
Regional

Women, minorities face prejudice in academia

In January 2005, Larry Summers, then president of Harvard University, gave a presentation at the Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce sponsored by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Although he read out of notes and not from a prepared statement, according to some of the people attending his presentation he mentioned that one hypothesis that could explain the higher proportion of males in science and engineering fields was the “intrinsic aptitude” difference between genders.

Although some claim that Summers’ comments were taken out of context, many observers think that such statements cost him his job at Harvard the following year, and ultimately the job of treasury secretary in the Obama administration. But regardless of the accuracy of what Summers meant, his comments created a great deal of controversy. So let’s look at the facts.

It is well known that women are underrepresented in many academic disciplines, particularly in areas such as physics, computer science and engineering. Only 20 percent of Ph.D.s in engineering are women despite the fact that women represent nearly 60 percent of all doctoral students. Summers’ comments on the lack of women’s success in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) came on the heels of a study released the previous year that reported that out of the 32 tenure offers made by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, only four went to women.

The basic question still remains. Why this disparity? In the January issue of the prestigious journal “Science,”

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

a group of researchers published a paper that had as its first author Sarah-Jane Leslie of Princeton University on the gender imbalance in STEM fields. According to Leslie, the imbalance is due to the fact that the practitioners in certain fields “...believe that raw, innate talent is the main requirement for success.” Women, she wrote, are stereotyped as not possessing such talent. She added that this hypothesis also extends to African Americans’ underrepresentation in STEM disciplines.

The authors based their conclusions on a nationwide survey of more than 1,800 faculty members, postdoctoral and graduate students. Essentially these researchers did not find any statistically significant difference in success between genders based on the number of hours worked, or any evidence that men were more “brilliant” than women in any field.

It all comes down to stereotypes that make women and African Americans seem less suited for certain disciplines than their male and white counterparts.

“Academics who wish to diversify their fields might want to downplay talk of innate intellectual giftedness and instead highlight the importance of sustained effort for top-level success in their field,” the study’s authors concluded. “We expect that such easily implementable changes would enhance the diversity of many academic

fields.”

This is a very interesting recommendation given that academia has been consistently accused of overplaying political correctness when it comes to talk of diversity and equality. Yet, this study shows that despite such talk stereotypes and biases still play a major role in the hiring of women and African Americans in STEM fields.

Although not mentioned in the study, there is also a major issue of pay inequality. It is hard to understand why faculty members in the same institutions of higher education, who essentially do the same work when it comes to teaching, scholarship and service, and who have to pass the same high bar in order to attain tenure, are being paid differently based upon their gender.

A recent study by the American Association of University Professors surveyed the salaries of faculty members in 1,156 postsecondary institutions. Almost all of them reported paying females less than males by about a margin of 10 percent. This disparity is particularly evident for the upper echelon of academia – full professors. And among the ranks of full professor, only 23 percent are women.

As these data clearly show, there is no question that institutions of higher education need to be more proactive in promoting both opportunities and equity for both women and minorities in their ranks. To be successful, those undertakings must be initiated by the leadership of those institutions.

A 2012 report published by the American Council on Education not only showed that the percentage of

college presidents who are women or minorities was well below the percentage of those groups in the general population, but also that those numbers are decreasing (even in minority serving institutions) despite the fact that there is no question that there are more and more females and members of ethnic groups who are prepared to take positions of leadership.

When those statistics were presented at a conference that I attended, an African-American woman colleague of mine who was a provost and wished to become a college president said to me with evident dismay, “I am doomed.”

Since the ultimate decision for hiring those leaders rests with the governing boards of those institutions, one wonders if they are aware or even care about all these inequalities in higher education.

I recently did an informal survey of ads for presidents/chancellors at American colleges and universities published in the last two years in “The Chronicle of Higher Education,” the trade publication for academics. I found that about 10 percent of those ads did not even mention the word “diversity” as part of their values in their prospectus. And, unfortunately, one has to wonder how many of those that mentioned the desire for diversity really meant it.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net> © All rights reserved.