ABSTRACT

COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION AND COMPOSITION:
A STUDY ACROSS CONTEXTS

by Katherine Heizenrader

This thesis explores relationships between college student retention and composition, through an analysis of research in both areas and a localized interview-based study. Chapter One consists of a literature review of retention research alongside major terms from composition studies concerning access and enrollment. Chapter Two describes a person-based research study, exploring major ideas that emerged from interviews with advisors, first-year composition instructors, and students distributed between Miami University’s selective admission and open admission campuses in the form of a thematic conversation about retention: how it is defined, who is invested in it, and factors that may lead to its improvement. This conversation raises questions and possibilities for local retention efforts, especially for students who move between commuter-oriented and residential-oriented campuses. Chapter Three presents pedagogical and curricular implications for Miami’s first-year composition program in light of the literature review and interviews, and advances suggestions for participating in institutional conversations.
COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION AND COMPOSITION:

A STUDY ACROSS CONTEXTS

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“The fact is that despite our many years of work on [retention], there is still much we do not know and have yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice.”
– Vincent Tinto, “Research and Practice of Student Retention: What Next?”

“[W]hat would it mean for our work as writing professionals if we take seriously those moments when our work intersects with the problem of retention?”
– Pegeen Reichert Powell, “Retention and Writing Instruction: Implications for Access and Pedagogy”

According to the U.S. Department of Education, an average of 79 percent of first-time students return to college for a subsequent year at four-year institutions, and 60 percent return to two-year institutions (“Institutional Retention”). This means that a substantial number of students who enter colleges and universities each fall will not return the next year. College student retention has at turns been characterized as a “nettlesome problem” and a “retention dilemma” (Braxton and Hirschy; Copeland and Levesque-Bristol). Indeed, there is reason to be concerned about the loss of students from United States colleges and universities; institutional funding is increasingly tied to retention rates, and the attainment of bachelor’s degrees remains unequal across socioeconomic lines in this country. In this thesis, I will address the questions and concerns raised by Vincent Tinto and Pegeen Reichert Powell in the epigraphs above.

My project stems from a growing interest in retention broadly, and a recent push from composition scholars to pay attention to this current issue. Rather than perpetuate notions of retention as a “nettlesome problem” or a troublesome “dilemma,” I want to explore the ways retention has been defined and researched over time, to provide a nuanced reading of the issue before connecting it to important conversations in composition studies about students’ access to and experiences within higher education.

In recent years, composition scholars have become more publicly concerned with retention efforts on their campuses. In her 2009 College Composition and
*Communication* article, Powell warns, “writing programs need to be informed about the politics and priorities of the retention efforts at our respective institutions, so that composition faculty are not recruited to participate in efforts that run counter to our own goals and pedagogies” (669). Powell’s warning is a response to an increased interest in the classroom as a site for retention efforts in higher education. One of the preeminent researchers of retention, Vincent Tinto, has observed that retention scholarship has historically overlooked “the multiple connections between faculty efforts to improve student learning to that of improved student retention” (9). In the current climate, with institutional budgets and reforms increasingly linked to retention and graduation rates, composition faculty and administrators at many institutions may find their positions as teachers and administrators tested or strained to accommodate concerns of student retention.¹ What they may not recognize—and what I argue in this thesis—is that through its unique positioning as a field with strong pedagogical and administrative heritages, composition may approach issues of retention in complex ways, addressing the perspectives of administrative, faculty, and student audiences. Bridging these perspectives could critically advance retention efforts by addressing the sometimes divergent, sometimes overlapping needs of students, educators, and institutions.

The question of composition’s role in student retention—programmatically and pedagogically—is a burgeoning area of interest in the field and advances important questions about students’ representations in retention research. To illustrate the complexities of this developing area, I turn to a recent *Open Words* article by Pegeen Reichert Powell and Danielle Aquiline. The authors represent one college student’s story alongside established retention theories in a busy two-column format. In the left column, the student—Jenelle—shares her struggles with finances, advising, and family support, as well as events she considers educational successes. In the right column, the voices of numerous education researchers clamber to provide formal models explaining many of the experiences Jenelle describes. This somewhat chaotic reading experience “illustrates

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¹ To provide a current local example, a recent article in *The Columbus Dispatch* states that Ohio college and university budgets will be tied to graduation rates: “Colleges and universities with higher graduation rates will be rewarded with more state money under a new funding formula included in Gov. John Kasich’s latest two-year budget proposal” (Jarman). Four-year institutions’ budgets will depend more heavily on graduation rates, though two-year schools will also be affected (Jarman).
[the] difficulties of going back and forth between students’ voices and retention research, [the] struggle to reconcile both of these discourses into one tidy narrative” (Powell and Aquiline 5). In the case of Jenelle’s story, and in the literature review I present in this chapter, a tidy narrative may be hard to come by. A more realistic goal may be to embrace the mess that results from bringing unfamiliar voices and diverse disciplinary perspectives together in discussions of retention. Through this somewhat messy narrative, I hope dominant terms from retention scholarship and composition studies may emerge, to expose key areas of overlap and contention that may lead to more informed and productive conversations for change.

What I intend to do in this chapter specifically is to consider retention discourses as they have developed over time, alongside changes in United States higher education. I will then consider composition’s complex institutional positioning, emphasizing the role of first-year composition programs as recognized gateways to higher education. In considering dominant movements in retention studies alongside landmark definitions of access in composition studies, I hope to suggest that composition already has a long-term stake in concerns of retention that permeate our educational landscape. I will explore key terms within both scholarly areas, terms that address students’ access to and experiences within higher education. These terms conceive of students in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. This review will not be a perfectly chronological enterprise, though I do hope to provide some shape of developments in terminology over time. Through this project, I strive to become better “informed of the politics and priorities of . . . retention efforts” (in Powell’s words) generally, before localizing my inquiry in subsequent chapters. In this way, the exigencies for my work are both broad and local; I plan to consider general conversations about retention alongside particular conversations at my institution, Miami University, in the chapters that follow.

Developing a vocabulary of key terms is valuable since a sustained interest in retention studies nationally shows no sign of subsiding. In “Past to Present: A Historical Look at Retention,” Joseph B. Berger and Susan C. Lyon state that by the 1990s “retention had become a dynamic and full-fledged area of study and had become permanently established as an educational priority throughout American higher education” (23). Tinto, in his historical overview of retention studies, acknowledges that
retention has become “big business,” motivating consulting services, conferences, a journal, and national surveys that attempt to track influences on student persistence (“Research and Practice” 5). These efforts highlight the breadth of interest in retention and speak to the increased use of retention data in institutional rankings and funding (Tinto, “Research and Practice” 5). Now is an opportune time to address what retention can mean historically and presently, before connecting that history to the interests of those who administer and teach within composition programs.

“Persistence,” “Retention,” and “Mortality Rates”: Key Terms in Retention Scholarship

The terms that characterize retention discourses are not neutral, and at turns reveal power structures in higher education and a preference toward medical and psychological discourses (Tinto’s influential book Leaving College is, notably, subtitled Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition) [emphasis added]. Early studies of student departure tracked student “mortality” rates, or the rates at which students left college before completing a degree (Berger and Lyon 7). This figurative death of the student suggests, to me, that early efforts in enrollment management viewed students in a limited scope; once a student left the university, he or she essentially ceased to exist. Tinto’s model for student departure (which I will discuss at greater length shortly) still dominates retention scholarship, and “extend[s] Spady’s (1970) work on connecting Durkheim’s (1951) theory of suicide to the study of college student persistence” (Braxton and Hirschy 67). Tinto justifies this model by arguing that suicide and student departure both “represent a form of voluntary withdrawal from communities . . . to signal somewhat similar forms of rejection of conventional norms regarding the value of persisting in those communities” (Leaving College 99). The connection between student departure and death runs deep in the literature, though student “mortality” as a term is no longer in popular use.

More commonly used terms today are “retention” and “persistence.” According to Berger and Lyon, retention refers to “the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation,” while persistence is “the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year
through degree completion” (7).² In this way, retention is inherently institution-focused; it relates to the success of an institution to keep its students enrolled (and an institution’s loss of students over time is calculated by student attrition rates). Persistence, in contrast, relates to an individual student’s trajectory through higher education at one or more institutions. I will broadly refer to this area of study as “retention studies,” though I will be careful to make distinctions between terms throughout my discussion as necessary.

The history of retention is closely tied to histories of access to higher education in the United States. Berger and Lyon trace the development of higher education administration alongside concerns of student retention and graduation rates, and argue that many of the institutional structures we see today were established with the express purpose of controlling enrollments and, concurrently, retention rates. They write of developments in the 1960s and 1970s:

As campuses grew and disciplinary fields became more specialized, so too did the roles of the professionals on the campus. In particular, the growth of student affairs administrators, admissions officers, and enrollment management specialists was driven by, and helped develop, retention efforts across the spectrum of American higher education. (4)

Berger and Lyon argue that prior to the twentieth century, United States universities were not particularly concerned with tracking enrollment data or with formalizing efforts to retain their students. They write, “The first 250 years in higher education focused more on institutional survival than on student persistence and retention” (12). Universities in these early years were sustained by a small elite class. College degrees were not standard, and the social pressure to retain students to the completion of their baccalaureate education did not exist. It was not until “the post-World War II boom” that institutions of higher education took on a serious “interest in student access and degree

² Berger and Lyon note, “While these terms are closely related, they are not synonymous” (7). They also explain that “attrition refers to students who fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters” and “stopout refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from an institution or system” (7).
“attainment” (Berger and Lyon 14). Unprecedented access to higher education spurred formalized efforts to control enrollments and to investigate factors influencing students’ persistence to degree completion. This post-World War II shift in interest to student enrollments and their management informs my discussion of retention scholarship and its key terms.

From Psychology to Environment: Tinto & An Evolution of Models for Student Departure

In his 2005 *Journal of College Student Retention* article, Tinto reflects on historical developments in retention scholarship. He writes,

> When the issue of student retention first appeared on the higher educational radar screen . . . student attrition was typically viewed through the lens of psychology. Student retention or the lack thereof was seen as the reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation. Students who did not stay were thought to be less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college education was believed to bestow. [emphasis added] (2)

Such psychological models for retention represent a preoccupation with students’ individual attributes and characteristics; they largely ignore the complex interactions between students and the institutions they enter, and place blame on “dropouts” who lack motivation or commitment. In *Leaving College*, Tinto acknowledges that student “dropouts” have been mistakenly portrayed as fitting a particular kind of personality profile and that, “as a consequence, we have been given the mistaken view that student dropouts are different or deviant from the rest of the student population” (2). While psychological models established retention scholarship as a legitimate area of educational research, they have come to be seen as limiting in their view of students and students’ relationships to their institutional environments. Alternative models have proliferated over the years; the limitations of early models have led scholars such as John M. Braxton and Amy S. Hirschy to call for “a multitheoretical approach” for investigating student retention (61).

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3 Mary Soliday states, “A college experience was not central to middle-class aspirations in the way it is today; though enrollments grew during this period, declines were periodic and threatened institutional growth and stability” (12).
In response to the limitations of psychological models, Tinto worked to develop a more nuanced understanding of student retention beginning in the 1970s. Tinto states, “As part of a broader change in how we understood the relationship between individuals and society, our view of student retention shifted to take account of the role of the environment, in particular the institution, in student decisions to stay or leave” (“Research and Practice” 2). This shift toward a deeper consideration of the interactions between students and institutions has had a lasting influence on the research of retention. Tinto calls this a movement toward the “age of involvement;” he writes, “Research . . . served to reinforce the importance of student contact or involvement to a range of student outcomes not the least of which was student retention . . . We learned that involvement matters and it matters most during the critical first year of college” (“Research and Practice” 3). Involvement, in these early days of Tinto’s research, was determined largely by residential students’ extracurricular activities on their campuses. As a result of this emphasis on extracurricular involvement, Tinto writes, “Most retention activities were appended to, rather than integrated within, the mainstream of institutional academic life” (“Research and Practice” 3). The perspectives and expertise of faculty were, and to an extent, remain absent from the research and practice of retention. Retention scholarship still struggles to include diverse faculty voices concerning classroom practices in its dominant conversations. This estrangement of faculty from retention efforts informs my current project; I argue alongside Tinto and others that the containment of retention research and practice has been an impediment, for students, faculty, and administrators, in advancing conversations about retention.

As stated above, early environmental models were limited in scope; Tinto acknowledges that his first studies were largely ignorant of important issues of race, class, and gender. These studies focused primarily on traditional populations of college students on four-year, residential campuses. Tinto states that retention scholarship “did not, in its initial formulation, speak to the experience of students in other types of institutions, two- and four-year, and of students of different gender, race, ethnicity, income, and orientation” (“Research and Practice” 3). I find it significant that retention scholarship originated with an eye to the experiences of “traditional” students. This shows us that considerations of race, class, gender, and other important aspects of
students’ identities have been *integrated* into this body of research over time. Retention studies builds from a scholarly tradition, and certainly not the only one, that must reconcile its deficit-oriented past with contemporary goals of articulating the needs of diverse students and institutions.

