

**Spirituality In Higher Education:**  
**A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose**  
**Summary of Selected Findings (2000-2003)**

Project Overview

Funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the multi-year Spirituality in Higher Education project explores the trends, patterns, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students, and how the college experience both influences and is influenced by spiritual development. The study is guided by a number of research questions, including:

- 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, honesty, optimism, and humility?
- 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?

The pilot study was based on a sample of 3,680 undergraduates attending 46 diverse colleges and universities across the country. Each student completed a specially designed follow up questionnaire in the Spring of 2003 (during their junior year in college), as well the

Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey when they first entered college in the Fall of 2000. Survey respondents attended a mix of public colleges and universities, private nonsectarian colleges and universities, Catholic colleges and universities, and other religious colleges and universities.

A revised survey will be administered to entering freshmen at a nationally representative sample of 240 colleges and universities during Fall 2004. These students will be surveyed again in Spring 2007 as juniors. The large-scale freshman survey planned for Fall 2004 is intended to be a “pretest” for the subsequent longitudinal follow up, which will make it possible to track *changes* in these students’ spiritual/religious development during the undergraduate years. The long-range design of the project anticipates additional follow-ups and new freshman surveys to be conducted every three years to chart changes and trends in the spiritual development of college students.

### Summary of the Findings

#### *Patterns of Spirituality and Religiousness in the Lives of College Students*

There is a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, with more than half placing a high value on “integrating spirituality” in their lives (58%), 77% saying “we are all spiritual beings,” and 71% indicating they “gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power.” Substantial numbers of students, upwards of 84%, have had a spiritual experience at least occasionally (e.g., witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature, listening to beautiful music). Regarding perspectives on religion, among the third-year college students surveyed, three in four report that they pray, that religion is personally helpful to them, and that they discuss religion and spirituality with friends. The following data provide further evidence of the general theme of spiritual and religious interest among students.

*Spiritual Beliefs, Experiences, Self-Assessments, and Goals*

- Percent of students agreeing that:

*All life is interconnected (88%)*

*People can reach a higher spiritual plane of consciousness through meditation or prayer (72%)*

- Percent of students rating as “essential” or “very important”:

*Seeking out opportunities to help me grow spiritually (40%)*

*Finding answers to the mysteries of life (35%)*

- Percent of students who have had a “spiritual” experience while:

*Witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature (73%)*

*Listening to beautiful music (64%)*

*Viewing a great work of art (36%)*

*Participating in a musical or artistic performance (34%)*

*Engaging in athletics (30%)*

*Meditating (30%)*

- Percent of students indicating that the following statements describe them “to a great extent”:

*Believing in the sacredness of life (51%)*

*Having an interest in spirituality (41%)*

- Evidence that many students appear to have achieved a relatively high level of “spiritual equanimity”:

*Frequently been able to find meaning in times of hardship (31%)*

*Frequently felt at peace/centered (29%)*

*The following describes me “to a great extent”:*

*Being thankful for all that has happened to me (66%)*

*Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed (50%)*

*Seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift (46%)*

- Percent of students rating themselves “above average” on various spiritual qualities:

*Compassion (74%)*

*Kindness (74%)*

*Helpfulness (71%)*

*Generosity (62%)*

*Forgiveness (59%)*

*Empathy (57%)*

*Spirituality (39%)*

- Percent of students actively engaged in a spiritual quest:

*“Essential” or “very important” goals in life:*

*Attaining wisdom (86%)*

*Becoming a more loving person (84%)*

*Seeking beauty in my life (67%)*

*Attaining inner harmony (60%)*

*Developing a meaningful philosophy of life (52%)*

*To “some” or “a great” extent, I am:*

*Searching for meaning/purpose in life (75%)*

*Having discussions about the meaning of life with my friends (69%)*

- The “ultimate spiritual quest” most often selected by students is:

*To become a better person (30%), followed by*

*To know what God requires of me (14%), and*

*To know my purpose in life (13%)*

### *Religious Engagement and Commitment*

- Evidence of religious engagement:

*Discussed religion/spirituality with friends (78%)*

*Do you pray? (yes = 77%)*

*Attended religious services during the past year (70%)*

- Percent of students indicating that religious/spiritual beliefs:

*Provide me with strength, support, and guidance (74%)*

*Have helped me develop my identity (73%)*

*Give meaning/purpose to my life (67%)*

### *Tolerance*

Although students report a high level of spirituality and even religiousness, they are very tolerant of non-religious people. Seven in ten agree that most people can grow spiritually without being religious, and 88% say that non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as religious believers.

