Female faculty offer opinions on Harvard president’s statements

By Jennifer Lee
Focus Editor

The debate still lingers, even though it’s been more than two months since Harvard president Larry Summers made his controversial remarks on women in science and engineering at a January National Bureau of Economic Research conference. Just two weeks ago, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard passed a “no confidence” vote citing long-standing dissatisfaction with his management style and, to a lesser extent, his conference remarks. So what do the women at Tech think about the controversy? We spoke to several female faculty to see what they thought were the real issues behind Summers’ statements.

“The question is, being provocative about what...it was very unclear what [Summers] was trying to do.”

Nancy Nersessian, Professor, CoC

Felt that his statements ignored decades of research on the topic.

“The question is, being provocative about what...it was very unclear exactly what he was trying to do.” Nersessian said. “It was a combination of ignorance of the empirical research that has been done and kind of this sense of arrogance that he could from the top of his head address a group of women researchers.”

Many also felt that as president of Harvard, Summers should have been much more aware of his position and his choice of words.

“I’m just surprised that someone in his position would make such a comment,” said Enid Steinbart, director of Advancement and Assessment in the School of Mathematics. “Where we are is not where we want to be, and it’s not inevitable that we continually going to be so underrepresented in the math and sciences.”

Mary Frank Fox, an NSF Ad-

Influence Professor in the School of Public Policy and co-director for the Center for the Study of Women, Science and Technology, has done research on the subject of women in science and academia for over 30 years.

“I was struck by the issue being raised in such a way as to suggest that what we need is more research on this topic of different abilities,” she said. In her research, Fox has

by: Lulu is sort of a writer’s cooperative,” Taylor said. “It’s a place where you can print out each other’s books and critique them. There are writers, so they check out each other’s books and critique them. As an author who use Lulu do not have an official editor to look over their work, this is a valuable opportunity.

Recent grad Matthew Taylor used the website Lulu.com to self-publish Tendrali, a collection of 50 poems he has written over the past eight years. He says it’s rewarding to see his work in a tangible form. B

Focus Editor

Matthew Taylor graduated in December 2004 in Materials Science and Engineering. Though he has applied in a couple of graduate schools, he’s taking a little break.

“When I actually had the book in my hands after it got printed, it was probably one of the most elevating experiences in my entire life.”

Matthew Taylor

MSE alum and author

According to Taylor, he’s a bicultural—his poetry is frequently characterized by an interesting use of font, color, size and justification.

“There are two different modes I write in: one is by computer and one is by hand...and whenever I’m writing by computer, I can type as fast as I could.

“...and people he passes on the street. There are other perks with online publishing, too. Lulu prints on demand, and it does not cost the writers a thing, which makes publishing financially feasible. The tradeoff is that the cover price of one copy is high.

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Taylor’s finished product is a dream come true. “When I actually had the book in my hands after it got printed, it was probably one of the most elevating experiences in my entire life,” he said. “Up until this point, it had been essentially a digital abstraction on my computer screen, a bunch of ideas—certainly written down, recorded, carefully arranged, but in the end it was still that digital media. When I finally had it in my hands, it was like it was real.”

The finished product did bring one fear to light, however. Friends and family would be reading it, probably for the first time, and the poetry is personal. “The scariest part [is] the idea that people will analyze what you’ve written and try to draw conclusions out of that, about who you are and what you do,” Taylor said. “In reality, I am who I am, and I do what I do.”

And Taylor does much more than writing poetry. He is currently working on a novel, tentatively called University, which he plans to finish in a year. He’s also started a children’s book in the style of Chris van Allsburg. Still, “I didn’t do this overnight. I’ve got eight years of stuff. I’ve probably been writing for 10 or 11. In some ways [Trendrali] was a test run for [my] novel, to see if it was a viable medium,” he said. “I’m fairly pleased with how the book came out.”

Taylor also recently started a media company called Recktified Media—“reck” as in Rambling Reck. “Right now its sole purpose is the sale and promotion of my book,” he hopes to open it to other artists to market their products. “It’s a media corporation, so it’s not just print media, it’s also promotion of bands, making T-shirts, audio production and distribution,” Taylor said.

Marketing his own book will be good practice. During April, which is National Poetry Month, Taylor plans to set up a card table with copies of his book at events and readings.

