

LARRY SUMMERS
CHARLES W. ELIOT UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

FORMER SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY
PRESIDENT EMERITUS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

INTERVIEW BY DANIEL DEVISE
THE WASHINGTON POST

SPONSORED BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI
2011 ATHENA CONFERENCE, November 4, 2011 – ANNE NEAL, PRESIDENT

START

DeVise: Dr. Summers, thank you for coming. I don't think I've ever done a public interview before. Perhaps you have! I hope that you all will ask him questions and not me at the end because his opinions are way more interesting and more valuable than mine. The first thing that I noticed when I was reading his bio I read, actually on Wikipedia, was that Henry Kissinger once said that this guy should be "given a White House post in which he is charged with shooting down or fixing bad ideas." So, in the context of higher education, what are a few bad ideas and how would you fix them?

Summers: I'm not entirely certain where to start. Look, I think higher education is one of America's huge strengths. And anything you say criticizing American higher education, there's plenty to say, needs to recognize that American higher education excels relative to the rest of the world more than virtually anything else America excels relative to the rest of the world and that we are an extraordinary magnet for talent of all kinds to come to our universities. While they may seem remarkably dysfunctional in many, many ways, they somehow do meet a test of attractiveness. And I think that's hugely important.

Some of the things that aggravated me and have aggravated me during my time in higher education would be these: An excessively relativist approach to truth. I once was present at a commencement speech at another university and the president of the university spoke about 'here at this great university we sift data, we argue, we challenge, we consider every topic, we weigh and balance every perspective and out of that comes' – and I knew how I would finish that sentence – 'comes a closer approximation to the truth we will never fully find.' This president continued 'out of that comes a greater and deeper respect for each other's opinion.' And those are profoundly different perspectives.

Whether two plus two equals four or five is not really matter of debate. Whether F equals MA or equals something else should not properly be a matter of debate. And whether it is the high relativism of the right that talks about evolutionary science and creation science as two alternative perspectives, or the perspective that holds that there's a particularly feminist view of physics that contributes to the understanding of physics. You are talking about deeply problematic notions and they are quite pervasive in the academy.

Second, it is the essence of the difference between market economies and socialist economies that in socialist economies, you bribe your butcher to get a cut of meat, and fundamentally customers try to make themselves attractive to producers and providers. And producers and providers have the leverage. Just walk outside and see all the advertisements, see all the offers. Think about it in capitalism. Do purchasing agents get bribed or do salesmen get bribed? You know who gets bribed, it's purchasing agents. The power is all on the side of the customer, not on the provider.

And yet so much in all of education is it's a system that's run for the convenience of the providers, rather than run for the convenience of the consumers. There is a classic economic analysis that goes back many, many years and it's referred to in economics because workers' co-ops were a very popular form of organization under Tito as the analysis of the Yugoslav firm. What it basically says is that if you have a firm that's run by the workers, it will stay too small and be too comfortable for the existing workers because if you let more workers in, that dilutes all the existing benefits. That's why it's usually thought they don't.

Adam Smith said this actually: Schools and universities that are run for the convenience of the masters rarely are mutually efficient and effective organizations. I think there needs to be much more attention directed to what the ultimate objectives of higher education institutions are and the operation of faculty governance can in many respects be problematic.

Third, the end of mandatory retirement was a disaster in higher education. The median age of a tenured faculty at Harvard is now 58. Now think about any leading business. Think about the set of 200 senior people in it. Can you think of any leading business where the median age of the top 200 people would be 58 or 59? Now to be sure, Harvard is in a different activity than most businesses. How does Harvard's activity differ? Well, an absolutely core and fundamental thing that Harvard does is relate to 19-year-olds and relate to students. That would probably not be a reason why you should have an older group than most do. The other absolutely crucial mission that a leading university has is creative ideas, disruptive innovations and challenges to conventional wisdom. That would probably not be a reason why you'd want to have an older group rather than a younger group.

