

*American educational institutions were founded on the development of the spirit as well as the intellect, a concept that was ended by the Enlightenment. Now, research conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), reveals that most students want their college or university to help them develop spiritually. Are their institutions ready?*

# *Spirituality in the Academy: Reintegrating Our Lives and the Lives of Our Students*

*By Jennifer A. Lindholm*

**T**O IGNORE the role of spirituality in personal development and professional behavior, higher education professor Elizabeth Tisdell asserts, is to overlook a potentially very powerful avenue through which many of us construct meaning and knowledge. Based on the findings from an ongoing national study called “Spirituality in Higher Education” that Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, and I are conducting, college students coming to campus today—who constitute a diverse group ethnically, socioeconomically, religiously, and politically—agree with Tisdell. One of the most notable findings from a survey we administered in fall 2004 to 112,232 entering first-year college students at 236 campuses nationwide is that today’s incoming students place significant personal emphasis on matters related to the interior dimensions of their lives. Moreover, they generally have high expectations for the role that their college or university should play in their emotional and spiritual development. For example, roughly two-thirds believe that it is “essential” or “very important” that their undergraduate experience enhance their

self-understanding, prepare them for responsible citizenship, and support their emotional development. In essence, they are searching for deeper meaning in their life, looking for ways to cultivate their inner self, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and striving to determine what they think and feel about the many issues confronting them and their communities.

The 2004 survey is part of a multiyear program of research that examines the spiritual development of college students during the undergraduate years. The study, which began in 2003 and is funded by the John Templeton Foundation, also focuses on how a sample of 40,679 college and university faculty at 511 campuses nationwide view the intersections between spirituality and higher education and how their own spirituality influences their approach to undergraduate education.

Findings from our 2003 pilot survey of 3,680 third-year undergraduates attending forty-six institutions across the country suggest that although students express a high level of interest in spiritual matters, colleges and universities appear to be doing little either to help stu-



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dents explore such issues or to support their search in the realm of values and beliefs. For example, more than half of the students who completed the pilot survey said that their professors “never” provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds said that their professors “never” encourage discussion of religious or spiritual matters. While 39 percent indicated that 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 these beliefs. Overall, nearly half of the college juniors who completed the pilot survey reported dissatisfaction with how their college experience has provided opportunities for religious or spiritual reflection.

Compiling students’ responses from the 2003 pilot study, subsequent focus group interviews, and the 2004 national survey, along with faculty’s responses from the 2004–2005 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey, we sought insight into several questions: To what extent do college students perceive themselves as spiritual beings? What role, if any, does spirituality play in their lives? What expectations do students have for their college or university with respect to facilitating their personal and spiritual growth? What perspectives on spirituality and higher education do educators commonly hold? Do those who are spiritually inclined approach teaching and learning differently than those who are not? How can campuses best respond to students’ developmental needs within this realm? Why does all this matter anyway?

To continue our exploration of the role that spirituality plays in higher education contexts, in November 2006, we invited teams of faculty and administrators from ten institutions around the country to participate in the three-day Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education at UCLA. In large-group and small-group set-

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tings, campus representatives from public and private colleges and universities engaged in thoughtful and lively conversation with noted scholars and experts in the area of spirituality and higher education whom we invited to serve as consultants. Discussions focused on how to most effectively and appropriately incorporate perspectives on spirituality into the undergraduate curriculum and cocurriculum and on associated issues related to institutional structure and culture. Each campus team left the institute with an institutional action agenda, and the UCLA research team and consultants will conduct periodic follow-ups to learn about the progress they have made and provide assistance, when possible.

Through our conversations with students, faculty, and administrators and from our analysis of national data, it is apparent that for students and educators alike, spirituality shapes the perspectives brought into educational settings and the values placed at the center of academic pursuits. This article highlights selected findings from our research to date, considers how the spiritual dimensions of students’ and educators’ lives may affect teaching and learning within the academy, and offers reflective questions for educators, along with ideas for how campuses might incorporate spirituality into undergraduate education.