While the Tinto model excluded diverse student perspectives in its beginnings, it did advance a much-needed consideration of students and institutions in interaction. By focusing on interaction, Tinto’s model provides a framework for understanding students’ relationships to institutions; and it is a framework on which nearly all subsequent research in retention is built. Berger and Lyon observe that “Tinto’s interactionist theory incorporates elements of both psychological and organizational theoretical models” and takes into account the relationship between individual students and their institutional environments (19). Tinto identifies attributes on the level of individual students and on the level of students’ interactions with their institutions: attributes that he claims can lead to some generalizable factors influencing student retention. For students’ motivation, he identifies *intention* and *commitment*, and for students’ relationships to institutions, he identifies *adjustment*, *difficulty*, *incongruence*, and *isolation* (*Leaving College* 39). Tinto explains that each factor “describes an important interactional outcome arising from individual experiences within the institution” (*Leaving College* 39). In a way, Tinto is identifying differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within this model: “Goal commitment refers to a person’s commitment to the educational and occupational goals one holds for oneself . . . Institutional commitment refers to the person’s commitment to the institution in which he/she is enrolled” (*Leaving College* 45). Within this framework, students integrate successfully into institutions, or they do not.4 Despite his criticism of definitions of deviant “dropouts,” in his 1993 revision of *Leaving College*, Tinto uses the term “deviant” in describing students who do not integrate successfully into institutional structures, socially and/or academically. He writes,

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4 Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, in her 2010 *Journal of Basic Writing* article on retaining basic writing students, forwards William G. Tierney’s criticism of the Tinto Model; there is a danger, he states, in “merely inserting minorities into a dominant cultural frame of reference that is transmitted within dominant cultural forms, leav[es] invisible cultural hierarchies intact” (qtd. in Webb-Sunderhaus 106-107). Webb-Sunderhaus then goes on to draw parallels between Tinto’s language of “integration” and David Bartholomae’s notion of “inventing the university,” which can also be seen as assimilationist in tone (107).
Clearly the term deviant is best understood here as meaning different from the common orientation of the majority within the institution. It need not imply deviance in any other domain (e.g., behavior) or with regard to some wider pattern of intellectual orientations. One need not be a societal deviant to find oneself at odds with the intellectual climate of a given institution. (Leaving College 57)

Tinto himself observes that, to lump all “dropouts” and their experiences together is limiting and largely unproductive. He writes, “Such stereotypes [about dropouts] are reinforced by language, by a way of talking about student departure, which labels individuals as failures for not having completed their course of study in an institution of higher education” (Leaving College 2). While Tinto’s intentions appear to be good – he is, after all, advocating for an improved understanding of how underrepresented students in particular may navigate their ways through institutions of higher education – his use of the word “deviant” here remains troubling. The term perpetuates an attitude of exclusion, of marginalization. Such language, even if it is wrapped up in an attitude of care, has a powerful influence on retention scholarship. It is language that still privileges the notion that students who leave an institution are individually deficient in some way. Despite these limitations, Tinto’s interactionist model is helpful in that it allows for a more nuanced view of student departure than a vocabulary of “student mortality rates” would probably provide. In tracing developments in retention studies, we can see how the key terms that define our language of students and student retention have the potential to limit or widen our vision of the ways in which students interact with their institutions.5

Input-Environment-Outcome: Astin & Variables for Persistence

Just as it is dangerous to characterize all “dropouts” in the same way, so is it unwise to assume that all students interact with institutions similarly. Alexander Astin,

5 Linda Adler-Kassner employs the notion of framing in her book The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers. She recognizes that dominant frames often exclude voices from writing programs and the students those programs serve. She warns, “Positing arguments that employ different frames means that we run the risk of remaining marginalized from these [dominant] discussions” (142). In this light, WPAs should not discount the dominant frames surrounding retention at their institutions, especially if those frames seem reductive in their definition of students’ experiences.
who remains widely cited in contemporary retention scholarship, has spent decades craft- 
ing a model that attempts to judge the impact of numerous variables on students’ 
experiences in higher education, including their motivation to remain enrolled. The result is the Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) model, which considers students’ “input 
variables” alongside institutions’ “environmental variables” to determine particular “outcomes.” This model seeks to identify predictable outcomes given a huge range of 
variables. In his words, Astin’s model strives to accomplish the following:

*Inputs* refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the 
institution; *environment* refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, 
and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and *outcomes* refers 
to the student’s characteristics after exposure to the environment. (7)

Notably, Astin, in his 1993 revision of his 1977 study *Four Critical Years*, 
advances a medical-oriented model for understanding students’ experiences in higher 
education. In this orientation, students are recipients of services that transform – or 
perhaps in the most extreme sense – *improve* or *remedy* them in some way. Astin notes 
that a key distinction between medicine and education “is that the causal connections 
between certain treatments and certain medical outcomes are much better understood 
than are the causal connections between educational programs (environments) and 
student outcomes” (21). This concern – that institutions cannot act as sterile laboratories 
for identifying causal connections between students’ experiences and their persistence – continues to irritate some retention scholars seeking definitive answers for students’ 
leaving. Such a focus on isolatable variables leads to questions about what features of 
students’ experiences are within an institution’s control. Tinto reminds us that 
institutions “often have little immediate control over student prior experiences or private 
lives” (“Research and Practice” 6). Astin’s model seems to be grounded in the 
assumption that to seek such “causal connections” between students (patients) and their 
educational experiences (treatments) is theoretically possible and worth striving for. This 
conception of student-institution interaction leaves me asking whether students’ 
experiences can or should be presented so clinically.

A focus on isolating variables influencing student retention continues to inform 
the field. Articles in the *Journal of College Student Retention* regularly report studies on
the impact of variables as diverse as student involvement in first year seminars, faculty emotional intelligence, and even student Facebook usage on student persistence (Crissman; Lillis; Morris et al). While these studies are often highly localized, they represent an ongoing, formalized interest in seeking “causal connections” between students’ participation in certain activities and their likelihood to remain in higher education. This scholarly tradition has legitimized the study of student departure by maintaining quite rigorous standards for research seeking concrete answers to questions about retention.

Both Tinto’s and Astin’s models may present imperfect vocabularies for defining students’ experiences, and through this they illustrate ongoing challenges of conceiving of retention and related issues. Their models have accomplished a great deal in advancing research in retention, but they also demonstrate the challenges of viewing students’ experiences on an individual versus institutional level. And they reveal questions: how do our understandings of student enrollment and retention inform our real, day-to-day interactions with students, and our methodological choices as we continue to advance research in college student retention?

**Composition Studies & Retention: A History of Access & Enrollment**

If Berger and Lyon are correct, and increased specialization in post-WWII American universities was “driven by, and helped develop, retention efforts across the spectrum of American higher education,” then it is valuable to consider composition’s positioning in this story (4). Composition scholarship is certainly no stranger to concerns of access and enrollment. As a field composition is often historically linked to the first-year composition course, which is regularly recognized as a significant site of gatekeeping and remediation (as detailed by Mary Soliday and Tom Fox, among many others). Powell explains that the study of retention emerged as college student enrollments were changing in the 1930s, at a time of a “shift to an urban industrialized society and the corresponding need for managers and professionals” that include WPAs (671). The remedial history of college composition is tied to this twentieth century shift toward enrollment management. Soliday, in *The Politics of Remediation: Institutional and Student Needs in Higher Education*, states, “Remediation serves immediate
institutional needs to solve crises in growth – in enrollment, curriculum, mission, and admissions standards – as much as it does to serve students’ needs” (2). Soliday recognizes that students’ entrance into the university involves a regular negotiation between student and institutional demands. The first-year composition course is always informed, in some way, by institutional pressures of admissions and enrollment management, and standards for college readiness are constantly negotiated and renegotiated due to these pressures.

The managerial or administrative influence on composition’s development as a field has been at turns overlooked and contested. Donna Strickland, in The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies, argues that composition programs – as well as the WPAs who support them – should claim their managerial past while also interrogating its relationship to their pedagogical goals. She cites Walter Jewell’s call that “administrators must find ways to define their role, to themselves as well as to the academic community at large, as educators rather than simply as managers” (93). In this view, composition professionals must balance their positions as enrollment managers and teachers simultaneously. In Defending Access, Tom Fox identifies “the strange combination of power and powerlessness that characterizes writing program administrators” (79). Fox argues that WPAs, like the students they serve, are subject to the social and political forces that influence access to higher education. WPAs often serve the troubling dual roles of institutional gatekeeper and low-level manager. This “strange combination of power and powerlessness” characterizes histories of composition broadly. Strickland seeks to reclaim the managerial influence in this history, in an attempt to articulate the WPA’s complex relationship to institutional structures and hierarchies; in doing so, she complicates traditional understandings of access. In her history, the democratizing forces of increased access to higher education in the second half of the twentieth century have in many cases led to stricter administrative roles:

[The] setting in motion of administrative structures to, on the face of it, meet the needs of students who would not otherwise have had access to a college education marks an important condition of possibility of the field of composition studies. It is the moment when material conditions made it possible to begin to offer doctoral degrees in composition and rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s: people who
could direct first-year writing programs, basic writing programs, writing-across-the-curriculum programs, and writing centers were suddenly in demand. 

[emphasis added] (82)

In this view, composition owes much of its professionalization to the development of rather conservative administrative structures. WPAs have been embedded in concerns of student access and enrollment from the beginning of their mass professionalization, not as part of a radical agenda of democratic access that often tints composition’s origin myths.\(^6\)

I would like to pause here to acknowledge the important voices within composition that are already addressing problems of retention. It is not surprising that scholars in basic writing, a field long concerned with questions of representation and marginalization, have been particularly vocal about retention issues. Specifically, Pegeen Reichert Powell, Matthew Kilian McCurrie, and Sara Webb-Sunderhaus have all recently published articles that address the challenges of taking up and responding to institutional discourses of retention as instructors and administrators of basic writing. Webb-Sunderhaus makes the thoughtful point that, “While we can learn from scholarship on retention and persistence, as compositionists we already know a great deal about our students, thanks to the nature and values of our field” (“When Access” 111). I would like to explore Webb-Sunderhaus’s suggestion that the nature and values of composition have a strong orientation toward individual students’ experiences within higher education. I feel it is a helpful starting point in exploring the key terms that inform composition’s historical and current notions of students whose first entry into higher education is quite possibly through the door of the composition classroom. Such an exploration of composition’s values and past may reveal that composition programs can have a more important role in negotiating student and institutional needs than perhaps they have received credit for.

“Diving In”: Shaughnessy & A New Language of Basic Writing

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\(^6\) Strickland writes, “[R]ather than represent composition studies as connected to material, hierarchical workplaces, most histories of composition studies have instead offered histories of ideas, including overviews or critiques of composition pedagogy, that more or less presume an audience of professionally secure teachers” (5).
Mina Shaughnessy, in her 1976 *College Composition and Communication* article “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” recognizes the challenges of balancing institutional gatekeeping practices with the experiences of real students and teachers. Shaughnessy takes to task the medical-oriented language associated with basic writing and remediation. She writes,

> Not only do medical metaphors dominate the pedagogy (remedial, clinic, lab, diagnosis, and so on), but teachers and administrators tend to discuss basic-writing students much as doctors tend to discuss their patients, without being tinged by mortality themselves and with certainly no expectations that questions will be raised about the state of their health. (234)

Shaughnessy’s project is a redemptive one; she aims to establish more critical metaphors detailing the stages by which instructors of basic writing may re-see their relationship to students as those students take up academic discourses. The result is a multi-staged scale consisting of four metaphors: guarding the tower, converting the natives, sounding the depths, and diving in. We now recognize the limitations of these metaphors, which can reinforce the image of an Ivory Tower with a gatekeeping function, as well as their arrangement on a narrow developmental scale. Also potentially limiting is the focus on the teacher’s experience in this project, and an obscuring of the students’ perceptions of their engagement with basic writing pedagogies. Even so, Shaughnessy’s lasting influence on basic writing, and on composition’s relationship to complex questions about access, is indisputable. She collapses notions of the educator as a static authority figure when she argues that the basic writing teacher should, as the ultimate step, strive “to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (238). In this view, student errors are subject to correction, but with the understanding that the institutional structures that define those errors are often unjust and need to be

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7 After Shaughnessy, many compositionists have advocated for more “student present” scholarship in basic writing. In her 1999 *Journal of Basic Writing* article, Susanmarie Harrington offers a history of basic writing scholarship in response to Wendy Bishop’s assertion that such scholarship has traditionally been a “student vacant” enterprise (91). Harrington surveys notable publications on basic writing and basic writers, from Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* to David Bartholomae’s “The Tidy House” to articles in the *Journal of Basic Writing* over time.
interrogated. Hers is a view that sets a precedent for composition – particularly the study of basic writing – to doubt gatekeeping structures that reduce students to patients and teachers to the doctors who treat their ailments. (This project is an important one, especially when we consider that Astin discusses a doctor-patient model for education nearly two decades after the publication of “Diving In.”) Shaughnessy’s work also sets a precedent for questioning composition’s influence on students’ lives within complex institutional systems. In The Politics of Remediation, Soliday judges that “Because she understood that remedial programs are often used to solve institutional crises, Shaughnessy also believed that these programs could not function as ‘the’ avenue for access to a liberal education” (14). While composition instructors can inhabit powerful sponsoring positions, they are also constrained by the pressures of admissions standards often dictated from outside of their immediate control.