The combination of tenure, and mandatory retirement and faculty governance is deeply toxic. It is not only because people stay too long, it is also because people who stay have control rights. It's not just that there's a question whether the slot for a developmental biologist is in most cases going to be best occupied by a 74-year-old; it is also a question of whether the best person to play a central role in deciding who the new developmental biologist for the next 30 years is going to be is a 74-year-old. Yet in the way that our universities are structured, those two functions are dovetailed. Now I do not want to be misunderstood. There are extraordinary, brilliant and able scholars working in their 70s, and in a few rare cases in their 80s. There is not any compelling case for age discrimination. But when there's mandatory retirement, there's a possibility of rehiring. When there's no mandatory retirement, there's no possibility of doing something about tenure.

I could go on but I'll start with these three: Pervasive relativism, excessive attentiveness to the convenience of the providers of service and the excessive aging driven by the lack of mandatory

retirements of leading faculty. Let me just introduce a caveat which I will not keep repeating: American higher education is an extraordinary far-flung thing. My personal experiences have been with a small but disproportionately influential segment of higher education, the leading private research university. So the perspective I'm going to bring in answering these questions is really a perspective on that group, which I think is disproportionately important to its numbers because of the ways in which it sets the tone.

But my answers should be understood as coming from somebody who brings that perspective. I'm not bringing that perspective because I think that segment is the most important or the most flawed or the most to be admired and studied, but I'm bringing that perspective because it's probably best to talk about what I know about and have experienced than to talk about what I don't know much about.

DeVise: I threw together a couple of thoughts that just sort of came in my head. You were talking about tenure and as best I understand it, the sort of machinery of tenure and the machinery of career advancement – and I think you had tenure at age 28 or some ridiculously young age – rewards professors not so much for teaching courses well, grading papers thoroughly or assigning a lot of work and grading it or interacting with students, but rather for sort of this routine of writing and publishing scholarship at a place like Harvard certainly or Johns Hopkins or UVA and the professors who get somewhere in life are the ones who amass these – I mean, my resume is one page long – these people who amass a 40-50 page resume and endless publications. Where do they find the time to write all these things?

Well, a lot of them are not particularly involved in teaching courses. Somebody at a conference cited some statistic that, at that moment in time, some huge percentage of the history faculty at Harvard were not actually teaching any courses at all that semester. A whole bunch of them were just idle – not idle – doing research writing scholarly papers. There was a Professor Vedder at the University of Ohio making essentially the same point about the University of Texas that the least busy 20% of the faculty there teaches 2% of the courses. So if that's the way you get ahead as a member of the faculty, what can a place like Harvard or a research university do to kind of incentivize undergraduate teaching, teaching freshman stuff and getting them to work hard and really interact with students?

Summers: I have the scars to show for having worked very hard to bring professors back into the classroom while I was president of Harvard, to having done a fair amount of teaching while I was president of Harvard, of continuing to teach undergraduates as I have returned to Harvard. During my time as president, we went from having freshman seminars for 20% of the students to freshman seminars being universally available for all students. We set off what was an attempt at significant curriculum reform. We substantially increased the emphasis on teaching in the evaluation of professors both in terms of tenure and in terms of compensation. I think we brought about some – I don't want to say an enormous amount – some change in culture. So I'm on your side.

On the other hand, let's take some extreme cases, not because the comparison is right but because they make the point. Suppose you had Niels Bohr on your faculty. Niels Bohr was a brilliant man. He was not a hugely articulate man but he was a brilliant man. Should Niels Bohr have been spending a lot of his time teaching freshman physics? Was Niels Bohr likely to be very good at meeting with kids who were having trouble understanding the difference between regular momentum and angular momentum? Probably not a great use of Niels Bohr's time. Most of our faculty isn't Niels Bohr to be sure, but it is worth remembering that John Rawls' book or, just to be politically neutral, Robert Nozick's book has been changing the lives of tens of thousands of students for decades. Probably at the margin creating an environment where they could write those books was very important relative to their having done an extra seminar.

