



EVOLUTION'S GLASS CEILING

By: David Klinghoffer
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[Original Article](#)

Experienced scientists who support intelligent design theories literally have to disguise themselves in order to perform their research.

A biologist I know recently bleached his hair and changed his appearance in other ways so as to be almost unrecognizable. I'm being deliberately vague about his looks and identity because he was going undercover. When I last saw him, he was ready for a stint of researching and lab work on intelligent design at a university that he declined to name. On returning to the lab after winter break, he said he would adopt a different disguise.

I asked how he planned to alter his appearance this time. "If I told you," he answered mildly, "that would kind of defeat the purpose, wouldn't it?"

The purpose is to avoid being spotted by scientists hostile to intelligent design (ID). If Darwinists realized that this stealthy biologist was working in their midst, as the guest of a professor at the same university, they could make that host professor pay a heavy career price.

Welcome to the underground world of Darwin-doubting scientists, who say they fear for their professional future. The challenges faced by these academic nonconformists have implications that go far beyond the faculty lounge.

A criticism often leveled at intelligent design is that ID theorists haven't done the research or the writing in peer-reviewed scientific journals that would make their view a serious contender to overturn Darwinism. This proves—say ID's opponents—that intelligent design is nothing more than religion masquerading as science. If such "pseudo-science" were taught in public schools, that would amount to the establishment of a state religion.

[What is ID](#), exactly? In brief, it asks whether unguided material processes alone were sufficient to produce the history of complex life on earth. ID argues that an intelligent cause, operating in nature, is the best explanation for the scientific evidence agreed on by Darwinists and Darwin critics alike. Much of the work being done on ID is organized by the Discovery Institute, where I work.

Evolution is hot these days, even showing up in the 2008 presidential election. Candidate Mike Huckabee has faced frequent questioning from reporters about his critical but vaguely expressed opinion on Darwinian theory. Meanwhile, Democratic contender Hillary Clinton declared in a New York Times interview: "I believe in evolution, and I am shocked at some of the things that people in public life have been saying," referring to her Republican rivals.

I asked leading ID-critics whether Darwin-doubters face any hurdles, beyond the strength or weakness of ID itself, to researching and testing their ideas. Kenneth Miller, a Brown University biologist, emailed me with a withering reply: "The conclusion of 'Design' should follow from well-done research on comparative genomics, molecular biology, gene expression, and biochemistry. There is, as you surely know, no barrier to such research."

Francisco Ayala, a biologist at the University of California, Irvine, was emphatic: "I cannot imagine any serious scientist or academic administrator trying to dissuade anybody else from carrying out any well-designed research project."

However, ID-sympathizers in academia say they face disturbing limits on scientific inquiry. Those limits work a bit like an invisible pet fence, popular with suburban homeowners who want to keep their dog from wandering out of the front yard. The pet wears a special collar. If he tries to cross over an underground wire around the perimeter of the yard, he gets an electric shock. Dogs and scientists learn quickly.

This April the feature-length documentary *Expelled* will open in theaters, telling stories of scientists whose colleagues punished them for questioning Darwinism. One evolutionary biologist featured in the film, Richard Sternberg, was penalized by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History for editing an article favorable to ID in a technical peer-reviewed biology journal housed at the Smithsonian.

The U.S. Office of Special Counsel investigated the case in 2005 and reported that Dr. Sternberg's Smithsonian colleagues created a "hostile work environment" for him "with the ultimate goal of forcing [him] out of the [Smithsonian]." His supervisor questioned others about Sternberg's political and religious beliefs, with a view to discrediting him. The museum confiscated his key to the facility and obstructed his access to research specimens.

Even a peripheral association with Darwin-doubting can destroy a scholar professionally. Take Guillermo Gonzalez, an astronomer at Iowa State University. He lost his bid for tenure in 2006 because he co-wrote a book, *The Privileged Planet* (Regnery), making a scientific case for the intelligent design of the cosmos. The book wasn't about Darwin or about biology.

Was Dr. Gonzalez qualified for the job? Actually, Gonzalez outperformed the tenured members of the astronomy faculty in basic measures of scientific reputation and scientific productivity. He exceeded his department's tenure standards, which measure "excellence" in terms of publications in refereed science journals, by more than 350 percent. Yet his department chairman flatly instructed the faculty voting on his tenure request that intelligent design is a litmus test, "disqualify[ing] him from serving as a science educator."

