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Letter from President Summers on women and science

January 19, 2005

Dear Members of the Harvard Community:

Last Friday I spoke at a conference on women and science, hosted by the National Bureau of Economic Research. I attended the conference with the intention of reinforcing my strong commitment to the advancement of women in science, and offering some informal observations on possibly fruitful avenues for further research. Ensuing media reports on my remarks appear to have had quite the opposite effect. I deeply regret the impact of my comments and apologize for not having weighed them more carefully.

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. It is a capacity shared by girls and boys, by women and men, and we must do all we can to nurture, develop, and recognize it, along with other vital talents. That includes carefully avoiding stereotypes, being alert to forms of subtle discrimination, and doing everything we can to remove obstacles to success.

I have learned a great deal from all that I have heard in the last few days. The many compelling e-mails and calls that I have received have made vivid the very real barriers faced by women in pursuing scientific and other academic careers. They have also powerfully underscored the imperative of providing strong and unequivocal encouragement to girls and young women interested in science.

I was wrong to have spoken in a way that has resulted in an unintended signal of discouragement to talented girls and women. As a university president, I consider nothing more important than helping to create an environment, at Harvard and beyond, in which every one of us can pursue our intellectual passions and realize our aspirations to the fullest possible extent. We will fulfill our promise as an academic community only if we draw as broadly and deeply as we can on the talents of outstanding women as well as men, among both our students and our faculty.

While in recent years there have been some strides forward in attracting more women into the front ranks of science, the progress overall has been frustratingly uneven and slow. Spurring greater progress is a critical challenge. As members of a university, we should do all we can to recognize and reduce barriers to the advancement of women in science. And, as academics who believe in the power of research, we should invest our energies in thinking as clearly and objectively as possible, drawing on potential insights from different disciplines, to identify and understand all the various factors that might possibly bear on the situation. The better our understanding, the better the prospects for long-term success.

I am strongly committed to Harvard's success in attracting both students and faculty who are outstanding and diverse along many dimensions. We have recently committed up to \$25 million in new funds to avoid budget constraints on the appointment of

outstanding scholars from underrepresented groups, including women and minorities. Last year we completed a comprehensive report of our appointments process in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and we continue to assess and implement measures at a variety of levels to improve our effectiveness in this area. And we are actively exploring ways to enhance flexibility and support for faculty trying to balance career and family, through such measures as enhanced leave, parental teaching relief, delayed tenure clocks, and better childcare options. These and other steps should all be part of a broad-based and sustained effort to achieve a vital goal we all share: assuring that Harvard plays a leadership role in accelerating the advancement of women in science and throughout academic life.

Sincerely,

Lawrence H. Summers