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1

INTRODUCTION

Retention, Persistence, and Writing: Expanding the Conversation

Todd Ruecker, Dawn Shepherd,
Heidi Estrem, and Beth Brunk-Chavez

“Colleges are Failing in Graduation Rates.” “It’s Bonus Time for Arizona University Presidents.” “Keep Students, Earn More.” These headlines have something in common: higher education’s increased concern over student retention and graduation in recent years, a concern that has impacted colleges and universities in ways we could not have predicted a decade ago. For example, the majority of states now have funding formulas in place that weigh retention and graduation rates in determining funding allotments (“Performance-Based Funding for Higher Education” 2015). Perhaps not too surprising, university president compensation is now often partially based on reaching and surpassing retention and matriculation benchmarks. And in an interesting and perhaps somewhat predictable move, at least one institution, Coastal Carolina University, has implemented a new policy that directly links faculty salary compression raises to improved student retention rates (Mulhere 2015). The logic goes that with more students staying around to finish their educations, postsecondary institutions can maintain their enrollment and share a portion of the tuition dollars that go along with them. These are three examples, but one would be hard pressed to find a single state, even a single institution, that isn’t “gravely concerned” about retention and graduation rates and is in the process of developing a range of strategic plans, action plans, programs, initiatives, and metrics to keep students enrolled and graduating in a timely manner. We wonder, however, how involved academic programs and their faculty are—or should be—in these conversations?

As teachers and scholars interested in improving student success at our institutions, this increased attention to retention and persistence is welcomed. As teachers of writing in postsecondary institutions, the four of us have been increasingly concerned about students in our classes who show up for a day, a week, or even a few months, and then disappear, sometimes because of unexpected family obligations or simply because they fall behind in the coursework due to an inflexible or overwhelming work schedule. We have explored how to work with students as individuals while thinking of ways to improve success rates across our writing programs. We are not alone. A search through the Writing Program Administrator's listserv (WPA-L) archives shows retention to be an ongoing interest of the composition community, a community who tends to teach small classes and has the opportunity to get to know the students who disappear. However, with the exception of work by Beth Brunk-Chavez and Elaine Fredericksen (Brunk-Chavez and Fredericksen 2008), Pegeen Reichert Powell (2009, 2014), and Todd Ruecker (2015), and some scholarship in basic writing (e.g., Baker and Jolly 1999; Glau 2007; Hagedorn 2012; McCurrie 2009; Peele 2010; Seidman 2012; Webb-Sunderhaus 2010), there has been very little published work that explores the ways writing program instructors and administrators can be involved in discussions of student retention and success and affect change not only at the programmatic level but also at the institutional and state levels.

But what is it that we mean when we enter conversations about retention? As you read this collection, you will notice that a variety of terms are used to talk about issues concerning this subject. When we discuss and analyze issues related to the retention of students in higher education, we use words like *success*, *persistence*, *retention*, “*drop out vs. stop out*,” and others. The title of this collection captures two of the most prominent terms, *retention* and *persistence*. As editors, we use *retention* deliberately because it is the key term most often used in the popular media and in our own scholarship. Retention is an institutional approach—and one that perhaps too often loses sight of student learning, interests, and motivations while focusing on the statistical and financial importance of each retained student. Student *persistence*, though, is in many ways the mirror opposite of retention. This term is most often identified with Vincent Tinto's work; it situates agency differently than does retention and assumes that students have a variety of reasons for continuing in higher education, or not. Using both these terms, as we do in the title, reflects our belief that that continued student learning and engagement in college is a mutual responsibility that involves actions by both institutions and students.

Other terms commonly associated with retention/persistence discourse are involvement, engagement, and integration. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) define involvement as “responsibility of the individual student,” (425) focusing on the energy they put into participating in the classroom and in other aspects of campus life. In contrast, engagement centers on the work that administrators, faculty, and staff do in “creating campus environments that are ripe with opportunities for students to be engaged” (425). Finally, “Integration (or what Tinto might now call ‘sense of belonging’) involves a reciprocal relationship between the student and the campus . . . a student must learn and adopt the norms of the campus culture, but the institution is also transformed by that merger” (425). As we discuss below, institutional considerations of integration have often emphasized the need for the student to change as opposed to the reciprocal obligation for the institution to change. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that Tinto himself has been quoted saying, “I don’t use the word integration anymore—haven’t used it in decades” (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie 2009, 423).