So I think it is probably appropriate that America have some variety of universities and that one kind of university that America have be the research university where you try to bring the best minds together. You ask them to do a certain amount of teaching but their highest purpose is to advance human knowledge in a fundamental way. I think I can claim, probably not more than the members of this group but more than most of the people in the milieu in which I operate, I believe a lot in metrics, evaluation, data, testing what we were doing and all that kind of stuff. It turns out the teaching ability at the age of 37 is not all that predictive of teaching ability at the age of 54. Research ability at the age of 37 is actually a good deal more predictive of intellectual distinction at the age of 57. So you could put a lot more emphasis on teaching, but if you put a lot more emphasis on teaching, you wouldn't necessarily get people who are actually going to be great teachers through their whole lifetime.

Look, it's not obvious what the bias here is. I have wondered, and this is from the perspective of an economist, I've wondered why there aren't any universities who say 'we're going to offer people a different contract. We're going to pay professors 50% more and we're going to ask them to teach significantly more.' In some sense, if there's really a huge problem that universities are making a huge mistake in letting their faculty not teach – if Harvard tried to increase its teaching loads in a major way and didn't change anything else, what would happen is the faculty would go to Yale or Princeton. It's not a tenable option for a single university.

People who believe in markets and competition should hesitate before concluding that everybody should collude on this. What the theory would tell you is if this is really a bad way of producing, that there ought to be a way to start a great university by putting dominant emphasis on teaching and paying in the way that you need to. I've wondered why that experiment hasn't been done more. I suspect the answer is that over time teaching ability and research ability and intellectual engagement are more correlated than people think. I suspect that to some degree it's better to have some kinds of specialization where some people are actually better as researchers than they are as teachers.

I remember an experience many, many years ago at Harvard – this was long before I was president – where a very, very distinguished member of the faculty at Harvard in economics – I won't name him but trust me, he's in the upper part of the distribution of Nobel prize winners – decided one year that in response to listening to some dean say something like what you're saying, decided that he was going to teach Introductory Economics. He made a pretty good effort at teaching Introductory Economics. It was him and there were two assistant professors and there

were 23 graduate students who taught sections of Introductory Economics. That's 26 sections. Of the 26 sections, his was 16th best as regarded by the students. Probably that was just not a sensible thing to have happen in the world. I think one needs to think hard – and as you can tell from the fact that I'm here and some of the kinds of things I'm saying, that I've got a lot of sympathy with many of the things that ACTA [American Council of Trustees and Alumni] has believed and advocated over time. But I think on this get-all-the-professors-back-in-the-classroom, it's a complicated subject. There's another whole question which is okay, there's Niels Bohr and he's probably pretty special and there's the average faculty member at Harvard and they're no Niels Bohr but maybe they're kind of special too. But at institution #88 in the United States, maybe they'd actually be spending less time writing their paper for the journal of something-something that probably not that many people are going to read and spending more time teaching. That's an argument that I can sort of relate to. I've always been very reluctant to make it because it always seems very snobby coming from somebody at one of the top research universities to say research is fine for us but you all shouldn't do it. But that is an additional kind of perspective on the issue.

DeVise: As a follow-up, do you think generally that university leaders do a good job figuring out who is really good at research and really freeing them to do research and figuring who is awfully good at teaching and let them do that and at figuring out who is doing an awful lot of one but really ought not to be because they're not so good at it?

Summers: I'm sure people could do better. The problem is it's a little more correlated than you suppose. Let me take a related issue that has actually been substantially studied at Harvard and a number of other places. There are a set of very legitimate issues they press particularly in business schools but they're around in the economics department, they're around in a variety of places by outside activities by faculty and how much outside activity and how much outside commercial activity should faculty engage in.

