

Battling the Covid Hangover: Reconsidering Students' Relationship to the Academy

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Abstract

In this preliminary paper we investigate shifts among undergraduate students' educational values and their motivations to pursue a college degree. As the academic community strives to overcome the effects COVID-19 pandemic, many educators search for ways to return to pre-pandemic norms. They often encounter relatively lower student engagement levels and lack of preparedness, which may have been exacerbated by the conditions of remote learning. We dig into the causes of these challenges, assessing existing literature on student motivation, preparation, and engagement. Our exploration highlights the need for adaptive strategies that acknowledge and respond to sometimes subtle shifts in norms and students' educational priorities.

"Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life" (p. 75).

—W.E.B. DuBois, 1903¹

¹ W. E. Burghardt DuBois, "The Talented Tenth," (33–75) in Booker T. Washington, et al. *The Negro Problem*, 1903, J. Pott and Co., https://librarycollections.law.umn.edu/documents/darrow/Talented_Tenth.pdf.

Introduction

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, the ethos of higher education feels different to many stakeholders who have taught, learned, led, and administered through economic shutdowns and fully remote learning environments (Cavanaugh, Jacquemin and Junker 2022; DiPietro 2023; Ferrer et al. 2023). While the pandemic hardly initiated massive shifts in attitudes, pedagogical approaches, and enrollment levels (Kline 2019; Ingersoll et al. 2021; Taie and Lewis 2023), the experience seemed to exacerbate or expedite trends that had manifested across all educational levels in the years leading up to 2020 (Dorn 2022; McGrath and Diaz 2023). In certain ways the pandemic helped clarify disconnects between teaching practices and extant technologies, pushing professors to adopt course management and online tools for example, but disruptions to higher ed overall negatively and disproportionately impacted minoritized populations that include people of color, women, and those with disabilities (Moscoviz and Evans 2022; Glazier and Strachan 2023; Mickey, Misra and Clark 2023).

Anecdotally, “things feel different” to faculty and administrators at many universities and colleges post-pandemic. Whereas COVID-19 may simply have acted as a catalyst for change, a point we return to later, many professors have remarked on what we call “the Covid hangover” or what others have termed “pandemic scars” (Blair et al. 2023): that is, a collection of attitudinal and behavioral changes that have become far more common among stakeholders during the past five years. For instance, more students miss assignments and class and supply all manner of excuses (“I have to take care of

my parents' dogs"); they miss or delay more classes or assignments for actual mental health crises, general anxiety, or health (Covid or otherwise); their attention spans have generally decreased; many have difficulty with vocabulary and reading longer texts, or were inadequately prepared for college work; they continually use screens (cellphones, etc.) unrelated to classroom activities while in class; and importantly, many are reticent to engage with peers in class, faculty in office hours, or each other on campus. For faculty, staff, and administrators, many of whom have experienced reductions in positions or pay, consequences have ranged from negative—including higher rates of burnout—to positive, such as adjustments to pedagogy that might be more supportive, respectful and inclusive of heterogeneous lived experiences, or transferable to online learning environments (Ba 2021; Roberts 2021; Grussendorf 2022; Taylor 2022; Blair et al. 2023; Glazier and Strachan 2023; Supiano 2024; Goldstein 2025).

Macrolevel changes in academia have been brewing for decades. As tuition costs have escalated, so have student debt loads and a growing sense that college isn't worth it, especially if an immediate paycheck can supplant potential student loan payments or if a degree can be accomplished comfortably through nontraditional means such as online certification programs (D'Agostino 2022). University administrations have adjusted their practices to align with managerial models such that higher education seems ever more like a business (Fasenfest 2021; Kline 2019). Declining student enrollments at regional and smaller private liberal arts universities have already pushed several off the financial cliff into closure (Costa 2019), and demographic forecasts predict more contraction—although not all types of institutions will be equally affected (Grawe 2018). Wider recruitment by universities to bridge enrollment gaps means

welcoming higher levels of first-generation, working, and/or returning students who have traditionally been underrepresented in four-year institutions, and students who may be underprepared for full college course loads.

These trends in higher education reflect broader, longitudinal shifts in society, the economy, and politics, all of which make the current era distinctive from those of the past. Over the past two decades, rapidly evolving technology, especially social media and communications, have boosted the gig economy and accelerated the spread of misinformation and disinformation, undermining trust in scholarship and scientific expertise (Druckman 2022). Economic inequality has increased while birth rates and state support for higher ed have declined and the contentious politics around higher education have intensified (Dorn 2017; AAUP 2023). Starting in 2025, Trump administration policies could refashion the academic enterprise as they rescind social justice-oriented or DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) programs, threaten to defund institutions that retain those programs, promise to “revisit” federal student aid, restrict the flow of immigrants (including international students), and deport “millions” of people signal potentially traumatic disruptions in university workforces, student bodies, and budgets.

These challenges to higher education may have recently crystallized but some of them have clear historical precedents. Today, the reappearance of similar economic, social, and political pressures signal that larger cyclical changes are afoot (Veysey 1958; Fischman and Gardner 2022). Charles Dorn (2017) reviews the historical record and identifies four historical patterns that he describes as discrete epochs in US higher education history, each characterized by an overarching purpose being pursued by the

main stakeholders (discussed below). Stated broadly, he argues that the main purposes or goals of the university and the students within it have shifted over time in response to forces exogenous to academe, and that the educational practices and reforms of each era reflect those changed purposes. Administrators also respond to students' perceived needs and goals, repositioning their institutional responsibilities.