This collection aims to unsettle and complicate these terms via chapters that explore how retention efforts at the institutional level impact writing programs, how writing programs can impact retention efforts at the institutional level, and how these efforts may or may not affect student persistence.

STUDENT RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Discussion around student retention in higher education expanded largely through the work of Vincent Tinto, whose 1975 piece “Dropout from Higher Education” synthesized existing research while introducing a model of student dropout that remained largely unquestioned for a few decades. Basing his theory of dropout on Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide, Tinto argued that students’ likelihood of success at college was based on their integration into the system, namely

that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (Tinto 1975, 94)

Tinto explained that academic integration included engagement in classrooms while social relations meant involvement with students and professors outside the classroom as well as engagement in various

extracurricular activities. He briefly referenced additional factors that positively correlated with retention, such as coming from a higher socioeconomic class background with educated parents and strong high school achievement, but he did not study extensively how students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds fit into his theory.

In later work on retention, Tinto (1988, 1993, 1997) expanded his theory of student integration into academic settings by drawing on Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*. Tinto's work here helped influence others who have also used Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field to make similar arguments that explore the disconnect between particular communities and academic communities and how this disconnect may promote high dropout rates. According to Tinto, "Individuals who come from families, communities, and schools whose norms and behaviors are very different from those of the communities of the college into which entry is made face especially difficult problems in seeking to achieve competent membership in the new communities" (Tinto 1993, 97). As a result, Tinto popularized the idea of establishing learning communities within institutions by arguing that creating a stronger community in the classroom setting would help institutions promote student persistence (Tinto 1997).

During this time, more scholars became interested in documenting various factors that promote student retention, with Alexander Astin's (1997) large scale study of hundreds of institutions being well known. As part of a growing movement aimed at promoting student engagement in college that included work by George Kuh and others, Astin (1997) explored a variety of factors that helped facilitate this engagement such as living on campus, attending a teaching-oriented institution, and not working off campus. Kuh et al. has been a proponent of the notion that student engagement is synonymous with retention/persistence, noting later that "What students do during college counts more in terms of what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college" (Kuh et al. 2005, 8).

While various scholars explored the efficacy of Tinto's model, some began to critique and refine it, explaining that it failed to fully consider a variety of external factors such as ability to pay the costs associated with college attendance (e.g., Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen 1990). More problematic, the approach seemed to promote a deficit model of minoritized students by stating that home communities mismatched with an institution were responsible for minoritized students not succeeding at rates like their majority peers (Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000; Yosso 2005). Tierney (2000) and Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora

(2000) have pointed out that the traditional models focused on integration placed the burden on minoritized students to conform to the institutions rather than expect “the total transformation of colleges and universities from monocultural to multi-cultural institutions” (Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000, 138).

Hrabowski (2005) noted that minoritized students’ success is affected by “motivational and performance vulnerability in the face of negative stereotypes and low expectations, academic and cultural isolation, peers who are not supportive of academic success, and perceived and actual discrimination” (126). Pointing to stagnant retention rates of Latina and Latino students and noting that institutions are failing to inquire about and adopt the successful retention efforts that Latina/o university students are already practicing, Soloranzo, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) argued that “higher education needs to adopt more explicit race-conscious practices to truly enhance the success and achievement of Latina/o college students” (289). Nonetheless, much of the interest in retention comes from a different perspective and advocates a very different set of changes, changes grounded more in the economic interests of institutions and governments and not the ethical imperative to help students succeed.

RECENT INTEREST IN RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

In the twenty-first century, federal and state governments have increasingly become interested in student retention, a trend that has emerged largely out of economic interest. One thread of this argument states that the US economy will need larger numbers of college-educated workers to compete in an increasingly globalized knowledge-based economy. Another area concerns the increasing cost of student loan debt along with increasing default rates, stemming in part from students who borrow money or use government grants (e.g., Pell Grants) and ultimately drop out of college without a job to pay for the accrued debts. Finally, states especially are increasingly concerned with reining in the costs of higher education and, in this perspective, one of the most wasteful areas of spending is educating students who never finish school.

