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Retention Risks and Realities: One Student's Story

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY ARE SPENDING increasing amounts of resources and energy on the issue of retention[1]. And according to Vincent Tinto, a leading retention scholar, "Student retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education[1] ("Research and Practice" 1). Retention is the effort of an institution to keep students enrolled until graduation, or put another way, to dissuade students from leaving. First-year writing instructors have many reasons to pay attention to the discourse of retention in higher education: for one, we are more likely than our colleagues who teach upper level courses to have the opportunity—and the concomitant responsibilities—to teach students before they decide to leave. Moreover, for readers who share this journal's commitment to the political work of teaching open admissions and non-traditional students, there is even more urgency to pay attention to retention, for in many cases, these are the students who are often least well-served by our institutions and who are more likely to decide to leave.

By "paying attention" to the issue of retention, however, we are not arguing for an uncritical, no-holds-barred approach to keeping students in their seats until graduation. Retention is an effort complicated not just by the reasons students leave in the first place but also by institutions' motivations to prevent them from doing so.

We are in the process of working with a group of students who volunteered to be "partnered" with a faculty member during this current academic year. The students were drawn from participants in the summer Bridge program—a program specifically designed by our institution to assess and ready otherwise ineligible first-year college students. Given that these students did not—for a variety of reasons—meet the admissions requirements of our institution prior to the Bridge program, they represented the wide-ranging risks associated with retention studies.

At the end of Bridge, students were given the opportunity to participate in

1. One study found that a sample of 40 American colleges spent an average of $9,696 on conferences, webcasts, research reports, and other information sources and a mean of $25, 527 on consulting services to improve student retention in the past year. 65% of the colleges had a high-level administrator or Dean whose primary responsibility is to maintain and increase student retention. (*Survey of Student Retention Policies in Higher Education* 18-19)

The Student Faculty Partnership for Success program during their first year.[2] The Student Faculty Partnership for Success program has two goals. The first is to learn from students themselves about the many complicated factors that lead some students to decide to enroll in subsequent semesters and others to leave our institution. The second goal is to intervene, when it's both possible and right to do so, to help students address problems that might otherwise lead to decisions to leave.[3]

The data that our institution and retention scholars compile and study provides some insight into the problem of attrition, but we couldn't hear our students' voices among the numbers and percentages and statistical probabilities. The Student Faculty Partnership for Success program in general, and this article in particular, is our attempt to listen carefully to individual students' voices, and to figure out what we can learn by doing so.

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In this article, we rely on the words of one student to illustrate the frustratingly complex issues surrounding retention. We first met Jenelle as one of Danielle's Bridge students. Danielle also partnered with her for the following academic year. Then, Pegeen taught Jenelle in Writing and Rhetoric I, the first required writing course at our college. Jenelle in many ways represents the larger population of students who are at risk for dropping out of college before graduation. We hear in her story many of the "risk factors" the data tell us to look for when trying to determine who might leave. She is representative, too, because paradoxically, her story is unique—the peculiarities of her experiences and behaviors and personality traits make it nearly impossible to extrapolate from this one case any useful generalizations about retention. We are inclined to argue that this is true for all students. Getting to know her, like getting to know the other students in our program, has taught us just how much we don't know, and how much we may never be able to know, about why some students leave and other students graduate.

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2. The Student Faculty Partnership for Success program was generously funded by a Multicultural Enrichment Grant from Columbia College Chicago's Office of Multicultural Affairs.

3. The Student Faculty Partnership for Success program partners approximately 30 students with one of four faculty members. The faculty member contacts each student regularly throughout the academic year to check on their academic and social adjustments to college, as well as to see how they're doing physically, emotionally, financially, and so on. All of the students participated in the summer Bridge program, where they learned about and volunteered to participate in the SFPS program.

And yet, as we discuss at the end of the article, while we don't know as much as we'd like to about retention, what writing instructors do know is pedagogy. The main question that Jenelle's story raises for us is this: If Jenelle never graduates from college, what do we want her to get out of our courses while she is here? In other words, as you read the following sections about how little we know about retention, consider how it might change the ways you approach course and assignment design, classroom practices, and pedagogy more generally.