Here's the problem: It is virtually always the case that if you make a list of which professors are pulling more than their weight as measured by the number of students in their classes, number of graduate students advised, number of interactions had with colleagues, benefits provided to the university, and who is pushing the edge of the university's outside activities rules the hardest? They're almost always the same. So then you say to yourself okay, we could crack down. So there's Professor X and there's Professor Y and Professor X teaches four classes with 162 students and has 9 graduate students and also is on 3 corporate boards. Professor Y teaches four classes with 21 students and has 1 graduate student and he's on no corporate boards. Do you really want to respond to that situation by saying that it's some kind of outrage that Professor X is on 3 corporate boards? Maybe you do because maybe everybody should do what they're able to and contribute to the university. But it is a complicated subject. That said, if universities provided more rewards for good teaching, created a better incentive system, better incentive systems around teaching, it would be a good thing.

Now look, you gotta understand that if you think it's simple in any one of these things, you're probably wrong. I work very hard at it with teaching awards, special things for people who are good teachers, rewards, incentives and I set an example myself when I was president. I was on this program. How do you measure who your very valuable teachers are? There's a strong

tendency to use the student evaluations. Here's the fact: As long as they don't count for much, student evaluations aren't bad. You just go to a university where nobody much looks at the student evaluations and you look at the student evaluations and they will turn out to track out quite well who is a good professor and who's not. The moment you start to say 'we're going to base peoples' salary, we're going to base peoples' tenure, we're going to base people's prestige, we're going to base people's reward on the student evaluations' – I promise it panders to the students. They start giving high grades, they start shlockin' it up, they try to make it more fun for the students, and they take the rigor down. It's a delicate argument.

It's sort of like the Heisenberg Principle. Information is there only as long as you don't use it. So if you want to reward teaching really highly, you have to ask yourself how are you going to tell...here I am, I'm President Summers and let's make it simple...I'm not President of Harvard which is vast. I'm President Summers of a college with 600 students in a class so I actually know to recognize all the professors in my university and I really want to reward the good teachers. How am I going to figure out who they are? How am I going to figure out who they are in a way that is going to have high legitimacy?

The same issue arises in 4th grade. In 4th grade we tend to be more comfortable with standardized tests. But by the way, since we started having high stakes testing, we have an epidemic of cheating scandals in urban America. We didn't use to have it. Now that we have high stakes testing, people cheat. Well OK, so here we are and how are we going to do it? Maybe I can tell who the good physics instructors and who the not-so-good physics instructors are by assigning a multiple choice test in physics. Maybe. Maybe that'll tell me something. There's a lot of questions about that in terms of what you really want people to get from a physics education. But suppose the kind of teaching that's involved is the kind of teaching my wife does. You really learn by studying "Moby Dick" for eight weeks and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" for six weeks, you really learn how to understand a piece of literature. How are you going to decide in that seminar of 15 people, how are you going to decide sitting as a university administrator who is good and who is not? Again, the more you're going to base on the decisions.... frankly, if you ask me in the Harvard departments I knew, I could answer that question and I'd be reasonably confident that my answers were right just because I sort of listened to students, listened to faculty. But they weren't right enough that I could base substantial awards on my impressions. And if my impressions were going to count for a lot, I'd no longer be able to form them exactly because people would say 'Joe is really god-awful.' They'd stop saying that if that was going to affect Joe's job security. So it's the right thing to do, but it is not an easy thing to do.

DeVise: It's sort of a distressing thought that I wonder if I gave some of my professors better marks if they gave me better marks. You'd hope that as a college student at a place like Harvard or Wesleyan, where I went, that you'd be able to sort of separate that evaluation.....

Summers: The data are unmistakable. The data are unmistakable. You know, we thought of all of this. We'd give the teacher evaluations before they get their grades rather than after they get their grades. People have fought about how to manage this. It's not just grades, by the way. Do we assign 30 pages of writing in this semester, or do we assign 15 pages of writing in this semester? We're not so likely to get higher ratings by assigning 30 pages.

