



## HARVARD PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS SPARK DEBATE ABOUT GENDER

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*Comments made by the president of Harvard University sparked heated debate over biological differences between males and females.*

Harvard University President Lawrence Summers issued an apology last week for comments he made at a recent academic conference that suggested that "innate differences" between the sexes may account for fewer numbers of women in elite math and science academic positions.

His admittedly provocative statements, which he said were based on scholarly hypotheses not his own opinions, occurred at a private Jan. 14 conference on women and minorities in the science and engineering workforce.

### **Controversial comments**

According to people who heard the comments, Summers said that there are few top female scientists because women with children were often unwilling or unable to work 80-hour weeks, but also because more males earn the best scores on math and science tests in late high school.

Summers said cutting-edge research has shown that genetics are more important than previously thought, compared with environment or upbringing, the Boston Globe reported.

In his talk, according to several participants, Summers also used as an example one of his daughters, who as a child was given two trucks in an effort at gender-neutral parenting. Yet she treated them almost like dolls, naming one of them "daddy truck" and the other "baby truck."

It was at this point that Nancy Hopkins, a Harvard graduate and biologist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, walked out, saying later that if she hadn't left, "I would've either blacked out or thrown up."

"It is so upsetting that all these brilliant young women [at Harvard] are being led by a man who views them this way," she said later in an interview.

The Harvard Faculty Standing Committee on Women sent a formal letter to the president objecting to his comments, saying they "impede our current efforts to recruit top women scholars."

Summers quickly issued formal letter printed on the university's Web site.

"Despite reports to the contrary, I did not say, and I do not believe, that girls are intellectually less able than boys, or that women lack the ability to succeed at the highest levels of science. As the careers of a great many distinguished women scientists make plain, the human potential to excel in science is not somehow the province of one gender or another," Summer's letter stated.

### **Teens respond**

When asked about their reactions to the president's comments, advanced science students from Mercyhurst Preparatory School in Erie, Pa. said they didn't see enough validity in Summers' claims.

"One thing he used were SAT scores. But they're not really a good predictor of how good a scientist you will be. They judge your ability to take the SATs not your ability to be a good scientist," junior Dann Cuneo said.

And while the students felt that posing such questions isn't necessarily wrong, the way the questions are posed is important too.

"An inherent point of the scientific method is having hypotheses. It was a part of his response. I think that is one argument in his defense. But he could have done it in more sensitive ways," 18-year-old Tom Martin said.

Martin, who is waiting to see if his application to Harvard will be accepted, says that this incident could change his attitude about the prestigious university.

"I'm kind of doubting whether I want to associate myself with this university. He should have been aware that his remarks -- he can never remove himself from the university. He should have been more sensitive to that," Martin said.

### **Inspiration to succeed**

But others felt Summers' comments inspired them to prove him wrong.

"I'm going to major in science -- maybe a pre-med program. The remarks inspire me to work harder. I think there are differences between men and women because I do pretty well. I do better than a lot of men in school here," senior Kelly DiMattio said.

"I thought that it was interesting -- he's so influential. It can be discouraging to women who want to persevere in the sciences. It makes me want to go there and show them that he's wrong," 17-year-old junior Kelly Miele said.

And for these students their experience has shown them that women can succeed in science.

"I know that going through school – 99 percent of my science teachers have been women. They know so much, it proves to me that it's not just a male subject. Seeing them be such great teachers, it influences me that I can be the same way," 16-year old Emily Sanner said.

"The girls are giving us guys a run for our money – it's half girls in the honors classes but most of the top grades are going to girls," Martin added.

*--By Annie Schleicher, Online NewsHour Extra*