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BU had role in Dembski return

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Baylor's history of controversy surrounding intelligent design has been well chronicled, especially when former professor Dr. William Dembski has been involved. But such was not the case in November of 2006 when Dembski arrived back on campus to work with Dr. Robert Marks, distinguished professor of computer and electrical engineering.

Baylor was involved in asking for the grant that brought Dembski back, but when his return was made known to the administration, Baylor returned the grant, effectively terminating his position.

The administration said it was initially unaware of Dembski's inclusion in the grant proposal because the proposal did not go through the proper academic channels. In documents obtained by The Baylor Lariat, Marks claimed otherwise but also called his collaboration with Dembski "stealth until others made it visible."

Marks became involved in another academic controversy this fall when his Web site containing research related to intelligent design was removed from Baylor's server.

The site chronicled his work in evolutionary informatics, a field which uses computer modeling of evolution and adds information to the understood process.

Adding information to the process is considered by some to imply that design must take place before evolution can begin.

But the issues with Marks' research began long before the Web site was removed, and documents obtained by the The Baylor Lariat show the history of this controversy.

LifeWorks Grant

The storm surrounding Marks' research dates back to a proposal that went through Baylor and provided for Dembski's return to campus.

Through the approval of a grant submitted to the LifeWorks Foundation and signed by President Lilley on April 28, 2006, Dembski was hired as a post-doctoral researcher to assist Marks.

Dembski, a proponent of intelligent design, previously directed Baylor's controversial Michael Polanyi Center, which was devoted to the study of science and religion. The center caused divisions among Baylor faculty and was disbanded in 2000.

The LifeWorks Foundation is directed by Microsoft millionaire Brendan Dixon, who said in a phone interview from Seattle with the Lariat that the foundation has been "winding down for the last year and half" and is closing down this year for reasons unrelated to Marks.

Dixon and his wife, Kim, are the sole employees of LifeWorks, which Dixon called "a small, family-run foundation."

"We provided funds to organizations that we felt were addressing inequities in life and trying to help move people forward," Dixon said.

The LifeWorks proposal approved by Lilley and accompanied by a letter he signed asked for \$15,000 from the foundation for Dembski's post-doctoral position, but Baylor ended up receiving \$30,000.

Dixon said he could not recall the specific numbers involved in the grant.

Dixon said the foundation received proposals all the time and has made varying grants, both large and small, throughout the years.

According to tax returns, in 2006 the foundation donated \$700,000 to the Discovery Institute, a nonpartisan think tank that supports intelligent design. Dixon said he is not in any way affiliated with the institute, however, and donates to various organizations.

Dixon, a computer scientist like Marks, said he met Marks in a social setting and became aware of his research. He said Marks later sent him a write-up on the research, which he found interesting and decided to support with a grant.

But unlike other grants made from the foundation, Dixon said, this one Baylor would eventually return, something he called "bizarre beyond belief."

In a letter from Lilley to the foundation dated April 28, 2006, Baylor requested a \$15,000 grant "to support a post-doctoral researcher."

Dembski was not named by Lilley in the letter, although he was named in the personnel section of the accompanying proposal.

After the grant was processed, Lilley sent a letter on June 29, 2006, to Dixon and the foundation thanking him for a "check of \$30,000" and stating, "We hope this project will be the beginning of a dynamic relationship between Baylor and The LifeWorks Foundation."

Director of media relations Lori Fogleman confirmed that Lilley signed off on the grant but "later became aware" of Dembski's hiring.

Dembski was named and his curriculum vitae included in the personnel section of the proposal, which was submitted April 28, 2006. The proposal, "Added Information in Evolutionary Search for Targeted Solutions," was for the investigation of "added information required to successfully perform evolutionary computing."

Dembski Back at Baylor

When it became apparent that Dembski was returning to Baylor, his arrival was not met with immediate resistance.

Dr. Ben Kelley, dean of the school of engineering, sent Marks an e-mail on Oct. 1, 2006, in which he said he had learned Marks requested office space for a new post-doctoral researcher.

"Since I haven't seen any requests for a new position I'd also like to chat with you about this," Kelley said in the e-mail.

Marks replied the same day, explaining his procurement of the grant and who it was funding. In an October 23, 2006, e-mail, Kelley's assistant requested a picture of Dembski for the school's Web site.

Dembski said he arrived at Baylor in November 2006 and was given an office in the Rogers Engineering Building.

"The dean knew about this. It was up-front," Dembski said. "It wasn't a big deal - I had friends there (in the engineering school)."

But by December, the situation had taken a different turn. A Dec. 1 e-mail from Kelley to Marks stated: "A serious situation is arising concerning your post-doc."

On Dec. 6 Marks wrote a letter to Lilley and Provost Randall O'Brien in response to what Marks called "rumblings about (Dembski's) return to my lab."

In the letter, Marks wrote that Kelley had communicated these concerns to him.