It is not entirely clear where this government interest in student retention in higher education begins, but one likely responsible force has been the increasing costs of college tuition alongside the growth of large educational foundations such as Lumina, Achieve, and the Gates Foundation (Donhardt 2007). Lumina, for instance, has a \$1.5 billion

endowment and spends around \$50 million in grants annually, which has helped make it tremendously visible and influential. Its primary focus, or Goal 2025, is aimed at “increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025” (Lumina Foundation 2015). It intends to reach this goal by developing an “outcomes-based approach that focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025” (Lumina Foundation 2015). Although focused primarily on increasing achievement in the K–12 system, Achieve has also directed some of its attention to higher education with similar aims to Lumina, asserting that “states must collect, coordinate, and use K–12 and postsecondary data to track and improve the readiness of graduates to succeed in college and the workplace” (Achieve 2015). As researchers interested in promoting student success through student learning outcome development and continual assessment of the work we do, we are on one hand interested in the possibilities that Lumina and Achieve promote. However, we share Adler-Kassner’s (2012) concerns that organizations like these risk pushing a reductive, vocational-oriented form of higher education. We have been especially concerned with the rapid increase in high-stakes testing at the K–12 level and the associated push for machine scoring; consequently, increasing usage of words like “accountability” and “data” is troubling and we wonder how long it will be until a K–12-style testing regime comes to higher education. With the introduction of the Collegiate Learning Assessment as a measure of students’ learning at college (a test that is partially based on written response but completely machine scored), this future may not be too far off.

A few trends have emerged at the state level that are shaping higher education, trends that were briefly mentioned in the introductory comments. First, presidents at major universities in states such as Arizona and Kentucky are receiving bonus packages for “sharply increasing student-retention rates,” among other goals (“It’s Bonus Time” 2013). In another area, state legislatures are increasingly pushing performance-based funding for higher education, which ties some amount of allocations toward metrics like student retention and graduation rates. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (“Performance-Based Funding for Higher Education” 2015), this model is in place in thirty states with several others considering this move. In these states, annual state funding for public colleges and universities is linked to improvements in retention rates, and it’s no secret why when in recent decades, many publicly funded state institutions have crossed a critical threshold:

student tuition accounts for more revenue than state appropriations. Therefore, institutions are desperate to find ways to keep students in classes. According to a Government Accountability Office's 2014 report, this milestone was reached on a national level in 2012. During the recession of the early 2000s, state funding decreased by 12 percent overall and by 24 percent per individual student ("State Funding Trends" 2014, 7). This reduction then brought a 55 percent parallel rise in student tuition (7). During this same time period, student enrollment increased by 20 percent, a "trend has been driven mostly by 4-year colleges, which experienced faster enrollment increases and steeper declines in median state funding per student than 2-year colleges" (8). As state funding becomes more scarce and at the same time dependent on meeting certain performance metrics, it is important for faculty to become more aware of these policy shifts and join the conversation in order to shape it in a productive way. As the title of Adler-Kassner's (2012) article alluded, these are "challenging times"; however, writing professionals have much to contribute to these conversations.

When we engage in work on student retention, it is important to think about the consequences of the higher stakes discussed above tied to student success rates, especially at institutions that serve high numbers of minoritized, first-generation, and returning students who have not traditionally been as successful in postsecondary education. Because the stakes are so high, clever administrators might look to initiatives that encourage certain student populations to enroll at a two-year institution in order to "prove themselves" before transferring to a university. While appearing to be more efficient on the surface, this kind of initiative would quietly move some student populations out of the four-year and into the two-year school in order to boost retention rates. As we work on this chapter, the news is filled with controversy over the president of Mount St. Mary's goal to identify early students who might struggle to succeed, encouraging them to start elsewhere, such as the "Army" or a "community college" (Mangan 2016). When faculty raised ethical concerns with this approach, which they felt boosted institutional retention numbers at the expense of students who might otherwise succeed, the administration tried to fire them. In these discussions, the notion of the four-year time to graduation, even though achieved by a minority of students nationwide, drives some of these discussions. For instance, the New Mexico lottery scholarship requirements were recently revised to increase students' minimum enrollment from twelve to fifteen credits per semester. If students fail to attain a sufficient GPA on these fifteen hours or drop a course, they stand to lose the scholarship permanently. Policies like these have the potential

