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Texas biology professors see little controversial about evolution, survey shows

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Most college biology professors in Texas see little controversial about evolution, according to a survey commissioned by an advocacy group seeking to influence Texas' public school science curriculum.

The survey was released Monday, amping up the volume of the debate as the State Board of Education prepares to discuss the science curriculum Wednesday.

That discussion will include what language is used in the state's classrooms to discuss the origins of the universe and life on Earth.

The board is not expected to vote on the issue until next year.

'What controversy?'

Almost 98 percent of the 450 biologists and biological anthropologists from 49 public and private universities in the state who responded to the survey rejected the movement known as intelligent design as teaching invalid science, according to the survey commissioned by the Austin-based Texas Freedom Network. The advocacy organization describes itself as "a mainstream voice to counter the religious right."

About 95 percent of professors said they want evolution to be the only theory of the origin of life taught in public schools, the survey showed.

"Opponents of evolution often say that we should 'teach the controversy,'" said Raymond Eve, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Arlington who conducted the survey. "The response of scientists is: What controversy?"

Those opponents say Eve's study was flawed.

Casey Luskin, a program officer at the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based think tank that advocates teaching students to analyze "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution, said fewer than half of the 1,019 faculty members contacted for the survey responded.

"It's a self-selecting survey," Luskin said. "There's a well-documented culture of intimidation that makes scientists uncomfortable expressing their doubts about Darwinism. This just serves to reinforce that climate of intimidation."

The dispute

The board is in the process of reviewing the science curriculum, but much of Wednesday's debate will center on how and whether to describe the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolutionary theory.

Proponents of evolution say there are no significant weaknesses in the theory; opponents want students to consider whether there are weaknesses in the theory of how life came to be.

"This survey explodes these scientific myths that have been used as part of a political strategy," Dan Quinn, Texas Freedom Network's communications director.

Not so, Luskin said. The scientists are trying to settle a scientific debate through politics, and the survey "shows just how ideological the Darwinists have become."

Luskin said the Discovery Institute does not seek to mandate the teaching of intelligent design in schools, but instead just wants a closer look at evolution.

The Freedom Network and other critics say proponents of intelligent design are using code words to insert creationist arguments into public school classrooms.

This report includes material from the Star-Telegram archives.

The evolutionary debate **Definitions**

Evolution: Natural selection acting after random mutation or genetic drift is the primary mechanism by which life forms have evolved, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

Intelligent design: Certain features of the natural world are so complex that it is most likely that they are products of an intelligent cause rather than random mutation and natural selection, according to the Discovery Institute.

Other findings: According to the survey by Raymond Eve, a University of Texas at Arlington sociologist:

94 percent of biologists and biological anthropologists who responded said objections to evolution are not scientifically valid.

80 percent believe that emphasizing "weaknesses" of evolution theory would "substantially harm students' college readiness . . . and ability to compete for 21st-century jobs."

91 percent strongly believe that support for evolution is compatible with religious faith.

Background: The State Board of Education appointed three critics of evolution to review new science curriculum standards for the coming decade; one official was from the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based think tank that advocates "intelligent design."

Why Texas educational issues are of national interest: Texas is the second-biggest buyer of textbooks in the nation, making up about 10 percent of the national market. Many publishers write textbooks with an eye toward what's going on in Texas, giving the state a great amount of influence over the national educational agenda.

Sources: www.tea.state.tx.us/teks; www.discovery.org; www.tfn.org