Our larger project focuses on how pedagogical practices could be calibrated to the current educational ethos in order to achieve learning outcomes more effectively. We believe that begins by understanding the relative values or purposes closely held by two primary stakeholders: faculty and students. By understanding the motivations of each group, curricula and classroom strategies could be better designed to meet the educational needs of this generation of students and help them thrive well past graduation. We do this with an eye to the larger academic ecology and exogenous forces that are increasingly present in the classroom, and also rely on recent work by Fischman and Gardner (2022), who argue that undergraduates tend to possess one of four ways of thinking about their four-year college experience (their four “mental models” are inertial, transactional, exploratory, and transformational, discussed below). We believe that these can be mapped onto different education epochs in terms of their relative prevalence, and could help us work through some of our post-Covid pedagogical dilemmas.

In this paper we lay out our framework for theorizing about and studying whether traditional (age 18–22) undergraduate students in four-year US colleges and universities differ from those who graduated before the COVID-19 pandemic, namely by examining whether their valuation of higher education and its purposes has shifted, and

whether expectations around the college experience differ between faculty and students. Globally speaking, as pedagogical scholars we sense a persistent disconnect between the goals of students and faculty.² We maintain that faculty largely approach education as a *transformational* endeavor, because faculty have been trained to create field-specific generalizable knowledge, share it widely (valuing knowledge for knowledge's sake), and to help students develop the skills that will enable them to participate socially and politically and achieve self-governance. In essence, most try to help their students think about themselves and society differently. Faculty implicitly understand that their students will become more employable across a range of professions through their academic experience, but four-year-degree program faculty largely do not treat post-secondary training as vocational; that effort rests with two-year and specialized colleges. In contrast and in keeping with Fischman and Gardner (2023), we theorize that while some students generally approach college as a place to transform themselves, many more are essentially practical and *transactional*: college is their ticket to a well-paying career, essentially vocational, and the task is to get in and out as soon as possible without wasting extra time or money. For them, going to college is merely instrumental for moving up the economic and/or social ladder and transformation is incidental. For most faculty, particularly those who have been trained in the liberal arts, college is an instrument for enabling students to achieve their goals through personal transformation (students become critical thinkers through learning and therefore can become more employable in the careers they choose).

² We use the term “faculty” here somewhat loosely, including instructors with a PhD in that category, assuming that all would have been socialized and trained to pursue similar goals (and hence, we do not separate them). The terms “professor” and “faculty” or “faculty member” are used interchangeably.

We hypothesize that these two essential forces—transformational and transactional—have always coexisted in the academy, remaining in tension throughout every era. In some periods and in certain kinds of institutions (especially community colleges designed for vocational training, or technical institutions focusing on traditional STEM or military training), the transactional ethos predominates among all stakeholders. When and where institutions choose to serve society and develop students in the liberal arts tradition of intellectual curiosity and criticality, then transformation predominates. In all cases, institutions function within a larger environment, an ethos that shapes key stakeholders' goals, expectations, and values. In the current era, we believe that the transactional mindset has displaced (but certainly not replaced) the other, holding sway on most four-year campuses. Moreover, because of endemic disconnects between the overall goals (or mindsets) of faculty and students, faculty are likely to feel frustrated by their students' unwillingness to invest extra time in their studies or assignments. Students (at least initially) may feel frustrated by the lack of understanding about the costs they are experiencing, and may resist efforts by faculty or the administration to challenge or change students' purposes. Identifying pedagogical strategies to better align these fundamental goals remains our ultimate objective.

Because our hunches demand data yet to be obtained, we find ourselves in the beginning stages of a larger research project that we outline below. In what follows, we first offer a brief taxonomy of student values and expectations and then move into the history of higher education, discussing the prevailing ethos as well as the student values and expectations that tended to predominate in each era (transformational or transactional). After describing and then comparing the different types of expectations

about college that are commonly held by students and faculty, we outline items to include in a survey instrument in order to obtain more specific information about their mental models, as well as those of administrators and parents. We conclude with some preliminary takeaways and questions about how to alter and align divergent expectations.

Mental Models of Academia and the Development of Higher Education

In their recent book, *The Real World of College* (2022), Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner report the findings of a five-year study of non-vocational (four-year, BA-granting) institutions, for which they conducted 2,000-plus semi-structured interviews of stakeholders associated with ten different campuses. To organize their findings, they posit four “mental models,” ideal types that encapsulate discrete sets of values, purposes, and approaches that undergraduate students possess about higher education.

According to their findings, about 3% of students in their sample are categorized as having an *inertial* mental model, in which they view college as the next logical step along their educational path: “After high school, one goes to college, but does not think much about reasons for being there, or of taking advantage of various opportunities; nor does one exhibit noteworthy aspirations” (2022: 121). Nearly half (45%) of all students whom they interviewed exhibit a *transactional* mental model in which college is viewed instrumentally: “One goes to college and does what (and *only* what) is required to get a degree and then secure placement in graduate school and/or a job” (121). For them,

college is a springboard: not more, not less. This perspective would be associated most closely with a view of college as vocational.

