

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

Key findings of the first national longitudinal study  
of undergraduates' spiritual growth

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In 2003, we began a seven-year study examining how students change during the college years and the role that college plays in facilitating the development of their spiritual qualities. Funded by the John Templeton Foundation, “Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” is the first national longitudinal study of students’ spiritual growth.

It is our shared belief that the findings provide a powerful argument for the proposition that higher education should attend more to students’ spiritual development, *because spirituality is essential to students’ lives.*

This study has enabled us to see how students change spiritually and religiously during the college years, and to identify ways in which colleges can contribute positively to this developmental process.

Assisting students’ spiritual growth will help create a new generation who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations, while also enabling students to respond to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing technological society with a greater sense of equanimity.

## **What We Examined**

We analyzed extensive data collected from 14, 527 students attending 136 colleges and universities nationwide, undertook personal interviews with individual students, held focus groups, and also surveyed and interviewed faculty. We developed measures of:

Five Spiritual Qualities: Spiritual Quest; Equanimity; Ethic of Caring; Charitable Involvement; and Ecumenical Worldview

Five Religious Qualities: Religious Commitment; Religious Engagement; Religious/Social Conservatism; Religious Skepticism; and Religious Struggle

Spirituality, as defined by our measures, is a multifaceted quality. It involves an active quest for answers to life’s “big questions” (**Spiritual Quest**), a global worldview that transcends ethnocentrism and egocentrism (**Ecumenical Worldview**), a sense of caring and compassion for others (**Ethic of Caring**) coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others (**Charitable Involvement**), and a capacity to maintain one’s sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress (**Equanimity**).

## **Key College Experiences Contribute to Students’ Spiritual Growth**

Although religious engagement declines somewhat during college, students’ spiritual qualities grow substantially.

Exposing students to diverse people, cultures, and ideas through study abroad, interdisciplinary coursework, service learning and other forms of civic engagement helps students value multiple perspectives as they confront the complex social, economic, and political problems of our time.

Meditation and self-reflection are among the most powerful tools for enhancing students' spiritual development.

Providing students with more opportunities to connect with their "inner selves" facilitates growth in their academic and leadership skills, contribute to their intellectual self-confidence and psychological well-being, as well as enhance their satisfaction with college.

### **We Asked Ourselves Three Important Questions**

What college experiences are most likely to promote students' spiritual development?

How does growth in spiritual qualities such as Equanimity, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview affect traditional outcomes, such as academic achievement, leadership skills, and satisfaction with college?

If colleges and universities emphasized activities and practices that promote spiritual development – such as self-reflection, interdisciplinary studies, and study abroad – how would traditional outcomes such as academic performance and leadership development be affected?

### **What We Found**

Students show the greatest degree of growth in the five spiritual qualities if they are actively engaged in "inner work" through self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation.

Students also show substantial increases in spiritual questing when their faculty encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose or otherwise show support for their spiritual development.

Most forms of Charitable Involvement during college—community service work, helping friends with personal problems, donating money to charity—promote the development of other spiritual qualities.

Growth in Equanimity enhances students' grade point average, Leadership skills, Psychological Well-being, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and Satisfaction with college.

Growth in Ethic of Caring and Ecumenical Worldview enhances students' interest in postgraduate study, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and commitment to promoting racial understanding.

Educational experiences and practices that promote spiritual development – especially service learning, interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, self-reflection, and meditation – have uniformly positive effects on traditional college outcomes.

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### **About the Project**

UCLA Professors Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin are founding directors of the Higher Education Research Institute and Co-Principal Investigators of the Spirituality in Higher Education Project. Dr. Jennifer A. Lindholm is the Project Director.

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 at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, the Institute serves as an inter-disciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training for postsecondary education.

Detailed findings from the study are presented in a forthcoming book by Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, tentatively entitled, “Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives,” and will be published by Harvard University Press in 2010.

To find out more about “Spirituality in Higher Education: The Search for Meaning and Purpose,” or to share your thoughts about opportunities to support students’ spiritual growth, please visit: [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu)