The Summers Storm:
A Response by the University of Michigan’s
Center for the Education of Women

Jean Waltman. PhD
Research Specialist
Center for the Education of Women

Anything else Harvard President Lawrence Summers said in his speech on “diversity in the science and engineering workforce” has been lost in the tumult over his hypothesis that men are five times more likely than women to be at the very high end of intellectual ability in math and sciences.

Rebuttals to this “men scientists are smarter than women scientists” assertion began almost immediately. Essays and editorials presented arguments and counter-arguments; Time ran a cover article describing the state of brain/gender research (March 7, 2005). While the dueling experts present evidence about the ways that gender does and does not influence intellect, we should be paying more attention to Summers’ other main hypothesis:

According to Summers, the first, and most important, reason for the disproportionately low numbers of women in the high-level ranks of academic science is their unwillingness to make the “near total commitment” that such positions require. His is, he says, an objective—not a normative—hypothesis, a judgment not of how it should be but of how it is:

Is our society right to expect that level of effort [80 hours or more per week] from people who hold the most prominent jobs? Is our society right to have familial arrangements in which women are asked to make that choice and asked more to make that choice than men? Is our society right to ask of anybody to have a prominent job at this level of intensity?… Those are all questions that I want to come back to….

Unfortunately, he never did get back to answer those questions. Perhaps if he had, he might have been able to soften somewhat the blows of criticism he received for his controversial comments about gender and scientific ability. Since he didn’t, however, let’s return to those important questions here and give some of the answers.

The President’s comment contains one of the arguments that women faculty—along with some of their male colleagues, higher education policy makers and researchers—have long been making. That is, in the 21st century, when the “professor-husband works while the wife stays at home” model is much less frequent, no one in the scientific or the academic community benefits from the grueling work standards Summers describes above.

This is an argument that many women faculty would agree helps to explain their limited representation at the highest levels of academic math, science, and engineering.
Over the years, the University of Michigan’s Center for the Education of Women has been surveying and talking with women faculty on a variety of career and work-life issues. We enter into the Summers debate to give voice, with quotes collected over the past five years from women in science and non-science departments across the University of Michigan campus, to how these women perceive their lives and careers. The issues they have consistently raised lend credence to Summers’ implication that unreasonable work demands are a serious hindrance to women’s rise to the top academic ranks. Embedded in these women’s comments are suggestions for how the academy can improve itself while also making it less difficult for women to rise to the tops of their professions.

Time

It boils down to time. Listen to women scientists and you’ll usually hear (1) how much time they spend at their work; (2) how they feel pressured to use that work time differently from their male colleagues; (3) how they perceive time to be used and misused in the academy; and (4) how they must juggle, and often hide evidence of, the time they devote to children and other family responsibilities.

It certainly is true that, at certain stages of their lives, many women faculty wish they could dedicate fewer hours per week to their jobs. But CEW’s research suggests that, overall, women actually work more hours per week than their male colleagues. In fact, the Faculty Work-Life Study we conducted in the mid-1990’s determined that women work 59 hours per week, significantly more than their male colleagues’ 56.5 hours per week.

According to one woman, “I do little but work. There is a particular work ethic here at Michigan, and there is certainly an expectation [that you’ll accept it]. As another women told us, “I don’t think there’s a woman who wouldn’t say that we’ve had to do more along the way to be in the same place.” Said another woman, “Women feel more compelled to take on more. And they feel guiltier about all the things they are not doing. They’re a little bit more pressured.” A woman in the Medical School explained, “If I don’t do everything [that my male colleagues do], I would be at a lower rank than my colleagues. You cannot give an inch on any level.”

So, what do UM women say about the time they spend? First, they believe—and research supports them—that they take on or are expected to do greater amounts of essential but non-research focused university work than do their male colleagues. In other words, the real issue may not so much be the amount of time women spend on the job but the ways they end up using that time. In the Faculty Work-Life Study, women assistant professors reported spending significantly higher percentages of their time per week performing internal university service activities than did male assistant professors. A significantly higher percentage of female assistant and associate professors also reported that, over a two-year period, they conferred and consulted with students on a daily or weekly basis. Often these students were not in the women’s classes, nor were they assigned to the women as advisees. Further, the data showed that such consultations were often about personal issues.