A third group of students, 36% of their sample, are *exploratory*: “One goes to college internationally to take time to learn about diverse fields of study and to try out new activities,” be they academic, extracurricular, or social (122); they network and intend to learn from those they meet. Finally, about 16% of students are considered *transformational*, as they “go to college to reflect about, and question, one’s own values and beliefs, with the expectation, and often as well, the aspiration that one may change in fundamental ways” (122). They expect their life trajectory will change significantly through the college experience. While the authors recognize that the goals of individual students are complex and often don’t fit neatly within one category, they argue the mental models help illuminate misalignments among and between different stakeholders (particularly faculty and students) and offer us both a starting point and a framework for tracking longitudinal shifts in student attitudes.

Among Fischman and Gardner’s other noteworthy findings is that mental models are associated with the admissions selectivity of a campus. Schools with the lowest level of selectivity tend to attract more transactionally-oriented students (57%) and the fewest students with exploratory (26%) and transformational (14%) mindsets, but a few outlier institutions suggest that efforts can be made to influence students’ perspectives over time. Students in moderately-selective institutions resemble those in the low-selective schools (54% exploratory, 10% transformational). On the other hand, highly-selective schools enroll the most transformational (22%) and exploratory students (51%). Across all schools, the number of students with transformational mental models increases

between the students' first year and graduation year. At high-selectivity schools only, transactional models increase. Medium-selectivity schools resemble low-selectivity schools but the results are more mixed. Their findings lead them to consider whether and how parents, faculty, or the campus environment affect students' attitudes about education, and they encourage efforts to foment more transformational thinking, which is directly related to abilities to "attend, analyze, reflect, connect, and communicate on issues of interest and importance" (2022: 133).

In their work, Fischman and Gardner generally present the *transactional* model in opposition to the *transformative*. As we reviewed their evidence, we recognized that historically speaking and more parsimoniously, the four categories could be collapsed into just these two, as the *exploratory* indicators are generally consistent with pursuit of transformational growth and change, and *inertial* indicators are consistent with those linked to the "practical" *transactional* model.³ Thus, we attempt to overlay this simpler two-category model on the eras of higher education that are discussed in the next section. We place Fischman and Gardner's mental models framework in conversation with Charles Dorn's historical epoch framework to help highlight our current era's social ethos and the potential misalignments among or between stakeholders that have been created through environmental or generational changes.

The dichotomy between transactional and transformational mental models is particularly apparent in Fishman's and Gardner's discussion of the mismatch between the mental models held by faculty and administrators (adults) versus those of students. In contrast to students, "*at nearly every school we studied, approximately three quarters*

³ Although this preliminary step reflects our own theorizing, we realize that empirical testing is required to confirm our suspicions.

of the on-campus adults (78%)” are categorized as having a transformational mental model, whereas 9% have transactional and 13% have exploratory mental models” (155). This mismatch creates challenges for effective teaching and learning. “While students sometimes feel that their interests and needs are not being met, faculty do not believe that they should focus on practical applications of learning: instead they should inspire their students to seek knowledge and to develop new ways of thinking (155).” Indeed, in our separate experiences at an R-1 PhD program, we were socialized as graduate students to focus on research and become experts in a subfield of the discipline. With the exception of one of us leading an internship class, none of our pedagogical training or regular appointments as TAs touched on addressing our students’ career aspirations, and we were not trained to mentor or advise undergraduate students about their career plans; instead, we were trained to build and communicate knowledge that was viewed as inherently transformative (and, although the notion was probably not voiced aloud, to leave the vocational training to community colleges).

Contemporary survey research also provides clues that these two populations (faculty and students at four-year universities and colleges) tend to operate with different mental models, which drive their interactions and their perceptions. In reviewing the 2023 Student Engagement Surveys of students and faculty (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement [FSSE] and National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], both conducted annually since 2003 by Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research) two striking pieces of evidence emerge. Faculty and students were asked how time was spent engaging with each other outside the classroom,

including talking about career plans, discussing academic performance, discussing ideas outside of the class, and working on non-course work (such as research). First, students and faculty rank the *importance* of engagement categories in similar ways. Both groups spend the most time talking about students' future careers and spend the least amount of time engaging each other on non-course related activities. However, the second and more intriguing piece of evidence is that the respondents' estimated time spent on a category, or their understanding of the time they spend engaging each other outside the classroom, varies drastically between the two groups. Only 12% of students reported they often spent time talking with faculty about their careers compared to 32.4% of faculty who reported they often spent time talking with students about future careers. This trend also held at the opposite side of the response scale, with 28% of students saying they never spoke with faculty about their careers compared to faculty saying that only 1.3% never spoke with students about their careers (NSSE 2023). See Figures 1 and 2 below for a visualization of these findings. This disconnect is particularly stark when we consider Fischman and Gardner's account of the misalignment in mental models between faculty and students.

