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IN RESPONSE TO THE REMARKS BY LAWRENCE H. SUMMERS, PRESENTING EMPIRICAL DATA ON THE DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING STYLES BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES

ROBIN A. BOYLE* AND ANDREA HONIGSFELD**

Lawrence H. Summers' remarks at a conference on "Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce,"¹ raise provocative issues regarding reasons for the disparities of "women's representation in tenured positions in science and engineering at top universities and research institutions."² He postulated that one reason for this disparity was the "different availability of aptitude at the high end."³ One suspects that the word "aptitude" struck a raw nerve in the audience. After all, most academics in the audience would be familiar with the research of Carol Gilligan, and her well-known book, *In A Different Voice*,⁴ suggesting that women have different moral and psychological tendencies than men, and that one is not superior to the other. More significantly, our country did experience a second wave of the feminist movement, which should have brought some enlightenment.

If the listeners or readers thought they misunderstood, if perhaps they thought that the president of one of the most prestigious schools of higher education could not possibly have meant that women are not as capable as men ("aptitude"), his clarification must have dispelled their disbelief. Summers explained that the difference in aptitude was evident by a "difference in the standard deviation, and variability of a male and female population" in "human attributes" including

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¹ Lawrence H. Summers, *Remarks at NBER Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce*, January 14, 2005, available at <http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/nber.html> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005) [hereinafter Remarks].

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ CAROL GILLIGAN, *IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT* (1982).

"overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability."⁵ In fact, he shaded this difference with "relatively clear evidence."⁶ Although he did not refer to any studies by name, he spoke as if everyone had read the same material. We do not fault him for giving his opinions, but it makes open debate far more difficult if the speaker fails to reveal his sources.

At odds with his proposition, he condemned gender discrimination by stating that it "vigorously needs to be combated."⁷ But if the top post of the educational hierarchy of this country believes that women may lack the innate intelligence and ability to be in tenured faculty positions in science and engineering at top schools, and if his views are shared by others (which makes his remarks all the more disturbing), then it would follow that schools will choose to employ men over women because they believe that men fill the standard of "three and a half, four [difference in] the standard deviation"⁸ above the norm, as Summers described the high bar.

Summers claimed to have done a fair amount of reading,⁹ but he may have overlooked a study by Doctors Andrea Honigsfeld and Rita Dunn, which found that there were differences between high school males and females, throughout the world, in terms of their learning styles.¹⁰ Honigsfeld and Dunn also found that, whereas there were differences between the learning styles of boys and girls in five countries,¹¹ individuals within each group had unique learning styles as well. This gender study, and others like it,¹² indicate that female students process academic information differently from their male counterparts. It also indicates that sweeping generalizations should not be made about how students learn based upon gender because experts reveal that individual learning styles are as unique as individual fingerprints.

Honigsfeld and Dunn used the Dunn and Dunn Learning Styles Model, which is based upon research conducted upon more than 125 institutions of higher

⁵ Remarks, *supra* note 1.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ An audience member, in asking a question, commented, "a lot of people in the room are [experts], and they've written a lot of papers in here that address . . ." To which Summers responded confidently, "I've read a lot of them." *Id.*

¹⁰ Andrea Honigsfeld & Rita Dunn, *High School Male and Female Learning-Style Similarities and Differences in Diverse Nations*, 96 J. EDUC. RES. 195 (2003).

¹¹ See *id.* at 197-198 (describing the subjects of the study as involving students from five countries - Bermuda, Hungary, Sweden, New Zealand, and Brunei).

¹² See generally Rita Dunn, Ruth DePaula, Heide Hlawaty, Andrea Honigsfeld, Tatiana Ulubabova, *The Case for Individualizing Teaching Based on a Cross-National Study of Adolescents' Learning Styles*, in PROCEEDINGS OF THE 8TH ANNUAL ELSIN CONFERENCE 179-180 (The University of Hull, UK) (2003); Ruth DePaula, *Comparative Analysis of the Learning Styles of Brazilian Versus Other Adolescents from Diverse Nations by Age, Gender, and Academic Achievement* (2002) (unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, St. John's University) (on file with St. John's University library); Heide Hlawaty, *Comparative Analysis of the Learning Styles of German Versus other Adolescents from Diverse Nations by Age, Gender, and Academic Achievement Level* (2002) (unpublished doctoral dissertation, St. John's University) (on file with St. John's University library).

education.¹³ The term “learning style” refers to the way in which each individual begins to concentrate on, process, internalize, and remember new and difficult academic information¹⁴ or skills.

In the Honigsfeld and Dunn study of five nations, “significant gender differences emerged for 9 of the 22 learning-style variables.”¹⁵ The overall findings indicated that male students tended to be statistically more kinesthetic (learning through active involvement—such as role-playing, case studies, or apprenticeships) and peer-oriented (preferring to learn with peers as opposed to with an authority figure such as the teacher) than females.¹⁶ In contrast to males, the study’s findings were that internationally females consistently revealed statistically higher levels of self-motivation; persistence (staying on-task with a difficult academic project); responsibility/conformity (preferring to do things correctly rather than taking short cuts); a need for sociological variety; and parent, teacher, and/or authority motivation.¹⁷

The Honigsfeld and Dunn study has relevance to Summers’ remarks. Previous research demonstrates that when students are taught to their learning-style strengths, their academic achievement significantly increases.¹⁸ If, in fact, there are studies indicating that males perform better on achievement tests than females, which Summers apparently presumes, then the next step of inquiry should be whether the teaching methods currently utilized may be more responsive to the learning styles of males rather than female students. According to Summers, the tenured faculty in fields of science and engineering tend to be males. Therefore it is likely that the instructional approaches they use may reflect male cognition and style and be more appealing to the learning styles of male, rather than female, students. Thus, it may be neither aptitude nor IQ that is at issue here, but the difference between how the subjects of science and engineering are taught and how these subjects are learned by females and males.

¹³ See The Learning Styles Network, available at www.learningstyles.net (last visited May 8, 2005).

¹⁴ See RITA DUNN & KENNETH DUNN, TEACHING SECONDARY STUDENTS THROUGH THEIR INDIVIDUAL LEARNING STYLES 2 (1993).

¹⁵ Honigsfeld & Dunn, *supra* note 10, at 200.

¹⁶ See *id.*

¹⁷ See *id.* at 203. Depending upon the variable and the gender, in some instances subjects from some countries were more like subjects from another country.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 204 (citing to Rita Dunn et al., *Effects of Matching and Mismatching Minority Developmental College Students’ Hemispheric Preferences on Mathematics Scores*, 83 J. EDUC. RES. 283 (1990); Rita Dunn, Armin P. Thies, & Andrea Honigsfeld, *Synthesis of the Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model Research: Analysis from a Neuropsychological Perspective*, St. John’s University’s Center for the Study of Learning and Teaching Styles (2001)).