Some campuses are forthright in limiting academic freedom. In 2005, at the University of Idaho, biologist and ID proponent Scott Minnich was the target of a ban on challenging Darwinism in science classrooms. The university's president, Timothy White, rejected any view other than the orthodox evolutionary one as "inappropriate in our life, earth, and physical science courses or curricula."

Apart from these high-profile cases, scholars who have felt the effects of evolution's Invisible Fence fall into three categories: the untenured who fear professional ruin; those who have already been ruined; and tenured scholars who, in principle, can research freely.

The untenured will, as a rule, speak only on the condition that neither they nor their institution be named. I asked one such scientist if he felt free to pursue his ID-related research interests. He said, "No, absolutely not. It presents a problem for me."

Part of his problem is that, before he felt the shock of the Invisible Fence, he wrote some things critical of Darwinism that are still on the Internet. He's now most of the way through a six-year tenure-track process. But

in seeking work before he got this job, "I was told directly [at another university] that the views I had expressed were the reason I was no longer being considered there for a research position."

Another biologist told of how, immediately after his interest in intelligent design became known, he had his lab space withdrawn. The assistant to the director of the facility emailed him that, due to an unexpected "space crunch," he had to be out in two weeks.

Asked about the statements of ID-critics that research critical of Darwin may be conducted freely, the biologist looked amused. "That's a huge joke," he said. He explained that professional science is "prestige driven and [scientists] don't want a knock to their prestige. You do well by impressing your peers, so you are reluctant to jeopardize that."

Being thought of as sympathetic to ID represents a blemish on a scientist's reputation. Thus an academic department or a scientific journal will be very reluctant to sponsor or publish research or writing that challenges Darwinism. A sort of intellectual paralysis results.

Caroline Crocker, a biologist with a specialty in immunopharmacology, can speak openly because she's given up hope of returning to academia. In 2005, Dr. Crocker discussed the scientific critique of Darwinism with the students in her cellbiology course at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va. When colleagues got wind of it, she was first forbidden from teaching either evolution or intelligent design. Then her contract was allowed to expire.

"I was absolutely shocked," said Crocker, "I was careful to let no one know what side [of the evolution controversy] I was on."

Her story was written up in the Washington Post and the science weekly Nature. When she later sought a research job at the National Institutes of Health, her reputation preceded her: "A friend, someone with connections at the NIH, told me, 'Don't bother applying. You're blacklisted now.'"

"There are so many bodies by the side of the road that people get the message," said Robert Marks, who teaches engineering and computational intelligence at Baylor University. One of his research interests is simulating evolution on computers. Without additional information (a/k/a design) being included in the simulation, he finds, the evolutionary process doesn't produce results as Darwin promised.

Dr. Marks has tenure and was lured away from the University of Washington in 2003, in an attempt by Baylor to upgrade its academic image. His latest book will be published by Oxford University Press. You might think he'd feel secure. Yet when I asked to interview him, he agreed only on the condition that his attorney listens.

At Baylor, Marks said, he has suffered "viewpoint discrimination, violation of academic freedom, persecution." In 2006, Baylor canceled a \$30,000 grant Dr. Marks had received, which was intended to let him hire a famous ID theorist, mathematician William Dembski, to assist him. In 2007, the university disconnected a website Marks had put together about "evolutionary informatics," featuring ID-related work done by Dr. Dembski and himself.

As it happens, Dembski had been booted from Baylor once before. That was in 2000, when Baylor's faculty got him fired as director of an academic center on campus. It was Dembski's criticism of Darwinian evolution that roused the other professors' ire.

Dr. Dembski probably won't be invited back to Baylor soon. Robert Marks remains, but describes the campus atmosphere in dark tones that would, it seems, apply equally well to universities elsewhere. "I know a number of people here who are interested in ID," he said, "but I've advised them to stay away. It would destroy their tenure chances. It's a career-killer." •

David Klinghoffer is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute. His new book, How Would God Vote? Why the Bible Commands You to be a Conservative (Doubleday), will be published in June. <=



Discovery Institute — Center for Science and Culture

208 Columbia St. — Seattle, WA 98104

206-292-0401 phone — 206-682-5320 fax

email: cscinfo@discovery.org Also: www.intelligentdesign.org