

# College Students' Experiences of Spirituality

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## *Faculty Introduction*

Dr. Gulden Esat

The research conducted by Ms. Enriquez was initiated as part of her volunteer research assistantship. I must express my appreciation for Ms. Enriquez's exceptional work in data entry and qualitative data analyses; she learned very quickly and demonstrated remarkable proficiency. Ms. Enriquez exhibited a genuine interest in comprehending the psychology of college students and how they conceptualize their spirituality. The outcome of this study is significant as it uncovers the spiritual aspirations of a diverse sample of college students. Understanding these spiritual dimensions can inform policies and practices in higher education, using these spiritual values as resources to face the stress of academic life. By participating in this project, Ms. Enriquez gained valuable insights into qualitative research methodology, enhancing her academic growth.

## *Abstract*

In the transition to adulthood, college students navigate a period of significant personal growth and exploration. Spirituality involves an individual's personal pursuit of meaning, purpose, and connection with the sacred or transcendent. It impacts relationships, academic pursuits, and overall well-being independently of organized religion. Spirituality seeks existential understanding and personal growth, often beyond traditional religious doctrines. This research investigates college students' spiritual aspirations, offering insights into their diverse perspectives. Participants responded to an anonymous, open-ended questionnaire exploring spirituality in interpersonal relationships, education, and broader life domains. The study reveals that a significant majority of college students prioritize spirituality, emphasizing their search for meaning, personal growth, and deeper community connections. These findings confirm spirituality as a pervasive wellbeing influence that shapes students' identities, including their academic pursuits.

Spirituality, a multifaceted concept often intertwined with existential inquiries and personal beliefs, is a central aspect of human experience. Originating from a wide array of faith traditions and cultural backgrounds, spirituality encompasses various dimensions, including connectedness, beliefs, transcendence, and existential concerns (Shek, 2012; Hill et al., 2001). Spirituality is distinct from religion in that spiritual experiences can be experienced beyond the confines of organized religion (Sheldrake, 2016). A spiritual experience is a deeply personal encounter that goes beyond everyday life, connecting someone with a greater existence or meaning (Hill et al., 2001). It often involves a sense of awe, deep insight, or a feeling of unity with something larger than oneself. These experiences can occur through activities like meditation, prayer, nature, or significant life events, and often bring a sense of inner peace, heightened awareness, or a transformative understanding of life's purpose or connection to the sacred. The current study's purpose is to understand how college students would like to experience spirituality regarding their family life, their social life (i.e., significant others and friends), academic life, and life overall, cutting across all types of religious affiliations, including nonreligious individuals.

### **Spirituality as a Comprehensive Concept**

Understanding spirituality as an experiential phenomenon within every sphere of life is backed up by research indicating the positive relationship between spirituality and quality of life (Borges et al., 2021). For instance, family life embodies a deeply personal connection to the sacred, permeating various dimensions of human experience (Walsh, 2012). Family process research underscores the significance of values in healthy family functioning. Shared beliefs that transcend individual experiences enable families to navigate life's challenges with greater acceptance and resilience (Mahoney et al., 2020). Through spirituality, families find meaning and hope even amidst pain and uncertainty, strengthening their bonds and creating a sense of common humanity. This experiential aspect of spirituality extends beyond religious affiliation, encompassing personal practices, values, and connections with nature (Walsh, 2012; Hill et al., 2001).

Beyond religious traditions, spirituality within family life involves rituals, traditions, and shared experiences that deepen familial connections and provide a sense of belonging and purpose. Familial spirituality involves

empathy, compassion, and understanding among family members, creating a supportive environment where individuals can express their deepest values and beliefs. Moreover, spirituality within the family context promotes resilience, enabling families to adapt to adversity and find meaning in difficult circumstances. In essence, spirituality within family life is characterized by the pursuit of meaning, connection, and resilience in the face of life's challenges, leading to a sense of shared purpose and humanity beyond individual experiences. This can manifest through sharing meaningful rituals or traditions together, supporting each other through difficult times with empathy and compassion, finding strength and resilience in times of adversity, connecting through shared values and beliefs, and cultivating a sense of purpose and unity beyond individual concerns (Walsh, 2012).

Spirituality extends beyond familial bonds to friendships, imbuing interpersonal connections with depth and meaning. Drawing from Aristotle's concept of friendship as encountering "another self," Vernon (2005) states that spiritual friendships embody both intimacy and individuality. Similar to familial spirituality, friendships rooted in spirituality transcend mere companionship; they become avenues for shared values, empathy, and understanding. In these relationships, individuals find mirrors of their own beliefs and emotions, yet they also honor and celebrate the distinctiveness of each other's identities. Unlike romanticized depictions of love, spiritual friendships embrace physical distance without longing for perpetual togetherness. Through spiritual friendships, individuals navigate

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***...individuals navigate life's complexities with companions who reflect their joys and sorrows...***

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life's complexities with companions who reflect their joys and sorrows without seeking to possess or consume one another. It is within these relationships that the essence of spirituality is revealed: the recognition of another soul, distinct yet intimately connected, promoting growth, empathy, and a shared journey toward understanding (Vernon, 2005).

