

Survey: College freshmen distance themselves from religion

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—This year's college freshmen are less concerned with their religious identity and more concerned about their job prospects, a recent survey reveals.

[The American Freshman](#), released by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, included responses from more than 153,000 college freshmen at 227 schools nationwide.

The survey suggested college freshmen increasingly are distancing themselves from religion. Nearly 28 percent of students surveyed did not identify with a religion, a number that has increased 12 percent since 1971.

Ajay Nair, [Emory University's](#) dean of campus life, said this number suggests students are participating in religious life in other ways.

More 'spiritual' than religious

"Religion has become increasingly politicized in recent years, and, as a result, I think students may be reluctant to identify with religious institutions," Nair said. "But it doesn't mean they aren't spiritual, and I think institutions like Emory do a great job of helping the spirituality of our students flourish."

Alana Redden, a freshman at Emory, experienced this firsthand. Growing up in Vermont with a mother who converted to Judaism and a father who converted to Buddhism, Redden did not fully explore her religious interests

before arriving at Emory.

“I’ve always identified with Buddhism and its approach to the world, but—besides my dad—I didn’t have a Buddhist community to plug into at home,” Redden said. “So, I have plugged into the Buddhist community here at Emory, which has been really interesting.”

Redden plans to continue that journey while in Tibet for a semester-long exchange program.

More planning for higher degrees

While Redden already is planning her time abroad, many students are looking even further into the future. The survey also revealed more than 43 percent of first-year students plan to pursue a master’s degree. In 1974, just 28 percent of students expressed similar aspirations.

Redden attributes the appeal of a graduate degree to the increasingly competitive job market.

“There’s an increasing emphasis on education as the years go on,” Redden said. “Undergrads are realizing that the job markets are really competitive, and to be able to get the job that they’re looking for, a lot of careers require master’s degrees.”