So poet, novelist, musician (did we mention he’s in a band?), tutor, businessman or engineer? Who knows? “I’d be pretty happy as an engineer, honestly, especially considering I spent five years preparing for that,” Taylor said. “As it is, I think I could be the happiest writing. You know, Mark Twain said it best: ‘I became a writer and I haven’t worked another day in my entire life.’”

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Caption Contest
(from 3/11)

“After being told that another member of the team was already number 12, Justin Tayback decides to become number 21.”

—Benjamin Deneweth, third-year Economics major

Look for another edition of the caption contest in a future issue of the paper.

Technique is looking for new interactive weekly features like Tech Up Close and Caption Contest. If you have suggestions, please email focus@technique.gatech.edu.

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Trendrali
from page 9

“It’s about the irony that God has carefully woven into our universe—exploring that idea.”

Matthew Taylor
MSE grad and author

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For more information about Trendrali and Recktified Media, visit www.recktified.com. To purchase Trendrali, visit www.lulu.com/mlt.
Projects, tests or papers? Assessing assessments

While a certain type may be more common in a given major, that doesn’t mean it’s preferred

By Narendhra Seshadri
Contributing Writer

Ask a frustrated student what assignment he or she is so worried about, and it’s easy to guess what the answer will be based on his or her major. For engineering students, it’s a free-response test or homework set. For Ivan Allen students, it will probably be an essay or paper. Management majors always seem to be working on group assignments and putting together PowerPoint presentations.

Why is it that some classes and majors seem entrenched in their types of assessments? Most students are used to one type or another, but given the chance to think about it, what would they really prefer—a test, a project or something else?

Jonathan Dechko, a fifth-year Management major, prefers projects to tests simply because “they [provide] a hands-on approach to the material and give applied learning instead of random memorization of facts.” But some engineering majors prefer projects as well. “[Projects are] different ways to express one’s abilities,” said Felix Boachie, a third-year Biomedical Engineering major. With tests, he said, “[even if] you know all the material, you could still end up failing.”

Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE) graduate student Ari Zachas agreed. “[I] prefer projects mainly because projects allow more thought into the problems” as compared to tests, he said.

Nafeez Taher, also an ECE graduate student, said, “For graduate courses, almost all major classes have some projects according to my experience. I feel like tests account for a much higher percentage of the grade than they should be. I learn much more by doing a project than by learning for a test.”

Projects were also beneficial for a sometimes-overlooked part of the student population. Courtney Wright, a graduate student in Operations Research, said she enjoys the “broad, low-stress, high-collaboration” involvement in projects. Also, as a distance-learning student, “they were a great way to put me in touch with other students in the class.”

Some students said projects had another benefit over tests: first-year Biology major Chutrcukran Rajendra said that projects alleviate the stress of Tech’s rigorous curriculum since they are “easier to make an A on” compared to tests, even if they involve more team meetings.

Not all students are fond of projects, especially group projects. Many complain that there are always one or two slackers that rarely show up for meetings, and turn in below-average work affecting the entire group’s grade.

Amin Rida, a fourth-year Electrical Engineering major, prefers tests because “you learn a lot more while studying for a test.” He feels that group projects don’t work out well because the work always piles up on a few people. In his Computer Communications class, for example, Rida said the group projects are “the most difficult in the class and yet sometimes hard to understand the material. Tests force you to go through your notes and to learn from class.”

Operations Research graduate student Lindy Sellars said she felt a combination of tests and projects is usually a good balance. “A mix of tests and a term project drives home the application of the theories and skills learned in the class,” Sellars said. Her classes reflect that philosophy: “Twenty-five percent of the classes give only tests and no projects, 75 percent of the classes give both,” she said. Sellars, who is currently framing a business plan for her management course, said, “We usually have two major tests and an involved project at the graduate level.”

However, the stereotypes seem to hold true when it comes to engineering versus liberal arts.

Rida said he feels writing assignments don’t “work out well for ECE courses” because they are more technical. On the other hand, freshman Public Policy major Ann Schneider said, “Tests are just cramming down the material, while projects are better especially for students who do not work well under pressure.”

She expressed a dislike for multiple choice tests, preferring assignments and group projects. “[Multiple choice tests] don’t necessarily help you in the long run, because in the workplace you will be writing plans and working on projects—not taking tests.”

“I feel like tests still count for a much higher percentage of the grade than they should be. I learn much more by doing a project.”

Nafeez Taher
ECE graduate student

“Tests work better... group projects are a bit tedious because of logistics.”