In what follows, we've put Jenelle's own words and story next to our reflection, as teachers and scholars. This conversation took place during an interview we had with Jenelle near the end of her first semester. In many ways, it is the culmination of a dialogue we had been having with Jenelle and with each other all year. This format, and the frantic nature of the reading required of it, illustrates our difficulties of going back and forth between students' voices and retention research, our struggle to reconcile both of these discourses into one tidy narrative, and the disjointedness of our understanding of retention.[4]

Retention and Previous Academic Experiences

Jenelle's story begins much earlier than this first excerpt. She lived in the city, then moved out to a suburb with her Mom, where, in her words, *"I got Saturday detentions almost every weekend. Didn't go"* and *"I wasn't going to classes. I was ditching a lot of the morning classes, always late."*

She got involved with gangs, then moved out to her Dad's home to avoid the gang members after her friend (sponsor? play brother?) was killed and they were coming after her. About that school, she says, *They threw me into geometry. And geometry I slept through every day. I told the [teacher] I'm not going to be*

According to Jennifer L. Crissman Ishler and M. Lee Upcraft's review of retention literature, "There is substantial evidence that the most powerful predictor of persistence into the sophomore year is the first-year student's prior academic achievement, including high school grades" (33; see also Caison, 431; Astin and Oseguera 256). If "prior academic achievement" can predict whether or not a student will re-enroll after the first semester or first year of college, then Jenelle's high school experience does not bode well. Her high school GPA undoubtedly reflected all of the moving around and

4. A note about Jenelle's words. Together, we interviewed Jenelle on campus on December 11, 2008, and that conversation was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. All of Jenelle's words appear here, in the left column in *italic* font, exactly as they appear in the transcript. An ellipsis (. . .) indicates parts of the conversation that were not included; brackets with italics inside [italics] indicate places where we inserted words to protect someone's anonymity, or because Jenelle's words weren't clear on the tape and we inserted a word that was our best guess. We used regular type in the left column to indicate our narrative explanations. All words in the right column are ours unless indicated by quotation marks.

able to learn this. And I slept through it every day. Chemistry was the same thing, slept through that. So, like, I was really screwing myself hard as hell, hard as hell. I wasn't passing any classes.

She then moved back to her Mom's when she found out that she wouldn't graduate on time from the school she attended at her Dad's. We asked if she had been held back a year in school because of all the turbulence . . . *[I]n answer to your question if I was held back, technical I was held back, because when I went to H-F as a junior, they did label me as a sophomore, so I guess that is being held back. But they told me I'd be able to make up the credits. But they're telling me in order to graduate, I would have to do so much schoolwork, Prairie State College to do night courses, do this, and then get my diploma mailed to me. I told them, kiss my ass. Either I'm going to graduate on time, or instead of doing all this stuff, I'll get my GED because it will be a lot quicker than doing all the extra shit.*

Rather than go to that trouble, she re-enrolled in her original high school and, in her words, *I killed my senior year. Killed it. Came out with A's and B's. Killed it. Graduated on time.*

violence and uncertainty that characterized her life during this period of time. Regardless of the quality of her high schools or the availability of AP classes or extracurriculars (we don't know these details about the high schools she attended), she clearly wasn't taking advantage of opportunities to prepare for college academically or behaviorally, and that lack of preparation is to some degree captured in the numbers of the GPA.

However, what her GPA doesn't adequately reflect is her high intelligence or her strong personality, which we can see glimpses of in her narrative here, and which we both witnessed ourselves in our classrooms and interactions with Jenelle over the course of several months.

Many humanists are wary of GPAs and SATs and all of their numbers as indicators of intelligence. To this general sense of wariness we'll add the further caution that when these numbers are used to predict retention, they'll increasingly be used to determine access (an institution that is determined to improve retention numbers will be more likely to deny access to students whose numbers suggest they won't make it) (see Astin).

