Powell, Pegeen Reichert. *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*. Logan: Utah State University Press. 2013. 136 pages. $24.95. ISBN 978-0-87421-930-2. Print.

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In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1987), Vincent Tinto called on university administrators to examine other reasons a student might drop out beyond his or her personal limitations. Tinto's call sparked a trend in higher education to explore ways universities can better integrate students into the college environment. In response, researchers have been studying students' interactions with peers and faculty (Astin), promoting Freshman Learning Communities (Zhao & Kuh) and Summer Bridge Programs (Ackerman), and encouraging greater collaboration between Academic and Student Affairs departments (Schroeder). Motivated by funding cuts and advised by political leaders, institutions across the nation are testing this research by employing new initiatives that might increase students' chances of staying enrolled.

With it known that most students who drop out of college leave their first year (Tinto), Pegeen Reichert Powell, Director of the Rhetoric & Composition program at Columbia College of Chicago, responds to higher education's most recent hike in encouraging student retention by examining how the retention conversation impacts the university's only required course, first-year composition. Powell's *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave* is the first scholarly work to provide composition scholars with an in-depth critique of the rhetoric surrounding retention. In particular, Powell takes up the notion that most retention research and on-campus initiatives communicate explicitly and implicitly that students who drop out or take time off of school are unsuccessful. Thus, when first-year composition instructors support their institution's valued chronology for graduation by participating in retention initiatives

and relaying a rhetoric of retention, they risk marginalizing students who, for reasons Powell argues are too complex than higher education researchers suggest, might not return the following semester. Ultimately, Powell tasks writing program administrators and faculty to design a curriculum that meets the needs of all students, even those who leave.

Separated into an introduction and four chapters, *Retention and Resistance* begins by establishing the relevance of higher education's retention research to first-year composition. Powell then analyzes the allure of the retention conversation for university administrators and faculty in chapter two, "The Seduction and Betrayal of the Discourse of Retention." With her argument sufficiently framed, chapter three, "The Possibility of Failure," challenges the culture of increasing student retention by critiquing higher education's pattern of equating student success with persistence. It is within this chapter that Powell most effectively calls on composition scholars to examine how their forward-looking pedagogies might be hindering students' access to education, while challenging the argument that the role of first-year composition is only to prepare students for future classes. Finishing with chapter four, "Beyond Retention," Powell calls on her readers to adopt "a kairotic pedagogy," a widely applicable approach to teaching that frames writing as a tool to achieve writing success in the present rather than the future. Upon completion of *Retention and Resistance*, composition instructors will feel inspired to continue the conversation this book begins, as Powell's text makes clear the need for first-year composition instructors to pay attention to institutional retention initiatives.

Setting the tone for her book, Powell's introduction presses that composition instructors, teaching the university's only universal requirement, are students' first impression of college and a target for higher administration to implement institutional initiatives (7). From there, Powell reviews notable retention scholarship. Initially, she acknowledges the benefits of retention for students, institutions, and society by appealing to leaders in higher education scholarship (Tinto; Siedman). Powell then

complicates their research. Contrary to the assumptions that inform post-secondary retention efforts, many studies identify other factors beyond the reach of the university that impact student persistence. Powell cites studies that support high school as the "most powerful predictor of [a student's] persistence into the sophomore year" (Ishler and Upcraft qtd. in Powell 37). She also offers family-related factors as a determiner in whether a student will graduate. By the end of the first chapter, Powell covers retention research that examines the roles "institutional support," "writing instruction," "bad luck," and "stress, time, and money" play in students' decisions to leave an institution. She argues that these factors cannot be measured, as one could fault an advisor's bad day or a family member's illness for a student's departure. In doing so, Powell directly confronts the trend in higher education to use big-data research for the purposes of encouraging students to stay. Thus, readers, especially those asked to participate in initiatives supported by big data, are provided with multiple reasons to question those initiatives' effectiveness, particularly within the composition classroom.

