Religious and Spiritual Development of UM Students

Recent studies have provided a spotlight on U.S. religious observance, and in particular, college student spirituality. According to a recent Institute for Social Research study at the University of Michigan, the United States is “among the most religious nations in the world,” with 46 percent of adults attending regular church services at least weekly (ISR, 2003). Similarly in a recent study of college students, more than half of third year college students place a high value on “integrating spirituality into my life,” while at the same time two thirds of college students state that they question their beliefs at least occasionally (Astin & Astin, 2003). As they ponder many other areas of their futures, college students are struggling to define their spiritual identities.

The CIRP survey, among many questions, asks students about past religious practices, current religious and spiritual beliefs, and future anticipation of spiritual and religious activity. Within this issue of “What’s on Our Students’ Minds,” we look at our entering students and the ways in which religious or spiritual expression are woven into their experiences and anticipated actions.

Literature

In the college student research literature, questions about religiosity or spirituality are considered central, but at the same time are often skirted (Love and Talbot, 1999). For many researchers and practitioners, these issues feel “out of bounds” for discussion, or personal or institutional discomfort with these topics comes to the fore. However, students developing as whole persons will have a spiritual and/or religious component to their growth. As far back as 1949, the American Council on Education stated that a proper education involves “attention to the student’s well-rounded development – physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually – as well as intellectually.” This component will interact and affect the other components of development; it cannot be compartmentalized from other components of student growth.

Chickering and Reisser (1993), in their discussion of identity development, describe a set of questions people resolve to build an identity, including:

Where do I come from? Who are my people? What were their values and traditions? What have they passed on to me? How do I feel about my family of origin and my ethnic heritage? Do I define myself as a part of a family group, a racial group, a religious tradition? How do I define myself as a member of a specific culture among many cultures? How do I define myself within a social and historical context? (p. 182)

Students, at the same time as they are maturing and developing self-identities (including in the area of religious or spiritual exploration) are also developing identities and beliefs in the areas of politics, intellectual curiosity, family relations, and many other facets (Anderson, 1994). In many respects, college students at all
levels are working to reconcile contradictions between multiple identities. These contradictions could include issues such as being a feminist and a Christian, or being on one end of the political spectrum while seeing people of one’s same faith advocate for positions on the other end of the political spectrum. It is with this context in mind that we seek to better understand entering students’ spiritual and religious attitudes and behaviors.

Method
The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has participated in the entering student study of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) each year since 1993. CIRP is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system that was started in 1966 by the American Council on Education, and is now conducted jointly with the University of California at Los Angeles. At the University of Michigan, Student Affairs Research administers the CIRP survey. This study serves as a baseline profile of the entering full-time undergraduate student population. The items included within this survey include students’ self-reported reasons for attending college and reasons students choose UM, as well as student hopes and expectations for the educational experience. The responses also provide family background, high school activities, and give insight into attitudes and viewpoints regarding selected social issues. During 2003, 3,092 students responded (a 61.2% response rate). This sample was representative of our entering first year class in most respects (such as residency, gender, and high school grades).

Many of these religious and spiritual expression questions have only been integrated into the last two CIRP survey administrations. These new questions focus on integration of spirituality into daily life and future decisions. A factor analysis (a statistical method to determine patterns of relationships between concepts) revealed that questions directly focused on “religiousness” (the survey term), spirituality, and religious practice did not relate closely with questions on personal philosophy or mission; there was not a relationship between questions of developing one’s personal mission and exploring one’s spiritual or religious expression.

Similarities and Differences
University of Michigan students are not so dissimilar from students nationally in terms of their religious and spiritual behaviors and beliefs. For examples:

* 78.4% of University of Michigan students attended religious services frequently or occasionally in their last year of high school, similar to the national number of 79.5%.
* While entering University of Michigan students have declined in their own self assessment of “spirituality,” they have not declined in this area as sharply as the national student body. Between 1999 and 2001, the percentage of students rating their spirituality as “above average” nationally decreased by 8%.
* Since September 11, 2001, there has not been a rise in student self ratings of either “spirituality” or “religiousness.” As well, religious service attendance has dropped for national and UM students (with the exception of UM women) since September 11.
* In the last five years, there has been a slight rise in the percentage of UM students who say they have “discussed religion” during high school. Nationally, there has been a slight drop in the percentage of students who stated that they have discussed religion.
* While the national student body reports a drop in the percentage of students desiring to “integrate spirituality in their lives” during the last five years, UM students have not had a similar decline in this desire until the last year.

