Across international contexts, higher education is often tasked with serving a multitude of purposes from vocational training and job placement to engendering a passion for lifelong learning and the pursuit of knowledge. Some colleges pride themselves on delivering a quality liberal arts education that endows students with skills and knowledge to enhance civic engagement, while other institutions of higher learning tout substantial financial returns to degrees among their alumni. Despite significant variation in college types in the USA and abroad, the full range of colleges presents a myriad of institutional mission statements that are in fact remarkably similar: nearly all colleges purport to serve one or any combination of purposes such as contributing to general knowledge, advancing social progress, promoting economic growth, or enhancing students’ critical thinking abilities. The platitudes through which colleges express their missions can create ambiguities around what exactly students should be getting from the college experience, not to mention that many institutional practices and policies are often at odds with these mission statements (Taylor & Morphew, 2010; Seeber et al., 2019). The grandiosity of institutional mission statements can in turn present a dilemma for students, who, in the absence of strong direction from colleges, may be more likely to approach postsecondary education more narrowly as a means to high-paying careers rather than places to build community and a sense of self. In the absence of broad-based data collection on the college student experience, it can be difficult to discern what students expect to get out of the college experience and whether their goals align with lofty missions of the institutions they attend.

While much ink has been spilled on the purpose of higher education across countries, *The Real World of College* by Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner effectively conveys a contemporary student perspective on the college experience that is very much at odds with the authors’ normative views on the role of higher education. Past work such as Grubb and Lazerson’s *Education Gospel* (2007) or, more recently, Johann Neem’s *What’s the Point of College* (2019) are great examples of books that dived deeper into the historical purposes of higher education and the ubiquity of linkages between school and vocation. Fischman and Gardner build on this literature to provide a more robust incorporation of student
perspectives in the hopes of convincing the public at large that liberal arts or nonvocational education, in its purest form, is something worth striving for.

In *The Real World of College*, Fischman and Gardner seek to better understand how students, parents, faculty, and administrators view the nonvocational college experience in the US context. They focus particularly on how current sentiments align or misalign with more normative ideas of liberal arts education as a pathway toward personal growth and transformation as opposed to the prevailing economic view that college degrees are most importantly a path to quality jobs, higher wages, and upward mobility. According to the authors, undergraduate students have increasingly adopted a transactional approach to college characterized by overemphasis on labor market preparation and financial returns to a degree. Fischman, who is a project director at Harvard University’s Project Zero, and Gardner, who is a professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, conducted over 2000 interviews across 10 nonvocational US college campuses to paint a picture of what the college experience is and argue for what, in their opinion, the central purpose of college should be: to instill in students an interest in learning and personal growth that can be drawn on throughout their life.

The book is divided into four main sections, the first of which provides an overview of employed research methodologies and more general motivations for the study. The second section dives into the study’s central findings on Higher Education Capital, or HEDCAP for short, which is essentially a composite score across seven questions developed by the authors to evaluate students’ critical thinking abilities. The final two sections of the book provide additional insights gleaned from interviews and offer recommendations for institutions going forward, with a particular emphasis on how institutions can work to alleviate mental health issues on campus and support students’ sense of community and belonging.

The book’s main contributions to higher education studies center on their development of the HEDCAP metric and their attention to the rising incidence of mental health issues on campus. In the absence of broad-based learning assessments in higher education in the US, HEDCAP offers a useful, albeit far from all-encompassing, framework for thinking through desired learning outcomes from liberal arts education. While the institutions are not all identified, the authors break their findings down across institutional selectivity and highlight that HEDCAP scores on average improved from students’ first to final year of college. This finding helps to convey a sense of optimism from the authors that higher education can in fact make a difference when it comes to building students’ intellectual capital. The results may be unsurprising but are nonetheless welcome given increasing political polarization and discontent around higher education.

To unpack student perceptions of the college experience, Fischman and Gardner proceed to use participant interview responses to categorize students as taking one of four mental approaches to higher education. A key finding from the book overall is that nearly half of all students interviewed view college transactionally as a means to smooth transitions to the labor market or graduate studies while less than one-fifth of the student sample is categorized as having a transformational view of higher education where college is an experience to build values, beliefs, and a sense of self. It is also interesting to note that these same categorizations are drawn from faculty, administrator, and parent interviews. For instance, Fischman and Gardner find that on campus faculty overwhelmingly view the college experience in transformational terms whereas parents and college trustees are more likely to emphasize transactional views of college, such as the importance of job preparation and return on investment.

The authors also spend significant time elaborating on worrying trends in students’ mental health and sense of belonging, which recent literature further affirms in both US
and international undergraduate and graduate contexts (Brown, 2018; Kotera et al., 2021; Lipson et al., 2022). In exploring the contributing factors to student struggles with mental health issues and a lack of belonging, academic success and workload come across as two leading factors; COVID-19 has only exacerbated student stress and anxiety levels. The severity of these issues comes across throughout the book and is used to inform a series of policy recommendations for institutions of higher learning.