“Power and Powerlessness”: Fox, Access, & Standards

Tom Fox, in Defending Access, advances a discussion of access and the inconsistent standards that can determine access, beginning with the fabled Harvard narrative of early writing placement exams. Fox challenges the notion that a homogenous college population has given way to an educational system of low standards due to an increase in “multicultural” students entering college (5). In advancing conversations about access for African American students particularly, Fox questions the “wish for the mythic equal past” that pervades discussions about standards; in these arguments, he asserts, “each author claims to be reasserting a standard that supposedly existed in the past and is now threatened or abandoned, without dealing with students whose diverse histories and cultures challenge an easy comparison” (5). Access, Fox argues, is linked significantly to standards in the form of testing, evaluations, and admission. And such standards should not be considered monolithic, static institutions that exist somehow apart from the changing landscape of society.

For Fox, composition professionals (whom he calls writing teachers) exist in a liminal position between power and powerlessness; he writes, “as writing teachers, we are institutionally positioned to gatekeep, to do harm. To create access, we must go against the grain” (17). Fox also leaves us asking what is within the writing teacher’s
control when it comes to sustaining students’ access to education and to academic discourses and political participation. He admits, “We can’t expect writing instruction to save the world or even to intervene in the economic and social worlds that prevent [students’] full participation.” (17). Fox reminds us that access is a complex phenomenon, influenced by standards at numerous twists and turns; these standards, he argues, “conserve and retain; their use is central to those who wish nostalgically for a monocultural university” (71). In Fox’s view “we normally say that we ‘have’ or ‘hold’ standards, but standards, especially because of their political nature, are always in action” (71). Fox’s perspective is valuable when considering more nuanced readings of college student retention; it seems that early models of retention fell victim to the image of a “monocultural university” that has taken on increasingly diverse student populations over time, populations assumed less likely to integrate easily into academic discourses and campus life. Because conservative standards have a powerful influence, Fox determines that “the difficulty of increasing access involves work[ing] simultaneously across multiple programs and sites” (71). Composition programs may not be able to “save the world,” but in Fox’s view they are more likely to work more effectively against barriers to access by collaborating with other institutional interests. Providing examples from his own institution, Fox argues that subtle advances can be made when “ideologies that would . . . prevent . . . access [are] challenged and, in some cases, partly transformed” (90). Fox’s call for collaboration is a reminder that changes in standards and access cannot take place in a vacuum.

**A Balance of Needs: Soliday & The Politics of Remediation**

Not unlike Fox, Soliday argues for a more nuanced and critical reading of access and standards. In her history of changing enrollments and admissions standards at City College of City University of New York specifically, she writes, “the number of courses and remediation’s role within a program serve political needs as much as students’ needs” (53). Like Fox, she is critical of a “monocultural” past in higher education. She argues that periodic literacy “crises” have been fueled by anxiety over the enrollment of “always new” minority students. Soliday identifies what she sees as institutional structures that allow for access while conserving selectivity:
The use of internal barriers and the differentiation of public higher education institutionalize our historical ambivalence toward that uses of education to achieve class mobility. The unselective institution exists in order to maintain democratic access without damaging selectivity in a hierarchical system. (13)

This perspective – that open admission policies can actually conserve selective systems – is important to discussions of retention. Characterizations of student attrition as a “nettlesome problem” or “dilemma” resemble crisis discourses concerning admissions and remedial programming. A preoccupation with “fixing” the problem of student departure may ignore Soliday’s claim that “the typical student at a four-year college remains a white and middle-class son or daughter of one or more college-educated parents” (61). Powell expresses concerns that administrative fixation on retention may lead to retention efforts dictating admissions standards. She writes, “There is a risk . . . that institutions could use retention data to craft admissions policies. In effect, retention could determine access” (672). I fear that admissions and retention are already long bound together. Tinto acknowledges that more selective universities have higher retention rates:

Not surprisingly, institutional selectivity tends to be inversely related to rates of departure (Astin 1975; Fetter 1977). The more selective institutions as a group tend to graduate a larger proportion of their students than the less selective institutions. They do so even after differences in the composition of their student bodies are taken into consideration (Raimst 1981). (Leaving College 33)

Elite institutions that have traditionally catered their programs, services, and even their physical design to students of particular educational and cultural backgrounds have likely perfected their ability to retain such students. And as a result, the scope of their services and programs for students, as well as their view of student needs, is limited. Indeed, it is unreasonable to expect that every institution will emphasize the same supports; contextual factors will naturally influence the goals of each institution. But John Tassoni, in his exploration of the history of access and basic writing at Miami University, reminds us that historically selective institutions that remain sedimented in old attitudes of elite student bodies do so at their own risk. Using Miami as an example, Tassoni writes, “given that . . . students at elite colleges are beginning to resemble those at second-tier
schools . . . the need for Oxford to weigh accessibility issues against the standards it imposes on its own changing demographics increases annually” (119). This local dynamic informs my own inquiry, and I will discuss such issues at Miami in the next chapter.

Soliday’s detailed discussion of standards and remediation as they relate to college composition is valuable when investigating the terms that constitute the histories of retention studies and composition studies. Her reading of college access is complex, and reminds us that increased access does not in and of itself democratize higher education. Such considerations are important when considering the numerous factors that may help or hinder students’ persistence after they enter higher education.

What It Means to Get to Know Them: Sternglass & Persistence

Since “persistence” refers to individual students’ experiences through education, compositionists are likely better prepared to address this aspect of retention studies. Marilyn Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them* shows the possibilities of a rich longitudinal study stemming from the relationship between an engaged composition instructor and her students over several years. In framing her study of basic writers at City College, Sternglass explains, “The difficulty with many statistical studies of retention is that either the time frame is too short or not enough information is known about students who leave the college” (Introduction xiii). Through interviews, observations, and the analysis of student writing over time, Sternglass shows how the six-year trajectory of a few students can take unexpected turns. In analyzing students’ texts and interviewing them, she identifies developments in confidence and critical thinking that could not be observed over a short period or without a genuine interest in students’ lives in and out of school. Sternglass takes written feedback from instructors into consideration, as well as the

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8 I contrast studies of individual persistence here with broad aggregate studies of student retention. For a study of institutional retention rates over several decades, an entirely different interpretation of a longitudinal project on retention, I recommend Gary T. Boden’s “Retention and Graduation Rates: Insights from an Extended Longitudinal View.”

9 Sternglass’s context for research, New York’s City University system, was highly influenced by Mina Shaughnessy’s work. Perhaps *Time to Know Them* is informed in part by “Shaughnessy’s call . . . for longitudinal research that would complicate the gatekeeping functions of writing programs” (Soliday 14).

10 Features of students’ lives Astin might refer to as “input variables.”
language of course syllabi and assignment prompts. This rich collection of data serves to support Sternglass’s assertion that “The degree of empathy and support between an instructor and an individual student can play a crucial role in the student’s ability to succeed in a discipline or even to be motivated to continue in that discipline” (195). Sternglass’s study is a valuable consideration of the idea of “engagement” as it transpires between instructors and students.

In addition to classroom observations and the close analysis of student writing produced for school, Sternglass considers students’ extracurricular writing activities. Sternglass explains that, through such writing activities, students are able to apply “old knowledge” built on their diverse cultural backgrounds to new learning situations with confidence that may not have been afforded to them otherwise (112). Sternglass makes a compelling argument for longitudinal studies of students’ experiences that complicate quantitative understandings of student retention, and that provide narratives of students’ experiences that are not always straightforward and smooth. Her study is also valuable – and rare – in retention research in that it positions reading and writing across the disciplines as valuable indicators of student development, suggesting also that faculty communication with students has motivational potential. Sternglass represents a student population “willing to devote all their energies to achieving academic and professional success,” an image that defies notions of students as passive patients in need of remedy (302). Time to Know Them engages discourses of composition and retention in a manner that remains, in many ways, unprecedented in scope.11

Sternglass is unable to attribute particular pedagogical choices directly to students’ persistence, and this shows the difficulty of isolating concrete variables influencing retention (a problem that continues to plague retention scholars). Soliday notes that Sternglass, despite her rich knowledge of students’ development as writers and people, sees composition instructors’ influence on students’ persistence as limited. She writes,

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11 Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis’ study Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College is another compelling longitudinal account of students’ development as writers and students. Of the first-year students in their study they write, “At a time of change, they were all developing new writing skills as they were recomposing themselves as human beings in response to other human beings” (13).
Marilyn Sternglass reveals that, even though some students experienced important changes in their cultural identities, these changes did not affect their persistence in college . . . Sternglass does not award substantial agency to English teachers in preparing students to succeed in liberal arts classes: neither writing teacher nor composition course plays a prominent role in helping students to stay in school over the long term. (8)

Soliday’s observation is a reminder that there are no easy answers to broad questions of retention, and that our conversations continue to struggle between first-hand accounts of students’ experiences and aggregate studies of student retention rates. It also illustrates Tinto’s concern that there is a divide between what has been theorized about student retention and what is definitively known to improve retention. Through the literature review in this chapter, I hope to have shown that these concerns are at the heart of contemporary conversations about retention and it has become increasingly clear that compositionists have valuable contributions to make – to advance their own programs as well as institution-wide efforts.

These concerns – of defining retention and of representing students’ experiences – inform the study I will present in the chapters that follow. While my own primary research may have raised more questions than conclusive answers, I find the local exploration of questions of retention valuable and enlightening. In the chapter that follows, I will apply this literature review to findings from interviews with multiple stakeholders at Miami University, an institution that encompasses diverse campus cultures: open-admission regional campuses and a selective residential “public ivy” campus. In talking with people who are directly concerned with matters of retention – advisors, first-year composition instructors, and students – I hope to come closer to articulating what retention means locally to Miami. Chapter Three will present implications for the curricular choices Miami’s first-year composition program may make, as well as suggestions for engaging in effective conversations about retention that go beyond the program.
CHAPTER TWO
“LIKE WALKING INTO A HUGE ROOM”: ENGAGING LOCAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RETENTION

“I think the only time it gets overwhelming is when you don’t have a seat of service. It’s like walking into a huge room; everybody has a seat, and you’re trying to find one. And there isn’t one. And so, there’s space for one, so you can either [say], ‘Uh, so I’m just gonna leave,’ or you go get your chair and pull it up and you get into the meeting. And so, I only find myself frustrated when I know that there’s more that I can do and I just can’t seem to get it out, and so I’m constantly searching for ways to make things more efficient, to aid someone else’s life.”
- Monica, advisor and instructor at a Miami regional campus

In this chapter, I will discuss the qualitative study I conducted at Miami University concerning student retention. I will outline my processes for planning and carrying out interviews with diverse stakeholders at multiple Miami campuses. I will then present major themes that emerged from these interviews with advisors, students, and composition instructors. Rather than divide the interview data along predictable lines of affiliation – by advisors, instructors, students – I will present them thematically. I will do this in the spirit of the epigraph that frames this chapter. These words from Monica, a participant in the study, liken participation in retention conversations to “walking into a huge room.” This is the image Monica conjured when I asked her how she balances her responsibilities for retaining students at the university with the day-to-day realities of her work as an advisor and instructor. In a way, I hope this chapter can serve as a kind of virtual room where voices not always heard together can mix and mingle. Advisors, instructors, and students will talk across common themes to paint a nuanced picture of what retention means between our campuses.