In her first chapter, Powell presents two lines of thinking for composition scholars to consider: First, she shows how universities have referenced retention studies to justify institutional actions. Second, she compares the research with experiences from one of her students, Helen. The complexity of Helen's narrative, shown alongside Powell's list of immeasurable reasons for student departure, is juxtaposed with higher education's simplistic solutions to decreasing dropout rates. Powell is very up front that Helen's narrative, and those from other students throughout the book, is not meant to be viewed as evidence in support of her argument. Instead, she intends for the narratives to symbolize the unique circumstances of every student who transfers, stops out, or drops out of a university. After making the point that—despite all that we know about the causes of attrition—retention rates have remained unchanged, Powell ends the chapter raising the question, "What should our course goals be…?" (48). Speaking directly to composition instructors

here, she begins her deliberate pattern of placing responsibility on readers to explore the ways that university retention efforts might undermine or contradict classroom pedagogies. Straddling the line between student advocacy and institutional criticism, Powell's decision to repeatedly call on her readers furthers her goal to inspire more research rather than make definitive claims about retention efforts or the purpose of first-year composition.

In her next chapter, Powell provides readers with possible reasons universities continue implementing retention efforts despite evidence of their efficacy. To do this, she employs Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand how attitudes toward retention have evolved in recent years. Before discussing her findings, however, she foregrounds her evidence with an overview of the changing climate of higher education. Powell examines how changes in US policy and economics encouraged a shift within higher education toward corporatization. The Student-Right-to-Know Act and *U.S. News and World Report* rankings place students in the customer role and force schools to compete for the best retention statistics. Furthermore, with tighter budgets, universities, Powell argues, rely on the "chronic discourse of retention…to highlight the need to maintain a flexible labor force and to demand unpaid work from all faculty" (60). While Powell acknowledges the sincerity behind retention efforts, she brings attention to the ulterior motives that have so many composition faculty members participating in what she believes is exclusionary pedagogy.

Powell's reference to the corporatization of higher education prepares readers for the results of her analysis of two self-studies conducted by her institution in 1999 and 2009. She discovers an unexpected difference between the two studies in how the term *retention* is integrated into administrative discourse (68). In the 1999 study, she found the term dynamic, written in various modified forms throughout an 11-page document. The study referenced national literature on retention as well as local faculty and administrative voices. Contrastingly, the 2009 study used the term always as an "isolated," "unmodified" concept (74).

Excluding local voices, the document also appeared "monovocal…consistent with the managerial discourse that dominates other genres circulating at the college" (75). From this observation, Powell notes that the college's portrayal of *retention* shifted from a complex concept open to multiple meanings to a more simplified problem unwelcomed to "contradictory or multiple voices" (71). Also problematic of the 2009 document, Powell highlights, is the lack of attention paid to attrition that the 1999 document included. Rather than acknowledging the role students play in their own paths to degree, the 2009 document leaves out references to attrition and persistence, instead focusing solely on the institution retaining students. Powell concludes from her study that the shifting in discourse "reflect[s] and construct[s] an approach to retention more in line with the corporatization of higher education"—an approach that presents an exclusionary attitude toward students like Cesar, a hard-working student of Powell's who loved college, but ultimately dropped out to help his family after his father lost his job.

Consistent with her introduction and first chapter, Powell ends her second chapter by calling on her audience of composition instructors to act by asking themselves: "What is the value of my course for Cesar if he never graduates? Is there still a way for us to talk about the value of our courses for all students, including those who leave?" (81-82). With these questions, Powell makes relevant to composition instructors the discourse being used among university administrators to encourage retention. Written to display the evolving treatment of retention in higher education, the results of her critical discourse analysis inspire readers to imagine how the patterns of corporatization that they might observe in their own institutions affect who and what is being valued within their composition classrooms.

As in the previous chapters, Powell approaches her third chapter by offering an overview of conversations relevant to the higher education community before drawing specific connections between those conversations and the values of composition studies. She begins by addressing the evolution of the term *failure*,

which she explains historically defined the bankruptcy of a business, but has since become a term used to point out a person's moral failure. Powell writes how embedded in political rhetoric is the "myth" of bootstraps, or the idea that success is gained individually and failure is only the fault of a person rather than a system (86). With its roots in nineteenth century business practices and its prevalence in American culture, *failure* is now being used by university administrators to describe the decisions made by students to drop out, transfer, or stop out of school, as those decisions represent a "failed [financial] investment" (90). This view toward student departure is widely supported by retention research (Tinto), which focuses on "integrat[ing]" students in all aspects of university life, so they are less "at risk *for failure*" (83; 93).