What is unnerving for us, in trying to understand retention better, is how even knowing more of Jenelle's story, even seeing behind the numbers, even coming to tremendously enjoy and respect her intelligence and her personality, we are no better able to predict her chances of graduating

With the encouragement of a friend, she applied to Columbia College Chicago, a private generous admissions, arts and media college. Her acceptance was contingent on attending a Summer Bridge program.

Yeah, and I got a letter that said I had to do the Bridge program, and I was pissed. I remember I was pissed about that. My mom read the letter first, though, and out of her mouth was, I told you this wasn't going to work and all this. But I was pissed, like, man, I wrote good on that essay. There should be no reason. But then I thought about it. They probably looked at my high school and, you know, my test scores, and they probably figured, you know. But I couldn't blame them for that because I wasn't showing up, so what the–you know? So, I told my mom–she told me I couldn't do it, and I said, watch.

PEGEEN: So, did you have either of your parents' support when you started the Bridge program?

No. My dad, like, he did come with me one time to another open house, like, after I came with [a friend] and stuff. It was like a parent thing. He came with me, and he said he liked the school, and he liked it because the music–neither one of my parents supported it as a career for me, or, you know what I'm saying, where I should be going to school at. But they're still–to this day, they're still talking about me going to community college.

Like her previous academic experiences and high school GPA, Jenelle's parents might be considered a "risk factor." It seems like commonsense, but retention scholars confirm that "Students whose parents expressed belief in their competence and abilities and who shared the students' interests and concerns were more likely to perform well in college than those whose parents did not demonstrate these attributes" (Cutrona, et al., 373). Not only did her parents not support her college choice, but her mother, from the very beginning, showed very little confidence in Jenelle's ability to succeed.

If we study retention in order to improve *all* students' chances to succeed (our reason for studying retention, though admittedly not the reason many institutions spend so much energy and resources on this problem), then studying factors like a student's relationship with her parents seems like a dead end. This is something that institutions can neither predict nor control.

Perhaps knowing Jenelle's story of her relationship with her parents helps, in some small way, to explain her performance, both in high school and college, but it actually raises more questions for us than it answers. For example, when and how do we intervene, if we feel that her mom is eroding Jenelle's sense of confidence and accomplishment, and thus her chances to succeed? In the context of retention efforts, should an institution's approach to *in loco parentis* take

into account students who have very little emotional or financial support from their parents?[5]

Retention, Self-efficacy, and Institutional Support

Jenelle did enroll in the Bridge program, where she met Danielle. She was very successful in the program, and agreed to "partner" with Danielle in the Student Faculty Partnership for Success Program. We asked if after the Bridge program, she felt ready for the semester.

Yeah, I was, but then no. I don't know. I was, but then I was nervous, because I'm thinking, OK, if that was two classes with Bridge, now I'm taking five. And that ended up being my worst–you know what I'm saying, like, that ended up being what kicked me in the ass in the end.

Jenelle enrolled in 15 credit hours for her first semester at Columbia.

I didn't even choose any of my classes. This lady, I don't even know her name, but this lady just sat me at a computer and she did everything. She told me what [classes] to pick out and what to pull. So, I really didn't have any say-so in what classes I wanted to take, really.

It was in the Art of Business Recording, a class required for Jenelle's major, that she started. While faculty may be the most obvious point of contact between a student and the institution, Jenelle's story also highlights how multifaceted the student's college experience is. She was nervous going in—retention scholars might identify this as her lack of a sense of self-efficacy (see Bean 220-223). And while it might be tempting to ascribe these nerves to her prior academic experiences or to her relationship with her parents, we might also consider how the institution can exacerbate her nervousness. As John P. Bean says, "Any interaction between students and an institution's faculty and other employees that increases the students' sense of self-efficacy is likely to improve their attitudes toward school and increase their likelihood of remaining enrolled" (221).