Locally, Miami is an intriguing site for exploring retention. The Oxford campus, with its “public ivy” image and high standards for admission, boasts one of the highest first-to-second year retention rates in the state of Ohio. According to the Ohio Board of Regents, in 2008, 88% of Oxford students persisted from their first to second year (“First to Second Year”). In contrast, the open-admission campuses in Hamilton and Middletown have among the lowest rates in the state, 61% and 56%, respectively (“First
to Second Year”). These numbers are not particularly surprising; Webb-Sunderhaus reminds us that “open-admission institutions are known for having retention and persistence rates lower than those of more selective institutions” (99). But Miami’s positioning is unique in that it allows us to see the contrasts between institutional models in sites united by name but unique in terms of history. Tassoni, in his history of basic writing at Miami, explains that remedial education has traditionally been left to the regional campuses in Hamilton and Middletown. He argues that the relegation of preparatory composition courses to the regional campuses “could be viewed as an attempt to assure Oxford’s reputation for selectivity and quality by separating [them] from the university’s efforts to provide access” (104). These institutional differences stand out to individuals – students and instructors – who move between campuses. According to Hamilton’s Office of Institutional Research, nearly 450 Hamilton students were in enrolled in classes at Oxford each semester in 2013 (“Ox-Regional Comparison”). These students represent an important bridge between related but distinct campuses. Furthermore, we know that Miami’s Oxford campus has an eye to retention through its Succeed at Miami retention initiative. In a document distributed to the English Department in the fall of 2012, the university claimed that Oxford’s attrition rate produces an $18 million decline in revenue with each “lost cohort” (“Succeed at Miami”). Individuals who transition between campuses during their educational careers reveal the challenges of adapting to campuses with vastly different supports and assumptions about students’ needs, knowledge, and experiences, and can enrich our understanding of what it really means to “succeed at Miami” beyond the quantitative enrollment data that so often dominate institutional retention discussions.

I feel that a caveat is necessary before I move into the particulars of the study. I did not approach my research – as many inquiries into retention do – with the aim to isolate concrete causes for student retention or attrition. I did not feel I was equipped with a mechanism for measuring such impacts and, more importantly, I doubted whether such a pursuit was worthwhile in my current framework. My focus instead has been to foster an open-ended conversation between diverse interests at Miami. Interview questions included, “Do you feel issues of student retention are significant to the work you do here?” and “What do you feel are the most common challenges – to your
knowledge – for students to stay in college on your campus?” (See appendix for all interview questions.) Through these questions I wanted to gain a sense of how retention is defined across campuses, and also how various stakeholders feel they may or may not be invested in retention efforts. The interviews brought forth personal accounts and compelling anecdotes from each participant. These qualitative data may not lead to definitive statements about improving retention at Miami, but they can provide a richer account of the attitudes and experiences participants have concerning retention. These accounts will lead to an implications section in Chapter Three.

The study consisted of hour-long interviews with twelve individuals on different Miami campuses, whom I interviewed between January and March of 2013. I recruited academic advisors, students, and composition instructors from across campuses. I sent recruitment emails through listservs for composition instructors, relocation students, and commuter students. I also recruited advisors through handouts distributed in their offices. The study was approved by Miami’s IRB and all participants signed consent forms granting permission to use their responses in the study. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

My recruitment efforts yielded a somewhat boisterous collection of interview transcripts, revealing the perspectives of one commuter student, nine composition instructors distributed between campuses, and two regional campus academic advisors. What follows is a conversation built on issues and concerns study participants raised in our interviews. I have selected passages from nine interviews that I feel provide the richest and most urgent themes and issues. Everyone’s words were valuable in the study, but the high number of Oxford composition instructors led to repetitions, and I found it necessary to reduce those interviews for the purposes of clear reporting. I recognize that this conversation, which takes place in an imagined “huge room,” is itself a construction. The participants did not speak to one another as they would in a focus group or meeting; I will do my best to contextualize their statements as I bring them together in this new “room.” We can imagine the participants poised around a virtual table during this conversation. Pulling up their chairs to the table are:

Heather, commuter student at both the main Oxford campus and a regional open admission campus
Monica, academic advisor and instructor at a regional campus
Dan, academic advisor and instructor at a regional campus
Ray, first-year composition instructor at a regional campus
Jan, first-year composition instructor at a regional campus
Lydia, first-year composition instructor and ELL specialist at a regional campus
Ben, assistant administrator for the Oxford composition program
Brian, former first-year composition instructor at a regional campus and current graduate teaching assistant at Oxford
Laurel, graduate teaching assistant at Oxford

The following sections are organized by common themes shared across multiple interviews. I have selected participants’ own words to title each section.

“‘Retention’ is a weird word”: Interrogating Terms Together

As I explained in Chapter One, the language of student enrollment and retention is not neutral. During the interviews, I wanted to get a sense of how participants defined “retention” and “persistence,” and whether they considered themselves stakeholders in such efforts in the first place. Responses were varied. Laurel, a graduate assistant who teaches first-year composition at Oxford, stated, “‘Retention’ is a weird word. Because . . . it means to hold or keep something, probably.” When I asked whether Laurel considered herself invested in retention, she expressed her belief that it “is an administrative term, and is not something I think about or deal with explicitly.” Ben, an assistant administrator at Oxford, drew some intriguing conclusions when working through his own definitions of institutional retention (what he sees as “keeping”) and individual persistence (what he calls “continuing”). He stated, “‘Keeping’ and ‘continuing’ are two different rhetorics, you know? I’m sure there are lines of crossing over, but they’re going to be two very different rhetorics, too . . . rhetoric [that] eventuates into different practice and process.” Both Laurel and Ben demonstrate an awareness – on at least a semantic level – of institutional definitions of retention, and provide compelling critical readings of them. Indeed, if composition instructors and administrators are to establish a place in retention conversations, how should they define their roles in students’ educational careers: as agents who try to keep students in seats for
the sake of the university, or as advocates for students to improve their chances of continuing? How might these attitudes, as Ben suggests, eventuate into different practices and processes? Porter et al argue that institutions are rhetorically constructed and, as a result, can be changed: “Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable” (611). If our understandings of retention are indeed “rhetorically constructed,” then we may interrogate those constructions with the ultimate goal of advancing positive change for individuals who have traditionally been denied access to – and success within – higher education.

Although everyone at the “table” agreed that they were invested in some way in retention, some composition instructors – Laurel, especially – were hesitant to align themselves with retention directly, but stated that they found student success central to their work. Laurel stated that “retention” conjures for her an image of a retention pool outside of an industrial plant. The term is institutional and impersonal, and ultimately not attractive to her. She explained,

So, if it had a different term . . . that sounded more positive – it almost reminds me of like ‘No Child Left Behind.’ Like it’s already negative . . ., but we’ll try to make it not be. And retention’s like, ‘We want students to stay here!’ as if they’re in a tiny retention pool, outside a plant. And it’s wrong; it’s the wrong word. So, better terminology? But then, conversely I recognize that our institution dialogues with other institutions and this discourse may be larger than I understand. And we may need to speak in those terms to communicate. So, I’m really torn. But if it could be redefined in terms that made sense to me and my work, I would be more inclined to make more explicit efforts.

It is my hope that, by presenting the diverse ways multiple stakeholders are invested in retention at Miami in this chapter, I may provide a more complicated picture of retention for those like Laurel who have difficulty seeing beyond administrative definitions. Perhaps the conversation generated in this chapter can serve in part as an exploration of those contested terms that have the potential to isolate compositionists from retention scholarship and practice.
“They are Miami but they aren’t Miami”: Challenges of a Regional Structure

Heather, the only current Miami undergraduate to participate in the study, commutes between a regional campus and Oxford. Heather is highly involved in the Oxford campus’s Commuter Center and shared her impressions of the relationship between the main and regional campuses. She explained that, while discussing needs of commuter students, she “got to talk with some of the administration over at [a regional campus], and it seems like even though we kind of are in different areas, that they kind of face the same thing: that they are Miami, but they aren’t Miami.” Heather concisely captures a complicated relationship between campuses, and Ray echoes her sentiment. In reflecting on his own time as a student at Oxford and his current experiences teaching at a regional campus, Ray came to this conclusion:

It’s just uniquely different between the two, in terms of retention . . . And [at Oxford], the issues of students, why they fail there, I think is – usually – it’s not money issues, whereas here, a lot of the retention might be: they’re overwhelmed, they’re working, and going to school, which is probably the main thing that you can point to here.

Ray’s suspicion is correct to an extent, at least in terms of the financial resources of many Oxford students. According to Oxford’s Office of Institutional Research, more than 80 percent of the Oxford students who did not return for a second Fall Semester in 2010 transferred to other institutions (Bakker). This implies that financial factors are less of a concern for students who leave the Oxford campus prior to the completion of a degree; most seem to maintain enough financial support to continue in higher education.

Accounts from regional students and instructors represent different challenges. At Miami Hamilton, the majority of students work part time, and 42 percent attend college full time (“Fast Facts”). While discussing her experience at Oxford, Heather admitted, “Some professors are okay, but there’s some professors who are just really not understanding of the fact that I have a part- to full-time job that I’m working on top of taking x-amount of credit hours.” For Heather, who at the time of our interview was still unable to pay for her spring semester course textbooks, material barriers and challenges for commuter students act as “a flurry of just small issues that add up.” These challenges may
contribute to Heather’s sense that commuter or relocation students “are Miami but they aren’t Miami.”

Dan also expressed some concerns about the Oxford-regional dynamic. Speaking to the Oxford campus’s elite image, Dan expressed his belief that relocation students can “stand out like a sore thumb up there.” Perceptions, whether they reflect the reality of Miami’s demographics or not, can be powerful. A 1999 survey through Miami’s Student Affairs Assessment Committee explored students’ perceptions of the “Miami image” (“Self Esteem”). According to the survey, a majority of students (close to 70 percent) perceived a “Miami image” built on a particular kind of dress, appearance and behavior, though only 15.4 percent felt they actually aligned with that image (“Self Esteem”).

While this survey was conducted more than a decade ago, it reveals a problem still relevant to students at Miami: that students perceive a strong image of what a Miami student “should” be, though few students actually consider themselves representatives of that image. The anxieties that Dan describes may stem from the perpetuation of a “Miami image” that prescribes a rather narrow type of student.

Such powerful perceptions may obscure the realities that students come to Oxford with diverse backgrounds and experiences. The regional campuses have long crafted and adapted their services for diverse student bodies, and that expertise can benefit the Oxford campus. Dan stated that the Oxford campus has adopted some advising approaches from the regional campuses, such as posting advising deadlines and announcements on the university online course management system. Moves like this may answer John Tassoni’s call for the “need for Oxford to weigh accessibility issues” for a student population that is not fixed:

Given that, as Alberti points out, students at elite colleges are beginning to resemble those at second-tier schools in their need to work long hours off campus and their increased exposure to the pressures of commuting, given the growing expense of college room and board (563), the need for Oxford to weigh accessibility issues against the standards it imposes on its own changing demographics increases annually. (119)

Heather, Ray, and Dan made compelling statements about the complex relationship between campuses and the experiences of students who move between them. I hope to
present considerations for the accessibility issues they and Tassoni describe as I share implications in the next chapter.

While I did not ask questions directly related to participants’ feelings about diversity at Miami, nearly everyone addressed it. Heather, who studies foreign languages and counts international students among her college friends, raised this point: “If you’re talking about diversity, then talk about the people who are the small groups, who really do need better support here at Miami, like your transfer students, your commuting students, your international students.” Heather expressed her belief that campus diversity is more complicated than it is often represented; the needs of commuter students from local communities, she felt, can sometimes be obscured, just as the needs of international students are in continuous negotiation. Brian also discussed the importance of “talk[ing] back to the institutionalization of diversity,” or superficial treatment of diversity that does little to advance equal opportunity. Of course, these challenges are present at every institution, but they seemed especially urgent to many participants at the time of the interviews. Based solely on participants’ impressions, there was a collective sense around the table that Oxford should continue to explore questions of diversity.

“In the middle of twenty million different new things”: Challenges to Persistence at Miami

Heather explained that she has heard stories from students whose lack of success in one course unsettled their confidence to continue. She explained that these students could be driven “to drop out of college forever just because they failed . . . one course. That’s a horrible stance to take, but when you’re in the middle of like twenty million different new things, I can totally understand that.” Heather captured the overwhelming feelings of entering and thriving within a campus culture, from her own experiences and those she observed in her peers. She credits the Commuter Center as an essential anchor and supportive community for her at Miami. In describing her first day at the Oxford campus Heather explained,

I went into the Commuter Center by mistake. But, if I hadn’t found that, on accident, that day on my orientation, I probably wouldn’t have stayed at Miami for more than a week. Because . . . I went to two different libraries, tried to sit down, tried to find something, but, like, it was like so incredibly terrifying,
because everybody else seemed to know what it is that they were doing. Even if they were just like me, it’s just the appearance of, “I have my place here; I’m doing this, I’m doing that.”