---

1 Data and quotations in this article come from the Faculty Work-Life Study (Blackburn, Hollenshead et al, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education and Center for the Education of Women, www.cew.umich.edu, University of Michigan, 1999), from interviews by Jean Waltman for her dissertation and for the ADVANCE project; and from focus groups conducted at CEW with assistant and associate women professors. All of the respondents are current or former University of Michigan faculty members.
As one woman perceived, some women’s service workloads are greater than their male colleagues because administrators “want to showcase the woman”—on committees and in public events, but often not in ways that are protective of or conducive to their own scholarly progress. According to a woman scientist,

As soon as I was tenured, I [began to recognize] some marginalization of women. And the way you're marginalized is you take on more and more administrative tasks. That's how you maintain your value. And day to day, it feels like it's a good idea. It's not. And you do more and more because, first of all, there's very few women of senior position, so to have a woman's voice on critical committees you have to do it or at least do your share because it would be an increased burden for a woman who wasn't tenured. [So] there's this continuing round of senior women who bounce from one committee to another. It's absurd and it devalues a woman scientist because your productivity suffers.

Even a woman who understand the phenomenon that “a faculty job will take as much time as you will possibly allow it and still demand more,” and who tries to respond by telling herself “I have tenure, so I’m just not going to let it have too much,” nonetheless admits that the work “keeps pushing in; it keeps pushing in.”

In many cases, women understand that they place themselves in such situations. One woman observed that the women she knows are involved in many “arenas,” partly because “that’s just the way the university is set up, but also partly because that’s the way our gender is trained. We’re acculturated to do a million things, to be multi-tasked all the time.” A woman scientist explained,

I’ve noticed that men are very good about protecting themselves and placing their priorities first, so that everything else gets taken care of after their priorities. And I’ve observed that it’s the women who come along and take up the slack because they somehow feel responsible. I somehow feel responsible. I feel like, “God, if I don’t do something about this, it’s not going to get done. If I don’t take care of this, the student isn’t going to get her funding” when it should have been someone else’s responsibility. And in some of these cases that someone else happens to be a man. And why haven’t I learned how to prioritize my research as number one in the same way that he obviously has?

How might the faculty with whom we at CEW have spoken redesign their academic careers? In addition to wanting their service work to be recognized as essential to the university, they also question whether all the time they feel pressured to devote to work is really necessary and productive. As a woman in the College of Engineering told us, “One of my colleagues put it quite well when he said that Michigan puts a real premium on busyness.” What important aspects of academic life, the women ask, are being lost in the frantic pace? According to the female Engineering faculty member,

I think the biggest problem in this place is that people are too busy. And I’m not convinced that it’s all because people ARE so busy, that it’s not necessarily a quantity of time issue. I don’t know if it’s because of the
way things are organized, or just that there’s a premium put on being busy. Or there’s not an environment that values the things people who aren’t busy do—like sitting around and talking about something over coffee or having an informal interaction in some random way. Those are the interactions that create good science. And to have a place where everybody’s so frantic that they don’t have the time to do the thinking that’s required, that’s a frustration for me.”

A woman faculty member expressed much the same sentiments:

What we’ve [she and her colleagues] been talking about more recently is having an intellectual life at the university. We don’t just regard it as a place where we punch the clock, but we’re beginning to feel more and more that we don’t have the space to have the intellectual community and conversations that we enjoy with each other because everybody is so frantic.

I look at a very senior colleague as a ‘real’ professor. He knows one subject extraordinarily well, but he also [enjoys nature sports and the arts]. You know he is a real scholar; you know he thinks deeply about things. I don’t feel like a real scholar. I don’t have time to think deeply about things. I have to carve an hour here and an hour there to think about something, and I just don’t feel like I’m doing justice to the work. It seems like the University wants quantity because we don’t know how to judge the quality perhaps.”

Another woman told a story that supports “what we’re talking about: Last week I met [a job] candidate. And she said to me, “Is this place as crazy as it seems?” She said, “Why are they trying to recruit me by just running me from morning to night and showing me how everybody is totally overworked?” She just cut right to the chase, like “I have a five-year old. Is this what life is like here? Because, if it is, I have to weigh whether I really…. ” And I thought that she got it very quickly: There’s a way that we think this is productivity; we think this is positive, so we create this atmosphere that is so amazingly intense.

I have an anecdote: I was just at the dentist, and my dental hygienist told me that they’ve noticed in the last seven years that there’s been an increase in the need for people to have these bite devises for people who grind their teeth. And she said, “They’re all academics!” [laughter] But she was dead serious. She said, “I don’t know what you guys do over there.”

