

Background to the Guillermo Gonzalez Story

Guillermo Gonzalez is an impressively productive observational astronomer at Iowa State University who is currently on a path to losing his job — not because of his teaching, his research, or his relationships with colleagues but because of his views about intelligent design expressed in a 2004 book.

The book is *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Universe is Designed for Discovery*, co-authored with philosopher Dr. Jay W. Richards. When the book was published, Gonzalez was already widely known and respected for his work on technical areas of astronomic research, such as the Galactic Habitable Zone (an idea he initiated) and stellar metallicity. He is an uncommonly prolific researcher and writer, influential in his field as well as in the wider scientific world.

Gonzalez is currently an assistant research professor of astronomy and physics at Iowa State University (ISU). He received his Ph.D. in astronomy from the University of Washington and did his post-doctoral research at the University of Texas, Austin, and the University of Washington. He has received fellowships, grants, and awards from NASA, the University of Washington, Sigma XI, and the National Science Foundation. He is the author of 68 peer-reviewed scientific articles, and his work has been cited over 1500 times in the scientific literature.

In *The Privileged Planet*, Dr. Gonzalez argues for the intelligent design of the universe, showing that life on Earth and our ability to make scientific discoveries depend on a host of incredibly improbable planetary conditions, suggesting intelligent design rather than a cosmic accident. It makes no claims for or against Darwinian evolution. Intelligent design arguments in cosmology are more widely tolerated than in biology.

Yet Gonzalez's colleagues were quickly stirred up against him, on the basis of his book alone, notwithstanding his previous and outstanding record of scholarship. His academic track record exceeds the achievements of virtually every other astronomer in his department. Secret e-mails exchanged among members of the ISU astronomy and physics department show that many feared the impact on their own academic reputations that would be felt as a result of publicity for Gonzalez's book.

That was in the fall of 2005, a year before the department would decide on Gonzalez's tenure appeal. Losing the appeal means, effectively, that a scholar is out of a job and must seek employment elsewhere. Gonzalez will be terminated in May 2008 unless the Iowa Board of Regents overturns ISU's previous tenure denial.

At the heart of the controversy around Gonzalez is the impressive research and publishing record that he has compiled. He has outperformed the tenured astronomers in his department, precisely the professors who voted against him for tenure, if performance is measured conventionally in terms of citations to his work in scientific papers by other scholars and in normalized publications of his own.

He has published more peer-reviewed journal articles than all but one of the faculty members granted tenure this year at ISU – across the university as a whole, not just his department. In fact, Gonzalez has more peer-reviewed journal articles to his credit than all but five faculty members granted tenure at ISU since 2003. In addition, he exceeded his department's own tenure standards, which define "excellence" in terms of publications in refereed science journals, by more than 350%.

Yet ISU president Dr. Gregory Geoffroy has attributed his rejection of Gonzalez's tenure appeal to matters having nothing to do with intelligent design. The astronomer simply "did not show the trajectory of excellence that we expect," Geoffroy has said.

His department chairman, Dr. Eli Rosenberg, claims in Gonzalez's tenure dossier that the astronomer failed to show an "overall positive trend" in his research record of late. Yet in 2006, the year he was up for tenure, Gonzalez published more total articles than all other tenured ISU astronomers. Moreover, Dr. Gonzalez has more per-capita citations in science journals and per-capita scientific publications than any other tenured astronomer at ISU since 2001, the year he joined ISU. In other words, Gonzalez outperformed the very astronomers that voted against his tenure, negating any basis for their complaining about the "trend" of his research while at ISU.

Meanwhile, his work has been featured in the world's most prestigious science journals, *Nature* in 2002 and *Science* in 2004. He co-authored the cover story for *Scientific American* in 2001, and he is also co-author of a 2006 peer-reviewed Cambridge University Press textbook, *Observational Astronomy*. He is clearly impacting the next generation of scientists, as his ideas about the Galactic Habitable Zone have even been incorporated into two astronomy textbooks by other authors.

With all this going for him, and being well-liked personally by his colleagues, getting tenure at ISU should have been nearly automatic. The university has struggled to explain the reason for his rejection, offering explanations that fall far short of being convincing. The claim is advanced, for example, that Gonzalez failed to secure enough funding for his research. But observational astronomers are not heavily dependent on sumptuous grants to support their research. They only need an already existing telescope, enough money to fly or drive to the facility, and an inexpensive computer to analyze the observational data they obtain.