## SPIRITUALITY AND THE AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT

**H**OW SPIRITUALLY INCLINED are today’s college students? Findings from the 2004 national survey show that traditional-age first-year students show high interest in spiritual matters. Although utilitarian motives such as receiving training for a specific career, getting a better job, and making more money figure prominently in students’ decision to attend college, the students in this study indicated that the most dominant motivation for attending college is to learn more about things that interest them, which 77 percent of the 2004 entering class cited as “essential” or “very important.” For nearly two-thirds, the desire to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas is also of paramount importance. Moreover, fully half of entering first-year students say a desire to find their purpose

in life was a compelling factor in their decision to attend college. In addition, many students report that spirituality plays a prominent role in their daily life. For example, across all types of institutions, eight out of ten entering first-year college students report that they believe in the sacredness of life. Nearly two-thirds identify their spirituality as a source of joy in their lives. Many entering college students also report that they are actively engaged in a spiritual quest; nearly half indicate that they consider it “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to help themselves grow spiritually. In addition, three-fourths say that they are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, and similar numbers report having at least occasional discussions about the meaning of life with their friends. Roughly two-thirds feel that their spiritual beliefs have helped them develop their identity and that these beliefs give meaning and purpose to their life. Indeed, today’s undergraduates emphasize the importance of enhancing both the interior and exterior dimensions of their lives.

Knowing that spirituality plays a key role in the daily life of entering college students, we gained additional insight into their personal conceptions of spirituality by interviewing second-, third-, and fourth-year undergraduates. In keeping with characterizations commonly noted in the literature, those with whom we talked most often conceptualized spirituality in terms of people’s “ultimate beliefs,” “morals,” or “philosophy of life,” a core “part of who you are” and the “values that you live by.” 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 conceived of 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 spirituality has important implications for relating to 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 a few, the constructs of religion and spirituality were largely inseparable. However, the vast majority perceived distinct differences between spirituality and religion and viewed the relationship between the two as highly variable. 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.” On the other hand, students commonly perceived religion as focusing more on “group concerns” and “doctrinal points” and involving a place of worship where people may go on a regular or occasional basis. Interestingly, nearly without exception, interview participants reported having experienced a change in regard to changes in their perspectives on religion and spirituality since entering college; not only were students more likely to view the relationship between the two constructs as highly variable, but they were also more open to and accepting of views and practices that differed from their own. Most commonly, students attributed these ideological shifts to their interactions with peers whose backgrounds and ways of thinking and acting differed considerably from their own and from those to which they had previously been exposed.

One point of interest for our research team is how students’ spirituality may affect their self-concept and the nature of their connections with others and the world around them. We are also interested in knowing how students’ spirituality influences the frames of reference they apply to their educational experiences both within and beyond the classroom. Findings from our preliminary analyses of the 2004 survey data reveal that incoming first-year college students who are highly spiritual are much more likely than their less spiritually inclined peers to possess high levels of equanimity (for example, they feel good about the way their life is heading, can find meaning in times of hardship, feel a strong connection to all of humanity) and characterize themselves as having a compassionate self-concept. They also demonstrate greater inclination toward charitable involvement, are more likely to hold an ecumenical worldview (for example, seek to understand other countries and cultures, believe in the goodness of all people, accept others as

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they are), and tend to exhibit a stronger ethic of caring. Relative to their less spiritual counterparts, nearly twice as many highly spiritual undergraduates disagree with the notion that “realistically, an individual can do little to bring about change in society.”

From an institutional standpoint, one of the most notable findings from the 2004 survey is that beyond placing significant personal emphasis on matters related to the interior dimensions of their lives, today’s incoming first-year students generally expect their college or university to play a role in their emotional and spiritual development. As we mentioned earlier, roughly two-thirds believe that it is “essential” or “very important” that their undergraduate experience enhance their self-understanding, prepare them for responsible citizenship, and support their emotional development. Nearly half assign similar levels of importance to the idea that their college should encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

A more complete understanding of how students’ spiritual development is shaped by the college they attend, the kinds of faculty who teach them, and the types of academic and cocurricular experiences they encounter must wait until our research team completes a longitudinal follow-up study of the 2004 first-year student cohort. Findings from the spring 2007 survey will enable us to assess change and growth in spiritual development during the undergraduate years. What we know for sure at this point is that although entering college students have high ambitions and aspirations for educational and occupational success (and college is, by and large, the primary means by which they believe they can realize these goals), they are also actively dealing with existential questions.

