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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

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August 24, 2006

The Honorable Margaret Spellings  
Secretary  
Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Madam Secretary:

I am writing to express concern about the exclusion of “evolutionary biology,” a core component of the biological sciences, from the eligibility rules for the new federal “National Smart Grant” program. According to a recent account in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the list of college majors for which students may be eligible to receive the Smart Grants has only a blank line where the listing for evolutionary biology would be expected to appear.<sup>1</sup>

I recognize that certain political constituencies oppose the teaching of evolution. But it is not the Department’s job to pander to the anti-science movement. Federal Smart Grants must be awarded based on the educational and scientific merits of fields of study, not political considerations or creationist beliefs.

In a report in today’s *New York Times*, a spokesperson for the Department of Education said that the omission was inadvertent. But independent observers questioned the accuracy of this assertion.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, the omission of evolutionary biology has not yet been corrected.

### The Smart Grant Program

The new National Smart Grant program, designed to award grants to college students in the fields of science and mathematics, was proposed by the Administration in the President’s Fiscal Year 2006 budget and enacted by Congress as part of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Educators Question Absence of Evolution From List of Majors Eligible for New Grants*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (Aug. 22, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Evolution Major Vanishes From Approved Federal List*, *New York Times* (Aug. 24, 2006).

The program marks the first time that Congress has directed the Department of Education to create eligibility requirements for a federal grant program based on the subject studied. On May 2, 2006, the Department of Education announced these requirements, including a list of fields of study that the “Secretary [of Education] has designated ... as eligible.”<sup>4</sup>

The list of eligible fields of study mirrors the set of science majors that are included in the classification system developed by the National Center for Educational Statistics for tracking educational trends.<sup>5</sup> Of the 81 fields of study in the “Biological and Biomedical Sciences,” the Smart Grant eligibility list omits only two: “Evolutionary Biology” and “Exercise Physiology.” In each case, the line where the field of study should have appeared was left blank. And in each case, no explanation is provided for the omission.<sup>6</sup>

### **Evolutionary Biology**

The field of evolutionary biology studies changes of populations and species of living organisms. It draws from a number of biological disciplines such as genetics, molecular biology, physiology, ecology, paleontology, and it helps unify these fields into one theoretical framework. As such, evolutionary biology is considered by many the “cornerstone” of modern biology. The field has many applications, such as an understanding of the evolution of disease strains and mounting a vaccine response.

President Bush’s science advisor, Dr. John Marburger, has acknowledged the importance of the field on multiple occasions. When asked during a university symposium about the President’s position on the teaching of evolution, Dr. Marburger stated that “Evolution is the cornerstone of modern biology. Period. What else can you say than that?”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in an interview with the Society for Neuroscience, Dr. Marburger stated that “Evolution ... is an appropriate, indeed an essential, component of a modern science curriculum.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> White House Office of Management and Budget, *Budget for the U.S. Government: FY 2005* (Feb. 2005); P.L. 109-171, The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *U.S. Department of Education Announces Student Eligibility Options for New Academic Grants* (May 2, 2006); U.S. Department of Education, *National SMART Grant — Fields of Study* (May, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, *Classification of Instructional Programs: 2000 Edition*, (Apr. 2002).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *National SMART Grant — Fields of Study* (May, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> University of Colorado at Boulder, “Policy, Politics, and Science in the White House: Conversations with Presidential Science Advisors” (Feb. 14, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> *The President’s Science Advisor Discusses Biomedical Research, Funding, and Politics*, Neuroscience Quarterly (Winter 2004).

In contrast, President Bush has wavered on the value of teaching evolution. While campaigning for president in 2000, he stated his belief that “children ought to be exposed to different theories about how the world started.”<sup>9</sup> More recently on August 1, 2005, President Bush was asked about his position on the teaching of intelligent design, a non-scientific view on the creation of life. He stated that “both sides ought to be properly taught ... so people can understand what the debate is about.”<sup>10</sup> President Bush also specified that “part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought” and “whether or not people ought to be exposed to different ideas ... the answer is yes.”

This position is contradicted by a consensus of major scientific and educational organizations including the National Science Teachers Association and the American Academy for the Advancement of Science. The National Academy of Science has found that “[c]reationism, intelligent design, and other claims of supernatural intervention in the origin of life or of species are not science because they are not testable by the methods of science.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Marburger similarly agrees, having stated that “‘intelligent design’ is not a scientific theory.” He went on to say that he does not “regard ‘intelligent design’ as a scientific topic.”<sup>12</sup>

### Questions

Despite the importance of evolutionary biology and its countless contributions to the advancement of science, medicine, and technology, an anti-science movement in states and school districts across the country has attempted to remove evolutionary biology from science curricula and replace it with nonscientific views of the origin of life.

Supporting strong and independent scientific study in the face of such nonscientific attacks should be a top priority of the federal government. The exclusion of evolutionary biology undermines the very goal of the Smart Grant program: promoting the advancement of science. I request that the list of eligible majors be corrected to include evolutionary biology immediately, and that steps be taken to remedy any inappropriate denials of grants that may have occurred because of the omission.

I request a further explanation of how and why evolutionary biology was excluded from the list of fields of study. I request copies of any communications (1) between the Department and private organizations or individuals or (2) within the Department or other parts of the federal

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<sup>9</sup> *Bush Says That He's Not Taking GOP Nomination for Granted*, USA Today (Aug. 19, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *Bush: Intelligent Design Should Be Taught*, Associated Press (Aug. 2, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> National Academy of Sciences, *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences, Second Edition* (1999).

<sup>12</sup> *Intelligent Denials*, The American Prospect (Feb. 22, 2005)

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government that relate to the preparation of the list of eligible fields of study or the exclusion of evolutionary biology from that list.

I request a response by September 1, 2006.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Waxman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "H" and "W".

Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member