In any event, Gonzalez received more grant funding than 35 percent of faculty members who were granted tenure at ISU in 2007 and who listed their research grants on their curriculum vitae. Indeed, of the utmost importance is the fact that grants are not even listed in the tenure guidelines for his department. Of the nine review letters that gave recommendations regarding Dr. Gonzalez's final tenure decision, six strongly supported his tenure promotion and gave glowing endorsements of his reputation and academic achievements. (Even Dr. Gonzalez's tenure dossier admitted that "five of the external letter writers ... including senior scientists at prestigious institutions recommend his promotion" and that only "[t]hree do not.") One reviewer observed that ISU's Department of Physics and Astronomy does not consider grants as a criterion for gaining tenure, and stated that "Dr. Gonzalez is eminently qualified for the promotion according to your guidelines of excellence in scholarship and exhibiting a potential for national distinction. In light of your criteria I

would certainly recommend the promotion.” ISU chose to ignore the advice of these senior scientists at prestigious institutions.

The true reason his colleagues on the faculty wanted to eject Gonzalez is made clear by their private e-mails and other documents from the case. **Their visceral intolerance towards intelligent design, and their litmus-test against anyone who supports the theory as unqualified to be a science educator, ensured that Dr. Gonzalez would not be evaluated fairly or impartially.** In addition to their own rejection of intelligent design, Gonzalez’s colleagues fretted about the impact that his support of intelligent design would have on their department — their reputations, their ability to attract high quality graduate students, and perhaps to obtain research funding themselves.

These may seem like legitimate concerns. But universities like Iowa State contractually guarantee to protect their professors’ academic freedom, and academic freedom has meaning only if it is upheld even in circumstances when guaranteeing the right of free thought costs somebody something. If a scholar like Gonzalez is “free” only to advance popular, uncontroversial ideas, that’s no freedom at all.

Moreover, ISU faculty complained about Dr. Gonzalez’s intelligent design work that was conducted completely outside of any relationship to ISU. First Amendment forbids a government entity like ISU from discriminating against an employee like Gonzalez on the basis not of his job performance but on that of ideas expressed outside the work environment. Dr. Gonzalez’s public comments and speeches as a citizen are clearly protected not only by academic freedom but by the First Amendment. Indeed, the ISU faculty handbook states that academic freedom “is the foundation of the university.” If only that were truly the case.

ISU knows it has violated Dr. Gonzalez’s academic freedom. That may be why the university fought so fiercely against an open records request made by the Discovery Institute, the leading think tank associated with advocacy for scientific research on intelligent design. Discovery asked for, among other things, any e-mails from 2004 to 2007 concerning Gonzalez and exchanged among ISU faculty and administrators. In an effort to stop the release of these documents, **ISU issued an ultimatum threatening to sue the Discovery Institute if it did not withdraw its request for the e-mails within 48 hours. ISU’s ultimatum was without legal merit, and only after the Institute called the bluff of ISU and obtained its own legal assistance did the university reluctantly agree to start handing over the documents. Even then, it took months for ISU to deliver all the materials, and key parts of the e-mails requested were blacked out. ISU still has not provided specific justifications for each of its redactions. In its efforts to obstruct a valid request filed under the Iowa Open Records Act, ISU grossly violated the requirements for timeliness set out by the act.**

Unfortunately, the Iowa State Board of Regents has refused to allow most of the materials obtained under the Open Records Act to be submitted into the record of Dr. Gonzalez’s final appeal to the Regents of his tenure denial. Gary Steinke, executive director of the Board of Regents, claims that this refusal is due to a technical requirement disallowing the consideration of evidence previously available to the appellant at earlier stages of his appeal, no matter how germane the evidence may be.

This is an outlandish claim. The Board of Regents makes the preposterous claim that Gonzalez should have presented these heretofore unavailable documents as part of his earlier appeal to ISU president Geoffroy in May 2007. But based on the time it took for ISU to comply with Discovery Institute's open records request, for these documents to have been available to Dr. Gonzalez at the time of his earlier appeal he would have had to file his own open records request even before he had been denied tenure! Even worse, he would have had to file the request upon some of the very ISU staff and administrators who were evaluating his tenure, potentially prejudicing his ability to obtain tenure through the standard internal tenure evaluation procedures at ISU.

The Regents' arbitrary exclusion of this important evidence from Dr. Gonzalez's appeal is a gross violation of his due process rights.