalled classes that challenged them to "think outside the box" and "evaluate my own values, morals, and beliefs," most students concurred with one woman, who explained:

> We don't really talk about anything controversial. [The professor] will just basically tell us the facts and what we need to learn.

While students were often aware of topically relevant courses they could take on their campuses, such as those offering perspectives on various religious faiths, the general consensus was that, in the words of one woman, "there's no class that talks about spirituality as a whole with an unbiased point of view." One student noted her perception—particularly in her biology classes—that spirituality is "kind of in the air" in certain class discussions, but that professors tend to steer the conversation away from topics that are controversial. Another woman concurred:

> [Professors] have that look that says, "Don't even go there." I know some people just want to jump out of their seats and say, "How do you know?" and "I don't believe it." I've actually had people tell me from previous years that have graduated that teachers used to actually lower their grades if they even tried to argue with them. So there's this thing where, you know, you'll see people look at each other and you'll see the wheels turning in everyone's head, but nothing is really said because everyone's just like, "Okay, let's just get through this because I know it's going to be a fight anyway."

Others, such as this man, shared a more positive classroom experience:

> I find that when teachers just briefly touch on the significance [of something] in terms of how things are in general, that helps me. It doesn't happen very often and I know it doesn't really work with all the subjects, but just touching on it a little bit is helpful. I think if it's forced, it won't work. If we have like forced discussions where people are sort of made to divulge what they think about [spiritual] things, it doesn't really [work], but just touching on it can be helpful.

Some students at nonsectarian institutions felt that discussions about religion, whether in class or not, are generally frowned upon and that people are "afraid" to broach associated topics. The hesitancy in raising religious/spiritual issues expressed by one man was shared by many of his peers:

> The taboo of bringing up religion . . . it's a bad thing. . . . There's a sense that you shouldn't bring up God in the academic setting. When you start bringing up religion, you show your assumption that there is a God and people try to play on that and you feel attacked and that's the reason I feel uncomfortable bringing up religion in the academic setting.

Indeed, while students were generally open to the idea of engaging in conversations about the spiritual aspect of their lives within campus settings in which they felt comfortable, there was widespread agreement that the process of opening communication lines for such exchanges could be challenging. This was particularly true given what students perceived to be the "prevailing assumptions" within academe. In reflecting on how existing norms might be altered most effectively, one woman's sentiments captured well the perspectives of her peers:

> I think the one thing I would change is professors. They're almost, like, scared they're going to offend somebody. I mean, it's rare that you get a professor to actually sit there and show you what they [believe]. I've never seen a professor actually involved in a real debate with students.

Future Directions

Spiritual growth has been described both as "complex and multifaceted" and as "contingent and universal."[24] Moreover, different trajectories have been evidenced for men and women and there is evidence from our preliminary work that meaningful dimensions of difference in process, practice, and perspective may also exist among students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds and faith traditions. Developmental paths have also been viewed as responsive to sociohistorical context. As Stokes has elaborated, changes in how people make meaning of their lives also tends to occur more intensively during times of crisis and transition than during periods of calm and stability.[25] To be sure, preliminary findings from the "Spirituality in Higher Education" study support these assertions and raise new questions.

Recently, we completed the first phase of data collection for a larger longitudinal study of college students' spiritual development that we believe will provide more comprehensive insight into the spiritual development of undergraduate students. Based on findings from the 2003 CSBV survey and related interview research, some of which have been highlighted in this chapter, we developed a revised two-page, 128-item version of the CSBV survey. That survey was administered in summer and fall 2004 to a diverse sub-sample of 2004 CIRP Freshman Survey participants. The sub-sample comprised approximately 120,000 entering freshmen at 240 colleges and universities. These students completed a special six-page Freshman Survey, which is intended to serve as a "pretest" for a longitudinal follow-up survey to be conducted in spring 2007 that will make it possible for the UCLA research team to track changes in students' spiritual development during their undergraduate years.

A related component of this 2004–2007 longitudinal student study is aimed at discerning how college and university faculty view the intersections between spirituality and higher education, examining how faculty beliefs and behavior may influence students' spiritual development, and exploring how faculty view their own spiritual expression within the context of their academic careers and institutionally based work. The following questions are among those that provide direction for this aspect of our work:

1) What role do faculty believe spirituality should play in the undergraduate experience?
2) How do faculty view their responsibility for helping students achieve a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives?
3) To what extent do faculty view themselves as potential facilitators of students' spiritual/religious development?
4) To what extent do faculty engage their students in curricular activities that can promote inner development such as reflective learning, journaling, and community service?
5) How might life-stage and/or generational differences affect how students and faculty differentially define and experience their spirituality?
6) What are the contextual (i.e., cultural and structural) aspects of campus life that faculty perceive as facilitating or hindering their own and/or their students' spiritual expression and development?

Our preliminary analyses (beginning in spring 2005) of faculty data will focus on creating national norms based on the weighted responses of approximately 75,000 faculty at 520 institutions nationwide. Subsequently, we will conduct a series of more in-depth analyses involving data collected from students and faculty at the 175 institutions that are participating in both the 2004 CIRP/CSBV Freshman Survey *and* the 2004 HERI Triennial Faculty Survey.

The importance of including faculty data in our analyses of students' spiritual growth and development during their undergraduate years is underscored by the fact that faculty attitudes and behavior are known to have important implications for student development. The actions of faculty both within and outside the classroom impact the learning and development of future teachers, lawyers, physicians, and policymakers, not to mention their very own academic successors and the thousands of others whose work affects our lives. Interpersonal interaction with faculty enhances a wide variety of student outcomes and, as Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling have shown,[26] is one of the most influential sources of undergraduate student learning.

As the primary adult agents of socialization within the college environment, faculty have the ability to impact student experiences and out-

comes both positively and negatively. Beyond influencing students' intellectual and career development, interacting with faculty has been shown to enhance students' personal identity awareness and moral development.[27] In addition, student-outcomes research shows that informal (i.e., out-of-class) interaction between students and faculty increases faculty influence on undergraduate students' values, beliefs, and behaviors[28] and positively affects students' intellectual curiosity, interpersonal skills, and maturational development.[29] Faculty mentoring has also been positively associated with student inclinations toward humanitarian behavior.[30] To date, however, there has been no empirical research that focuses specifically on how faculty values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions affect the spiritual growth and development of undergraduate students.

One of the most critical questions posed by the "Spirituality in Higher Education" project is how spirituality affects other aspects of college students' development, including their academic performance, psychological and physical health, sense of personal empowerment, civic responsibility, empathy, racial/ethnic awareness and tolerance, religiousness, and satisfaction with college. While definitive answers to these questions must await the longitudinal study currently underway that will conclude in spring 2007, data collected thus far has enabled us to gain some preliminary insight about college students' spirituality. Ultimately, the aim of this work is to promote public awareness of and attention to the spiritual development of American college students. Moreover, we hope that the insights, understanding, and dialogue generated through this research and related efforts will provide a broad foundation for associated student, faculty, and institutional development initiatives that are aimed at facilitating this important and too-often-overlooked aspect of college student development.

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Tobin Belzer, Richard W. Flory, N

INTRODUCTION

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