Alexander W. Astin reports that 20 percent of U. S. undergrads identify as “spiritual but not religious.” He explains what this means in terms of student identity and urges us to support the development of these students.

By Alexander W. Astin

“Spirituality” and “Religiousness” among American College Students

Take a quick glance at programming schedules in student centers and residence halls on campuses across the country, and you’re likely to see references to “interfaith dialogues” or other types of interreligious activities. Attention to and interest in students’ religious and spiritual lives has grown significantly over the past decade, as conversations about religion have begun to take hold in the worlds of foreign policy, politics, and the media. In addition, UCLA’s annual national survey, The American Freshman, by John H. Pryor, Sylvia Hurtado, Victor B. Sennet, Jose Luis Santos, and William S. Korn, has documented the growing polarization among college students’ religious beliefs, with the greatest growth occurring on opposite ends of the spectrum—among evangelicals and nonbelievers.

For their part, colleges and universities have played a key role in refocusing attention on issues such as religious freedom and tolerance, and interfaith relations. However, though well intentioned and effective in some ways, looking through an interreligious lens may bypass one sizeable and growing group of students: those who view themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” Since most of these students are not active members of any defined religious tradition, they seldom participate in the activities of campus religious organizations: therefore, they are unlikely to be drawn to or feel included in interfaith efforts.

Little is known about “spiritual, but not religious” students, but it is important that we examine what we do know in order to consider new and more effective ways to engage them in experiences that foster spiritual growth. In our seven-year study of college students’ spiritual development, Cultivating the Spirit: How Colleges Influence Students’ Inner Lives, my colleagues Helen Astin, Jennifer Lindholm, and I found that spiritual life is a critical aspect of a student’s development that can affect a wide range of other learning outcomes. These positive outcomes include academic performance, leadership self-concept, satisfaction, and cross-cultural and cross-racial relationship building. Based on what we’ve learned about the importance of students’ inner lives, it is even more critical for us to understand students’ spiritual identities, including how they view the relationship between...
spirituality and religiousness and how students who say they are “spiritual, but not religious” differ from students who say they are both spiritual and religious, or from those who say they are neither.

**Cultivating the Spirit: an Overview**

TO UNDERSTAND COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SPIRITUAL and religious engagement and growth for our national study, *Cultivating the Spirit*, we analyzed data from 14,527 students who completed UCLA’s annual freshman survey when they first entered college in the fall of 2004 and a follow-up survey administered three years later at the end of their third (“junior”) year in college. These students were enrolled at a national sample of 136 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities.

As part of our study, we sought to differentiate spirituality from religiousness, a distinction perhaps best understood by comparing the measures we developed for each. For example, religiousness was defined using the following measures:

- **Religious engagement**: activities such as attendance at religious services, prayer, and reading sacred texts.
- **Religious commitment**: the degree to which students say they gain personal strength by trusting in a higher power and believe that their religious beliefs play a central role in daily life.
- **Religious/social conservatism**: opposition to casual sex and abortion, belief that people who don’t believe in God will be punished, and a commitment to proselytize.
- **Religious skepticism**: 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.
- **Religious struggle**: feeling unsettled about religious matters, disagreeing with family about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning one’s religious beliefs.

The five spiritual measures were as follows:

- **Spiritual quest**: actively seeking to become a more self-aware and enlightened person and to find answers to life’s mysteries and “big questions.”
- **Equanimity**: the ability to find meaning in times of hardship, feel at peace, see each day as a gift, and feel good about the direction of life.
- **Ethic of caring**: commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and promoting racial understanding.
- **Charitable involvement**: activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems.
- **Ecumenical worldview**: interest in different religious traditions, desire to understand other countries and cultures, strong connection to all humanity, and belief that all life is interconnected.

We used these 10 measures to determine students’ levels of spirituality and religiousness. In addition, the follow-up survey contained two questions that asked students to measure their own levels: “I consider myself a religious person” and “I consider myself a spiritual person.” Students could respond to these questions in one of four ways: agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly. In most comparisons, below, I’ve combined the two “agree” responses and the two “disagree” responses.