## **College Students and Spirituality**

Studies on college students aged 18 to 25 reveal the profound impact of religiosity and spirituality on well-being. According to Nadal et al. (2018), those who exhibit religious and spiritual traits tend to experience higher levels of psychological well-being and better social adjustment;

whereas, students who are not spiritual but religious tend to present higher levels of depression, antisocial behavior, hazardous alcohol consumption, and sexual risk-taking.

Ekwonye et al.'s (2020) study examined students' narratives regarding their spiritual journeys, revealing diverse catalysts and perceptions of spirituality. For some, the recognition of a higher existence initiates their spiritual awakening, as they sense a connection to something beyond the physical realm. Others attribute their spiritual development to an understanding of the interplay between their physical and spiritual selves, recognizing the importance of balance in both aspects for personal well-being. Academic challenges serve as a trigger for introspection and spiritual growth, prompting individuals to reflect on their actions and seek guidance for navigating life's complexities. Furthermore, spirituality is not solely perceived as a personal connection to a higher power but also as a guiding force shaping individuals' behavior toward others. Some participants emphasize the interconnectedness between spirituality and religion, while others view spirituality as a distinct aspect of their being, surpassing religious affiliations. Despite differing perspectives, the majority acknowledge the significance of spirituality in providing guidance, resilience, and shaping their identities, particularly in times of adversity.

## **Present Study**

The field of psychology has witnessed a resurgence of interest in understanding these constructs, reflecting the growing recognition of spirituality's role in human development and well-being. However, defining spirituality remains complex, often reflecting diverse cultural and individual perspectives (Sheldrake, 2016). As spirituality permeates various aspects of life, including health care, education, and personal growth, its study extends beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, requiring interdisciplinary collaboration to unravel its intricate meanings and implications.

The present study aimed to explore the spiritual aspirations of college students concerning their family life, their relationships with peers, significant others, and their academic life. Studying the spiritual aspirations of college students is a way to holistically understand

them, given that spirituality often shapes students' values, guiding their decisions and behavior in these aspects of life.

Spirituality can provide students with a sense of purpose and resilience, helping them navigate challenges and maintain motivation (Nadal et al., 2018). While the research in this area, particularly regarding the impact of spirituality on student mental health and academic achievement, is still underdeveloped, understanding these spiritual dimensions can inform policies and practices in higher education. By fostering environments that support students' comprehensive growth and success, institutions can better address the holistic needs of their student populations.

## **Method**

### **Research Design and Participants**

A qualitative phenomenological design was used in this study. Data were collected from participants of a larger study that investigated the effectiveness of a universal mental health program for college students, with one of the program's lessons focusing on exploring spiritual development (Esat et al., 2021). One-hundred-thirteen college students responded to the questionnaire, with some leaving responses blank, which were categorized as missing data. The demographic qualities of the participants are presented in Table 1. Most participants fell within the age range of 19 to 25 years old, constituting 86.3% of the sample, while 13.5% were aged between 26 to 34 years old. In terms of gender distribution, 66.37% of participants identified as female, 26.55% as male, 0.88% preferred not to disclose their gender, and 6.19% were categorized as missing data. Regarding race and ethnicity, the sample was diverse, with the largest representation being Hispanic/Latino American (44.25%) followed by European American (16.81%), Asian American (21.24%), African American (10.62%), other ethnicities (.88%), and 6.19% were categorized as missing data. Concerning religion, most participants identified as Christian (51.33%), with 17.70% reporting no religion. The details of the religious diversity are presented in Table 1. The data, collected anonymously, comprise responses to the study's questions and is not linked to individual participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	
<i>Gender</i>	Male	30	26.55%	
	Female	75	66.37%	
	Preferred not to disclose	1	.88%	
	Missing data	7	6.19%	
	Total	113	100%	
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	European American	19	16.81%	
	African American	12	10.62%	
	American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0.0%	
	Asian American	24	21.24%	
	Hispanic/Latino American	50	44.25%	
	Other	1	0.88%	
	Missing data	7	6.19%	
	Total	113	100%	
	<i>Religion</i>	Christian	58	51.33%
		Muslim	5	4.42%
		Buddhism	6	5.31%
Hinduism		3	2.65%	
Other		9	7.96%	
Prefer not to report		5	4.42%	
No religion		20	17.70%	
Missing data		7	6.19%	
Total		113	100%	

## Measures and Procedures

In this study, participants' spiritual aspirations were gauged through a series of questions probing their desired spiritual experiences across various life domains. The participants responded to the open-ended questions, presented in Table 2. Participants were prompted to envision their ideal spiritual encounters within their family, friends, and romantic relationships, and during academic activities like lectures and assignments.

