

## **SPIRITUAL CHANGES IN STUDENTS DURING THE UNDERGRADUATE YEARS** New Longitudinal Study Shows Growth in Spiritual Qualities from Freshman to Junior Years

This report highlights recent findings from an ongoing national study of college students' spiritual development conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute under a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The findings summarized below are based on comprehensive longitudinal data collected from 14,527 students attending 136 colleges and universities nationwide. The students were first surveyed as entering freshmen in the fall of 2004 and again in the late spring of 2007 at the end of their junior year. Data reported below have been statistically adjusted to represent the entire population of spring 2007 college juniors who first entered baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities as freshmen in the fall of 2004.

### **Overview of Findings**

The new national study reveals that while students' attendance at religious services declines during the first three years of college, they experience significant growth along several spiritual dimensions during the same period.

Compared to when they were entering freshmen, college juniors are more likely to be engaged in a spiritual quest, are more caring, and show higher levels of equanimity and ecumenical worldview.

These findings suggest that many students are emerging from the collegiate experience with a desire to find spiritual meaning and perspective in their everyday lives. The data also suggest that the collegiate experience is influencing students in positive ways that will better prepare them for leadership roles in our global society.

### **Spiritual Changes**

Evidence that the juniors are more engaged in a spiritual quest than they were as entering freshmen is reflected in increasing percentages who embrace the following life goals as either "very important" or "essential":

- "integrating spirituality into my life" (from 41.8% in 2004 to 50.4% in 2007)
- "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (from 41.2 to 55.4)
- "attaining inner harmony" (from 48.7 to 62.6)
- "seeking beauty in my life" (from 53.7 to 66.2)
- "becoming a more loving person" (from 67.4 to 82.8)



Growth in the “Ethic of Caring” is reflected in the students’ increasing endorsement of the following life goals:

- “helping others in difficulty” (from 62.1% in 2004 to 74.3% in 2007)
- “reducing pain and suffering in the world” (from 54.6 to 66.6)
- “helping to promote racial understanding” (from 27.3 to 37.5)
- “becoming involved in programs to help clean up the environment” (from 16.9 to 30.0)

An increasing sense of “Equanimity” is suggested by the growing percentages of students who:

- say they have “frequently been able to find meaning in times of hardship” (from 25.9% in 2004 to 31.0% in 2007)
- describe themselves as “seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift” (from 38.9 to 45.5) and,
- see themselves as “being thankful for all that has happened to me” (from 52.0 to 61.2).

Growth in what the researchers call an “Ecumenical Worldview” is revealed in the students’ growing endorsement of:

- “improving my understanding of other countries and cultures” (42.0% in 2004 versus 55.4% in 2007)
- “improving the human condition “ (53.4 versus 63.8)
- “feeling a strong connection to all humanity” (75.6 to 80.8) and
- their increasing agreement with the proposition that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers” (from 83.3 to 90.5).

Further evidence of increasing acceptance of persons with differing beliefs is suggested by the students’ growing agreement with two other propositions: “most people can grow spiritually without being religious” (from 62.8% in 2004 to 74.8% in 2007) and “it doesn’t matter what I believe as long as I lead a moral life” (from 51.1% to 57.8%).

Projecting these findings into the future, one can envision a college educated workforce that is more inclusive and accepting of persons from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, and at the same time more caring and more collaborative. These qualities would seem to be critical to an effective workforce of the future.

Despite their increasing interest in spiritual matters, most students (59.7%) report that their professors *never* “encouraged discussions of religious/spiritual matters,” and only 19.6 percent report that their professors “frequently encouraged exploration of questions of meaning and purpose” (52.4% “occasionally” encouraged such exploration and 28.0 percent “never” encouraged it). These findings show that while today’s students are showing significant spiritual growth, the full potential of colleges and universities to facilitate that growth is still to be realized.



## Changes in Religious Belief and Commitment

While religious belief and commitment show only slight changes during college, religious observance shows a clear-cut decline. Between 2004 and 2007 there were small declines in the percentages of students who believe in God (77.1 versus 74.2, respectively) or pray (69.2 versus 67.3), compared to slight increases in the percentages who believe in life after death at least “to some extent” (85.4 versus 86.6) or who consider “seeking to follow religious teachings in my everyday life” a “very important” or “essential” personal objective (39.4 versus 40.6).

Attendance at religious services, however, shows a steep decline during college. While about half of the students (54.3%) attend services in college at about the same rate as they did in high school, more than a third (38.6%) attend less frequently, compared to only 7 percent who increase their frequency of attendance after entering college. As a result, the rate of frequent attendance declines from 43.7 percent in high school to 25.4 percent in college, and the rate of non-attendance nearly doubles (from 20.2% to 37.5%). Consistent with these trends, the number of students who rate themselves above average in “religiousness” declines from 33.8 to 30.5 percent.

