Inside the academy, time to ask some difficult questions

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These days, public discussion of colleges and universities in the United States – and there is a lot of it – is almost exclusively concerned with rising costs, the job prospects of graduates, the contributions of colleges and universities to economic growth, and funding by the states and the federal government.

Although this attention devoted to the economics of higher education is understandable, it has crowded out a discussion of equally fundamental, and perhaps even more fundamental, issues.

At or near the top of this list, I would argue, are: whom should we teach? What should we teach? How should we teach?

The observations (and assertions) that follow are meant to stimulate a conversation about
these questions among professors, administrators and students inside the academy – and citizens who are (or should be) interested in the role of colleges and universities as engines of equal opportunity, empowerment and social progress.

**Who gets access?**

Let's consider the first question: whom should we teach?

Colleges and universities, especially elite institutions, can and should do a lot more to enroll academically talented students from lower- and middle-class families. A study completed in 2003 by the Consortium on Financing Higher Education found that 36% of all highly-qualified high school seniors (with excellent grade point averages and combined SAT scores over 1200) come from the top 20% of families as measured by income. Fifty-seven percent of undergraduates at selective colleges and universities, however, come from this group.

Wealthy American families, then, are overrepresented on these campuses by 21%.

Financial aid, provided on the basis of need, is of course essential to addressing this imbalance. But so is outreach to underrepresented students and their families, many of whom do not know much about financial aid, in the form of loans and grants, for which they might be eligible.

As is evident in the above details, greater access to higher education will benefit not only the individuals who matriculate but American society as a whole.

**Making the curriculum matter**

So, the next question is, what should we teach?

The underlying structure of the curriculum in higher ed has remained the same over the years. Mad African!: (Broken Sword), CC BY-NC

Although the content of individual courses has undergone constant change, the underlying structure of the curriculum at many liberal arts colleges and universities has remained the same for decades.

It almost always consists of three parts: a major, which is fulfilled with 10 or 12 courses within a single discipline or under a multidisciplinary umbrella; general education, which often takes the form of distribution requirements, two or three courses in the humanities, social sciences,
and sciences; and electives, which are meant to give students opportunities to pursue intellectual interests or acquire “practical” skills.

As currently constituted, in my view, the curriculum serves the interests of departments and individual faculty members better than it does students.

The major may be best suited to the very few undergraduates who intend to get a PhD in the field. Many majors, especially those in the humanities and “soft” social sciences, have little or no structure, apart from a required introductory course or courses.

Nor is there clear and convincing evidence that focused study in a single discipline (whether it is in a traditional or a vocational field) has a substantial and enduring impact on subject matter mastery, problem-solving, analytical thinking, or reading and writing skills.

General education requirements are even more problematic. Over the years, as Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard University, has observed in his book, the aims attached to general education requirements have increased. They now include global competence, quantitative skills, ethics and respect for diversity as well as “literacy” in science, government and literature.

At the same time, dare I say it, many departments have developed “watered-down” general education courses for undergraduates who want to get distribution requirements “out of the way.”

Electives, of course, are left to the students – and virtually nothing is known about how they use their freedom of choice.

Are they exploring genuine interests and acquiring practical skills, Bok asks, or are they taking easy courses to raise their grade point average and pursue extracurricular activities in their spare time? Do they value the electives they have taken more than courses in the major or those taken to fulfill their distribution requirements?

Transforming teaching

And finally, how do we teach?

Digital technologies have already had a substantive impact on pedagogy. Online presentations, assigned as homework, followed by interactive “flipped classroom” sessions that build on information that has already been absorbed, and use rapid feedback and collaborative problem-solving, are replacing traditional lectures.

This transformation in teaching methods has only just begun.

The transformation also provides an occasion to evaluate the extent to which colleges and universities are effectively nurturing “critical thinking,” ie, the capacity to evaluate the quality and reliability of information and the claims based on it.

Measurements to assess critical thinking, including the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which assesses improvement in writing skills and critical thinking across four years of college, and National Survey of Student Engagement, which gauges how often students experience rapid feedback, interactive discussion and collaborative problem-solving, are in their infancy. Their findings about critical thinking are not encouraging and should be a basis for discussions about pedagogy.
Making education relevant

Those discussions, in my judgment, might include ways to counter the erosion of public confidence in science and scientists.

They might also address the claims recently made by Kyla Ebels-Duggan, a professor of philosophy at Northwestern University (in The Aims of Higher Education: Problems of Morality and Justice, edited by Harry Brighouse and Michael McPherson, 2015) that 21st-century undergraduates do not defer to the moral authority of tradition (or “Great Books”) and are far more likely to embrace moral relativism (i.e., my opinion is as good as his or her opinion).

Better on offense than defense, they often exhibit confidence in their own criticism of a claim and an unwillingness to advance a claim of their own. To counter these tendencies, Ebels-Duggan proposes that teachers cultivate the intellectual virtues of charity and humility.

More controversially, although she knows she will be accused (by proponents of the pedagogy of “content neutrality” and professorial “objectivity”) of politicizing the classroom, she recommends that instructors make explicit their admiration for values such as respect for human rights; equal protection under the law; and the obligation to help those in serious need.

By putting on display ideas such as these – ideas they respect – and explaining why they respect them, Ebels-Duggan emphasizes, teachers might be able to break through their students’ intuition (or belief) that much of what is taught in college is irrelevant to them and the world in which they live.

Her passion serves as a reminder that who we teach, what we teach, and how we teach matters.