Prove Him Wrong

We are writing in response to the controversial comments made by Harvard University president Lawrence Summers during a luncheon talk on January 14, 2005. During this talk, Summers attempted to address the reasons behind low numbers of women in high-level positions in mathematics and science. One of Summers' "reasons", and the particular comment that we would like to address, is that there may be an innate difference in ability in these fields between men and women. Dr. Summers based this idea on the disparity between standardized math exam scores for school-age girls and boys.

Regardless of Summers' position as the president of Harvard, his idea is not new, nor is it correct. We agree that "raising questions, discussing multiple factors that may explain a difficult problem, and seeking to understand how they interrelate is vitally important" (Summers), however, we feel that resorting to illogical and outdated arguments is not effective in the question behind women's numbers in the sciences. The reasons behind women's lack of representation at all levels of academic science are complex. Although the discussion that Summers' comments provoked is a necessary driving force behind the work to solve these problems, we feel that there is a difference between provoking intellectual debate and blatantly ignoring previous research findings.

Several reputable scholars have devoted years of research to the question of women's achievements in science and have published articles and literature on the subject. Recent studies directly counter Dr. Summers' suggested "findings", including those that indicate gender differences in performance on mathematical tests are small and decreasing, and that a variety of factors, including expectations and stereotyping, influence performance (Leahey and Guo, Hyde, et al., Spencer, Steele, and Quinn). Even the sociologists whose research Summers cited in his speech have spoken out on the misrepresentation of their finding and have publicly stated that their research "goes against Larry's suggestion that math ability is something innate." (Shauman and Xie). It is irresponsible for a person trained in research such as Summers to ignore previous evidence before arriving at a hypothesis.

Counter-examples to the suggestion of "innate ability" are drawn from the fields of law and medical science. There was a dramatic increase in the number of women in the sciences after the passage of equal opportunity legislation in the seventies. In fact, women's representation has increased in all scientific fields except computer science. We feel it is more beneficial for the cause of equal gender representation in the sciences to address the gender dichotomies that occur as a result of cultural influences rather than unsubstantiated "innate abilities".

We make no claim to the intellectual rigor that Dr. Summers possesses, but as women students in science we have seen the realities of stereotyping. For many females in our generation, failure in mathematics was a self-fulfilling prophecy influenced by cultural attitudes about our abilities in "atypical" fields. Because of this, confidence remains one of the largest problems for female science students. Studies of attrition in computer science have shown that female students performing at the same level as their male counterparts will often rank their own abilities significantly lower than that of their peers (Margolis & Fisher). Women in the sciences spend enough time questioning their own abilities; it is irresponsible for the president of a respected university to confirm their doubts.

Courses in the sciences are usually extremely rigorous and intellectually challenging, regardless of a student's gender. Any student knows that success in an academic course can be determined by a variety of factors, including the professor's teaching style, the quality of the textbook, and the content of lectures, projects, and examinations. Summers' comments are damaging in that they encourage women to consider their struggles in scientific courses to be a result of their gender, instead of the result of a variety of other factors. This could potentially increase the disparagement of women in scientific disciplines, and hurt the careers of women scientists entering the workforce.

If we accept or even allow the irresponsible speech by Dr. Summers, we are condoning girls and women to abandon science and math. By perceiving girls as "innately different" than boys in scientific fields, we are not only doing women a great disservice, but we are risking a huge loss for our society. Society benefits most when we take full advantage of the wide range of scientific and technical talent among us – and the varied perspective that comes with this talent.

Stopping this female brain drain has been a challenge for years, and the Women in Computer Science group (WICS), in affiliation with the Computer & Information Science department at the University of Oregon, is pushing ahead with mentoring programs and stepped-up recruitment efforts. We encourage those who have been moved by Summers' comments to explore the wide range of rebuttals and responses available. As a word of encouragement to all women struggling in the sciences, WICS says: "Ladies: the president of Harvard says you can't do math. Prove him wrong."

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In Support:

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