To the Editor:

Last Friday, Dr. Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard University and an economist, spoke before a meeting of the National Bureau of Economic Research, about the causes for women's under-representation in science. He suggested that, since fewer girls than boys have top scores on science and math tests in late high school, perhaps genetic, rather than social, differences explain why so few women are successful in these fields.

We would like to respond:

Well-accepted, path-breaking research on learning (see, for example, Bransford, et al., "How People Learn", and Claude Steele's work on "stereotype threat"), shows that expectations heavily influence performance, particularly on tests. If society, institutions, teachers, and leaders like President Summers, expect (overtly or subconsciously) that girls and women will not perform as well as boys and men, there is a good chance many will not perform as well. At the same time, there is little evidence that those scoring at the very top of the range in standardized tests, are likely to have more successful careers in the sciences. Too many other factors are involved. Finally, well-documented evidence demonstrates women's efforts and achievements are not valued, recognized and rewarded to the same extent as those of their male counterparts (see, for example, Virginia Valian's work on gender schema).

As leaders in science, engineering, and education, we are concerned with the suggestion that the status quo for women in science and engineering may be natural, inevitable, and unrelated to social factors. Counter-examples to this suggestion are drawn quickly from the fields of law, and of medical science. In 1970, women represented just 5% of law students and 8% of medical school students. These low percentages have increased substantially in response to social changes and concerted institutional and individual effort. Obviously, the low rates of participation in 1970 were indicative of social, and not genetic, barriers to success.

We must continue to address the multitude of small and subtle ways in which people of all kinds are discouraged from pursuing interest in scientific and technical fields. Society benefits most when we take full advantage of the scientific and technical talent among us. It is time to create a broader awareness of those proven and effective means, including institutional policies and practices, which enable women and other underrepresented groups to step beyond the historical barriers in science and engineering.

Sincerely,
Carol B. Muller, President and CEO, MentorNet and Consulting Associate
Professor of Mechanical Engineering, Stanford University

Sally M. Ride, Joseph and Ingrid Hibbens Professor of Space Science, University of California, San Diego

Janie Fouke, Professor and Dean, College of Engineering, Michigan State University

Telle Whitney, President, Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology

Denice D. Denton, Dean of Engineering, University of Washington, and University of California, Santa Cruz Chancellor Designate

Nancy Cantor, Chancellor, Syracuse University

Donna J. Nelson, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of Oklahoma

Jim Plummer, Dean of Engineering, Stanford University

Ilene Busch-Vishniac, Professor of Mechanical Engineering and former Dean of the Whiting School of Engineering, Johns Hopkins University

Carolyn Meyers, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Sue V. Rosser, Dean, Ivan Allen College, Georgia Institute of Technology

Londa Schiebinger, Professor of History of Science and Barbara D. Finberg Director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Stanford University

Eric Roberts, Professor of Computer Science, Stanford University

David Burgess, Professor of Biology, Boston College and past president, Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native American in Science

Craig Beeson, Associate Professor, Medical University of South Carolina

Susan Staffin Metz, Senior Advisor, Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education, Stevens Institute of Technology

Lucinda Sanders, CEO, National Center for Women & Information Technology

Bevlee A. Watford, President, WEPAN - the Women in Engineering Programs and Advocates Network
Elizabeth S. Ivey, President, Association for Women in Science

Mary Frank Fox, NSF ADVANCE Professor, Co-director, Center for Study of Women, Science, & Technology, Georgia Institute of Technology

Sheldon Wettack, Professor of Chemistry and former Dean of Faculty, Harvey Mudd College

Maria Klawe, Dean of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Princeton University

William A. Wulf, President, National Academy of Engineering

Joan Girgus, Professor of Psychology and Special Assistant to the Dean of the Faculty, Princeton University

Phoebe S. Leboy, Professor of Biochemistry, University of Pennsylvania

Eleanor L. Babco, Executive Director, Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology

Betty Shanahan, Executive Director & CEO, Society of Women Engineers

Catherine Didion, Director, International Network for Women Engineers and Scientists (INWES)

Daryl E. Chubin, Director, AAAS Center for Advancing Science & Engineering Capacity

Monique Frize, President, INWES (International Network for Women Engineers and Scientists)

