



Powell, P. R. (2013). *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

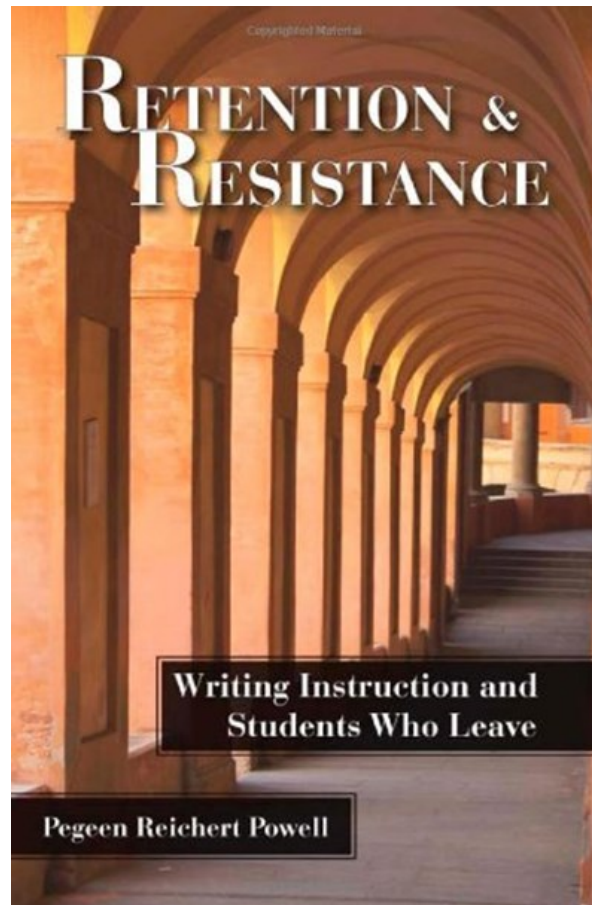
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Reviewed by Jesse Bishop  
Georgia Highlands College  
United States

There are perhaps fewer words in higher education with more use and baggage than “retention.” For more than forty years, scholars and researchers have been studying the concept, including its various synonyms and theoretical descendants. In recent years, the larger community surrounding higher education has taken up the term, politicizing, monetizing, and proselytizing to differing ends. First year writing (FYW) instructors, who have had front row seats to watching students come and go, sometimes find themselves in a quandary as pedagogies are pitted against policy and politics. This is the subject of Pegeen Reichert Powell’s *Retention & Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*, published in 2013 by Utah State University Press.

Powell, Associate Professor of English at Columbia College, Chicago, has written for an audience of her peers in first-year writing. As such, her rhetorical strategies are targeted; leaning on contemporary rhetoric in composition studies, the *resistance* is a clear nod to the power and agency of language—for students and instructors. She writes from a place of



practical experience, blending prior research with theory with experience—both her own and those of her students. The result is an easily readable, critically interesting book that raises far more questions than it seeks to answer.

After framing the discussion and encouraging readers to take note of the language of retention efforts, Powell takes readers through four chapters that offer a brief-but-thorough history of retention, a critical analysis of the language of retention, an exploration of the notion of failure in business and academic contexts, and an evaluation of the impact of retention efforts on writing instruction and instructors. There is an uneasy tension between retention and the perceived work of writing instructors, a tension heightened by the author's commentary and analysis. Powell writes, "The goal of such [retention] research is to figure out ways to keep as many students as possible enrolled in a particular institution" (p. 31), which suggests less than altruistic motives on the parts the institutions enrolling those students and of those researchers who have studied this phenomenon. This is a tension that builds and relaxes throughout Powell's work. The central argument of the book is complex and multilayered: Powell argues that retention efforts are largely ineffective because the forces that cause attrition are varied and individual to specific students; however, retention efforts and language saturate the college environment and influence all aspects of higher education, even as students leave at different times for different reasons; as a result, writing instructors should focus not on the larger scheme of retention, but on helping their students while those students are in their courses.

In the introduction to the work, Powell implores readers to "pay attention" to the language of retention (p. 6), which she claims has been a failure—or later in the work, efforts which have been "ineffective at best" (p. 106). These efforts are often linked with FYW courses because FYW courses may be the only near-universal course requires for college students (p. 8), and because of the importance of first-year students in retention studies. Powell asks that readers pay attention to

opportunities, specifically the opportunity to envision a kind of kairotic, opportunistic-design of the learning experience for students. The notion of *kairos* is especially important to Powell, as she views this notion of “opportunities of the moment” (p. 13). This vision suggests that students be taught in the moment rather than for transfer or progression. Finally, Powell begs readers to pay attention to her students’ stories, namely Helen’s, Caesar’s, and Nathan’s. The gesture seeks to give voice to powerful experiences, but Powell notes that these are exceptional cases, not generalizable or transferable. Still, they carry a significant weight because they become the lenses through which the first three chapters are presented and through which retention and pedagogies discussed.