Figure 1

Faculty Understanding of Engagement with Students 2023

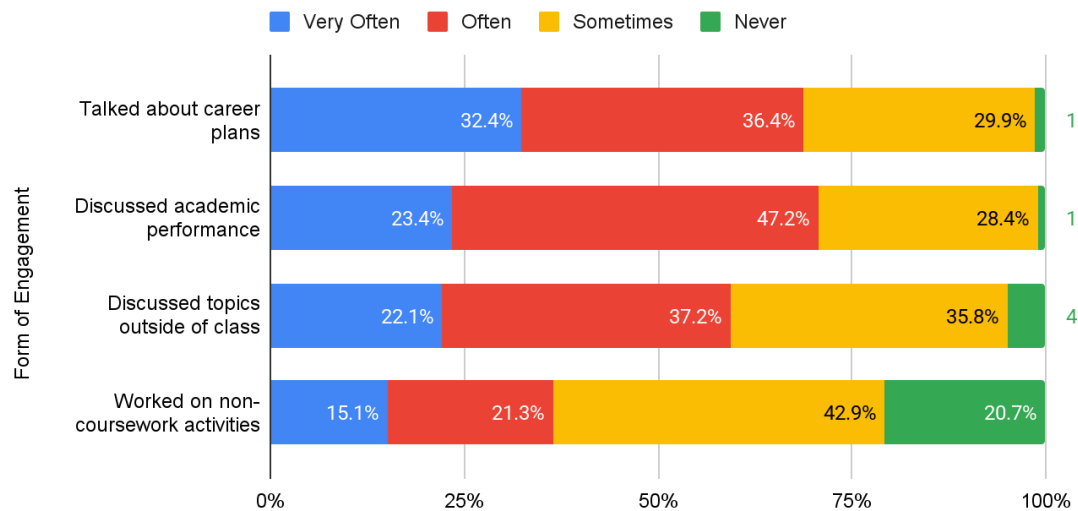
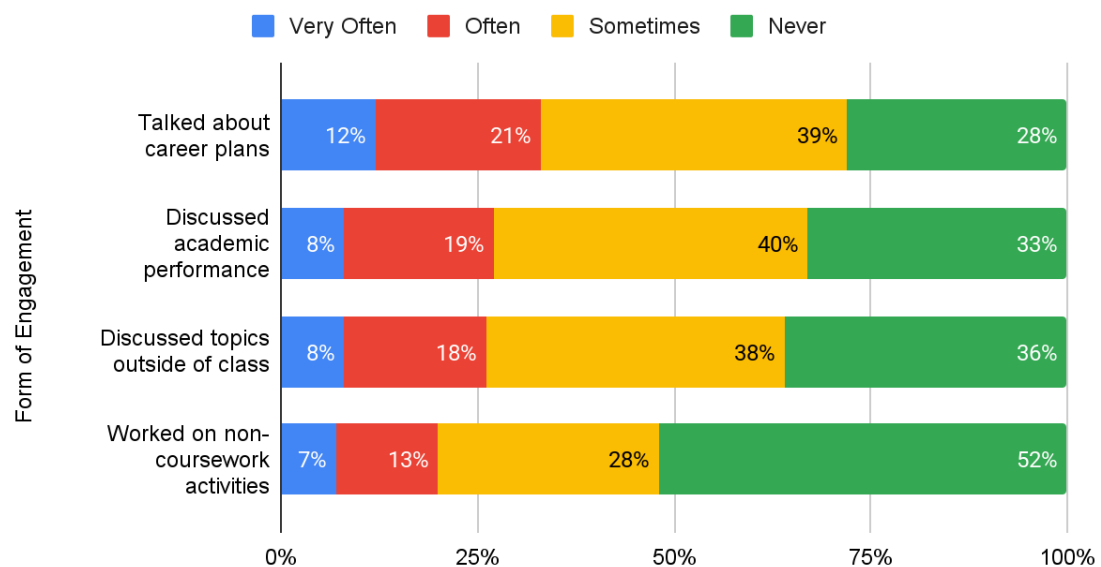


Figure 2

Student Understanding of Engagement with Faculty 2023



Sources: FSSE (2023) and NSSE (2023).

A Brief History of Academia: Changes in the Ethos

In *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (2017), Charles Dorn offers a historical framework that, when put in conversation with Fischman and Gardner's mental models, allows us to recognize unique aspects about our current higher educational space as well as certain conditions that are common across time.

Dorn posits that higher education institutions through the various educational epochs of history centered the idea that higher education exists primarily to promote the common good. Each epoch draws out what the common good is a bit differently. Dorn distinguishes four separate eras,⁴ each defined by a different social ethos that is generally supported among education stakeholders: *civic-mindedness*, *practicality*, *commercialism*, and *affluence* (2017, 3). In our reading of Dorn's retelling of history, the transactional and transformative mental models were placed in tension with each other from the start in the United States, and in each era, one tends to predominate. In the Early National Period when flagship institutions were being founded, the individual's transformation was upheld as the foremost impetus for attending higher education, marginalizing the transactional mental model (17). For the sake of brevity, we will quickly summarize the other epochs to press the point that transactional attitudes are not a new phenomenon in higher education, but more clearly emerged as a competitor to transformational education and stabilized during the Civil War and the Cold War eras. It should be emphasized, however, that the first educational epoch came closest to embodying a "pure" transformational social ethos. The early education system—born in the colonies, nurtured by classical liberal thinkers—focused on the shaping and

⁴ The four eras or epochs are: The Early National Period, The Antebellum and Civil War Era, Reconstruction Through the Second World War, and the Cold War Through the Twenty-First Century.

disciplining of young minds to foster civically minded leaders (9).⁵ Given transformational education's strong head start, it took several generations for transactional pursuits to take root in higher education.

