

Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 6

January 2014

Pegeen Reichert Powell. Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave

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Recommended Citation

McHenry, Linda (2014) "Pegeen Reichert Powell. Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 6.
DOI: 10.58809/OKNK7073
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol6/iss1/6>

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Pegeen Reichert Powell. *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013. 144 p. ISBN 9780874219302. \$24.95

In *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*, Pegeen Reichert Powell takes aim at the discourse of retention and argues faculty's time spent on retention data is wasted: "The issue of retention reminds us of the forces in many of our students' lives that we simply have no control over; their emotional and physical health, their financial situation, their family obligations, their changing desires and goals" (p. 13). Instead, she advocates for a kairotic pedagogy, in which faculty invest in learning students' stories and "[treat] students who leave as individual problems to be solved, situations that require intervention" (p. 100). In its Greek root, "kairos" is about the right place in the right measure, and its importance to writing instruction has been argued by James Kinneavy and others. Reichert Powell offers three first-year composition student narratives from a grant-funded program where she served as coordinator of Student Faculty Partnership for Success. But rather than giving readers the stories of students who were successfully retained, Reichert Powell presents students whom her institution failed to retain. One of these students, Helen, left after her first semester. Another, Nathan, had been enrolled in a two-year college and a trade school but left to work full time. After losing his job, Nathan enrolled at Reichert Powell's college to continue his education. And the third, Cesar, left college after his first year. For Reichert Powell, the complex and unique circumstances of each of these students serves as justification for her suggestion that faculty and colleges and universities ought to do nothing institutionally to improve retention rates of students.

Reichert Powell's book poses many interesting questions about the future of first-year composition but provides no new pedagogical theories. For instance, Reichert Powell briefly discusses findings that little transfer of skills from first-year composition to other courses takes place. She includes seminal research from Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, Anne Herrington and Marica Curtis, Lucille McCarthy, and David Smith that document the ways students do not transfer specific skill sets that most who teach first-year composition would recognize as student learner outcomes, such as summarizing and analyzing information or identifying writing genres. Sadly, Reichert Powell offers no discussion or explanation of writing student learner outcomes, which may assist faculty in better understanding what it is that they are working so hard to teach their students. For those of us in the trenches, *Retention & Resistance* does not offer new concrete ways to improve writing pedagogy or even better ways to examine retention. Ultimately, Reichert Powell decides that since a faculty member cannot "solve" the retention problems of each student, then the entire project of improving an institution's retention rate is misguided and not worthy of attention. Her approach is not helpful or useful for faculty who hope to improve their institution's connection to its students.

Those of us in higher education who are participating in conversations about retention understand that the point is not to solve retention. Instead, the issue is to improve an institution's retention rate, that is, to make the institution more relevant to its students and better meet students' needs so that they return to continue their studies after their first year. Reichert Powell's conception of retention makes her study less useful for many academics who are working to improve retention rates at their institutions. In her introduction, Reichert Powell defines retention as "the rate at which institutions keep students until they graduate" (p. 6). This definition is problematic in that it is inconsistent with the more widely accepted usage of "retention" as "[T]he percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall" (National Center for Education Statistics). Reichert Powell's more general concept of retention severely weakens the relevance of her work. Educators hoping to find strategies for improving their institutions' retention rates will be disappointed by Reichert Powell's book. She offers no suggestions for addressing retention problems, and instead pessimistically asserts that such efforts are in vain, writing "My argument throughout this book has been that trying to prevent students from leaving our colleges and universities before they graduate is ineffective at best; an institution can simply do very little, if anything to address the complicated reasons surrounding students' leaving" (p. 106). To her credit, Reichert Powell endorses a pedagogical approach that emphasizes providing instruction that meets individual students' needs. However, she refuses to engage the possibility that an institution might somehow make itself more relevant to students and, thus, offer more students a reason to continue their studies.

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