

Darwin sceptic says views cost tenure

He's a young astronomer with dozens of articles in top journals; he has made an important discovery in the field of extrasolar planets; and he is a proponent of intelligent design, the idea that an intelligent force has shaped the Universe. It's that last fact that Guillermo Gonzalez thinks has cost him his tenure at Iowa State University.

Gonzalez, who has been at Iowa State in Ames since 2001, was denied tenure on 9 March. He is now appealing the decision on the grounds that his religious belief, not the quality of his science, was the basis for turning down his application. "I'm concerned my views on intelligent design were a factor," he says.

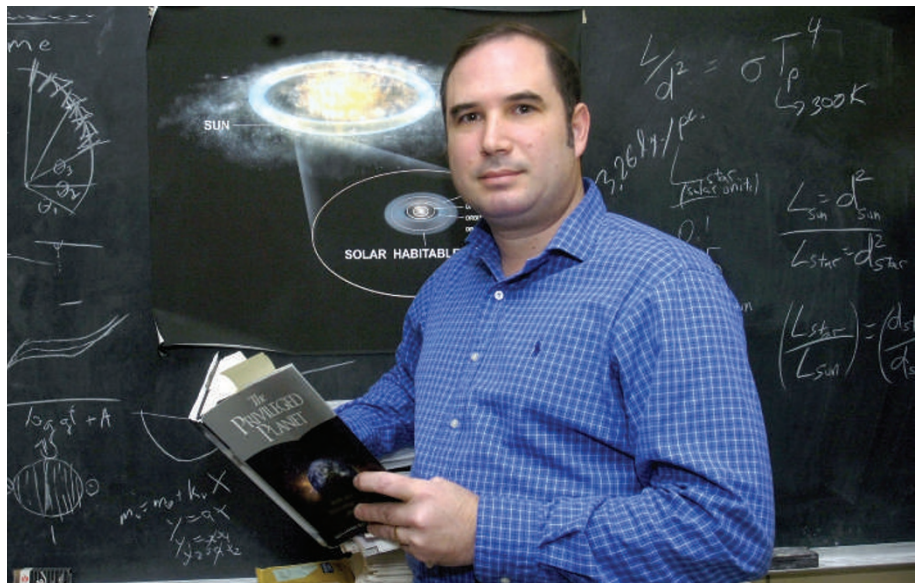
Advocates of intelligent design are rallying behind Gonzalez in the latest example of what they say is blatant academic discrimination. "Academia seems to be in a rage about anything that points to any purpose," says Michael Behe, a biochemist and prominent advocate of intelligent design at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. "They are penalizing an associate professor who's doing his job because he has views they disagree with."

But other researchers think that the department's decision was entirely justified. "I would have voted to deny him tenure," says Robert Park, a physicist at the University of Maryland in College Park. "He has established that he does not understand the scientific process."

Gonzalez's early career was far from controversial. He graduated with a PhD from the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1993 and did a postdoc at the University of Texas in Austin. "He proved himself very quickly," says David Lambert, director of the university's MacDonald Observatory. He and Gonzalez co-authored several papers on variable stars, and Lambert says that while there, the young Cuban immigrant was an impressive scientist. "He is one of the best postdocs I have had," he says.

In 1996, Gonzalez returned to the University of Washington to do his second postdoc, and again distinguished himself — producing two papers^{1,2} that linked a star's metal content to the presence of extrasolar planets around it. The papers are still highly cited, and they have encouraged other researchers to search for planets around metal-rich stars.

The 43-year-old astronomer is also a deeply religious evangelical Christian, and his faith has shaped his views on science. He considers himself a "sceptic" of Darwin, and says that his Christianity helps him to understand Earth's



Astronomer Guillermo Gonzalez has been actively promoting his book on intelligent design.

position in the Universe. "Our location in the Galaxy, which is optimized for habitability, is also the best place for doing cosmology and stellar astrophysics in the Galaxy," he says. In other words: "The Universe is designed for scientific discovery."

Gonzalez refrained from mentioning his beliefs in his teaching and peer-reviewed works, but in 2004, he co-authored a book entitled *The Privileged Planet*, which included many of his pro-design arguments³. He has since travelled the country delivering talks that support the thesis of his book.

His work did not go unnoticed at Iowa State. In 2005, Gonzalez's rising profile led a group of 131 faculty members to sign a petition disavowing intelligent design. "We were starting to see Iowa State mentioned as a place where intelligent-design research was happening," says Hector Avalos, a religious-studies professor who helped lead the signature drive. "We wanted to make sure that people knew the university does not support intelligent design." Avalos adds that they did not name Gonzalez directly, and he takes no position on the astronomer's tenure.

Nevertheless, proponents of intelligent design point to the signature drive as evidence of a widespread academic hostility to those who support the idea. "There is a pattern happening to everybody who's pro intelligent design," says one pro-design biologist, who

declined to be named because his own tenure process has just begun. "The same thing could happen to me," he says. "I don't want to get into trouble."

But Park says that a researcher's views on intelligent design cannot be divorced from the tenure decision. Anyone who believes that an intelligent force set the Earth's location doesn't understand probability's role in the Universe, Park argues. Such a person is hardly qualified to teach others about the scientific method. "We're entrusting the minds of our students to this person," he says.

But not all scientists agree. "Nothing I have seen in his refereed papers leads me to believe his beliefs are impinging on his science," says David Lambert. "I would have said he was a serious tenure candidate."

Eli Rosenberg, who chairs Iowa State's physics department, concedes that Gonzalez's belief in intelligent design did come up during the tenure process. "I'd be a fool if I said it was not [discussed]," he says. But, he adds, "intelligent design was not a major or even a big factor in this decision." Four of twelve tenure candidates have been turned down in the past decade, he says. "We are a fairly hard-nosed department."

Iowa State's president Gregory Geoffroy is now reviewing Gonzalez's appeal. He has until 6 June to make his final decision. ■

Geoff Brumfiel

1. Gonzalez, G. *Mon. Not. R. Astron. Soc.* **285**, 403-412 (1997).
2. Gonzalez, G. *Astron. Astrophys.* **334**, 221-238 (1998).
3. Back, C. H. & Pesca, D. *Nature* **428**, 808-809 (2004).