

Attending to Students' Inner Lives: A Call to Higher Education



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The undersigned were participants in a retreat that was convened in Palm Desert, California on April 4-6, 2011 to discuss the findings and policy implications of the recently released book *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*.¹

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¹ By Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, & Jennifer A. Lindholm (Jossey Bass/Wiley, 2011).

Attending to Students' Inner Lives

A Call to Higher Education

This statement sets forth some of the major reasons why higher education institutions should consider giving greater priority to facilitating students' spiritual development. It also reviews specific policies and practices that research has shown to be effective means of assisting students in their spiritual quest.

We believe that *spirituality is fundamental to students' lives*. The “big questions” that preoccupy students are essentially spiritual questions: Who am I? Why am I in college? What are my most deeply felt values? Do I have a mission or purpose in my life? What kind of person do I want to become? What sort of world do I want to help create? What is my role and place in the universe? When we speak of students' “spiritual quest,” we are essentially speaking of their efforts to seek answers to such questions and to find a sense of direction in their lives.

How students deal with these questions affects many very practical decisions that they will have to make, including their choices of courses, majors, and careers; whether they opt to stay in college or drop out; and whether they decide to pursue postgraduate study. Seeking answers to these questions is also directly relevant to the development of personal qualities such as self-understanding, empathy, caring, and social responsibility.

Background

Despite the extraordinary amount of research that has been done on the development of college students—more than five thousand studies in the past four decades—very little systematic study has been done on students' spiritual development.

This lack of interest in spirituality within the research community is likewise evident in our colleges and universities. While higher education focuses with new intensity on test scores, grades, persistence, and degrees, it has increasingly come to neglect students' “inner” development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding.

What Do We Mean by “Spirituality”?

Scholars and practitioners have defined spirituality as a dynamic construct that involves the internal processes of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness, of being open to exploring a connection to a higher power, of transcending one's locus of centrality while developing a greater sense of

connectedness to self and others through relationship and community, and of defining one's role and place in the world and the universe.

Spirituality thus points to our inner, subjective life. It also involves our affective experiences at least as much as it does our reasoning or logic. More specifically, spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us.

Eighty-four percent of entering college freshmen say that “to find my purpose in life” is at least a “somewhat important” reason for attending college, and 48% say that it is a “very important” reason.

Nearly three college students in four (72%) consider themselves to be “spiritual,” and a little more than half (54%) say they are “religious.” That many students express their spiritual inclinations through their religious faith is reflected in the fact that 71% of those who see themselves as “spiritual” also say they are “religious.” And even though three entering college freshmen in four report that they are actively “searching for meaning and purpose in life,” most of these students have to explore such questions on their own, with little or no help from faculty.

Spirituality and Higher Education

We do not agree with those who believe that higher education should concern itself solely with students' “cognitive” development—thinking, reasoning, memorizing, critical analysis, and the like—and that the affective or emotional side of the student's life is not relevant to the work of higher education. We are persuaded by abundant evidence that there is no such thing as “pure” cognition that can be considered in isolation from affect; on the contrary, thinking and reasoning are almost always taking place in some kind of affective “bed” or context. Spiritual and/or religious quests significantly influence what students feel is important to learn.

We thus align ourselves with that growing number of educators who have been calling for a more holistic or integral education, pointing to the need to connect mind and spirit and to return to the true values of liberal education—an education that examines learning and knowledge in relation to an exploration of the self and one's responsibility to self and others. We are speaking here of

developing something very close to what Howard Gardner has referred to as “Existential Intelligence.”²

Finally, as educators and citizens we must ask ourselves: What kinds of people will our global society of the future need? It goes without saying that technical knowledge and skill are becoming increasingly important for one’s effective functioning in modern society, but technical knowledge alone will not be adequate for dealing with some of society’s most pressing problems: violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and the religious, national, and ethnic conflicts that continue to plague our country and our world. At root, these are problems of the “heart,” problems that call for greater self-awareness, self-understanding, equanimity, empathy, and concern for others.

The Study

The study that led us to prepare this statement appears in the recently released book, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives* (by Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm). It is based on seven years of research that examines how students’ spiritual qualities evolve during the college years and explores the role that college plays in facilitating spiritual development. Carried out at UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute under grants from the John Templeton Foundation, this is the first national longitudinal study of college students’ spiritual development.