Despite students’ high level of interest in spiritual matters, however, findings from our 2003 pilot survey of third-year undergraduates as well as from our interviews with students suggest that they have had mixed experiences in dealing with spiritual and religious topics on campus. While many are inclined to discuss related issues with their peers, we also heard repeatedly that students 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 in environments in which they are not entirely certain that their perspectives will be validated and that their sentiments will be respected. For the most part, however, students are open to the idea of engaging in conversations about the spiritual aspects of their lives in campus settings (both in and out of the classroom) in which they feel comfortable. Nonetheless, there was widespread agreement that the process of opening lines of communication for such dialogue could be challenging. This was particularly true given what students generally perceived to be, as one student described, the “prevailing assumptions” within academe.

## ACADEME’S PREVAILING ASSUMPTIONS

**I**N 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 academic contexts. However, in the current era, characterized by Hillary Rodham Clinton (in David Myers’s book *The American Paradox*) as one of spiritual poverty, there has been a hunger for spiritual growth and a growing societal quest for what professor Ian Mitroff and organizational consultant Elizabeth Denton have described as nonreligious, nondenominational ways of fostering spirituality. 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. The myriad ways in which our higher education institutions are evolving also compel us to reconsider long-standing expectations and deeply held assumptions about many aspects of undergraduate education and our work as educators as well as the associated effects that our beliefs and behaviors have on life both within and beyond the academy.

Alexander Astin noted in an article in *Liberal Education* that while many of the core literary and philosophical traditions that constitute 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. Scholars

such as George Marsden and Arthur Cohen have pointed out that whereas spiritual aspects of student development were cornerstones of early American college curricula, the Enlightenment ideals, positivistic modes of thinking, and scientific worldviews that began to exert a powerful influence on American thought in the late nineteenth century have continued to dominate societal values and individual goal orientations. One manifestation of the resulting worldview is that 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.

On one hand, the current prevailing orientation paints a discouraging portrait of the higher education landscape and its corresponding capacity to facilitate students' holistic development. On the other, however, the broad formative roles that colleges and universities play in American society positions them well as a critical focal point for the response to the question of how we can balance the exterior and interior aspects of individuals' lives more effectively. For example, university scholar and provost emeritus John Bennett has written about those within the academy who hold what he refers to as "relational spiritualities." He defines these individuals as being "no less committed to the enlargement and extension of learning, but [emphasizing] openness and community rather than exclusion and separatism." Unafraid of change and transformation, those with relational spiritualities view students as "potential colleagues in the quest for learning" and "value the invitation to grow that attending to and caring for others involves" (pp. 11–12). In light of the current challenges that American society now faces, such a perspective may be especially important for educators who wish to reaffirm their commitment to contributing more fully to

the well-being of students, institutions, and the broader society.

A fundamental reason for concerning ourselves with the spiritual dimension of educators' lives, their views on students' spiritual development, and associated behavioral implications is that the attitudes and behaviors of faculty, staff, and administrators shape many of the structural and cultural characteristics of campus life. In return, the campus life they create shapes them. Ultimately, values and beliefs represent the standards by which institutional decisions are made and priorities are set. Jon Dalton, a former vice president of student affairs, noted in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Education* (2006) that student affairs educators have an especially rich legacy of concern for holistic education and personal development and that the significance of their contributions to the softer aspects of undergraduate student development should not be underestimated or overlooked. Student affairs educators have played key leadership roles in facilitating student development in this realm and should continue to do so. However, for spirituality to have a central place in campus life, the essential tenets of an institution's role in students' spiritual development should also be reflected in the core values, beliefs, and commitments of academic affairs educators.

Envisioning campus communities in which the life of the mind and the life of the spirit are mutually celebrated, supported, and sustained necessitates reconsideration of traditional associations between academic and student affairs units. To create institutional environments that provide welcoming and engaging contexts for the personal and professional development of students, faculty, administrators, and staff, all members of the campus community should be willing to look closely not just at what they do (or do not do) on a daily basis but also why. Granted, one of the challenges in embarking on such a reconstructive path is the near absence of per-

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tinient information to guide focused dialogue on the topic of spirituality. The addition of approximately twenty items that focus specifically on spirituality and related issues to the 2004–2005 HERI Faculty Survey has provided our research team with the unique opportunity to examine one group of educators' views in this largely unexamined area.

