

## Summers calls for initiative on women

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By Marcella Bombardieri, Globe Staff | January 22, 2005

Harvard University's president, Lawrence H. Summers, yesterday asked the dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study to oversee a new initiative designed to quickly identify new ways to recruit and support women at Harvard.

In a sign of how much Summers' incendiary remarks about women have shaken the Harvard campus, the new undertaking is being put on a fast track -- an unusual step in the often-ponderous Ivory Tower. Summers said that task forces would be appointed next week, and that the university would begin implementing their recommendations by the end of the semester.

"The events of recent days and continuing concerns suggest that we as a university need to do much more," Summers said. The new initiative will "assure we have the most robust mechanisms we can to recruit and develop the careers of female scholars."

Summers asked Radcliffe Dean Drew Gilpin Faust to help him and Provost Steven E. Hyman establish the task forces to examine how the university hires and cultivates women faculty members and study disparities between men and women, especially in the sciences.

After an extraordinary week of public criticism, Summers sounded penitent in a short phone interview yesterday, repeating at least four times the phrase "I was wrong."

"I've seen the distress that people took from the reports" of his remarks "and I've realized that this was a case where the good academic value of challenging and provoking thought just went where it should not have gone," Summers said. "I was wrong in my comments."

Summers reiterated that he has learned a lot from the e-mails he's received and from conversations with female professors who told him about their career struggles.

Asked if he was disavowing the remarks he made at the Jan. 14 conference, or just the way they were misconstrued -- as he has previously said -- Summers answered: "I've certainly learned a great deal. I've certainly been reminded of what's most important, which is that we need more women in science and engineering in America and in the world."

Faust was appointed the first dean of the Radcliffe Institute in 2001, when Harvard and its sister college, Radcliffe, formally merged. Previously the director of the women's studies program at the University of Pennsylvania, she is a respected historian of culture and gender in the Civil War era.

After the merger, Radcliffe, which once granted joint degrees with Harvard to its women students, was recast as an institute that hosts fellows every year and sponsors research, with an emphasis on women, gender, and society.

Faust said she thinks Harvard can turn this controversy into something fruitful.

"People have been made much more aware of the issues and have had to look hard at the question of gender at Harvard and in academic life more widely," she said. "There's not just a sense of possibility but a sense of urgency that will mean that things happen fast. I want to make sure they happen not just fast but effectively."

Neither Faust nor Summers could provide details of the focus or composition of the task forces that will be announced next week, since virtually nothing has been decided. Yesterday's decision to launch the initiative appears to be the result of the meeting that Summers set up Thursday night with Harvard's official standing committee on women, after its members sent him an angry note.

The committee wrote that his comments at the National Bureau of Economic Research "serve to reinforce an institutional culture at Harvard that erects numerous barriers to improving the representation of women on the faculty, and to impede our current efforts to recruit top women scholars."

Faust said the new initiative will "look as broadly as we can at these issues." She said that would include examining the hiring and promotion of women, the climate for students and young women on campus, and systems of mentoring,

as well as a scholarly look at why more women don't begin or persist in academic careers, particularly in the sciences and engineering.

Harvard released a study in December that concluded that there was "no statistically significant difference" between men and women on the faculty in measures such as pay and promotion. But the Standing Committee on Women slammed the methodology as "crippling to the validity of the report."

Faust said yesterday that Harvard would now probably "look not simply at counting the numbers but also at some of the less tangible, [less] quantifiable issues" that relate to women's choices and experiences. She referred to a 2003 Duke University study that used ethnographers as well as other researchers to document a campus climate where women felt pressure to be "effortlessly perfect."

Radcliffe is already sponsoring a study by two Harvard economists to examine the career paths for women in society in general, not just academia.

Reaction was muted on campus yesterday since Summers' new move, which he mentioned in an interview, has not been officially announced.

"I was certainly hoping that Larry would come up with some innovative ideas," Harvard physicist Howard Georgi said when he was told of the undertaking. Georgi collected over 100 signatures to add to the letter the standing committee sent Summers. "He's a talented, bright guy, and I'm glad we've got him engaged in the problem."

Summers has been under pressure to repair the damage done when he said at the academic conference that innate differences between men and women may help explain why fewer women succeed at the top levels of science and math careers.

Summers has declined to release the tape of his remarks, saying the meeting was private.

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