

## The Right Time and Place for Big Questions

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In April a national poll conducted by Harvard University found that seven out of 10 college students consider religion to be important in their lives. Moreover, of the 1,200 students surveyed, one-fourth said that they had become more spiritual in college, while only 7 percent said they had become less so.

Similarly a survey of almost 3,700 students by the Spirituality in Higher Education Project, sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, found that 77 percent said they prayed, 71 percent said they considered religion personally helpful, and 73 percent said religious or spiritual beliefs helped develop their identities. And, in a much larger survey by the project, more than two-thirds of the 100,000-plus freshman said it was “essential” or “very important” that their college experience enhance their self-understanding.

What do those results say about religiosity and spirituality of today’s young people, especially after they enter college? According to Helen Astin, one of the lead researchers of the UCLA project, “Students become less religious while in college with respect to attending church, but their goal to integrate spirituality into their lives increases in importance.”

To be sure, perhaps as many as a quarter of all college students want nothing to do with religion or spirituality in any form. In addition, many Americans say that they have no religious affiliation—the number doubled between 1990 and 2001—and undergraduates probably reflect that trend. But many of the students who report that they are nondenominational still say they hold strong views on moral issues and the Bible. Most important, many also often say that they have a strong desire for an environment that nurtures spirituality.

Thus, a class of 50 students may include a dozen who are hostile to or uninterested in religion and, at the other extreme, another dozen who are committed to specific religious doctrines that they may not want challenged. But the class will also probably contain a larger group of students

in the middle, whom Christian Smith, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in his recent book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford 2005), calls “moralistic, therapeutic deists”—those who affirm that religion is a “good thing” because it makes you feel like a better person. They may complain, as nearly two-thirds of the respondents to the UCLA survey did, that their professors simply don’t provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life and other spiritual or religious matters.

That may sound like a pedagogical nightmare. But could it perhaps, instead, be an opportunity for more-effective teaching? Indeed, some “big questions” are now front and center in the consciousness of many students. Of course, “What am I going to do with my life?” is often the biggest of the big questions, but there are also questions concerning personal and civic morality, the existence and nature of radical evil, the perennial tug of war between scientific and religious worldviews, and the relationship between wealth and happiness, and between power and justice, in both national and international affairs.

Students sometimes feel as if they are the first ever to struggle with such questions. Part of a liberal education, surely, is to remind them that many other people over the centuries, from Homer to Toni Morrison, have confronted those questions, too, and can provide historical perspective, analytical techniques, a rich vocabulary for thinking about them. Might not both religious and secular approaches offer colleges a chance to help students systematically discuss the issues that seem to be on their minds and, at the same time, reinvigorate the liberal arts?

To explore that possibility, the Teagle Foundation, where I serve as president, recently brought together, in one of its “listenings”—guided, but informal, discussions aimed at helping the foundation formulate its policies—faculty members, chaplains, administrators, students, and researchers from a wide range of four-year colleges. We wanted to hear how the role of religion was changing on various campuses and whether those changes could lead to a more robust engagement with liberal education.

We followed that meeting, where we formulated the issues in religious terms, with a “virtual listening” on the Internet that posed similar questions in resolutely secular terms: “Are today’s students interested in big questions, and if so, how are colleges responding?” We let the participants define the term “big questions” for themselves, simply providing examples like: “What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death?” In other words, we asked about questions of meaning and value that traditionally have been central to a liberal education.

The participants in the two sessions spoke in different terms, but there was wide agreement in both sessions that many students are not only curious about such matters, they are “hungry” and “thirsty” for opportunities to think them through in informed and systematic ways. The participants also expressed some dissatisfaction with the way colleges are dealing with those questions, especially when the topic of religion came up.

