Careers Based on Talents, Tastes

THE FEB. 12 op-ed article, “Women and science: the real issue,” by three university presidents criticizes Lawrence Summers’s suggestion that innate sex differences might contribute to the dearth of women in science. Such assertions, they say, “may reinforce negative stereotypes and biases.”

Significantly, the presidents do not claim that Summers was incorrect. In fact, average sex differences in temperament and cognitive abilities do seem to influence occupational distributions, from book editing to auto mechanics to nursing to engineering. It is not enough to label scientific fields as “historically unfriendly” to women. The same could be said about law and medicine, but sex ratios in law schools and medical schools are now close to parity.

Even in science, women are not uniformly “under represented.” In 2002, women’s share of doctorates was 16 percent in physics, 18 percent in engineering, 29 percent in mathematics, 34 percent in chemistry, 45 percent in biology, and 67 percent in psychology. Although one might view these figures simply as measures of friendliness to women, more likely they reflect the fields’ differing social dimensions and mathematical demands. Occupational distributions may be more a product of individuals’ choices based upon their talents and tastes than they are of female victimization.

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