In Chapter 1, Powell uses Helen’s story as a way to explore the background and history of retention research. Helen’s story is a framing device to introduce concepts related to retention; as such, Helen is the focal point of this chapter with retention research serving as a supplemental set of theories against which Helen’s experiences are juxtaposed. Powell’s summary of the history of retention research is a veritable who’s who of researchers that many student affairs professionals would recognize: Astin, Tinto, and Kuh, among others. However, Powell is critical of most of this research. She cites a number of studies and data sets that cast doubt on retention efforts, and relies heavily on Helen as a counterweight against the generalizations of many studies. Because of this lack of generalizability in student departures, drop-outs and stop-outs, she begins to make her case for a kairotic pedagogy, one focused on the opportunities afforded to students while they are in college—regardless of how long they may stay.

Chapter 2 takes up a more thorough analysis of the rhetoric of retention, using Caesar’s story to supplement the criticism of that rhetoric. Using Fairclough’s (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA), Powell begins to vivisection retention and the linguistic and power structures in which it lives. First, Powell contextualizes the rhetoric of retention within “academic capitalism” (p. 56). Powell notes, “The corporatization of higher education is a

diffuse, complicated, and at times contradictory phenomenon” (p. 58), allowing for one to understand “the endurance of the discourse of retention despite overwhelming evidence of its ineffectiveness” (p. 58). This discussion affords Powell the opportunity to address a concern first mentioned in the preceding chapter. In her criticism of retention efforts, the author notes that she is disinclined to suggest faculty take on more responsibility for retention efforts until part-time and contingent faculty working conditions are improved. She again returns to the issue of faculty working conditions, with a stronger context for the criticism. Citing several studies that attempt to equate faculty status with retention success or failure, Powell begins to chip away at the veneer of the corporatist endeavor that is contemporary higher education. She writes that colleges “need the discourse of retention [...] to justify the overreliance on contingent labor in the first place” (p. 60). She juxtaposes the capitalist impulses of the university (as an idea) with the “nostalgic appeals” for an altruistic, democratic past that never existed (p. 76). “Higher education,” she argues, “has always been structured on the premise that *not* everyone will earn a degree (p. 76, emphasis added). Chapter 2 concludes with Caesar’s narrative, illustrating the financial implications of the corporate university and student attrition. If students—such as Caesar—cannot afford college, then they simply cannot go to college or remain in college. Thus, they become “failures.”

Chapter 3 explores the relationship of retention efforts and financial interests in the corporatized model of higher education that Powell outlines in Chapter 2. Powell explains, “The problem of failure is at the murky center of the issue of student retention...when we talk about students who are ‘at risk,’ we are talking about students who are at risk *for failure*” (p. 83, original emphasis). She warns that while institutions see student attrition as failure, students themselves may not. For the institution, though, student departure is failure because “it is impossible to educate students who are not there” (p. 84). Drawing on speeches from President Obama, as well as historians and popular

writers, Powell explains the current obsession with “greatness” and “failure” (p. 86), and how misrepresented the notion of failure is. She notes that failure was once only used in the banking and business world; however, by the mid-nineteenth century, the term failure had become synonymous with personal, moral ruin (pp. 87-88). As a result, attrition-as-failure poses a problem; she is critical of Tinto’s studies, a cornerstone of retention research, because of his conceptual ties to Durkheim’s suicide studies, arguing that his work is equating attrition to a metaphorical death or self-harm. She questions why more academics—especially writing instructors—have not expressed similar concerns. Academic failure, in this sense, is serious business, and there remains a financial aspect because of student debt: when students leave college without completing and accruing debt along the way, their efforts are viewed as “a failed investment indeed” (p. 91). She closes the chapter with Nathan’s story, which weaves together the complex and competing pressures exerted on students through the fear of financial and personal failure.

Finally, Chapter 4 moves “Beyond Retention” to offer implications for the seemingly contentious intersection of retention and teaching and learning. Powell asserts, “The reality that a four-year college education earned at one institution right after high school is not typical for the majority of the population anymore” (p. 106). Yet, she notes that retention models “affect every facet” of the college experience, especially for faculty (p. 106). She begins bridging together related ideas expressed in the preceding chapters to make her final argument about pedagogy: it must be *kairotic*—concerned with the here and now for students who may leave; it must be practical and remain inviting so that those students may one day return to college. She notes that her pedagogy emphasizes “participation, not preparation” (p. 118). Powell writes:

We don’t begin where students are in order to lead them toward subsequent semesters in the academy; we begin where students are in order to demonstrate to them the role writing can play

in their lives right now, the habits and practices that can, immediately and in the future, infuse their lives as students but also as workers and citizens. (p. 119).

