We would like to share with you some recent findings from our national study of college students’ spiritual and religious development. The full study will be reported in a forthcoming book that we have written together with our colleague Jennifer Lindholm.2

Our primary reason for undertaking this study is our shared belief that spirituality and religion are 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 to create? When we speak of students’ “spiritual quest,” we are essentially speaking of their efforts to seek answers to such questions. And if you read a few treatises on liberal learning, it becomes clear that one of the major purposes of a liberal education is to assist students in their attempts to grapple with such questions.

How students deal with these questions also 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

1 Talk presented at the Ninth Annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA, February 26, 2010
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\(^1\)—more than 5,000 studies in the past four decades—very little systematic study has been done on students’ spiritual development. Indeed, in the index of Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) latest comprehensive review of the literature,\(^2\) there are only two references to “religion” and no references to “spirituality.” Aside from a few studies conducted at religiously affiliated colleges, very little empirical research has been done on students’ religious or 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 these topics within the research community is likewise evident in our colleges and universities. So 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 self-understanding.

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?
Despite what some critics would have us believe, our data show that most students still have 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 their college will “enhance my self-understanding” and “help me to develop my personal values.”

Despite their strong religious orientation, today’s students demonstrate a high level of religious tolerance and acceptance of differing perspectives. For example, nine in ten college juniors agree that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral as those of religious believers.” Our study also 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.

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. Some faculty assume that spirituality 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 because “this is a personal matter that 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, multi-cultural workshops, “freshman 101” courses, and the like. Such activities necessarily touch on students’ purposes, hopes, dreams, aspirations, values, beliefs, and other “spiritual” matters. We should also note here that the mission statements of secular liberal arts institutions frequently include a commitment to value-laden student outcomes such as character, social responsibility, honesty, and citizenship.

And while some critics of higher education like to portray college faculty as uniformly positivistic and materialistic, the national faculty survey that we conducted for this project paints a very different picture of faculty. These data show that 81% of teaching faculty nationwide consider themselves to be “spiritual,” and 64% consider themselves to be “religious”.

To ignore the spiritual side of students’ and faculty’s lives is to encourage a kind of fragmentation and a lack of authenticity. Such 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, of the need to connect mind and spirit, and of the need to return to the true values of liberal education—an education that examines learning and knowledge in relation to an exploration of self (Chickering et al, 2005; Braskamp et al, 2006; Tisdel, 2003). 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 Study

The main objectives of our study are to document how students change spiritually and religiously during the college years, and to identify ways in which colleges can contribute in a positive way to this developmental process.

We began this work in 2003 with support from the John Templeton Foundation. 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.

Data from a pilot survey conducted in 2003 with about 3,700 students were used to
develop measures of students’ spiritual and religious qualities. Next we administered these
measures to over 112,000 entering freshmen in fall 2004. Finally, a subsample of about 15,000
of these students were re-surveyed as they were about to finish their junior year in college in
spring 2007. The main purpose of these latter two surveys (2004 and 2007) 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.

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 own spirituality, goals for undergraduate
education, preferred teaching styles, as well as their attitudes about the potential role that
institutions might play in facilitating the student’s spiritual development.

We worked with pilot data for over a year to develop five measures of religiousness and
five measures of spirituality.

Measures of Religiousness
Let’s first review briefly our five measures of religiousness. *Religious Commitment* is an “internal” quality that reflects the student’s self-rating on “religiousness” as well as the degree to which the student seeks to follow religious teachings in everyday life, finds religion to be personally helpful, and gains personal strength by trusting in a higher power.

*Religious Engagement*, an “external” measure, which represents the behavioral counterpart to Religious Commitment, includes behaviors such as attending religious services, praying, religious singing/chanting, and reading sacred texts.

*Religious/Social Conservatism* reflects the student’s degree of opposition to such things as abortion, casual sex, and atheism, as well as an inclination to proselytize. As it turns out, these first three measures are closely related, so that students who have a strong religious commitment also tend to show high levels of religious engagement and conservatism.

*Religious Struggle* reflects the extent to which the student feels unsettled about religious matters, disagrees with family about religious matters, feels distant from God, has questioned her/his religious beliefs, or feels disillusioned with his/her religious upbringing. Interestingly enough, it is not uncommon for students who are highly religiously committed and engaged to also show high levels of religious struggle.

Our final religious measure, *Religious Skepticism*, reflects beliefs such as “the universe arose by chance” and “in the future, science will be able to explain everything” and disbelief in the notion of life after death. As you might expect, this measure shows a strong negative association with the first three measures.