DeVise: This segues nicely into this next question I had. I'm trying to understand all of this. There's this website called gradeinflation.something and Harvard I guess is one of the best documented cases. In 1889, the average GPA was 2.46. Something under a B, right? And in 2005, the overall GPA at Harvard was 3.45, which is a full point higher. That's just a longer and maybe more dramatic example of something that's been spotted at lots and lots of different colleges that grades are sort of drifting up in every sector I think other than maybe community colleges. And yet there's also ample evidence that the amount of time students spend engaged in scholarship is going down since maybe the Kennedy administration. I think it's been tracked at least that long. Students, according to the NSSE – a strict survey of student engagement – I might get this wrong but I think they spent something like 15 hours a week on schoolwork now where in the 60s they might have spent 35 or something. It's probably not that dramatic but there's been a big decline in the time students spend actually studying. People connect this data to there's this longer weekend now in college. The weekend starts on Thursday or something. Part of it is that the people all have laptops so you can do your work faster; you don't have to write everything out longhand like I suppose I did. A lot of this decline has been since the advent of the personal computer. So it's more than that. Then you throw in these evaluations and the idea that the professor gets rewarded by the students for assigning less work and giving out higher grades.

Summers: So look, the input thing is a little complicated. You've got to be a little careful. When I went to college in 1971, it was not uncommon to have studied calculus before you went to college, but it was not the expectation even if you were planning to study math or physics. Today, anyone who is planning to study math or physics at a top university has surely studied calculus and they might have studied a little mathematics beyond it. In 1925, it was commonly remarked that relativity theory was only understood by 12 people. Relativity today appears on freshman physics exams. So if you actually ask what students know coming out of college in 2012, it is vastly greater than what they knew coming out in 1867. While it's harder to make the comparison, they come out knowing more than students did in 1975 when I came out of college. One of the things that people don't remark on is a kind of general cognitive progress in society.

There's a well-known phenomenon that is not well understood – the Flynn effect. If you measure IQs, the average IQ in the United States and in most countries has risen by between 2 and 3 points a decade for the last five decades. If you don't believe me, just do an experiment. It will take you 90 minutes to do this experiment. Just watch one show of the "Beverly Hillbillies," which was the most popular show on American television in the 1960s and watch one show of "West Wing," which was the most popular television show in America in the last decade. Just watch them. You will not be in any doubt that the vast public just has a totally different level of cognitive demand from what it receives. That I think is a different perspective on the comments you made about people are studying less. But I think the larger point and the one where I completely agree, is the four minute mile was a miracle when Roger Bannister did it and most good college track teams have somebody who can run a four minute mile today. But we still only give one gold medal in the Olympics. And, so I think grade inflation is deeply problematic. I think a society that tolerates and supports the inflation of the grades of its students should not be

surprised when it finds the inflation of reported corporate earnings by those students 20 years later to be a serious problem.

It's very much a mood these days that you need to teach people ethics. I am all for being ethical, but I think of grade inflation as a kind of ethical issue and a kind of example setting issue. I think of the way faculty misconduct is handled as a kind of ethical issue. I think there's a great deal that universities could do in terms of the way they operate to improve the models of ethical behavior that they set for their students.

DeVise: A couple of very prominent schools, as I recall, simply set a sort of a formula and said, well, thou shall not give more than 35% A's, or something like that, that we won't have more than one third of all grades be A's henceforth. Does that sort of simple solution work?

Summers: In some contexts it probably does and in other contexts it probably doesn't. I was successful in inducing the Harvard faculty to take a situation where 90% of Harvard graduates graduated with honors when I became president and to reduce that number to just above 50%. Fifty is probably a lot but at least it was no longer true that the most unique honor you could graduate with was none, which was the case when I arrived. So in that context it works.

Here's the problem: I've spent a lot of time thinking about this – so you want to say that only 30% of the grades can be A's. So, now, how are we going to allocate the 30% of the grades that are going to be A's? You could say that every class would get 30% A's. But how about if I take French where you get all the way to literacy in two semesters and you take French and you get all the way to literacy in four semesters. Should we have 30% A's in both classes? How about if I take freshman Physics with Quantum Mechanics and Relativity and you take freshman Physics for Poets. Should we have the same fraction of A's in both classes? So it turns out, you have to figure out how you do it. How do you set up a fair system given that there are courses that differ in their intrinsic difficulties? Now there are people with economist mathematical skills who have devised algorithms where you basically have to report your grades and then you get an adjusted grade in each course and you adjust the grade based on how able the other students were in the class. If they're a bunch of superstars, then you adjust the grade downward. There's mathematical ways of trying to do it but they tend to be kind of complicated and byzantine. Therefore they don't seem legitimate and easier to understand. So I would love to see a good way of enforcing mega caps, of the kind you describe on grades. But it isn't something that is easy and there are huge differences in these things.

