

# The Spiritual Life

## OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A National Study of  
College Students' Search  
for Meaning and Purpose



Higher Education Research Institute  
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles

## THE PROJECT

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA began a major, multi-year research project to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. Funded by the John Templeton Foundation, the study is designed to enhance our understanding of the role that spirituality plays in students' lives and to identify strategies that institutions can use to enhance students' spiritual development.

As the project's Co-Principal Investigators, Alexander Astin and Helen Astin, wrote:

*The project is based in part on the realization that the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities devote to the 'exterior' and 'interior' aspects of students' development has gotten out of balance...we have increasingly come to neglect the student's inner development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding.\**

## THE RESEARCH

This report summarizes findings from a survey of 112,232 entering first-year students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities across the country. An initial pilot survey of 3,680 third-year students at 46 colleges and universities was completed in 2003.

A follow-up survey, which will be administered to this year's first-year students in Spring 2007 when they are juniors, will be used to study changes in these students' spiritual/religious development during their undergraduate years. Faculty perspectives on spirituality and the undergraduate curriculum will also be examined.

## 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, it serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education. Its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) annual Survey of Entering Freshmen initiated in 1966 is one of the most widely used sources of information about colleges and college students in the nation. HERI's research program covers a variety of topics including the outcomes of postsecondary education, leadership development, faculty performance, federal and state policy, and educational equity.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

\**The Dallas Morning News*, November 29, 2003

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# OVERVIEW

What is the meaning of college?  
What am I going to do with my life?

How will I know I am going the 'right' way?  
What kind of person  
do I want to be?

How is everything I've worked for up to this  
point going to contribute back to society?

How am I going to leave my mark  
when I finally pass away?

—Student Voices<sup>1</sup>

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA launched a major, multi-year program of research to examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. The study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is designed to enhance our understanding of how college students conceive of spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students' spiritual development. Given the broad formative roles that colleges and universities play in our society, higher education represents a critical focal point for responding to the question of how we can balance the "exterior" and "interior" aspects of our lives more effectively.



Building on the growing interest on college campuses to include spiritual development as a core component of a liberal arts education, the study employs a multi-institutional and longitudinal design to identify trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students. Entitled *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*, the study, guided by a nine-member Technical Advisory Panel and an eleven-member National Advisory Board, aims to address the following questions:

- ▶ How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues and questions such as the meaning of life and work?
- ▶ How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities such as compassion, generosity, optimism, and kindness?
- ▶ What spiritual/religious practices (e.g., rituals, prayer/meditation, service to others) are students most/least attracted to?
- ▶ How do spiritual/religious practices affect students' academic and personal development?
- ▶ What is the connection between traditional religious practices and spiritual development?
- ▶ What in the undergraduate experience facilitates or hinders students' spiritual/religious quest?

This report presents highlights of findings based on data collected in late summer and early fall 2004 from 112,232 students attending a national sample of 236 colleges and universities. Students responded to a six-page survey questionnaire that addressed questions about their backgrounds, educational and occupational aspirations, and values and beliefs with respect to spiritual and religious matters.

The study revealed that today's college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They also display high levels of religious commitment and involvement.

As they begin their college experience, freshmen have high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development. They place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality.

There are important similarities and distinctions between those students who are strongly religious and those who are highly spiritual. These qualities manifest themselves in a variety of ways related to students' practices, feelings, self-conceptions, and worldviews.

Varying degrees of spirituality and religiousness also translate into significant differences in students' political and social attitudes. Some of these differences, however, do not correspond to what would be expected in the current national political discourse. Spiritual and religious beliefs and practices also play a role in a students' psychological and physical well-being.

Finally, the survey looked at 19 different religious preferences, and this report provides some insights into the similarities and differences among students of different religious faiths.

**“To have the Astin team turning its prodigious research expertise to questions of how to support students who want to explore their religious and spiritual identities and commitments in the context of a rigorous liberal education is a great gift to higher education. The findings from this important study will help us understand where we are serving our students well and where we may be falling short.”**

**—Diana Chapman Walsh  
President, Wellesley College**

# FINDINGS

“How often do we encounter a research program that addresses a set of questions so central, so pivotal, so critical, and in retrospect, so obvious, that we wonder aloud why no one thought to ask these questions before?”

—Lee S. Shulman, President  
The Carnegie Foundation  
for the Advancement of Teaching

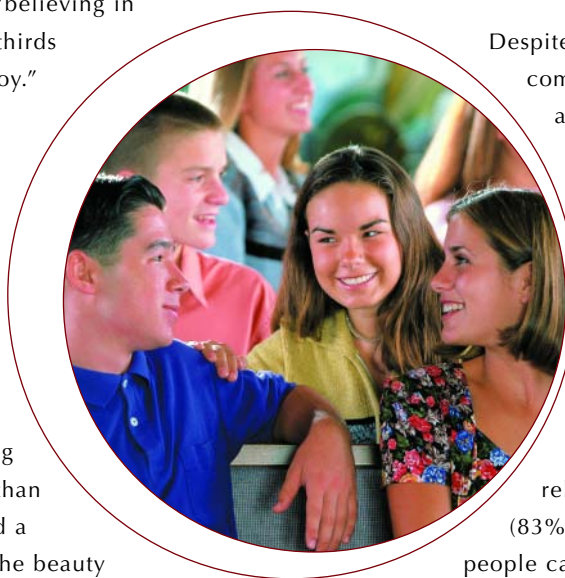
## SPIRITUAL SEARCH AND RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

*College students report high levels of spirituality and idealism. They espouse many spiritual and religious values and virtues.*

Today’s entering college students report high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Four in five indicate “having an interest in spirituality” and “believing in the sacredness of life,” and nearly two-thirds say that “my spirituality is a source of joy.” Many are also actively engaged in a spiritual quest, with nearly half reporting that they consider it “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually. Moreover, three-fourths of the students say that they are “searching for meaning/purpose in life,” and similar numbers report that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends. Additionally, more than three in five freshmen report having had a spiritual experience while “witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature,” and over one-half say they have had such an experience while “listening to beautiful music” (see Table 1).

The entering freshmen also show a high degree of involvement in religion. About four in five report that they attended religious services in the past year and that they discussed religion/spirituality with friends and family. More than three-fourths believe in God, and more than two in three say that their religious/spiritual beliefs “provide me with strength, support, and guidance.” Four in ten also consider it “essential” or “very important” to “follow religious teachings in my everyday life” (see Table 2). Additionally, over two-thirds of the students say they pray; 61 percent pray at least weekly, and 28 percent pray daily. They “frequently” pray “for loved ones” (68%), “to express gratitude” (59%), “for forgiveness” (58%), and “for help in solving problems” (58%).

Three-fourths (74%) of the freshmen also say that they feel a “sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self.” When asked about their personal views of God, more than half (56%) perceive God as “love” or as the “creator,” and about half (49%) experience God as a “protector.” Forty-four percent of the students say that, in the past year, they frequently “felt loved by God.”



Despite their strong religious commitment, students also demonstrate a high level of religious tolerance and acceptance. For example, most students agree that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers” (83%) and that “most people can grow spiritually without being religious” (64%).

Similarly, nearly two-thirds of the students (63%) disagree with the proposition that “people who don’t believe in God will be punished.”

The potentially positive societal force originating from students' idealism is evidenced by the significant numbers that rate "helping others who are in difficulty" (63%) and "reducing pain and suffering in the world" (55%) as "essential" or "very important" goals in life. Not only do many students hold

these ideals, they act on them: The vast majority (82%) performed volunteer work while in high school and more than two-thirds (70%) report that they are actively engaged in "trying to change things that are unfair in the world."

**Table 1. Indicators of Students' Spirituality**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Believe in the sacredness of life . . . . .	83 *
Have an interest in spirituality . . . . .	80 *
Search for meaning/purpose in life . . . . .	76 *
Have discussions about the meaning of life with friends. . . . .	74 *
My spirituality is a source of joy . . . . .	64 **
Seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually . . . . .	47 ***

\* Describes students to some or a great extent

\*\* Agree strongly or somewhat

\*\*\* Consider it essential or very important

**Table 2. Indicators of Students' Religiosity**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Believe in God . . . . .	79
Pray . . . . .	69
Attended religious services. . . . .	81 *
Discussed religion/spirituality with friends . . . . .	80 *
Discussed religion/spirituality with family . . . . .	76 *
Religious beliefs provide strength, support, and guidance . . . . .	69 **
Follow religious teachings in everyday life. . . . .	40 ***

\* Occasionally or frequently

\*\* Agree strongly or somewhat

\*\*\* Consider it essential or very important

Despite their strong spiritual and religious interests, many students also express religious doubts and reservations. Well over half of the freshmen report that they have at least occasionally “felt distant from God” (65%) and questioned their religious beliefs (57%), and about half have at least occasionally “felt angry with God” (48%) and disagreed with their families about religious matters (52%). In response to the question, “How would you describe your current views about spiritual/religious matters?”, fewer than half indicate that they feel “secure” in their views (see Figure 1).

While today’s entering college freshmen clearly expect their institutions to play an instrumental role in preparing them for employment (94%) and graduate or advanced education (81%), they also have high expectations that college will help them develop emotionally and spiritually. About two-thirds consider it “essential” or “very important” that their college enhance their self-understanding (69%), prepare them for responsible citizenship (67%), develop their personal values (67%), and provide for their emotional development (63%). Moreover, nearly half (48%) say that it is “essential” or “very important” that college encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

## MEASURING SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS

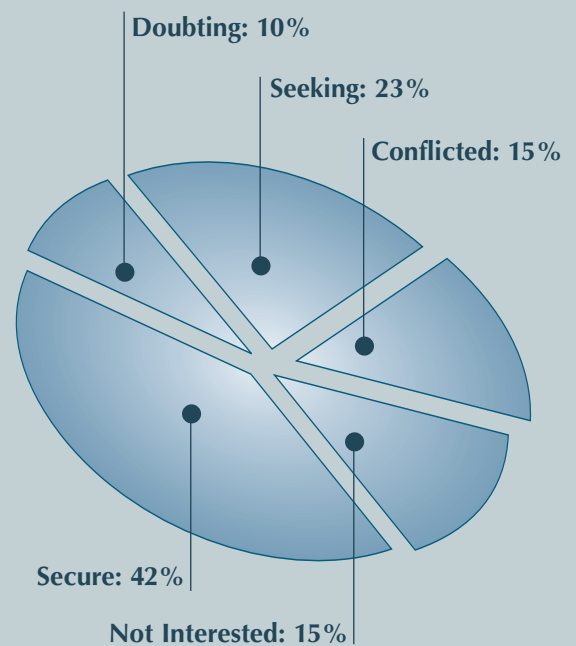
*Spirituality and religiousness are multidimensional: They express themselves in a variety of beliefs and everyday practices.*

For the past two years, the HERI research team has been developing a number of “scales” that measure various aspects of students’ spirituality and religiousness by combining questionnaire items with similar content. In this report, we utilize 12 of these scales, which include three measures of spirituality (Spirituality, Spiritual Quest, and Equanimity), five

measures of religiousness (Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Religious Skepticism, and Religious Struggle), and four other dimensions that were expected to be related to spirituality and religiousness (Charitable Involvement, Compassionate Self-Concept, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview).

As might be expected, students who are strongly religious also tend to be highly spiritual, but there are important distinctions. Spirituality, for example, is much more closely associated with Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, Compassionate Self-Concept, and Ecumenical Worldview than is either Religious

**Figure 1. Current Views about Spiritual/Religious Matters<sup>2</sup>**



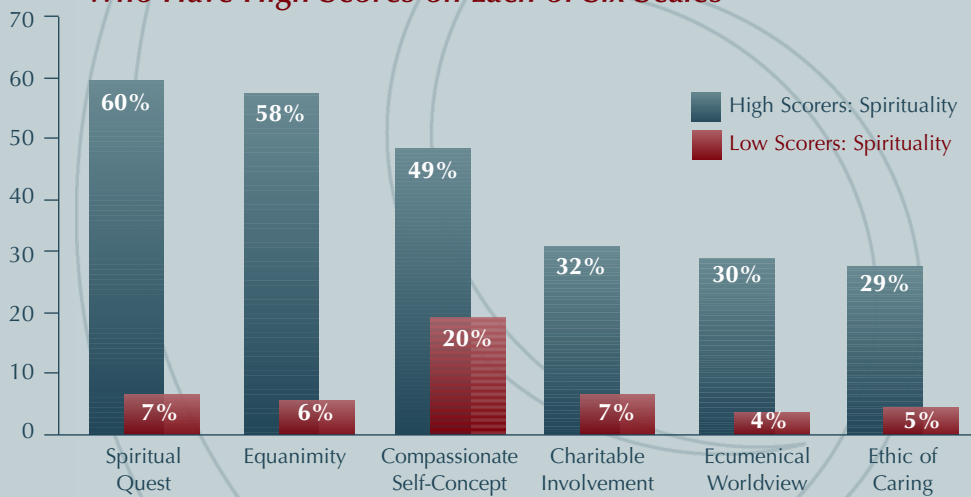
<sup>2</sup> These figures add to more than 100% because students were permitted to choose more than one response option.