How does religiousness change during the college years? Two qualities show substantial declines after the student enters college —Religious Engagement and Religious/Social Conservatism, while two others show little change—Religious Commitment and Religious
Skepticism. The only measure showing any increase during college is Religious Struggle.

Does the type of college attended make any difference as far as these changes in religiousness are concerned? The two most unique patterns are associated with research universities, on the one hand, and evangelical colleges, on the other. In the research universities students show greater-than-average declines in both Religious Engagement and Religious Conservatism and significant increases in Religious Skepticism. In the evangelical colleges, by contrast, students show smaller-than-average declines in both Religious Engagement and Religious/Social Conservatism.

Our statistical analyses shows that this effect—slowing the overall declines in Religious Engagement and Conservatism that occurs among students in general—can be attributed primarily to one factor: the very high initial level of Religious Engagement by the peer group at evangelical colleges, which appears to serve as a brake on the tendency of college students to lower their rate of attendance at religious services after they enter college. So even though a student at an evangelical college might, like college students elsewhere, be tempted to skip religious services because of other social and academic demands associated with being a college student, that student is likely to be deterred from doing so by the presence of so many student peers who themselves frequently attend religious services; such peers might well notice the absence of that student at services.

One somewhat surprising effect of attending an evangelical college is that students show a substantial *increase* in their level of Religious Struggle, despite the fact that they report *very low* levels of Struggle when they enter college as new freshmen. At this point we can only speculate as to the reasons. One possibility has to do with fact that many of these students may have had a relatively sheltered religious upbringing, where friends and family alike embrace a
common belief system and where there are sanctions against questioning one’s beliefs (this conclusion is consistent with the finding that evangelical college students report such a low level of struggle when they start college). For many evangelical college students, being in college may thus represent their first sustained experience in critical thinking, where ideas, regardless of their source, are subjected to investigation, discussion, argument, and debate. Assuming that theological propositions may also come up for critical examination in such an environment, the experience could well be unsettling and possibly even disorienting for some of these students, leading them in turn to begin to question their belief systems and their faith in general.

Measures of Spirituality

Let’s turn now to consider our five measures of spiritual qualities. *Spiritual Quest* assesses the student’s interest in searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries of life, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. The notion of a spiritual “quest” is clearly reflected in the scale items, all of which include words such as “finding,” “attaining,” “seeking,” “developing,” “searching,” and “becoming.”

*Equanimity* indicates the extent to which the student feels at peace/centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, and feels good about the direction of her/his life. We believe that equanimity may well be the prototypic defining quality of a spiritual person.

The last three spiritual measures reflect the student’s sense of *relatedness to others*. *Charitable Involvement* is a behavioral measure that includes activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems. *Ethic of Caring*, an “internal” measure, assesses the student’s degree of commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and making the
world a better place. And finally, *Ecumenical Worldview* indicates the extent to which the student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, and believes that love is at the root of all the great religions.

If one were to develop a definition of “spirituality” based on these five qualities, that definition would read something like this:

“Spirituality is a multifaceted quality that involves an active quest for answers to life’s ‘big questions’ (Spiritual Quest), a global worldview that transcends egocentrism and ethnocentrism (Ecumenical Worldview), a sense of caring and compassion for others (Ethic of Caring) coupled with a lifestyle that includes service to others (Charitable Involvement), and a capacity to maintain one’s sense of calm and centeredness, especially in times of stress (Equanimity).”

Longitudinal Data and Analysis

In contrast to religiousness, there is a good deal of positive *growth* in most spiritual qualities during the college years. Thus, compared to when they started college as freshmen, the juniors scored higher not only on Spiritual Quest, but also on three of the other four spiritual qualities: Equanimity, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview.

Items from the Equanimity scale that showed positive growth during the first three years of college show us that students are feeling more at peace and more centered, and are expressing more optimism and gratitude about the direction of their lives.
In the past decade the field of positive psychology has expanded our understanding of human development by focusing our attention on human strengths and psychologically healthy functioning in general. This field has flourished in recent years, and research has shown that persons who exemplify positive psychological traits also demonstrate high levels of psychological and physical health. One of the key indicators of healthy psychological functioning is a sense of *transcendence* that encompasses traits such as optimism and generosity. We believe that similar traits are reflected in several of our spirituality scales, but especially in Equanimity, which incorporates items such as “feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed,” “being thankful for all that has happened to me,” and “seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift.”

These increases in Equanimity are especially significant in light of the fact that other evidence from our survey indicates that students are experiencing a considerable increase in stress during their first three years of college. Apparently, their capacity to deal with such stress (i.e., their capacity for Equanimity) grows during the same period.