**General Findings on Spirituality and Religiousness**

INTERESTINGLY, WE FOUND THAT FOR STUDENTS, spirituality almost always goes with religiousness—over 90 percent of the students who say they are “religious” also consider themselves to be “spiritual.” However, religiousness more often does not go with spirituality: 30 percent of “spiritual” students say that they are “not religious.”

This finding is in line with what we saw in students overall. In general, students are somewhat more inclined to see themselves as “spiritual” (72 percent) than as “religious” (66 percent). When the two questions are considered together, we find that about half of the students (51 percent) consider themselves to be both spiritual and religious, and another 25 percent say they are neither spiritual nor religious. In other words, three students in four give similar responses to the two questions: they are either religious and spiritual or neither religious nor spiritual. Of the remaining...
students, only a small number (5 percent) say they are religious but not spiritual. Most of the rest say they are spiritual but not religious (20 percent); in other words, one college student in five claims to be spiritual but not religious.

While it is impossible to know precisely what students have in mind when they use these two terms—in all likelihood it varies a good deal from student to student—it seems likely that "religiousness" implies acceptance of a set of beliefs and practices associated with a particular religious denomination or group. Religious Engagement, for example, as defined in our study, involves activities such as prayer and attending services. The fact that many students—believers and nonbelievers alike—are probably inclined to associate

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"Spirituality" with "religiousness" may help to explain why three out of four say they are either religious and spiritual or neither religious nor spiritual. Most of the rest—the "spiritual but not religious" ("SNR") students—may believe in a deity or in some sort of reality beyond the physical world of matter, but for various reasons have found themselves unable to embrace either the theological claims, code of conduct, or rituals of particular religious denominations. For this reason, educators need to keep in mind that most SNR students would probably not see themselves as participating in an activity that carries the label "interfaith."

Institutional Differences

Among the 136 institutions that participated in our study, we saw tremendous variation in how "religious" and how "spiritual" the student bodies consider themselves to be. For example, the percentages of students at each college who consider themselves to be religious range from a low of 11 to a high of 97! The four institutions in our sample with over 90 percent of their students reporting that they are religious are all religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges: Baptist, Mormon, Methodist, and Christian Reformed. These same colleges also have the highest proportions of students who say that they are both religious and spiritual, ranging from 85 to 92 percent.

By contrast, the four highest concentrations of students who say they are spiritual but not religious range from only 36 to 46 percent. These institutions are all selective, independent private liberal arts colleges located across the country (Oregon, New York, and two in Ohio). In other words, spiritual-but-not-religious students constitute a minority on all 136 campuses.

When it comes to students who are neither spiritual nor religious, the highest-ranking institution has 50 percent of its students who say this, followed by another institution at 43 percent, and five more tied at 41 percent. These institutions include four selective independent liberal arts colleges, one state university, one selective private university, and one Roman Catholic liberal arts college.

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Students Who Are "Spiritual but Not Religious"

WHO ARE THESE STUDENTS WHO say they are "spiritual" but not "religious" ("SNR")? How do they compare with the three other groups: Spiritual and Religious, Religious but not Spiritual, and neither Spiritual nor Religious? How do SNR students compare to the three other groups in their religious preferences, spiritual/religious beliefs, spiritual/religious qualities, demographics, majors and careers, political orientation, and values? While the practical implications of this information may not be readily apparent, the more we know about a group of students, the better equipped we are to serve them and to foster their growth.

Religious Preference

Unitarians/Universalists include nearly twice as many SNR students (39 percent) as do students in general
(20 percent). Only two other denominational groups include at least 30 percent SNRs: Buddhists (31 percent) and Episcopalians (30 percent). At the other extreme, the three groups with the lowest percentages of SNRs include Mormons (7 percent), 7th Day Adventists (8 percent), and UCC/Congregationalists (9 percent). Roman Catholics, Muslims, Baptists, and those who are members of Mainline Protestant faiths are all bunched up between 11 and 14 percent.

