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# Spirituality, Liberal Learning, and College Student Engagement

ONE OF THE MORE INTRIGUING TRENDS at the turn of the twenty-first century is the ascendant influence of religion in various aspects of American life. The renewed interest in religion and spirituality is not just a function of aging baby boomers acknowledging their mortality. The University of Pennsylvania reported that 86 percent of those between the ages of eleven and eighteen believe religion is an important part of life (Hulett 2004).

Religion has always had a place in American higher education. Most colonial colleges were founded to transmit and preserve the values, beliefs, traditions, and cultural heritage of their sponsoring denominational groups. Today, the small segment of higher education devoted to this mission includes denominational and faith-based institutions, particularly the members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and some visible national universities such as Baylor, Brigham Young, and Notre Dame. At the same time, increasing numbers of students are openly practicing their religious beliefs or exploring spiritual dimensions of their personal development, whether at a small private

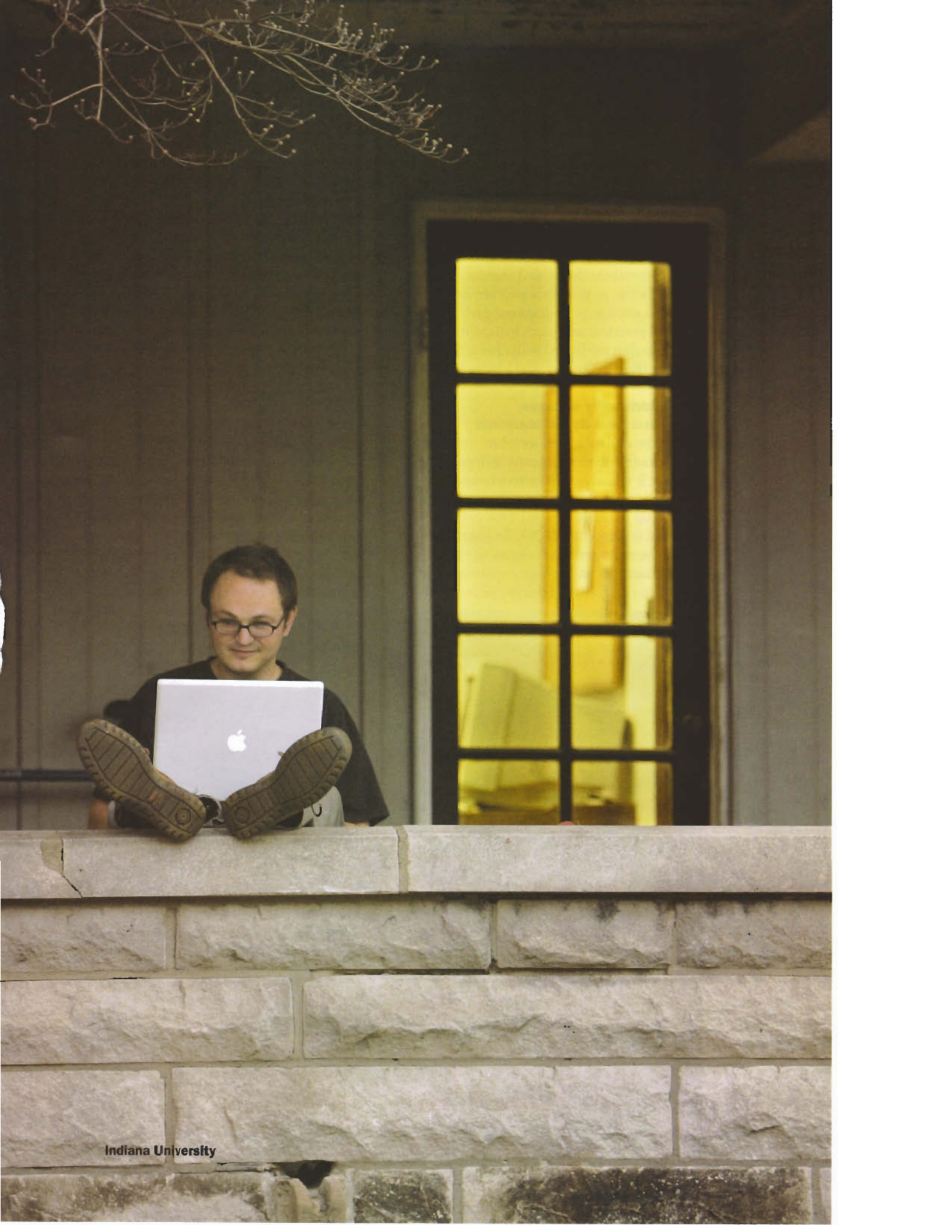
church-related college or a large public university. Their presence will, if it hasn't already, present challenges to faculty members, administrators, and governing boards who have not determined how to strike the appropriate balance between spiritual or religious practices and student learning, or whether these human development goals can or even should be addressed within the curriculum.

