

KAY FLOYD CONSULTING GROUP

Resource planning and development solutions for higher education institutions and non-profit organizations

U.S. Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions Program

Success in the First Year and Beyond: Transforming Curriculum and Academic Support Systems

External Evaluation Report

Year 1: October 1, 2018 – September 30, 2019

Prepared for: Northern Vermont University—Johnson

By: Kay Floyd, Evaluator

November 2019

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I. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

In October 2018, Northern Vermont University—Johnson (formerly Johnson State College) was awarded a five-year, \$1,816,525 grant through the U.S. Department of Education’s Title III, Part A Strengthening Institutions Program. The purpose of the Title III program is to help eligible institutions of higher education become self-sufficient and expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing funds to improve and strengthen academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability.



Figure 1: NVU-Johnson Title III Strategies

Through this Title III project, NVU-Johnson is addressing its major problems which include: (1) a rural service area with high percentages of first-generation college students, many of whom are unprepared for college; (2) low retention and graduation rates compared to peer institutions in the state and nation; (3) too many students not passing gateway courses; (4) an advising system that is limited in scope and does not meet the needs or expectations of faculty or students; (5) inadequate institutional research support; (6) limited professional development for faculty and staff; and (7) an underfunded endowment. In response to these problems, NVU-Johnson is implementing four strategies (Figure 1) with the ultimate goals of fostering early and ongoing student success through college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes, and strengthening NVU-Johnson’s financial future.

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b. External Evaluator

Kay A. Floyd, president/principal consultant of Kay Floyd Consulting Group, served as the external evaluator for NVU-Johnson's Title III grant in 2018-19. A member of the American Evaluation Association, over the past 10 years she has conducted several project evaluations for colleges and universities with programs funded through the U.S. Department of Education including the Title III Strengthening Institutions Program, Title III Predominantly Black Institutions Program, and Title V Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions Program. She was not involved with the implementation of NVU-Johnson's Title III project.

c. Evaluation Procedures

As guided by NVU-Johnson's application, the external evaluator communicated periodically with project leadership to discuss progress throughout Year 1. A year-end site visit was conducted on October 22-23, 2019. Project staff and administrators met with during the visit included the following:

- Kathleen Brinegar, Associate Professor/Title III Project Director
- Daniel Regan, Title III Consultant
- Elaine Collins, President
- Nolan Atkins, Provost
- Tyler Card, Accountant (Vermont State Colleges System)
- Kate Gold, Director of Advising & Registration (Lyndon); Institutional Research (both campuses)
- Leah Hollenberger, University Development and External Relations Officer
- Sara Kinerson, Director of Advising/Title III Committee
- Ken Leslie, Professor of Fine Arts/Title III Committee
- Mary Martin, Associate Professor of Fine Arts
- Hannah Miller, Assistant Professor of Education
- Aimee Pascale, Assistant Professor of Exercise Sciences (Lyndon); Director of Center for Teaching & Learning (both campuses)
- Betsy Ward, Grants Manager (Vermont State Colleges System)
- Margo Warden, Director of First-Year Experience/Title III Committee
- Michele Whitmore, Associate Dean of Students/Title III Committee

The purpose of the visit was to:

1. Review and discuss objectives and data collection procedures to determine if objectives are measurable and suitable to ensure valid assessments of program success and impact;
2. Review progress on activities, results, and outcomes, including unintended outcomes;

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3. Discuss management procedures and reporting procedures;
4. Compare the projected budget to actual expenditures;
5. Discuss any problems or concerns related to the project;
6. Provide appropriate suggestions and recommendations for project implementation and management;
7. Examine key areas related to initial project implementation; and
8. Discuss plans for Year 2 implementation.

Before, during, and following the site visit, qualitative and quantitative information in the form of data, reports, and documents, as well as the original project proposal, budget reports, and details on achievements, were reviewed. This report contains the results of the year-end review and the evaluator's conclusions and recommendations for future project implementation and management.

II. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Data and information for the objectives were provided by project staff and detailed in reports shared with the external evaluator. Measurable outcomes for Year 1 are highlighted in the table on the following page. (Note that one of the eight objectives—Objective 5: six-year graduation rate—is designed to be measured in Years 3-5.) NVU-Johnson exceeded the target for the objective designed to capture student satisfaction with advising (Objective 6) and made progress on objectives measuring an increase in fall-to-fall retention of junior to senior students (Objective 3) and raising non-federal matching funds for the project's endowment component (Objective 8). Targets were not met for four objectives designed to measure fall-to-fall retention for first-time, full-time students (Objective 1); fall-to-fall retention for sophomore to junior students (Objective 2); graduation rates for "near-completers" (Objective 4); and key gateway course failure/withdrawal rates (Objective 7).

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Table 1: Key Overall Goal and Objectives Year 1 Measurable Outcomes			
Goals	Objectives in Measurable Terms	Year 1 Results	Target Status
Overall Academic Programs and Institutional Management Goal: Foster early and ongoing student success through implementation of college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes	Obj. 1: By September 30, 2019, increase fall-to-fall retention of first-time, full-time students to 70%. Original Baseline = 69% Most Recent Baseline = 64.0% 2017-18	60.8% (110/181)	Not Met
	Obj. 2: By September 30, 2019, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from sophomore to junior year to 80%. Original Baseline = 79% Most Recent Baseline = 73.8%	74.0% (125/169)	Not Met
	Obj. 3: By September 30, 2019, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from junior to senior year to 88%. Original Baseline = 87% Most Recent Baseline = 70.8%	71.1% (118/166)	Progress
	Obj. 4: By September 30, 2019, increase completion rate of “near-completers” to 50%. Baseline = established 2017	11%	Not Met
	Obj. 5: Increase six-year graduation rate	To be measured in Years 3-5	N/A
	Obj. 6: By September 30, 2019, increase student overall satisfaction with advising to 50%. Baseline = 2017 survey	81.3% (spring 2019 survey)	Exceeded
	Obj. 7: By September 30, 2019, decrease failure/withdrawal rates in three gateway courses by 10%. Baseline= avg. 27.7% (25% Bio 1210; 28% MAT 1080; 30% ENG 1072)	31% avg. 36% BIO 1210 26% MAT 1080 31% ENG 1072	Not Met
	Fiscal Stability Goal: Strengthen NVU-Johnson’s fiscal future	Obj. 8: By September 30, 2018, increase NVU’s endowment by at least \$179,000. Baseline = \$3,742,523	\$26,000 non-federal funds raised to match \$26,000 federal funds

III. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Organized within each of the four project strategies, this section highlights implementation activities related to the project’s goals and objectives for Year 1 (October 1, 2018 – September 30, 2019). Sources of information on the activities, as detailed on pages 21-

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35 in the original proposal, include the interim performance report submitted to the U.S.

Department of Education in spring 2019, a summary of highlights prepared by project leaders, and information shared during the site visit.

