

College students' spiritual interests increase; worship attendance drops

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LOS ANGELES (RNS)—Though college students' attendance at worship services declines, their interest in spiritual matters grows during their time on campus, a new UCLA study shows.

UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute compared the views of students who were freshmen in the fall of 2004 with the same students' thoughts in the spring of 2007, when they were juniors.

The survey of more than 14,000 students found more than 50 percent of students considered "integrating spirituality into my life" very important or essential in 2007, an increase of almost 10 percentage points from 2004.

Likewise, more students thought "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was essential or very important.

While their spiritual interests increased, their worship attendance did not.

Slightly more than half the students said they attended services in college at about the same rate as they attended them in high school.

Almost 40 percent, however, said they worshipped less frequently. Seven percent said they worshipped more.

Researchers also concluded an increasing percentage of students had an “ecumenical worldview.” In 2004, 42 percent said they endorsed “improving my understanding of other countries and cultures;” 55 percent said the same in 2007.

Students showed increasing agreement over time with the idea that nonreligious people can lead lives as moral as those of religious believers, with 90 percent approving the statement this year.

“The data suggest that college is influencing students in positive ways that will better prepare them for leadership roles in our global society,” said UCLA emeritus professor Alexander Astin, one of the principal investigators for the research.

The research included 14,527 students attending 136 U.S. colleges and universities. Its margin of error is between 1 and 2 percentage points. The John Templeton Foundation funds the project, now in its fifth year.