

olen

ttle theft

the items.  
Immediately have the  
as that had been for-

the amnesty program  
ow important it was to  
ttle debris, especially  
g to find this stuff for  
ome.

ounty alone, 35 people  
of debris under the pro-  
I continue to search for  
le material illegally.  
ne search teams begin  
' Kerss said.  
ey will evaluate any  
them and determine if  
intent to steal the item.  
biggest day for volun-  
rest Service spokes-  
n. About 1,800 people  
Sabine County.

f the support from the  
d into Sabine County.  
tional Guard members  
Augustine County,  
ding that the resources  
to the Sabine County  
dinate some organized  
for some key areas  
believe may contain  
d to be searched in a  
he said.

gas tax

ity," said Metro board

llon gas tax, last raised  
ix. Of the state money,  
l goes to education, so  
to split a regional tax.  
is considering drafting  
rity, said he might con-  
toward transportation.  
e an equal participant.  
artners, a group led by  
Jim Royer.

\$45 billion in mobili-  
only \$20 billion to \$3

authority could take

# OPINION

THE BATTALION

Page 5B • Monday, February 10, 2003

## A MATTER OF EVOLUTION

Tech professor requires those seeking letter of recommendation believe in evolution

The U.S. Department of Justice has launched an investigation into the policy of an associate professor of biology at Texas Tech University concerning his writing letters of recommendation. Dr. Michael Dini adopts strict guidelines that involve not writing letters of recommendation to medical or post-graduate biology schools for students who do not accept evolution, according to The New York Times. Spurred by a complaint of the Liberty Legal Institute, a group of Christian lawyers, the investigation wastes time and taxpayer money when Dini obviously has done nothing wrong.

Liberty Legal lawyer Hiram Sasser correctly told the University Daily (Texas Tech's student newspaper) that the policy violates the First Amendment.

"One thing professors cannot do is deny students rights because of race, gender, religion or nationality," Sasser said.

This logic bears one intrinsic flaw: a letter of recommendation is not a right guaranteed to students through either the United States or Texas Constitution. Rather, it is a privilege that a student earns, written as an opinion of the professor who provides it. A professor can choose to write a letter of recommendation for any student he sees fit, and the restraint is whether the professor thinks the student deserves it.

Dini's Web site lays out the factors that play into his decision for writing these letters.

"The central, unifying principle of biology is the theory of evolution, which includes both micro- and macro-evolution, and which extends to all species," he says. Dini argues that if a student does not believe in these tenets, this student lacks the required knowledge of biology to attend medical or graduate school. This is the decision that any professor writing a letter of recommendation makes. Whether you agree with Dini or not, there is no argument that he has the right to make such a decision.

Dini's Web site also states that the student seeking the letter of recommendation should have earned an "A" in at least one class taught by him. No lawsuits have been filed

against this policy. This also ensures that any student for whom Dini writes a letter qualifies, in Dini's eyes, for post-graduate studies; believing in evolution serves as another important criterion. Any number of reasons exist why a professor might deny a student a letter of recommendation, and a non-belief in evolution is just one.

According to Ronald Philips, the president of Texas Tech's Chief of Staff, the University has no regulations concerning for whom professors can and cannot write letters of recommendation. So in this case, Dini has not even broken any university rules.

Micha Sprawling, the student on whose behalf the suit was filed, only sat in two of Dini's classes before he withdrew from the course, according to The New York Times.

If a letter of recommendation were really this important to Sprawling, he could have gone to another professor of biology for his letter. Assuming Sprawling planned to go on to graduate school, he surely would have taken another biology course with a professor capable of writing a letter of recommendation.

"They've taken prayer out of schools and the Ten Commandments out of courtrooms, so I thought I had an opportunity to make a difference," Sprawling told The New York Times.

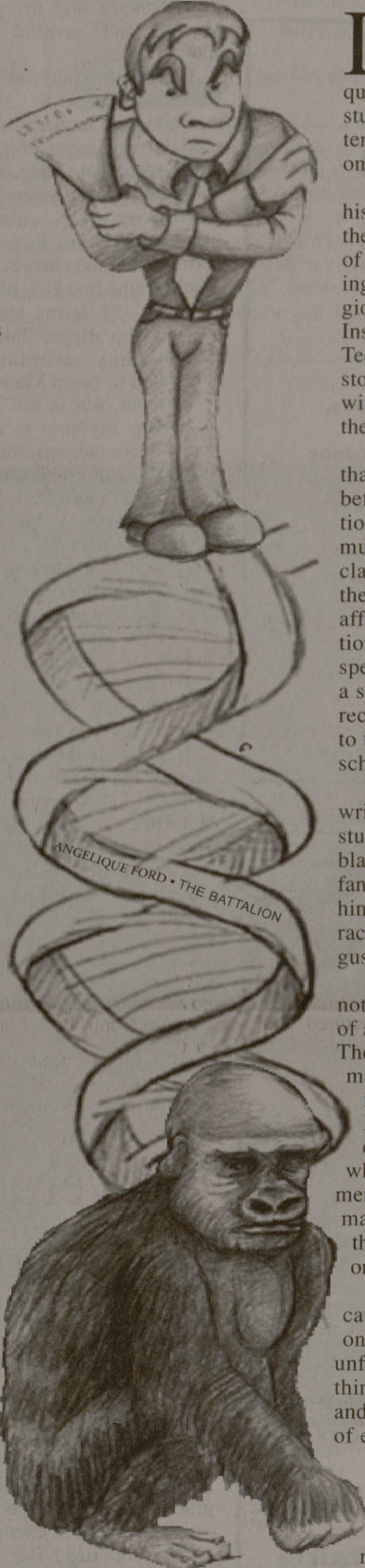
Dini's policy may have offended Sprawling, but the government, not a 22-year-old college student, deals with issues of freedom of religion and separation of church and state. This is simply a case of a disgruntled Christian, upset by constitutional Supreme Court rulings, who is seeking to exact revenge on the system in hopes of outlawing perfectly constitutional practices.