One president of a prestigious liberal-arts college, for example, wrote to say that she thought

colleges were responding fairly well to the needs of “religiously oriented students,” apparently referring to institutions’ provision of places for worship, meeting spaces for students of different faiths, menu options, and the like. But, she added, “I don’t think colleges are dealing with what I call the theological questions—the questions religion might answer—of our students ... in ways they were in the 1950s or 1960s or other eras.”

Yet when we explored specifically what colleges should do to help students grapple with those questions, agreement disappeared. Should the big questions even be a legitimate concern for an institution? And, if so, did such questions have to be dealt with in the curriculum? Could they be left to the chaplains, the student-life professionals, or the proverbial late-night bull sessions? Were faculty members adequately trained to deal with such matters? Would they take them on? Or were the professional demands of advancing and transmitting disciplinary knowledge too great? On those matters, no consensus emerged, and the participants reported that most campuses seem not to have a venue to discuss them.

Yet many professors with whom I have spoken say that they want time to discuss big questions with students and colleagues, although they are often uncomfortable with explicitly framing those questions in religious terms. Some assume that students who use religious language to talk about such matters are, as one of my friends put it, “just a bunch of anti-intellectual fanatics.”

To explore whether that assumption is accurate, I called George D. Kuh, a professor of higher education at Indiana University in Bloomington, and asked him if he could confirm or refute it from the data he has collected through the National Survey of Student Engagement. He and a colleague, Robert M. Gonyea, analyzed responses from 150,000 students at 461 four-year colleges to determine the relationship between participation in various religious or spiritual practices and “deep learning,” or the ability to analyze, integrate, and synthesize information from various sources and apply it to new experiences. Their study found that what they termed “spiritually enhancing activities”—worship, meditation, and prayer had no negative effect on “educationally purposeful activities.”

The separate findings of Margarita Mooney, a research fellow in the Office of Population Research at Princeton University, were no less significant. Analyzing nearly 4,000 responses from students at 28 highly selective colleges, collected through the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, she found that students who participated in religious rituals once a week studied longer and reported higher grade-point averages and greater institutional satisfaction than their peers.

Such students, in other words, are not “anti-intellectual fanatics.” Neither of the two studies, to be sure, looks in detail at affiliations with specific religious groups. It would be useful to know more about evangelical-Christian students, whose prominence on campuses has increased so much in recent years. Yet one thing is clear: Although evangelical students are more likely now to identify themselves as “conservative” or “Republican” than in the past, they defy some widespread stereotypes about conservative opinions. Joel Carpenter, the provost of Calvin College, called my attention to a book published in 2002 by his colleagues Corwin E. Smidt and James M. Penning, *Evangelicalism: The Next Generation* (Baker Academic, 2002). The authors note that, while

evangelical students hold some predictably conservative views, the majority also favor the Equal Rights Amendment and registering all guns, and they are 50-50 when it comes to banning all abortions and favoring government programs to deal with poverty. Further, they oppose increasing defense spending and raising tariffs to protect American jobs.

When colleges stereotype such students, when faculty members dismiss their deeply held views as anti-intellectual, the students may take refuge in a hidden network of religious groups, Bible-study classes, and worship activities on their campuses. They often report that such “underground universities” provide a safe space for them to speak their minds and talk about matters that otherwise get short shrift.

At times, such networks also are places to gain advice about course selection. In discussing that with a student, I learned the word “faithbuster”—as in, “Avoid Professor G.’s course in Early Christianity; it’s a ‘faithbuster.’” I also learned that on some campuses, local clergymen and women teach “countercourses” to refute the assertions made in courses in the regular curriculum.

At first I deplored the concept of the underground university. Then a colleague asked me if anyone had ever taken my teaching seriously enough to organize or participate in a countercourse. I began to feel guilty that I hadn’t provoked stronger reactions. He went on: “Is there anything the matter with students’ meeting in this way? Isn’t it a kind of compliment to have someone pay such attention to your views?” The questions brought me back to the fundamental question of this essay: Can students’ interest in and engagement with religion and spiritual matters, and the questions associated with them, invigorate their liberal education?