The rise of "practicality" during the mid-nineteenth century had a magnetic force on universities as general reverence for useful scientific knowledge grew. Dorn first draws attention to agricultural and military schools as producing applicable knowledge that supported the growing needs of the United States (75). The growth of schools followed in the footsteps of the industrial revolution, with mechanization, mass production, and the rise of commercialism, all of which revolutionized society and the economy. However, what is more informative for our study at hand is the rise of normal schools. Inspired by the growth of similar institutions in Europe, they introduced the idea "of teaching as professional work that required practical training for effective classroom instruction (93)." This moment in higher education history highlights two sides of the rise of a transactional mental model. One side is the shift to treating teaching as a stand-alone profession, comparable to agriculture and mechanics, whereby teacher and learner alike focus on the practicality of teaching. The other side is that students expect to attend college to acquire practical skills, not for transformation of self or necessarily their community. That is not to say that higher education abandoned the common good, because much like agriculture and mechanics, the shift to viewing teaching and learning served practical needs of the nation as a whole, particularly as more and more individuals sought postsecondary and graduate degrees.

⁵ Fischman and Gardner demonstrate in their work that this original social ethos of personal transformation into critical thinking, civically engaged members of society still seemingly dominates faculty and administrators' understanding of education (154-155).

Practicality was fully realized as being central to the educational enterprise at the turn of the 20th century as schools were founded or reformed with the transactional mental model at their foundation (University of Chicago, Stanford, and Cornell to list a few⁶), thereby dethroning the transformational model. For instance, Leland Stanford broadly claimed the nation needed a university to put practical education at the foremost focus—as opposed to a theoretical education (117). Dorn also recognized that while Stanford felt the object of universities was “to qualify students for personal success,” the purpose remained to “promote the public welfare”—just an incredibly commercial public welfare (9). At Stanford University and elsewhere, transactional and transformational mental models seemed to reach equilibrium, at least where the administration was concerned. For their part, faculty coming into their own and students coming of age in this era would have been shaped by a culture that Alan Trachtenberg (1982) has characterized as “the incorporation of America (1982: 4).”

The Cold War through the Twenty-First Century is a subsequent period when the transactional mental model pushed the transformational model further away from the center and education started to be framed as a commodity in the US. According to Dorn, during this third education epoch the shift was driven largely by the influx of students from middle and lower socioeconomic strata, by their being able to access education both through ample funding for individual students (the G.I. Bill and student loans) and the expansion of available public institutions geared to accommodate them (such as the University of Southern Florida). At this point, students—particularly

⁶ A multi-million dollar donation by oil magnate John D. Rockefeller established the University of Chicago in 1891 (classes began in 1892) “on land donated by business magnate Marshall Field” (25). It was mostly designed after German research-oriented universities and welcomed both men and women and racial minorities. As pointed out in the New World Encyclopedia’s entry for the University, “Rockefeller’s early fiscal emphasis on the physics department showed his pragmatic, yet deeply intellectual, desires for the school” (NWE 2025).

lower-income male students (176)—increasingly focused on gaining a higher educational degree for the sake of employment. This era signals one of the first clear misalignments of mental models among stakeholders, as more students were geared for transactionalism while faculty and administrators sought to revive the civic focus of higher education. Daniel Clark (1998) reinforces this idea in his paper, “The Two Joes Meet—Joe College, Joe Veteran.” As Clark assesses the way the explosion of ‘nontraditional’ students transformed classes and seminars across the nation, he explains that the perception of the purpose of education was highly influenced by “emerging new conceptions of defining oneself in a corporate world and a consumer culture (Clark 1998, 168).” Both Dorn and Clark explore this era of *affluence*, a period when the transactional mental model of college solidified around the view that higher education is a good to be consumed and treated like the commodity it had become (see also Berrett 2015; McMurtrie 2024).

Commonly centered throughout these different educational epochs is the shared notion that higher education should serve the public or lead to a common good (Dorn 2017, 2). Yet, as this quick historical overview shows, during several periods in history, some of the key stakeholders in higher education operated from a transactional framework (or a “practical” ethos) that privileges individual gain. The increasing focus on individual advancement figures largely in our characterization of the current era, and drives our search for empirical evidence that can be found in the literature as well as surveys and interviews. As we and others have observed (McMurtie 2024), our contemporary educational epoch is not only becoming increasingly transactional but is being paired with an individualistic understanding of the “goods” education offers: an

individual's degree, an individual's employable skills, an individual's future income. For administrators or "the university," this is captured and aggregated as quantifiable "public good" statistics, often because they are "selling points" to potential educational consumers, and also because the state may require it: at least ten states have laws or initiatives requiring universities and colleges annually report the earnings of their graduates so that "return on investment" can be justified.⁷ For faculty, particularly those who have been trained and mentored by professors anchored in a transformational mindset, those statistics take a backseat to their shared purposes of expanding the field of knowledge (foremost in the minds of researchers) and preparing young scholars to acquire knowledge and skills, expand their minds (foremost for teacher-scholars), and incidentally but purposefully, prepare them to enter a profession and be successful (Fischman and Gardner 2022).