The second-largest concentration of SNR students is those students who choose “none” as their religious preference (36 percent). This group also has, by far, the largest concentration of students who say they are neither religious nor spiritual (60 percent). In contrast, the largest concentrations of spiritual and religious students (both 75 percent) are found among two evangelical denominations, Baptists and members of the Church of Christ.

Clearly, students’ denominational preferences don’t necessarily provide a reliable indicator of how they see themselves in terms of religiousness or spirituality. Given the great diversity of denominations and in light of the fact that “spiritual” seems to be the more appealing self-label for students (recall that fully 72 percent of the students consider themselves to be “spiritual,” in contrast to only 56 percent who self-identify as “religious”), educators who seek to involve students in activities that address their spiritual/religious needs might be well advised to rely more on the terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” than on words like “faith,” “religious,” etc.

Spiritual/Religious Beliefs

More than half the SNR students (57 percent) believe in God, while only 11 percent say they do not. The remaining one-third (32 percent) are “not sure.” This contrasts sharply with both groups of religious students, where 97 percent (religious and spiritual) and 91 percent (religious, not spiritual) believe in God. As would be expected, students who are neither religious nor spiritual show the lowest rate of belief in God (33 percent), with 40 percent “not sure” and 27 percent “no.”

Belief in life after death follows a similar pattern, although direct comparisons with belief in God are difficult because the questions were asked differently. Only a minority of SNR students (37 percent) believes in life after death “to a great extent,” with another 47 percent believing “to some extent.” About one in six (16 percent) believes “not at all.” The lowest level of belief, of course, is shown by students who say they are neither spiritual nor religious: 16 percent to a great extent, 48 percent to some extent, and 35 percent not at all. Students who are both spiritual and religious display the highest level of belief in life after death: 76 percent “to a great extent,” 21 percent “to some extent,” and only 3 percent “not at all.”

Here we observe some of the largest differences among our four student groups (i.e., in whether they believe in God or in life after death). The majority of students—those who consider themselves to be religious—are extremely homogeneous in their beliefs about such matters, while the SNR students (and students who are neither spiritual nor religious) are much more variable in where they stand. Clearly, educators who deal with SNR students should not assume that such students embrace a uniform position when it comes to these two key beliefs.

Students who are both spiritual and religious display the highest level of belief in life after death.

It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which these differences might carry over into other areas of student life. Religious students are uniformly sure of themselves when it comes to theological issues such as the existence of God and an afterlife, whereas the nonreligious students (including SNRs) show much more variability in their positions on such matters.

Spiritual/Religious Qualities

As would be expected, the two groups of students who say they are “spiritual” score higher than the other two (“not spiritual”) groups on all five measures of specific spiritual qualities developed for Cultivating the Spirit. SNR students are the highest-scoring group on three of the five measures—Spiritual Quest, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview—and the second-highest-scoring group (next to students who are spiritual and religious) on the other two measures (Equanimity and Charitable Involvement). The largest difference occurs on Ecumenical Worldview, where 28 percent of SNR students obtain high scores, compared to 20 percent of spiritual and religious students and only 6–7 percent in the two “nonspiritual” groups. 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 all life is interconnected.”

Educators should keep in mind that Cultivating the Spirit identifies a number of student experiences
that facilitate growth in these five spiritual qualities: contemplative practices such as reflection and meditation, and exposing students to diverse people, cultures, and ideas through study abroad, interracial interaction, interdisciplinary coursework, service learning and other forms of civic engagement. In addition, most forms of Charitable Involvement during college—community service work, helping friends with personal problems, donating money to charity—promote the development of the other four spiritual qualities. Growth in these spiritual qualities, in turn, was found to contribute to a number of positive college outcomes, including academic performance, leadership self-concept, ability to get along with persons from other races and cultures, satisfaction with college, and aspirations for graduate study.

A very different pattern emerges with the five religious qualities. As expected, SNR students obtain relatively low scores on Religious Engagement, Religious Commitment, and Religious/Social Conservatism—

**Religious Struggle involves**

"feeling unsettled about religious matters, disagreeing with family about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning one's religious beliefs."