Another spiritually-related quality that shows significant growth during college is what we call Ecumenical Worldview. Items in that scale suggest that students are not only becoming more interested in other cultures and feeling more connected to others, but are also becoming more tolerant and more interested in improving the human condition.

Hand in hand with this growth and expansion of ecumenical understanding, our data reveal a parallel increase in students’ Ethic of Caring. Here we see students becoming much more likely to want to help others, to reduce the pain and suffering in the world, and help clean up the environment and promote racial understanding.
We have recently been examining these last two measures—Ecumenical Worldview and Ethic of Caring—in greater depth, and our results suggest that certain elements in both qualities can be combined to yield a measure that we have tentatively called *Global Citizenship*. We believe that Global Citizenship reflects a personal quality that should be central to our discussions about preparing students to be citizens of the global community.

We feel strongly that the overall pattern of spiritual change and growth that we have just described speaks well for what we can expect of this next generation of professionals and leaders. If colleges and universities can strengthen their capacity to promote the development of personal qualities like those we have been discussing, as we look to the future we can envision an educated work force that will be more inclusive, more accepting of differences, more caring, less individualistic, more community-centered, and more collaborative. If indeed these findings suggest that many students can accumulate ‘spiritual capital’ as they progress through college, then we should expect to see our organizations and institutions of the future become more self-aware, compassionate, and tolerant.

If we look once more at the data we have reported thus far, we have to acknowledge that a key question still remains: is this growth in students’ spiritual capital accounted by their experiences in college and if so, what are the types of institutions, faculty qualities, and college experiences that can help to promote in students a greater Ethic of Caring, Ecumenical Worldview and a sense of personal Equanimity and overall Spirituality?

The Role of College and College Experiences in the Development of Spirituality

To examine how and why spirituality and spiritual qualities such as Equanimity, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview change and grow over time, we have undertaken a number
of analyses to identify factors in the undergraduate experience that promote or detract from the development of these spiritual qualities during the college years. These analyses have pinpointed a number of college experiences that can play an important role in students’ spiritual development.

Let’s start first with the faculty: Can faculty influence the development of spirituality and related qualities? The answer would seem to be a clear-cut “yes.” Basically what we find is that students are most likely to show positive growth in their spirituality when their faculty actively encourage them either to explore questions of meaning and purpose or to engage in discussions of religious and spiritual matters. And, not surprisingly, this kind of encouragement is most likely to occur when faculty members personally believe that it is important for undergraduate education to enhance students’ spiritual development and to facilitate students’ search for meaning and purpose.

The faculty’s specific pedagogical practices also play a significant role in students’ spiritual development. Practices that appear to enhance students’ spiritual growth include reflective writing and journaling, the use of collaborative group projects, and the use of contemplation and meditation in the classroom.

In addition to these faculty influences, we also find that the students’ fields of study have differential effects on students’ spirituality. Thus, students are much more likely to show positive growth in Spirituality, Equanimity, Ethic of caring, and Ecumenical Worldview if they major in either education, fine arts, health professions, biological sciences, or social sciences. By contrast, we find negative growth in these same qualities when the student majors in either engineering, mathematics/statistics, physical science, or other technical fields.
Several other curricular and co-curricular experiences are also found to play a critical role in how these spiritual qualities develop. Some of the strongest positive effects occur when students engage in service learning, take interdisciplinary courses, or participate in study abroad programs. And when it comes to co-curricular experiences, leadership training has an especially positive effect; we also find positive effects associated with participation in intercollegiate athletics and being an active member of student organizations.

When it comes to the development of an Ethic of Caring and an Ecumenical Worldview, it also appears to matter where students live and what their peer interactions are like. Living in a campus residence hall—an experience that many believe to be a key part of a liberal education for traditional-age students—has a positive effect on their Ethic of Caring, while students’ Ecumenical Worldview is positively affected when students interact frequently with people of different races. These two findings speak to the overall value of liberal learning as a time when students are provided with opportunities to encounter new ideas, interact with different kinds of people, and be exposed to different cultures.

It is also important to note that certain other college activities and experiences have negative effects on spirituality and related qualities. Specifically, we find that watching a lot of television, spending a lot of time playing video games, and frequent drinking and partying are all activities that detract from growth in qualities such as Ethic of Caring, Ecumenical Worldview, and Equanimity.

The fact that a liberal education can facilitate growth in student qualities such as Equanimity, Ecumenical Worldview, and Ethic of Caring makes us optimistic about the potential of our colleges and universities to produce graduates who will become more effective and more humane parents and partners, citizens of the larger community, and participants in the workforce.
Given the growing political, racial, religious, and ethnic tensions that we are witnessing today, these personal qualities are critical to creating a more effective global citizenry.

