Note

1. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the work of my colleagues who served on this committee: Jennifer Alles, Matthew McCurrie, Nita Meola, Hilary Neubert, Peter Jonn Salovaara, and Ryan Trauman. I am especially grateful to Hilary Neubert, who first articulated our goal as providing an analytical and heuristic framework, and then continued to help me think about our course in relation to "writing and threshold concepts, approaches to writing instruction I discuss here in the chapter."

References


9

RETENTION, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY,
AND STUDENTS AS AGENTS

Eschewing the Deficit Model

Beth Buyserie, Anna Plemons, and Patricia Freitag Ericsson

Although common knowledge in composition studies has long held that first year composition (FYS) plays an important role in student retention, proof for that belief is scarce. In Fall 2008, composition faculty and advocates from a number of student support units at Washington State University designed and put into practice a unique retention and persistence program that has led us to validate this common knowledge. Known as the Critical Literacies Achievement and Success Program (CLASP), this retention approach affirms the experiences and academic assets of underrepresented students, provides theoretically-grounded pedagogical workshops for faculty, works in collaboration with a broad collection of campus support units, collects both quantitative and qualitative data, and has succeeded in garnering grant support. In essence, CLASP addresses student retention and persistence by actively supporting weekly student-faculty dialogue and critically reflective teacher pedagogy.

This chapter foregrounds the major tenets of CLASP’s retention approach while illustrating them in a particular institutional setting. CLASP employs a two-pronged approach, with one prong focused on student learning and the other on faculty development. First, we reject a deficit model for the increasing number of students at Washington State University (WSU) who identify as low-income, of color, first-generation, or have other retention “risk” factors. Instead, we work to couple students’ existing academic assets with opportunities to practice self-efficacy. Second, we engage faculty in critical pedagogy sessions that help them explore the connections between their pedagogy and the retention of underrepresented students. These approaches together make a difference.
that, we argue, either one alone would not. In this chapter, we outline CLASP's theoretically grounded pedagogy, which connects retention theory outside composition (Tinto 1993) with critical composition pedagogy (e.g., Ratcliffe 2005; Reichert Powell 2013; Villanueva 1997, 2004), drawing in additional significant voices from related fields (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2014; Steele 2011). Our data on student retention, persistence, and skill transfer demonstrate the model's successes and areas for improvement, adding quantitative and qualitative information to the existing body of composition scholarship on retention.

Briefly, students in CLASP dialogue weekly with faculty during office hours, developing a practice of self-efficacy that better equips them to navigate the unspoken expectations of the university. At the same time, CLASP engages faculty in professional development opportunities that explore the connection between pedagogy and the retention of underrepresented students. Finally, CLASP also meets with educational opportunity programs (i.e., TRIO, Multicultural Student Services, and the College Assistance Migrant Program), closing the loop between those who support the students outside the classroom and those who teach key introductory courses like English composition.

WHAT WE (DON'T) KNOW ABOUT STUDENT RETENTION AND FYC: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In March 2015, a WPA-listserv exchange on "FYC and retention" revealed that some Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) are paying attention to campus retention discourses. By delving into institutional research data, some WPAs (e.g., Nora Bacon of University of Nebraska Omaha and Michael Day of Northern Illinois University) reported that students who take FYC in their first year of college return at a rate nearly 10 percent higher than those who did not take FYC. While this rare data provides some correlation, it is not strong enough to prove causation. Additional support for our disciplinary belief in the importance of FYC for retention can be drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) focus on "High-Impact Practices" (NSSE 2015). Although FYC is not explicitly one of those practices, it is an integral part of all the practices listed as High-Impact. In fact, the definition of a High-Impact Practice can be easily mapped on to FYC best practices: High-Impact Practices "demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback" (NSSE 2015). Starting in 2015, the NSSE reinforced the importance of writing as an important facet of student engagement by providing institutions with an optional module on writing (NSSE 2015). All of the questions in this model are oriented toward an evaluation of FYC best practices pedagogy (NSSE 2015). These few examples, however, are not strong enough to fully support claims about the common understanding of the importance of FYC in student retention.