The fact that Jenelle didn't get much say in shaping her first-semester schedule undoubtedly failed to increase her sense of self-efficacy. Moreover, as she

5. *In Loco Parentis* is the idea that the university should play the role of the parent while the student is on campus. This idea was challenged successfully in the 1960s and 1970s, when students demanded more autonomy and more prominent roles in college governance, and when the legal age to vote was lowered to 18. At this point, colleges and universities shifted away from a culture of *in loco parentis*. However, more recently, institutions have been sued and found responsible for things that have happened to students while on campus. The tendency of parents to sue institutions, as well as the culture of "helicopter parenting," has initiated another shift, back toward policies and practices that might be understood as in loco parentis. Some retention efforts—including our own Student Faculty Partnership for Success program—could be seen as efforts by the institution to play the role of the parent; we argue for more research and greater skepticism when this occurs. (See Sweeton and Davis for a brief history of this concept; see Trimbur; Podis and Podis for critiques of *in loco parentis* in composition studies.)

ed questioning whether or not she wanted to continue her degree in Music Business.

Because we had, like, a paper, a 16-page paper due on–what was it like, the different–I showed you, the different jobs. And I have to talk about how country and rap did this in the industry and how money and all, like–it just wasn't–when I looked at that paper, I was like, well, this is my career. I should love doing this. And I showed, you know, David in our class, I showed him the paper, and he was like, man, maybe I should do this. I would love to write a paper like that. So, I'm thinking, like, damn, you know, people actually like doing this, so maybe this ain't for me. And that was just–and another reason why I dropped [the class] was because that was just–I already saw a downfall. You know. I already saw that it was going to bring me down, so I just figured, just cut it while I can, you know?

became increasingly unsure about her career choice and major, she could surely have benefitted from better academic advising. Tinto argues that "advising is particularly important to the success of the many students who either begin college undecided about their major or change their major during college" (Epilogue 322).

We understand the importance of institutional efforts to improve students' experiences with academic advising, the financial aid office, and other crucial services. And we think Jenelle's experience with these services at our college should have been better. However, we are not confident that improved services would necessarily increase her chances of succeeding. The more we know of her story, the less able we are to identify straightforward solutions: Improve the advising process! Provide more career counseling! Tutoring! Better customer service in Financial Aid!

We see how a student's sense of self-efficacy and her chances for success are the accumulation of variables both as profound as the relationship between mother and daughter, for example, and as capricious as an academic advisor's bad day, a chance conversation with a classmate, the timing of the "withdraw" date on the academic calendar.

Jenelle was also realizing that, unlike the Bridge Program, she had to initiate relationships with her teachers. She admits that she didn't always make the effort to do this:

PEGEEN: OK. Those two teachers, did you go to their offices?

JENELLE: No.

PEGEEN: You never go to their offices during the semester?

JENELLE: Mm-mm.

PEGEEN: How did you communicate with them?

> "I tell him I've got a lot going on, it doesn't phase him"

JENELLE: Just through e-mail and my – but with my econ teacher, I'll leave him a – like, I haven't – me and him haven't been – he only knows, like, a fragment of what's been going on in my life, you know? And I'm sure when he reads an e-mail, and I tell him I've got a lot going on, it doesn't phase him, you know? But he – I told him about the car accident. I told him about that. But I really haven't – I didn't go in detail like I should have, you know? But I didn't feel that – to me, he wasn't that kind of teacher to give you that connection to chit-chat like that, you know?

PEGEEN: And the other teacher?

The management teacher? She knows everything, but it's like she rushed, like, when I

A student's relationship with faculty can also have both profound consequences and be the result of the capriciousness of the registration process. In their review of retention scholarship, Ishler and Upcraft refer to a study that found that "specific faculty behaviors contributed to student persistence: faculty members being supportive of student needs, being approachable, and returning telephone calls and e-mails in a timely fashion" (38). Increasingly, retention scholarship is arguing for the role of faculty in improving students' chances of success (see Tinto "Research and Practice").

And in fact, some of this research, as well as our own instincts about these matters, motivated the Student Faculty Partnership for Success Program that Jenelle was a part of. What first-year writing faculty do as a matter of course—teach smaller classes, conduct frequent conferences, assign papers that call for personal writing—are a tremendous resource, deliberately or not, for retention efforts at their institutions. But, in spite of—or is it because of?—our experience with the Student Faculty Partnership for Success Program, we are hesitant to argue that this is a role that faculty should seek or fill.

