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[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Students](#)

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### **How Spiritual Traits Enhance Students' Lives—and Maybe Their Grades**

*By Beckie Supiano*

During college, students attend religious services less often, but they become more spiritual—and that growth is linked to a number of positive academic and personal outcomes. That's one of the key findings of *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*, a new book based on a longitudinal study of students.

The basis of the book is surveys given to students as entering freshmen and as juniors. The freshman survey was included in a special expanded version of the annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey, conducted by the University of California at Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute, which more than 112,000 students took in 2004. A subsample of about 15,000 juniors completed a follow-up survey in the spring of 2007.

The study was designed to measure, separately, students' religious and spiritual qualities. Students' responses from freshman and junior years were compared to show change over the course of college. Researchers [released some results from the study](#) in 2007, showing that students became more interested in spirituality and more caring over time.

For the book, however, they mined the data more deeply—examining the relationship between spiritual and religious qualities and other outcomes, such as academic performance and leadership ability. Some of the qualities they looked at were charitable involvement, spiritual quest, and religious engagement.

The authors use the term spirituality broadly, to mean people's inner, subjective lives. They found that students' level of spiritual quest, or seeking meaning and purpose in life, rose during college. By the second survey, eight in 10 students were at least "moderately" engaged in a spiritual quest. Students were more likely as juniors than as freshmen to say they wanted to develop a

meaningful philosophy of life, seek beauty, become a more loving person, and attain inner harmony.

Students were also more likely to exhibit equanimity, the authors' term for having a sense of peace and being able to find meaning in hardship, as upperclassmen.

The researchers found that when students grew significantly in equanimity, their grades improved. None of the other spirituality or religion measures had an effect on GPA. Growth in equanimity also raised students' intellectual self-esteem, but the authors were not able to tell if the boost to self-esteem raised students' grades, or if the higher grades led to higher self-esteem.

Students who saw a big growth in equanimity also displayed a greater sense of well-being, larger than average growth in leadership abilities, and a higher level of satisfaction with their college experience. Spiritual quest, on the other hand, had a negative effect on well-being and satisfaction.

And the authors found that students' level of religious struggle, or questioning their beliefs, increased in college. However, their level of religious skepticism or religious commitment stayed about the same, even though their engagement in religion declined. Students also became less religiously conservative, measured by their responses to questions on issues like abortion and casual sex.

One measure of students' spirituality also saw a decline during the college years: charitable involvement. This drop was primarily caused by a dip in students' level of community service, a development the authors suggest might be driven by the greater demands of college-level academic work. They do note that some measures of charitable involvement, donating money and helping friends with their problems, rose during college.

Some activities that occur in college seem to strengthen students' spiritual growth, the authors found. Interdisciplinary studies, service learning, and study abroad were all found to enhance spiritual development, as was a "student-centered" teaching approach.

But there are other things colleges could do to foster students' spiritual growth.

"Some of the most powerful experiences in promoting spiritual development are used very little in higher education now," said Alexander W. Astin, a professor emeritus of higher education at

UCLA and one of the authors.

Those experiences include self-reflection, meditation, and contemplation. The authors suggest that colleges should encourage these behaviors. "We can be doing a lot more of that inside and outside of the classes," Mr. Astin said.

Professors may be uncomfortable talking about "spirituality," the authors said. But when faculty were surveyed as part of the project, they said they were interested in activities like helping students develop personal values and enhancing students' self-understanding, efforts that fit the authors' concept of spirituality.

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