### WHAT DO COLLEGE FACULTY HAVE TO SAY?

**F**INDINGS from the 2004–2005 HERI Faculty Survey show that, for many faculty, the spiritual dimension of life is indeed highly relevant. Within today's professoriate, four in five faculty members describe themselves as “a spiritual person.” Nearly half say that they are spiritual “to a great extent.” In addition, more than two-thirds view “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an “essential” or “very important” life goal. More than two-thirds say that they seek opportunities to grow spiritually to at least “some” extent and that they engage in self-reflection to a “great” extent. Similarly, for nearly half of today's faculty, “integrating spirituality in my life” is “essential” or “very important.”

In keeping with the overarching themes of our broader research agenda, we were interested to know whether faculty who are highly spiritual differ from their colleagues who are not, and if they do, how? To explore the connections between faculty spirituality and other beliefs and behaviors, we created a spirituality measure comprising three items on the 2004–2005 HERI Faculty Survey: self-identification as a spiritual person; personal priority placed on seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually; and personal value attributed to integrating spirituality into one's life. We then categorized faculty as having a high or low score on this measure, based on the degree to which they self-identified with each particular state, quality, or circumstance. While such determinations are admittedly somewhat arbitrary, we made an effort to introduce a certain amount of rationality into the creation of such categorizations by posing the following question: In order to defend the proposition that someone possesses a high (or low) degree of the particular trait in question, what pattern of responses to the entire set of questions would that person have to show? We followed the same process for categorizing high and low scorers on six other mea-

asures: focus on students' personal development, civic-minded values, diversity advocacy, student-centered pedagogy, civic-minded practice, and positive outlook on work and life.

In every instance, we find that highly spiritual faculty are much more likely than their less spiritual colleagues to be high scorers on these six qualities. It is not necessarily surprising that highly spiritual faculty would place a premium both on enhancing students' civic-minded values (community service, citizenship) and contributing to students' personal development (self-understanding, personal values, moral character, and the search for meaning and purpose), as well as spiritual development. However, it is also noteworthy that highly spiritual faculty are more likely to employ student-centered teaching methods such as group projects, cooperative learning, and reflective writing. Some of our most recent analyses indicate that the effect of spirituality on use of student-centered pedagogy is largely independent of faculty members' personal characteristics, field of study, or institutional affiliation.

Why highly spiritual faculty also express a much more positive outlook about their job and their life than their less spiritual colleagues do is not entirely clear. The content of this scale, however, suggests that highly spiritual faculty have been better able to integrate their personal and professional lives and to create a better alignment between their academic work and their personal values. Whatever the explanation for this positive relationship between spirituality and having a positive outlook in work and life, these results suggest that institutions may want to consider giving greater priority to their faculty's personal and spiritual development. Such a conclusion is consistent with the finding that more than half of college and university faculty disagree with the statement “The spiritual dimension of faculty members' lives has no place in the academy.” In fact, with the exception of public universities (where 49 percent disagree), a majority of faculty in all types of institutions disagree with this proposition. Taken together, these findings support the sentiments that faculty shared during interviews with the Astins several years ago. Indeed, like students, most faculty were found to be personally open to engaging in conversations on issues of meaning and spirituality but felt constrained by the structural and cultural limitations that both their profession and their institutional work environment impose.

The devaluing of nonintellectual pursuits within the academy aside, another concern heard anecdotally from faculty and underscored during dialogue at the Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education is that for faculty and academic administrators alike, a significant part of their reluctance to support students' quest for self-discovery and spiritual growth stems from their perceived lack of expertise in that realm. Professor Barbara Pesut has explained that the primary barriers to integrating spirituality into higher education curricula include the definitional complexity of the term *spirituality* within a multicultural society, the dominance of secular and materialistic values, and the lack of "models, faculty preparedness, and accountability" (p. 128). These considerations, coupled with ambiguous notions of what spirituality would look like when expressed in educational contexts, are undoubtedly reflected in the faculty's mixed responses to related questions on the 2004–2005 HERI Faculty Survey. For example, when asked directly whether "colleges should be concerned with facilitating students' spiritual development," less than one-third of faculty agree. However, more than half also believe that the following educational goals for undergraduate students are "essential" or "very important": enhancing self-understanding, developing moral character, and helping students develop personal values.

Not surprisingly, when the question of facilitating students' spiritual development is examined in relation to faculty members' academic field, we find substantial differences. Overall, the highest levels (40 percent or higher) of faculty who agree with the notion that colleges should be involved in facilitating students' spiritual development are found in the health sciences and humanities, while the lowest levels (25 percent or lower) are found in the biological sciences, social sciences, physical sciences, and agriculture/forestry. Even larger differences occur among faculty who are employed at different types of institutions; those in Catholic colleges and "other religious" colleges exhibit the highest levels of agreement (greater than 60 percent), and faculty in public universities and public colleges show the lowest levels of agreement (23 percent or lower).