The "facts" on which Sprawling's complaint rests are false and misguided. No reason exists for Dini to change his policy because his policy is his opinion. The fact that the Department of Justice is even involved only shows to everyone that complaining to the right people can achieve any agenda no matter how ridiculous.

Matthew Rigney is a sophomore journalism major.



MATTHEW RIGNEY



Dr. Michael Dini, a professor of biology at Texas Tech University, caused quite a stir in recent weeks when students complained that his criteria for obtaining letters of recommendation were unjust.

Among other things, he asks his students to profess a belief in the theory of evolution, regardless of their religious beliefs, according to Fox News. Is he practicing religious discrimination as the Liberty Legal Institute, lawyers representing the Texas Tech students, argue? No. But this is the story of clueless students butting heads with a biology teacher misrepresenting the issue of evolution.

Dini, on his Web site, lists criteria that one must possess or demonstrate before obtaining a letter of recommendation from him. He asks that students must have received an "A" in one of his classes, know him "fairly well" and he, them, and "truthfully and forthrightly affirm a scientific answer" to the question: "How do you think the human species originated?" One supposes that if a student fulfills this criteria, a letter of recommendation from Dini will be given to them for use on graduate or medical school applications.

However, if Dini does not want to write a letter of recommendation for a student because the student is white, black, Jewish, Christian, or even a Lakers fan, that is his prerogative. It may make him a bigot or racist, but bigots and racists have rights regardless of how disgusting their ideas may be.

Dini is a private citizen who should not be forced to write a letter on behalf of anyone who he does not see fit. Though his lack of a recommendation may hurt a potentially great doctor, it is not evident that such a letter from Dini would even help. Nevertheless, only Dini can and should decide to whom and for whom he writes a recommendation letter. Citizens may have many rights in this country, but one of them is not the right to a letter of recommendation from Dr. Michael Dini.

So what about Dini? His attempts at causing controversy (which he admits on his Web site that he likes to do) are unfortunate in that they show two things: first, his arrogance as a teacher, and second, his ignorance of the concept of evolution.

"If modern medicine" he writes, "is based on the method of science, then how can someone who denies the theory of evolution — the very pinnacle of modern biological science —

ask to be recommended into a scientific profession by a professional scientist?" This argument is too simplistic. He generalizes the theory of evolution as if the entire concept has not been under serious debate for the past 30 years by those who believe most strongly in it. Human evolution is evident from fossil records, but how evolution occurred, a far

more interesting and intelligent debate, is one that Dini does not touch in the gauntlet of criteria that he so haughtily throws before his students.

Dr. Stephen Gould, who died this past year co-authored the theory of "punctuated equilibrium," published in 1972. According to his own essay "Evolution as Fact and Theory," this revolutionary idea helped explain anomalies in the fossil record by suggesting that evolution occurred, not at a gradual pace as the Darwinian model suggested, rather, with short quick bursts of dramatic change.

Surely, Dini is aware of Gould's efforts. Yet, he chose to misrepresent the theory of evolution as if it were uncomplicated and inorganic. Gould's work stood in stark contrast to the Darwinian theory and has ever since continually necessitated the need for further research on and criticism of the entire evolution theory.

Perhaps a more fitting litmus test for students seeking a letter of recommendation would not be how well they answer the question "how did the human species originate?," rather, how well they analyze the competing theories of how the human species evolved. The former is a question asked of a first-year biology student; the latter is asked of an advanced student exhibiting the level of intelligence that graduate school requires. And it is graduate school, not college, for which Dini writes these letters.

One may often look at this story and see faith versus science. However, nothing science has brought before humankind, be it fact or theory, has shaken Christian faith. Science and Christianity are not mutually exclusive, as many on both sides would like to purport, rather they are a harmonious pair. Science strengthens Christianity and Christianity, science. This story, however, of Dini and his students remains prosaic. It is merely that of a biology teacher oversimplifying a subject and overly sensitive students.

Michael Ward is a senior history major.