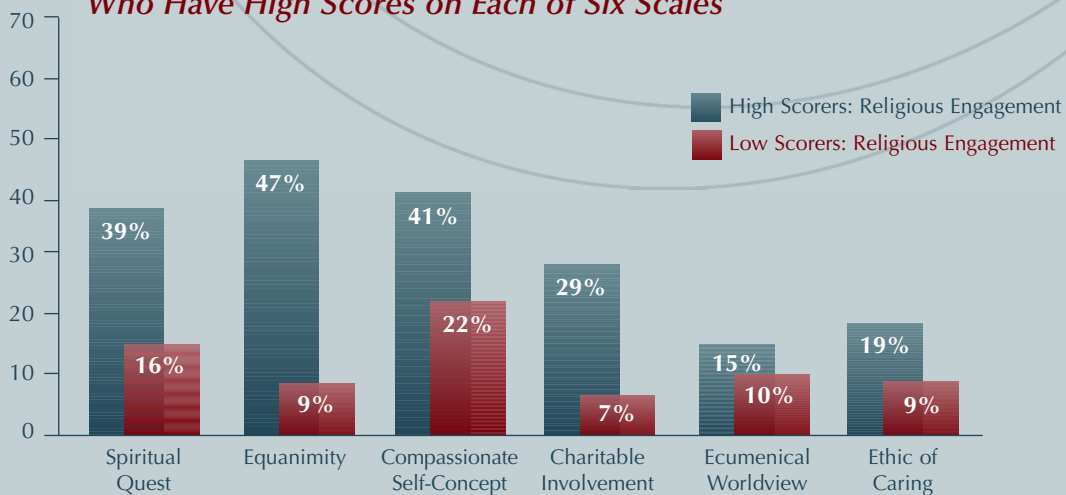
Commitment or Religious Engagement. Religious Commitment and Engagement, on the other hand, are much more closely associated with Religious/Social Conservatism and (negatively) with Religious Skepticism. Students who score high on Spirituality are markedly more inclined toward Charitable Involvement than are

their less spiritually oriented peers. Students who score high on Spirituality also possess high levels of Ethic of Caring and Compassionate Self-Concept. Regarding Religious Engagement, the differences between high and low scorers on the above three dimensions are less pronounced (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2. Percentages of High and Low Scorers on Spirituality Who Have High Scores on Each of Six Scales**



**Figure 3. Percentages of High and Low Scorers on Religious Engagement Who Have High Scores on Each of Six Scales**



## DIMENSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS

The following provides brief descriptions of the types of items that comprise each scale. Following each description are the percentages of all students who score either high or low on that scale. More information on these scales is available at [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu).

**SPIRITUALITY** includes believing in the sacredness of life, seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually, and believing that we are all spiritual beings. *17% scored high, 25% low.*

**SPIRITUAL QUEST** reflects interest in the meaning/purpose of life, finding answers to the mysteries of life, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. *25% scored high, 23% low.*

**EQUANIMITY** involves feeling at peace/centered, being able to find meaning in times of hardship, and feeling a strong connection to all of humanity. *22% scored high, 20% low.*

**RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT** includes following religious teachings in everyday life, finding religion to be personally helpful, and gaining personal strength by trusting in a higher power. *37% scored high, 2% low.*

**RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT** involves attending religious services, praying, and reading sacred texts. *20% scored high, 24% low.*

**RELIGIOUS/SOCIAL CONSERVATISM** reflects opposition to such things as casual sex and abortion, the use of prayer to receive forgiveness, and the belief that people who don't believe in God will be punished. *23% scored high, 4% low.*

**RELIGIOUS SKEPTICISM** includes beliefs such as "the universe arose by chance" and "in the future, science will be able to explain everything," and disbelief in the notion of life after death. *17% scored high, 24% low.*

**RELIGIOUS STRUGGLE** indicates feeling unsettled about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning religious beliefs. *11% scored high, 36% low.*

**CHARITABLE INVOLVEMENT** assesses behaviors such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems. *15% scored high, 26% low.*

**COMPASSIONATE SELF-CONCEPT** reflects self-ratings on qualities such as compassion, kindness, generosity, and forgiveness. *30% scored high, 25% low.*

**ETHIC OF CARING** measures degree of commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and making the world a better place. *13% scored high, 26% low.*

**ECUMENICAL WORLDVIEW** reflects interest in different religious traditions, seeking to understand other countries and cultures, and believing that love is at the root of all the great religions. *14% scored high, 19% low.*



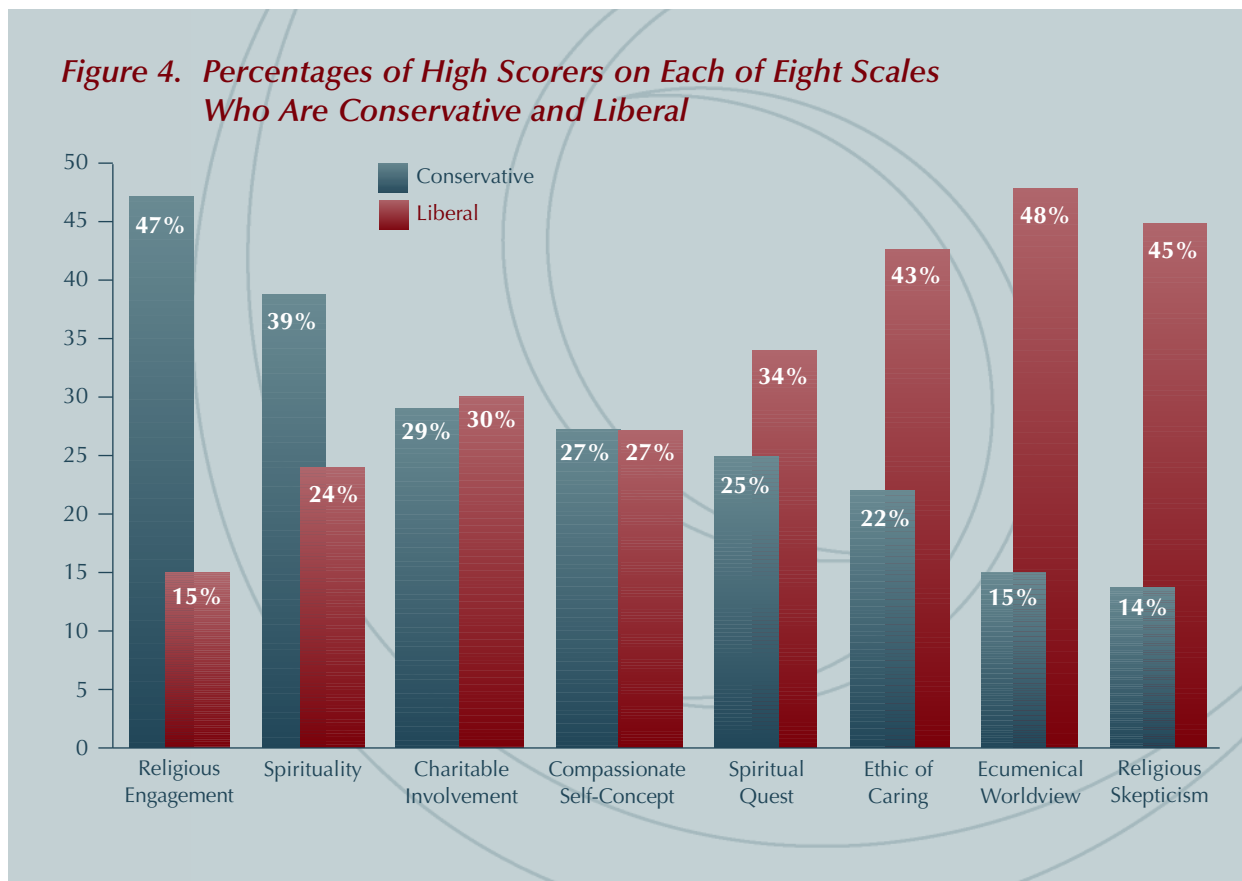
## POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ATTITUDES