At Miami Oxford, where students are required to live on campus for their first two years, students who go against this expectation can easily feel disconnected. The residential culture is so pervasive, Dan explained, that when first- and second-year students relocate to Oxford from the campus where he works, they must have an affidavit notarized by a notary public confirming that they have a legitimate reason to live off-campus. To Dan, these barriers represent powerful distinctions between campuses, leading to his conclusion that, in many ways, “Oxford is not built for our type of student. Everything is during the day. You know, we offer classes until ten o’clock at night, we offer weekend stuff, we offer online stuff: none of that in Oxford for the most part.” These campus distinctions became clear across the interviews. Regional instructors reflected deeply on material barriers to access and success for students throughout their interviews; these factors constantly impact their relationships with students. Dan and Monica showed a strong awareness of the life events that often intervene in commuter and working students’ educations. Lydia, who works primarily with ELL students, even ventured to guess that “with English language learners . . . retention is almost never about motivation . . . I think it’s the outside world that is the problem for them, and the challenge to overcome.” Certainly, pressures of the “outside world” are more easily identified on Miami’s regional commuter campuses. These pressures tend to be obscured, as Heather suggests, by the deep residential culture of the Oxford campus. Again, such perceptions are powerful. Certainly, residential students struggle to find their place in a new environment, but as Heather suggested, an appearance of “I have my place here” can be difficult to move past for non-residential students at Oxford.

Involvement or engagement, terms I introduced in Chapter One, can look decidedly different between commuter students and residential students on Miami’s campuses. Monica feels a special sense of responsibility for getting students involved in the commuter campus community:

We have to find a way to help them to feel a part of it, and not just something that they’re doing to get to a specific place in life, meaning, trying to get this degree,
but, that’s their only focus . . . I think they face a lot of dynamics that a traditional college student doesn’t face because they have to do a little bit more to make sure they are touching base with the right people in a timely manner so that they are able to continue to move forward.

Monica described her own experiences as a commuter and an ethnic minority while a student at Miami. She explained,

The other factor that plays in for me is being a minority. And, here on the [regional] campus, I’m not gonna say I never felt it, because I did coming in, but it quickly diminished as I got involved as a student as I was always around doing something and then moved into different roles where I worked with administration. But I did feel it on the . . . Oxford campus. Um, as soon as I got there, I was stereotyped for being a minority and also because I was a [regional] student. So there’s already the idea that if you did not start at Oxford you’re not as intelligent as Oxford students. So, basically dealing with that elitist mindset, um, there were challenges.

These perspectives inform Monica’s work with students in significant ways. Monica knows firsthand how it feels to transition between the regional and Oxford campuses as a minority student.¹² For her, involvement as a student meant working with campus administrators as a student employee and member of student organizations. Her association with higher-level administrators became, in her opinion, a gateway to heightened respect from her instructors and peers. This kind of involvement shows how Monica was able to invent a place at the university that had previously been undefined for her. Heather’s experience has been similar in some regards. As a commuter student Heather has advocated for commuter support at the Oxford campus and has met with administrators to discuss issues concerning space and resources for commuters. In the face of diminishing resources (for example, the commuter center will be reduced in size when it moves to a new student center on Oxford’s campus), Heather remains a staunch advocate for commuter students. She explained, “I’m really, really trying to remain

¹² According to Miami’s “Diversity Snapshot,” nearly 83% of the Oxford undergraduate population fell under the “White & Unknown” designation (“Enrollment”). White enrollments at both Hamilton and Middletown were at least as high (“Enrollment”).
optimistic because . . . I’m really trying to advocate for everybody because it seems like not too many people do.” Involvement for Monica and Heather goes beyond casual participation in a campus club. It is about gaining a voice at Miami and advocating for nontraditional students. Monica and Heather, through their actions, complicate the discourses of student need that Soliday argues have sustained the American literacy crisis and stratification of higher education (120). Webb-Sunderhaus argues that research in student development in basic writing scholarship has “tended to focus on how [marginalized] students have failed to invent the university and, more commonly, how the university has failed these students” (109). Monica and Heather’s successes as engaged members of meaningful campus organizations may provide a strong counter-narrative to a historical focus on struggle or failure.

“My job is not to retain students; my job is to teach them”: Retention, the Question of Responsibility, and Definitions of Success

The conversation to this point has focused on defining terms and identifying possible challenges to persistence, particularly for commuter students. Naturally stemming from this conversation is the question of responsibility: How are study participants invested in concerns of retention and persistence at Miami? Jan, a first-year composition instructor at a regional campus, expressed her belief that “my job is not to retain students; my job is to teach them.” She quickly qualified this statement by stating, “If [students are] struggling, I take it as a personal choice to help them, to make certain they get the help they need.” Jan’s attitude aligns with Powell’s argument that “student learning, or education more broadly, should always be the primary motivation” for institutions of higher learning (“Retention and Writing Instruction” 669). Brian, in reflecting on his teaching experience at a regional campus, takes a slightly different stance. Looking back on his first semester teaching commuter students, Brian discussed a conversation he had with the English department regarding the high number of absences he was observing in his classes. Brian explained,

In that meeting, I sort of reflected and thought, Okay, my job as a teacher is retention. I mean, a lot of my time, I thought to myself, needs to be spent on not just designing . . . great classroom exercises and activities and work; I mean that’s sort of connected to it, right? But a large part of it has to be on retention, and
working with the class more as individuals and less as a class. So, to individual students: emailing them individually, asking them what’s going on, if I can help. . . making it more personal.

These observations reveal an important question about retention: that of responsibility. They also expose the challenges of meeting the myriad demands of students, administrators, and departments from one institutional position; like Brian, all composition instructors must juggle these demands in their day-to-day work. Jan and Brian may have different conceptions of their responsibility for retaining students, but they share a concern for supporting students on an individual level. From her stance as an advisor and instructor, Monica has developed her own approach for advising students at a regional campus. I asked Monica if she struggles to balance institutional retention efforts with the day-to-day realities of students’ lives. Specifically, I wanted to know if she is ever frustrated when she finds herself unable to trace the concrete impacts of her work, such as in cases when students leave college unexpectedly. She responded with this reflective statement:

If you give someone something solid, to where they can go and they can continue to explore that above and beyond you, then they are equipped to continue. So even if I never see it, um, to me, I’m working on planting seeds that are of enough quality that they’re bound to manifest at some point.

Monica reminds us that the impacts of our work – as instructors and advisors – are not always immediately visible. With an eye to “planting seeds,” we may conceive of our work differently. On a related note, Brian told the story of one student whose college experience might not align with conventional expectations. This student, a military veteran, enrolled in Brian’s first-year composition course because “he wanted the college experience.” Brian told me that this student approached him at the end of the semester to thank him and to tell him that he would not be coming back to college. For this student, “the college experience” consisted of a single course. This poignant interaction led Brian to reflect on the very definition of “the college experience”:

It was really powerful, and to me seems to be the heart of retention; like, there’s these pockets of time that we have, right? And there’s so much of a focus on . . . the college experience for four years, right? But how do you define the college
experience, right? Is it four years? Is it three years? Is it one semester? Is it one class?

Dan, who is responsible for monitoring retention data at his campus, also recognized the challenges of defining “the college experience” for a diverse student population. He raised the point that institutional measures for retention have their limitations and may not adequately capture students’ goals:

So, you know, from my point of view, yes we’ve lost them; they count against us in terms of retention, but ultimately, they fulfilled the goals they came here for, and in fact, we did retain them: we retained them for as long as they were willing to stay, and we didn’t lose them in that sense. So, it’s a really difficult process to report both . . . to external people, but also just for us to take a measure for our own purposes on how we’re doing, because how do you measure somebody’s intents?

Jan, Monica, Brian, and Dan all provide important considerations about questions of responsibility in matters of retention. To mix participants’ metaphors, how can we challenge ourselves to “plant seeds” during the “pockets of time” we do have with students? McCurrie would argue that a first step might be to identify students’ goals and definitions of success early in our relationships with them. McCurrie explains,

The plans, programs, and goals of teachers and administrators may only coincidentally intersect with what students want. Administrators feel successful when their programs advance the school’s mission and use resources responsibly. Teachers feel successful when students enter the academic discourse community. According to the research, however, students are interested in personal and professional fulfillment. (45)

Retention, through this view, can be seen as only one particular measure of success among many. By exploring diverse definitions of success, we can challenge ourselves to move away from assumptions about the goals students bring with them (assumptions like: “All of the students I teach intend to graduate with a bachelor’s degree from Miami in four years”). Patrick Sullivan expresses a sentiment similar to McCurrie’s (and Dan’s) in his discussion of standards for success in open-admission versus more selective institutions. To Sullivan, the practice of measuring success by graduation rates and
degree completion “avoids or simplifies complexities that are unique to the learning communities at open admissions institutions” (“Measuring ‘Success’” 618). Sullivan cites a 2005 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) report to advance his point. According to the survey, 57 percent of community college students identified the attainment of an associate’s degree as a primary goal (“Measuring ‘Success’” 622). Forty-eight percent indicated that they intended to transfer to a four-year university (“Measuring ‘Success’” 622). Sullivan’s project is a corrective one; he aims to challenge the notion of the “cooling out function” of open-admission institutions popularized by Burton Clark. Two-year colleges do not inherently weaken students’ chances of persisting in Sullivan’s view. Rather, the goals students bring with them, often informed by material and cultural factors, are likely to differ considerably from those of students at more selective universities where the path to a bachelor’s degree is often much clearer. These differences, to Sullivan, should guide our institutional definitions of success, and should move us away from unfairly labeling the attrition rates of open admission institutions as failures. Dan sees these challenges every day, as he attempts to measure his campus’s success in supporting the diverse, sometimes even contradictory, goals of open admission students. In complicating the parameters of the “college experience” and expanding definitions of “success,” we can perhaps see retention rates as part of a much more complicated story of students’ experiences in higher education.

“We are just one among many”: Resisting First-Year Composition as Panacea

Our conversation now shifts more specifically to the role of the first-year composition course in addressing concerns of retention. In her interview, Jan raised the point that “We are not the do-all/die-all of university courses. We are just one among many.” This is an important reminder that, when we talk about positive interventions that first-year composition may take in improving retention, we must not think about our

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13 Even Tinto, in his 2012 book Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action, recognizes that retention rates are just one measure of success; he writes, “Most institutions serve multiple missions, not all of which focus on completing a program of study . . . [A] more reasonable way of measuring institutional effectiveness would be to employ multiple measures of institutional performance” (152).
programs in isolation. Ben warned against framing the first-year composition course as a kind of panacea that can improve student retention rates simply because most students have to take it. He mused, “if composition does feed into retention, or persistence, it doesn’t have anything to do necessarily with just the fact that that universal requirement is there and that they show up first semester and they go.” These observations are an important check when we attempt to link particular variables to retention. Soliday suggests that even Sternglass, in her unparalleled longitudinal study of students at CUNY, “does not award substantial agency to English teachers . . . neither writing teacher nor composition course plays a prominent role in helping students to stay in school over the long term” (Politics 8). Though it may be foolhardy to link first-year composition directly to improved retention, how might we enact ways of thinking about and discussing retention that move toward positive change? I hope to provide some suggestions that continue this thread in the next chapter.

Who is better equipped to comment on the role of college composition in student persistence than a current Miami student? A junior in terms of course credits, Heather started at a community college before relocating to Miami where she now divides her time between Oxford and a regional campus. For Heather, first-year composition was always somewhat of an afterthought. Well into her major, Heather still needs to take English 112, the second-semester requirement of first-year composition at Miami. She noted that “since I’ve taken such a weird course and kind of avoided my English or writing courses, I’ve just fallen out of practice, and now that I’m all of a sudden like, boom, everybody expects all of this, I’m three years out of practice.” Heather, who studies foreign languages and hopes to work with English language learners one day, has a keen awareness of language and sees her own experience as a writer as a process. But she does feel that her lack of first-year composition instruction may have put her at a disadvantage. Heather sees her multilingual experience as an occasional barrier to her academic writing. She explained,

You just have two languages in your head; they’re gonna collide sometimes, and it’s gonna be hard to figure it out, but it’s just something that it’s different for each person and you have to work through it, so, my way of working through it has been trying to avoid it. I’m working on finding a better solution than that.
Heather’s experience is a reminder that the students we encounter in first-year composition arrive with their own unique language backgrounds. It may be tempting, particularly on the Oxford campus – where close to 100 percent of students admitted for Fall 2013 ranked in the 50th percentile or better in their high school graduating class – to assume knowledge of students’ level of preparation for college writing (“First-Year Class Profile”). Heather, who has taken on writing assignments across the disciplines – and in languages other than English, no less – shows how such assumptions can obscure students’ rich academic and linguistic backgrounds. Heather’s concerns suggest that she sees the first-year composition requirement as a possible missing piece to her educational experience. She holds in it some regard and sees her avoidance of it as a potential barrier to her success as a writer in increasingly challenging college courses.

