

Intelligent Design Gains Momentum, Raises Eyebrows On Campuses

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TBC Today: Evolve This! [Excerpts]

When Hannah Maxson started an intelligent design club at Cornell University last fall, a handful of science majors showed up for the first meeting. Today, the high-profile club boasts more than 80 members.

Until recently, the nationwide debate over whether intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution was centered primarily in public elementary and high-school science classes. In Dover, Pa., for example, parents won a legal fight against a school board decision to teach intelligent design in biology classes. A new school board formally ditched the intelligent design curriculum Tuesday (Jan. 3).

Now the discussion is spilling over onto university campuses. At nearly 30 public and private universities across the country, students have started clubs aimed at promoting intelligent design. The clubs, sponsored by the Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness Center (IDEA), a small, nonprofit organization based in San Diego, have been gaining members and visibility.

Intelligent design clubs at other universities have also been gaining momentum and attention. The first IDEA club meeting at George Mason University, a public school in Fairfax, Va., drew 20 people. At the group's most recent meeting, where a scientist guest speaker offered his criticisms of intelligent design, 90 people attended. So did CBS News, said Salvador Cordova, a 42-year-old engineer and George Mason alumnus who founded the club last year.

Casey Luskin, 27, founded the first IDEA club in 1999, at the University of California at San Diego. Luskin, then a college junior, had become interested in intelligent design after taking a biology seminar that taught about the theory. When Luskin graduated with a master's degree in earth sciences in 2001, he founded the IDEA Center to help other students start their own clubs.

If a high-school or university student contacts the IDEA Center about starting an intelligent design club, the center will provide a curriculum with suggested discussion topics, books, videos and a bibliography of sources.

Recently the center helped start clubs at the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. A few high schools, including one as far away as Kenya, have also started IDEA chapters.

Glenn Branch, deputy director for the National Center for Science Education, an Oakland, Calif.-based group dedicated to keeping evolution in public school classrooms, downplayed the significance of the IDEA clubs.

"I'm not sure that they really have been springing up in such a major way," Branch said. "Certainly, if you compare them to number of (college) juggling clubs that there are, there must be many more juggling clubs."

Still, IDEA clubs are making waves. At Cornell, Maxson holds her weekly meetings and continually raises the subject of intelligent design with friends over dinner, even if she feels that the university environment is "hostile" to her ideas.

"Sometimes," she admits, in a quiet, hesitant voice, "you sort of wonder, 'What have we gotten ourselves into?'" (Brown, Religion News Service, January 4, 2006).