Marks explained to the president and provost that he had procured the LifeWorks grant for Dembski's hiring, adding that "Dr. Dembski has a small office in the Rogers Building and came in two or three times a week."

Marks stated, "I know you believe it is my right as a Baylor professor to pursue research in Intelligent Design. I also hope you believe, as I do, foundational academic freedom of intellectual pursuit trumps any protests concerning the hiring of Dr. Dembski in my research group.

"Before the LifeWorks gift is expended, I plan to attract additional funds for Dr. Dembski's support. Ultimately I would like to raise sufficient soft money for a perpetually endowed position so that Dr. Dembski could, if he so chose, join my group full time. He has not agreed to do so."

Dembski's Firing

Dembski's position at Baylor did not last long.

On Dec. 8 Kelley wrote an e-mail to Dembski to notify him that his position was discontinued.

On the same day, Marks wrote an e-mail to O'Brien and others saying: "Our collaboration (Marks and Dembski's) was stealth until others made it visible."

Marks referred all questions to his attorney, John Gilmore, who did not return calls to his cell phone Wednesday and Thursday.

Dembski said he thought the comment could be "taken in various ways."

"I know for myself I wasn't predicated on a gift from the LifeWorks Foundation. Funding from this gift is no longer available."

Kelley confirmed to the Lariat that it was his decision to return the money to the foundation.

Dembski said when his position was terminated, Kelley was "the only person (he) dealt with really."

"I met with him when he indicated that there might be some problems with my position, and I met with him and Marks at 7 a.m. on a Monday morning about five or six days before I was terminated," Dembski said.

"(Kelley) indicated that he thought my mathematics was good, but he didn't really follow it all. He basically said, 'I have to do what's best for engineering. This could affect funding,' but he kind of left it hanging as if I was a liability to the engineering school."

Fogleman said the grant "was a research proposal that did not go through the proper academic channels."

"This grant was actually a gift to the university that went through university development," Fogleman said. "It did not go through the academic side of the house and follow that standard procedure of external funding evaluation - department chair, Office of Sponsored Programs, dean and provost."

According to documents obtained by the Lariat, Marks submitted the grant proposal to the Office of Sponsored Programs, which then directed it to Baylor's Development Office.

In an e-mail to the Office of Sponsored Programs, Marks wrote, "Who submits the grant, your office or development, is your call.

The development office then took over the grant submission process, according to the e-mails.

Fogleman said the university could not confirm clarify the grant's approval process as of press time.

Dembski said for Baylor to return the grant, thereby eliminating his position, was "unprecedented."

"For Baylor to stop me in this way was hindering Bob's research," Dembski said. "I was skeptical at first about returning to Baylor, but I mean, this was coming under a grant that Bob had, and I was basically employed by him."

Dembski said he at least had a safety net of another full-time job. Dembski is a research professor of philosophy at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

A Different 'Vetting'

Despite comments made by Marks that his collaboration with Dembski was "stealth," Dembski said his association at Baylor wasn't hidden.

"I have ... a file of a letter that Lilley signed off on basically thanking the foundation and all of the paperwork that went through," Dembski said, adding, "If he didn't look it over it closely enough, well, OK, whose fault is that?"

Fogleman said the president receives large amounts of paperwork to sign, and "once anything reaches the president's desk, he is trusting that the processes in place have been properly vetted at that point."

But the LifeWorks grant, which she said "circumvented the standard funding evaluation programs," could have "been vetted completely differently if it had gone through the academic side."

Dr. Donald Schmeltekopf, former provost and current director of the Center for Ministry Effectiveness and Educational Leadership, said, "It's not unusual to not read (grants) all the way through."

"There's a system in place," he said. "You rely on others like deans and chairs to check these things. I rarely read through every page of a proposal I was sent (when I was provost), and I signed off on a lot of grants ... If you get a proposal on a particularly busy day, you could sign off on something you weren't aware of."

Schmeltekopf said considering the history Baylor has with Dembski, if he had written proposal with Dembski in it, he "would've made sure that the administration knew that he was involved."

"Seems to be that folks didn't know what they signed," Schmeltekopf said. "You just don't do that to your school, your administration."

STARS Proposal

After the return of the LifeWorks money, Marks continued to submit proposals for his research.

In May of 2007, Marks submitted a research proposal to STARS, a grant-awarding program funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

The John Templeton Foundation is a philanthropic foundation that issues grants in the fields of science and philosophy and funds what its mission statement calls "discovery in areas engaging life's biggest questions."

Kelley set up a meeting with department chairs and deans to discuss the proposal's funding source and scientific merit.

"Some could conclude that this project has ID implications, and certainly the outcomes could potentially be used in that that (sic) emotion-packed debate," Kelley wrote in a May 8 e-mail.

The next day Marks wrote to Kelley and O'Brien, "Let me remove any doubt ... this proposal DEFINITELY has ID implications."