Although the relevant issues are too complex to summarize here, a few tension points immediately surface. For example, some faculty members worry that students who arrive at college holding fast to religious beliefs are conditioned to resist the "liberal learning" curriculum and may graduate without seriously reexamining their beliefs and values. At institutions as different as Knox College (Hulett 2004) and the Air Force Academy (Gorski 2004), many students exhibit little tolerance for peers who practice religious beliefs different from their own. These behaviors, too, are antithetical to the goals of liberal learning.

At first blush, the search for meaning—including reflecting on one's spiritual or religious beliefs—is consistent with exposure to liberal arts educational practices (Blaich et al. 2004) that encourage students to become more open to alternative, diverse views about various matters, including religion and spirituality (Astin et al. 2005). On balance, college does have a liberalizing effect as students tend to become less rigid in their orientation

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toward religion by the time they are seniors. Students attending a church-related college are less likely to experience changes in their religious affiliation and degree of religiosity (Astin 1993; Feldman and Newcomb 1969; Kuh 1999; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Faculty members, peers, and campus cultures are key factors as an institution's environmental press can encourage or discourage religious and spiritual practices and participation in other activities that are linked with character development (Kuh 2000; Kuh and Umbach 2004).

**Does spirituality enhance or detract from liberal learning?**

Given the dramatic demographic and attitudinal changes marking recent college-going cohorts, it would be instructive to know how participating in spirituality-enhancing activities relates to other aspects of the college experience (Astin et al. 2005). To learn more about the relationships between spirituality, liberal learning, and college experiences, we turned to the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) database. Using students' responses to NSSE questions, we can estimate whether students who frequently worship or engage in other spirituality-enhancing practices are more or less likely to

- engage in deep learning activities;
- interact with students from different religious and political backgrounds;
- participate in community service and service-learning programs;
- perceive the campus environment to be supportive;
- be satisfied with college;
- make gains in writing clearly, speaking effectively, self-understanding, understanding others, and so forth.

In addition, we can determine the extent to which these relationships are "general" (i.e., essentially the same across all students) or "conditional" (i.e., specific to certain types of students or to institutions with certain characteristics). For example, do students majoring in traditional liberal arts fields differ in systematic ways from their counterparts in



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other majors? Does the strength of the denominational affiliation of an institution matter to spirituality, college student engagement, and desired liberal learning outcomes?

#### **Who, where, what, how:**

##### **A note on methods<sup>1</sup>**

Our data come from 149,801 randomly sampled first-year (51 percent) and senior students (49 percent) who completed the NSSE survey in 2004 when they were attending 461 different four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Almost two-thirds were women; 90 percent were full-time students. In terms of major field, about 40 percent of the seniors were majoring in what might be considered liberal arts disciplines (arts, humanities, biological and physical sciences, social sciences) with the rest distributed among professional fields (42 percent) and other areas (15 percent) or undecided (3 percent).

Schools were assigned to one of five major Carnegie institutional categories: Doctoral/Research-Extensive (Doc-Ext), Doctoral/

Research-Intensive (Doc-Int), Master's I & II (MA), Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts (Bac-LA), and Baccalaureate-General (Bac-Gen).

About 16 percent of the institutions are liberal arts colleges, the same proportion that make up the national pool. In addition, twenty-nine of the participating colleges and universities were classified as "faith-based" for the purpose of this study. The faith-based college category is made up of institutions with reputations for being fundamentalistic in their adherence to a religious tradition, including member schools of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. Comparing faith-based with other institutions is an attempt to better understand how the emphasis schools give to religion and religious practices affects other aspects of the college experience.

##### **Variables of interest**

*Student Engagement.* Three student engagement measures are of particular interest in this study (see box below). The first two, spiritual practices and interactions with diverse peers, deal

#### MEASURES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

**Spiritual practices (one item):** In your experience at this institution, how often have you participated in activities to enhance your spirituality (worship, meditation, prayer, etc.)?

**Interactions with diverse peers (one item):** In your experience at this institution, how often have you had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values?