## Charitable Involvement

While there was an increase between high school and college in the number of students who donated money to charity (from 69.9% in 2004 to 74.7% in 2007), there was a decline in the percent who participated in community service (from 82.1 to 73.8) and in the percent who took a course that involved community service (from 50.3 to 33.0).

That these declines in community service involvement and in attendance at religious services may be attributable, at least in part, to the greater academic demands of college (in contrast to high school) is suggested by the fact that the number of students who spend at least six hours per week studying or doing homework increased sharply from 38.8% to 66.8% between 2004 and 2007.

## Political Orientation and Attitudes

Over time, students also become more liberal in their political ideology and attitudes toward socio-cultural issues, as evidenced by the following changes noted in the data:

	<u>2004</u>	<u>2007</u>
Political orientation: Liberal/far left	28.6%	34.3%
Conservative/far right	26.6%	25.1%
Middle-of-the-road	44.7%	40.6%

*Agree* that:

Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now	57.3%	60.2%
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Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status	53.8%	66.1%
Abortion should be legal	51.9%	59.7%
Casual sex is okay if people like each other	44.7%	51.5%
The death penalty should be abolished	32.5%	37.1%

*Disagree that:*

The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family	81.4%	86.0%
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America	76.1%	85.2%
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships	68.4%	78.6%
Federal military spending should be increased	65.8%	75.2%

When it comes to political engagement, fewer than half of the students (31.9% in 2004 and 41.4% in 2007) consider it “very important” or “essential” to keep up to date with political affairs, while even fewer (7.4% in 2004 and 8.7% in 2007) report that they have worked on a political campaign either as freshmen or juniors. Similarly, less than one in five students (16.4% in 2004 and 18.7% in 2007) considers it important to “influence the political structure.” The fact that students show little inclination toward political engagement may have implications not only for the forthcoming national election, but also for the future of our representative form of democracy. While students show at least some growth in political engagement during college, the absolute level of engagement remains quite low.

### **Health and Well-being**

While students grow spiritually over the first three years in college, their sense of psychological well-being declines, with increases in the percent who frequently feel:

- “depressed” (from 9.2 to 12.3 between 2004 and 2007)
- “overwhelmed by everything I have to do” (from 31.8 to 46.3), and
- that “[my] life is filled with stress and anxiety” (from 26.0 to 41.5).

Consistent with the decline in self-rated physical health (the percent of students who rate themselves “above average” declines from 51.2 to 45.6 between 2004 and 2007), the percent who engage in “exercise or sports” for more than 5 hours per week declines by nearly half (from 52.0 to 28.8), and the percent engaging for more than 10 hours per week declines by nearly two thirds (from 32.7 to 11.5).

One of the largest changes between high school and college is in alcohol consumption. Over half (52.0%) of the students who never drank beer in high school become beer drinkers in college, and one in ten (10.6%) become frequent beer drinkers. Similarly, the number of students who drink wine or liquor at least occasionally increased from 52.7% to 81.0%.

### **Background of the Study**



Now in its fifth year, the project—“Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students” Search for Meaning and Purpose”—is predicated in part on the realization that the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities devote to the “exterior” and “interior” aspects of the student’s development has gotten out of balance. Thus, while higher education can be justifiably proud of its “outer” accomplishments in the fields of science, medicine, technology, and commerce, institutions have increasingly come to neglect the student’s “inner” development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, self-understanding, and spirituality.

The study is examining a series of related questions: What role does spirituality play in the lives of today’s college students? What is the connection between spirituality and religion? How do students’ spiritual and religious qualities change during the college years, and how do such qualities relate to the students’ academic and career development? How many students are actively engaged in a spiritual quest? What are colleges and universities doing that either encourages or inhibits students in this quest?

The sense in which the study defines “spiritual development” is very broad: how students make meaning of their education and their lives, how they develop a sense of purpose, and the value and belief dilemmas that they experience.

Data collection was initiated in the spring of 2003 with a pilot study of some 3,700 college juniors attending 46 institutions. Data from this survey were used to develop a number of measures of spirituality, religiousness, and “related qualities” such as Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview. These measures were subsequently incorporated into the longitudinal study, which was initiated in the fall of 2004 with a comprehensive survey of 112,232 entering college freshmen at 236 colleges and universities. A sub-sample of 136 of these institutions subsequently participated in a longitudinal follow up survey in the late spring of 2007, yielding freshman-junior data from a total of 14,527 students. The longitudinal findings contained in this report are based on these students’ responses.

### **The Higher Education Research Institute**

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, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

The project is funded by a 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.

Further information concerning the project can be found at the project website:  
[www.spitituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spitituality.ucla.edu).