*While there is a political divide on some issues between students at different levels of Spirituality and Religious Engagement, there is also convergence on a number of social concerns and on the ideals, virtues, and values that students espouse.*

Political orientation is measured by students' self-identification on a 5-point scale: far right, conservative, middle-of-the-road, liberal, and far left.<sup>3</sup> In addition, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a wide variety of topics ranging from the much-debated political issues of abortion, the death penalty, same-sex relationships and marriages, the legalization of marijuana, taxes, military spending,

and the rights of criminals. Other attitudinal questions refer more specifically to the college environment, including the issues of affirmative action and free speech on campus. Social issues address students' views on racial discrimination, the role of married women in the family, and an individual's ability to create change in society.

Political orientation shows a number of relationships with students' spirituality and religiousness (see Figure 4). For example, among students who show high levels of Religious Engagement, conservatives outnumber liberals by better than 3 to 1. (As would be expected, the figures are reversed when we look at Religious Skepticism: Among highly skeptical students, liberals outnumber conservatives). Conservatives also outnumber liberals among students with high scores



<sup>3</sup>To simplify the discussion, we will use the term "liberal" to refer to students who checked either liberal or far left and the term "conservative" to refer to those who checked either conservative or far right.

on Spirituality, although the differences are not as extreme. However, when it comes to freshmen who score high on Spiritual Quest, liberals actually outnumber conservatives.

Also shown in Figure 4, the political orientation of students is equally balanced between conservatives and liberals in the case of students who earn high scores on either Charitable Involvement or

Compassionate Self-Concept. Liberals substantially outnumber conservatives, however, when it comes to scoring high on either Ethic of Caring or Ecumenical Worldview.

These differences in political orientation among students with high scores on spirituality and religiousness are further reflected in the divergence of attitudes toward political and social issues of national interest.

**Table 3. Social/Political Views of Students with High and Low Levels of Religious Engagement**

Percent Agreeing that:	Level of Religious Engagement		Difference
	High	Low	
Abortion should be legal . . . . .	23	77	54
Sex is okay if people really like each other . . . . .	15	67	52
Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status . . . . .	28	76	48
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships . . . . .	53	16	37
Marijuana should be legalized. . . . .	19	49	30
Colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers . . . . .	52	37	15
Federal military spending should be increased . . . . .	44	30	14
Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about change in society . . . . .	20	33	13
Colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech on campus . . . . .	64	53	11
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now . . . . .	50	60	10
The death penalty should be abolished . . . . .	36	30	6
There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals . . . . .	61	55	6
The activities of married women are best confined to the home/family . . . . .	23	18	5
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America . . . . .	25	21	4
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished . . . . .	51	55	4
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns . . . . .	75	78	3

Consistent with nation-wide trends in the general population, abortion, the legalization of marijuana, casual sex, and the legal sanctioning of same-sex relationships continue to be highly divisive issues for students who fall at the high and low of spirituality and religiousness. Thus, students reporting high levels of Religious Engagement, compared to their classmates

with low levels of Engagement, are much less likely to support keeping abortion legal, engaging in casual sex,<sup>4</sup> allowing same-sex couples to have legal marital status, and legalizing marijuana (see Table 3). Similar, but somewhat smaller, differences are seen when students at the high and low ends of Spirituality are compared (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Social/Political Views of Students with High and Low Levels of Spirituality**

Percent Agreeing that:	Level of Spirituality		Difference
	High	Low	
Sex is okay if people really like each other . . . . .	22	65	43
Abortion should be legal . . . . .	33	72	39
Same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status . . . . .	39	71	32
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships . . . . .	44	20	24
Marijuana should be legalized. . . . .	26	45	19
The death penalty should be abolished . . . . .	42	26	16
Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about change in society . . . . .	18	34	16
Colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech on campus . . . . .	63	53	10
Colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers . . . . .	48	40	8
Federal military spending should be increased . . . . .	40	33	7
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now . . . . .	52	58	6
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished . . . . .	51	55	4
There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals . . . . .	55	58	3
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns . . . . .	77	75	2
The activities of married women are best confined to the home/family . . . . .	21	19	2
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America . . . . .	23	23	0

<sup>4</sup>"If two people really like each other, it's okay for them to have sex even if they've known each other only for a very short time."

In conjunction with these pronounced differences in viewpoints, highly religiously engaged, and to a lesser extent, highly spiritual students take a more conservative stance on such issues as military spending and taxation. These differences, although comparatively more subtle, are noteworthy. For example, 44 percent of highly religiously engaged students support increased military spending, as compared to only 30 percent of their less engaged counterparts. Similarly, only 50 percent of religiously engaged students believe that wealthy people should pay more taxes, versus 60 percent of students with low levels of Religious Engagement.



Although the results on attitudes concerning abortion, gay rights, and marijuana are perhaps to be expected, findings concerning attitudes regarding capital punishment and affirmative action produce some surprises. Thus, when we compare students at the opposite extremes of Religious Engagement, *more* of the high-scoring as compared to low-scoring students support abolition of the death penalty. This difference is even larger when we compare high- and low-scoring students on Spirituality. Similarly, when it comes to affirmative action, slightly *fewer* high-scoring, in contrast to low-scoring, students on both Religious Engagement and Spirituality support its abolition.

While support for affirmative action and opposition to the death penalty have typically been considered “liberal” positions within the current national political

discourse, the highly religious and highly spiritual students clearly do not subscribe to a uniform set of conservative viewpoints, and actually assume relatively liberal perspectives on these two issues. Opposition to the death penalty, while commonly perceived as a liberal viewpoint, does appear to be consistent with highly spiritual and religious students’ views on the preservation of life as understood through their disapproving stance on legalized abortion.