Strategy 1: Centralize and Improve Advising and Student Success Services

- A full-time academic advisor was hired in January to support students in their second year and beyond. Responsibilities include walk-in advising, coordinating NVU's national and international exchange programs, overseeing the administration of the Second Year Student Assessment (Noel-Levitz), and completing degree audits for all sophomores as well as juniors and seniors identified in the student concerns process.
- Space was reorganized in Dewey Hall to create collaborative office/workspace for Advising, First-Year Experience, and Career and Internship units. These units now share a single, large office suite. Previously the offices were separated by location and/or closed doors in between units. This creates more of a one-stop-shop for student support services. The Academic Support Services unit has also been able to use rooms in this space for academic coaching and tutoring.
- The exit notification and leave of absence form and process was revised to allow for collecting better data on individuals' reasons for leaving. The new process requires an exit interview to aid in data collection and support students in staying.
- A search for a Director of Student Engagement & Persistence was conducted; the selected applicant will begin her work in December 2019. Responsibilities include program evaluation of student success initiatives; identification, collection and analysis of student retention data across various student populations; conducting exit interviews with individuals wishing to exit the college; and working with "near-completers" to reach graduation.
- A project was launched to identify and reenroll students who have not taken courses in the past three semesters.
- Software (Veera) was purchased to meet institutional research needs; it enables staff to run predictive analytics to help identify what characteristics, experiences, and dispositions predispose someone to leave NVU before graduation. This data will allow NVU to develop programming to support students whose profiles show at-risk factors.
- A faculty member will be paid to perform part-time institutional research duties to meet Title III project data needs beginning in fall 2019.
- Helpdesk software was purchased to facilitate submission of data requests to a centralized location for fulfillment.
- A joint effort between a student group and the Dean of Students' Office has led to the opening of a Wellness Hub on campus. Open hours will be staffed by students to help point their peers to the appropriate support services across campus. Title III funds will pay to increase student awareness of this new service and space.

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- New signage has been ordered to help students identify the location of support services at the entrance to Dewey Hall and to replace old signage that is inaccurate due to restructuring (offices include advising, career and internship services).

Strategy 2: Increase Student Engagement and Experiential Learning

- Four nationally recognized surveys are being administered to collect baseline data about incoming students and the NVU student experience after the first semester, during sophomore year, and during the senior year.
- Members of the Title III Committee engaged in a listening tour with student leadership groups across campus to introduce students to the Title III grant and collect qualitative data around perceived barriers to student success and persistence.
- \$10,000 in course redesign mini-grants was awarded to six full- and part-time faculty members to redesign courses to promote student engagement and success through high impact practices (e.g., working with local artists to curate art exhibits vs. simply viewing them).
- The Title III Committee distributed a request for proposals for travel funds available for students/faculty to present collaborative research and projects during the 2019-2020 academic year.
- The grant funded professional development and experiential learning opportunities for faculty and students. For example, attendance at a digital humanities workshop for a faculty member and a student—the faculty member is launching a digital humanities course in the spring and the student is working on using techniques learned from the workshop to enhance data collection for her senior thesis.
- Through grant sponsorship, the Office of First-Year Experience launched a sophomore experience during the spring 2019 semester. It involves events geared towards building community within the sophomore class with a focus on career exploration.

Strategy 3: Establish a Center for Teaching Excellence

- Title III funds were used to provide the Director of the Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) with an additional course release during the spring 2019 semester to increase the CTL's capacity to offer professional development opportunities.
- A search was conducted for an Assistant Director of the Center for Teaching & Learning to further advance the goals of the center and increase the number of professional development opportunities offered. This individual will begin in spring 2020.
- A monthly workshop series was launched in the spring 2019 semester titled, "Teaching and Learning for Student Success." Each month, faculty and staff gather over lunch to explore topics integral to student success and persistence. The topics are chosen by looking at local data and the workshops are led by faculty and staff. This series continued with four workshops held during the fall 2019 semester.

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- The grant sponsored a spring workshop titled, “Teaching First-Year Undergraduates: Promoting Students’ Active Involvement in the FYS” for instructors of first-year seminars and gateway courses.
- Future professional development programming is being planned around diversity and inclusion and will include a workshop on social justice considerations for syllabi.
- A NACADA trainer will be scheduled to visit campus to conduct an advising audit to provide information on how to improve advising services across campus.

Strategy 4: Build NVU’s Endowment

- A High-Impact Endowment Fund was created as a repository for contributions to support the educational goals of Title III; \$26,000 was raised during Year 1 to match \$26,000 in federal funds.