Students’ access to the first-year composition series is one concern, and their experience once there is another. Ben acknowledged that, as a co-administrator involved in drop/add week on the Oxford campus, he has more exposure to enrollment management issues than most others in the composition program. But this administrative work is really secondary, in Ben’s view, to cultivating a “context of support” for students once they are registered. In Ben’s view, “a good classroom really . . . in part is an outgrowth of a supportive program. And so, I like the programmatic angle, because I feel like, you know, with the new TAs I’m contributing to multiple pedagogies.” As Ben suggested earlier, it is dangerous to judge first-year composition’s merits based simply on its status as a universal requirement with high enrollment. Brian, speaking from his experience at both residential and commuter campuses, reminds us that composition instructors should keep an eye to “building community, building a critical pedagogy with students.” In Brian’s view, “you need to think about the fragility of the classroom and the ways in which identities come into contact with each other, and in which they can be taken away in a heartbeat.” Specifically, Brian was referring to an incident in one of the courses he taught at a regional campus, when a student stopped coming to class after feeling threatened by a homophobic remark made by another student. Brian’s account reminds us that the classroom is a powerful space where students may at turns succeed or

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14 A large part of Ben’s job involves mentoring incoming graduate assistants and introducing them to Miami’s first-year composition curriculum.
struggle to connect with their peers and the university overall. For commuter students this space is particularly significant; Braxton and Hirschy suggest, “Without strong social communities on commuter campuses, the academic realm of the institution holds primary status” (78). While a valuable space for all students, the classroom serves as a major site of community for commuter and other nonresidential students.

Composition instructors have a great deal to say about their one-on-one interactions with students during office hours and in exchanges before and after class. Laurel has found ways to reach out in her instructional role. She explained, “When I see someone that might need a little extra I put it out there, and I feel like that is my tiny contribution.” Laurel found ways to address issues of difference in the first-year composition curriculum. For example, she explained that one student – a commuter like Heather – used the public argument portion of the first-year Composition and Rhetoric course to argue for more economical dining options for nonresidential students. Laurel explained that she learned about this student’s frustration largely through one-on-one conferencing and conversations during office hours:

She did her public argument paper on why the prices were so high . . . And, she was frustrated and she said, ‘No one else in this class understands why I’m writing this. No one cares; they all have the card that you swipe and they never think about the price.’ And, uh, she ended up kind of signaling that class issues are sort of . . . an issue . . . by sharing little anecdotes in the conference and during office hours and, uh, it ended with me swearing for the first time in front of a student but I was like, ‘Yeah, people make assumptions based on class that are really fucked up sometimes.’ And she was like, ‘Yeah.’ And I could tell there was a moment where she was like, ‘You get it.’ And . . . I got the sense that she definitely wanted more support, or did not feel that there was enough for someone who commutes.

Moments like the one Laurel describes are more likely to occur when instructors establish time and space to meet with students outside of class. When I asked Monica how instructors might contribute to retention efforts more directly, she stressed that faculty should see students as “not just your 9:30 to 10:45 class job . . . I think faculty need to be able to have adequate time to advise students.” Lydia also suggested that “faculty . . .
need to be open to taking time away from teaching and planning and researching, and also take time to learn about what’s going on on the campus, and learn about different programs.” Brian observed that the time before and after class was extremely valuable to his interactions with commuter students, especially. If students communicated challenges to him, it was almost always at these caught moments before and after class and rarely by email or during office hours, which, Brian observed, are not particularly practical for commuter students. For Laurel and Brian, and for many composition instructors, awareness of students’ concerns and the opportunity to talk about them may only arise during brief conversations outside of class. While composition instructors are certainly not the only instructors capable of providing one-on-one guidance for students, the personal nature of composition courses often equips us, as Webb-Sunderhaus suggests, to “already know a great deal about our students” (111).

“Retention of faculty”: Concerns of Academic Labor and Student Support

Monica’s call for instructors to go beyond the “9:30 to 10:45 class job” inspires important questions about academic labor in higher education. Jan, toward the end of her interview, observed, “One thing I find is sad . . . is how our campus worries about retention of numbers, but [doesn’t] worry about retention of faculty. Other than tenured.” Jan makes a valuable point about possible relationships between retention of faculty and retention of students. Ray also reflected on the question of instructors’ investment in these issues:

I don’t know how much of a stake each person has in the university. To me, are they a stakeholder in the process . . . if you’re tenure-track you have one viewpoint. If you’re part-time . . . you know, that grouping of the faculty makes a huge difference in terms of how they’re going to connect. And think about retention. Because obviously, there will be some people, they wouldn’t care as long as students show up they just, you know, go through the motions.

Powell and Aquiline address this issue as they discuss retention concerns at their own institution. They state, “We could never argue that faculty should play a more prominent role in responding to student needs, in the name of retention, until the working conditions of our part-time colleagues are drastically improved” (11). Powell and Aquiline feel
there is no question that “teachers’ working conditions and students’ experiences at any given institution are inextricably linked” (11). Just as we must discuss the degree of responsibility that different stakeholders assume in retention, so must we advocate for reasonable conditions and compensation for those who take on additional responsibilities to address institutional needs. This is another powerful incentive for advancing composition’s voice in institutional conversations about retention.

The themes presented in this chapter are a few among many that emerged from the interviews, representing the dominant concerns that came up “around the table.” To summarize, these themes include:

- **The challenge of defining and using terms such as “retention” and “persistence” across diverse disciplinary settings:** composition instructors may be less familiar with administrative terminology or less comfortable in taking it up.

- **Tensions between Miami’s selective and open-admission campuses:** some interviewees expressed their belief that regional students can be perceived as less prepared or less able than students admitted directly to Oxford.

- **Challenges to persistence at Miami, particularly for students who move between campuses:** unique differences between commuter and residential campus cultures may present special challenges to commuter or part-time students at Oxford.

- **The question of responsibility and definitions of success:** instructors may hesitate to align themselves with retention efforts directly but are invested in supporting students’ success and achievement of individual goals.

- **The role of first-year composition in retention conversations, including concerns of academic labor:** related to the question of responsibility in retention efforts, some part-time instructors expressed their belief that academic labor conditions should be taken into greater consideration.

Though this conversation is an assemblage of several one-on-one interviews, it is my hope that this presentation shows a compelling exchange between advisors, instructors, and students at different campuses, demonstrating the potential for productive conversations about retention in the future. In the next chapter I will discuss at greater length the implications of the study, and will advance some recommendations for
Miami’s first-year composition program based on the themes that emerged around the table.
CHAPTER THREE
BOUNDARY CROSSING FOR CURRICULAR & INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

“I don’t know if they have necessarily found the golden key, you know? But I definitely think [retention is] something that’s talked about all the time.”
- Lydia, first-year composition instructor and ELL coordinator at a Miami regional campus

“The Teacher’s Guide is for Oxford and, you know, it just doesn’t shift over there. It shifts, right? Maybe that’s too strong of a statement, but they’re different campuses.”
- Brian, former first-year composition instructor at a Miami regional campus and current graduate teaching assistant at Miami Oxford

“And so, just even sitting here talking to you, I was thinking about the fact that a student comes in, and this is how they do it. Why not teach those classes from a standpoint of translation? And so, ‘This is how it’s communicated under these contexts or under this context in this situation, but if you had to communicate the same thing in this situation, I want you to translate that.’”
- Monica, advisor and instructor at a Miami regional campus

In this chapter I will explore some of the implications of the study presented in Chapter Two. I will put forth pedagogical considerations for the first-year composition program at Miami, as well as recommendations for engaging in retention conversations beyond the program. I embark on these recommendations somewhat cautiously, sharing Lydia’s sentiment that there is no “golden key” that can unlock all of the mysteries of student retention. When Brian and I talked, he raised another humbling point. I asked him whether he felt supports could be improved for students across campuses, and he replied, “It would sort of be presumptuous for me to say, ‘Well, [the regional campuses] don’t have this’ . . . when there are people who’ve been on that campus for fifteen, twenty years.” Like Brian, I want to avoid presumptuous recommendations in this chapter. One of the most valuable insights I take from my research is that presumptions – about students, teachers, and their campus affiliations – are powerful forces that can lead to misinformation about students’ backgrounds and goals. I will also be careful not to
exploit problematic discourses of student need as I make my recommendations. Soliday argues that the discourse of student need “depends upon a cluster of assumptions, the chief of which is that only students require remediation, not institutions” (143). I agree with Soliday, and will be careful in my use of the word “need” as I make recommendations. Students at Miami, as Heather shows us, do have very real needs, but we must go to students themselves to determine what they are. And we should be conscious of the ways in which our university and composition program may themselves be remediated to address those needs better.

The interviews presented in Chapter Two show that instructors of composition, while they may not align themselves explicitly alongside retention efforts, have a great deal to say about students’ persistence. Furthermore, insights from past Miami students (Ray and Monica) and a present student (Heather) paint a detailed picture of transitioning between commuter and residential campuses. Participants shared compelling anecdotes from within the classroom and beyond, presenting a substantial reserve of knowledge about the challenges and successes students can encounter at Miami. I will try to draw from this reserve as I advance the implications that follow. There are programmatic and institution-wide implications for this study. Programmatically, we can consider how first-year composition might adapt its curricular design and pedagogical practices with retention in mind. And broadly, we can consider how composition instructors might participate in retention conversations that traverse disciplinary or even campus boundaries. I will address both implications in this chapter, using Soliday’s notion of translation/border pedagogy and Adler-Kassner’s notion of reframing/story changing as my primary guides.

“I want you to translate that”: Translation Pedagogy across Contexts

Brian makes a valuable point in the second epigraph to this chapter. Miami’s first-year composition curriculum has been streamlined across campuses, in response to the university’s Top 25 initiative, which advances the revision of curricula for the most heavily enrolled courses at Miami (Porter). As Brian suggests, there is some question as to whether a common curriculum can successfully “shift” between contexts. I suggest that, as we consider the relationship between Miami’s first-year composition curriculum
and student retention, we first define the existing program and its adaptability. In “What is College Writing For?” Ellen Knodt suggests there is “a wide disagreement among composition programs and faculty about the goals to be achieved in college writing programs” (146). She identifies six common types of programs to illustrate this point: the Traditional Five-Paragraph Essay Program, the Classical Rhetoric Program, the Sociopolitical Program, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, the First-Year Orientation Program, and the Professional Writing Program. Knodt explains, “one can see that a student successfully passing [one] course would have an entirely different background in terminology and technique from a student who had taken [another] course” (150). Of course, many first-year composition curricula – including Miami’s, I would argue – take on diverse goals and draw from multiple types of programs as defined by Knodt. Miami’s regional campus structure adds another layer of complexity to the question of curriculum and pedagogy. In their investigation of Miami’s institutional history, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Ellenmarie Cronin Wahrlab explain, “By locating basic writing only on the regional campuses, Miami’s tradition of sorting students into different tracks took on a main campus/regional campus distinction” (163). The authors explain that, in this situation, students are “scripted” according to their campus affiliation, with Miami’s Oxford campus historically emphasizing academic writing and the regional campuses emphasizing workplace or basic writing. They then imagine a curriculum that addresses questions of the vocational but with a critical focus, stating that “the course focus on critical inquiry into work led students to a deeper contextual understanding of how they were positioned” (171). Lewiecki-Wilson and Wahrlab raise important considerations about the nature of first-year composition at Miami, especially as we envision a curriculum that is meaningful and adaptable to the contexts of the open admission campuses and the “public ivy” that is Oxford.

Before I move into specific pedagogical recommendations, I find it important to acknowledge important differences between curricular reforms and broader institutional reforms. Changes we make to our curricular and teaching practices will not in and of themselves impact broad social inequities that deny some students’ access to or success through higher education. As Soliday states, “Those who espouse a long-term view will consider how material considerations affect educational success as much or more than
linguistic choices that students and teachers make” (8). That being said, composition instructors should not be discouraged from developing their teaching practices with students’ persistence in mind. While a student’s success in a single composition course may not be indicative of their persistence through the requirements for a degree overall, it is still an important step in their educational experience, and one over which instructors may have some influence. First-year composition is poised as a nearly universal passageway for students in their first year or two of college (though there are always exceptions, such as Heather, who still must satisfy the requirement in her third year). Tinto states that 38 percent of students who leave four-year colleges will do so in their first year (Completing College 3). Though first-year composition instructors may only influence the immediate conditions of their own classrooms, they should consider themselves a significant part of many students’ transition into and through college during the important first years.