Despite these patterns of difference, highly spiritual and highly religious students do not vary appreciably from their low-scoring counterparts when it comes to the issues of race, criminals’ rights, the role of women, and gun control. Thus, when we compare students across the spectrum of Spirituality, we find a considerable degree of consensus with respect to these issues. Marginal differences of opinion on these issues are also noted among students at the high and low extremes of the Religious Engagement spectrum.

Opinions of highly spiritual and highly religiously engaged students also produce an interesting pattern on the topic of colleges’ regulatory responsibility over extreme views expressed on campuses. Both groups support greater involvement by campuses in curtailing racist/sexist speech (63 percent of highly spiritual students and 64 percent of highly religiously engaged students, compared to 53 percent of low scorers on each measure) as well as banning extreme speakers from campus (48 percent and 52 percent of high scorers, respectively, compared to 40 and 37 percent of low scorers).

The survey responses also reveal a higher level of skepticism among less spiritual, as compared to highly spiritual students, when it comes to belief in the individual’s capacity to enact change in society. For example, while 34 percent of the least spiritual students agree with the statement that “Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society,” only 18 percent of highly spiritual students also agree. This trend is similarly reflected on five additional measures: Spiritual Quest (34% of low scorers on Spiritual Quest versus 22% of high scorers agree that an individual cannot change society), Charitable Involvement (35% versus 19%), Ecumenical Worldview (35% versus 19%), Religious Engagement (33% versus 20%), and Ethic of Caring (35% versus 21%).

## SPIRITUALITY, RELIGIOUSNESS, AND WELL-BEING

*Adhering to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices plays a role in students’ psychological and physical well-being. While spirituality and religiousness generally relate to physical well-being, the relationships with psychological health are nuanced and complex.*

*Psychological health* is a dimension of well-being determined by the student’s combined responses to four related items on the freshman questionnaire. To qualify as having “positive” psychological health, students must (1) rate themselves at least “above average” on emotional health relative to their peers, (2) report that they feel “overwhelmed” or “depressed” only occasionally or not at all, and (3) report that their life is *not* “filled with stress and anxiety.” Defined in this way, positive psychological health was reported by 34 percent of all freshmen.

Students with high scores on Spirituality are not immune to the psychological stressors of life. In fact, when compared to students with low scores on Spirituality, high scorers are slightly less likely to exhibit positive psychological health. Furthermore, when asked about the likelihood that they will “seek personal counseling” during college, fewer than half as many high as opposed to low scorers on Spirituality say that there is “no chance” that they will do so (see Table 5).

Despite their slightly lower propensity to exhibit positive psychological health, high scorers on Spirituality are much more likely than low scorers to

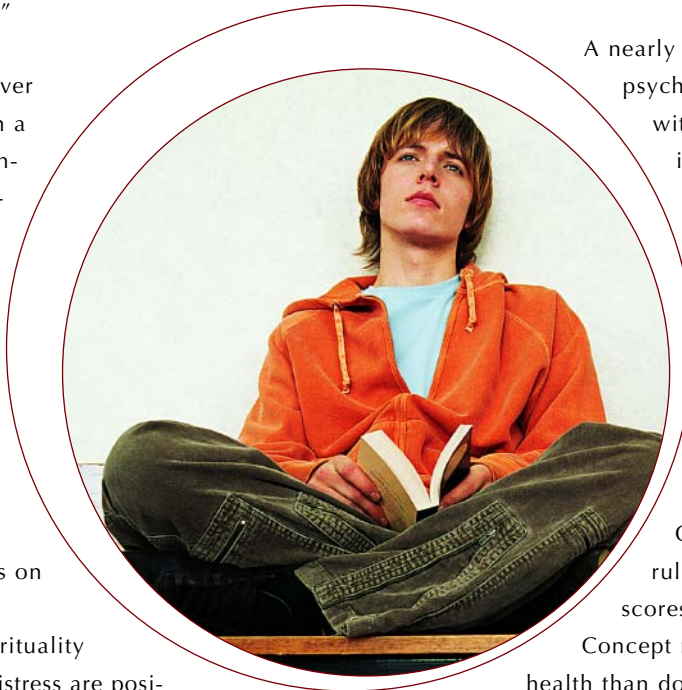
**Table 5. Spirituality, Religiousness, and Psychological Well-Being**

Psychological Well-Being Indicator	In Percentages					
	Spirituality		Religious Commitment		Religious Engagement	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Positive psychological health	33	37	35	33	36	36
“No chance” student will seek personal counseling during college	14	31	18	32	16	26
“Frequently” able to find meaning in times of hardship	55	11	51	14	48	13
“Frequently” felt at peace/centered	58	18	53	18	51	22

evidence Equanimity. That is, the relationship between Spirituality and psychological well-being reverses when we consider the extent to which students concur that they have “been able to find meaning in times of hardship” and “felt at peace/centered.” In fact, over half of students with a strong spiritual orientation are “frequently” able to find meaning during difficult times (55%) and feel at peace and centered (58%), compared to only 11 percent and 18 percent, respectively, of low scorers on Spirituality. In other words, although Spirituality and psychological distress are positively linked, so are Spirituality and mechanisms for coping with hardship. In short, the slightly lower likelihood that spiritually-inclined students will report positive psychological health must be understood in the context of their greater propensity to discover meaning and peace of mind even under difficult circumstances.

Students with the highest scores on Religious Struggle and Spiritual Quest also tend to experience lower levels of psychological health than those who are not struggling or questing, and more often expect to seek counseling during college. Yet, those in the midst of Religious Struggle or Quest indicate that they are able to find

meaning in hardship more consistently than those *not* questing or struggling. Questing students, in fact, are three times more likely to “frequently” feel at peace/centered than are non-questers (46% versus 16%).



A nearly identical pattern—greater psychological distress combined with the ability to find meaning in hardship and a sense of peace—emerges for those students whose spirituality manifests itself in having a Compassionate Self-Concept, being committed to Charitable Involvement, exhibiting an Ethic of Caring, and holding to an Ecumenical Worldview. One exception to this general rule is that students with high scores on Compassionate Self-Concept report greater psychological health than do students who rate themselves as less compassionate.

