



Cultivating the Spirit

HOW COLLEGE CAN ENHANCE
STUDENTS' INNER LIVES

Alexander W. Astin • Helen S. Astin
Jennifer A. Lindholm

“This book challenges us to look where we have been reluctant to gaze and to engage with the most central features of student thoughts and commitments. I can only hope that the publication of this work will encourage many others to pursue these questions. We owe the distinguished authors our deep gratitude.”

—Lee S. Shulman, president emeritus, The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Charles E. Ducommun
Professor of Education Emeritus, Stanford University

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Stanford University, and author, *Finding Your Religion*

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*To our granddaughters, Erin, Amalia, and Ila
—Alexander Astin and Helen Astin*

*To Mom, Cooper, and Bentley
—Jennifer Lindholm*

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Readers of *Change* magazine voted Dr. Astin as the person “most admired for creative, insightful thinking” in the field of higher education. A study in the *Journal of Higher Education* identified him as the most frequently cited author in the higher education field, and his book *Four Critical Years* as the most frequently cited book in the field. Astin has lectured at more than 250 colleges and universities in the United States and abroad, served as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, been elected to membership in the National Academy of Education, and is the recipient of eleven honorary degrees.

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CULTIVATING THE SPIRIT

CHAPTER ONE

WHY SPIRITUALITY MATTERS

This book is about the spiritual growth of college students. It is based on a seven-year study of how students change during the college years and the role that college plays in facilitating the development of their spiritual qualities.

Our primary reason for undertaking this study has been our shared belief that *spirituality is fundamental to students' lives*. The “big questions” that preoccupy students are essentially spiritual questions: Who am I? What are my most deeply felt values? Do I have a mission or purpose in my life? Why am I in college? What kind of person do I want to become? What sort of world do I want to help create? When we speak of students’ “spiritual quest,” we are essentially speaking of their efforts to seek answers to such questions.

How students deal with these questions has obvious implications for many very practical decisions that they will have to make, including their choices of courses, majors, and careers, not to mention 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.

Despite the extraordinary amount of research that has been done on the development of college students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005)—more than five thousand studies in the past four decades—very little systematic study has been done on students’ spiritual development. Indeed, in the latest

comprehensive review of the literature that examines the effect of college on students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), there are no references to “spirituality” and only two references to “religion.” Recent years have seen a surge of interest in the topic of spirituality among some scholars and practitioners in higher education (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006; Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2005; Kazanjian and Laurence, 2000; Tisdell, 2003), but aside from a few studies of students’ religious development conducted mainly at religiously affiliated colleges, very little empirical research has been done on students’ spiritual development. We were thus motivated to undertake this study in part because of this gap in the literature and our desire to shed some light on a little-understood but potentially very important topic.

This lack of interest in spirituality within the research community is likewise evident in our colleges and universities. While higher education continues to put a lot of emphasis on test scores, grades, credits, and degrees, it has increasingly come to neglect its students’ “inner” development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and of self-understanding. For us, *how* students define their spirituality or *what* particular meaning they make of their lives is not at issue. Rather, our concern is that the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities devote to the “inner” and “outer” aspects of our students’ lives has gotten way out of balance.

What is most ironic about all of this is that while many of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim, “know thyself,” the development of self-awareness receives very little attention in our colleges and universities. If students lack self-understanding—the capacity to see themselves clearly and honestly and to understand why they feel and act as they do—then how can we expect them to become responsible parents, professionals, and citizens?

Another consideration that stimulated our interest in studying students’ spiritual development is the manner in which students’ concerns and values have been changing over recent decades. Annual surveys of entering college freshmen (Pryor et al., 2007) show that the personal goal of “being very well off financially” has grown dramatically in popularity, while the value of “developing

a meaningful philosophy of life”—which was the highest-ranked concern in the 1970s—has declined sharply among students. This is not completely surprising to us. Over time, students have become more anxious about their futures and more overwhelmed by everything they have to do, balancing school with paid employment, worrying about being able to finance their college education and finding a job after college. At the same time, these personal concerns are exacerbated by national and global changes: a deteriorating economy, an environment that is being depleted of its natural resources, and religious and political conflicts that result in bloodshed and destruction around the globe.