Arguing against our common understanding of the importance of FYC is 2009 research by Blythe et al., published in the WPA: Writing Program Administration. This research was based on previous insights that "more writing experience may not always be what academically marginal students need." The authors posit that "more writing is not always the answer to an academically marginal student's writing dilemma" (Blythe et al. 2009, 12). Overall, their research substantiated this insight and indicated writing courses themselves might not be the only successful intervention in student retention (Blythe et al. 2009).

Recent research by Pegeen Reichert Powell (2013) argues that retention should not be about keeping students at a particular university and instead about the good pedagogical practices teachers routinely employ. Reichert Powell (2013) claims that "the focus on the first year in retention literature does not always translate to a focus on pedagogy or to a reliance on the expertise of faculty who regularly teach first-year students" (8). CLASP stands in that gap, asking faculty to think critically about their role as classroom teachers in student retention. We agree with Reichert Powell's (2009) earlier argument that the composition classroom is particularly well suited to serve as a bridge between overly bureaucratic notions of student retention and strong pedagogical discussions. As Reichert Powell (2009) argues, the composition class can serve "as an interface between students' past and future educational experiences, as an introduction to the discourse practices of higher education, and as one of the only universal requirements at most institutions" (669). CLASP considers faculty pedagogy a key component of student retention. Therefore, we have worked to engage our entire FYC faculty in critical reflection about their pedagogy, helping faculty in our program understand the direct lines between how they teach and student persistence.

Reichert Powell's (2009, 2013) ongoing efforts to complicate the role of FYC in retention echoes those of Richard E. Miller (1998), who emphasizes how little we really know and understand about student retention, even as our discourse is peppered with vague references to "the student" (15). Miller claims that "invoking the ever-pliant student helps cover over the embarrassing fact that we know almost nothing"
about how students experience the culture of schooling or why some
students fail and other succeed” (16). Students are simply perceived,
in Miller’s words, as “absolutely anonymous, deracinated, ahistorical,
malleable, infinitely penetrable being[s]” (16). Reichert Powell (2013)
might agree that this infinite malleability is a key characteristic of cur-
rent retention discourse, as all our current approaches to retention view
students “as a problem to be solved” (36).

CLASP was not initially designed to support claims about the impor-
tance of FYC in retention discourse, nor did we set out to complicate
the sometimes questionable nature of retention discourse. Nevertheless,
the program’s emphasis on both critical pedagogy and intentional
weekly dialogue during office hours between students and faculty has
proved to be instrumental in navigating the intersections between FYC,
derrepresented students (particularly students of color at a predomi-
nantly white university), and administrative conversations about stu-
dent retention. We have found that the CLASP framework addresses
the weaknesses in retention discourse—discussion about and around
the student—by eschewing a deficit model and working to support stu-
dents who are identified by the university as “at risk” for retention. By
rejecting notions of deficit, this framework aligns with Reichert Powell
(2013), who insists that the university share responsibility for student
permanence—rather than placing the onus for this permanence solely on
the students.

STUDENTS AS AGENTS: CONNECTING RETENTION
THEORY WITH CRITICAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

While we reject the pitfalls of traditional retention discourse, we are
aware that this discourse pervades campus discussions. A composition
program can be a part of efforts to modify the conversation by inviting
students “at risk” for retention into purposeful dialogue with faculty
members. As student development scholars such as Alexander Astin,
Arthur Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, and Vincent Tinto have noted,
derrepresented students (particularly first-generation college stu-
dents) benefit from opportunities that develop and scaffold the bureau-
cratic skills that high-achieving students are more likely to employ
without overt permission (implicit permission is typically afforded to
students operating within positions of race and class privilege) (Astin
1999; Chickering and Gamson 1999; Tinto 1993). One such skill is the
use of faculty office hours, a tradition most faculty consider standard
and may only communicate via the syllabus or routine class announce-
ments. Many faculty are unaware of the power dynamics inherent in
office hours, believing (with good intentions) that students who want
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Theorically-Grounded Pedagogy: Connecting Retention Theory with Critical Composition Pedagogy