Marks declined to attend the meeting but had lunch with Kelley on May 11. In an e-mail that day to Kelley, he wrote, "The bottom line, as I understand it, is that the decision to pull the STARS proposal was President Lilley's decision communicated to you by (physics professor and vice provost for research) Truell Hyde. The reason stated for pulling was not the content of the proposal, but was the technicality that the proposal was not properly submitted."

Fogleman said, "When the STARS proposal was first submitted to the Office of Sponsored Programs, it was already up against the deadline, yet the proposal had never been through the standard academic approval process - dean, vice provost for research, provost - which is required of all faculty research proposals.

"Because the process was not followed from the beginning, OSP had to start from scratch," Fogleman said. "The proposal did proceed through the standard procedure and was eventually approved."

Representing Pat Neff

Despite the proposals Marks submitted, the controversy surrounding his research continued to be a subject of debate within Baylor.

On June 11, Marks sent Lilley and O'Brien a copy of Darwin's Black Box, a book by biochemist Michael Behe presenting a case for intelligent design and a scientific argument for the existence of God.

He sent with the book a letter explaining that he and "some others at Baylor are doing work in how God is revealed in science, mathematics and engineering [Romans 1:20]. One oft misunderstood (sic) component of this area is sometimes called Intelligent Design. The phrase is now used largely in an inappropriate pejorative (sic) sense because of its depiction as mindless uninformed creationism. Proper study of the interface of God and Science is anything but."

He added that he would "welcome the opportunity to talk" about his field and answer any questions Lilley or others might have.

Fogleman said "the president and provost receive a steady flow of books on a daily basis from people inside and outside the university, faculty-recommended books, faculty-written books and such. The president's office did receive a copy of the book."

Kelley and Marks met July 9, and in an e-mail exchange that followed the meeting, Kelley wrote to Marks that his impression was "that the books you sent weren't well received, perhaps particularly by President Lilley. However, I do not wish to put words in their mouths."

All questions for President Lilley were directed to Lori Fogleman, director of media communications.

In comments about the intelligent design debate, Kelley stated, "It is not your or my perusal to dictate whether or how Baylor collectively decides to/if open/reopen a dialog (sic).

"Many have concluded that there is no debate to be had, and others conclude the debate has already occurred. Most main-stream scientists and engineers, including a good share at Baylor, have dismissed ID.

"There are elements of or individuals at Baylor who stand to loose (sic) or be hurt by the perception the university is pursuing or advocating 'bogus' science. That is a huge factor, and much larger than your or my opinions."

Kelley suggested that Marks focus the "mainstream and vast majority" of his research toward "traditional ECE (Electrical and Computer Engineering) research."

Kelley also mentioned in the e-mail that Marks had expressed a preference to focus on "science and God at Baylor" research.

"That is not why you were attractive to us before you were hired (as we have discussed), and not what I expect from you as a Distinguished Professor (as we have discussed)," Kelley wrote.

Kelley relayed to Marks that some people may view him "as out to promote Bob Marks' agenda first or at the expense of the ECS (school of Engineering and Computer Science) agenda." He encouraged him to pursue research that could "promote and benefit Baylor ECE."

To communicate his support of Kelley, O'Brien sent a follow-up e-mail to Marks on July 11 thanking him for the book. He assured Marks that Kelly was "representing institutional concerns and policy, which must be supported by Pat Neff Hall."

He wrote to Marks later that day reiterating, "The concerns (Kelly) is visiting with you about are strong ones in high quarters."

Web site disconnected

The conflict took a different turn when Marks did a July 20 podcast interview with Casey Luskin, program officer in public policy and legal affairs for the Discovery Institute.

The interview was posted on the institute's Web site and discussed the nature of Marks' research on his Web site, www.evolutionaryinformatics.org, which is now hosted on a third-party server.

Later on July 27 Kelly sent Marks another e-mail saying, "I have received several concerned messages this week about an interview and web site dealing with evolutionary computing associated ID (sic). Please disconnect this web site immediately..."

The Web site was shut down in August and Marks and his attorney, John Gilmore, met with Kelley, Baylor General Counsel Charles Beckenhauer and Provost Randall O'Brien. The Web site contained some of Marks' work as well as material by Dembski.

Despite Baylor's approval of the LifeWorks, STARS and National Science Foundation proposals for Marks' research, Fogleman said the Web site is a separate issue.

Baylor officials maintain that the Web site was removed on a procedural technicality and that the university did not approve the research.

"Our professors are expected to research and teach in areas that they are hired to produce," Fogleman said.

"We're talking about any kind of outside research -- outside of their particular field of expertise in which they are hired to produce at the university. If they fulfill all of their contractual obligations to the university regarding time and productivity, then that professor is perfectly free to research in an outside area," Fogleman said.

"Right now, this continues to be an ongoing legal discussion that we hope will be resolved satisfactorily."

City editor Claire St. Amant contributed to this story.

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