IV. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

As guided by the procedures outlined in the Title III proposal that are designed to ensure efficient and effective project implementation, a Title III Committee was formed and includes representatives from the following key units: First-Year Experience, Dean of Students, Advising, and Faculty. The committee meets regularly and is led by the Title III Project Director and Associate Professor of Education, Dr. Kathleen Brinegar. She provides leadership and administrative oversight for all aspects of the project and is assisted by Dr. Daniel Regan who serves as advisor to the Project Director and to the President on matters related to Title III. Dr. Brinegar meets regularly with NVU’s president, Dr. Elaine Collins, to ensure progress and integration into the culture of NVU and for early identification of any issues and development of corrective actions to avoid potential barriers to successful project implementation.

V. BUDGET

The original approved budget compared to actual expenditures, as of September 30, 2019, are shown in the table on the following page. Primarily due to delays in hiring personnel, almost 80% of the Title III budget was unspent at the end of Year 1 resulting in significant carryover funds of approximately \$360,000 into Year 2. (See the next section for related recommendations and suggestions.)

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Table 2: Title III Budget for Year 1 Projected vs. Actual Expenditures (as of 09/30/2019)		
Grant Category	Original Budget Year 1	Actual Expenditures Year 1*
Personnel	\$ 192,400	\$ 53,216
Fringe	70,760	4,008
Travel	20,000	2,669
Supplies	8,500	129
Contractual	21,000	5,000
Other	136,000	20,207
Total	\$ 448,660	\$ 85,229
Source: Vermont State Colleges (VSC) System		
*Total expenditures within each category were determined by the external evaluator based on the VSC report provided during the site visit.		

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The four recommendations presented below were developed based on documents, reports, data, discussions, and observations by the evaluator. The evaluator believes considering and acting on these recommendations and suggestions will help strengthen the overall implementation of NVU’s Title III project for the remaining years of the grant.

Recommendation 1: Develop Carryover Plan

A carryover situation is frequently the result of a longer than anticipated hiring process that impacts institutions in the first year of a funded program; this was the case for NVU-Johnson. Largely the result of delayed hires during the first year, a primary challenge to project implementation observed by the evaluator is the high level of carryover funds of approximately \$360,000 or 80% of the budget. Per the “Expanded Authorities” amendments, carryover funds can be used for any allowable cost that falls within the approved project scope. As NVU-Johnson considers ways in which to use carryover funds, it is recommended that a supporting statement or rationale be developed that clearly indicates the expense is within the scope of the project; identifies the specific strategies, goals, and objectives to which it relates; and ensures the cost is reasonable and adheres to NVU-Johnson’s policies and procedures (i.e., follow the same process that was used to develop and justify the original proposal budget).

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Recommendation 2: Build Capacity for Successful Project Management

Connect with Internal and External Colleagues. Budget reports provided by the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) system office are not organized by federal grant category. This format is a challenge since the Project Director and other Title III leadership cannot easily or accurately determine levels of expenditures within categories and compare to the approved Title III budget. To address this situation, the Project Director intends to meet with the individual who was previously employed as the college's grants accountant to help identify the best process to match expenses with the appropriate grant category. In addition to meeting with the college's previous grants accountant, other NVU-Johnson federal grant project directors, e.g., TRiO Student Support Services, may also have helpful information on how they monitor budgets by federal category. Participation in the U.S. Department of Education's project director meetings is also a good way to connect with others who are implementing Title III projects and to acquire additional knowledge for efficient and effective project management. In years when the U.S. Department of Education does not hold workshops, project leadership could consider participation in other federal grants management workshops and conferences.

Maintain Time and Effort System. As Title III project personnel are hired and in place, ensure that the time and effort reporting system is followed and aligns with the approved proposal.

Develop Title III Policies and Procedures Manual. If not already created, project leadership and staff should develop a Title III Policies and Procedures manual. This will help to ensure that all project and other staff have a clear understanding of the procedures and necessary activities for successful management and, in the event of program staff changes, provide consistent management guidance.