Fewer than one in 10 obtain high scores, compared to 24–40 percent among spiritual and religious students—but not quite as low as students who are neither spiritual nor religious (only one in a hundred obtain high scores). Similarly, when it comes to Religious Skepticism, SNR students, with only one in four being high scorers, are a distant second to students who are neither spiritual nor religious (55 percent). (Only 2–5 percent of the two religious groups score high on Skepticism.) Finally, SNR students turn out to be the highest-scoring group on the fifth religious measure, Religious Struggle, with one in five obtaining high scores, compared to only one in 10 among the three other groups. Religious Struggle involves “feeling unsettled about religious matters, disagreeing with family about religious matters, feeling distant from God, and questioning one's religious beliefs.”

In all likelihood, the high level of Religious Struggle shown by SNR students is a reflection of the fact that they are actively exploring spiritual questions (42 percent score high on Spiritual Quest) while at the same time experiencing a good deal of Religious Skepticism.

*Cultivating the Spirit* shows that while spiritual qualities tend to show positive growth during college, religious engagement and religious conservatism both decline, and students’ overall level of religious commitment shows little change. At the same time, growth in religious qualities during college turned out not to be associated with most college outcomes.

**Demographics**

When we look at demographic characteristics of students who identify as SNR, such as race, gender, and social class, we find only minor differences from other groups. Women are most concentrated among SNR students (57 percent) and those who say they religious and spiritual (58 percent), and least concentrated among those who say they are neither (47 percent). Differences by race, parental income, and parental education are even smaller, except for a tendency for the SNR students to come from somewhat better educated families: 29 percent of their fathers have graduate degrees, compared to 17–22 percent of students in the three other groups.

**Majors and Careers**

SNR students are less likely to major in certain professional fields—business and engineering—than are students in the three other groups. For example, only 9 percent of SNR students are business majors, compared to 14–21 percent of students in the three other groups. Similarly, only 9 percent of SNR students are engineering majors, compared to 11–18 percent of students in the other groups. SNR students are also underrepresented in education (5 percent) compared to spiritual/religious students (8 percent) and religious/not spiritual students (12 percent), but are tied with not spiritual/not religious students (5 percent). Conversely, SNR students are overrepresented in the arts, humanities, and social sciences (29 percent), compared to the three other groups (13–23 percent).

These differences by major are further reflected in the students’ life goals and choices of careers. Only 20 percent of SNR students aspire to careers in business or engineering, compared to 25–38 percent of students in the three other groups, and 11 percent of SNR students aspire to careers in the arts, compared to only 6–8 percent of students in the three other groups. Consistent with these choices, more SNR students, in comparison to students in the three other groups, aspire to “write original works” and to “create works of art” and
fewer aspire to be “a success in business” or to become “very well off financially.” This last value, incidentally, reached its highest level of popularity—82 percent endorsement—in the latest (Fall 2014) edition of The American Freshman by Kevin Eagan, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Joseph J. Ramirez, Melissa C. Aragon, Maria Ramirez Suchard, and Sylvia Hurtado.

**Political Orientation**

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of SNR students is their political beliefs. Compared to the three other groups, they are much more likely to identify themselves as “liberal” or “far left” (53 percent) and much less likely to identify as “conservative” or “far right” (11 percent) (the remaining 36 percent identify as “middle-of-the-road”). At the other extreme, conservative/far right students significantly outnumber liberal/far left students among students who say they are *both* religious and spiritual (36–22 percent) as well as among those who say they are religious but not spiritual (38–21 percent). Students who are *neither* religious nor spiritual more closely resemble SNR students at 45 percent liberal/far left and 14 percent conservative/far right.

In short, it would appear that religiousness is much more closely associated with a student’s political orientation than spirituality is. In fact, among students who do not consider themselves to be religious, those who view themselves as spiritual are substantially more likely than those who do not to be on the left side of the political spectrum (53 versus 45 percent) and less likely to be on the right (11 versus 14 percent). Similarly, among students who consider themselves to be religious, those who also see themselves as spiritual tend to be slightly less conservative (and slightly more liberal) than do students who do not consider themselves to be spiritual. What this suggests is that, once we control for a student’s degree of religiousness, spirituality shows a positive association with political liberalism.