To understand why this pattern of greater psychological distress *and* greater Equanimity appears to be so common, consider the lifestyle choices of a student who is devoted to Charitable Involvement, espouses an Ethic of Caring, exercises compassion, and strives to understand and appreciate differences in others. Such individuals may ultimately relinquish some of their own comforts for the sake of justice, the well-being of others, and the greater good. In the end, these sacrifices can take a toll on immediate psychological



well-being, leading to a feeling of being overwhelmed or even depressed. Yet, at the same time, those who make choices in life to serve and to care reap rewards as well, including personal insights that can lead to a greater sense of connection to others and a more clearly defined sense of personal meaning and peace. We saw in an earlier section how Spirituality is positively associated with Compassionate Self-Concept, Ethic of Caring, Charitable Involvement, and Ecumenical Worldview. Arguably, the finding that spiritually-inclined students evidence slightly greater psychological distress but also are more apt to experience peace/centeredness and able to find meaning in the face of hardship makes sense if, in fact, such students are choosing to traverse more difficult (yet perhaps more fulfilling) life paths focused on social justice and serving others.

Finding meaning in times of hardship and feeling at peace/centered both show relationships with Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement that closely parallel their associations with Spirituality. In other words, students who are strongly committed to their religious faith and highly engaged in religious practices indicate a greater propensity for finding meaning and achieving centeredness than do those who score low on the religiousness measures. However, when it comes to psychological well-being,

religiously engaged and non-engaged students show identical rates of psychological health, and religiously committed students actually show slightly *higher* rates than do their non-committed counterparts. Nevertheless, as with Spirituality, students who are the least religiously committed and engaged are more prone to say that there is “no chance” they will seek personal counseling during college.

Seven indicators of positive *physical health* were selected from the entering freshman survey: abstinence from drinking beer, abstinence from drinking wine or liquor, being a nonsmoker, maintaining a “healthy” diet, not missing school because of illness, not staying up all night, and rating oneself at least “above average” in physical health.



Spirituality generally shows positive associations with various measures of physical well-being. Specifically, students with high scores on Spirituality are more likely than students with low scores to abstain from beer, wine or liquor, and cigarettes; to “frequently” maintain a healthy diet; and to rate themselves “above average” on physical health relative to peers. Highly spiritual individuals are also slightly more inclined *not* to stay

up all night (see Table 6). Similar patterns can be observed when we compare high versus low scorers on other measures that are related to Spirituality. Thus, Compassionate Self-Concept, Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview are all associated with physical well-being when measured in terms of abstinence from alcohol and cigarettes and maintaining a healthy diet. Moreover, Compassionate Self-Concept and Ethic of Caring are both positively associated with self-rated physical health.

Both Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement relate to better physical health, showing a pattern of relationships very much like the pattern for Spirituality. The relationships with abstinence from alcohol are even stronger, especially for Religious Engagement, where the rates of abstinence for high

and low scorers, respectively, are 75 versus 44 percent for beer and 66 versus 39 percent for wine or liquor.

Students who are experiencing Religious Struggle show a very different pattern when it comes to physical well-being. Thus, those who report high levels of Religious Struggle, compared to those reporting low levels, are *more* likely to drink beer (55% versus 42%), drink wine or liquor (65% versus 48%), and smoke cigarettes (30% versus 16%). In addition, students struggling with religious issues are more inclined than students who are not struggling to “frequently” stay up all night (26% versus 15%) and miss school because of illness (10% versus 4%), and less likely to maintain a healthy diet (34% versus 37%) or rate their physical health as “above average” (48% versus 54%).

**Table 6. Spirituality, Religiousness, and Physical Well-Being**

Physical Well-Being Indicator	In Percentages					
	Spirituality		Religious Commitment		Religious Engagement	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Never drank beer	68	45	71	43	75	44
Never drank wine or liquor	59	40	62	33	66	39
Never smoked cigarettes	84	76	88	75	89	75
“Frequently” maintained a healthy diet	44	31	40	33	41	33
Never stayed up all night	25	21	26	20	27	21
Never missed school because of illness	30	31	30	30	30	31
“Above average” self-rated physical health	56	49	54	49	53	49

## RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE

*There is a wealth of diversity in students’ religious beliefs and practices.*

Students’ religious preferences were classified into 19 different categories, including 12 major Christian denominations, “other Christian,” Unitarian, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and “None.” (There was also an “other religion” category—accounting for about 3 percent of the students—which is not considered here because of ambiguities in interpretation.)

### Overview of Religious Preferences

The religious preference accounting for the highest percentage (28%) of entering freshmen is Roman Catholic, with another 17 percent choosing one of the mainline Protestant faiths: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran. Two other sizable groups are those who identify as either Baptist (13%) or “other Christian” (11%). Another 17 percent indicate “None” as their religious preference (see Table 7). About one-fourth (26%) of the freshmen say that they consider themselves to be born-again Christians, with the following groups showing the highest percentages: Baptist (70%), “other Christian” (59%), and 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist (51%).

There are at least two clear-cut clusters of religious preferences. The first—involving Mormons, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, Baptists, and “other Christians”—is strongly spiritual, religious, and religiously/socially conservative and expresses very little religious skepticism. (This group contrasts dramatically with students professing no religious preference, who show the opposite pattern.) The second group—involving Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, Episcopalians, Jewish students, and members of the Eastern Orthodox Church—tends to score low on religiousness, high on Religious Skepticism, and high on Ecumenical Worldview, Ethic of Caring, and Charitable Involvement.

In reviewing the descriptions below, the reader should keep in mind that in these analyses we have focused on mean *differences* between the students in each religious group and students in general (i.e., the “norm”). Some groups differed from the norm on many of the 12 measures of spirituality/religiousness, whereas the students in several other groups differed very little,

**Table 7. Students’ Religious Preferences**

Religious Preference	Percent
Roman Catholic	28
None	17
Baptist	13
Other Christian	11
Methodist	6
Lutheran	5
Presbyterian	4
Church of Christ	3
Other Religion	3
Episcopalian	2
Jewish	2
Buddhist	1
Eastern Orthodox	1
Hindu	1
Islamic	1
United Church of Christ	1
Latter-Day Saints (Mormon)	.4
7 <sup>th</sup> Day Adventist	.4
Unitarian	.4
Quaker	.2

*Note: Percentages add to more than 100% due to rounding of percentages greater than 1.*

if at all, from students in general. Consequently, if we have very little to say about a particular religious group, this does *not* mean that the group is not “important.” Rather, it simply means that the group’s mean scores on the 12 measures differ little from the mean scores for all students. In other words, the students in such groups closely resemble all entering freshmen when it comes to their scores on the 12 measures.

