

Academe Online

Wedging Creationism into the Academy

Proponents of a controversial theory struggle to gain purchase within academia. A case study of the quest for academic legitimacy.

By Barbara Forrest and Glenn Branch

In 1999, William Dembski became director of the newly established Michael Polanyi Center at Baylor University, thanks to the support of Baylor's president Robert Sloan. The center was, as Dembski observed, "the first intelligent design think tank at a research university." As such, it fulfilled a crucial objective of the "intelligent design" movement, which aims to discredit the evolutionary sciences and to promote the notion that scientific evidence exists for intelligent design in nature.

Calling themselves "the Wedge," adherents of the movement are avidly pursuing a twenty-year plan to convince the public that intelligent design is "an accepted alternative in the sciences" and to promote "the influence of design theory in spheres other than natural science." The sobriquet "the Wedge" reflects movement leader Phillip Johnson's desire to insert "the thin edge of a wedge" into "the ruling philosophy of modern culture." For Johnson, a retired professor of law from the University of California, Berkeley, the Christian gospel is what will follow the thin edge.

The group's plan, outlined in a manifesto informally called the "Wedge Document," involves cultivating "potential academic allies," initiating "direct confrontation with the advocates of materialist science," and holding "challenge conferences in significant academic settings" in order to "draw scientific materialists into open debate with design theorists." Once ensconced at Baylor, a Baptist university known for its excellent science departments, Dembski was in a perfect position to advance the Wedge.

From its beginning, however, the Polanyi Center was embroiled in controversy. Baylor faculty members complained that Sloan behaved autocratically in establishing the center without soliciting their advice and consent. Moreover, especially in the science departments, faculty expressed dismay over the center's association with intelligent design, which they regarded as a thinly disguised form of creationism, likely to damage the reputation of Baylor's science and medical programs. A review committee Sloan appointed to address faculty concerns reached a conciliatory but lukewarm solution: the center was to be renamed, reconstituted within Baylor's Institute for Faith and Learning, and supervised by a faculty advisory committee.

In a press release, however, Dembski publicly celebrated what he called the committee's "unqualified affirmation" of intelligent design, gloating that his opponents "have met their Waterloo." Outraged, the faculty protested, and Sloan asked Dembski to withdraw his remarks. In a second press release, Dembski refused, accusing the administration of "intellectual McCarthyism" and Sloan himself of "the utmost of bad faith." He was removed as the center's director.

Despite this debacle, it is evident that the Wedge still envisions Baylor as a base for in-telligent design. Dembski remains as an associate research professor, although he is slated to begin a new position at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in June 2005. His Polanyi Center associate Bruce Gordon remains as acting director of the Baylor Center for Science, Philosophy, and Religion. Baylor also hired two additional members of the Wedge, mechanical engineering professor Walter Bradley and philosopher Francis J. Beckwith.

Shortly after his appointment as associate director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor, Beckwith was involved in a controversy of his own, when twenty-nine members of the Dawson family complained that Beckwith's views on church-state separation rendered him inappropriate for the post. Particularly troublesome to them was his affiliation with the Discovery Institute, the institutional home of intelligent design, which they described as promoting "the latest version of creationist theory."

Smoke Without Fire

As the Dawson family recognized, intelligent design is the latest face of the antievolution movement, formerly dominated by "young-earth" creationists. Committed to a literal reading of the biblical book of Genesis, such creationists believe that the earth is about ten thousand years old, that species of living things were specially and separately created by God, and that speciation is possible only within biblical "kinds." Intelligent design, however, is not officially committed to such a literal reading of Genesis; in their assaults on evolution, Johnson and Dembski prefer instead to invoke the mystic language of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." Learning from the repeated failures of young-earth creationism, subscribers to intelligent design—who include a handful of young-earth creationists—seek to distance themselves from the public image of creationism as a sectarian and retrogressive pseudoscience. They thus take no official stand on the age of the earth, common descent, and the possibility of macroevolution.

What they insist on is the bankruptcy of mainstream evolutionary science. The idea is to unite antievolutionists under the noncommittal banner of "mere creation" (consciously echoing popular Christian apologist C.S. Lewis's "mere Christianity"), affirming their common belief in God as creator while avoiding discussion of divisive details. They want to defer doctrinal disputes, such as those involving the age of the earth, until the public is convinced that intelligent design is a legitimate scientific alternative to evolution. Indeed, according to the Wedge's repeated announcements, intelligent design is on the cutting edge of science.