One promising avenue for supporting students’ transition emerged in my conversation with Monica, which also frames this chapter. As we discussed the diverse literacies students bring with them to the university, Monica paused thoughtfully. She said, “Why not teach these classes from a standpoint of translation?” That is, why not guide students to become aware of their prior literacies before introducing them to academic and professional ways of thinking and composing? Monica’s insights align to an extent with Soliday’s call for translation or border pedagogies. In Soliday’s view, rather than take up academic writing at the expense of losing prior “language worlds,” students should be invited to explore both worlds concurrently. Soliday acknowledges that translation pedagogy stems from a long tradition of negotiating students’ positioning “between worlds”:

There is a robust tradition of scholarship crossing several subfields that discusses how students write between worlds. Composition teachers address questions of translation because the collision between language worlds has shaped the discipline of college English studies from the beginning. (147)

Soliday recognizes that this process of translation is complicated and has the potential to “accommodate and subvert academic conventions at the same time” (149). In its ideal form, such a pedagogical model would “provide moments for student writers to bring
different literacies, languages, or cultural experiences together” (149). Soliday reminds us that, for too long, the explicit teaching of academic discourse conventions has been seen as a project for minority (or “always-new”) students only. She asserts that even “students defined as well-prepared have to surrender what they already know, or at least they believe that they must do so, to assimilate to academic discourses” (157). In this way, translation pedagogy should not focus on minority or remedial students’ assimilation into academic discourses already inhabited by “well-prepared” students. Instead, there should be a focus on identifying each student’s prior ways of communicating in the world before introducing academic or professional writing conventions that may be unfamiliar. Such an approach would be valuable for Miami’s first-year composition program, especially as it has become standardized across campuses. It is dangerous to assume that most Oxford students are well prepared and most regional students underprepared for college-level writing and inquiry. We need to consider how to create meaningful inquiries that are relevant for all Miami students, and that do not make assumptions about students’ backgrounds.

Soliday recognizes possible limitations of translation or border pedagogy; she cites Fusco’s warnings that “border crossing . . . in and of itself does not disrupt historically entrenched inequities” and that we should be careful not to “confl ate hybridity with parity” (180). Soliday suggests that a classroom that is accepting of multiple literacies may aid students in their engagement and development in the course, but does not erase social inequities beyond the course. And even in explicitly guiding students to take up discourses of power or privilege, we may not significantly impact those inequities. Fox writes,

We fall into the trap of imagining that language standards and social boundaries are one and the same. If we tell ourselves and our students that they will achieve access if they master writing standards, we are obscuring and underestimating the powerful forces of racism, sexism, elitism, and heterosexism that continue to operate despite the students’ mastery of standards. (6)

Composition instructors walk a fine line as they envision approaches that welcome diverse ways of meaning-making into their classrooms while also granting students
access to powerful discourses.\textsuperscript{15} Despite these challenges, Soliday argues that “Most of us wouldn’t want to abandon a two-faced discourse that reproduces the dominant culture while providing access to its critique” (183). This tension impacts the first-year composition program’s choices concerning the genres students work within and the audiences they seek to reach. Translation or border pedagogy may bring us closer to understanding where students come from, and how their prior experiences can inform their encounters with new discourses. And beyond that, it can allow students to respond to and critique academic and institutional discourses, allowing for a dynamic exchange of perspectives.

Miami’s first-year composition curriculum (particularly that of English 111: Composition and Rhetoric) might fit most neatly into Knodt’s definition of a “Classical Rhetoric Program.” The program’s Teacher’s Guide describes the course as follows: “The course emphasizes rhetorical inquiry and invention, promoting critical questioning, exploring, and researching, and teaching skills for planning, analysis, research, and development of ideas for a particular academic or public audience” (57). The ways in which the course can deliver rhetorical inquiry and invention are quite open, however, and may lend themselves to translation pedagogies. Furthermore, the Teacher’s Guide identifies reflection and meta-cognitive awareness as formal learning outcomes of the English 111 course (58). The first inquiry in the course’s inquiry-based curriculum focuses on reflective practice, and invites students to “position themselves as rhetoricians in a variety of contexts” (65). This structure can invite acts of translation that encourage students to reflect on their prior literacy or linguistic experiences and to explore intersections between diverse experiences in their lives. Inquiry One could potentially take on the form of the “familiar essay” or literacy narrative that “mingles common registers of language and experience with more culturally elevated styles” (Soliday 154). An inquiry modeled on translation or border pedagogies could address another outcome for the first inquiry: to provide a writing sample so instructors may “determine right

\textsuperscript{15} Fox also makes the point that we can fall into the trap of imagining non-academic and academic discourses as though they are in direct opposition to one another: “While initiation theories have been helpful in shaping curriculum and in defining basic writers, early formulations simplified both the academic community and students’ communities, representing both as homogenous and mutually exclusive.” (56)
away what help and advice individual students need” (Teacher’s Guide 65). If students are allowed to reflect on their prior literacy and linguistic experiences, and their knowledge of academic discourses, instructors may avoid making assumptions about students’ prior knowledge and preparedness for “college” writing. This knowledge may also inspire more personalized and relevant approaches to guiding students through less familiar discursive landscapes.

Existing models for Inquiry One in the Teacher’s Guide ask students to produce a “reflective narrative on language,” to explore “world Englishes and language,” and to investigate intersections between “writing and technology” (67-69). In many ways, these model assignments already invite meaningful reflection about prior learning into our composition classrooms. I myself have learned a great deal from students through this inquiry, in terms of the content of their reflections and the ways in which they present that content. I have read vivid reflections about students’ exposure to new regional English dialects, students’ relationships to language as people who are vision or hearing impaired, and more. I have read reflections that embrace the personal nature of the inquiry through vivid detail and description, and others that resist narrative forms so vehemently that they take on a confusingly passive approach to telling personal stories. All of these examples have shown me that students come to first-year composition with unique attitudes about language and unique interpretations of what college-level writing “should” look like. I cannot empirically prove that these reflective opportunities improved students’ transition into new academic discourses or genres, but at the very least they equipped me as an instructor with background information that could inform my broad pedagogical choices as well as my support for individual students each semester.

Translation/border pedagogy may add another layer to the goals of Inquiry One, among them, to invite students to reflect on their roles as rhetoricians, and to provide a writing sample for instructors early in the term. An assignment with a focus on translation can actively require students to “position themselves as rhetoricians in a variety of contexts” in the space of one text. For example, an Inquiry One assignment could ask students to reflect on their experiences communicating with audiences in past contexts (academic or non-academic), as they construct a compelling argument for a new
audience and context. Students may be invited to analyze selected literacy narratives – or other texts that discuss rhetorical choices or positionings – while advancing their own narratives about communicating in the world. This inquiry would serve as a kind of translation between an established academic form (the close reading essay or analysis) and a more personal act of writing (the literacy narrative). Drawing from examples from her own classes, Soliday explains that “translation occurs when a writer . . . connects the individual experience to the collective one” (160). While the English 111 curriculum already invites students to reflect on their rhetorical backgrounds, perhaps more attention could be paid to building these macro-micro connections through translation. Inquiry One lends itself well to this kind of reflective work, but instructors can keep an eye to students’ translative actions throughout the course, as they navigate their way through a number of new rhetorical situations.

“No one else . . . understands why I’m writing this”: Argument, Engagement, & First-Year Composition

In Time to Know Them, Sternglass raises important questions about social and economic issues that affect students, and the treatment and role of those issues in college-level inquiry. She writes,

Should we think of race, gender, class, and ideology only as “topics” that students write about during their college years, or should we probe more deeply and ask ourselves what the effects of these factors have been on the students’ academic lives? How have these factors sensitized them to the justices and injustices of the society in which they are living? How can they productively bring about the changes that will improve the lives of others of their background as well as the larger society? (112-113)

In Chapter Two, I shared Laurel’s account of one student’s approach to the public argument inquiry (Inquiry Three) in English 111. This student, a commuter discouraged by high prices for food on campus, chose to argue for more affordable dining options at Miami. One of the learning outcomes of the public argument inquiry asks students to “recognize language as a powerful tool in the public sphere” (Teacher’s Guide 89). Laurel’s story invites us to think about ways our composition program can encourage
students’ engagement with campus and community issues that have personal meaning, and to imagine relevant public audiences for those issues. According to Laurel, the student expressed frustration that “No one else in this class understands why I’m writing this. No one cares.” I cannot know whether the acts of researching and composing an argument allowed the student to “recognize language as a powerful tool” with the potential to get others to care, but it is my hope that Inquiry Three has this potential. If we provide students with the opportunity to discuss issues of access in our first-year composition courses, we may open up a space for engagement not otherwise available to them. For commuter and part-time students, who often have fewer on-campus venues for sharing issues that matter to them, this engagement may be particularly valuable.\footnote{And the impact of in-class interactions on students’ lives outside of class merits mention here. Tinto explains that social and academic involvement should not be conflated, but do relate to one another. He explains, “Academic involvement in class through the use of cooperative group work, for instance, has been shown to promote social involvement that extends beyond the class (Tinto 1997)” (Completing College 65).}

This act of sharing issues may also be productive in supporting the very act of transitioning to a new campus environment for first-year students. By investigating the structures of their institution – along with possible areas for interrogation and improvement – students may gain a sense that they can break down a seemingly monolithic university into manageable pieces. It may also give them an opportunity to become informed of services available (or unavailable) to them and to other students. As Heather reminds us, new students can feel bombarded by “twenty million different new things” as they enter college. By focusing the formal argument genre on local issues that concern students directly, the English 111 curriculum might streamline students’ personal and academic transitions, potentially lessening their sense that the university is an insurmountable structure, or at the least, suggesting to them that the classroom is a space where they can discuss such transitions. A focus on local argument would not reduce the rhetorical rigor of the inquiry; students would remain accountable to real audiences, and would need to consider the implications of effectively delivering their research-based arguments to relevant parties. Students, in this sense, are given the opportunity to voice their local concerns while practicing formal argumentative moves. Students who are encouraged to critique their institutions are not being asked to blend into a static
structure, but instead can take a more active approach to their transition to college; I feel that this active approach can resist integrationist models even as it guides students through formal discursive practices of academic writing. I would argue that this approach has the potential to guide students away from treating social issues as unmovable “topics,” as Sternglass muses, and toward an attitude that their presence at the university is valuable and can advance critical conversations about diversity, educational access, and support.

Powell supports a first-year composition curriculum that takes on conversations about retention directly. She outlines her plan for a service-learning oriented course with assigned readings on retention research as well as mentoring relationships with middle and high school students. Powell’s model could serve as powerful opportunity for students to explore histories of educational access and privilege, and to apply research to mentoring relationships with students who aspire to enter college. Powell envisions the model as one option for helping students to “see themselves as ‘expert college students,’ a self-image that may help them resist the temptation to drop out later in their college career” (679). I believe there are many approaches composition instructors may take to encourage such a self-image in students, and they do not need to be carried out as explicitly as Powell’s service-learning model. For example, Miami students could investigate institutional artifacts such as the “Succeed at Miami” documents to explore administrative discourses, learn about resources, and talk openly about definitions of success (I discuss these documents at greater length later in the chapter). Such an activity, if integrated carefully into the composition course, could also encourage discussions of power and privilege, and could guide students in generating their own, more holistic notions of what it means to “Succeed at Miami.” As I discussed above, we may encourage students to reflect on where they have come from and where they are going through acts of translation, and we may invite them to argue for local changes that are relevant to their lives and those of their peers, by formalizing these practices into our existing inquiry-based curriculum. We should also be receptive to what students have to say outside of class; as Brian and Laurel have shared, we may come to know some students only when they communicate one-one-one during conferences, office hours, or brief moments before or after class. All of these practices may better allow instructors to
move away from assumptions to discover what matters to students as writers, as learners, and as people seeking out meaningful futures. As Kristin Dombek and Scott Herndon assert in *Critical Passages: Teaching the Transition to College Composition*, “The kinds of stereotypes teachers harbor about students make it too easy to assume that our students just don’t care enough to work hard at writing. Our experience, however, has shown just the opposite to be the case” (10).

I admit that these suggestions do not themselves lead to improved student persistence. I acknowledge also the curriculum so cleanly presented on the pages of the *Teacher’s Guide* is likely to look quite different at ground level; individual teachers interpret curricula differently, so there should never be the understanding that a course is perfectly standardized across locations. But I do feel that the considerations above can help in maximizing the value of the “pockets of time” (in Brian’s words) that we do have with students. By inviting students to translate their experiences and engage issues that matter to them, we are better equipped to recommend meaningful supports for individual students, and to advocate for programmatic or institutional changes that improve accessibility and involvement for all students. Lydia reminds us that there may not be a “golden key” for solving problems of student departure, and I argue that the search for a single key is unlikely to benefit our long-term efforts to support students’ persistence. Instead, we should focus on developing practices that improve our understanding of students’ backgrounds and goals and their engagement with their communities, practices that can inform our choices as teachers and our conversations about retention.