To help students develop their own ideas of what they should be getting out of college, Fischman and Gardner suggest that colleges more clearly identify the goals of a liberal arts education during student onboarding. They also suggest more narrowly defining what have otherwise become hackneyed institutional mission statements and making sure to align program curriculums with these revised missions. Instead of trying to be “all things to all students” (p. 252), colleges should work towards upholding a mission statement that is embodied in the school culture and that students more clearly understand. The authors go one step further in explicitly reminding college stakeholders that return on investment and increased emphasis on vocational outcomes as a measurement for success in higher education can ultimately detract from the college experience.

The book is not without its limitations. The HEDCAP metric offers colleges within the USA and abroad one potential framework for evaluating students’ critical thinking ability, but it is not clear whether HEDCAP could be implemented at scale by colleges nor if that is its ultimate purpose. The authors use HEDCAP to explore patterns across students, academic disciplines, and colleges, and they refrain from advocating its use as an accountability metric in higher education. If HEDCAP was designed for more widespread use as an accountability metric, it would have been helpful for the authors to elaborate on best practices to ensure that integrity of the measure is not compromised in the name of competition; indeed, it is not difficult to imagine institutions boasting of high HEDCAP scores in the ever-present pursuit of improving reputation, prestige, and ranking without adequately reflecting on results for the purposes of improving the student experience and campus culture.

There is additional ambiguity around how HEDCAP might be used by institutions with competing priorities that may not perfectly align with Fischman and Gardner’s outspoken view that the central purpose of liberal arts education is to enhance students’ intellectual capital. Few will argue with this statement, but the study’s limited institutional scope leaves the reader with a sense that HEDCAP is not for more vocationally oriented institutions such as community colleges, trade schools, and graduate schools that comprise a substantial portion of higher education. The ten institutions included in the analysis are said to be representative of nonvocational institutions of higher learning, which the reader can only interpret as a mix of selective and less selective smaller liberal arts colleges and public universities in the USA. The notion of strictly characterizing colleges and universities as vocational or nonvocational is slippery, and by narrowly focusing on what they deem to be nonvocational colleges, the authors undoubtedly miss out on collecting information on a large swath of students. For example, in the USA, more than 40 percent of undergraduate students enroll at community colleges, which are likely to be characterized by Fischman and Gardner as vocational. Still, many of these students attend these institutions with the hopes of receiving a liberal arts education. Study implementation across a more diverse set of institutions would have been helpful in further differentiating student perceptions of the college experience and enhancing HEDCAP’s external validity as a useful measure across higher education contexts.

While the authors and their research team collect an impressive amount of data through interviews, the lack of demographic data prevents them from conducting what would
otherwise be a richer analysis of findings along race and class lines. Central findings around students’ transactional approaches to higher education and more general trends in mental health and belonging would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of contributing factors. The lack of demographic data further detracts from the ability to generalize some of their findings or the lack thereof. For instance, the authors mention several times throughout the book their surprise that college costs were rarely mentioned by interview participants. While this is certainly surprising within a US higher education finance context that can be characterized as a high-tuition, high-aid model, the inability to dissect these findings by race, family income, and other key demographics is a missed opportunity.

The absence of disaggregating findings by key student demographics also leaves room for a more critical take on Fischman and Gardner’s view that students should approach college as a transformational rather than transactional experience. It is well within reason to expect, for example, a low-income, first-generation college student to place job preparation and future earnings above intellectual capital when it comes to ranking what they hope to achieve from the college experience. While the authors do elaborate on the pressures students face from parents, institutions, and society at large to ensure positive returns on their investment in higher education, it would have been helpful to engage in a more thorough discussion of how their normative views on the purpose of higher education can at times conflict with broader racial and socioeconomic inequities.

*The Real World of College* offers key insights into the college experience as heard directly from students, faculty, parents, and administrators. While the study was undertaken within the US context, central findings on students’ approaches to higher education and concerns around mental health and belonging are relevant for higher education stakeholders across country contexts. It suffices to say that, even within more explicitly vocationally centric institutions, faculty and administrators hope to deliver the type of education that not only helps students meet their intended professional goals, but also provides an environment that is conducive to personal growth and transformation. Many factors contributing to the student college experience lie outside of institutions’ control, from structural inequalities in labor market access to the strength of social safety nets. Still, a number of these factors are within their control and can help to improve the college experience for all stakeholders. Ensuring students have access to quality mental health services and de-escalating the centrality of post-degree employment as the driving purpose of higher education seem like good places to start.

**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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