Its most conspicuous feature, however, is its scientific sterility. The Wedge's most notable attempts to provide a case for intelligent design appear in books for the general reader, such as Dembski's *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* and Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*. The few university presses (such as Cambridge and Michigan State) that have published intelligent design books classify them as philosophy, rhetoric, or public affairs, not science. There are no peer-reviewed studies supporting intelligent design in the scientific research literature. The scientific community as a whole is unimpressed and unconvinced, and intelligent design's credentials as a scientific research program appear negligible. Indeed, Dembski himself recently conceded that "the scientific research part" of intelligent design is now "lagging behind" its success in influencing popular opinion. So the Wedge needs another way to persuade education policy makers that intelligent design is academically respectable.

Thanks in part to the Wedge's academic networking, a fair number of academics with religious and political convictions similar to those of Wedge advocates support intelligent design, even if they are not necessarily active proponents. Many—such as Robert Kaita of Princeton, Henry Schaefer III of the University of Georgia, Robert Koons and J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas at Austin, and Guillermo Gonzalez of Iowa State—are fellows of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture (CSC), the main institutional home of intelligent design. Prominent academics who, although not officially associated with the CSC, sympathize with the Wedge's aims include Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame, Huston Smith of Syracuse, and Frank Tipler of Tulane. And efforts are under way to recruit students to the cause: according to the "Wedge Document," what intelligent design needs is "an initially small and relatively young group of scientists . . . able to do creative work at the pressure points." In a 1999 interview with *Communiqué*, a quarterly journal for Christian artists and writers, Johnson advised such students to "keep your head down while you're getting your PhD."

What are the academic supporters of intelligent design doing to advance its cause? Significantly, they are not teaching it in mainstream science courses, despite Behe's declaration that it "must be ranked as one of the greatest achievements in the history of science." Access Research Network, a Wedge auxiliary, lists only two "[intelligent design] colleges": Oklahoma Baptist University (home to CSC fellow Michael Newton Keas) and Biola University (formerly the Bible Institute of Los Angeles and home to CSC fellows William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, and John Mark Reynolds).

On the rare occasions when intelligent design is taught as science in mainstream academia, it appears in venues not subject to the same scrutiny as regular courses: honors seminars, independent study, continuing education, not-for-credit minicourses, and interdisciplinary—especially science-and-religion—courses. Science faculty are typically not thrilled. For example, an honors course at the University of New Mexico in which intelligent design was treated respectfully was reclassified as a humanities course after the science faculty protested that students in the class were presented with material that they were not equipped to evaluate on its scientific merits, such as they were.

Conference or Congregation?

Despite the scientific sterility of intelligent design, its proponents regularly hold conferences, usually on campuses, with a view to establishing contact with sympathetic faculty and students. Early conferences, such as the Wedge's 1996 "Mere Creation" conference at Biola, were essentially "in-house" meetings of those eager to found a new antievolution movement with a broader appeal than young-earth creationism. In his introduction to the conference proceedings, published in 1998 as *Mere Creation: Science, Faith, and Intelligent Design*, Dembski describes the purpose of the conference as formulating "a theory of creation that puts Christians in the strongest possible position to defeat the common enemy of creation." He added that "mere creation is a golden opportunity for a new generation of Christian scholars." The list of contributors to *Mere Creation* is a veritable who's who of the Wedge.

The "Nature of Nature" conference, held in 2000 at Baylor under the auspices of the Polanyi Center, purported to be "an interdisciplinary conference on the role of naturalism in science." Although "naturalism" refers to a number of distinct positions in a variety of disciplines, it means only one thing to the Wedge: the enemy. (In *Mere Creation*, Dembski describes "mere creation" as "a theory of creation aimed specifically at defeating naturalism and its consequences," a definition that describes intelligent design as well.)

The Wedge lost no time in appropriating the prestige of the conference attendees (including two Nobel laureates) to advertise intelligent design and its crusade against naturalism. In *Christianity Today*, a magazine devoted to news and culture from an evangelical perspective, CSC fellow Nancy Pearcey boasted, "These scientists' willingness even to address such questions, alongside design proponents such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig, gives enormous credibility to the [intelligent design] movement."

Like the "Nature of Nature" conference, "Design and Its Critics," held in 2000 at Concordia University, featured presentations by both proponents and opponents of intelligent design. At subsequent conferences, however—such as those held at Yale and the University of San Francisco—only proponents of intelligent design spoke. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the settings for these conferences were chosen not only for convenience but also for their aura of academic legitimacy. Commenting on the Yale conference, for example, a student auxiliary of the Access Research Network gushed, "Basically, the conference, beside being a statement (after all we were meeting at Yale University), proved to be very promising." (Emphasis in original.) Yet such conferences are typically not sponsored by the universities at which they are held but by associated religious organizations—at Yale, a ministry calling itself the Rivendell Institute for Christian Thought and Learning.