There basically are two patterns and these tend to be quite typical at leading universities if you study it. The first is, just like it's much harder to kill somebody if you have to look at them; it's much harder to give somebody a C if you've seen them. So nobody in the seminar ever gets a C. There is systematic, vast grade inflation in small classes relative to large classes. Overwhelming pattern. The second is very substantial grade inflation in the humanities. It differs across universities in the sciences versus the social sciences, in part because the social sciences tend to have very large classes. So if you're in a humanities seminar at a leading university and you don't get a high grade, something is badly wrong. There's a famous story that used to be told at Harvard...and I don't think this was in humanities in fairness, I think it was in a different field...during the 60s when things were really terrible. There was a guy who in the first semester

gave everybody, all 30 of his students, 20 of them A's and 10 of them A-minuses. The second semester, he gave 19 of them A's, 9 of them A-minuses and 2 of them B+'s. The dean called him in and said 'I really need to talk about your grading.' The guy interrupted and said 'just a minute, dean. Those two guys just didn't understand anything.'

DeVise: I've come back to this three or four times in my reporting and I'm fairly new having spent maybe two years doing higher ed and I'm fascinated by this. ACTA has this rubric and they will grade a school according to which specific disciplines it requires students to take like math, science, foreign language. If at Johns Hopkins you have to take math or science but not math and science, you don't get as much credit for that. If the requirements say that you can take a language or something else....at a lot of these great, great universities – and I don't think ACTA is denying they're great universities – it's real *mungy*. you can kind of go through four years at place like Brown or Johns Hopkins or Yale having not taken a single science course and having not taken a single math course, certainly having not ever read Shakespeare if you don't care to or just don't think of it. Or the squid's eye professor reviews don't give a good grade to the person teaching it and might just not take it. There's just a very small number of universities that have core curricula: Chicago, Columbia, St. John's – the great books school – and a number of others. The guy who runs the program at Chicago told me, and surely you of all people would understand this, that it would be impossible for the University of Chicago to assemble a core curriculum now from nothing and the reason I was told is that each of the disciplines is a little fiefdom and each of them wants their own stuff included. So suddenly you've 200 different things that have to be in the core and that's not a core anymore, it's everything. So who's going to be the unlucky soul who has to decide what's in the core curriculum if there is to be a core curriculum? Apparently it's just an impossible decision that no faculty can arrive at. So what's the question in all of this? You led Harvard, so do you think there's any scenario in which a place like Harvard....because Harvard use to have sort of a core curriculum, could it ever have one again?

Summers: Harvard had a curriculum that was called core curriculum when I came and it now has a curriculum that is a general education curriculum. Neither curriculum prescribed that you learn any particular play of Shakespeare's or aspect of Ancient Greece or a component of mathematics. I thought the Harvard core as I found it was proud about being about ways of knowing. I thought if we had a little less ways of knowing and a little more knowing it would be a positive change and I think to some extent that's been recognized in Harvard's general education curriculum. I've always been kind of torn on this. On the one hand, it's sort of hard to believe that there isn't some body of knowledge that has some commonness to our culture and our moment to which everyone while they're in college should have to have some exposure. That is the great appeal of the core curriculum and I think it has a lot of logic, really a lot of logic. Just like I've noticed in life that once people get over the age of 25, they tend to be more enthusiastic about conscription than before they're over the age of 25. There is something similar in that.