Susan L. Ganter, Executive Director, Association for Women in Science and Associate Professor of Mathematical Sciences, Clemson University

E. Ann Nalley, Professor of Chemistry, Cameron University and President Elect, American Chemical Society

Judy Franz, Executive Officer, American Physical Society

Hector D. Abrua, Emile M. Chamot Professor and Chair, Department of Chemistry & Chemical Biology, Baker Laboratory, Cornell University

Myra H. Strober, Professor of Education and Business (by courtesy), Stanford University

Jane Zimmer Daniels, Co-Founder & Founding President WEPAN (Women in
Engineering Programs & Advocates Network

Emily A. Carter, Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering and Applied and Computational Mathematics, Associated Faculty in PICSciE, Chemistry, Chemical Engineering, and PRISM. Princeton University

Jean H. Rhodes, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Iris Schrijver, Director, Molecular Pathology Laboratory, Director, Molecular Genetic Pathology Fellowship Program, Medical Director, Stanford POCT, Assistant Professor of Pathology and (by courtesy) Pediatrics, Stanford University School of Medicine

Virginia A. Zakian, Harry C. Wiess Professor in the Life Sciences, Department of Molecular Biology, Lewis Thomas Labs, Princeton University

Barbara Simons, Former President, Association for Computing Machinery

Ursula Martin, Professor and Director of women@CL project, University of Cambridge

Jo Boaler, Associate Professor, Mathematics Education, Stanford University

Katherine Rose Jolluck, Professor of History, Stanford University

Purnima Mankekar, Associate Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Stanford University

Robert M. Gray, Lucent Technologies Professor of Engineering and Vice Chair, Department of Electrical Engineering, Stanford University

Margaret W. Conkey, Class of 1960 Professor of Anthropology, Director, Archaeological Research Facility, University of California, Berkeley and President, Archaeology Division, American Anthropological Association

Peter Stansky, Frances and Charles Field Professor of History Emeritus, Stanford University

Aihua Xie, Professor of Physics, Oklahoma State University and Chair, the APS Committee on the Status of Women in Physics

Pino Martin, Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, Princeton University

Linda P.B. Katehi, John A. Edwardson Dean of Engineering, Purdue University
Jo Anne Miller, Chair, MentorNet Board of Directors, CEO, RNM Engineering and Principal, Nokia Innovent

Amelia Tess Thornton, CEO, The Thornton Group

Andrea LaPaugh, Professor of Computer Science, Princeton University

Deborah L. Rhode, Professor of Law, Director of the Center on Ethics, Stanford University

Barbara C. Gelpi, Professor of English, Emerita, Stanford University

Mary Jean Harrold, NSF ADVANCE Professor of Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology

Cherrill M. Spencer, Stanford Linear Accelerator Center and Vice-President, Math/Science Network

Carla Schlatter Ellis, Professor of Computer Science, Duke University

Iris Schrijver, Pathology Department, Stanford University

Susan Lord, Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering, University of San Diego

Helen Quinn, Past President, American Physical Society

Margaret Murnane, Professor of Physics, JILA, University of Colorado at Boulder

Patricia P. Jones, Professor Vice Provost for Faculty, Professor of Biological Sciences, Stanford University

Frances Hellman, Professor of Physics, UC Berkeley

Gail Wight, Assistant Professor of Media Art, Stanford University

Ruth O'Hara, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University School of Medicine

Mary Pickering, Professor of History, San Jose State University

Sheri Sheppard, Associate Professor, Mechanical Engineering, Stanford University

David Leith, Professor and Emeritus Director of Research, Stanford Linear
Accelerator Center, Stanford University

Adina Paytan, Assistant Professor of Geological and Environmental Sciences, Stanford University

Matthew H. Sommer, Professor of History, Stanford University

Audrey Shafer, Associate Professor, Anesthesia, Stanford University School of Medicine

David Grusky, Professor of Sociology, Stanford University

Sherry Yennello, Professor and Associate Dean, Texas A&M University

Ashima Madan, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Stanford University Medical Center

Denise L. Johnson, Associate Professor of Surgery, Advising Dean, Stanford University Medical School

Sylvia Yanagisako, Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Stanford University

Jennifer M. Chou-Green, Academic Career E-mentoring Project Director, MentorNet

Sandra Robinson, Region 5 Women in Engineering Coordinator, IEEE