to harm students who stand the most to gain from retention efforts: first-generation, minoritized, language learners, economically disadvantaged students. Minoritized students, including Latinas/os, are already over-represented at community colleges. With only two out of twenty Latina/o students starting at community colleges transferring to four-year institutions (Sóloranzo, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005, 279) we need to be alert for practices and policies that boost a particular institution's numbers at the expense of student opportunities. It is important to consider who is involved in defining student success: administrators, faculty, or students? When this definition is driven by administration without faculty and student involvement, we risk encountering more situations like Mount St. Mary's. Thus, we join the authors in this collection in arguing that it is vital for faculty, including writing program administrators, to be involved in discussions of retention and keep the focus on student success and not simply on boosting institutional numbers.

WHERE COMPOSITION HAS BEEN AND WHERE IT NEEDS TO GO

We are concerned that too often faculty are not involved in these conversations. Retention-related workshops and focus groups are often held on our campuses, but faculty are rarely, or perhaps sparsely, represented; the vast majority of participants work in student affairs, are assigned to student success initiatives, or collect and analyze data in institutional assessment offices. Alternatively, faculty might be involved—but through efforts to recruit potential English majors and not with any real attention to first-year introductory writing courses. Whether the division between faculty and “the rest of the university” is accurate, the implication in these contexts is that faculty are not responsible for contributing to student retention. From this perspective, it is as if curriculum and teaching have been black boxed and student success, retention, and persistence depend on what the rest of the university can do to assist students outside of that box.

So, why aren't faculty more directly involved in these retention and persistence conversations at the institutional level? As ample research has shown, student persistence is affected by a variety of factors, many of which are beyond the scope of any one individual course or two-course sequence: financial concerns; high school preparation; academic placement and progress; out-of-school responsibilities, whether the student lives and/or works on campus; if the student's parents went to college and whether *they* graduated; what the student's first language is; if the student feels as though she belongs on campus, can be successful, and

is motivated to complete the degree; and so on. It is justifiable, then, for faculty to express concern over being held accountable for student persistence. Perhaps what faculty do is one small (albeit significant) piece of this puzzle, and perhaps the reason this retention conversation is dominated by university staff and administrators rather than faculty is that they are in the position to address the whole student (or at least more parts of that whole student). They can gather data on these demographics, implement far-reaching programs, and improve the processes that most affect students outside of the classroom. Justifiably so, many faculty resist being held responsible for student retention because of the perceptions that those conversations threaten academic integrity (think grade inflation), position faculty against an unfair metric (think evaluations based on number of students passing the course), and move our focus from the goal of educating and toward institutional quantitative metrics based on the numbers of students enrolling and graduating (think passing versus learning).

Given these concerns, however, how can first-year composition become more involved in student persistence conversations? If we flip the retention conundrum from institutional focus on percentages, dollars, and degree-completion rates to instead center on student learning, scholarship in writing studies has much to inform our understandings of issues that affect retention. The question of how and why students are or aren't successful in first-year writing courses is one that all of us care about. As noted, composition scholars are often not as present in retention efforts as they might be—and their expertise is not necessarily recognized by on-campus administrators. Our field's focus has largely followed Pegeen Reichert Powell's (2014) conclusion in exploring the role of first-year writing in retention: "while there may be very little we can do to prevent our students from leaving, we have a lot more control over what we do when they're sitting in front of us in our classrooms" (28). The challenge, though, is that when we focus solely on the classroom level, we miss larger changes that can lend themselves to institutional retention efforts without compromising our values as writing faculty.