Plan Of Research

In order to suggest reparative pedagogical practices, we seek to cultivate a general understanding of the higher education social ethos that underpins stakeholder motivations currently. Our next step is to get a better handle on the basic motivations and expectations of higher education stakeholders, including high schoolers, undergraduate students, their parents, administrators, and faculty. Opinions and attitudes about education are more difficult to obtain than one might expect. A search of all JPSE (*Journal of Political Science Education*) articles failed to uncover any datasets

⁷ For most of these states, by mandate (statutorily, or tied to budgets or program initiatives) graduates' employment and earnings are collected and publicly reported, ostensibly for the purposes of tracking graduates' "success" as well as providing funding "accountability" to taxpayers. They include: Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas. In California, Cal-PASS Plus reports are limited to community college graduate information but initiatives have been pushed to include UC and state university graduate statistics as well.

that appeared germane. A few pertinent items are embedded in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), and “the gold standard” of longitudinal higher education survey data lies with HERI.

Advantageously, HERI data would enable a comparative study of student populations because they track individuals from their first year to their senior year. Unfortunately, their paywall presents a prohibitively high barrier to obtaining raw data (note to reader: we are actively seeking a UCLA partner who could help us gain unlimited access to surveys dating back to 1964). Other “usual suspects” such as the Department of Education merely collect statistics on enrollment, attendance, student demographics, teacher pay, and so forth.

As noted above, Fischman and Gardner (2022) surveyed and interviewed over 2,000 stakeholders at non-vocational (four-year, BA-granting) institutions (note: we are aiming for a much smaller sample). At the core of their analysis is their construction of four different mental models from their data: inertial, transactional, exploratory, and transformational. In this project we concentrate on the relationship between transactional and transformational mental models, arguing that they are mutually exclusive yet codependent categories (their changes are statistically related yet they mutually influence each other). In other words, indicators for one category should be empirically distinct from the other, yet the existence of one implies the existence of the other; more of one implies less of the other (and in this sense they would be inversely related). We believe they work in tandem with each other, as education serves both a public and a private good: educated, fully realized individuals are equipped to serve themselves as well as society. Viewing these mental models as codependent allows us

not only to recognize the imbalance between or misalignment of faculty's and students' goals but also to recognize how each of these groups hold the models in relationship to each other (i.e, which they value more). Understanding the fundamental values that shape stakeholders' approaches could help faculty motivate students to adopt potentially more advantageous transformational mental models; conversely, faculty might learn to be more explicit in acknowledging the value of and supporting transactional educational experiences that seem ubiquitous today—without surrendering the primacy of transformation.

Applying this modified mental models framework to the historical epoch framework of Dorn (2017), we hypothesize that a key element that defines the current social ethos of higher education is isolated individualism, whereby the common good that higher education is “supposed” to serve has been largely displaced by the pursuit of individual good(s). This higher education ethos reflects the contemporary wider American ethos or zeitgeist. Given that campuses can have their own cultures and histories that distinguish them from the wider society, we anticipate that the educational ethos may vary by institutional type; for example, transactionalism may be more visible on low-selectivity campuses. Given our premise that transactionalism and transformationalism are “always” in tension, we would expect to uncover evidence that transactionalism has gained significant ground in recent years on more campuses. Further, we believe that this individualistic ethos coupled with the transactional mental model exacerbates the anti-social tendencies of students—and that high levels of social anxiety create a negative feedback loop, reinforcing the individualistic ethos (Thompson 2025). While we recognize that COVID-19 did not create the problems or challenges of social isolation,

we would expect to find evidence that this condition was exacerbated during and after the pandemic, which began in spring 2020.

On the faculty side, we hypothesize that especially on campuses where faculty have aged in place, sharper generational divides will appear when comparing the mental models of students and their instructors. Consistent with Fischman and Gardner (2022), we would expect that faculty—most of whom were socialized by more established professors who were presumably biased towards transformationalism—will trust in the transformative power of education, valuing it over the transactional mindset. We have identified several HERI items (see Appendix) that have been included in their national survey instruments (The Freshman Survey and College Senior Survey) that would allow us to analyze students' attitudes and levels of engagement with faculty prior to and after COVID-19, giving us a picture of the impacts of COVID-19 and patterns that may be taking shape post-pandemic.

After analyzing existing data, our plan is to build and administer a series of opinion surveys and to brace them with interviews. We intend to gather institutional data and student demographic information (race, gender, age, first-generation status, race/ethnicity, SES, regional identification, and so forth) in order to test for differences among specific student populations and among campuses. Coupling the HERI longitudinal data with our survey data should allow us greater purchase on how students articulate their mental models that may be reflective of the prevailing educational ethos. This would be expanded with semi-structured interviews to clarify the relative influences of variables such as geography and institutional type on educational ethos. This work follows an educational ecology design (Kirst and Stevens 2015) that is

exemplified by Fischman and Gardner in *The Real World of College*, and we intend to build on their research by capitalizing on demographic information (which they did not use) to investigate how mental models condition the relationships between students and faculty across different types of colleges and universities in the US.