What should be the extent of faculty response-ability? Just how "supportive" and "approachable" should we be? These are sincere questions, arising out of a real frustration with the conflict between our best intentions and our most severe limitations.

was trying to explain to her, because I came up – I sent her an e-mail when I was absent for the classes. And one day after class, I went up to her and I wanted to talk to her personally and just explain to her personally, like, everything I said in the e-mail, but to her face. And when I was talking to her and she was, like, oh, like rushing me, like, oh, it's OK! Yeah, it's OK, _____, you know? So, I just felt like she really didn't care. She seemed – she told me I'm going to pass, so that's what it was, you know?

We found ourselves, over the course of a semester, trying to respond to domestic violence, the threat of homelessness, financial crises, possible unplanned pregnancies, mental illnesses, physical illnesses, and a whole host of other serious issues. We were overwhelmed and under-qualified.[6]

It's easy to point an accusatory finger at the faculty member who was too rushed to talk with Jenelle, or who didn't like to "chit chat." But that was us, sometimes, too.

Moreover, 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. It should be obvious to all readers that teachers' working conditions and students' experiences at any given institution are inextricably linked. It is the part-time faculty, after all, that so often ends up shouldering much of this responsibility. In the case of our institution, we found that—due to both staffing scenarios and the enthusiastic involvement of newer teachers—it was many of the part-time faculty members that developed lasting bonds with these students and that tried, endlessly and without additional compensation, to facilitate success during these students' first year.

6. Virginia Tech, and closer to home, Northern Illinois, have raised a whole host of legal and ethical issues about faculty response-ability. In the context of those tragedies, retention seems almost trivial.

Retention and Stress: Time and Money

Jenelle's first-semester experiences, as well as her frustrations, were heavily influenced by events happening outside of the classroom, including the fact that her need for money, both to pay for school and to live, requires that she works 25-30 hours a week as a janitor at a suburban mall.

DANIELLE: What do you think are the top three factors that contributed to you not doing as well as you wanted to in your classes?

Time. Time is one. That's one thing I can say. Like, I didn't give enough time in my studies . . . I did not give enough time in my studies. But that's because I didn't have the time.

Well, just drama, like, just drama at my house, and just like the situation. I mean, my family and, like, as stupid as it sounds, but with me jumping a lot with different houses, it really, it takes toll on your mind after a while, like, not having, like, one bed to sleep in. Like, it sounds really stupid. I mean, that sounds lame as hell, but–

Well, like, I don't know. To me, it just sounds like a bad reason not to, like, do good in school, but just jumping around and having to worry about, like, one month having the money for a Metra pass but then next month not having the money for a Metra pass, but then where am I going to stay, and not argue, you know? It was just – that's one thing I feel.

DANIELLE: So, time, family drama, and maybe money?

Yeah. That would be it. Well, I wouldn't even say the money, like, would affect the

So, how does a faculty member, who is worried about time, money, family obligations, and the stress of day-to-day living, respond to these concerns in a student?

Worries about time and money converge for most students in an unavoidable catch-22: the absolute necessity of a job to pay for school and the time a job takes away from schoolwork. It's interesting to note that Jenelle doesn't really consider money to be a top stressor. "Money comes and goes, you know?" But neither does she consider it an option to *not* work, and it's the time commitment required of working that is, in her mind, the number one stressor.

Part-time work (fewer than 15 hours) on campus has been found to increase a student's chances of persisting. More hours, or work off campus, decrease these chances (Ishler and Upcraft 39). But on-campus work is not available for everyone, and most students, like Jenelle, need far more hours to barely scratch by.

It's tempting to see money as the cure-all for all attrition. However, even this isn't as simple as it looks. While more money probably would make a huge difference for Jenelle, we heard too many other stories from other students for whom money was not the reason they were struggling. Moreover, retention scholars argue that it's not just a student's ability to pay for school that influences retention, but if a student believes that the cost *exceeds the benefits,* he

grades, because money comes and goes, you know?