### *Skepticism*

We would be remiss to overlook the significant minority of students who are less spiritually and religiously devoted. All told, at least one student in five evidences a high degree of religious/spiritual skepticism, as the following data suggest:

*It is futile to try to discover the purpose of existence (31% agree)*

*Whether or not there is a Supreme Being is a matter of indifference to me (27% agree)*

*I have never felt a sense of sacredness (24% agree)*

*Believing in supernatural phenomena is foolish* (22% agree)

*In the future, science will be able to explain everything* (21% agree)

*The universe arose by chance* (19% agree)

Moreover, 12% of students indicate that they do not consider themselves to be on a spiritual quest.

### *Spiritual Struggles*

Another notable proportion of third-year college students faces challenges and struggles in their spiritual and religious development. Two-thirds (65%) report that they question their religious/spiritual beliefs at least occasionally (18% frequently), and a similar number (68%) say that they are “feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters” at least “to some extent.” Three fourths (76%) of the students have “struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death” at least occasionally (21% frequently), and nearly half (46%) have at least occasionally “felt angry with God” (6% frequently). One-third (38%) of the students report feeling “disillusioned with my religious upbringing” at least “to some extent.”

### *Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in the Classroom*

Despite the fact that considerable numbers of students are “searching for meaning and purpose in life” (75%) and discussing spirituality with friends (78%), more than half (56%) say that their professors *never* provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of the students say professors *never* encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters (62%). While 39% say their religious or spiritual beliefs have been strengthened by “new ideas encountered in classes,” 53% report the classroom has had no impact. Only 55% are satisfied with how their college experience has provided “opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection.”

### *Spiritual and Religious Change During College*

The data reveal demonstrable changes across three years of college. One of the most dramatic shifts occurred in religious service attendance. As observed in Table 1, over half (52%) of the sample reported attending religious services frequently the year before they entered college, but less than one-third (29%) attend frequently by their junior year. Furthermore, only 9% report that their “religiousness” is much stronger since entering college, and only 13% say their spirituality is much stronger.

Declines in religious practice notwithstanding, the data show a rise in the number of students who say it is “very important” to integrate spirituality into their lives (from 51% in 2000 to 58% in 2003), develop a meaningful philosophy of life (43% to 52%), and help others who are in difficulty (60% to 74%). Likewise, students become less concerned with becoming well-off financially after three years of college (71% to 63%). Interestingly, the findings point to declines in students’ self-rated spirituality relative to peers (47% to 39%). Though they are clearly committed to integrating spirituality into their lives, students, perhaps equating spirituality with religious practice, may feel hesitant to classify themselves as spiritual individuals because of lapses in their religious service attendance.

**Table 1. Changes In Spirituality and Religiousness, 2000-2003**

	Correlation <sup>a</sup>	Percent		Percent Change
		2000	2003	
“Frequently” attended religious services	.55	52.1	29.4	-22.7
“Above average” in spirituality (self-rating)	.53	46.6	38.9	-7.7
“Essential” or “very important” goal:				
Integrate spirituality into my life	.60	51.0	57.7	6.7
Develop meaningful philosophy of life	.45	42.5	51.8	9.3
Help others who are in difficulty	.40	60.2	74.0	13.8
Be very well off financially	.51	70.6	63.4	-7.2

<sup>a</sup>The correlation is between 2000 and 2003 responses to each item.

### *Spiritual Dimensions*

A number of preliminary analyses of the survey data resulted in the development of 19 factor scales, which combine several items with similar content. For these purposes we relied on the technique of factor analysis,<sup>1</sup> a procedure that examines the correlations among a set of variables (in this case, individual questionnaire items) with the goal of reducing the variables to a smaller set of more general “factors.” In many respects this was a trial and error process whereby we sought to identify clusters of items that had consistent and coherent content and which simultaneously demonstrated a high degree of statistical internal consistency.

Six of the resulting 19 scales verified constructs that were initially hypothesized: Religious/Social Conservatism, Religious Skepticism, and Well Being (which actually turned into four scales: Self-Esteem, Equanimity, Psychological Distress, and Spiritual Distress). Two other scales appeared to replicate “domains” that formed part of the framework we originally used to select the items: Spiritual Quest and Aesthetically-based Spiritual Experience. In addition to these, the following 11 scales emerged: Spirituality (of which Aesthetically-based Spiritual Experience was a key component), Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Spiritual/Religious Growth, Growth in Global/National Understanding, Growth in Tolerance,

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<sup>1</sup> Principal components factor extraction, with Varimax rotation.