Table 2 Questions Presented to Participants

### Questions

1. Describe how you would like to experience your spirituality in your relationships with family.
2. Describe how you would like to experience your spirituality with friends.
3. Describe how you would like to experience your spirituality with significant others.
4. Describe how you would like to experience your spirituality when involved in academic work. (Lectures and assignments)
5. Describe how you would like to experience your spirituality in general.

## Data Analysis

A content analysis strategy was used to analyze the responses of the participants. Content analysis in qualitative research is a systematic method for interpreting textual data through the process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Responses were systematically coded based on identified themes, following a coding scheme developed in accordance with the research questions. The coding scheme consisted of five main categories: Spirituality in Family Relationships, Spirituality with Friends, Spirituality with Significant Others, Spirituality in Academic Work, and General Experience of Spirituality. To establish the reliability of the theme coding, the faculty supervisor trained the author, and the agreement between the independent coding of the faculty and author was between the range of 93.6% to 100%.

## Results

The analysis of participants' responses revealed several themes related to their desired experiences of spirituality. Nearly all participants reported having spiritual aspirations; however, three students (2.5%) stated that they did not consider themselves spiritual. The most frequently reported theme was "being able to communicate openly" (reported 50 times), indicating a strong desire for talking freely and sharing within their relationships. Similarly, "sharing spiritual experiences" was also frequently mentioned (50 times), highlighting the importance of sharing and connecting through spiritual practices. Other prevalent themes included "applying spiritual understandings in daily life" (reported 60 times), suggesting a desire for practical application of the spiritual concepts they identified with. Additionally, a "peaceful state" (reported 63 times) emerged as a significant theme, indicating a desire for inner peace, calm demeanor and spiritual connection amidst life's challenges. Themes such as "spending quality time" (reported 36 times), "mindful awareness and being present" (reported 31 times), and "sense of unity/support/connection" (reported 44 times) highlighted the importance of meaningful connections, mindfulness, and supportive communities in participants' spiritual experiences. Overall, the themes identified reflect a multifaceted understanding of spirituality including relational, emotional, and practical dimensions.

## Discussion

This study explored the spiritual aspirations of college students at an urban university in the southern United States. Nearly all students (97.5%) reported spirituality-related desires concerning their family life, peer relations, and academic life. The analysis revealed several recurring themes including the importance of spirituality in connections and support within familial and social relationships, its role as a guiding principle in personal growth and romantic partnerships, and its integration into academic pursuits as a source of meaning and purpose. Themes such as empathy, understanding, trust, and a supportive environment were consistent with prior research (Vernon, 2005; Walsh 2012).

Additionally, participants expressed a desire for spirituality to provide inner peace, fulfillment, and a sense of connection to something greater than themselves. The discoveries indicate that spirituality plays diverse roles in the lives of college students, spanning relational, personal, and academic realms.

This study exhibits notable strengths in its comprehensive examination of spirituality among college students, facilitated by open-ended questions that elicited detailed and insightful responses. However, potential limitations should be considered, such as the reliance on a single data collection method, which may constrain the generalizability of the results. Due to the anonymous nature of data collection, the demographic characteristics of the participants could not be linked to the results, preventing any comparative analysis. Additionally, the study's sample size and diversity of participants could be expanded to enhance its strength.

Looking forward, future research endeavors may benefit from exploring the longitudinal effects of spirituality on college students' well-being and academic performance. Comparative studies across diverse demographic and cultural cohorts could provide valuable insights into the role of spirituality in higher education. Embracing mixed-methods approaches could also enhance our understanding by capturing a broader spectrum of experiences and perspectives. ■

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### Student Biography

Samantha K. Enriquez is a senior at Sam Houston State University, expected to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology in fall 2024. As an online student, Samantha proudly represents Bearkat pride from afar. Her personal journey, marked by early mental health challenges, was transformed through spirituality and professional support, inspiring her to pursue psychology. Samantha aims to further her education with a Master's in Mental Health Counseling, focusing on research into personal understanding, development, and spiritual impact. Her dedication to these areas drives her commitment to exploring *College Students' Experiences of Spirituality*, research conducted in collaboration with Dr. Gulden Esat. Samantha is passionate about contributing to others' self-discovery and healing through her work.