Evolution is like Betsy Ross. It’s a great seamstress.” So said a biology student at a university in Utah to portray evolution as the great unifying factor in the biological sciences. Yet in the same class, another student submitted a paper stating, “I feel that Darwin’s works themselves have not made a massive impact on current biological research.” These opposing views (and those in between) are not uncommon in all levels of students, nor is it uncommon for students to have various misconceptions about evolutionary theory (Sinclair & Baldwin, 1995; Sinclair & Pendarvis, 1998).

In the classroom, some students meet the mention of the word “evolution” with varying level of disgruntled feelings and resistance. In some areas of the country, groups have exerted pressure on educators to remove evolutionary biology from their science curricula (Goldsmith, 2000; Moore, 1999, 2000). Across the country, significant percentages of high school teachers are not convinced that evolution is a central concept to biology and/or are of the opinion that creation should be taught in public school science classes (Elgin, 1983; Osif 1997; Rutledge & Warden, 2000; Tatina, 1989; Weld & McNew, 1999; Zimmerman, 1987). Are these attitudes transferred from educators to their students? What messages do an educator’s personal and professional attitudes send to students—the students who may someday be teachers themselves, whether this be in the context of a family discussion or in front of a class of their own?

Unless we address these questions, educators will not be able to convey the importance to students of evolutionary biology in biological disciplines. This article examines attitudes of educators currently teaching biology at universities throughout Utah. The author surveyed educators about the importance of understanding evolutionary biology, and gathered information about their strategies in facing students questioning the validity of learning evolution.

Method

The author sent surveys to professors in biology fields at Utah universities. Participants reported gender, state where they earned their advanced degree, and current educational institution. They also reported number of years taught at the university level (<3, 3–5, 6–10, 11–15, and >15 years), if an evolution course was required of all majors in their program, and their opinions of whether an evolution course should be required.