Power to the Pedagogues

By Christopher Winship and Mark Ratner

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In the Sept. 18 issue of U. S. News & World Report, the nation's best colleges and universities are graded like bonds or ranked like baseball teams. This year, a new category, "tops in teaching," has been added to the traditional ones. Why did this take so long? Why is teaching treated as an appendix in evaluating educational institutions?

Competition in recruitment is ubiquitous among these institutions. Admissions offices have developed into sophisticated marketing organizations in their efforts to attract promising minority members and other qualified students. Athletic departments have created scouting programs that rival those of professional teams. Deans' offices and department chairmen and chairwomen have strategies to hire renowned researchers.

So much of university life is now inevitably — and not inappropriately — market-driven. But there is no extensive competitive market for high-quality college teaching. Stanford does not attempt to lure away Yale's most talented instructors; nor does Berkeley try to steal the best teachers from Brandeis.

This is surprising. In the 1990's, universities have faced a 40 percent decrease in the number of 18-year-olds. With rises in tuition far outstripping increases in family incomes, there has been an even sharper percentage drop in the number of students who can pay full tuition. Universities have responded with increased salesmanship, recruitment and packaging of their programs.

But they have not responded by hiring the best teachers to attract the best students.

The cynical explanation sees abandonment of instruction, which should be higher education's first priority. Critics argue that universities put far too much emphasis on research and sports, to the detriment of their teaching mission.

This explanation is inadequate. Not only do universities generally not compete for top teachers, but small liberal arts colleges, where research and sports are of considerably less importance, do not either. Amherst and Reed, Grinnell and Carleton, generally do not try to steal one another's top teachers.

Competition for top teachers does not exist even among elite private schools. Exeter and Andover do not customarily raid each other's faculties.

Since education is the top priority at these institutions, why then isn't there competition to hire Mr. Chips?

Why is there no competitive market for high-quality teaching at any level of education?

One obvious issue that prevents a hiring war for superior instructors is the measurement question. Hardly any one agrees wholly on what is meant by good teaching. Are good teachers those who entertain — or those from whom one learns most?

Educators disagree on whether the goal of good teaching is imparting knowledge or developing analytic skills. They argue over where the difficult issues of the development of values and maturity fit in.

How then should teaching be assessed? Many faculty members fear, with some justification, that student evaluations are little more than popularity contests. At Dartmouth, a school with a strong reputation for teaching (ranked first by U. S. News & World Report in the category of "top national universities"), the faculty refuses to permit student evaluations precisely for this reason.

> Colleges are market-driven. To gain respect, great teachers have to learn to compete.

Alternatively, faculty members might evaluate each other's teaching. It won't work, if only because it would take too much time.

How might the public use impartial judgments to compare departments, or even colleges or universities? If a faculty member, a department or a school does a considerably better job of teaching than others, how can this be proved, particularly to prospective students and their parents?

It is easy to evaluate the performances of colleges and universities in other ways. Winning teams and research breakthroughs help generate more student applications, greater alumni financial support and outside financing for research. Great teaching, alas, rarely proves equally newsworthy. It is thus not surprising that universities stress other activities to the neglect of teaching.

Research universities have made attempts to emphasize the quality of instruction. Teaching prizes have proliferated on many campuses. Teaching is now often taken into account in salary decisions. During tenure and promotion reviews, faculty members are often required to provide course materials as part of their folder, and student evaluations are commonly examined. Nevertheless, the overall impact of these changes appears to be modest.

Teaching can be given a renewed priority, but not by cheapening it by making teachers marketable — that is, by making them celebrities, the way quarterbacks are.

Outside agencies, possibly sponsored by the Carnegie Commission for Higher Education, might evaluate the quality of instruction at various institutions and thus enable prospective students to compare programs. This in turn would create an incentive for universities to hire the best instructors.

By introducing teaching as a factor in ranking schools, U. S. News & World Report could help to create that incentive. The other criteria it uses are easily quantifiable measures like the size of a school's endowments, test scores and graduation rates. The teaching ratings are purely based on reputation — not surprising, given the difficulties of determining just who is a good teacher and why.

Further, these ratings, the magazine said, are based on "an unusually strong commitment to undergraduate teaching" — commitment, not accomplishment. The grade is for effort, not for results.

U. S. News uses separate rankings for research universities and liberal arts colleges. But we should be able to compare the quality of teaching at, say, the University of Washington and at Williams.

One road to improved teaching might be for universities to establish special funds for hiring star teachers, as many institutions have done for hiring minority faculty members.

Another possibility, used by many law and business schools where teaching is often given high priority, would be to have faculty candidates try out for a year so that their teaching could be evaluated directly.

But this is not enough. In American society, in which illegitimacy, violence, cynicism and cult membership are at shockingly high levels among the young, our colleges and universities seem to have abandoned their moral, intellectual and socializing roles. Recall that Harvard and William and Mary, among others, began as schools of theology.

To the degree that our institutions are conduits not only for knowledge but also for the highest values and ethics of the society, Mr. Chips is — must be — a critical part of their mission. But if a competitive market developed for great teachers, would it be a market for Mr. Chips — or, more likely, for great classroom entertainers?

The problem is not simply that traditional values have been misplaced by today's faculty members and administrators. Rather, the problem is that universities, while adjusting to economic changes, have become far too market-driven.

Admittedly, creating competition for Mr. Chips would be no simple matter. But it is imperative. □

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