Despite what seems to be a growing materialism and declining concern with existential questions among our college students, the study reported in this book shows that most students still maintain a strong interest in spiritual and religious matters. Fully four in five students tell us that they “have an interest in spirituality” and that they “believe in the sacredness of life,” and nearly two-thirds say that “my spirituality is a source of joy.” Students also hold strong religious beliefs. 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.” Finally, three-fourths of the students report feeling a “sense of connection with God/Higher Power that transcends my personal self.”

When they enter college as new freshmen, students also express high expectations for their own spiritual development. More than eight in ten report that “to find my purpose in life” is at least a “somewhat” important reason for attending college (half say it’s a “very important” reason), and two-thirds of new freshmen say that it is either “very important” or “essential” that college “helps you develop your personal values” and “enhances your self-understanding.”

Despite their strong religious orientation, today’s students demonstrate a high level of religious tolerance and acceptance. Nine in ten college juniors agree that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers,” and three in four agree that “most people can grow spiritually without being religious.” Our study reveals that most students are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and

charitable, and clarifying how they feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "SPIRITUALITY"?

Spirituality points to our inner, subjective life, as contrasted with the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that we can point to and measure directly. Spirituality 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. Spirituality can also bear on aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical. Finally, we believe that highly "spiritual" people tend to exemplify certain personal qualities such as love, compassion, and equanimity.

Since a casual perusal of a few dictionaries or a brief journey through the Internet, as well as a thorough review of the published scholarly literature, makes it clear that "spirituality" is subject to a variety of definitions, we make no claim that our definition is the only or even the ideal one. However, we do believe that it captures many of the basic elements that others have identified as components of spirituality. (A review of the literature shows that researchers and practitioners have defined spirituality as a dynamic construct that involves the internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness; transcending one's locus of centrality while developing a greater sense of connectedness to self and others through relationship and community; deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in life; being open to exploring a relationship with a higher power that transcends human existence and human knowing; and valuing the sacred. Spirituality has also been described as an animating, creative, energizing, and meaning-making force; a source of inner strength; an inner moral orientation; a way of knowing and of being in the world; a source of connection that brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment; and a dynamic expression of ourselves that gives

shape to, and is shaped by, who we really are. Within the spiritual domain, human development has been characterized both by one's capacity to integrate the many other—cognitive, social, emotional, moral—aspects of development as well as our capacity for integrity, wholeness, openness, self-responsibility, and authentic self-transcendence. See, for example, Dyson, Cobb, and Forman, 1997; Goddard, 2000; Hill et al., 2000; Hindman, 2002; King, 1996; Baker, 2003; Love and Talbot, 1999; Tanyi, 2002; Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott, 1999; Parks, 2000; Zohar and Marshall, 2004.) We offer our brief characterization of spirituality here so that readers will have some sense of the perspective from which we have approached our study.

For many years, the construct of spirituality was closely aligned—even synonymous—with religious beliefs and convictions. Current conceptions, however, are much broader. How then do spirituality and religion differ? We see religiousness as involving adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity or being that is believed to have created and govern the world. Religiousness typically involves membership in some kind of community of fellow believers and practitioners, as well as participation in ceremonies or rituals. This vision parallels distinctions made by other scholars, including those who compose the Institute/National Institute on Aging Workgroup: “Whereas religion is characterized by group activity that involves specific behavioral, social, doctrinal, and denominational characteristics, spirituality is commonly conceived as personal, transcendent, and characterized by qualities of relatedness” (Fetzer Institute, 2003). It is to be expected that some students will view religious practice as the primary means for expressing their spirituality, while for others formal religion will play little or no part in their spiritual life (see, for example, Fuller, 2001).

SPIRITUALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

When we speak of spirituality with our academic colleagues, we get highly varied responses. Some are uncomfortable with the term. Others are pleased that we are studying this aspect of students' lives. Still others tell us that spiritual issues have no place

in the academy. Part of the problem is that the word “spirituality” is not likely to be heard in academic conversations; it’s something new, and many academics are inclined to question something that is new or unfamiliar. There is also a deeper reason why academics are not likely to discuss spirituality: many faculty members associate spirituality with religion, and since most of our colleges and universities are secular, they assume that spirituality (religion) has no place in the academic environment, except possibly as a subject to be taught or studied by people in departments of religious studies. Academics who hold this view sometimes argue that a secular institution should not concern itself with its students’ spirituality (religiousness) because “this is none of our business.” Of course, such an extreme position ignores the fact that colleges and universities are already deeply involved with students’ personal lives through such varied activities as academic advising, orientation, residential living, multicultural workshops, and “freshman 101” courses. Such activities necessarily touch on students’ purposes, hopes, dreams, aspirations, values, beliefs, and other “spiritual” matters. Furthermore, the mission statements of colleges and universities frequently include a commitment to value-laden student outcomes like character, social responsibility, honesty, and citizenship.

In many respects, the secular institution is the ideal place for students to explore their spiritual sides because, unlike many sectarian institutions, there is no official perspective or dogma when it comes to spiritual values or beliefs. Students are presumably free, if not encouraged, to explore and question their values and beliefs, no matter where such questioning might lead them. Critics of secular institutions sometimes argue, of course, that such institutions do in fact promote a kind of de facto “party line”—a positivistic, materialistic, agnostic/atheistic perspective that discourages many students from openly exploring spiritual matters. While no doubt there are individual professors who embrace such views (and some who make little or no effort to hide them from students), many others do not share them. In fact, the national faculty survey that we conducted for this project shows that 81 percent of teaching faculty consider themselves to be “spiritual,” and 64 percent, “religious” (Lindholm, Astin, and Astin, 2005).

To ignore the spiritual side of students' and faculty's lives is to encourage a kind of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity, where students and faculty act either as if they are not spiritual beings, or as if their spiritual side is irrelevant to their vocation or work. Within such an environment, academic endeavors can become separated from students' most deeply felt values, and students may hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, and wholeness with each other and especially with faculty.

This kind of fragmentation is further encouraged by those who believe that higher education should concern itself only 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 the university. We do not believe that there is any such thing as "pure" cognition that can be considered in isolation from affect; on the contrary, it would appear that our thoughts and our reasoning are almost always taking place in some kind of affective "bed" or context.

In the past few years, higher education has come under increasing criticism for what many see as its impersonal and fragmented approach to undergraduate education. Growing numbers of educators are calling for a more holistic 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 self (see, for example, Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006; Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2005; Lee, 1999; Tisdell, 2003; Trautvetter, 2007). Such a reinvigorated liberal arts curriculum would, of course, pay much closer attention to the existential questions that we know are prominent in students' minds. At the same time, we have seen a movement gradually emerging in higher education where many academics find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives and their institutions more whole. This movement likely reflects a growing concern with recovering a sense of meaning in American society more generally. The growing unease about our institutions and our society has led some of us to start talking much more openly about spirituality.

Envisioning campus communities in which the life of the mind and the life of the spirit are mutually celebrated, supported, and sustained necessitates that those of us within higher education reconsider our traditional ways of being and doing. We must be open to broadening our existing frames of reference and willing to look closely not just at what we do (or do not do) on a daily basis, but why. At the same time, persons outside the academy must also reflect on the origins of their traditional presumptions about the nature and purpose of higher education as well as their own academic experience and how it has affected their lives.