In terms of the implications of being more “religious” or “spiritual” on other aspects of student lives, some interesting linkages emerge for UM entering students:

* About 24.7% of men, and 22.9% of women in 2002, entered the university with the intention of obtaining a doctorate. These numbers of doctorate seekers rise dramatically for those students who identify as the “highest 10%” for spirituality, to 31.3% of men and 32.1% of women. Law and medical degree aspirations remain largely unchanged.
* Catholic students, as well as students reporting non-Protestant Christian faiths or non-Judeo-Christian faiths (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) reported more “religiousness” than other students. While Catholic students did not report higher levels of “spirituality” than the student population, these other student groups also reported higher spirituality.
Students reporting no religious faith tradition reported vastly lower levels of “spirituality” than other students. This might contrast with a notion of many students that they will focus on spirituality without involvement with organized religion.

“Spirituality” and “Religiousness” each seemed to be linked with a variety of behaviors. In the following tables, we look at the relationships separately for men and women.

For men, higher religiousness and higher spirituality is significantly linked to increases and decreases in several areas. The following table lists these increases and decreases.

**Increased characteristics**
- Characters before college:
  - Performed volunteer work
  - Discussed religion
  - Father has a graduate degree
  - Mother has a graduate degree
  - Right leaning political view
- Increased confidence in:
  - Academic ability
  - Leadership ability
  - Popularity
  - Intellectual abilities
  - Social abilities
  - Self understanding
- Increased desire to:
  - Become a minority in even more
  - Achieve in a performing art
  - Influence social values
  - Raise a family
  - Keep up with political affairs
  - Be a community leader
  - Understand different cultures

**Decreased characteristics**
- Characteristics before college:
  - Smoking
  - Drinking beer
  - Drinking wine/liquor (occasional drinker only)
  - Left leaning and middle of the road political orientation
- Decreased desire to:
  - Be well off financially
  - Make theoretical contribution in science

Men and women are similar in many respects. Higher religiousness and spirituality, as the students assess themselves, are linked to greater volunteerism and more discussion of religion before college. Several areas of self confidence are positively associated with both higher religiousness and higher spirituality, including academics, leadership, popularity, intellectual self confidence, social self confidence, and self understanding. Men and women rating themselves higher in religiousness and in spirituality also demonstrate desires to achieve in a performing art, influence social values, raise a family, help others in difficulty, be a community leader, and understand other countries and cultures.

For women, higher religiousness and higher spirituality is significantly linked to increases and decreases in several areas. The following table lists these increases and decreases.

**Increased characteristics**
- Characters before college:
  - Performed volunteer work
  - Discussed religion
  - Right leaning political view
- Increased confidence in:
  - Academic ability
  - Leadership ability
  - Popularity
  - Intellectual abilities
  - Social abilities
  - Self understanding
  - Understand other countries and cultures
- Increased desire to:
  - Achieve in a performing art
  - Influence social values
  - Raise a family
  - Help others in difficulty
  - Make theoretical contribution in science
  - Be a community leader

**Decreased characteristics**
- Characteristics before college:
  - Smoking (religiousness only)
  - Drinking beer
  - Drinking wine/liquor (occasional drinker only)
  - Father has a graduate degree
  - Mother has a graduate degree
  - Left leaning and middle of the road political orientation
For all of these similarities, interesting differences emerge. Men who rate themselves higher in religiousness and in spirituality report significantly higher numbers of fathers and mothers with graduate degrees. Similarly oriented females were less likely to have parents with graduate degrees. At the same time, women rating themselves higher in religiousness and in spirituality reported higher desires to make theoretical contributions to science than other women, while men reported the reverse. Interestingly, the desire to contribute to science in either case did not align with parental academic achievement. For both men and women, higher religiousness and spirituality did not seem to lower feelings of being overwhelmed or depressed.

The end result of this listing appears to be a strengthening of confidence in those who report higher religiousness and spirituality. It could also indicate more universal confidence across areas; students with higher general self-confidence may not differentiate between various abilities when assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

As well, there are some “communitarian” impulses demonstrated in those rating themselves higher in religiousness and in spirituality, such as a desire to help others in difficulty or be a community leader.

**Issues for educators**

As students start their educational careers at the University of Michigan, most enter with both a sense of connection to religious or spiritual expression and a pattern of attendance at religious services. However, the intellectual curiosity we hope that students will demonstrate during their collegiate studies may result in inner conflict as students explore their multiple identities. Religious and spiritual expression provide an arena in which many other identities are tested, including political ideology, future careers, relationship building, and future religious identity. While a public university is not a training ground for a specific ideology, recent international events indicate the usefulness of the university as a place to learn about a variety of religious cultures and traditions. Opportunities, in and out of the classroom, to learn about other cultures while forming one’s own identity will help students examine and better understand their own beliefs.

**Bibliography**