I think I've been at least modestly accomplished and successful intellectually in my life. I have essentially no capacity for foreign languages. Really just can't understand them – it's just not something I can do. I struggled through high school language for a few years. I went to MIT

where they didn't have that requirement. If they had had that requirement, I suppose I probably wouldn't have failed out but it would have been very painful and at the end of my required three semesters, if it had been three semesters, I would not have been able to speak a foreign language. My wife, who is a professor of English at Harvard, would make the same statement about her capacity for mathematics. Would she have been better off tortured into it? I don't know. I'm guessing a quarter of you in this room if you think about it could think about some area of knowledge where your basic view was you weren't that interested and you weren't that good and you did a certain amount of it in high school and if you had been forced to do a year of it in college, it would've been very painful and the gain would not have been enormous. That's one type of problem you have to think about with a core curriculum.

Second is, you do have to sort of decide what's in it. It's really hard to get a group of faculty members to agree on what's in it. I actually had a much more modest aspiration during my time as president that I made some progress on, but I was not completely successful in achieving it. Forget what's required; shouldn't we have a one semester, or a one year course where you can study the history of art, not the history of Matisse in 19th century Paris but *the* history of art or *the* history of music or *the* history of the United States? I remember one moment which sort of captured a lot of it – I remarked probably in my usual impolitic way, on the fact that as best I could tell from a study of the catalog there was no course at Harvard this year where a student could learn about the American Revolution: George Washington, and Madison and the Federalist papers and the Constitution and all of that. It just seemed to me that there ought to be a course for a student that wanted to study the American Revolution. One of the members of the faculty said 'Larry, you're actually not right though I don't think you'll be much pleased by this correction. There is a course being offered that does talk about the American Revolution. It's a course on the American Revolution, the Guatemalan Revolution and the Haitian Revolution and the comparative perspective.' I said 'whatever the utility of that course, and there may be a lot to learn from that comparison, I don't think that's responsive to the particular itch that I was looking to scratch by asking my question.'

So I actually think the right aspiration is for there to be more courses that provide the option of being broadly equipped by great teachers for a life of enlightened participation in society. I think there's a fair amount of demand for them on the part of students. I actually think there's less provided than there is demand. That was kind of where I put my energy, because I think compulsion has a variety of problematic aspects and the closer you get to it, the more complicated it gets. Okay, so we need to have a language requirement. Suppose I grew up in a bilingual household and I'm bilingual? Do I get to say I've satisfied the language requirement or do I have to take a third language? Do we have to have a science requirement but suppose I took AP Bio, does that count? I've got a bunch of students who didn't take much science in high school and they're like taking Biology for Babies. But I already know everything about Biology for Babies. Do I still have to do the science requirement or do I not have to do the science requirement? If you actually pursue it, down the road you find it gets much, much more difficult than you had first thought.

My emphasis was to think that 'canon' should not be a dirty word. But there's a tendency in many parts of academia to think that it is. There are areas that I don't know much about and I want somebody who is deeply knowledgeable and cares passionately about them to help identify

a canon so I can educate myself. So I think of that as a positive process, not as a negative process. But there's something in the culture that tends to react adversely to the word canon.

Neal: Larry, you'll have to leave in about three minutes so, Larry do you want to take some questions?

Male Voice: Do you think the tendency of specialized departments in the bigger universities has a weakness in that it leads to a certain kind of scholasticism or perhaps excessive homogeneity of opinion? I'll give you a very brief example: My daughter graduated with a major in economics from Harvard 20 years ago and when she got out I got to talking with her a bit about her studies and we were talking about the Keynesian revolution in the 1930s and the debate that went on between Keynes and the Austrian School, Hayek and his people. It turned out that she had never heard of that debate or those discussions. Admittedly, the Austrians are not the mainstream school of economics but she had never heard of it. She said 'Dad, I'm shocked. This was probably the great debate of the century, wasn't it?'. It occurred to me that perhaps within her studies there, there had been an excessive homogeneity of opinion such that they didn't think it was even worthwhile to raise different points of view on some of the core elements of the basic theoretical apparatus of economics today. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Summers: There's a couple parts of that question. The best and the worst of academia happen at the boundaries between disciplines. Most of the most important discoveries happen across boundaries. Much of the most interesting discussion and conversation involves the multiplicity of perspective that comes from different disciplines. Much of the worst nonsense is perpetrated by people who describe themselves as being at the boundary of disciplines because they can't really meet the standards of either. And so 'how you approach the interdisciplinary' is a complicated kind of question.