Because we believe that good pedagogy supports retention and persistence, the second prong of CLASP is a six-part critical pedagogies series that offers FYC faculty the opportunity to engage in ongoing reflexive conversations regarding teacher rhetoric, privilege, and power in the classroom. The series is part of the composition program’s weekly Professional Development in Composition sessions, which are attended by instructors (who can earn Professional Development Certificates) and graduate students (who attend Professional Development sessions for credit). An average of thirty instructors participate in the CLASP pedagogy series every year: composition faculty’s willingness in this series to critically examine teacher rhetoric, privilege, and power plays an important role in student retention and in the discourse of student retention, particularly the retention of low-income students and students of color at predominantly white, middle-class institutions. This pedagogy series is presented within the context of ongoing reflection and dialogue, recognizing that addressing issues of power is never complete. CLASP advocates from various student support units also attend these sessions to ensure that our conversations represent the students as whole persons rather than as representatives from homogenous underrepresented groups. This series is intentionally designed to address an institutional system that often frames these student-faculty interactions as remedial.

Reichert Powell (2013) argues against the dangers of presuming retention is even possible or that can be supported with one-size-fits-all models. Nonetheless, Reichert Powell’s strong claims about what we cannot do hardly negate the need for critical reflection and de-colonial action on the part of faculty. As three white faculty/WPAs working within a predominantly white institution, we are aware of composition’s role in the linguistic colonization of students. A significant body of composition scholarship details the disconnects, silences and damages that occur in cross-cultural communication in the classroom (e.g., Ratcliffe 2005; Royster 1996; Villanueva 1997, 2004). As Stephanie Kerschbaum (2014) points out, underrepresented students are often still positioned “as others needing to be better integrated into campus communities” (15), an assimilation move that marks difference as deficient. Her claim is important for composition’s approach to retention: classrooms might be spaces to introduce students to academic discourse and push back against unexamined notions of difference and inclusion. The CLASP pedagogy series focuses on the problematic intersections of teacher rhetoric and cross-cultural intention.

### Table 9.1. CLASP Pedagogy Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1: Pedagogies of Inclusion/Critical Pedagogies</td>
<td>Session 4: Rhetorical Listening and Responding to Student Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 2: Power, Privilege, and Student Participation</td>
<td>Session 5: Student Self-Reflection, Goal Setting, and Stereotype Threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 3: Course Design and Critical Pedagogy</td>
<td>Session 6: Rhetorical Listening, Color-blind Racism, and Stereotype Threat: Considerations for Student-Teacher Conferencing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six-part critical pedagogy series, offered during weekly Professional Development in Composition sessions, includes the elements depicted in Table 9.1.

In this series, to engage a busy FYC faculty in productive, ongoing questioning of pedagogy, we looked for scholarship that addressed particular aspects of privilege. Since WSU is approximately 70 percent white, considering Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) work on color-blind rhetorics and Claude Steele’s (2011) work on stereotype threat offers appropriate platforms for a larger conversation about the relationship between teacher privilege and classroom pedagogy. The decision to focus on race privilege was also supported by the CLASP campus partners, who articulated the frequency with which their students experience negative race-related encounters in the classroom. Systemic racism is an aspect of the college experience for many students and faculty are often unwitting actors in student stories about racist and racialized experiences. For our pedagogy series, Bonilla-Silva (2014) and Steele (2011) provide discussion ideas and pedagogical tools for starting difficult and protracted conversations about a fraught topic.

To avoid the pitfalls of discrete, reifying “diversity training” programs, teachers are also introduced to a methodology for listening rhetorically (Ratcliffe 2005). Each topic is selected for the possibilities it affords the discussion of teacher privilege in the classroom within a practical, pedagogical context. The pedagogical constructs of the series do not operate from a deficit model (neither teachers nor students are “broken”), nor is it an expert discourse. The sessions encourage the inclusion of lived experience and story telling between teachers, thus modeling and reinforcing a posture of rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe 2005). Ratcliffe’s call to purposeful listening for presences, absences, and unknowns leads to the fundamental question that has always complicated/frustrated/stymied cross-cultural communication: “How may we listen for that which we do not intellectually, viscerally, or experientially know?” (29), a
question prompted by the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster (1996). The work of Bonilla-Silva (2014) on color-blind racism and Steele (2011) on stereotype threat offer writing teachers some starting points for working toward a productive methodology that responds to Ratcliffe's (2009) fundamental question of how we listen for what we do not understand and for what we have not been trained to hear.

