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☀ -1° | Hi 22° / Lo 8° | Forecast

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[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > [Essays](#)

Past week: [Fri](#) | [Sat](#) | [Sun](#) | [Mon](#) | [Tue](#) | [Wed](#) | [Thu](#)

## Note to Harvard president: Women can so do science

By Albert J. Simone

(January 28, 2005) — The national media recently reported on comments made by the Harvard University president on the paucity of women in engineering, computers, technology and science. For example, women comprise only 20 percent of the students studying engineering and computer science.

This situation is of special significance for two reasons:

- Are there social or professional barriers that deny access to women in these fields?
- The number of students (men and women) entering college to study engineering and computers has been declining in recent years. Given the fact that almost 60 percent of the students in higher education are women, one of the best ways to meet the shortage of Americans in technology areas, especially when the current cohort of technical professionals retires, is to draw from the ranks of women.

Harvard President Lawrence Summers suggested two hypotheses for the lack of women in technological fields. He did not conclude that his two explanations were the cause; rather, he suggested that they be researched.

His first hypothesis is that women do not enter these fields because to succeed in them, one has to work 80 or 90 hours per week and women are not willing or able to make that commitment. Second, he suggested that perhaps there is some biological or genetic attribute that makes women less intellectually suitable for those fields. My own experience would cause me to reject both of those hypotheses.

For example, I have taught literally hundreds of women in undergraduate, master's and doctoral level courses at seven universities in the field of mathematics, operations research, statistics, engineering and mathematical economics. In each of these courses, women were a small minority of the students in the classes. However, in every case, women, on average, tended to do better than the men and, in fact, many times women were at the top of the class.

I remember once at the University of Cincinnati, a company asked for the résumés of the top 10 students in the college so that they could select one for a prestigious fellowship. I received an outrageous phone call from the company accusing me of attempting to pursue some social, politically correct objective rather than giving them a quality group of people from which to select. Their complaint was that all 10 candidates I had submitted were women. My response was that the top 10 students in the college ranked by grade-point average were women.

There was a time when women were expected to major in nursing or education. It was said that they were not suited to studying law, medicine or business.

Today, law schools, business schools and medical schools have many women — often the majority — at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. We now know how wrong we were. I believe we are no less wrong in stereotyping the lack of women in technology fields on the basis of false and unsubstantiated hypotheses.

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Nonetheless, it is important to address the relatively low numbers of women in technology fields.

At the Rochester Institute of Technology, for the past 13 years, we have offered a program in the spring titled "Women in Math, Engineering, Science and Technology." Under this program, women who are juniors and seniors in high school are invited to attend a daylong program at RIT in which successful women from across the country in engineering, science and technology offer seminars describing why and how they entered their fields, what they do, what it takes for success, and how much they enjoy it.



We seek to make more women aware of opportunities in these fields and encourage them to enter them. We also offer special scholarships to women entering these fields, such as The Kate Gleason Scholars. The women who hold the Gleason Scholarships often graduate at the top of their class.

Furthermore, professors Elizabeth Lawley and Tona Henderson in the RIT Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences are utilizing a \$325,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to study factors affecting the recruiting and retention of women in computing, with a view toward developing strategies to increase recruiting and retention rates of women in computer fields.

In short, women can do technology. We need them to help us remain competitive in the global marketplace. We need to be sure that parents, teachers, counselors and the public do not create artificial barriers, particularly at early ages, that might discourage women from entering these fields.

Simone is president, Rochester Institute of Technology.

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