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# For Your Information

## Comments on Female Math Ability Spark Reaction

In remarks made during an economics conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in January 2005, Harvard University President Lawrence Summers suggested that innate differences might account for the disparity in men's and women's achievement in mathematics and science. After his remarks elicited a torrent of protest, Summers posted an apology on the Harvard website.

Among those registering protest were leaders of several mathematics organizations, including the AMS. Below are excerpts from some of the statements by these leaders.

### **David Eisenbud, AMS president, and James Arthur, AMS president elect:**

The speculations made by Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard University, at a conference on January 14, 2005, about the causes of the current shortage of women in science were inappropriate. His high position at Harvard places on him a high burden of responsibility. His remarks may be damaging and counterproductive to a cause he and all educators should support. We who strive to make our subject areas attractive and accessible to all express our dismay at such remarks.

*January 21, 2005*

### **Martin Golubitsky, president, Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM):**

The widely reported speculations made by the president of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, about possible causes of the current shortage of women in science have fueled controversy and had some potentially unfortunate effects. One of the most serious is the possible discouragement of talented women with strong potential for excellence in science, engineering, and mathematics. SIAM's position is that it is essential to encourage women (as well as men) to pursue studies in science and mathematics. SIAM wishes to emphasize strongly the many outstanding accomplishments of women in mathematics and its applications.

*February 2, 2005*

### **Carolyn Gordon, president, Association for Women in Mathematics:**

Regarding Lawrence H. Summers's remarks on the underrepresentation of women in mathematics and science,

the real news is that despite cultural barriers, women are entering these fields in greater and greater numbers. About a third of all United States citizens who have received Ph.D.'s in mathematics recently are women. About half of all undergraduate mathematics degrees in the United States go to women. Yes, there is still a shortage of women on the mathematics and sciences faculties of many American universities, including Harvard. So universities should hire more of these excellent women and then treat them as if they value them. We call on Lawrence Summers, as well as the leaders of all educational institutions, to take positive action to encourage the influx of women and minorities into mathematics, science, and engineering. [This statement was endorsed by the AWM Executive Committee and appeared as a letter to the editor in the *New York Times* on January 28, 2005.]

### **International Council for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (ICIAM):**

Recent remarks of the President of Harvard University have led to media speculation that innate differences in the mathematical abilities of men and women make it less likely that women will succeed in science and mathematics. ICIAM does not accept this notion. ICIAM members are well aware that there are many barriers (whether financial, cultural, or practical) that face women who want to pursue mathematical or scientific careers at the highest levels. The unbroken career paths that are typical of successful male careers in mathematics take no account of the specific responsibilities of women related to childbearing and family. As an international organization representing the world's applied mathematicians, ICIAM is committed to removing the educational inequalities in mathematics that exist in many parts of the world and to improving the access to careers in the mathematical sciences for all men and women.

*February 1, 2005*

—Allyn Jackson