SPIRITUALITY AND THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

Since higher education is responsible for educating the next generation of leaders, it is reasonable to ask: What kinds of people will our global society need? It goes without saying that technical knowledge and technical skills 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 spirit, problems that call for greater self-awareness, self-understanding, equanimity, empathy, and concern for others. A key aim of our study is to assess how and why these qualities change during the college years and the role college plays in their development. The findings from the study reported in this book should not only teach us more about what colleges and universities can do to promote students' spiritual growth but also enhance our understanding of how spiritual development can contribute to global understanding and caring.

The book is written with a diverse audience in mind. While the higher education community may well turn out to be our primary audience, we also believe that parents and students themselves could also regard the findings to be of considerable interest. Indeed, our view is that the larger public would also benefit from learning about students' ongoing search for meaning and

purpose, about their need to care for and about others, their interest in and appreciation of the global community and the environment, and their quest for feeling more whole, more centered, and more at peace with themselves and others.

THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study reported in this book are to document how students change spiritually and religiously during the college years, and to identify ways in which colleges can contribute to this developmental process. Our hope is that the knowledge generated by this research will enhance higher education's capacity to facilitate students' spiritual development.

We began this work in 2003. At the outset, we wanted the research to be comprehensive, to cover students of different racial and religious backgrounds and in different fields of study. We also wanted our students' colleges to reflect the wonderful diversity of America's higher education institutions—public and private, large and small, selective and nonselective, religious and nonreligious. To study such a large and diverse sample of students, we obviously had to utilize a survey approach, whereby students would tell us about themselves and their college experiences via self-administered survey questionnaires. Our first task was to develop a survey questionnaire that could explore the student's spiritual life and religious beliefs and practices. This process, which is described in detail in Chapter Two, initially involved a great deal of reading, discussion, pilot testing, and consultation with colleagues across the country.

Data from a pilot survey conducted in 2003 with about 3,700 college students were used to develop measures of students' spiritual and religious qualities. Next we surveyed over 112,000 students in Fall 2004. Finally, a subsample of about 15,000 of these students completed another survey as they were about to finish their junior year in Spring 2007. The main purpose of the 2004 and 2007 surveys was to create a longitudinal database, which would enable us to assess changes in individual students' spiritual and religious qualities during the first three years of college. To supplement the rich data that these students provided in the two surveys, we also conducted personal interviews and focus groups

with students enrolled in eleven diverse campuses across the country. Selected faculty from each campus were also interviewed.

In an effort to understand the role that college faculty play in affecting students' spiritual development, during the 2004–2005 academic year we also collected extensive survey data from individual faculty members at the same institutions where we collected longitudinal student data. This survey examined each faculty member's spirituality, goals for undergraduate education, preferred teaching styles, and attitudes about the potential role that institutions might play in facilitating the student's spiritual development.

THE STORY

We believe that the story told by our study data is not only fascinating but also of great importance for students, for institutions, and for the larger society. Essentially, we find that while students' degree of religious engagement declines somewhat during college, their spirituality shows substantial growth. Students become more caring, more tolerant, more connected with others, and more actively engaged in a spiritual quest. We have also found that *spiritual growth enhances other college outcomes*, such as academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction with college.

These positive changes in students' spiritual qualities are not merely maturational; indeed, our data provide strong evidence pointing to specific experiences during college that can contribute to students' spiritual growth. Some of these experiences, such as study abroad, interdisciplinary studies, and service learning, appear to be effective because they expose students to new and diverse people, cultures, and ideas. Spiritual development is also enhanced if students engage in what we refer to as "inner work" through activities such as meditation or self-reflection, or if their professors actively encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose. In contrast, our data suggest that spiritual development is impeded when students engage in activities that distract them from the ordinary experience of campus life—activities such as watching a lot of television or spending a good deal of time playing video games.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the next chapter, we describe how we developed ten different measures of students' spiritual and religious qualities. The next five chapters (Three–Seven) document how students change spiritually and religiously during the first three years of college, and how specific aspects of the college experience help to shape their spiritual and religious development. Chapter Eight examines the role of spiritual development in students' academic and personal development, and Chapter Nine discusses what institutions can and are doing to assist students in their spiritual journey.