**Values**

Consistent with their liberal political identification, SNR students are more committed than students in the three other groups are to abolishing the death penalty, helping to promote racial understanding, legalizing marijuana, influencing the political structure, participating in programs to clean up the environment and “improving my understanding of other countries and cultures.” At the same time, they are the least likely of the four groups to support increased military spending, to agree that the courts “show too much concern for the rights of criminals” or that colleges have a right ban “extreme speakers” from the campus, or to believe that “the activities of married women are best confined to the home and family” or that “racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America.” Interestingly enough, a majority of students in all four groups supports gay marriage, although support is much stronger among SNR students (85 percent) and those who are neither religious nor spiritual (83 percent) than among students who are religious and spiritual (52 percent) or religious-not spiritual (57 percent). Finally, SNR students, together with students who say they are neither spiritual nor religious, are much more likely than the two “religious” groups to agree that abortion should be legal (76 and 86 percent versus 43 and 54 percent, respectively).

**Strategies for Practitioners**

**THE MAJOR LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THIS**

*This research are that spiritual life is a critical aspect of a student’s development that can affect a wide range of other student outcomes, and educators can reach the widest range of undergraduates by appealing to their “spiritual” interests and concerns. Not only do one in five students see themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” but among that majority of students who see themselves as “religious,” more than nine in 10 also see themselves as “spiritual.”*

Perhaps the most significant finding for educators, and especially for student affairs staff, is that in addition to the fact that “spiritual-not-religious” students comprise a substantial segment of the student body on many campuses, they are also a distinctive group that differs from other students in important ways, including academic interests, values, and political attitudes. These findings further support the need for universities to consider different ways to engage SNR students in spiritual development.

On most campuses, there is no organization that recognizes or represents students who are spiritual but not religious, and as I’ve noted, SNR students are not likely to participate in interfaith outreach efforts. What’s more, SNR students may be reluctant to participate in interfaith efforts because these students tend
to be left leaning in their political views, a fact that could exacerbate any perceived differences that such students may see between themselves and conventionally religious students. This sense of alienation could be especially strong on the campuses of religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Yet to exclude such students from these efforts would be especially unfortunate, given their very high scores on Ecumenical Worldview, which highlights their “interest in different religious traditions,” desire to “understand other countries and cultures,” and the “strong connection to all humanity,” a quality that would enable them to become engaged and empathetic contributors to such efforts. In addition, it seems that an increasing number of inter-

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faith “dialogues” on campuses these days have taken on a partisan flavor, with various denominational groups vying for recognition and attention. Finding a way to involve SNR students in such dialogues might have at least two advantages. First, since many SNR students are not affiliated with particular religious faiths, their presence would tend to lessen the tendency toward partisanship. And, as already suggested, the high level of Ecumenical Worldview that characterizes SNR students could have a positive effect on such dialogues.

Educators who are interested in the religious life of the institution should also consider that, despite the obvious political differences, spiritual-but-not-religious students have certain potentially important traits in common with their classmates who are spiritual and religious. Both groups, for example, tend to score high on all five spiritual qualities, especially spiritual quest, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview. And when it comes to theological issues, more than half of the spiritual-but-not-religious students say they believe in God, and 84 percent report believing in life after death, at least “to some extent.”

Perhaps the most direct way to strengthen an institution’s capacity to enhance its students’ spiritual development would be to expand existing programs and practices that have already been shown to promote spiritual development: service learning, study abroad, leadership development programs, “big questions” seminars held in residence halls, and activities that promote interracial interaction. And given that relatively few educators currently employ contemplation, meditation, or self-reflection, greater use of such practices in curricular programs offers substantial potential for strengthening the capacity of colleges and universities to facilitate students’ spiritual development. Enhancing students’ spiritual growth should help create a new generation who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations, while also enabling students to respond to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing society with a greater sense of equanimity.

**NOTES**