Although intelligent design conferences will probably continue to be held under such auspices on campuses across the country, recent gatherings have returned to the sectarian institutions that nurture the movement. Two major conferences—"Research and Progress in Intelligent Design" (RAPID), held in 2002, and "ID and the Future of Science," held in April 2004—were hosted by Biola, which is increasingly invested in intelligent design. Perhaps unable to find a suitable academic venue, the organizers of

"Dispelling the Myth of Darwinism" held the June 2004 event at a North Carolina church; the speakers included both intelligent design stalwarts such as Behe and unreconstructed young-earth creationists such as John Morris of the Institute for Creation Research.

The Culture Wars

In his keynote address to the RAPID conference, William Dembski described intelligent design's "dual role as a constructive scientific project and as a means for cultural renaissance." (Emphasis added.) Reflecting a similar revivalist spirit, the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture had been the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture until 2002. Explaining the name change, a spokesperson for the CSC unconvincingly insisted that the old name was simply too long. Significantly, however, the change followed hard on the heels of accusations that the center's real interest was not science but reforming culture along lines favored by conservative Christians.

Such accusations appear extremely plausible, not only in the absence of any scientific research supporting intelligent design, but also in light of Phillip Johnson's claim that "Darwinian evolution is not primarily important as a scientific theory but as a culturally dominant creation story. . . . When there is radical disagreement in a commonwealth about the creation story, the stage is set for intense conflict, the kind . . . known as 'culture war.'" Similarly, the "Wedge Document" states that the goals of the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture (as it then was) were to "defeat scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural, and political legacies. To replace materialistic explanations with the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God."

For Johnson, the Wedge is waging a Kulturkampf: "We're trying to go into enemy territory . . . [to] blow up the ammunition dump. What is their ammunition dump in this metaphor? It is their version of creation." The battlefield extends to politics, and the Discovery Institute is politically connected: its president, Bruce Chapman, held positions in the federal government during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and U.S. Representatives John Boehner, Steve Chabot, and Mark Souder and Senators Judd Gregg and Rick Santorum have expressed sympathy for intelligent design. Indeed, Santorum proposed a symbolic "sense of the Senate" amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that tendentiously described evolution as controversial.

Although a vestige of the Santorum language appeared in the conference report, the amendment itself was not included in the legislation that President George W. Bush signed as the No Child Left Behind Act. But proponents of intelligent design and creationists generally construed it as a victory anyway. When the CSC involved itself in a 2003 controversy over the selection of Texas science textbooks, Santorum, Gregg, and Boehner wrote a letter to Bruce Chapman—on congressional stationery—echoing the CSC's interpretation of the amendment. The letter designates Santorum as the amendment's author, but Johnson asserts in his 2002 book, *The Right Questions: Truth, Meaning, and Public Debate*, that he actually drafted it. Yet he earlier told a reporter, "We definitely aren't looking for some legislation to support our views, or anything like that."

The Wedge's political activity, if successful, could have serious repercussions for academic scientists. In his book *Icons of Evolution*, CSC fellow Jonathan Wells accuses evolutionary scientists of systematically misrepresenting the evidence for evolution, echoing Johnson's quip, "When our leading scientists have to resort to the sort of distortion that would land a stock promoter in jail, you know they are in trouble." Wells urges his readers to challenge federal funding of evolutionary biology: "If you object to supporting dogmatic Darwinists that misrepresent the truth to keep themselves in power . . . call for congressional hearings on the way federal money is distributed" by the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He also warns college and university alumni, "Voluntary donations by college graduates to their alma maters often go to departments that indoctrinate students in Darwinism rather than show them the real evidence."

The main battlefield for intelligent design's culture war, however, is the public schools. Wedge proponents are already preparing for the inevitable legal clash over the constitutionality of teaching intelligent design. In the 1987 case of *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that teaching "creation science" in the public schools is a form of religious advocacy and is thus prohibited by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Wedge advocates therefore strive to distinguish intelligent design from creationism in the hope that it will survive constitutional scrutiny. The fact that three members of the Supreme Court—Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Associate Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas—have expressed dissatisfaction with the Edwards decision is doubtless a source of encouragement.

Meanwhile, despite token concessions by Dembski and Johnson that intelligent design should prove its worth to the scientific community before it enters science classrooms in public schools, and despite the professed qualms of a few intelligent design advocates, there is steady activity aimed at introducing the concept into the public school science curricula—or, failing that, of presenting "evidence against evolution," which is essentially the traditional creationist litany of supposed errors in mainstream science.

In disputes about teaching evolution in school districts across the country, intelligent design literature is now employed indiscriminately along with that of young-earth creationists. At the state level, intelligent design proponents have lobbied diligently to undermine the place of evolution in state science education standards. They consistently failed—until March 2004, when the Ohio Board of Education approved a creationist lesson plan for its new science curriculum. The lesson, "Critical Analysis of Evolution," written by intelligent design proponents, reflects a small but exploitable concession to creationists in the new science standards, which require students to learn how scientists "critically analyze aspects of evolutionary theory." Ohio may now become the Wedge's long-sought legal test case.