To be specific, Bonilla-Silva (2014) gives teachers the language with which to interrogate the disconnections between cross-cultural intention and classroom practice and interrogate their own relationship with the dominant racial ideology. Bonilla-Silva's insight that "younger, educated, middle-class people are more likely than older, less-educated, working-class people to make full use of the resources of color-blind racism" (71) is particularly important for us because the demographic of WSU writing teachers is predominantly white, young, and educated. While Bonilla-Silva (2014) outlines the frames and rhetorical moves used by whites in the maintenance of a color-blind racism, Steele's (2011) research on stereotype threat describes the psychological responses by members of non-dominant groups in specific instances where they perceive a threat of being viewed in a stereotypic way. Steele suggests that performance is significantly and negatively affected in situations where members of a non-dominant group perceive the threat of being viewed in a stereotypic way. The work of Bonilla-Silva and Steele, taken together, gives faculty some concrete tools with which to listening with intent to students, consider how their rhetoric might maintain dominant ideology, and identify disconnections between teacherly intent and pedagogical practice.

CLASP DATA: FALL 2011–SPRING 2014

Speaking to the Bureau: Data and Retention Discourse

In a different era, it might have been enough for a composition program to emphasize pedagogy and go forward, but data-driven accountability and shrinking budgets demand that composition programs provide substantiated results. Composition scholars, Richard Haswell and Susan McLeod (2001) argue that "we need to think carefully about administrators [bureaucrats] as audience—what they do, what they want, and what kind of information they might need from evaluations to do their job... As the academic equivalent of managers in a corporation [a bureaucracy], they have the job of maintaining the quality of the institution while working within budgets" (Haswell and McLeod 2001, 173). Part of the CLASP approach is a careful collection of retention data and reporting that data to administrators. This approach has allowed CLASP to become visible and valuable to the administration in ways that would not be possible without such data. Our work takes heed of Haswell and McLeod’s argument that administrators have a primary need: “to make decisions about allocation of resources” (173). We are fully aware that as a bureaucratic entity dependent on the resources of the kind of data they need to justify the types of programs we want to run.

In Fall 2011, CLASP received a 3-year grant from College Spark Washington (a community grants program). This grant funding allowed us to design our assessment methods, develop and implement the CLASP Pedagogy Series, and prepare materials for dissemination and potential replication. Though CLASP continues, most of our data (including student and faculty pre- and post-course surveys, student and faculty focus groups, course grades, student demographic data, number of student-faculty conferences, retention rates, and progress toward graduation) was collected between Fall 2011 and Spring 2014. Because our data come from a particular institutional setting, we do not claim that our results are generalizable to outside populations, although we suspect they might be. Even though our data is persuasive, it is not absolute proof of CLASP’s effectiveness. The situational and contextual interactions that take place in the pedagogy sessions and student-faculty meetings are not fully representable by numerical data. That aside, we include results that we have repeatedly presented to WSU faculty, advisors, and administration, other institutions, and at national conferences. This data-driven research has been invaluable in opening dialogue with upper-level administration, as well in helping help us consider how we might shape retention discourse at our institution.

Demographics and Retention

For the six semesters between Fall 2011-Spring 2014, CLASP served an average of 40 students per semester (240 students total). Eighty-four percent of the students were Pell-Grant eligible, and 80 percent were students of color. For the six-semester period, 1,920 student-teacher meetings during weekly office hours took place. CLASP students met with their FYC instructors an average of eight times during each semester. Each faculty member was assigned no more than four CLASP students to ensure that faculty could meet with students during regular office hours. Because of this limitation, the size of our program is always dependent upon the number of faculty teaching English 101 (typically about 25–30 instructors teaching over 50 sections per semester).
Figure 9.1. Retention to 2nd Year (CLASP Participants: 2011–12 = 93; 2012–13 = 77; 2013–14 = 71)

Figure 9.1 illustrates CLASP student retention rates from first to second year for the three years of our grant. We realize the retention rates in Figure 9.1 are affected by a number of variables, so we do not attribute them solely to CLASP. At the same time, because our follow-up data shows positive results, we assume CLASP has played a significant role in the positive retention numbers for participants.

CLASP student retention rates from second to third year are illustrated in Figure 9.2.

