



Academic Inquisitors

By Christina Hoff Sommers

Are women victims of a widespread bias in science and engineering, as a 2006 report of the National Academy of Sciences concluded? Or are there alternative explanations for the paucity of women in various quantitative fields? What, if anything, is to be done to encourage more women engineers and scientists? On October 1, AEI resident scholar Christina Hoff Sommers hosted a conference entitled “Women and Science,” which featured papers from several scholars and brought together thinkers from all sides of the debate. Sommers reported the findings of the conference in the following article, which appeared in the Wall Street Journal on October 16, 2007.

As if losing the presidency of Harvard for hinting that there might be a biological explanation for the preponderance of men in academic science was not enough, Lawrence Summers now appears to be *persona non grata* elsewhere, too.

A few weeks ago the University of California–Davis rescinded an invitation for him to speak. More than 150 faculty members signed a petition protesting his appearance, saying Summers “has come to symbolize gender and racial prejudice in academia.” Davis ecology professor Maureen Stanton was “appalled and stunned that someone like Summers would be invited to speak.”

Stanton and her allies want pariah status for anyone who dares to suggest a biological basis for difference. Yet the scientific literature on why men and women enter different fields is legitimate, robust, complex, and fascinating. What is appalling is that leading academic institutions would try to shut down the discussion and get away with it. Almost.

Last week, AEI brought together top researchers on sex differences, ranging from the strongly feminist Brandeis women’s studies scholar Rosalind

Barnett to AEI scholar and coauthor of *The Bell Curve* Charles Murray. The discussions were heated, but civil. No one got mad, fled the room weeping, or nearly fainted.

Barnett opened by reminding the conference of the history of prejudice against women in the sciences. Though significant gains have been made, she pointed out that there are still “invisible walls” that hold women back. Another speaker, Richard Haier, professor of psychology at the University of California–Irvine, acknowledged the long history of prejudice, then presented slides that must give pause to even the most fervent biology denier.

Using the latest and most advanced MRI brain imaging technology, he demonstrated that male and female brains have strikingly distinct architectures and process information differently. Haier reminded us that “there is so much we do not know and so much yet to discover about brain biology and sex differences, and perhaps even career choices.”

Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor at Cambridge University and one of the world’s leading experts on autism, had an intriguing hypothesis. Autism is far more common in males than females. Those afflicted with the disorder, including those with normal or high IQ, tend to be socially

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disconnected and clueless about the emotional states of others. They often exhibit an obsessive fixation on objects and machines.

Sound like anyone you know?

Systematizers and Empathizers

Baron-Cohen suggested that autism may be the far end of the male norm—the “extreme male brain,” all systematizing and no empathizing. He believes that men are, on average, wired to be better systematizers and women to be better empathizers. He presented a wide range of correlations between the level of fetal testosterone and behaviors in both girls and boys from infancy into grade school to back up his belief.

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Harvard cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Spelke, another speaker, noted that Baron-Cohen’s theory is not settled science. She is right, of course.

Yet the current configuration of the workplace fits Baron-Cohen’s theory: women dominate in empathy-centered fields such as early childhood education, social work, and psychology, while men are overrepresented in

the “systematizing” vocations such as car repair, oil drilling, and electrical engineering.

The Time for Open Inquiry Is Now

Others debated the pros and cons of research on “unconscious bias” and the effects of stereotypes on test takers. So it went. No one present could doubt the importance of the debate or the significance of the evidence from both sides. The audience was captivated as experts played with the politically incorrect notion that male and female brains may be markedly different.

Unfortunately, the deniers of differences between the sexes are on the march with powerful allies. In the fall of 2006, the National Academy of Sciences released a recklessly one-sided study, now widely referred to as authoritative, entitled *Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering*. According to the report, differences in cognition between the sexes have no bearing on the dearth of women in academic math, physics, and engineering. It is all due to bias. Case closed. The report calls on Congress to hold hearings on gender bias in the sciences and on federal agencies to “move immediately” to apply anti-discrimination laws such as Title IX to academic science (but not English) departments.

“The time for action is now.”

No, it is not. Now is the time for scholars in our universities and in the National Academy of Sciences to defend and support principles of free and objective inquiry. The chronically appalled must not have the last word.