Power to the Pedagogues

By Christopher Winship and Mark Ratner

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—"top 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?

The answer lies in the fact that teaching is ubiquitous among these institutions. Admissions offices have developed sophisticated statistical models to sift through the applications of the best students. Athletic departments have created scouting programs that rival those of professional teams. Deans' offices and department chairs and chairwomen have strategies to hire renowned researchers.

So much of university life is now money-oriented—and not appropriately—market-driven. But there is no evidence that competitive market pressure will improve teaching. Instead, it will drive down the quality of teaching. The problem lies with the professors, not the administrators.

Colleges are market-driven. To gain respect, great teachers have to learn to compete. Otherwise, they will be replaced by their replacements.

Since education is the top priority at all of these institutions, why aren't there programs to hire Mr. Chips? Why is there no competitive market for high-quality teaching at any level of education? One obvious reason is that the market for teaching is not free. The market for teaching is shaped by the market for education. The market for education is shaped by the market for knowledge and technology. The market for knowledge and technology is shaped by the market for innovation and development.

But this is not enough. In American society, in which illegitimacy, violence, cynicism and public distrust are at shockingly high levels among the young, our colleges and universities seem to have abandoned their intellectual, moral and socializing roles. Recall that Harvard and Williams 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?

Slightly different results 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 reason for improved teaching might be the use of special funds for hiring star teachers, as many institutions have done for hiring minority faculty members. Another possibility is the use of new law and business schools where teaching, once given high priority, could be in high demand and could be in high demand.

Christopher Winship is professor of sociology at Harvard. Mark Ratner is professor of chemistry at Northwestern University.