Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose

Higher Education Research Institute
University of California, Los Angeles

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Research Questions

- What role does spirituality play in the lives of today’s college students?
- How do students’ spiritual qualities change during the college years?
- How many students are actively engaged in a spiritual quest?
- What are institutions doing that aids or inhibits students in this quest?
What is Spirituality?

- Points to our interiors
- Involves our values, beliefs, meaning, and purpose
- Has to do with our connectedness to others and the world around us
Design of the Study

- Spring 2003 pilot: 3,700 students
- Fall 2004: survey 112,000 freshmen
- Spring 2007: follow up 15,000 juniors
- Survey of Faculty in 2004-2005
Indicators of Spirituality

- Have an interest in spirituality 81%
- Believe in the sacredness of life 84%
- My spirituality is a source of joy 64%
- Seeking opportunities to grow spiritually 47%
- Searching for meaning/purpose in life 76%
- Discuss meaning of life with friends 74%
- Spiritual experience: witnessing nature 62%
- Spiritual experience: listening to music 58%
Indicators of Religiousness

- Attended Religious Services 81%
- Discussed religion/spirituality 80%
- Believe in God 79%
- Religious beliefs: strength, support, guidance 68%
- Follow religious teaching in everyday life 40%
- Pray 69%
Religious Tolerance

- “Non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers” 84%
- “Most people can grow spiritually without being religious” 63%
- “People who don’t believe in God will be punished” 35%
Expectations for College

- Encourage personal expression of spirituality 48%
- Enhance self-understanding 69%
- Prepare for responsible citizenship 67%
- Develop personal values 67%
- Provide for emotional development 63%
Measures of Spirituality

- Spiritual Quest
- Equanimity
- Charitable Involvement
- Ethic of Caring
- Ecumenical Worldview
Spirituality Defined by 5 Measures

- “A multifaceted quality involving an active quest for answers to life’s ‘big questions’ …
- A global worldview that transcends egocentrism and ethnocentrism…
- A sense of caring and compassion for others… coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others…and
- A capacity to maintain one’s sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress..”.
Spiritual Qualities Showing Increases During College

- Spiritual Quest
- Equanimity
- Ethic of Caring
- Ecumenical Worldview
Developing a Meaningful Philosophy of Life
Seeking Beauty in My Life
Becoming a More Loving Person
Attaining Inner Harmony

Spiritual Quest

Percent

2004 2007

Developing a Meaningful Philosophy of Life
Seeking Beauty in My Life
Becoming a More Loving Person
Attaining Inner Harmony

Percent

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90

- Spiritual Quest
- Percent
- 2004
- 2007

- Developing a Meaningful Philosophy of Life
- Seeking Beauty in My Life
- Becoming a More Loving Person
- Attaining Inner Harmony

- 2004
- 2007
Seeing Each Day as a Gift
Being Thankful for All That Has Happened to Me
Frequently Have Been Able to Find Meaning in Times of Hardship

Equanimity

Percent

Seeing Each Day as a Gift
Being Thankful for All That Has Happened to Me
Frequently Have Been Able to Find Meaning in Times of Hardship

Equanimity

2004
2007
Improving My Understanding of Other Cultures

Helping to Improve the Human Condition

People Can Grow Spiritually Without Being Religious

Feeling a Strong Connection to All Humanity

Ecumenical Worldview

- Improving My Understanding of Other Cultures: 50 (2004), 60 (2007)
- Feeling a Strong Connection to All Humanity: 10 (2004), 20 (2007)

Years: 2004, 2007
GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP
“Institutions rich in social capital are self-aware. They know what they believe in, what and whom they affect, and what they want to achieve... [they are] value led...the values of spiritual capital are deep human values...[these institutions] feel a part of and responsible to the community, the planet, life itself.”
Faculty Effects on Students’ Spiritual Development

- Direct Encouragement
- Reflective writing and journaling
- Collaborative group projects
- Contemplation/meditation
Increases in Ecumenical Worldview During College

% Scoring "High" on Ecumenical

2004 2007
Students Fail to Show an Increase If They Get No Encouragement from Professors
EFFECTS OF MAJOR

- **POSITIVE**: fine arts, health professions, biological sciences, social sciences

- **NEGATIVE**: engineering, mathematics, physical science, other technical fields
Other Positive Influences

- Service learning
- Interdisciplinary courses
- Study abroad programs
- Leadership training
- Intercollegiate athletics
- Student organizations
Negative Influences on Spiritual Development

- Watching television
- Playing video games
- Frequent drinking/partying
Spiritual Growth Enhances:

- Leadership qualities
- Psychological well-being
- Intellectual self-esteem
- Academic performance (GPA)
- Satisfaction with college
- Commitment to Diversity
Promising Practices

- OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION
- FACULTY/STAFF ORIENTATION
- PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- PLACES FOR REFLECTION
- INTER-FAITH FORUMS
- FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS
- RESIDENCE HALLS/LIVING-LEARNING
- GUEST SPEAKERS/FORUMS
- MISSION/VISION STATEMENTS
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Project Website: WWW.SPIRITUALITY.UCLA.EDU