Abuse of Academia

In such episodes, intelligent design proponents have flaunted their academic credentials and affiliations for all they are worth—or beyond. They frequently mention the ultimate scientific accolade, the Nobel Prize, in connection with Henry F. Schaefer, who in addition to being a self-described progressive creationist and CSC fellow is a distinguished chemist at the University of Georgia. Needless to say, inflating his reputation, the Discovery Institute refers to him as a five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize, even though the only source for this claim seems to be an undocumented assertion in *U.S. News & World Report*. (According to the Nobel Foundation, nominations remain confidential for fifty years.)

Dembksi also gratuitously invokes the laurels, boasting of his correspondence with a Nobel laureate, bragging that one of his books was published in a series whose editors include a Nobel laureate, and exulting that the publisher of the intelligent design book *The Mystery of Life's Origin* also published books by eight Nobel laureates. In contrast, during the Edwards case, seventy-two Nobel laureates endorsed an amicus brief that noted that the "evolutionary history of organisms has been as extensively tested and as thoroughly corroborated as any biological concept."

Academic credentials and affiliations were also used opportunistically in 2001, when the Discovery Institute purchased advertisements in three national publications—the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, and the *Weekly Standard*—to proclaim the adherence of about a hundred scientists to a statement reading, "We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged." Such statements commonly note the institutional affiliations of signatories for purposes of identification. But this statement strategically listed either the institution that granted a signatory's PhD or the institutions with which the individual is presently affiliated. Thus the institutions listed for Raymond G. Bohlin, Fazale Rana, and Jonathan Wells, for example, were the University of Texas, Ohio University, and the University of California, Berkeley, where they earned their degrees, rather than their current affiliations: Probe Ministries for Bohlin, the Reasons to Believe ministry for Rana, and the CSC for Wells. During controversies over evolution education in Georgia, New Mexico, Ohio, and Texas, similar lists of local scientists were circulated.

It is easy for the public, unacquainted with academic life, to suppose that the existence of a handful of scientists who reject evolution means that there is a legitimate scientific controversy about evolution. In a tongue-in-cheek response to statements such as the Discovery Institute's, the National Center for Science Education (NCSE) released a statement in February 2003, reading in part, "It is scientifically inappropriate and pedagogically irresponsible for creationist pseudoscience, including but not limited to 'intelligent design,' to be introduced into the science curricula of our nation's public schools." The cream of the jest was that only scientists named Steve—or cognates such as Steven, Stephen, Stephanie, Esteban, and so on—were allowed to sign. ("Steve" was chosen to honor the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould.) About 1 percent of the U.S. population possess such a first name, so each signatory represents about a hundred scientists. By November 2004, the NCSE's "Steve-o-meter" read 515.

Less whimsically, during the controversy over the Ohio science education standards, researchers at the University of Cincinnati's Internet Public Opinion Laboratory conducted a poll of science professors at four-year public and private colleges in Ohio. Of the 460 respondents, 90 percent said that there was no scientific evidence at all for intelligent design; 93 percent said that they were unaware of "any scientifically valid evidence or an [alternative] scientific theory that challenges the fundamental principles of the theory of evolution"; and a nearly unanimous 97 percent said that they did not use intelligent design in their own research. Included among those surveyed were faculty at such fundamentalist schools as Cedarville University, which accepts a statement of faith according to which "by definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record." If the pollsters had excluded professors with such a dogmatic commitment to biblical inerrancy, the results would have been even closer to unanimity.

Over thirty years ago, the great geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in light of evolution," and his words continue to ring true today. Biologists, and scientists generally, know that evolutionary biology continues to thrive, despite constant claims by its ideological opponents that it is a "theory in crisis." Insofar as biologists are aware of intelligent design, they generally regard it as they do young-earth creationism: negligible at best, a nuisance at worst. But unlike young-earth creationism, intelligent design maintains a not inconsiderable base within academia, whose members seemingly exploit their academic standing to promote the concept as intellectually respectable while shirking the task of producing a scientifically compelling case for it. To be sure, academic supporters of intelligent design enjoy, and should enjoy, the same degree of academic freedom conferred on the professoriate in general. But academic freedom is no excuse for misleading students about the scientific legitimacy of a view overwhelmingly rejected by the scientific community. In short, the academic supporters of intelligent design are enjoying, in the familiar phrase, power without responsibility. It is a trend that their colleagues ought to be aware of, worry about, and help to resist.

Barbara Forrest is professor of philosophy at Southeastern Louisiana University and author, with Paul R. Gross, of Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design, published in 2004. Glenn Branch is deputy director of the National Center for Science Education, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science that defends the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

American Association of University Professors
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, Suite #500; Washington, DC 20005
Phone: 202-737-5900 | Fax: 202-737-5526