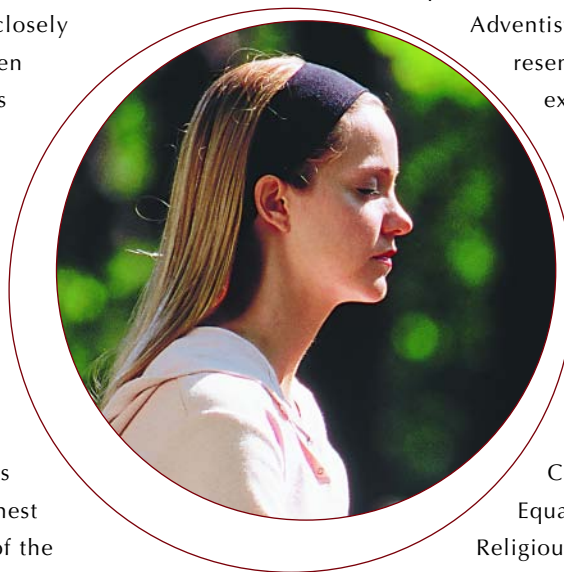
### **Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)**

Students indicating “LDS (Mormon)” as their religious preference show one of the most clear-cut patterns of all of the religious groups. They receive the highest scores of all groups on five of the 12 measures: Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Spirituality, and Equanimity. They also obtain above average scores on Spiritual Quest, Charitable Involvement, and Ecumenical Worldview, and the lowest score of all groups on Religious Skepticism.

Several of these scores were substantially higher than the scores of any other group. Thus, fully 71 percent of the Mormons earn high scores on Religious Commitment, compared to 55 percent for the next highest group (Baptist) and 38 percent for students in general. Similarly, 56 percent of the Mormons receive high scores on Spirituality, compared to 36 percent for the next highest group (7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists) and only 17 percent for students in general. And when it comes to Equanimity, 42 percent of the Mormons obtain high

scores, in contrast to only 31 percent for the second-highest-scoring group (Baptist) and 22 percent for students in general.

As it turns out, there are three other religious groups—Baptists, “other Christians,” and 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists—whose profiles very closely resemble the Mormons’ profile, except that the scores are generally not as extreme.



### **Baptist**

Like the Mormons, students selecting Baptist as their religious preference tend to obtain high scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Spirituality, and Equanimity, and low scores on Religious Skepticism. However, Baptists also obtain one of the *lowest* overall scores of all groups on Ecumenical Worldview (only 9 percent with high scores), in contrast to the Mormons, whose overall score on this measure is slightly above average (19 percent with high scores). It should also be noted that, unlike the Mormons, neither Baptists nor “other Christians” (see below) receive high mean scores on either Spiritual Quest or Charitable Involvement.

### **Other Christian**

The pattern of scores for students in the “other Christian” group is virtually identical to the pattern for Baptist students: high scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Spirituality, and Equanimity, and low scores on

Religious Skepticism. And, like the Baptists, “other Christians” also tend to obtain below average scores on Ecumenical Worldview, with only 11 percent receiving high scores.

Who populates this “other Christian” group? In earlier pilot testing with this questionnaire, students who selected this option were asked to write in their religious preference, and by far the most common response was “nondenominational Christian.” It should be noted that in HERI’s annual freshman survey, this “other Christian” category, together with “None” are the two fastest-growing categories, with both reaching all-time highs (14<sup>5</sup> and 18 percent, respectively), in the fall 2004 survey.

### 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist

The pattern of scores for students choosing 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist as their preferred religion resembles the pattern for Mormons on five measures: high scores on Religious Engagement, Religious Commitment, Spirituality, and Spiritual Quest and low scores on Religious Skepticism. Although 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists also obtain slightly above average scores on Compassionate Self-Concept—35 percent receiving high scores, compared to 30 percent for students in general—their scores are not significantly higher than those of either Mormons (33 percent),

“other Christians” (33 percent), or Baptists (32 percent). It should be noted, however, that—unlike the Mormons, Baptists, and “other Christians”—7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists receive only average scores on Religious/Social Conservatism.

### None

As might be expected, students reporting “None” as their religious preference show a pattern of scores on many of the measures which is the reverse of the pattern shown by Mormons: the highest mean score of all groups on Religious Skepticism, and the lowest mean

scores of all groups on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Spirituality, and Equanimity. The “Nones” also earn a very low overall score on Religious/Social Conservatism. This pattern is also a mirror image of the patterns for both Baptists and “other Christians.” Again, in contrast to the Mormons, the “Nones” also receive the lowest score of all groups on Charitable Involvement. And, in contrast to the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, “Nones” earn the lowest score of all groups on Compassionate Self-Concept.



<sup>5</sup>Includes “Church of Christ,” which was not a separate category prior to the 2003 survey.

To get some idea of the magnitude of the contrast between the “Nones,” on the one hand, and the Mormons, Baptists, “other Christians,” and 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, on the other, it is useful to compare their responses to some of the individual questionnaire items. For example, 72 percent of the Mormons, compared to only 8 percent of the “Nones,” believe that “it is important to follow religious teachings in my everyday life.” Similarly, fully 85 percent of the Baptists say that they pray weekly, compared to only 12 percent of the “Nones.” And when it comes to “discussing religion in class,” 50 percent of the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists say they do this “frequently,” in contrast to only 14 percent of the “Nones.” Finally, 66 percent of the “other Christians,” in contrast to only 17 percent of the “Nones,” say that “believing in life after death” describes them “to a great extent.”

### Unitarian

Students choosing Unitarian as their religious preference produced what is probably the most distinctive pattern of scores, differing significantly from students in general on 11 of the 12 measures. Like the “Nones,” Unitarians tend to have high scores on Religious Skepticism and low scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, and Religious/Social Conservatism (lowest of all religious groups).



Unitarians earn high scores on Spirituality, Compassionate Self-Concept, Spiritual Quest, Religious Struggle, Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview. Their mean scores on these last five measures, in fact, are the highest of all 19 religious groups. Thus, while more than one Unitarian in four (26 percent) earns a high score on Spirituality, only one “None” in *twenty* (5 percent) earns such a score. Thirty-six percent of the Unitarians, compared to only 13 percent of the “Nones,” say that “integrating spirituality into my life” is an “essential” or “very important” goal in life. And 42 percent of the Unitarians, in contrast to only 16 percent of the “Nones,” report frequently having had a spiritual experience while “witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature.”

### Buddhist

The pattern of scores for Buddhist students is very similar to the pattern for Unitarians: high scores on Spiritual Quest, Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, Ecumenical Worldview, and Religious Skepticism, and low scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, and Religious/Social Conservatism. The only difference is that Buddhists, but not Unitarians, receive slightly below average scores on Equanimity.

## Jewish

Jewish students share much in common with Unitarians and Buddhists, except that their scores tend not to be as extreme. Thus, Jewish students earn above average scores on Ecumenical Worldview, Ethic of Caring, and especially Religious Skepticism, and below average scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, and Religious/Social Conservatism. Jewish students do show one striking difference from Unitarians: Whereas their scores on Spirituality tend to be considerably below average (9 percent earning high scores), Unitarians' scores are well above average (26 percent high scorers). Moreover, unlike the Unitarians and Buddhists, Jewish students obtain only average scores on Spiritual Quest and Charitable Involvement.