The research team analyzed extensive data collected from 14,527 students attending 136 colleges and universities nationwide, conducted focus groups and personal interviews with individual students, and also surveyed and interviewed faculty. The study identified five religious qualities and five spiritual qualities. To assess change and growth over time, measures of these ten qualities were obtained when the students entered college as new freshmen and again at the end of their junior year. The religious measures include *Religious Commitment*, *Religious Engagement*, *Religious/Social Conservatism*, *Religious Skepticism*, and *Religious Struggle*. The five spiritual qualities consist of *Spiritual Quest*, *Equanimity*, *Ethic of Caring*, *Charitable Involvement*, and *Ecumenical Worldview*.

Spiritual Quest reflects the degree to which the student is actively seeking to become a more self-aware and enlightened person and to find answers to life’s mysteries and “big questions.” **Equanimity** measures the extent to which the student is able to find meaning in times of hardship, feels at peace, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her life. **Ethic of Caring** reflects the student’s commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain

² [▲] Gardner, Howard. (1999) "Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century." New York: Basic Books.

and suffering in the world, and promoting racial understanding. **Charitable Involvement** includes activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems. **Ecumenical Worldview** indicates the extent to which the student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, and believes that all life is interconnected.

Spirituality, as defined by these measures, is a multifaceted quality involving 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**).

Religious Engagement involves activities such as attendance at religious services, prayer, and reading sacred texts. **Religious Commitment** reflects the degree to which students say they gain personal strength by trusting in a higher power and believe that their religious beliefs play a central role in daily life. **Religious/Social Conservatism** reflects opposition to casual sex and abortion, believing that people who don't believe in God will be punished, and a commitment to proselytize. **Religious Skepticism** is defined by 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. **Religious Struggle** includes feeling unsettled about religious matters, disagreeing with family about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning one's religious beliefs.

The study's major findings include the following:

- Although Religious Engagement and Religious/social Conservatism decline somewhat during college, students' spiritual qualities grow substantially.
- Students show the greatest spiritual growth during college if they are actively engaged in "inner work" through self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation. Meditation and self-reflection also strengthen Religious Commitment and Religious Engagement.
- Faculty seldom encourage students to explore spiritual or religious questions. In the follow up survey only 19% of college juniors report that their faculty frequently encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose, and 58% report that their faculty never encourage them to explore religious/spiritual matters.

When faculty do encourage students to explore questions of meaning and purpose or otherwise show support for their spiritual development, students become more actively involved in spiritual questing. While faculty encouragement to explore religious questions strengthens students' Religious Engagement and Religious Commitment, it also tends to increase the degree of Religious Struggle that they experience.

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

- Exposing students to diverse people, cultures, and ideas through study abroad, interracial interaction, interdisciplinary coursework, service learning and other forms of civic engagement contribute to spiritual growth.

- Growth in spiritual qualities such as Equanimity, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview enhances students' academic achievement and personal development. Similar effects were not associated with growth in religious qualities.

- Providing students with more opportunities to connect with their “inner selves” thus facilitates growth in their academic and leadership skills, contributes to their psychological well-being, and enhances their satisfaction with college.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We are concerned that many higher education institutions pay so little attention to addressing students' inner lives, in spite of numerous claims made in their institutional mission statements about the need to educate the “whole person” and about the importance, not only of developing students' cognitive capacities, but also of attending to their emotional development, including their moral and character development.

The broad formative roles that colleges and universities continue to play in our society, combined with their long-term commitment to the ideals of “liberal learning,” position them well to respond to the questions of how we can balance the exterior and interior aspects of students' lives more effectively; how we can fully support the development of students' inner qualities so that they might live more meaningful lives and cope with life's inherent uncertainties and discontinuities; and how we can thoroughly and intentionally prepare students to serve their communities, our society, and the world at large.

That significant numbers of college and university faculty may be receptive to putting more emphasis on students' inner life is suggested by the results of the national faculty survey conducted in conjunction with *Cultivating the Spirit*. When asked to rate the importance of a number of goals for undergraduate education, 53

percent of faculty members say they consider it an essential or very important goal to “help students develop personal values.” And fully 60 percent also consider “enhancing students’ self-understanding” as an essential or very important goal. However, only about half as many faculty support a similar focus on students’ “spiritual development,” underscoring the discomfort many of them feel with the use of the term “spiritual” in connection with higher education. We believe that much of this discomfort would be alleviated if faculty were to familiarize themselves with the definition of “spirituality” employed in this study and the associated findings. We also believe that institutions need to provide students with opportunities to develop an understanding and appreciation of various forms of religious/spiritual engagement while also helping them to develop the habits of evidence-based inquiry and analysis that are fundamental to high quality postsecondary learning.