Based on my conversations with faculty members in a wide range of fields, meetings with students, and class visits, the answer clearly is “Yes.” As a result, the Teagle Foundation invited colleges to apply for support for projects that deal with big questions in undergraduate education. We received more than 60 preliminary proposals, including projects that bring together humanistic and scientific approaches to the concept of “the human” and explorations of the role of the liberal arts in preparing for one’s lifework. Some proposals were shaped by a specifically religious point of view; others were secular. Some of the most interesting aimed to bring those two perspectives together. The large number of excellent proposals made the selection process difficult.

To learn which projects we supported, please visit our Web site (<http://www.teaglefoundation.org>).

Despite the number and quality of those applications, however, we can see that there is still reluctance among faculty members to engage with the big questions—many professors clearly feel that they are not adequately trained to deal with them. Faculty members have also expressed concerns that tenure and salary increases will be put in jeopardy if they break out of existing disciplinary paradigms—or that a few students who find that class discussions run counter to their beliefs or preferences could damage professors’ careers by filling out negative course evaluations.

While those are serious concerns, they are not insurmountable obstacles. Institutions that have developed methods and structures to promote such engagement with students report encouraging

results. One college, for example, simply dedicated a vacant faculty line for a year to organizing a faculty seminar along those lines.

Teachers sometimes need to be assured that they do not have to answer the questions for their students; rather, their role is just to help students think about them. As a friend recently wrote, it is less a question of expertise than of feeling “comfortable enough to articulate an issue in a way that is cogent and civil, and encourages and doesn’t close off discussion.” Those are skills that most faculty members already have or can readily develop.

As for faculty members’ concerns about putting their careers at risk, a colleague who teaches at an institution known for its religiously conservative methods told me that he makes very explicit at the outset of each course the approach that he will take, the reason for it, and the benefits that can come from having one’s faith challenged by contrary points of view. Some students, he explained, drop the course. But those who stay are usually positive in their response to it, as are his colleagues.

Two other faculty reactions can also be impediments. One is, “We don’t want to ‘proselytize,’ ‘brainwash,’ or ‘fashion’ our students.” The other is, “But we are already dealing with the big questions.” Both concerns, however, are distractions from the main issue. The only faculty members I know who want to mold their students are the ones who define their job as producing the new generation of Ph.D.’s in their field. Otherwise no one is trying to shape students’ lives for them.

The claim that professors are already dealing with the big questions has more to be said for it. In the humanities, course syllabi, new programs and departments, and collegewide curricula have changed markedly in recent years, often focusing on identity questions. They have provided opportunities for students to explore questions of racial, ethnic, and gender and sexual identities and have transformed curricular structures and professional patterns. Faculty members, as well as students, care about those questions and, as a result, write and teach with passion about them. The success of such efforts offers lessons about how to deal with other big questions in the curriculum and scholarship.

But, at the same time, older structures that used to put the big questions front and center have often failed or faded. Those include core curricula, great-books programs, surveys “from Plato to NATO,” and general-education requirements of various sorts. Because the texts and problems in such courses often dealt with civic, moral, cosmic, or theological topics, it was hard to escape some big questions or some of the approaches used to deal with them. Although colleges cannot or should not revert to their old patterns, the demise of those patterns may leave a certain vacuum which, if not filled in constructive ways, will draw simplistic or anti-intellectual responses.

Students, particularly those entering college at the traditional age, lack the perspective, vocabulary, analytical and logical skills, and appreciation for the approaches of various philosophical and religious traditions. They have a convenient set of clichés derived from popular culture, but not much else. Unless they are challenged to find better ways of thinking, those clichés will continue to

carry the day.

That is the situation that we face now: a changing set of student concerns and commitments, some “hunger” and “thirst” for better ways to approach those questions, but perplexity about how to find those ways. There’s a need—and an opportunity—for liberal education to respond with imagination and fresh approaches.