A Few More Words to Conclude

At a panel on pedagogy at a regional Political Science conference in 2024, we listened to our colleagues pivot from sharing how they tackled active learning to bemoaning the lack of student engagement in spite of their attempts to “actively engage” them. Some of the hypotheses about why students were failing to connect to each other and to college in general ranged from a loss of academic rigor due to poor instruction during COVID-19, to shortened attention spans due to quick-consumption media (fewer than 120 characters or 10 seconds), to mounting anti-intellectual sentiment in the US. While empathetic to these concerns and recognizing some truth in them, we separately observed that the responsibility for lack of student engagement is often placed on students for not meeting us faculty in the classroom space when we are working so hard to create an active learning environment. Upon a chance encounter, and realizing a mutual connection through our graduate school alma mater and also our shared frustrations, we as authors arrived at the hope that we could help pivot the conversation from how students are failing to engage higher education to how we can bridge the gap between faculty and students’ motivations for engagement. In other words, we began by asking, what is the larger educational ethos that predominates and shapes relationships within academia?

As Dorn helps show us, and as our colleagues anecdotally highlighted, the exogenous forces on academia have an immense impact on educational ethos. As we hit the quarter century mark, the challenges of education in the 21st century are glaring: decreased economic viability of degrees, increased cost of higher education, political attitudes and actions antagonistic to knowledge and critical thinking, diverse spectrum of student preparation and foundational skills, and the omnipresence of distracting technology such as social media and artificial intelligence, just to name a few. For many, post-COVID-19 has been a time of reflection and honesty about the state of the world that arises only from a deep trauma arising from a fundamental disruption to the status quo, a phenomenon we have termed the Covid hangover. While that experience can often overwhelm and sometimes seem impossible to move past, Wendy Fischman and Howard Gardner offer us a timely way to reflect on how to use *what is* to move towards *what can be*. While grand in scope (and in hope), we propose the Covid-hangover project to help faculty and administrators better meet the newest generation of students' needs and to progress to an educational environment that uses both the levers of education and of work to uplift communities as a whole and fulfill the common good.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions of Interest from HERI's 2019 "The Freshman Survey" Instrument⁸

35. How would you rate yourself in the following areas?					
	A Major Strength	Somewhat Strong	Average	Somewhat Weak	A Major Weakness
Ability to see the world from someone else's perspective	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tolerance of others with different beliefs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Openness to having my own views challenged:	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ability to work cooperatively with diverse people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Critical thinking skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ability to manage your time effectively	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

40. In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following reasons?			
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
To be able to get a better job	☐	☐	☐
To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas	☐	☐	☐
To make me a more cultured person	☐	☐	☐
To be able to make more money	☐	☐	☐
To learn more about things that interest me	☐	☐	☐
To get training for a specific career	☐	☐	☐
To prepare myself for graduate or professional school	☐	☐	☐

⁸ Similar versions of these questions have been included in the Freshman Survey since its inception in 1965. Stolzenberg, Ellen, Melissa Aragon, Edgar Romo, Victoria Couch, Destiny McClennan, M. Kevin Eagan, and Nathaniel Kang. 202. *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*. Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA.

To please my family	☐	☐	☐
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43. Below are some reasons that might have influenced your decision to attend this particular college. How important was each reason in your decision to come here?			
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
My parents/relatives wanted me to come here	☐	☐	☐
My teacher advised me	☐	☐	☐
This college has a very good academic reputation	☐	☐	☐
This college has a good reputation for its social and extracurricular activities	☐	☐	☐
I was offered financial assistance	☐	☐	☐
The cost of attending this college	☐	☐	☐
High school counselor advised me	☐	☐	☐
Private college counselor advised me	☐	☐	☐
I wanted to live near home	☐	☐	☐
Not offered aid by first choice	☐	☐	☐
Could not afford first choice	☐	☐	☐
This college's graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools	☐	☐	☐
This college's graduates get good jobs	☐	☐	☐
I was attracted by the religious affiliation/orientation of this college	☐	☐	☐
I wanted to go to a school about the size of this college	☐	☐	☐
rankings in national magazines	☐	☐	☐
I was admitted through an Early Action or Early Decision program	☐	☐	☐
A visit to this campus	☐	☐	☐
This college's graduates make a difference in the world	☐	☐	☐
Communication with a professor	☐	☐	☐
The academic reputation of my intended major	☐	☐	☐

51. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following:				
	Essential	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Becoming an authority in my field	☐	☐	☐	☐
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my social field	☐	☐	☐	☐
Influencing the political structure	☐	☐	☐	☐
Influencing social values	☐	☐	☐	☐
Raising a family	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being very well off financially	☐	☐	☐	☐
Helping others who are in difficulty	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making a theoretical contribution to science	☐	☐	☐	☐
Writing original works (poems, novels, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Creating artistic works (painting, sculpture, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Becoming successful in a business of my own	☐	☐	☐	☐
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	☐	☐	☐	☐
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participating in a community action program	☐	☐	☐	☐
Helping to promote racial understanding	☐	☐	☐	☐
Keeping up to date with political affairs	☐	☐	☐	☐
Becoming a community leader	☐	☐	☐	☐
Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures	☐	☐	☐	☐
Integrating spirituality into my life	☐	☐	☐	☐

