



LATEST NEWS

SMU profs protest intelligent design conference

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By **JEFFREY WEISS / The Dallas Morning News**

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Professors opposed to the Bush library aren't the only angry faculty members at Southern Methodist University this week.

Science professors upset about a presentation on "Intelligent Design" fired blistering letters to the administration, asking that the event be shut down.

The "Darwin vs. Design" conference, co-sponsored by the SMU law school's Christian Legal Society, will say that a designer with the power to shape the cosmos is the best explanation for aspects of life and the universe. The event is produced by the Discovery Institute, the Seattle-based organization that says it has scientific evidence for its claims.

The anthropology department at SMU begged to differ:

"These are conferences of and for believers and their sympathetic recruits," said the letter sent to administrators by the department. "They have no place on an academic campus with their polemics hidden behind a deceptive mask."

Similar letters were sent by the biology and geology departments.

The university is not going to cancel the event, interim provost Tom Tunks said Friday. The official response is a statement that the event to be held in McFarlin Auditorium April 13-14 is not endorsed by the school:

"Although SMU makes its facilities available as a community service, and in support of the free marketplace of ideas, providing facilities for those programs does not imply SMU's endorsement of the presenters' views," the statement said.

The school also will review its policies about who is allowed to hold events on campus, Dr. Tunks said.

The size of the dispute reflects two ongoing battles about academic freedom and responsibility.

One is local: The concern that some SMU professors have that the proposed Bush

library and an accompanying policy institute would create the impression that the school tilts politically toward the positions of the current administration.

The other is national and local: The struggle between those who say the material world couldn't get this way on it's own versus those who say that there's no scientific justification to invoke the supernatural as an explanation.

Many SMU science professors say they are worried that merely allowing "Darwin vs. Design" on campus could give the public impression that Intelligent Design has support from scientists at the school.

The Bush library debate has increased the size of the response to the Intelligent Design conference, some university officials said.

"In the broader context of the Bush library debate, this is causing enormous discomfort," said Caroline Brettell, interim dean of the Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences and an anthropologist.

The collision started last year, when law student Sarah Levy learned that the Discovery Institute wanted to hold a series of "Darwin vs. Design" conferences, including one in Dallas. Ms. Levy is president of the SMU chapter of the Christian Legal Society, which has about 100 members. SMU requires outside groups to have an official university organization as co-sponsor for any event to be held on campus.

"It is a very pertinent topic of debate right now and one that has some legal controversy around it," Ms. Levy said. "So it seemed that it was an appropriate event for the legal society to sponsor."

The two-day event will feature well-known supporters of Intelligent Design. Dr. Michael Behe is author of the book Darwin's Black Box and was a key witness in 2005 at a federal trial that produced a ruling that Intelligent Design was religion rather than science.

While some who are leading the protest acknowledge the need for free speech and academic freedom, they say this event doesn't qualify.

"This is propaganda," said Dr. John Ubelaker, former chairman of the biology department. "Using the campus for propaganda does not fit into anybody's scheme of intellectual discussion."

Other biologists compared the conference to a presentation by Holocaust deniers. Would the university allow that to happen?

Physics professor Randy Scalise regularly teaches a class that is called "The Scientific Method," but is generally referred to as "debunking pseudoscience." He's told his students to attend the conference – but he said he's preparing them with material to put it into a scientific context.

But he wishes the conference wasn't happening.

"I think that by having them on campus, we are giving them legitimacy," he said.

Organizers of the conference said that the attacks by the faculty come as no surprise – but are groundless.

"We aren't trying to be sneaky," said Dr. Stephen Meyer, director of the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute.

He's scheduled to speak at the event, which brings him back to a campus where he took classes while working in Dallas as a geophysicist.

"We are very clear that this is a conference to inform the greater Dallas community about what Intelligent Design is," he said.

As for whether it's religion, "we'll be talking about scientific evidence," he said. "We won't be quoting Bible verses."

Several of the scientists leading the protests said Friday that they were satisfied with the university response. And some were trying to figure out how to turn what they considered to be a negative into a positive.

"They are going to use it as a teaching moment," Dr. Bretell said.

CLASH OF IDEAS

What intelligent design proponents say:

Certain features of the universe and of living things are best and scientifically explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection. Many say only a supernatural being, a god or God, could accomplish that. They say scientific evidence exists to support intelligent design.

What most scientists say:

Intelligent Design is religion rather than science. Many unlikely events happen, natural selection has directed the evolution of life, and an ever-increasing body of evidence indicates that evolution undirected by intelligence can explain our material world. Intelligent Design is not science because it cannot be used to make unique predictions that can be tested.

What a federal judge said:

In 2005, in a case against the Dover, Pa., school district, U.S. District Judge John E. Jones ruled that Intelligent Design was essentially religious and therefore should not be taught as science in public schools.