It is in response to the association of attrition to failure that Powell best relates retention to the concerns of composition scholars. She argues that when universities solely direct their efforts toward "integrat[ing] individual students" into university life, they are neglecting to question the ideologies such strategies favor, particularly the "intellectual and social values of the institution" (95). In other words, by investing in retention initiatives, such as freshman learning communities, mentoring programs, or academic coaching, which work to prevent students from dropping out, universities communicate to students that they do not appreciate those who, for circumstances that Powell's claims cannot be measured, are unable to persist (95). Making known this is a clear issue of access, Powell problematizes "*retention efforts*" by borrowing from rhetorician and disability studies scholar, Jay Dolmage. She aligns universities' retention efforts to Dolmage's interpretation of retrofitting, or building an "after-the-fact" solution to meet a particular need—like "the ramp built for students with physical disabilities" (98). Powell suggests that investing in potential solutions to address students' leaving school ignores the larger issue of universities valuing a single chronology for graduation instead of being a space for all students to gain positive educational experiences, regardless of their

timeline. Powell ends her third chapter by calling on faculty and administrators to implement a more inclusive curriculum. Chapter four then is Powell's proposal for how composition instructors can begin answering this call.

Powell's answer to the research she has presented throughout her book is for composition instructors to employ "a kairotic pedagogy" (118). The use of *a* in front of kairotic allows readers to imagine how Powell's ideas might influence their own. The *a* is intentionally inclusive, as Powell's goal has always been to get composition scholars talking about retention. Therefore, her definition of *a kairotic pedagogy* is mainly communicated through abstract descriptions: A kairotic pedagogy "shifts our attention away from chronology and toward opportunities available in a given moment, in a specific place" (117); "confronts the porous nature of higher education" (118); and encourages "*participation, not preparation*" (Fox qtd. in Powell 118). Framing her proposal in this way maintains Powell's position that *a kairotic pedagogy* is a way of thinking about curriculum design rather than a curriculum design in itself (118). In the end, Powell calls on composition instructors to consider what reading and writing demands students are facing during the course of their semester together, rather than those students may face following the course's completion. This way, all students, even those who may not persist, will have gained valuable resources applicable to all areas of their lives and be more likely to view the university as a place they'd like to return to if they have an opportunity to do so.

Although her description of *a kairotic pedagogy* is not supported by a concrete syllabus or assessment measures, items typically included in works for pedagogical change, Powell does offer specific scenarios in which the concept can be applied to existing pedagogies. For example, for instructors who rely on themes, work in a WID program, encourage writing through multiple modes, or prefer appealing to classical rhetoric, Powell draws on scholars (Carter; Horner; Hillard; Howard) to display how *a kairotic pedagogy* could be envisioned among an array of approaches to first-year composition. Thus, Powell continues with her goal of

reaching a wide-range of composition instructors to emphasize the importance of paying attention to an institution's rhetoric of retention.

As one might learn from *Retention and Resistance*, more work remains to be done, but by describing the implications that a rhetoric of retention can have on first-year composition, Powell makes clear that this work must be done. Nonetheless, Powell's book is intentionally fluid. Rather than taking a definitive stance on the purpose of first-year composition or elaborating on a single solution to what she views as exclusionary pedagogy, Powell's insistent questioning of her readers leaves room for other studies to be conducted. This pattern of openness continues throughout her final chapter, where she offers her proposal—a flexible vision of what a *kairotic* classroom might look like—by offering a variety of examples instead of a step-by-step guide. Regardless of where one's teaching philosophy lies on the composition spectrum, *Retention and Resistance* is a productive and inclusive resource for thinking about how the trends in higher education affect our classrooms.

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