At the same time, our data also suggest that there is much more that institutions can be doing to facilitate students in their Spiritual Quest. Despite their increasing interest in spiritual matters during college, most students (60%) report that their professors never “encouraged discussions of religious/spiritual matters,” and only 20% report that their professors frequently “encouraged exploration of questions of meaning and purpose” (52% “occasionally” encouraged such exploration and 28% “never” encouraged it). These findings show that while today’s students are showing significant spiritual growth, the full potential of a liberal education to facilitate that growth is still to be realized.

So far we have been looking at the effect of various college experiences on students’ spiritual development. We would like to close by looking very briefly at our data from a different perspective, namely, how does spiritual development during college affect other aspects of the student’s development? Basically, what we are finding is that positive growth in the student’s spiritual qualities is associated with a wide range of other positive outcomes of a liberal education, including leadership qualities, psychological well-being, intellectual self-esteem, academic performance, commitment to diversity, and satisfaction with college. In particular, growth in the qualities of Equanimity and Global Citizenship during the college years has positive effects on virtually all of these traditional outcomes. Specifically, growth in Equanimity enhances students’ grade point averages, leadership skills, psychological well-being, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and satisfaction with college. Growth in Global Citizenship enhances students’ interest in postgraduate study, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and commitment to promoting racial understanding.
The Role of Faculty

In considering the implications of these findings for liberal education, we naturally turn our thoughts again to the critical role played by college faculty. If institutions are to more fully embrace the idea of enhancing students’ spiritual development and expand their use of some of the practices that have been found to enhance students’ spirituality, significant numbers of faculty members have to buy in. Faculty are powerful role models for students; they are not only the transmitters of knowledge and the facilitators of students’ search for understanding, but they are also adults who model behavior that students frequently emulate. Further, there is ample research evidence that the faculty’s behavior has a direct effect on students’ academic and personal development (Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Shouping Hu, 2001; Lamport, 1993).

For all these reasons we made a point in designing our study to acquire information about the characteristics and behaviors of faculty. In surveying faculty members, we therefore included questions about their own spirituality: Do they consider themselves to be spiritual? What role does spirituality play in their lives? We also wanted to learn how faculty members view the place of spirituality in higher education, whether they think colleges should try to enhance students’ spiritual development and facilitate their search for meaning and purpose, or encourage the development of students’ self-understanding and values. Faculty members were also queried about their teaching methods and pedagogical style, and whether they employed a “student-centered” approach that incorporated practices such as cooperative learning, group projects, and reflective writing.

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3 During the 2004-2005 academic year the Higher Education Research Institute surveyed over 50,000 faculty at more than 400 institutions as part of its ongoing Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP).
The results of this exploration show that if faculty consider the enhancement of students’ spiritual development to be an important component of a liberal education, or if they practice student-centered pedagogy in their teaching, students tend to perform better academically. Specific practices that promote academic and intellectual development include group projects, service learning, and the use of contemplation. Faculty behavior outside the classroom is also important, in that students earn better grades and strengthen their aspirations for postgraduate study if they have opportunities to interact with faculty outside of class. Again, these findings confirm earlier research on the positive effects of student-faculty interaction (Astin, 1993).

Conclusion

In recent years most colleges and universities have intensified efforts to provide students with educational experiences that engage them with diverse peoples and cultures through the use of study abroad and foreign language programs, workshops, speakers, and seminars. Institutions have also seen the power of service learning and other forms of civic engagement, and the importance of interdisciplinary coursework in helping students to appreciate the value of multiple perspectives in their attempts to confront the complex social, economic, and political problems of our times. Our study has shown that most of these initiatives are also contributing in significant ways to students’ spiritual development.

One form of pedagogy that has so far been employed by very few higher education institutions is contemplative practices such as meditation and self-reflection. Our data suggest that these practices are among the most powerful tools that we have at our disposal for enhancing students’ spiritual development.

Our findings also show that providing students with more opportunities to touch base with their “inner selves” will facilitate growth in their academic and leadership skills, contribute
to their intellectual self-confidence and psychological well-being, and enhance their satisfaction
with the college experience.

In closing, we believe that the findings of this study constitute a powerful argument in
support of the proposition that higher education should attend more to students’ spiritual
development. Assisting more students to grow spiritually will help to create a new generation of
young adults who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice
than previous generations and who are able to employ greater equanimity in responding to the
many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing technological society.
References