To be sure, there are a wide range of issues to consider in thinking through how faculty—as well as staff and administrators—who work in different types of campus contexts can most effectively and appropriately

create institutional environments in which students' holistic development can flourish. Among the most critical considerations are the constraints imposed by traditional academic culture and related anxieties about the parameters of our responsibilities as educators. Structures and strategies for cultural change and professional development, along with existing reward structures, must all be considered.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

THERE REMAINS much more to examine within our student and faculty databases on the topic of spiritual development in higher education and much more to learn from listening to those who work and study in the academy. Even when we are equipped with the information that is available, bridging the gap between student interests and college practice requires thoughtful consideration. Among individuals and institutions, the capacity for self-reflection will be critical in planning, initiating, sustaining, and evaluating efforts to enhance the meaning-making aspects of teaching and learning. Educators should first look at the degree to which they have achieved an integrated identity that incorporates personal and professional passions. Toward this end, questions to ask include the following: How does our work reflect who we are? To what extent do we experience congruence between our personal and professional values? What effect does that congruence (or lack thereof) have on us and on others? To what extent do we feel connected to others within our campus communities? Then, turning our attention to our interactions with students, we should ask ourselves and each other questions such as those Dalton recommends in Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm's *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Education* (2006): How can we help students integrate their educational experiences in a rich, constructive way? How can we empower students to see and embrace their own role in their personal and spiritual development? What historical, situational, or contextual factors in our institutions either inhibit or facilitate our support of students' spiritual development?

The rapidly changing higher education landscape presents significant and, in some ways, unprecedented challenges. However, that shifting terrain also offers

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tremendous opportunity. Creating college and university environments that inspire students, faculty, administrators, and staff to strengthen their sense of connectedness and to challenge themselves and each other to be consistently responsive and accountable, while not an easy undertaking, is well within our reach. How each of us defines our spirituality is of far less significance than collectively making efforts to create integrated lives. Such a pursuit requires us to open our minds and our hearts to new ideas and new ways of being and doing and to encourage students to do the same. Educators and students alike must also develop the ability to honor and celebrate our differences yet not allow these differences to overshadow our core commonalities.

Through the experiences and insights of the practitioners who participated in the recent Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education and through the writings of others who have shared related ideas, we find that there are many ways in which questions of meaning, purpose, and values can be more readily integrated into the undergraduate educational experience. Institute proceedings are available on the project Web site ([www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu)). The conversations and presentations that took place suggest several promising curricular and cocurricular possibilities.

On the curricular side, for example, several campus teams created action plans to facilitate faculty dialogue on how to bring the conversation about meaning and purpose into the classroom and deal effectively with spiritual or religious questions that may arise. Such efforts might be supported by sponsoring a speaker series in order to introduce faculty to students' interests and developmental needs and in order to offer facilitative curricular suggestions within different disciplinary contexts. Another team is exploring possibilities for developing courses that incorporate spiritual perspectives—for example, courses on ethical and moral leadership development or contemplative practices in the arts.

Cocurricular efforts that campus teams commonly embraced included experimenting with first- and second-year residence halls focused on the theme of spirituality or simply introducing conversations about spirituality, meaning, purpose, vocation, civic engagement, and values into existing residence life programming in theme halls or in regular halls. Other campuses are pursuing multifaceted plans for shaping their over-

all campus environments in ways that establish stronger, more instrumental connections between student affairs and academic affairs and create a campuswide culture of reflection and authenticity. Among the primary vehicles for initiating such change include convocation activities; new student, faculty, and staff orientation programs; and events that offer faculty and staff structured opportunities to address foundational questions such as, How does your work reflect who you are?

One potentially valuable way that we, as researchers, can support these efforts to integrate spirituality into campus life is to provide more information to campuses about this aspect of students' lives and to work with institutional colleagues to develop ideas for curricular and cocurricular programming that can help facilitate student spiritual growth. Ultimately, our shared hope as a research team is that the insights, understanding, and dialogue generated through ongoing research and related efforts will provide a broad foundation for student, faculty, staff, administrator, and institutional development initiatives aimed at promoting integrative personal, educational, and professional development experiences.

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