Within the field of basic writing, some program and classroom-level efforts have taken up retention questions. Tracey Baker and Peggy Jolly found that enrollment in a basic writing program supported the success of conditionally admitted students, a result that helped save their program in the face of budget cuts (Baker and Jolly 1999). Greg Glau's (2007) influential work on the stretch program at Arizona State advocates both for the improved student experience and for the positive impact on retention. His data-driven research indicated that students

in the stretch program—those more at risk for dropping out—were retained at higher rates than their counterparts. As other campuses implemented versions of the program, research often indicated a correlation with increased retention (Estrem, Shepherd, and Duman 2014; McCurrie 2009; Peele 2010).

Others have engaged with these questions from the placement viewpoint, working to enhance the opportunity for students to be placed into the appropriate class. Directed Self-Placement (DSP) research, for example, seems to indicate that students at some schools with DSP are retained at higher rates than their counterparts. Dan Royer and Roger Gilles, who are widely credited with introducing DSP, argue “success often begins with a proper estimation of one’s abilities” (Royer and Gilles 1998, 70). David Blakesley, Erin Harvey, and Erica Reynolds report that a Stretch program, in combination with DSP, led to a 9 percent higher success rate for stretch students (Blakesley, Harvey, and Reynolds 2003). While there are questions about the lack of validity inquiry into DSP and alternative placement models, writing scholars have worked in these kinds of student-centered ways to better support student learning and success.

A variety of other efforts within writing studies has been linked to enhanced student learning and success. For example, Rebecca Babcock and Therese Thonus report on the improved retention for students who have required Writing Center visits (Babcock and Thonus 2012). Others note how learning communities—of which first-year writing courses are usually a key component—seem to enhance retention (Shapiro and Levine 1999). Still others explore how class size—often linked to retention efforts more generally—is key within first-year writing courses as well (Glau 2007).

HOW FACULTY CAN INFLUENCE RETENTION DISCUSSIONS AND SUPPORT STUDENT PERSISTENCE: TWO EXAMPLES

We offer two brief examples from Boise State University that have allowed two of the editors to address students’ needs, offer a challenging curriculum, and contribute to campus-wide retention initiatives. These examples begin to demonstrate the complexity of retention issues—and how they can serve as a fulcrum of competing interests and motivations from a variety of stakeholders. They also demonstrate how challenging it is to engage with issues related to writing courses and retention.

The first involves placement and the challenges and rewards of systems-level change. Despite substantive national and local data on how

problematic the Compass writing placement test was (a report from our institutional research office indicated that students might as well flip a coin to determine their initial writing course), a number of administrators from across our campus were initially reluctant to consider changing the process. After all, even though the Compass exam wasn't valid for accurate placement, it was efficient, deeply embedded in campus data systems, and provided a clear matrix for students, parents, and advisors. However, we were eventually granted permission to pilot an alternative. For several years, we developed, revised, and piloted an online multiple measures course-matching process called The Write Class. With every iteration of our pilot program, our data indicated that students were more successful in their writing class—and therefore more likely to continue at the university—when they used The Write Class for placement. In the spring of 2013, state-level conversations about developing more flexible placement strategies and reducing remediation and meant that we could propose and implement The Write Class as our sole placement process for all incoming students.

In 2012, the incoming class only used the state test score (Compass, ACT, and SAT) charts for placement. In 2013, the incoming class only used The Write Class. Without other substantive changes to curriculum, staffing structure, or funding, student retention rates rose by 5 percent. In other words, approximately 120 additional students successfully completed their first-year writing course than in the previous year. In what will likely surprise no one reading this collection, when students are in the first-year writing course that is best suited for them, they're much more likely to be successful. When they're successful in their first-year writing course, they're able to proceed to 200-level and upper-division courses. Yet to affect this change took years of advocacy, conversations, and piloting.

The second example is about repeating students, a population that has intrigued the four editors of this collection for years. As we reviewed course completion rates at Boise State, we realized that students who are not successful in a first-year writing course are more than twice as likely as first-time students to be unsuccessful the second time. As educators invested in supporting all students—and who operate from the belief that all students have the capacity to be successful in our courses—this finding troubled us. It also prompted us to set up an initiative to support these students through a series of low-stakes, reflection-driven interventions. Among these is a survey that asks students to reflect on the situation surrounding their previous course attempt(s) and to consider how this time might be different. We assumed that students were largely

unsuccessful as a result of non-cognitive factors unrelated to school, such as changing work expectations or new family obligations. What we found was more complex. Such variables did play a role, but students were more likely to indicate that school-related concerns (e.g., struggling to adjust to college or to course material, feeling overwhelmed) affected their ability to complete the course. Knowing this has allowed us to reflect on our own curricula and pedagogies as we make adjustments to support students' persistence at Boise State.