Growth in Leadership, Charitable Involvement, Social Activism, Artistic Orientation, and Compassionate Self-Concept.

For the purposes of this review, we will focus on one of the key factor scales, Spirituality, and its correlates. To begin, the 14 items that make up the Spirituality scale are as follows:

- *Commitment to integrating spirituality into my life*
- *Believing we are all spiritual beings*
- *Believing people can reach a higher spiritual plane of consciousness through meditation or prayer*
- *Having an interest in spirituality*
- *Believing in the sacredness of life*
- *Seeking out opportunities to help me grow spiritually*
- *Being on a spiritual quest*
- *Self-rated Spirituality*
- *Having had a “spiritual” experience while:*

*Listening to beautiful music*

*Viewing a great work of art*

*Participating in a musical or artistic performance*

*Engaging in athletics*

*Witnessing the beauty and harmony of nature*

*Meditating*

The possible range of scores is from 14 (least spiritual) to 47 (most spiritual). We chose a cutting score of 36 or higher to identify students who were “highly” spiritual or who had a “strong” spiritual focus. Using this cutting point, 21% of the students qualify as highly spiritual.

We chose a cutting point of 23 or lower to identify students with little or no spiritual focus. This cutting point thus identifies about 17% of the students as having little or no spiritual focus, a figure very close to the percent we designated as scoring “high” on Religious Skepticism (15%). As one might expect, these two measures are strongly associated ( $r = -.71$ ) in a negative direction.

One of the most critical questions posed by this study is how spirituality affects other aspects of the student’s college experience. While definitive answers to this question must await the longitudinal study planned to begin in Fall 2004 (i.e., when we will be able to study *changes* in spirituality from the point of initial entry to college), the current data enable us to gain some clues as to the possible effects of spirituality by examining the *correlates* of spirituality as revealed in the follow up survey.

Below we summarize each of our hypotheses together with the relevant findings. Specifically, it was expected that spirituality should be positively associated with the following qualities:

- Physical and psychological health, including self-esteem

Result: Mixed. Spirituality is positively associated with Self-esteem ( $r = .17$ ) and self-rated physical health ( $r = .05$ ), but it is also positively associated with both Psychological Distress ( $r = .05$ ) and Spiritual Distress ( $r = .16$ ).

- Optimism and a sense of personal empowerment

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively associated with Equanimity ( $r = .55$ ) and negatively associated with the belief that “Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society” ( $r = -.29$ ).

- Civic responsibility

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively associated with both Charitable Involvement ( $r = .38$ ) and Social Activism ( $r = .45$ ).

- Empathy, understanding of/caring for others

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively associated with the importance of “Reducing pain and suffering in the world” ( $r = .43$ ), “Feeling a strong connection to all of humanity” ( $r = .40$ ), and Compassionate Self-concept ( $r = .31$ ). It also has positive relationships with helping others in difficulty, understanding others, believing in the goodness of all people, helping friends with personal problems, becoming a more loving person, and improving the human condition.

- Racial/ethnic awareness and tolerance

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively related to the importance of promoting racial understanding ( $r = .33$ ), attending a racial/cultural awareness workshop ( $r = .19$ ), ability to get along with people of different races/cultures ( $r = .13$ ), and growth in tolerance during college ( $r = .20$ ).

- Academic performance

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively related to graduate-level degree aspirations (.05), college GPA (.15), and intellectual self-confidence (.08).

- Satisfaction with college

Result: Strongly Supported. Spirituality is positively associated with being satisfied with the sense of community on campus (.09), amount of contact with faculty (.08), interaction with other students (.07), and the overall college experience (.18).

- Religiousness

Result: Strongly Supported. As many other studies have shown, there is a good deal of overlap between spirituality and religiousness. In the current study, our spirituality measure correlates .78 and .66, respectively, with Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement. While highly religious students also tend to obtain high scores on the traits listed above, highly spiritual students generally obtain somewhat higher scores, especially on Equanimity, personal empowerment, empathy, and racial/ethnic awareness.

### *Spirituality and Student Characteristics*

To delve deeper into the question of how spirituality might differ across various student populations, we compared groups broken out by academic major, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and political orientation/engagement.

*College major.* Students in fine arts and humanities fields are about three times as likely as computer science and physical science majors to report high levels of spirituality.