Sheila Lukesh
ISyE graduate student
Women from page 9

found that women in the science and engineering disciplines in fact had higher IQs, grades and other performance indicators that would refute the “intrinsic aptitude” claim. “They were able to overcome social barriers to stay in [these fields]... that’s something that has been demonstrated again and again,” she said.

Society vs. genetics

All the faculty members interviewed also emphasized their belief that social and environmental factors were much more important to a woman’s success in science and engineering than aptitude. “[There is] compelling evidence of the power of small differences in how we treat boys and girls, men and women,” said Mahera Philobos, an academic professional in the School of Civil Engineering and the director of Women in Engineering. “Those differences, I would argue, provide a better hypothesis than innate sex differences to explain the gap between the numbers of men and women in academic jobs in the sciences.”

For Nesterick, who earned undergraduate degrees in physics and philosophy and whose background is in cognitive science, social factors played a role in her own advancement as well. “I never found being a woman an impediment to studying science,” she said. “But I also realized...why am I not a theoretical physicist: because even though I did well, none of my professors really ever encouraged me to go to graduate school in physics.”

For Steinbart, the idea of a “critical mass” that makes an environment more conducive to women was a factor when she was applying to graduate school. “I didn’t necessarily want to go where I would be one of two or three female grad students in the program...there’s kind of a magic number: you don’t have to be in the majority, but once you get up to a sizable minority, that just feels more comfortable.”

Women in academia

Another issue brought up by Summers was that faculty was the issue of women not wanting to work in a “high-powered, intense workplace.” That’s extremely misleading,” Philobos said. “First of all, no one [set] this as a condition for advancement. If this is true, then that concept should be changing, not the other way around.”

Steinbart agreed, and said that when it comes to academia, “there are certain things that the workplace can do,” such as flexible hours and being able to take time off from the tenure clock without penalty for raising a child.

Steinbart also said in the recruitment process, diversifying the faculty was not an issue of lowering standards. “It’s not, ‘Because we don’t lower standards, that’s why we don’t have any women,’” she said.

More statistics

Instead of focusing on the low number of women in science and engineering, some faculty pointed out the need to look at other statistics. “I don’t think it’s an issue of just numbers of women in science, it’s what happens to you when you get your degree,” Fox said. “I think that we now have made the point of time...we have pretty significant groups of women of some of the scientific fields such as the life sciences...and even chemistry.”

This may be due to an attraction to “new sciences,” Newstetter said, pointing out that during the early days of computer science and information technology, the percentage of women in computing was much higher than today. This is clearly the case with biomedical engineering, which, according to Newstetter, is one of the few engineering majors at Tech that is 50 percent women.

The school’s first Ph.D class, in fact, was all female. Interestingly, Newstetter noted, though a number of students from that class are close to finishing their Ph.Ds, “Of those that I have talked with, none of them are planning to go into academia,” Newstetter said.

Teach from page 9

Students coming to the library to work or study passed by the exhibits, occasionally stopping to talk with the presenters or find out more about what the posters and projects were about. “We’re in the library; they have to see what they’re doing whether they want to or not,” Llewellyn laughed.

Llewellyn said that the presenters may have gotten more out of the event than the students, though “I hope that we reached some students,” she said. Their location in the library also helped draw students who may not have known about Teaching Day to the presenters. “If they saw professors they knew, they stopped and [were like], ‘oh, what are you doing here?’” she said.

Teaching fellows such as Michael Elliott, associate professor of City and Regional Planning and Public Policy, presented a case study in environmental policy issues. Jerry Ulrich, associate professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities, played CDs of the chorus singing, “It was nice to see music since it’s not always represented as part of Tech,” Llewellyn said.

STEP fellows presented posters and multimedia displays: for example, a STEP fellow from Marietta had a presentation on a laser lab. There were a few fun presentations as well. Matthew Baker, an assistant professor in the School of Mathemat- ics, did magic tricks.

“The faculty projects were great this year...they generated a lot of good interest,” Llewellyn said. President Clough also stopped by the event to talk to presenters and students. “The one really nice thing is President Clough always makes the time to come,” Llewellyn said.

“I think that shows a commitment from the top of how important teach- ing is on this campus,” something that students don’t always think about, she said. “[Clough] spent a good half hour walking around and talking to people at their post- ers, really finding out what people were doing, and I think that really had an impact on people doing the presenting and the people walking through.”

President Clough took half an hour to talk to presenters during Teaching Day, CETL Director Donna Llewellyn applauded Clough’s attendance each year as evidence of his commitment to teaching.