DANIELLE: But the stress from the money.

Yeah. There you go. I would say number three stress, then. Yeah.

or she may decide to leave (Braxton and Hirschy 62).

The stressors that Jenelle names are fairly typical. At times, the stress she was under might have been different in degree, but not necessarily different in kind, than the stress that all of our students and our colleagues experience. Why does this stress prevent some people from succeeding, while others are able to manage? And to what extent can retention efforts deal with these factors?

Retention and Plain Bad Luck

So I wasn't, like, steady living at mom's house, but I was there most of the time now. And the first two weeks, we were just bickering. The third week, it was horrible. And then around that time, I got in the car accident. It was on a Wednesday night, and–I got in the car accident, and my parents, like, I don't know. They weren't focused on the car accident. They were focused on the neighborhood I was in. Which it wasn't–it was on 76th and State, and my house is on 87th. So, really, you know what I'm saying, you can't really bitch at me for that. You know? . . . Well, I go home, and my mom–I already called my parents when the accident happened. And I go home and I talk to my mom. I said I need–because she was holding $400 for me. She had $400 of my savings. And so I said I need $100 to get the car–to tow the car. When I got to the curb, she was gone. She went with her boyfriend and left the money on the table. Which right there, that kind of hurt my feelings because, if it was me and my

The story that Jenelle tells about the car accident illustrates perfectly the bewildering mess of issues that comprise the problem of retention: the family drama, again; unexpected expenses that eat into savings; missed days at work and school because of transportation; even access to technology (because of her work schedule and commute to school, she did not have enough time in the labs on campus to do homework; the laptop, a gift from her father, promised to be a real boost to her performance in school).

And all of this triggered by chance, an unlucky wrong-place-wrong-time occurrence. The car accident, for Jenelle, was a turning point, the point at which we saw her motivation, her self-confidence, and her energy levels drop precipitously. Up until that point, the Student Faculty Partnership for Success program had provided her a valuable support network, which, combined

daughter got into an accident, my ass would be waiting outside for her to come through that door. You know what I'm saying?

And then the next day, well, I got home to the house. After all this, got home to the house, and my mom goes, where's your laptop, that I just got that Tuesday before. This is Wednesday. I got it the week before on Tuesday. And I said, what? And she said, where's your laptop? And I said, you're taking away my laptop? And she goes, not me, your father.

The next day, I wake up to both my parents calling off of work. And I go outside, and my dad's there, and he sees my car, and I could see his whole face turn pale. And gets to where he about threw up. And I looked at him and said, at least I'm not dead. You know? That's all I could say. I didn't know what to say, you know? My car looked horrible. And he was just like, don't talk to me right now. And I said, OK, that's fine. I just walked away, and I came back about ten minutes later, and I said, well, what am I going to do about my car? And he looked at me, and his white face turned to red, and he started screaming at me, telling me how I'm fucking up my life, how he don't know what's going on in my head or what I'm doing. And I just–I, at that point, like, with the accident and everything, I had no energy. I had no reason to scream.

with her intelligence and wit and strong will, made all of us hopeful.

But there is no retention effort or well-intentioned faculty member or institutional program that could have prevented or predicted this accident.

And if Jenelle does not enroll in subsequent semesters, then she is left with no college degree and serious amounts of debt.[7] While her relationship with our college may dissipate, the consequences of the few months she was here could plague her for years.

There are a number of details in Jenelle's story that could be plotted as data points in a retention study: her high school GPA, her family background, her experience in the advising office, her relationship with faculty, her income, and so on. But there is very little in her story that tells us what we should do differently, as faculty or as institutions.

This conclusion is consistent with the retention scholarship at large. Tinto acknowledges that "while it can be said that we now know the broad dimensions of the process of student leaving, we know very little about a theory of action for student persistence" (Epilogue 317). We might be able to explain why some students leave and some succeed, and in some cases we might even be able to predict these outcomes with some degree of accuracy, but we still don't know what to do about it.