For a number of years, increasing numbers of college faculty and administrators have been recognizing the importance of offering students opportunities to study abroad, to take interdisciplinary courses, and to engage in service learning (i.e., community service carried out as part of an academic course). This research study has shown that all of these curricular experiences can contribute significantly to students’ spiritual development. In addition to these academic courses and experiences, higher education has also recognized the importance of co-curricular experiences that are designed to attend to students’ “whole” development and prepare them for roles as members of the larger community and the workforce. Leadership training, membership in student organizations, community service, and participation in student governance all have long traditions in the student affairs field as programmatic efforts that supplement traditional academic coursework. Such practices have been expanded over the years because of their demonstrated value in preparing students for work and community life. This study has shown that they can also be viewed as ways to facilitate students’ spiritual development.

What Institutions Can Do

While it may be tempting to refrain from using the terms “spirituality” or “spiritual quest” when referring to one’s search for meaning and purpose, one’s sense of connectedness to others, the world, or the universe, or any of the other dimensions of spirituality that were utilized in this study, avoiding these terms only further marginalizes the kinds of questions that occupy many students’ time and

thought. Indeed, one of the single most important steps in advancing students' interior development on a college campus may be to acknowledge the importance of this dimension of human development. There is a power in naming; it is a liberating experience that can create space for members of the campus community to openly debate the ways in which spiritual development broadly construed might fit into the curriculum and how it aligns with the purposes of liberal learning. We thus believe that the time has come to refocus the discourse on spirituality in higher education away from the question of "whether" to the question of "how."

Institutional leaders can begin this process by taking an inventory of current campus efforts that are directed toward students' spiritual development and/or religious quests. We are impressed with the number and diversity of such efforts already underway, as reported by more than 400 institutions in a guidebook recently released by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.³ Every type of institution is well represented in this report, and the programs and practices are not only being carried within academic affairs (course content, pedagogical practices), student affairs (student activities, residence hall programming), and offices of spiritual/religious life, chaplaincies, and campus ministries (interfaith dialogues, service to the campus and local communities), but also involve modifications in the physical plant. Given that spiritually-focused practices such as these may not be known to many members of the general campus community, taking a campus-wide inventory would seem like a good place to start.

Perhaps the most direct way to strengthen an institution's capacity to enhance its students' spiritual development would be to expand existing programs and practices that have already been shown to promote spiritual development: service learning, interdisciplinary studies, study abroad, leadership development programs, and programs that promote interracial interaction. And given that relatively few institutions currently emphasize the use of contemplation, meditation, or self-reflection, greater use of such practices in both instructional and co-curricular programs offers substantial potential for strengthening the capacity of colleges and universities to enhance students' spiritual growth and development. Faculty should also explore ways in which issues of meaning and purpose can be introduced into regular coursework. Finally, it is important that more institutions begin to recognize the evolving nature of scientific knowledge, especially the current trend away from excessive fragmentation toward greater integration and interconnectedness.

³ Lindholm, J. L., Millora, M. L., Schwartz, L. M. & Spinoso, H. S. (2011). *Guidebook of Promising Practices: Facilitating Students' Spiritual Development*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

Many campuses are already providing opportunities for students to engage in dialogue about spirituality and religion. Some programs focus solely on spirituality or religion, others address the intersection of the two, and still others are concerned primarily with interfaith understanding. One university is currently sponsoring a series of highly successful “Big Questions” seminars, where faculty visit residence halls to lead discussions centering around questions of purpose, meaning, and value. Ultimately, such programs have the potential to build bridges across differences and cultivate an appreciation for a rich diversity of beliefs and perspectives. Like these dialogues about broad spiritual questions and issues, interfaith dialogues led by campus ministries and offices of religious/spiritual life have the potential to promote students’ understanding and respect for other spiritual and religious traditions.

Several of the institutions that responded to the *Promising Practices* survey have created physical spaces on their campuses that are dedicated to contemplative practices such as meditation, prayer, and self-reflection. We believe that the very existence of such spaces sends an important symbolic message to the campus community concerning the institution’s support for, and encouragement of, contemplative and self-reflective practices.

Still another promising practice recently undertaken by several universities involves what might be termed a collective “book read,” whereby the institution acquires multiple copies of *Cultivating the Spirit* which are distributed to selected members of campus community. Participants, who could include faculty, administrators, staff, and/or students, convene to discuss the implications of the findings for campus programs and practices. These discussions can take place on line, in committee meetings, or in retreat settings.

In short, it is our shared belief that the findings from this study provide a powerful argument for the proposition that higher education should attend more to students’ spiritual development. 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. Enhancing 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 society with a greater sense of equanimity.

An electronic copy of this document is available at www.spirituality.ucla.edu