52. What is your best guess as to the chances that you will:				
	Very Good Chance	Some Chance	Very Little Chance	No Chance
Change major field	☐	☐	☐	☐
Change career choice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participate in student government	☐	☐	☐	☐
Get a job to help pay for college expenses	☐	☐	☐	☐
Join fraternity or sorority	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participate in student protests or demonstrations	☐	☐	☐	☐
Transfer to another college before graduating	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participate in volunteer or community service work	☐	☐	☐	☐
Seek personal counseling	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participate in student clubs/groups	☐	☐	☐	☐
Participate in a study abroad program	☐	☐	☐	☐
Work on a professor's research project	☐	☐	☐	☐
Get tutoring help in specific courses	☐	☐	☐	☐
Take course from more than one college simultaneously	☐	☐	☐	☐
Take a leave of absence from this college temporarily	☐	☐	☐	☐
Take a course exclusively online	☐	☐	☐	☐
Vote in a local, state, or national election	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix B: Survey Questions of Interest from HERI's (2025) College Senior Survey Instrument⁹

23. Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements. This institution has contributed to my: (Select one in each row)
[Response categories: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]
Intellectual and practical skills (including inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, and information literacy)
Knowledge of people from different races/cultures
Understanding of global issues
Understanding of national issues
Understanding of the problems facing my community
Problem-solving skills
Foreign language ability
Preparedness for employment after college
Preparedness for graduate or advanced education
Ability to conduct research

25. Please rate your satisfaction with your college in each area: (Select one in each row)
[Response categories: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied]
Courses in your major field
Amount of contact with faculty
Class size
Relevance of coursework to everyday life
Relevance of coursework to career plans
Overall quality of instruction
Overall sense of community among students
Availability of campus social activities
Respect for the expression of diverse beliefs
Racial/ethnic diversity of the student body
Racial/ethnic diversity of the faculty
Overall college experience

29. Indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following: (Select one in each row)
[Response categories: Essential, Very Important, Somewhat Important, Not Important]
Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.)
Becoming an authority in my field

⁹ Similar versions of these questions have been included in the CSS since its inception in 1993. Source: Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA. <https://heri.ucla.edu/college-senior-survey/>.

Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field
Influencing the political structure
Influencing social values
Raising a family
Being very well off financially
Helping others who are in difficulty
Making a theoretical contribution to science
Writing original works (poems, novels, etc.)
Creating artistic work (paintings, sculpture, etc.)
Becoming successful in a business of my own
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life
Participating in a community action program
Helping to promote racial understanding
Keeping up to date with political affairs
Becoming a community leader
Integrating spirituality into my life
Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures
Adopting “green” practices to protect the environment
Working to correct social inequalities
Working to correct economic inequalities
Working to achieve greater gender equity

Appendix C: Survey Questions of Interest from HERI’s (2024-25) Faculty Survey Instrument¹⁰

19. During the past year, how often have you done each of the following with your undergraduate advisees?
(Responses: Frequently, Occasionally, Not at All)
Informed them of academic support options (e.g., study skills advising, financial aid advising, Writing Center, Disability Resource Center)
Helped them plan their course of study
Discussed their academic performance
Provided information on other academic opportunities (e.g., study abroad, internships, undergraduate research)
Discussed career and post-graduation goals

¹⁰ Similar versions of these questions have been included in the Faculty Survey, which is administered every three years since its inception in 1989. Source: Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA.
<https://ucla.app.box.com/v/Faculty-Survey-Instrument>.

26. In your interactions with undergraduates, how often in the past year did you encourage them to: (Select one for each item)

(Responses: Frequently, Occasionally, Not at All)

Ask questions in class

Support their opinions with a logical argument

Seek solutions to problems and explain them to others

Analyze multiple sources of information before coming to a conclusion

Evaluate the quality or reliability of information they receive

Take risks for potential gains

Seek alternative solutions to a problem

Look up scientific research articles and resources

Explore topics on their own, even though it was not required for a class

Accept mistakes as part of the learning process

Recognize biases that affect their thinking

35. Please indicate the extent to which you agree it is your role to:

(Responses: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

Encourage students to become agents of social change

Prepare students for employment after college

Prepare students for graduate or advanced education

Develop students' moral character

Provide for students' emotional development

Help students develop personal values

Enhance students' knowledge of and appreciation for other racial/ethnic groups

Promote students' ability to write effectively

Encourage respect for different beliefs

36. Please indicate your agreement with each of the following statements:

(Responses: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

The chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one's earning power

A racially/ethnically diverse student body enhances the educational experience of all students

Colleges have a responsibility to work with their surrounding communities to address local issues

Private funding sources often prevent researchers from being completely objective in the conduct of their work

I try to dispel perceptions of competition in my classroom

Students' use of personal devices and laptops in the classroom serve as more of a distraction than an educational resource

I feel I have the skills to facilitate conversations about diversity issues in the classroom

I achieve a healthy balance between my personal life and my professional life

I feel that I have to work harder than my colleagues to be perceived as a legitimate scholar

38. Indicate how important you believe each priority listed below is at your college or university:
(Responses: Highest Priority, High Priority, Medium Priority, Low Priority)

Increase or maintain institutional affordability

Develop a sense of community among students and faculty

Facilitate student involvement in community service

Help students learn how to bring about change in society

Increase or maintain institutional prestige

Hire faculty “stars”

Recruit more traditionally underrepresented students

Increase the selectivity of the student body through more competitive admissions criteria

Promote gender diversity in the faculty and administration

Promote racial and ethnic diversity in the faculty and administration

Provide resources for faculty to engage in community-based teaching or research

Create and sustain partnerships with surrounding communities

Pursue extramural funding

Strengthen links with the for-profit, corporate sector

Develop leadership ability among students

Develop an appreciation for multiculturalism

Prepare students for the workplace