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Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Student's Inner Lives

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Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Student's Inner Lives.

Astin, A. W., & Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011).
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by Jason Bertrand

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“Higher education has come under fire in recent years due to its “impersonal and fragmented approach to undergraduate education” (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 2011, p.7). This is the emphasis of a recent article entitled *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Student’s Inner Lives*. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) initiated the study to discover why spirituality really matters in the realm of higher education. To that end they surveyed an immense number of students all over the country in order to produce findings which are valuable to understanding student spirituality and religiousness in college.

Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) pointed out a vast difference between the definitions of religion and spirituality. The authors indicated “religiousness typically involves membership in some kind of community of fellow believers and practitioners, as well as participation in ceremonies or rituals” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011, p. 5). On the other hand, the authors stated:

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. (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011, p. 4)

In addition to the differences in definitions, the authors also indicated various instances in their research which displayed a vast difference between student engagement in spirituality and religion. One example is that “while college students’ degree of religious engagement declines somewhat during college, their spirituality shows substantial growth” (p.10). Many experiences are provided during college which contribute to a students’ spiritual growth, including: study abroad trips, meditation, service learning and interdisciplinary studies. Each of these are discussed in depth, and the results of their inquiry supported the claim that spirituality does show grow during college.

Twelve content areas, or domains, were analyzed when designing scales to measure religiousness and spirituality. Within the content areas, the authors called attention to five spirituality measures. The Spiritual Quest assesses the student’s interest in searching for purpose and meaning in their life as well as developing a meaningful philosophy on life. Equanimity is the ability to feel good about the direction of their life and to discover meaning in difficult times. The Ethic of Caring is the degree of commitment and connection to values such as helping others, making the world a better place, and changing things that are unfair in the world. Charitable Involvement is the practice of participating in community service, donating money to charity and helping friends in times of need. Lastly, an Ecumenical Worldview is the level of interest in understanding others’ backgrounds, cultures, rituals and religions by believing there is good in all people. These five spirituality measures are beneficial for assessing spirituality and religiousness in the lives of college students.

Research on the spiritual growth of college students seems to be quite limited, especially longitudinal research. Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) developed a seven-year longitudinal study which focused on how college students change during the college years and the role that the institution plays in facilitating the development of their spiritual qualities. In 2004, the two-page, 160 question survey was added to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, which is conducted each year by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institution. That year 112,232 students responded from 236 different colleges and universities. The two-page survey is now called the College Students Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey. The CSBV has 160 questions which pertain directly to the students' perspectives, and practices in respect to spirituality and religion.

Former studies by Robert C. Fuller and Larry A. Braskamp on development of purpose and differences in spirituality and religion support Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2011) findings in many respects to spirituality. Results from Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's survey have many beneficial outcomes for faculty and administrators looking to fold spiritual development into the classroom, as well as make spiritual development a staple in the broader mission of the institution. The authors found that one of the greatest barriers to students' thoughtful exploration of life's so-called big questions is time pressure. Attendance at religious services shows a steep decline during college, nearly doubling in "nonattendance" from freshman to junior year (Astin et al., 2011, p. 89). In addition, students' sense of psychological well-being shows a substantial decline during college. However, nearly every form of peer interaction positively influences satisfaction with college, including participation in student organizations and group projects (Astin et al, 2011). The behaviors and practices of faculty members play a significant role in how students change and grow with respect to spiritual qualities (Astin et al, 2011). Meditation and self-reflection are among the most powerful tools at the disposal of the institution for enhancing students' spiritual development (Astin et al, 2011).

These findings naturally lead the reader to wonder what can be done on campuses to promote the exploration of spiritual issues with students. Many great ideas are shared in the book from various institutions. A few examples include establishing places for reflection and quiet spaces on campus, hosting speakers and forums to encourage spiritual discussions, and providing interfaith forums on the diversity of religious and spiritual views.

The findings in this research uphold the idea that higher education should attend more to students' spiritual development. It is the job of the faculty to facilitate conversations on heavy topics such as the meaning of life, life after death, and who we really are. Reasons faculty may resist these conversations or topics are vast and include not wanting to look as though they are prophesying, not adhering to the separation of church and state, and not feeling as though they are experts in the topic of spirituality. The research in this book shows a very high degree in which students benefit from being given the opportunity to share insight on their own spirituality as well as learn from the role modeling of the faculty members' spiritual journey. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* reveals that students are very interested in spiritual exploration and that faculty and administrators should not hold back, but should cultivate this documented need for the benefit of their students. 

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