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UCLA Launches Second Phase of Study Tracking College Students' Spiritual Growth

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA announced today that it will launch the second phase of a comprehensive, nationwide study of spirituality on college campuses. Called *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*, the multi-year project will build on the wealth of information gathered to date and will continue to examine the trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students. A primary focus for this second phase of the project is to examine how the college experience ultimately influences undergraduate students' spiritual development.

Initial research revealed that college students view their spiritual development as a critical part of their college experience, and that they want colleges and universities to support this development, but that most colleges and universities are not currently doing so.

"The research done in the first phase of the project has provided a great deal of information on college students' spirituality, and what institutions are, or in most cases are not, doing to facilitate this development," said Alexander W. Astin, a Co-Principal Investigator for the project. "This information offers a much-needed framework to help colleges expand opportunities for students to explore spirituality, and we look forward to engaging colleges and universities across the nation throughout this next phase of the project."

Initial Project Findings

The initial phase of the project launched in 2003 included three major components:

- An initial pilot survey completed by 3,700 juniors at 46 colleges and universities;
- A revised survey administered to more than 112,000 entering freshmen at 236 colleges and universities; and
- A survey of more than 40,000 faculty at 421 colleges and universities nationwide.

In the Spring of 2004, HERI released a report based on the freshmen survey findings entitled, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, which indicated that students "are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community."

The study also showed that students have high expectations for the role that colleges and universities can play in their spiritual and emotional development. More than two-thirds say that it is "essential" or "very important" that their college enhances their self-understanding and rate



highly the role they want their college to play in developing their personal values. Nearly half also say that it is “essential” or “very important” that colleges encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

The faculty survey found that four in five college professors (81%) consider themselves to be spiritual persons. In addition, more than two-thirds of faculty (69%) are actively seeking out opportunities for spiritual development, and a similar number (70%) embrace “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an essential or very important personal goal.

The report showed that a majority of faculty believe that their own spirituality does have a place in the academy, with 57% *disagreeing* with the notion that “the spiritual dimension of faculty members’ lives has no place in the academy.” And while only 30% agree that “colleges should be concerned with facilitating students’ spiritual development,” more than half believe that each of the following should be among the “essential” or “very important” goals of an undergraduate education:

- Enhancing students’ self-understanding (60%);
- Developing moral character (59%); and
- Helping students develop personal values (53%).

“The surveys have shown that while many students would like the college experience to encourage them in their spiritual development, we now know that relatively few students have actually received such encouragement from their professors,” said Astin. “The results from the faculty survey are beginning to provide us with a much more complete picture of spirituality in academia, and it would appear that there is much more that colleges can do to facilitate students’ spiritual development.”

Second Phase of the Project

The second phase of the project will feature several initiatives designed to track the spiritual experience of students on campus over time, and to engage colleges and universities in considering how to support this aspect of students’ personal development most effectively.

Key components of the next phase of the project will include:

- **A longitudinal follow-up survey of the 2004 entering freshmen in Spring 2007.** The survey will allow the project team to assess change and growth in spiritual development during the undergraduate years. The analyses will focus on determining whether, and how, students’ spiritual development is shaped by the types of colleges they attend, the kinds of faculty who teach them, and the types of academic and cocurricular experiences they encounter during the first three years of college.
- **A National Institute on Integrating Spirituality into the Campus Curriculum and Cocurriculum.** The Institute will be designed to engage college and university faculty and administrators in designing and implementing programs that incorporate spiritual issues and perspectives into campus life. It will also serve to develop and test



materials that are appropriate for initiating appropriate curricular and cocurricular changes on campus.

- **A second survey of entering freshmen in Fall 2008.** Surveying another freshmen class will allow trends in the spiritual characteristics and development to be assessed.

“Once the impact that the first three years of college has on students is determined, the project will focus on engaging college and university faculty and administrators to design and implement programs that will facilitate students' spiritual development during the undergraduate years,” said Astin.

HERI

The project is led by UCLA Professors Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin. Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm is the Project Director. HERI researchers are guided by a National Advisory Board and a Technical Advisory Panel.

HERI is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, the Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

The project is funded by a \$1.9 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which was established in 1987 by philanthropist and renowned international investor, Sir John Templeton, to encourage a fresh appreciation of the critical importance---for all peoples and cultures---of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Templeton Foundation seeks to act as a critical catalyst for progress, especially by supporting studies that demonstrate the benefits of an open, humble and progressive approach to learning in these areas.

For more information, please visit the project Web site at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.

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