Interestingly, fine arts and humanities majors are also more likely than other majors to be highly engaged in a spiritual quest (43% and 42%, respectively) and to express high levels of spiritual distress (27% and 31%). By contrast, students in the physical sciences (19%), computer science (23%), engineering (23%), and business (24%) are the least likely to show high levels of engagement in a spiritual quest, while especially low percentages of computer science (10%), engineering (11%), business (15%), and education (17%) majors report high levels of spiritual distress.

Close to half of education students report high levels of religious/spiritual growth during their first three years of college. This sharply contrasts with just one in five among physical and computer science majors and one in four among history or political science majors. Students

majoring in journalism, health professions, engineering, and psychology fall in between, with about one in three reporting a high level of religious/spiritual growth during college.

When it comes to viewing oneself as highly “compassionate,” students majoring in sociology (33%), the health professions (32%), and education (31%) are the most likely to perceive themselves as such, whereas those majoring in the physical sciences (17%) or engineering (15%) are the least likely to see themselves as highly compassionate.

The degree to which students are committed to religious beliefs also varies by field of study, with the highest levels of religious commitment – finding religion to be personally helpful, gaining spiritual strength by trusting in a Higher Power, feeling loved by God, seeking to follow religious teachings in everyday life, etc. – occurring among students in education (53%) and the fine arts (48%), and the lowest levels occurring among biological science (32%), history or political science (31%), computer science (30%), sociology (30%), and physical science (30%) majors.

*Gender.* Women exhibit greater commitment to religion and spirituality compared to men. In fact, 26% of women relative to 16% of men classify as highly spiritual, at the same time that 37% of the women and 25% of the men are high scorers on religious commitment. The behavioral measure of religiousness, religious engagement, evidences less distinction across gender, with 22% of the women and 18% of the men scoring high on this scale.

High levels of charitable involvement are shown by 21% of the women, compared to only 8% of the men. By contrast, 33% of the men and only 12% of the women show little or no charitable involvement.

Women are also more likely than men to experience spiritual and especially psychological distress, with about one-third (32%, compared to only 20% of the men) reporting

high levels of psychological distress during their third year in college. Men, by contrast, show higher levels of self-esteem and religious skepticism. One in five men (20%), for example, show high levels of religious skepticism, in contrast to only one in ten (10%) of the women.

*Socioeconomic status.* “Social class,” which was defined by combining the income and education levels of the students' parents, is unrelated to most measures of spirituality and religiousness. The only exceptions are that students from the highest social class level show more religious skepticism, higher self-esteem, less religious/social conservatism, and less psychological distress than do students from lower levels.

While the level of education of the students' parents is also unrelated to almost all measures of spirituality and religiousness, students from the lowest income levels tend to show greater religious engagement, religious commitment, equanimity, and spirituality compared to students from higher income levels.

*Political orientation and engagement.* Students who are highly engaged religiously differ from their less religious classmates in their attitudes about a number of social issues. The largest gap is in views about casual sex, with only 7% of highly religious students (compared to 80% of the least religious students) agreeing with the proposition that “if two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time.” The most and least religious students also differ substantially in their rates of agreement with legalized abortion (24% versus 79%) and legalization of marijuana (17% versus 64%). And when it comes to “laws prohibiting homosexual relationships,” highly religious students are much more likely to support such laws (38%) than are the least religious students (17%).

A very different pattern emerges, however, when it comes to attitudes on gun control and the death penalty. More of the most religious students (75%) than of the least religious students

(70%) agree that “the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns,” and the most religious students are substantially more likely than the least religious students are to support abolition of the death penalty (38% versus 23%).

Students who identify themselves as politically “conservative,” compared to those who self-identify as “liberal,” are noticeably more likely to show high levels of religious commitment (50% versus 18%) and religious engagement (37% versus 10%), and also more likely to demonstrate high levels of equanimity (35% versus 23%) and self-esteem (37% versus 29%). Liberal students, by contrast, are more likely to express high levels of religious skepticism (23% versus 7%) and to be engaged in a spiritual quest (33% versus 27%).

Political engagement is only weakly related to religious engagement and unrelated to religious commitment. However, students who are highly engaged politically, compared to politically disengaged students, show much higher levels of charitable involvement, social activism, growth in global/national understanding, and self-esteem, and are much more likely to be engaged in a spiritual quest. “Political engagement” is defined by behaviors such as voting in student elections, frequently discussing politics, wanting to influence the political structure, and participating in student government.