

Fine arts majors more spiritual than science or business majors, UCLA survey indicates_50304

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LOS ANGELES (RNS)-Are biology majors a bunch of godless evolutionists and business students cold-hearted capitalists? Are art and music students the ones truly in touch with their spiritual sides?

Maybe so, according to new findings from the first-ever survey of the religious habits of American college students, conducted by researchers at the University of California-Los Angeles.

The national survey of 3,680 students by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute found religious commitment runs strongest among fine arts, education and humanities majors, and lowest among biology, history

and sociology majors.

"Naturally, scientists are focused on the exterior world of objects and things, whereas the humanities and people in the fine arts are more focused on the interior," said Alexander Astin, co-director of the study.

Astin defined "spiritual commitment" through a series of questions that measured personal value of religion, attendance at worship services, belief in a higher power and applying religious values to everyday life.

Sixty-two percent of fine arts majors rated high on "spiritual commitment," compared to 52 percent of journalism majors, 44 percent of business majors, 43 percent of biology majors, 41 percent of political science majors and 37 percent of sociology majors.

In addition, the study found arts and humanities majors were twice as likely to exhibit signs of "spiritual distress"—questioning beliefs, struggling to understand evil, wrestling with religious upbringing—as business or computer science students.

Still, Astin said it is premature to label all scientists or computer whizzes as spiritually hollow. Most of these academic disciplines simply don't prompt or promote spiritual reflection, he said.

But for biology students who are training to be doctors, and business majors entering the work force in the shadow of Enron and Martha Stewart, colleges would do well to help students hone their internal spiritual and moral compasses, he said.

"I would say that's something desperately needed in modern medicine," he said. "It's the ability of the physician to empathize with the patients' interior situation and not just treat them like a piece of meat."

The newest findings, part of an ongoing survey of students at 46 U.S.

campuses, support Astin's early data that show campuses do a poor job of fostering spiritual development. Last November, Astin said nearly two-thirds of students said their professors do not encourage discussions of spiritual matters, and 53 percent of students said time in the classroom had no impact on their spiritual development.

What's more, only 29 percent of college juniors attend religious services, compared to 52 percent of incoming freshmen.

Among Astin's other findings:

Students who party frequently are more likely to stop attending religious services, and "spiritually committed" students generally earn higher grades.

- ☒ Students who score high on measures of spiritual commitment generally are healthier, happier and more involved in community service.
- ☒ Education students (46 percent) showed the highest levels of "spiritual growth," followed by one-third of journalism majors, one-quarter of political science majors and one-fifth of physical science majors.

One striking finding, however, showed that students engaged in a "spiritual quest" to find meaning in their lives also show higher levels of "psychological distress," evidenced by stress or anxiety. Majors who tend to be more spiritually engaged—the humanities and fine arts—displayed the highest levels of physical distress, while education, business and computer science majors ranked near the bottom.

"Part of questing is not having answers. It's not necessarily a bad thing," Astin said. "Psychological distress can be a positive thing if it leads people to solve some of their problems."

How spiritual commitment varies among different college majors

High levels of religious commitment

- ☒ 62 percent-fine arts majors
- ☒ 59 percent-education
- ☒ 57 percent-humanities
- ☒ 53 percent-health professional
- ☒ 52 percent-journalism
- ☒ 51 percent-psychology
- ☒ 44 percent-business
- ☒ 43 percent-physical science
- ☒ 43 percent-computer science
- ☒ 43 percent-biological science
- ☒ 41 percent-history or political science
- ☒ 37 percent-sociology

Experienced high levels of religious/spiritual growth during the first three years of college

- ☒ 46 percent-education majors

- 40 percent-fine arts
- 37 percent-humanities
- 36 percent-business
- 35 percent-journalism
- 34 percent-health professional
- 33 percent-psychology
- 28 percent-sociology
- 28 percent-biological science
- 25 percent-history or political science
- 22 percent-computer science
- 19 percent-physical science

Engaged in a “spiritual quest”

- 43 percent-fine arts majors
- 42 percent-humanities
- 38 percent-psychology
- 37 percent-journalism
- 33 percent-history or political science

- 31 percent-biological science
- 30 percent-sociology
- 29 percent-education
- 26 percent-health professional
- 24 percent-business
- 23 percent-computer science
- 19 percent-physical science

Express high levels of “spiritual distress”

31 percent-humanities majors

27 percent-fine arts

25 percent-history or political science

24 percent-sociology

24 percent-journalism

24 percent-psychology

22 percent-biological science

21 percent-physical science

18 percent-health professional

17 percent-education

15 percent-business

10 percent-computer science

Source: Higher Education Research Institute/University of California-Los Angeles.

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