**Deep learning (nine items):** How often have you:

- Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources, or included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments?
- Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions?
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class?
- Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)?
- Synthesized and organized ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships?
- Analyzed the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components?
- Made judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions?
- Applied theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations?

with aspects of religion and spirituality. The third, deep learning, is particularly relevant because it is composed of behaviors that are essential to acquiring the skills and competencies needed to become an intentional learner, one of the more important outcomes claimed by proponents of liberal learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2002; Entwistle and Entwistle 1991; Schneider 2004; Tagg 2003).

To see if participating in spiritual activities made any difference in how students spent their time, we also included in the analyses several other engagement measures from NSSE, such as contact with faculty members outside of class, community service, and service learning.

*Perceptions of the Campus Environment.* Students' perceptions of the campus environment are associated with their engagement in educationally purposeful activities and many desirable outcomes of college. To assess the degree to which students perceive their institution supports and encourages their development both in and out of the classroom and fosters positive, productive relationships among students, faculty, and administrators, we included three sets of environment items in the analysis: perceptions of the extent to which the out-of-class environment is supportive of students' academic and social needs (three items); quality of relationships among faculty, administrators and students (three items); overall satisfaction with the college experience (two items).

*Self-Reported Outcomes.* NSSE asks students to estimate the progress or gains they have made since starting college in a variety of areas, almost all of which are valued in the liberal arts tradition: general education (four items—thinking, writing and speaking clearly, and acquiring a broad general education); personal-social development (eight items such as self understanding, developing a personal code of ethics, and understanding people from other backgrounds); practical competence (three items—acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills, using computing and information technology, and analyzing quantitative problems); and deepened sense of spirituality (one item).

#### **Analytical approach**

After examining various descriptive measures, we fitted the regression models in table 1 iteratively to include only items that were

statistically related to the behaviors and outcomes of interest, including spiritual practices, interactions with diverse peers, deep learning, and a deepened sense of spirituality and other self-reported outcomes. Because our analyses indicated that grades and major field made no difference in terms of spiritual practices, these variables were dropped from the regression models. Student background characteristics and institutional characteristics were used as controls.

The plus and minus signs in table 1 represent the effect size associated with the variable, or the degree to which a statistically significant difference represents a “real,” meaningful difference in student behavior or institutional performance. In other words, is the difference big enough that the finding warrants attention and, perhaps, interventions in terms of policy or programmatic changes? Plus signs indicate a positive relationship between variables; minus signs indicate a negative relationship. The more plus or minus signs, the stronger the relationship. Additional information about the data sources and analytical methods used for this study is available online at [www.indiana.edu/~nsse/html/research.htm](http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/html/research.htm) or [www.teaglefoundation.org](http://www.teaglefoundation.org).

#### **What we learned**

Our analyses revealed three noteworthy patterns.

1. *Students who frequently engage in spirituality-enhancing practices also participate more in a broad cross-section of collegiate activities.*

Students who engage frequently in spirituality-enhancing activities exercise more, attend cultural events more often, and are more likely to perform community service. They also are somewhat more satisfied with college and view the out-of-class environment more positively. In addition, they spend less time relaxing and socializing (including “partying”) and more time in extracurricular activities. One exception to the latter finding is that varsity athletes participate less in spirituality-enhancing activities than any other student group. Worship, meditation, prayer, and similar activities during college appear to contribute to personal and social development through a deepened sense of spirituality. Perhaps most important, there is no evidence that spiritual practices have negative effects on other desirable activities, such as studying, deep learning, or extracurricular involvements.

Table 1

**Relationships between spirituality, liberal learning, and student engagement\***

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	DEPENDENT VARIABLE						
	Deep learning	Spiritual practices	Interactions w/ diverse peers: relig., polit., values	Deepened sense of spirituality	Personal-social development	Practical competence	General education
<b>Engagement</b>							
Deep learning	n/a			+	++	++	++
Spiritual practices		n/a		++			
Working with faculty out of classroom	+						
Community-based work as part of a course	+	+		+	+		
Community service/volunteerism		+					
Interactions with diverse peers: religious beliefs, political opinions, and personal values	++		n/a	-			
Interactions with diverse peers: race and ethnicity	+		+++				
Attending art events		+	+				
Exercising		+					
Relaxing and socializing		-					
<b>Perceptions of the Campus Environment</b>							
Perceptions of the out-of-class environment	+	+		++	++	+	++
Quality of relationships	+			+	+	+	+
Overall satisfaction with the college experience	+	+		+	+	++	++
<b>Institutional Mission</b>							
Faith-based institution	-	+++	--	+++	+	-	-
* Student- and institution-level controls included class standing, sex, race/ethnicity, enrollment, transfer students, participation in the Greek system, parental income, international students, athletes, self-reported grades, sector, Carnegie type, selectivity, and enrollment size.							