## Islamic

Students choosing Islamic as their religious preference show a unique pattern on several of the measures: high scores on Religious Commitment, Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, Ecumenical Worldview, and Compassionate Self-Concept (highest of all religious groups), and low scores on Religious Skepticism and Religious Struggle (lowest of all religious groups). Thus, when it comes to Religious Skepticism, only 22 percent of the Islamic students agree that "the universe arose by chance," compared to 49 percent of the Unitarians and the "Nones." And when it comes to Compassionate Self-Concept, 41 percent of the Islamic students receive high scores, compared with only 24 percent of the "Nones."

## Hindu

Hindu students show a pattern of responses that is similar to the Unitarian pattern, except that there are fewer measures where they deviate from the overall average and the deviations are generally smaller.

Thus, Hindu students tend to earn above average scores on Compassionate Self-Concept, Charitable Involvement, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview, and below average scores on Religious Commitment and Religious/Social Conservatism.



## Episcopal

Episcopalian students also show a pattern of scores on four measures that resembles the patterns for Unitarians, Buddhists, and Hindus: slightly above average scores on Charitable Involvement and Ecumenical Worldview, and relatively low scores on Religious Commitment and Religious/Social Conservatism.

## Eastern Orthodox

Members of the Eastern Orthodox Church demonstrate a pattern of scores that also resembles some of the Unitarians' scores: relatively high scores on Spiritual Quest and relatively low scores on Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, and Religious/Social Conservatism. However, unlike the Unitarians, who tend to score relatively high on Religious Struggle, members of the Eastern Orthodox Church tend to receive low scores on this measure.

### **Roman Catholic**

Students choosing Roman Catholic as their religious preference tend to score below the overall average on four measures: Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, and Religious Skepticism. The Catholics' relatively low score on Skepticism is unusual, in the sense that students with low scores on the first three measures of religiousness ordinarily earn *high* scores on Religious Skepticism (e.g., Jewish students, Unitarians, Buddhists, and "Nones.")

### **Lutheran**

Lutherans also receive below average scores on four measures: Religious Skepticism, Religious Struggle, Spiritual Quest, and Ethic of Caring (their average scores on these last two measures are the lowest of all groups).

### **Other Religious Preferences**

Most of the five remaining religious groups show patterns of scores that closely resemble students in general, with a few exceptions. Presbyterians, for example, earn slightly above average scores on Religious Engagement and Charitable Involvement, and relatively low scores on Religious Skepticism.

Members of the Church of Christ obtain below average scores on Charitable Involvement, Religious Skepticism, and Ecumenical Worldview (similar to the Baptists). Quakers earn slightly above average scores on Religious Skepticism and Ecumenical Worldview and slightly below average scores on Religious Commitment. Finally, members of the United Church of Christ (UCC) score slightly below average on Religious/Social Conservatism and Religious Skepticism, while Methodists score slightly below average on Religious Skepticism and Ethic of Caring.

## **CONCLUSION**

Students coming to campuses today are a diverse group ethnically, socio-economically, religiously, and politically. While they have high ambitions and aspirations for educational and occupational success, and college is the means by which they believe they can realize their goals, they are also actively dealing with existential questions. They 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.

**“This research suggests that the newest generation expresses definite commitment to balancing material and spiritual interests—They hold challenging ideas for their boomer teachers, parents and employers. We need to study the Astins’ work and get ready for them.”**

—Claire Gaudiani  
Heyman Center for Philanthropy and Fundraising  
New York University  
Former President, Connecticut College



# METHODOLOGY

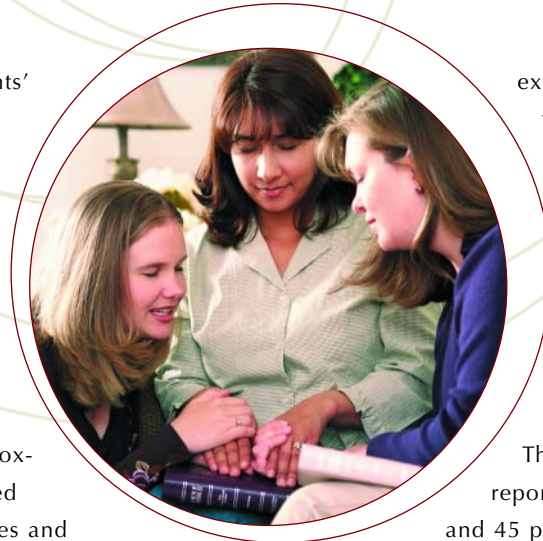
“For years, educators have heard the depressing news that students’ goals for college learning have become narrow and instrumental. This study shows us that students are more idealistic in their expectations of college than we have known. The question now is whether the college curriculum—broadly conceived—goes far enough in engaging students’ search for a sense of larger purpose.”

—Carol Geary Schneider

President, American Association of Colleges and Universities

The fall 2004 College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey was administered to entering first-year students as a two-page addendum to the traditional four-page freshman survey conducted by UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). The 2004 CIRP/CSBV freshman survey included approximately 160 items that pertained directly to students’ perspectives and practices with respect to spirituality and religion. Altogether, a diverse group of 236 institutions and 112,232 students participated in the 2004 CIRP/CSBV Survey.

A CSBV “normative” sample was selected on the basis of response rates for each campus. After 27 institutions where the student participation rate was judged to be too low were eliminated, 98,593 students from 209 institutions were retained for inclusion in the normative CSBV sample. Data from this normative sample were weighted to approximate the responses we would have



expected had all first-time, full-time students attending baccalaureate colleges and universities across the country participated in the survey. For more methodological details, please consult the project website at: [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu).

The population portrayed in this report includes 55 percent women and 45 percent men. The ethnic/racial distribution is: 76 percent White; 8 percent African American; 7 percent Asian American; 5 percent Latino; 2 percent American Indian; 1 percent Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; and 2 percent “other.”<sup>6</sup> Two-thirds (66%) of the fall 2004 freshmen attended public colleges and universities and 17 percent are enrolled at nonsectarian private institutions. The remaining students are enrolled at Catholic (7%), Evangelical (3%), and “other” Church-Affiliated (8%) institutions.

<sup>6</sup>These figures add to more than 100% because students were permitted to choose more than one response option.

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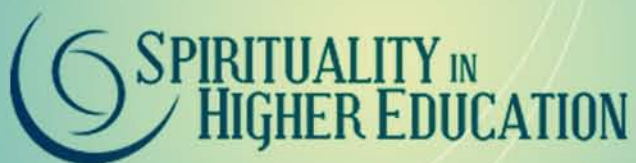
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