To potential critics of this effort, this focus on the opportune moment, she argues that faculty “cannot prepare students for this world, in part because it is changing so fast it is not realistic that we could anticipate what our students would need a year from now” (p. 123). She concludes that attrition is not a problem to be solved, and if it were a problem, faculty can do very little to solve it. Moreover, retention discourse “is effective at denying faculty agency” because of the top-down implementation and the skepticism that a close reading of retention research breeds. Rather than lamenting the acceptable losses, Powell asks readers to “Imagine if our institutions were places students could ‘go back to.’ Not places where we do everything we can to prevent them from leaving, but places we invite them back to when they’re ready” (p. 131).

One of the strongest aspects of the book is Powell’s vision, which imagines a new model of teaching and learning in higher education. Many of these provide a foundation for future research and discussions on the nature and outcomes of teaching and learning in with “transient” populations (p. 108). When she envisions the possibilities of kairotic pedagogies, Powell’s words are full of hope--her optimism taking shape in smooth sentences that drift into a kind of conversational ease. This is in sharp contrast to some of the jargon-heavy sections on retention, which seem to purposefully get clogged with stiff, impersonal discourse. One might suspect this is an intentional (and useful) strategy. In fact, despite generally being a supporter of retention efforts, the reviewer found himself cheering on the insurgency, pumping his metaphorical fist in defiance of data and policies that dehumanize. When Powell’s imagination is at work, the possibilities are real and the opportunities seem endless.

Unfortunately, Powell’s rhetorical moves toward pathos may be where her arguments seem weakest, especially when stressing her point that

students *will* leave college. This notion might best be described as *acceptable loss*. While noble, her intentions to educate students as much as she can while she can seems less kairoitic and more necrotic, like educational-hospice for students. If we know that their academic careers are dead or dying, she advocates doing the most we can to make their writing lives comfortable and practical. She points again and again to the opportune moments for learning, yet in describing her students Helen, Caesar, and Nathan, she never indicates what she—as an instructor—tried to do or might have done to help them continue, not for retention’s sake but for the sake of the students who clearly needed help. While retention efforts may be ineffectual at times, the one factor that seems well established in successful retention efforts is the relationship between students and faculty members (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The *kairos*, here, seems relegated to the classroom, at least as Powell has described. Most FYW instructors know that their reach and influence extends far beyond those boundaries. The author’s insistence that these three students represent what cannot be generalized provides more of a case for professorial intervention, in the Freirean sense of critical pedagogy. In other words, there is a missed opportunity to help these three students and countless others like them. To use these three students as evidence or even simply “narrative context” (p. 19) raises questions about the author’s awareness of her audience of FYW instructors.

The idea of *acceptable loss* draws another concern into focus. Early on in the book, Powell writes, “Faculty can provide an important check to ensure that we retain a focus on teaching and learning rather than simply keeping students in seats” (p. 7). Many scholars, researchers, and theorists have noted that teaching and learning is deeply personal, yet Powell’s impersonal tone and clinical approach to these exceptional cases seems to be one that reports their situations as acceptable and even confirmatory to the argument’s end: retention efforts do not work. Writing of Helen’s experience with a car accident, Powell notes, “But there is no retention research or well-intentioned

faculty member or institutional program that could have prevented or predicted this accident” (p. 47). Yet, the author seemingly undermines her position by noting that faculty *could* do more, but she does not advocate for this because of her concerns about adjunct working conditions. To be fair, adjunct work and treatment are real and valid concerns. However, including them in this way diminishes the effectiveness of her argument. It is clear that Powell is an advocate for faculty, but for this reviewer, there are ethical questions about the way that she chooses to frame this advocacy because it seems as though she is *willing* to sacrifice help/support for students to make a political point; whether that is what actually transpires or not, the implication alone is enough to cause some readers to bristle. Still, the conversation is an important one to have given the current state of faculty status and expectations for workloads.

Those criticisms aside, this is a book that FYW instructors *should* read. There is much to discuss as FYW instructors might take up Powell’s charge to resist, and there is much to discuss regarding retention efforts themselves. This is a respectable introduction to some of the key figures and debates in retention research, especially for instructors who may not be familiar with these concepts and research. FYW instructors will likely be enamored with Powell’s imaginative visions of kairotic pedagogies. Many, especially those current adjuncts or those recently into more permanent positions, will likely feel emboldened by Powell’s concern for their situations. Some will take issue with a few of Powell’s ideas, but this is a benefit as well. As Powell notes of her pedagogy: “The goal is active, engaged writing that emerges from interested reading and [...] that seizes the opportunity of the particulars confluence of forces and personalities” (p. 122). The desire to initiate a conversation about these issues speaks to the usefulness of her work in this book.

## References

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### About the Reviewer

Jesse Bishop  
Associate Professor of English  
Georgia Highlands College  
United States

Jesse Bishop, Associate Professor of English at Georgia Highlands College, has taught first-year composition, creative writing, and literature courses for more than a decade. He holds doctorate in School Improvement from the University of West Georgia. His areas of research interests and expertise include: composition pedagogies, assessment, instructional technology, and social media and student engagement.



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