

Fine arts majors most religious, survey finds: Sociology majors least religious

News in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

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 the findings from the first-ever survey of the religious habits of American college students, conducted by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles. The national survey of 3,680 students by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute found that 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," Alexander Astin, co-director of the study, said in an interview. 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, Astin found that 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. Some academic disciplines simply don't prompt or promote spiritual reflection, he said.

For biology students who are training to be doctors, however, 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 patient's 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 showing that campuses do a poor job of fostering spiritual development. According to Astin, last November 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. Those who tend to be more spiritually engaged—majoring in 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." *-Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*