Survey Data: CLASP and Control Group

For six semesters, CLASP students completed a pre- and post-course survey, responding to questions about their confidence in speaking with faculty and how likely they were to do so. Our results were positive, enabling us to meet or exceed our grant’s benchmarks. In Fall 2012, the granting agency requested a survey of non-CLASP students to serve as a control group; the control group received no special instructions to meet with faculty, other than the general invitations to attend office hours that faculty typically extend to a class. That semester, CLASP students and faculty conferenced a total of 322 times in Fall 2012, with an average of 7.1 meetings per student. No data was collected on the number of times non-CLASP students met with faculty.

The figures below illustrate CLASP and control group responses to a series of statements about student confidence in meeting and talking with faculty.

Question A: I am confident with my academic (college level) writing abilities. (Figure 9.3)
Question B: I am confident talking with my instructor about my writing. (Figure 9.4)
Question C: I am likely to approach my English instructor if I have a question. (Figure 9.5)
Question D: I am likely to meet with my future instructors to ask questions or dialogue about course concepts. (Figure 9.6)

CLASP students showed substantial growth in confidence, consistently surpassing the control group. The control group provided more positive responses on the pre-survey, but did not show the same improvement in positive responses on the post-survey.

In promoting the idea of students as agents, we are interested in whether students apply the skills learned in CLASP (including approaching a faculty member, using office hours, and developing strong questions as a starting point for dialogue) to their future courses. Figure 9.6 shows that, without exception, CLASP students indicated they were likely to be active agents in dialoging with faculty.
After CLASP: Student Survey Results

Our data also show that students who learn to use faculty office hours in CLASP transfer this ability to their subsequent classes. We asked students who were one semester out of CLASP to respond to the following two statements:

1. I met with instructors of my courses this semester.
2. I met with instructors of my courses this semester because of what I learned in CLASP.

Figures 9.7 and 9.8 show the average of responses to these two questions from the Fall 2011 and 2012 follow-up surveys:

Overall, our data suggest that students in the program understand that they can choose to be actively engaged in their own education, rather than subjects of it.
I met with instructors of my courses this semester

- Yes 3%
- No 97%

Figure 9.7. Question 1 Responses (averages from Year 2011-2012 Cohort)

I met with instructors of my courses this semester because of what I learned in CLASP

- Yes 5%
- In part 43%
- No 52%

Figure 9.8. Question 2 Responses (averages from Year 2011-2012 Cohort)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CLASP: A REPLICABLE AND CUSTOMIZABLE MODEL

We believe that the CLASP model can be implemented at other institutions, and its dual emphasis on student-faculty dialogue and teacher education can be used as a model for other populations. As evidence, we look to our own university. The composition program is CLASP's only academic partner at WSU for its first five years. In 2013, the Mathematics Department began participating in the structured weekly student-faculty dialogue (during office hours) component of CLASP, and is in the process of adding the key critical pedagogy piece. After a Retention Summit held in May 2014, eight additional academic departments joined CLASP, with nearly 60 participating faculty meeting with approximately 100 students per semester. To support the critical pedagogy component, and to continue collecting data, a campus-wide CLASP Director was hired in Spring 2015. As of Fall 2015, there are 10 academic units participating: Comparative Ethnic Studies, English, Entomology, Environmental Science, Geology, History, Human Development, Mathematics, Music, and Science.

Though our data has been instrumental to the successful growth of CLASP and serves the university bureaucracy well, we intentionally foreground theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that we believe will help turn retention and persistence discourse away from deficit models that deny student agency. Attention to faculty development that acknowledges student assets ought to be a key part of retention theory and practice. Likewise, retention efforts are well-served when they include sustained, critical faculty reflection regarding the relationship between power, privilege, rhetorical listening, stereotype threat, and the retention of underrepresented students.

Notes
1. The concurrent labor issues and the details of CLASP are addressed later in this chapter.
2. We thank Dr. Preston Andrews for his invaluable help with our data representation design.
3. The Fall 2012 CLASP cohort included 45 students from 20 sections of English 101; the control group included 119 students from five sections English 101.
4. 66% of students responded to follow-up survey in Fall 2011; 69% in Fall 2012.

References


