

Understanding the religious and spiritual dimensions of students' lives in the first year of college.

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Journal of College Student Development

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 44, Number 6, November/December 2003

pp. 723-745

10.1353/csd.2003.0063

ARTICLE

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Abstract

In this study we sought to understand how the first college year impacted students spiritually and religiously. The sample was comprised of 3,680 first-year students from 50 colleges and universities across the country and included individuals representing a variety of racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds. Overall, students became less religiously active, but were more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives after one year. Further, religiousness and spirituality were highly correlated, although personal characteristics, institutional variables, and college experiences were also associated with these constructs.

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The present-day college or university tends to refrain from directly encouraging students to reflect on their "inner lives," particularly their spiritual values and development (Astin, 2002; Raper, 2001). Although higher education was steeped in religious tradition for much of its past, Enlightenment ideals during the late 19th century encouraged a shift toward valuing positivistic paradigms and scientific objectivity (Marsden, 1994). The turning tide had vast implications—both positive and negative—for academe. On one hand, it allowed for scientific advancement and made possible the representation of nonreligious or non-Protestant philosophies in the academy (Marsden; Raper). On the other hand, spirit lost ground to science in the process, and religious perspectives began to appear out of place in the secular milieu

(Marsden; Raper). Smith (2001) summarized the current attitude toward spirituality in higher education: "I have never encountered students who did not think that they had a spiritual side to their nature, but organized, institutionalized spirituality (which is what religion comes down to) is not well regarded on campus" (p. 96).

The purpose of the current study was to explore the extent to which students in their first year of college were involved in religious practices and considered themselves spiritual. We traced changes in religiousness and spirituality using a longitudinal sample of first-year college students who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey in Fall 2000 and a follow-up survey, Your First College Year (YFCY), in Spring 2001. Furthermore, multiple regression analyses were used to highlight the precollege characteristics, high school activities, college environments, and college experiences that predicted religious behavior and spiritual self-perceptions at the end of the first college year.

Defining Religiousness and Spirituality

Love (2001) defines *religion* as "a shared system of beliefs, principles or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe" (p. 8). Although *spirituality* is difficult to characterize, Love and Talbot (1999) derived

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