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Colleges Fail to Encourage Spiritual Ideas, Study Finds

Students in UCLA survey say they value religious beliefs but that schools evade the issue.

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Most college students value spirituality or religion in their personal lives, but many find that their professors and schools do little, if anything, to encourage their interest, a new UCLA study says.

The national study, based on a survey of 3,680 students at 46 colleges and universities, found that 73% of those polled say their religious or spiritual beliefs helped develop their identity. In addition, 77% say that they pray, and 71% indicated that they find religion to be helpful.

At the same time, 62% report that their professors never encourage discussion of religious or spiritual issues, and 53% say the classroom has had no effect on their beliefs.

"The survey shows that students have deeply felt values and interests in spirituality and religion, but their academic work and campus programs seem to be divorced from it," said Alexander W. Astin, director of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and co-author of the study.

"It's completely understandable . . . to keep religion and academic study separate," Astin said. "But spirituality is a much more generic concept that, for many students, doesn't necessarily mean religion, and all students are on some kind of a spiritual developmental path. We can do a lot more to assist them."

The study also compared

changes in the outlooks of the polled students from their freshman year to their junior year. One of the most dramatic changes was the drop-off in attendance of religious services: 52% reported attending religious services frequently the year before they entered college, but only 29% said they did the same by their junior year.

Still, the percentage of students who say it is "very important" or "essential" to integrate spirituality into their lives climbed from 51% in the 2000 poll to 58% this year. Over the same period, the percentages of students who consider it very important or essential to develop a meaningful philosophy of life climbed from 43% to 52%, while those believing it is very important or essential to help others who are in difficulty rose from 60% to 74%.

Larry A. Braskamp, an education professor at Loyola University Chicago familiar with the UCLA research, agreed that students are interested in exploring spiritual issues but get little support from professors. "Faculty are comfortable dealing with the head, as opposed to the heart. They don't want to be indoctrinating students. So when they get into the area of faith, religion and spirituality, they view them as the personal domains of students."

What's more, some students say discussing spiritual or, in particular, explicitly religious topics in the classroom could create friction.

On the Cal State Northridge campus Thursday, Tikia Roach, a freshman planning to major in psychology, said in an interview: "There are too many people to offend. Why even go there?"

Daria Akhten, a Northridge

freshman from West Hollywood majoring in marketing, agreed that, "for some reason, people can't discuss religion in classrooms, discussion-style. It has to be really argumentative."

But Akhten said she wishes that professors would discuss "meaning of life" issues in class. For freshmen in particular, it could be an important source of support, she said. "A lot of people are living on campus and they do stupid things, but professors don't talk about that," Akhten said.

The new report is the first product of a long-term research project called "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose" being conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. The aim is to track the spiritual growth of students during their college years and to use the findings to encourage schools to foster students' spiritual interests and personal development.

"The longer-term interest here is in helping people become more engaged citizens, more responsible parents, better neighbors. All of these are legitimate goals for an educational institution, but if you ignore a major part of a student's inner development, then you're going to have a hard time doing this," Astin said.

The next stage of research will involve interviews next fall of 90,000 entering college freshmen, and then conducting follow-up surveys in the spring of their third year in school. The research is being funded with a \$1.9-million grant from the Philadelphia-based John Templeton Foundation, an organization founded to pursue research in theology and spirituality.