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Oklahoma Legislature Investigates Richard Dawkins' Free Speech

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Well, it's official: Oklahoma's state legislature is investigating the University of Oklahoma for hosting a speech by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins.

As I noted in a [post](#) over the weekend at Dawkins' website, the legislature first considered two resolutions condemning both Dawkins and the theory of evolution as "an unproven and unpopular theory." (I highly recommend reading both of the proposed resolutions.) Despite their efforts, the legislature failed to prevent Dawkins from speaking on March 6 to an audience of thousands at the University of Oklahoma.

Last week, however, I received multiple reports that the legislature was now investigating the speech, and I wrote the University of Oklahoma President David Boren directly asking to know if this was true.

Sure enough, I just received [confirmation](#) today in a letter from the Open Records Office at the University of Oklahoma. The letter confirms that on the day of Dawkins' speech, Oklahoma State Representative Rebecca Hamilton requested substantial information relating to the speech from Vice President for Governmental Relations Danny Hilliard. Representative Hamilton's exhaustive request included demands for all e-mails and correspondence relating to the speech; a list of all money paid to Dawkins and the entities, public or private, responsible for this funding; and the total cost to the university, including, among other things, security fees, advertising, and even "faculty time spent promoting this event."

Rick Farmer, the director of committee staff for the Oklahoma House of Representatives, also wrote the University on March 12, requesting confirmation that Dawkins had indeed waived all compensation for the speech.

Now some of you--though I hope not too many--may wonder: "What's wrong with the legislature investigating a speech by a famous evolutionary biologist at a public university?" Well, a lot of things, actually. As I wrote in my [post](#) on Dawkins' website:

If this investigation is indeed taking place, what the state legislature needs to understand is that in court cases dating back to the days of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, even investigating clearly protected speech on the basis of its viewpoint violates the First Amendment.

Think about it: If every time a student or faculty member invited, say, Rick Warren to speak on campus, they knew they would be subjected to a thorough and time-consuming investigation by state officials, you can all but guarantee that schools across the country would think twice before inviting Rick Warren. This would be a great way for state legislatures to chill speech they dislike without ever having to find the speaker guilty of a single thing. Talk about your un-American activities.

Given the fact the legislature clearly is concerned with nothing other than Dawkins' viewpoint, such an investigation is improper and should end immediately.

Now that we know this investigation is going on, many questions still need to be answered: What does the state legislature plan to do with this information? Does this mean that any time Richard Dawkins or other evolutionary scientists give speeches about evolution in Oklahoma, they too will be investigated? And perhaps most importantly: Doesn't the Oklahoma legislature have anything better to do?

I think I know the answer to the last question, but I think it's time the Oklahoma Legislature answered the first two. Stay tuned.

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