

Spirituality in Higher Education

A UCLA Study

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The week before Thanksgiving I found myself at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) among approximately sixty academics invited to be part of a proactive effort to support spirituality in higher education through both curricular and co-curricular means. Ten teams of four had been invited from diverse colleges and universities, including Carnegie Mellon, UC Irvine, Bates, and Wellesley. We were at UCLA's prestigious Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the behest of Professors Alexander "Sandy" and Helen Astin, founders of HERI, who have been researching the spiritual life of students and the professoriate in recent years. Some years ago they came to 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 Astins and their research team, therefore, set out first to "examine the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years," and then to do an analogous study of spirituality in the professoriate.

In 2004 HERI's Spirituality in Higher Education research project surveyed 112,000 first-year students at 236 colleges and universities with a follow-up survey scheduled for 2007; in 2005 a similar survey of professors was performed. I offer a sampling of their findings concerning incoming freshmen:¹

- College students show a high degree of spiritual interest and involvement. Three-fourths say that they are "searching for meaning/purpose in life" or that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends. Similar numbers have high expectations that college

will help them develop emotionally and spiritually.

- Many are 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.
- Eight students in ten attended religious services during the past year and similar numbers discussed religion with both friends and family.
- More than two-thirds pray, and four in ten consider it very important that they follow religious teachings in their everyday life.
- Almost eight students in ten believe in God, with more than half perceiving God as "love" or as the "creator," and about half experiencing God as a "protector."
- As they begin college, 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.

Some of the leading indicators from the survey are:

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

The statistics for professors are similarly revealing:

Consider myself a spiritual person	81%*
Goal: Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	70%**
Seek out opportunities to grow spiritually	69%*
Engage in self-reflection	68%***
Goal: Integrating spirituality in my life	47%**

*To some or a great extent

**Essential or very important

***To a great extent

When faculty members were asked whether colleges should facilitate students' spiritual development, only 30% agreed. This was in accord with the results of a smaller study of college juniors who said that faculty rarely or never offered them the opportunity for spiritual or religious discussions or conversation around meaning, purpose, and values.

The recent UCLA meeting I attended had the explicit intention to redress this lack of opportunity afforded to students and to address the core dimension of their lives. Students come to campuses in their first year of college life with the hope that, in addition to traditional academics,

they will develop a meaningful philosophy that touches on the core dimensions of their humanity. Too often they leave without this aspect of their lives being addressed. Those gathered at UCLA recognized value in developing curricular offerings and in developing non-academic supports for students as they explore and deepen their spiritual lives. The issue of language, and even the use of the word "spirituality," was thoroughly discussed, especially by representatives from large public universities. While we all agreed that colleges and universities should do much more to deepen student engagement around meaning, purpose, and values, some did not agree that we should frame it as a spiritual or religious issue. We will be working on these matters in the years to come, both through research and through direct innovation at some of America's leading colleges and universities.

Endnotes

1. Full results available at www.spirituality.ucla.edu.