2. *Institutional mission and campus culture matter more to spirituality and liberal learning outcomes than most other institutional characteristics.*

Students who view the out-of-class climate as supportive of their social and nonacademic needs report greater gains in all of the outcomes on the NSSE survey, including a deepened sense of spirituality. From analyses not displayed in table 1, we noted that students at baccalaureate general colleges participate more frequently in spirituality-enhancing activities and gain more in this area, but they are less likely to engage in meaningful ways with students from different backgrounds.

**Spirituality-enhancing activities do not seem to hinder, and may even have mildly salutary effects on, engagement in educationally purposeful activities and desired outcomes of college**

In contrast, students at baccalaureate liberal arts colleges interact more frequently with diverse peers and are comparable to students at other types of institutions (except baccalaureate general colleges) in how often they participate in spirituality-enhancing activities and

the extent to which they deepen their sense of spirituality during college.

Institutional size and selectivity have only trivial effects on the frequency with which students engage in spirituality-enhancing activities and interact with students from different backgrounds or the extent to which they deepen their sense of spirituality. This finding is consistent with many other studies of the relationships between institutional characteristics and student engagement (Kuh and Pascarella 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

3. *Students at faith-based colleges engage in spiritual practices more and gain more in this area, but participate less often in certain other activities associated with liberal education outcomes.*

As expected, students at the twenty-nine faith-based schools worship much more frequently and report deepening their sense of spirituality to a greater degree than students at other institutions. This is true even though other denominationally-affiliated colleges are combined with nondenominational institutions in the comparison group.

However, students at faith-based colleges have far fewer serious conversations with students whose religious, political, and personal beliefs and values differ from their own. This

is not surprising, given the characteristics of students who matriculate and persist. Because the student bodies at many of these institutions are relatively homogenous, students have less contact with people whose values, attitudes, and beliefs are very different from their own. As a result, the campus culture tends to reinforce a fairly narrow range of thought and action.

The findings also indicate a tendency for students at faith-based colleges to engage less in deep learning activities and to gain less in developing practical competence and general education outcomes. However, the effect sizes associated with these differences are small. To the extent there are educational and social tradeoffs for attending a faith-based college, especially in terms of outcomes traditionally associated with liberal learning, the collegiate experience of students at faith-based colleges warrant a more thorough examination.

**What to make of this?**

For those concerned that the resurgence in participating in worship, prayer, meditation, and related practices might have a dampening effect on liberal learning and engaging in other educationally purposeful activities, the answer from this study is “not to worry.” Spirituality-enhancing activities do not seem to hinder, and may even have mildly salutary effects on, engagement in educationally purposeful activities and desired outcomes of college. In fact, participation in religious activities is positively correlated with interacting with students with very different religious and political beliefs and personal values, though the effect size is trivial. In addition, involvement in spirituality-enhancing activities during college is strongly linked to a deepened sense of spirituality across all types of students. These patterns are pretty much the same across different types and sizes of institutions and major fields. The one clear exception is faith-based colleges where students on average are highly involved in spirituality-enhancing activities, but have less contact with students from different backgrounds and engage less often in deep learning activities.

It stands to reason that colleges with a faith-based mission attract students who are predisposed to participating in religious and spirituality-enhancing and related activities and reinforce these behaviors after they

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matriculate. Also, students who perceive their campus environment to be supportive of their needs and interests are more likely to engage in spiritual practices and to report deepening their sense of spirituality to a greater degree. This leads us to wonder: What can colleges do to make their campus climates more supportive of students' nonacademic needs and interests and to involve them in religious and spiritual activities in ways that are compatible with their interests and further liberal education aims? Do some faith-based colleges engage their students in deep learning activities to a greater degree than others, thereby attaining a better balance in terms of religiosity and liberal arts education? Do some public institutions have an especially hospitable campus climate that encourages student participation in spirituality-enhancing activities for those seeking them?

The changing nature and characteristics of college students in virtually every sector, coupled with the rising prominence of religion and spirituality worldwide, underscore the importance of answering these and related questions. Without such information, efforts to improve teaching and learning will almost certainly have limited impact on student development. □

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the authors' names on the subject line.

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