### MAIL CALL

#### Cube of Xoe cartoon relies on vulgarity

In response to a Feb. 7 Cube of Xoe cartoon:

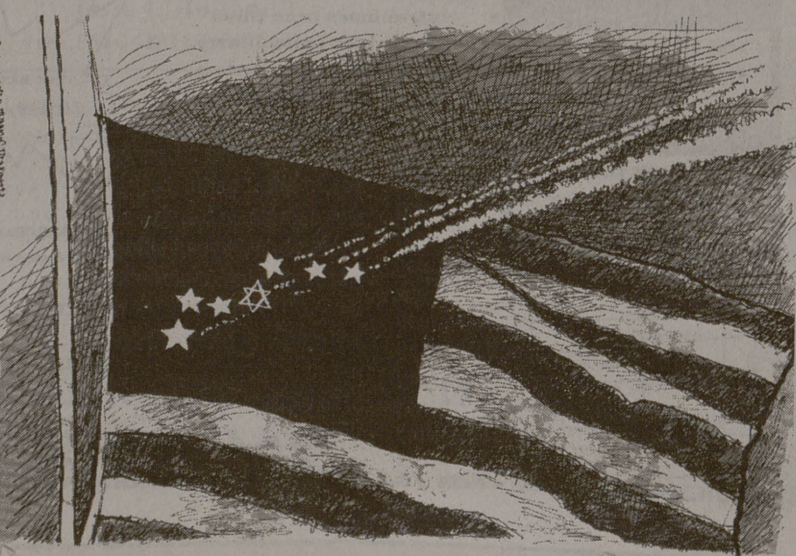
I think it is a shame that The Battalion must resort to cursing and swearing. It is so commonplace that people do it without thinking. People should have respect enough for one another not to cuss or use any profane language in an environment like The Battalion where thousands of students and faculty read it everyday.

In Friday's Battalion, I read Cube of Xoe for the first and last time. The woman was making herself a little haughty and rubbed her score in by referring to the people she was playing with as "beyotches."

Everyone knows the word to which this refers.

It is sad that this language is allowed to slip into a paper that is read by so many.

MINE LUKKONG  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
ARTIST: MINE LUKKONG



## The future of NASA

### NASA must reconfigure in wake of Columbia

Three decades ago the United States put a man on the moon. Since then, shuttle take-offs have never really recaptured the sense of mission that carried a space shuttle to the moon more than 33 years ago. Since then, projects — a manned flight to Mars, a permanent lunar base — have come and gone with nothing but empty budget lines to show for them. Retirement of the shuttle has been years in the coming — unfortunately, Columbia had to self-destruct in our backyards for the nation to come to terms with this. It is time the space program set some less risky goals with higher scientific payoff.

NASA should untangle itself from the risky web of manned missions and concentrate on more practical unmanned assignments. The purpose of the space program should be scientific, exploratory missions that will increase our knowledge of the universe. Unmanned missions allow space exploration without having to support life, and they can travel longer, in more dangerous areas at lower risk. Sending men on the assignments does little to increase that knowledge.

The only research requiring a human crew is "life science," or studying the human body's response to space. Space life science is useful, but requires astronauts to be on the space station or in the shuttle merely to take one another's pulse, which is a rather marginal goal. See the inefficiency? And after throwing in a risk assessment factor, (when flying a machine with more than 2.5 million parts, even a 99.9 percent reliability level would still leave 2,500 things to go wrong) there is little argument for continuing to man space missions at all.

Perhaps the United States should first define pay-offs. There are few experiments conducted aboard the space station, which was conceived mainly to give the shuttle a destination, that could not be conducted on unmanned probes. Is a shuttle flying to service the space station really necessary? Faced with the shuttle's

obvious uselessness, NASA proclaimed the shuttle to be essential for building the space station. In doing so, NASA attempted to salvage what had been sold as a futuristic exploration vehicle into a truck for carrying materials to a construction site.

In just two decades of use, shuttles have experienced an array of problems including engine malfunctions and damage to the heat-shielding tiles that have nearly produced other disasters. Seeing this, some analysts proposed that the shuttle be phased out, and cargo launches be carried aboard by far cheaper, unmanned rockets.

After the Challenger disaster nearly three decades ago, no NASA manager was fired; no safety systems were added to the solid rocket boosters whose explosion destroyed Challenger; no escape-capsule system was added to get astronauts out in a catastrophe, which might have helped Columbia. Instead, in return for this failure, the shuttle program got a big budget increase. And President Bush is certainly bringing home the bacon again to NASA in the proposed 2004 budget.

Bush plans to bump NASA spending by nearly \$500 million to \$15.47 billion. Greater funding will only expand the current space program, which translates into expanded room for error. NASA does not need more money; it needs restructuring. NASA's current budget only usurps funds that could be invested in a modern system that would make space flight cheaper and safer.

For 20 years, the American space program has been linked to a space-shuttle system that is too expensive, too risky, and too big for most of the ways it is used. The shuttle is impressive in technical terms, but in financial terms and safety terms, no project has done more harm to space exploration. NASA should not stunt space exploration in the name of status.

Leann Bickford is a freshman business administration major.



LEANN BICKFORD