**Boundary Crossing and Story Changing**

I want to argue that just as boundary crossing and translation are valuable to students transitioning through college, so are these practices important for advancing conversations about retention amongst faculty, staff, and administrators. Fox builds this link in his conclusion to *Defending Access*. He writes:

The more numerous and broader the relationships students establish, the more likely they will be successful. It is easy, pleasant, and important to have close

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17 And faculty responsiveness to curricular changes or pedagogical suggestions is not always smooth or immediate. Jan admitted, “My syllabus, my assignments are mine. I’ve come up with them through the years of training and teaching, on my own.”
relationships with other professionals in composition. But we are doomed if we simply speak to ourselves . . . Despite the historic opposition of administration to faculty and to change, we need to watch for those administrators, especially the ones who remember teaching, who may be able to listen, learn, and help. (113)

Conversations about student access, enrollment, and retention often require compositionists to cross over institutional boundaries, to establish relationships outside of their programs and departments. Fox advances the recommendation that boundary crossing must take place in order to advocate for students historically marginalized from higher education (in other words, the “always new” students Soliday discusses). Fox argues that major change—change that leads to improved access and support at the institutional level—cannot occur in a departmental vacuum. He writes,

No small group of faculty, no matter how persistent, can “fix” the structures of the university so that students of color enter and are successful . . . that doesn’t solve the problem that most students of color don’t even apply for college. We can work through the writing project to increase the number of students who see college as in their interest, but no . . . program can eliminate the subtle, and obvious, ways that racism excludes students once they are here. (90)

Fox calls for writing programs to imagine their work as “a series of coordinated, collaborative practices that open the discussions of academic disciplines to broader populations . . . by establishing communications across traditional boundaries and by fighting oppressive institutional structures” (90). This boundary crossing is valuable to our conversations about retention, to our interactions with others in the “huge rooms” Monica describes.

Given composition’s pedagogical heritage, it is a field perhaps more concerned with individual students’ growth and persistence than with institutional retention rates. Composition’s knowledge of student experiences can and, I argue, should inform the next wave of retention scholarship. As I suggested in Chapter One, concerns of student enrollment and retention historically influence the structuring of composition programs, so to think we are somehow removed from these problems is dangerous. Rather than set ourselves in stark opposition to institutional discourses of retention, we as compositionists should challenge ourselves to purposefully move between disciplinary
frames in the service of students. Linda Adler-Kassner employs this notion of framing in her book *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. She observes, “[F]or WPAs and writing instructors . . . we are up against [frame dominance] – we’re trying to reshape frames that have powerful sponsors” (130). By taking up new frames, Adler-Kassner suggests that WPAs can participate in powerful “story changing” experiences. She explains,

> [W]e exist within a series of large bureaucracies upon which we depend for our livelihoods (e.g., Miller 1998). Our status within these institutions – which itself is influenced by our campus administrators (department heads, deans, provosts) – has profound influences on the kinds of risks that we can take in identifying potential audiences for story changing, and in developing messages to communicate with these audiences. (136)

Adler-Kassner recognizes that dominant frames often exclude voices from writing programs and the students those programs serve. But she warns, “Positing arguments that employ different frames means that we run the risk of remaining marginalized from these [dominant] discussions” (142). She encourages WPAs to “[r]emember Lakoff’s maxim: when you negate a frame, you reinforce the frame” (148). In this light, WPAs should not discount the dominant frames surrounding retention at their institutions, *especially* if those frames seem reductive or counter to commonplace values in composition studies. WPAs are poised to reframe dominant discussions about retention if they are willing to recognize the similarities and differences between their interests and those of other stakeholders at their institutions. Alice Horning’s article on class size is a strong example of WPAs employing new frames to appeal to administrative audiences. Horning writes, “To fight the good fight, I went looking to find information, statistics, report, research, national statements, anything I could find to prove lowering class size was a good, urgent, necessary step” (11). Here, Horning enacts Adler-Kassner’s advice: “Once we have identified an issue to tackle, the next step in the story-changing process is to find out what we know about the issue already, and what we need to know” (132). WPAs can enact meaningful changes to their programs and their campuses if they engage in this kind of conscious reframing and story changing. This process is not about sacrificing commonplace values in composition to the kinds of quantitative evidence
often preferred by administrative audiences, but is rather an opportunity to reframe those values in a more palatable way to “powerful sponsors.” It is unlikely that upper-level administrators can be convinced of a program’s efficacy based solely on anecdotal information. But WPAs and instructors can imagine ways to blend their qualitative understandings of students’ experiences with quantitative research on such issues as the impact of class size on student achievement and the relationship between engagement and persistence.18

Adler-Kassner’s vision of WPA activism is built on three approaches: interest-based organizing, values-based organizing, and issue-based organizing. These approaches invite various stakeholders to meet around shared concerns. Adler-Kassner explains that interest-based organizing often begins with conversations revealing “issues [that] emerge from relationships” and tends to focus on short-term projects (100). Values-based organizing is motivated by the values of the organizer and “proceeds from the idea that language – in the form of metaphors and frames – can be used to trigger particular conceptions of individuals’ principles and values” (112). Finally, issue-based organizing builds from issues as a starting point in working toward “short-term . . . success and targeted, long-term . . . change” (118). All three approaches may provide practical models for addressing retention with diverse audiences. And all have the potential to lead, in Adler-Kassner’s words, to important acts of “story-changing.” I would argue that acts of story-changing are especially important for advancing conversations about students historically deemed underprepared or remedial. As the literature review to this thesis shows, the ways students have been defined in retention scholarship and composition studies have changed over time, and story-changing can advance new, more inclusive, definitions.

In my interpretation, the organizing approaches Adler-Kassner presents could impact retention conversations in multiple ways. Interest-based organizing might advance short-term goals such as advocating for small class sizes to promote student

18 David Charney makes a valuable point about methodology in his CCC article “Empiricism is Not a Four-Letter Word.” Compositionists may limit themselves by restricting research to purely qualitative inquiry. Charney warns, “By disparaging objective methods and advocating increasingly subjectivist methods, we may also be impairing our ability to improve our own work and use it to promote social justice” (569).
engagement and individualized academic support. This approach could be valuable when faced with immediate decisions about student enrollment and services in first-year composition. *Values-based organizing* might advance long-term discussions about defining student success alongside concerns of retention. In the last chapter, I shared Sullivan’s and McCurrie’s arguments for alternative measures of success that go beyond retention rates. Such discussions could be advanced through values-based organizing. *Issue-based organizing* might advance broad discussions about retention, conceiving of retention as the core issue before identifying other issues (such as engagement and first-year programming) nested within it. Compositionists may find themselves in issue-based organizing situations if they participate in retention committees or other institution-wide groups concerned with short-term and long-term retention efforts. Each approach requires some movement between frames to communicate with multiple stakeholders.

To advance this idea of reframing and story changing with a more specific example, we can turn to the “Succeed at Miami” initiative I introduced briefly in Chapter Two. Miami’s Retention Steering Committee distributed “Succeed at Miami” documents in Fall 2012; the documents target three audiences: faculty/instructional staff, students, and parents/families. The documents provide concise suggestions for keeping students connected to university resources and remaining organized and on course toward a degree. The “Succeed at Miami” documents advance their own “Miami image” to an extent; the document aimed at faculty immediately describes Miami students as “high ability, enthusiastic, and motivated” (“Succeed at Miami”). The document intended for parents assumes an audience of involved and knowledgeable parents; alongside advice for encouraging healthy choices and time management strategies, the document asks parents to “resist the urge to step in and plan for your son or daughter” (“Succeed at Miami”). While this advice is well intended and recognizes a holistic approach to students’ success, it omits advice and links to services for commuter students or students who themselves have families (and yes, these students represent a minority at Oxford, but this exactly why considerations for their success should also be shared). The conversation generated in Chapter Two would likely lead to a more diverse vision of what is needed to “Succeed at Miami.” Small amendments to these documents – such as the inclusion of Commuter Center contact information – could reach out to a greater
number of students. We can continue to reframe our readings of success at Miami if we make the effort to converse across boundaries as our interests, values, and issues allow or, at turns, demand.

The study I have presented in this thesis may not qualify as a true instance of activistic organizing or, for that matter, as a fully formed act of institutional critique as defined by Porter et al. But the figurative conversation around the table might bring us closer to understanding how we might approach questions of retention with advisors, administrators, and other instructors in the future, as we organize around interests, values, or issues. The very act of “sitting at the table” was enlightening and humbling for me as a researcher; it convinced me that there is value in reaching across institutional boundaries and taking up new frames – even temporarily – to consider the many facets of student retention at Miami. I have come to see that advisors have complex understandings of retention that go beyond the numbers. I have recognized that, as an instructor at Oxford, it can be quite easy to overlook the realities of widespread student departure that deeply impact other contexts; current and former regional campus instructors reminded me that not all instructors can expect students to come to class consistently throughout the semester. As a result, I embrace Howard Tinberg’s assessment that two-year college instructors deserve more recognition as “deeply reflective and impassioned practitioners” (71). Additionally, I have come to see along with Jan that our composition program is “just one among many.” While it is important to promote the considerable influence of our program in the university, we should also acknowledge that we are part of a larger network of supports, services, and influences in students’ lives.

It is my hope that, rather than fixate on the “causes and cures” of student departure, future research in retention may focus more deeply on the networks I mentioned above, and their collective impact on students’ lives in college and after. Composition has a great deal to contribute to retention scholarship, particularly as retention research moves increasingly toward faculty involvement and classroom practice. At Miami, we can consider how our curricular and pedagogical choices encourage students to transition into higher education and invent spaces for themselves in the university. We can also challenge ourselves to take on mixed-methods research that
unites retention and composition scholarship, to develop even more compelling arguments for first-year composition’s role in students’ growth and persistence. In this way, student departure may look less like a “nettlesome problem” to be fixed (Braxton and Hirschy 61). Instead, it becomes a shared responsibility that requires us to expand our networks and adapt our practices to support students’ diverse goals.
APPENDIX

List of Interview Questions for Student Services Providers (Advisors)

1. Please tell me a bit about your professional background and describe your work here at Miami. How long have you worked at Miami? Have you worked at more than one Miami campus?
2. Do you feel that issues of student retention are significant in the work you do here? Please elaborate.
3. How do you define student retention? Persistence?
4. How do you feel the university has defined retention on your campus? Is it an issue of significant concern, to your understanding?
5. How do you address concerns of student retention in your position? Do you collect data on retention? Support students directly in their success or persistence? Educate campus stakeholders about retention?
6. What do you feel are the most common challenges – to your knowledge – for students to stay in college on your campus? Please elaborate.
7. Do you feel that the university is prepared to support students in the face of the challenges you just described?
8. How might instructors better understand their role in encouraging the retention of students on your campus? Do you feel instructors are invested in this issue?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?
List of Interview Questions for First-Year Composition Instructors

1. Please tell me a bit about your professional background and describe your work here at Miami. How long have you worked at Miami? Have you worked at more than one Miami campus?

2. Do you feel that issues of student retention are significant in the work you do here? Please elaborate.

3. How do you define student retention? Persistence?

4. How do you feel the university has defined retention on your campus? Is it an issue of significant concern, to your understanding?

5. How do you address concerns of student retention in your position? Do you collect data on retention? Support students directly in their success or persistence through your pedagogical choices? Educate campus stakeholders about retention?

6. What do you feel are the most common challenges – to your knowledge – for students to stay in college on your campus? Please elaborate.

7. Do you feel that the university (and, more specifically, the first-year composition program) is prepared to support students in the face of the challenges you just described?

8. How might instructors better understand their role in encouraging the retention of students on your campus? Do you feel instructors are invested in this issue? Do you feel they even should be invested?

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?
List of Interview Questions for Students

1. Please tell me a bit about your educational background and describe your studies here at Miami. How long have you attended Miami? Have you attended more than one Miami campus, or transferred from another school?

2. What role does your college education play in your hopes and goals for your future?

3. Have you experienced any challenges in staying in college? If yes, please describe them.

4. Do you feel that the university is prepared to support you in some of the challenges you just described?

5. When you face a challenge (to keeping up with school, understanding and completing your work, taking care of personal issues), whom do you go to for support?

6. How would you describe your relationships with your instructors in college? With your first-year composition instructor particularly?

7. Please describe your experience in first-year composition at Miami. What did you do during class time in your English course? What kinds of writing did you do? How much time did you devote to the course on an average week?

8. How do you feel about writing at the college level? Please describe some of your experiences with writing beyond your first-year writing course. Have you used any of the strategies or concepts from your first-year writing course in other courses or other areas of your life such as the workplace?

9. If you transferred from one Miami campus to another, do you feel that the expectations for writing were different in any way between campuses? Do you feel that you were adequately prepared for writing in this new setting after taking your first-year writing course? Please explain.

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
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