

RESPONSE TO FELDMAN

K. Patricia Cross
Conner Professor of Education
University of California, Berkeley

My response to Marv Feldman's provocative paper might well be called a trilogy of a trilogy. I am going to present my comments in three portions, each of which has three segments. First, I want to support most of what Marv has written, and in some cases, go beyond his own enthusiasm for vocational and technical education as an important mission of community colleges. Second, I want to take issue with some of his perceptions and assertions. Third, I want to point to some issues that he has not addressed or not given as much attention as I think they deserve.

Throughout Marv's paper, there is the implication that vocational education is not receiving its due in terms of either attention or respect. I think his perception is correct, and unfortunately the 1980's reform movement has done a further disservice to vocational education by equating excellence with a singular model of excellence, often modified by the word "academic." Whereas, the phrase "academic excellence" is familiar to all of us these days, we hear very little about excellence in vocational education. Indeed, many community colleges are feeling pressured to define their success in terms of the numbers of transfers to four-year institutions and test scores on standardized tests of academic achievement. When was the last time you heard a community college

brag that most of their students took jobs in the local community rather than transferring to a four-year institution?

A second point, made strongly by Marv, with which I agree is that the development of our human resources is critically important to us, as a nation, as we attempt to increase our productivity and to compete in world markets. The United States has gone through three distinct periods in its relatively short history. Land was once the capital investment, and wealth and productivity depended on land holdings and cultivation. Then came the industrial revolution, and with it the industrial barons of society who made vast fortunes from the work of machines. Now we have entered the post-industrial society, which depends heavily on human resources for its economy. Silicon Valley is rich in scientific knowledge and human ideas, rather than in land or machinery. The nice thing about our new dependence on the development of human resources is that unlike natural resources, they are nondepletable, and the more we use them, the richer they become.

Finally, I agree with Marv's emphasis on the necessity for establishing working partnerships with employers and just about everyone else in the community who is working toward a better standard of living for all people.

To conclude my first part of this trilogy, I would say that I agree heartily with Marv's major points and with the general flavor of his paper and with the arguments he makes for more attention to and respect for the extremely important role that community colleges play in the education of the workers of our society--which now includes or should include almost all of us.

Now for my three disagreements, which tend to center on clusters of words and could therefore be dismissed as mere quibbles, but I think they run deeper than that.

First, is his disturbing use of the phrase "life after work," as in "community colleges should educate students for jobs as well as for a satisfying and ennobling life after work." Now, I'm not sure whether that phrase refers to after 5:00 or after retirement, but in either case, the separation of work from life seems especially incongruous as we move toward the full development of human resources, not as replacements for machines, but as a goal in and of itself. The goal of education is the development of uniquely human talents and potential. Workers should not have to wait until after work to express their richest human qualities. For employers, society, and individual workers, the goal should be to make work "satisfying and ennobling."

My second disagreement also has to do with word definition, but also perhaps with larger issues. Marv quotes, with apparent approval, critics of education who contend that we are "mis-educating" at least half of our young people. I am first of all puzzled as to what that word might mean. I am familiar, of course, with concepts of undereducated, poorly educated, and even ill-educated. But mis-educated seems to imply that we are educating people in a wrong direction. I surmise from the context in which Marv uses the word, that he alludes to the fact--and I think it is a fact--that we give most of our attention in schools to preparing students for further formal education, and in the process, "mis-educate" the half of the students who do not go on for further formal education. I

don't think, however, that preparing all students for further education and encouraging them to go as far as their interests and abilities take them is necessarily mis-education. Education, at its best, is an enabling activity that increases the options open to people. "Mis-education," to my way of thinking, would consist of closing doors of opportunity, sending people in directions that close off their options. Failure to teach students quantitative skills, for example, would be mis-education because it closes off so many options in a world increasingly dependent on technology, on the job and off.

My third disagreement is basic and perpetuates an argument that is ongoing in circles of both educators and employers. Marv takes the position that community colleges would do well to train and retrain "each individual worker for a job we know exists." Opponents would say, of course, that we should teach people how to learn, so that they may learn new jobs as old ones disappear and change, seemingly more quickly with each passing year. Before I've become used to the fantastic rise of the "overnight delivery" business, for example, I contemplate its demise as colleagues across the nation urge me to "fax" it. Change is simply so rapid these days that we talk about the "half-life" of knowledge and skills in terms of years rather than decades or generations.

Some would go so far as to contend that we should train people so that they can learn jobs that **don't** exist today, in the certainty that most workers will change skills, jobs, and even careers many times during their lifetimes. With the obligation of community colleges and other educators to provide increasing opportunities and options for lifelong education, the question of

whether to train people for jobs that exist or to cope with an ever-changing marketplace, is not as critical as it was under the assumption that education was front-loaded, and whatever people needed to know, they learned before adulthood.

This leads me to the third portion of my trilogy, which is a discussion of issues that were mentioned lightly or not at all in Marv's paper. Lifelong learning, it seems to me, is critically important as we plan for vocational education. It received some attention in passing, but the very concept of lifelong learning and the vital role of the community college in providing it lie at the very center of how we think about the future. Ideally, lifelong learning would enable people to add continuously to their skills and knowledge throughout life, so that they could climb a spiral toward their fullest possible development. Practically, the world throws new challenges at us so fast that lifelong learning is becoming a necessity, not so much to win the race as to keep from losing it. Retraining may be on the road to becoming a more important mission of community colleges than pretraining.

A second issue that, it seems to me, is under-addressed by Marv is the importance of excellence in vocational education. For too long, vocational educators have let "excellence" become equated with "academic" in the minds of both educators and the general public. I believe that vocational educators should launch a vigorous campaign for excellence in vocational and technical education -- which means constructive criticism of what is, followed by implementation of what should be.

A third issue that should be given more attention in Marv's paper is the potential contribution of vocational and technical education to the development of the person. All too prevalent in most writing about vocational education today, is the dependence of society on a well-trained and well-educated workforce to regain our competitive edge in world markets, to increase productivity, and to raise the national standard of living. I believe that vocational education has an underutilized and powerful potential to contribute to human development. Vocational educators, more than academic educators, have an opportunity to teach responsibility, collaboration, respect for others, self-esteem, and a host of other virtues that are more real to students in a work-focused situation than in most academic exercises. The case needs to be made for the undeniably important role of vocational education in student development.

This concludes my trilogy of trilogies. I'll admit that I had to work very hard to find things in Marv's paper with which I could take issue. I think we all owe a great debt of gratitude to Marv for starting, in such a provocative and lucid way, a discussion that needs to take place.