As policies and politics shift at the state levels, the first-year writing classroom continues to play an integral role in many students' first-year experiences and can be a gatekeeper for some students, especially those concerned about their English abilities. Consequently, it behooves those involved in writing programs to attend to these larger discussions and become involved in not only shaping our own classrooms to support students but also in working to advocate for broader changes that align with our disciplinary notions of what should be done to promote student success.

CONTENTS OF THIS COLLECTION

In response to our call for work on retention, we received a wide variety of proposals representing different institutional contexts and different approaches to student retention in writing programs. We noticed two primary trends in the proposals we received: (a) those that took a broader view of retention discourses in institutions and beyond and imagined ways that composition could be involved in these discussions and (b) those that explored curricular changes within our programs to promote student success. With this in mind, we separated the collection into two parts: Part 1: Writing, Retention, and Broader Policy Contexts and Part 2: Writing Program Initiatives that Matter.

Part 1 begins with a chapter by Rita Malenczyk focused on how Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) involved in institutional discussions of student success can and should use an understanding of students' development as writers and thinkers to help their institutions stay on the "assistance" side of the line. Other chapters in Part 1 explore possibilities for collaboration between different institutional agents (Ashley J. Holmes and Cristine Busser), how big data might shape writing program administration retention and assessment effort (Marc Scott), possibilities for professional development among faculty in two-year college English departments (Joanne Giordano, Holly Hassel, Jennifer Heinert, and Cassandra Phillips), how success in first-year

composition connects with overall student success (Nathan Garrett, Matthew Bridgewater, and Bruce Feinstein), and finally how a variety of external factors such as broader social policies factor in to student success (Sara Webb-Sunderhaus).

Part 2 shifts to writing programs themselves and conceptualizing moves within programs to better support student retention and persistence. It opens with a chapter by Pegeen Reichert Powell, who has been one of the leading voices in the field calling for more attention to initiatives focused on student retention. She asks WPAs to embrace the kairotic moment and think of Derrida's concept of "absolute hospitality" as they work to redesign their programs for students success. Other chapters focus on describing various program models including Washington State University's Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program (CLASP; Beth Buyserie, Anna Plemons, and Patricia Freitag Ericsson), University of North Carolina at Pembroke's studio *PlusOne* program (Polina Chemishanova and Robin Snead), Arizona State University's Stretch Program (Sarah Elizabeth Snyder), supplemental instruction on a regional commuter campus (Sarah E. Harris), developmental learning communities at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (Susan Wolff Murphy and Mark Hartlaub), and an undergraduate mentorship program at Northern Illinois University, one of the most linguistically diverse institutions in the Midwest (Michael Day, Tawanda Gipson, and Chris Parker). The collection closes with an afterword by Linda Adler-Kassner that engages with the chapters and the broader political contexts of student retention and persistence.

As seen through the perspectives, conversations, strategies, and solutions discussed in these chapters, seeking opportunities to participate in national, regional, institutional, and programmatic conversations about retention and persistence is important for all stakeholders. Even as first-year composition has long been employing some of the best practices validated by retention research, we would argue that as valuable as our work is, and as important as our research and teaching objectives are, we often fall short of connecting our work to the bigger picture of student success—and we have probably have little idea about what other parts of the university do to promote persistence outside of the classes we teach. While composition studies is working at an advantage in many ways (after all, we do participate in first-year programs on our campuses, we do take assessment seriously, we do professionally develop our instructors), there is still much to be done. We need to consider ways to use data as well as our experiences to spur conversations that matter to us—conversations about retention, persistence,

and student learning. Engaging in retention efforts on campus requires us to ask questions at *both* a student level and a programmatic/systems level. We believe it is a good time for first-year writing programs to contribute to the larger conversation regarding retention and persistence and to bring attention to themselves as key places for advocacy, research, and curricular innovation.

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