

## Harvard President's Comments Demonstrate Need for Commitment to Equality for Women in Science and Technology

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By now, many are aware of Harvard University President Lawrence Summers' comments made on Jan. 14, during his lunch talk at the National Bureau of Economic Research conference entitled Diversifying the Science Work Force: The Movement of Women and Underrepresented Minorities into S&E Careers, as part of the Science Engineering Workforce Project.

As I recall, he started by explaining that because Harvard draws only from the very top, it would be understandable that very few women would be found there.

Most of his rationales focused on: (1) reluctance or inability of women who have children to work 80-hour weeks, (2) an innate difference, that fewer girls than boys have top scores on science and math tests in late high school years, and (3) lack of evidence for discrimination, upon applying economic principles of supply and demand; he said he knew of no department hiring away top women who are discriminated against elsewhere.

Are these valid and how big a role do they play in determining the upper limit of women academics in math and science? (1) There are many reports of women who chose to have no children or families, do choose to work 80-hour weeks, and nevertheless experience differential treatment. There are also reports of men choosing against 80-hour weeks. Unless men and women have similar environments, whether women are more reluctant than men (or vice versa) is not necessarily attributable solely to the 80-hour week. (2) The pertinent issue is not merely about sex differences; while there are genetic components to all of the things discussed at the conference, the sex differences don't actually determine performance outcomes. (3) There are departments which are building strong and diverse faculties by hiring away women from other universities; this is happening, although it may not be generally publicized.

Instead of arguing points that may be flawed, irrelevant, or uninformed, I propose that we move to a more productive approach for solving issues facing women and minorities in science. I propose that there are other "hypotheticals" to account for women's lower numbers and proportions, such as discouragement at school, discrimination in getting into top graduate programs, disparagement of their work, and behavior which makes women feel like outsiders.

I suggest that we now focus on the things that could actually bring people together to improve our science and our nation -- the policies, practices, and processes related to the fair evaluation of potential and performance. Perhaps our academic leaders could demonstrate such a commitment to equalizing our workforce in science and technology. The nation's most prestigious universities have a special responsibility to lead in this arena.

- Download Dr. Nelson's **report** in PDF format.
- Read NOW's Jan. 20 **statement** calling for Harvard President Lawrence Summers' resignation.
- Read about NOW's January 2004 congressional **briefing** on this issue.

*Dr. Donna J. Nelson conducted the first comprehensive national survey of tenured faculty at major research universities, calling attention to a dramatic under-representation of women and people of color in top-ranking positions in the science, engineering, math and information technology fields. For this contribution heightening awareness about the need for gender equity in education, and for her own perseverance in a field typically dominated by white men, NOW presented Dr. Nelson with a **Woman of Courage Award** at our 2004 National Conference.*

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