Another change many women would definitely make to the higher education culture is to acknowledge and honor the flexibility that even the brightest, most dedicated and hard working faculty—men and women—need at various times in their lives to balance the personal and professional. These women are dedicated scholars, researchers and teachers who do not want a lifetime of reduced appointments (though part-time tenure is growing as a viable career option), but merely the option to take semester- or year-long reduced hours or paid leaves to help manage family needs. However, as a woman scientist remarked, “The idea that you would take off a year to stay home with children just doesn’t fit ‘their’ model.”
In many departments faculty who are mothers face external and internal pressure to maintain a consistent level of work equal to their male and female colleagues who either have no children or have spouses at home. “The men,” said one woman, “all have children of course, and that’s fine, but I just feel like I’m constantly held suspicious for anything related to being a parent, and that’s pretty awful.” Some of them sense, as another woman told us, that they have to “pretend that your children, your spouse, your familial juggling is a dirty little secret of your own.” This and the following comments suggest the stress these women face:

When we had kids, we made the decision that all the showy baby things my husband [in another academic department] would do, like take them off to the doctor and so forth. He got a lot of support. ‘Isn’t he a good father? Isn’t he wonderful?’ And, you know, that’s not the feedback I got…I used to get these reviews that said I was cold, and I wasn’t sociable.

I would say to a new woman faculty member, “Don’t expect much sympathy for issues that tend to segregate by gender.” Issues related to pregnancy, childcare or elderly parent care. If it’s a physical problem related in any way to gender, you will not get the same sympathy as the faculty member who has prostrate problems….If you’re a young woman and you want to have children, it’s going to be difficult. There’s not going to be much sympathy; there’s not going to be much help.

If time is the problem, what is the resolution that allows women to take full advantage of their intelligence, commitment, and love of science? Some women challenge the current assumption that more is always better or that there’s only one way to have a successful, productive academic career. As they have told us:

[There should be] a number of ways forward if you want to succeed. One is to work a ton. The other is to sort of take a longer time to get where you’re trying to go, still based on the same level of achievement. You could do that at a reduced appointment that would allow you to balance work and family in a way that one finds appropriate.

Would the university crumble [if it were a better place for women]? It wouldn’t, and it wouldn’t have to give up its reputation. The issue is doing good work, advancing science, saving peoples’ lives and giving them a chance at a better life…. We shouldn’t stop doing those things; this is the place where we should be doing the things we’re doing. HOW we do them, and how we burn up and use up the people who do them is the subject, I think. Not that we should change from a research intensive university, but how can we do what we do without throwing out all except a few people who are willing to fit…a focused and corporate mode….You have to buy into a very narrow line to succeed. That’s the bottom line. In doing that, you can have a very rich and rewarding career. But you have to first put your house in order…and sell your soul, so to speak.

Many men, including the two scientists cited below, agree with their women colleagues:

We’re not going to be able to staff an institution in the future unless we can actually adopt those policies [more flexible tenure/timer flexible time/etc]….We’re going to have
an institution that has just a bunch of people that are all the same. Not just men, but men that actually have chosen a particular way to do things, which might be working eighty hours a week. And they would all be the same and that ultimately won’t be appealing to our graduate and undergraduate student populations. And actually it’s probably not sustainable any more.

I view myself as part of a very small cohort, which is male faculty members that have full-time working spouses. And you actually won’t get us working at institutions that are staffed just by men who don’t have to balance work and family. But I think we’ll [men with working wives] become larger in the future. It’s an issue that science and engineering as a whole will have to address eventually: How are you going to deal with couples where both the people want to work?”

Conclusion

Of course, the gender inequities in the academy are much more complex than Summers suggests or than we have delineated here. Other factors, also totally unrelated to scientific intelligence, contribute to making women’s academic experiences different from their male colleagues’ in many ways. All of these factors likely help explain why some women make life decisions that ultimately keep them from the highest scientific ranks. A full discussion of the issues would examine the sacrifices that women have traditionally made, and are still making, to secure and maintain their positions, among them—

• Academic women are more likely than their male colleagues to remain single and/or not to have children.
• Women are more likely than their male colleagues to delay having children until after tenure, at which time they may encounter difficulties with pregnancy.
• Women are less likely to get all the mentoring they need.
• The traditional criteria for evaluating research and publication often do not recognize the unique and valuable characteristics and contributions of women scientists and scholars. (See V. Valian, Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women. 1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.)

How easy, how convenient it is to point to differences in their brains to explain the differences in achievement between men and women scientists, especially since we have no definitive scientific answers to resolve the question. And how misleading it is to ignore the arguments—for which we have substantial qualitative and quantitative data—that various current assumptions and work conditions DO negatively affect the ability of women scientists to rise to the highest academic ranks.

Perhaps we should be listening to what these men and women are saying. Perhaps if we stopped being trapped by the current system, unable to look objectively at whether it really does create the best scholarship, the best research, the best graduates and future scholars, or the best intellectual environment, we might improve the academy. And, at the same time, we would allow faculty members to better integrate their lives with their careers. That would be a very good thing. It would also help everyone, but especially women, to optimize their professional lives without sacrificing the joys and responsibilities of their personal lives.
We predict that any institution that commits itself to such goals will attract women and men who are the brightest, most promising scholars. Given the latitude to build work styles that accommodate their changing personal life needs, they will come.