There's an element in your question in the way you asked about it, though you didn't put it this way, about the right versus the left. I bet your daughter learned more about Keynes than she learned about Hayek while she was at Harvard, and look, there's a very legitimate line of argument that seriousness about diversity should include diversity of perspective and that it's hard. It's a complicated question, you know, if you believe deeply in capitalism, you can work at a company that's for profit or you can work at a not-for-profit institution. If you hate capitalism, than you really have many fewer choices. If you look at people who work for not-for-profit institutions, it can't be very surprising that a disproportionate share of them are people who are less wildly enthusiastic about capitalism. I think it's certainly true that if you look at the Harvard faculty, look at the faculty of many leading universities, way to the left of center. On the other hand, that doesn't mean people are discriminating. It's a reflection of who kind of wants to be there and people are better at teaching what they're enthusiastic about. I would say in defense of my colleagues in the Harvard economics department, that in terms of providing a multiplicity of perspectives that includes the right sixty-percent of America, whatever the problems of the economic department, they are nothing compared to the problems of almost any other social science. Students, they may not be exposed to Hayek because it's a little bit dated. Perhaps they should be, but students almost anywhere will be exposed to Milton Friedman, who would stand for those beliefs, but whoever the equivalent of Milton Friedman is in historiography, in literary

study, in sociology, in anthropology, these people are much less likely to find their way into most university curricula.

Male voice: Not to debate the grade point average, I think your point about higher IQ and better preparation is solid, but it seems to me like that's only an argument that grades should be higher if the curriculum has stayed the same. We're still testing them at the same level of vigor as when the preparation was less good and the IQs were lower. It seems to me like wouldn't the better solution be to move toward the three year curriculum that's been debated now internationally about moving maybe the entering calculus class, if we have a lot of people, should be two semesters combined. Same thing with science. Maybe this is the way to take advantage of this so that a C still equals average performance but basically, now students are graduating more quickly now that courses are more rigorous.

Summers: So my point about the four minute mile was intended to say that I did not embrace the defense of grade inflation that the students are smarter now. I was only trying to say that if you were to say that students work less, it seems fair to also point out that they know more. But I agree with the perspective, which is there can only be so many excellent people and excellence needs to be judged in relative terms.

I think you were really using the grade inflation as a hook to ask me what I thought about the three year curriculum. I'm kind of uncertain about what I think. It's true that it's an international standard. It's also true that students in American universities have, in a large number of cases, extracurricular lives that they find very stimulating. I don't mean the social life, I mean whether it's athletics, whether it's student journalism, whether it's student artistic performance, whether it's employment, that would be much more difficult to accommodate in a three year standard curriculum. I think there's a lot that's positive in that. I think if you have a three year curriculum, people are thinking about leaving more or less after they've just arrived and I don't find our universities under-vocationalized at the moment. I think the three year curriculum would push in that direction so whereas, as I looked at things in education, I thought – I might be wrong and there are people who find this view offensive – my instinct was almost nothing would be lost if law was a two year degree. So I relate to the concept of shortening, at looking at what happens in the second and third years of law school and whereas I thought that something probably should be done about the nine-year Ph.D., which is all too common, particularly in some of the humanistic disciplines or the perpetual post-doc that's becoming more common in the sciences. I'm not averse on principle to compression arguments; I don't find myself seized with the three-year curriculum as being an especially high priority. I think a different question is, you need one level of persuasion to convince somebody that something should be the norm. And you need another level of persuasion to convince somebody that something should be an option.

END

This transcript provides a snapshot of the conversation that took place between Larry Summers and Daniel de Vise. Incomplete thoughts – sentences that began and were cut off before making a point – were left off this transcript for clarity.