7. Jeffrey Williams writes very persuasively about the need for faculty to consider what we're teaching the next generation by requiring that they accumulate tremendous amounts of debt in order to attain a degree.

Conclusion: Retention and Writing Instruction

PEGEEN: So, you're not registered for classes this spring.

No, unfortunately.

PEGEEN: So, what's your plan?

Work and work.

DANIELLE: On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most sure, how sure are you you're going to come back in the fall?

In the fall? I don't know. But how sure am I going to come back? Ten percent – or not 10 percent. [10, the most sure.]

DANIELLE: Ten. OK, on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most sure, how sure are you that you're going to graduate from Columbia in the next five years?

7… I would say 10, but the thing is, I'm just not sure if I want to keep to music. You know. But I have to do something from Columbia, because I don't see myself being at any other college, so I have to pick some kind of degree to graduate, so 7 1/2, but we'll push it to 10, though, because I'm going to graduate eventually. [CHUCKLES] *Just eventually.*

But I do know for a fact that if I don't have my stuff together by the age of, like, 20 – I said 21, but I'm saying 20 – I'm going to the military. I already – I have no other option. And I figure 21 will be a good age, because by the time I serve four years, I'll still come out young, you know? I won't have any – I don't know. That's it.

And yet, we must continue to teach, knowing that there are other Jenelles in our classrooms (we should be so lucky!), and that every student deserves our best efforts.

The one factor in Jenelle's experiences that we don't discuss in the sections above is her time in our classrooms. This is the one factor that we *do* control, that we *can* predict, at least to some extent, with thoughtful lesson plans and assignment design.

We argue that the issue of retention should frame our thinking about pedagogy more than it currently does: What should our course goals be, when we consider that many of our students may never take another college class?

Our (tentative) response is that we need to stop thinking of our first-year courses, and especially basic writing courses (which are more likely to be populated by students who are at risk for dropping out), as *preparation* for further academic study. This is counterintuitive, we realize, because many first-year writing and basic writing pedagogies are grounded in the assumption that if only we give students a solid foundation (of basic skills, of critical thinking, of academic strategies), they will succeed.

However, in *The End of Composition Studies*, David W. Smit claims that "the evidence suggests that learners do not necessarily transfer the kinds of knowledge and skills they have learned previously to new

tasks" (119). So, the efficacy of designing courses that prepare students for success in future courses is questionable anyway.

But in the context of retention, keeping in mind students like Jenelle who may never take another college course—or who may graduate "just eventually"—it is even more important that we design courses that are meaningful for what they do *right now,* while they're in our classrooms.

At a 4Cs 2008 panel on retention, Tom Fox, in his comments afterward, put it succinctly: "participation, not preparation." We need to design courses that invite students to *participate* right now, in our classrooms, in consequential, engaging work that involves substantial writing and reading.

For example, at the end of Pegeen's class, as part of a final project, Jenelle and another student went to a local school and did a presentation to persuade the students not to join a gang. Jenelle and her classmate came up with this idea on their own, out of the conviction that other kids shouldn't have to go through what they did. Courses and assignments that provide students the opportunity to do meaningful work right now may not seem like the most obvious retention strategy. Retention is not the goal, though. Education is.

Epilogue

Though we don't see Jenelle as often since her first semester ended, we do still keep in contact with her. Initially, she had set up monthly visits with a counselor in the Office of Student Affairs. This relationship—coupled with Jenelle's bond with both Pegeen and Danielle—kept her connected to college life and to our institution, specifically.

A few months ago, Jenelle told us that she would be transferring to a local community college for the fall semester. She was having a very difficult time finding the financial resources to pay for college and, since the community college is considerably less expensive than our institution, this proved an impetus for change. Jenelle was happy that she would be able to continue school in downtown Chicago and that, thankfully, many of her credits would transfer.

Recently, Jenelle's circumstances—and, as a result, her short-term goals—have changed. She continues to live in an unstable home and has taken a second job in order to prepare for living independently. With a work schedule that extends beyond 40 hours a week, she has had little time to think about returning to school. As of now, she plans to take a few more semesters off and "maybe take a class or two" when she can.

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