

Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs, edited by Todd Ruecker, Dawn Shepherd, Heidi Estrem, and Beth Brunk-Chavez. Utah State U P, 2017. 278 pp.

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Vincent Tinto's landmark publication, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, opened the dialogue for strategies universities can employ to curb students leaving the university before degree completion. Yet, three decades on, the specter of student attrition persists. At my own institution, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the retention rate in fall 2016 for all second-year students was 71.4% (74.8% nationwide); this rate is even lower for Hispanic (63.4%) and black (53.6%) students ("Crimson Snapshot").

As an integral part of the university ecosystem, the field of composition has not ignored the retention dialogues. In 2014, Pegeen Reichert Powell's *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave* expanded the discussion of how composition instructors can respond to the discourse surrounding student retention. *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs* extends this dialogue by offering a variety of theoretical essays and empirical studies that address how the field of composition can respond to the issue of student retention.

The collection is divided into two main sections, with the first offering theoretical discussions of the role first-year composition plays in the retention dialogues, and the second explicitly detailing the steps various composition programs have taken to improve student retention along with qualitative and quantitative studies to test their efficacy.

For instance, in chapter six, Nathan Garrett, Matthew Bridgewater, and Bruce Feinstein offer evidence that success in first-year writing is strongly tied to student persistence. Their study supports Ashley J. Holmes and Cristine Busser's argument in chapter three that university writing programs must meaningfully collaborate with retention programs, stating that "when retention initiatives are employed through a top-down model, administrators are missing an opportunity to gain feedback from WPAs and writing instructors on the effectiveness of their programs" (51).

Still, a healthy skepticism on current attitudes towards retention efforts simmers across the collection. In chapter two, Rita Malenczyk criticizes the obsession universities have with retaining students, suggesting that "implemented uncritically, retention efforts can turn a university into a panopticon" (25). Similarly, in chapter four, March Scott debates the use of large data sets by universities to track students' histories to predict their success, arguing that

this data, “doesn’t replace the need for careful programmatic assessment and inquiry” (69). Much like David S. Martin’s edited collection, *Transnational Writing Program Administration*, where many authors implied that global neoliberalism fueled American universities’ international student recruitment and expansion efforts, skepticism over the intentions of modern university administrators also runs across *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs*. Both collections demonstrate that the field of composition does not uncritically accept the narratives spun by university stakeholders outside the discipline.

Of course, Reichert Powell contributes to the collection, appropriate considering the majority of the authors in the collection cite her work. In what may strike some readers as fatalistic and undermining the goals of student retention, in chapter eight Reichert Powell acknowledges that “some students should leave” (135); the composition instructor should instead focus on teaching skills students can use in their professional lives, regardless of whether they finish their studies.

Sara Webb-Sunderhaus’s piece in chapter seven stands out in the collection by offering a glimpse into the harsh reality of a student expected to fail. A trigger warning is warranted: The chapter delves into the childhood trauma and drug use by a student. Yet this collection would be wanting without the inclusion of at least one study offering an in-depth look at the often-hidden struggles students bring into the classroom, which can contribute to their attrition.

A number of strategies by composition programs across the country are described in the second half of the collection for readers to consider using in their own contexts. Some report on the value of embedding tutors within writing courses, some on adding additional courses, and one asks instructors to reflect on the power imbalances inherent in the classroom. As a former writing center assistant director, I would have liked the collection to include an essay from the perspective of the university writing center, considering how intertwined the writing center is with writing programs.

However, while the quantitative studies of the collection are valuable for their rigorous methodologies, their results may cause the reader to question whether the steps composition programs have taken to improve student persistence is working. Sarah Elizabeth Snyder’s study in chapter eleven on the efficacy of Arizona State University’s Stretch Program on second language and basic writers yielded mixed results; Snyder notes that the study “supports a claim of higher retention than traditional FYC from first semester to second semester for both mainstream and multilingual students,” yet “persistence from second to third semester . . . are the lowest percentages record for the Stretch Program to date” (199). Similarly, in their study in chapter fourteen on the benefits of peer advocates (PA), Michael Day, Tawanda Gipson, and Christopher P. Parker admitted that they were “somewhat disappointed that the

quantitative results indicated very little difference in academic improvement and retention between PA and non-PA students” (250). Still, the inclusion of these studies is needed to provide impetus for others in the field to consider the efficacy of their own programs.

In sum, the collection reminds composition instructors that they must retain their own agency and voice in the discourse surrounding retention while simultaneously helping students develop their own agency and voice. As an instructor of basic writing at my institution, I am well aware that the faces I see during the first week of the semester may disappear halfway through; the collection has certainly instilled in me a sense of responsibility for the continued success of my students, regardless of whether they finish their degree.

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Works Cited

- “Crimson Snapshot Academics.” *Crimson Snapshot*, Indiana U of Pennsylvania, www.iup.edu/snapshot/academics/.
- Martins, David S. *Transnational Writing Program Administration*. Utah State UP, 2015.
- Reichert Powell, Pegeen. *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*. Utah State UP, 2014.
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