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Recommendation 3: Communicate Project Information, Available Resources, and Successes

As successful outcomes are realized through the project's activities, communicating with the NVU community about the extent of the resources available and successful achievements of the Title III project will help to ensure all stakeholders are fully aware of the importance of the project to NVU and its impact on students. Showcasing success becomes even more important as the project progresses and decisions are made regarding post-grant institutionalization of project components. It is recommended that information and successes be shared whenever possible and in a variety of formats that will reach a broad audience, e.g., establish and update a Title III website, share updates at regular campus-wide meetings, faculty forums, and use other available campus methods of sharing information and results.

Recommendation 4: Improve Project Implementation through Use of Survey Results and Analysis

In addition to the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey) administered at the end of Year 1, three nationally-recognized surveys are scheduled to be administered during Year 2—BCSSE (Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement), NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement), and the Noel-Levitz SYSA (Second-Year Student Assessment). Results of these key surveys are a valuable opportunity to make timely and necessary adjustments to the project. Prior to the beginning of Year 3, project leadership and the Title III Committee should review results and analyses of the surveys for data and feedback that can be used to help inform project activities in Year 3 and beyond.

VII. SUMMARY

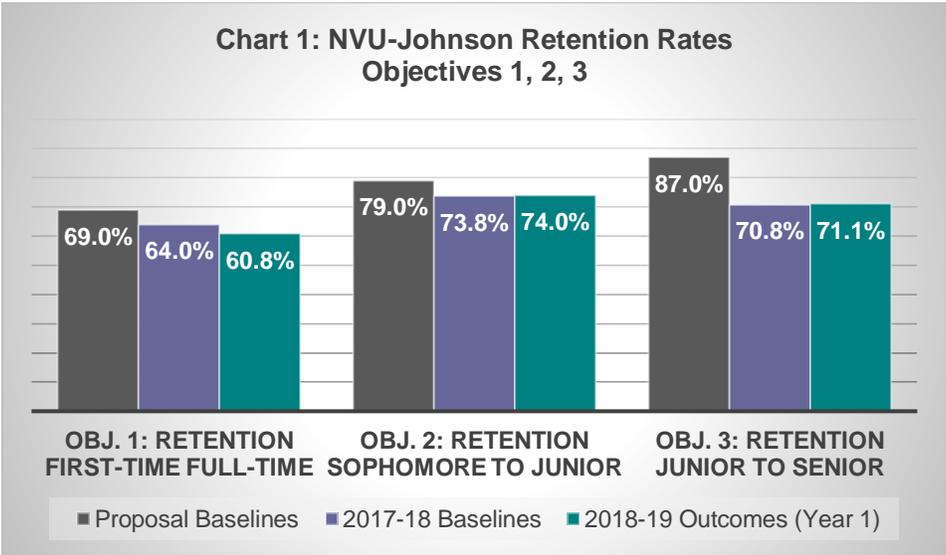
Northern Vermont University-Johnson is implementing its Title III project as intended as demonstrated by the progress made on key activities detailed in this report (pp. 5-8) and by targeted outcomes realized during the year, i.e., exceeded targeted student satisfaction with advising from 50% to 81.3% (Objective 6) and raised \$26,000 in non-federal funds to match \$26,000 in federal funds (Objective 8) for an increased endowment of \$52,000. Throughout the

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first year of the project, NVU-Johnson has also demonstrated the ability to assess challenges and identify opportunities to move the project forward. For example, various tasks were initiated even with delays in hiring key personnel and other contributing factors such as the recent unification of Johnson State College with Lyndon State College into NVU; consolidation of positions/tasks from system campuses to the chancellor’s office; and self-identified challenges that included a lengthy process to obtain IRB approval for the four surveys to be administered and timely assistance from the Information Technology department to launch the new Veera platform for data preparation, predictive analytics, and end-user data exploration.

In spring 2017, NVU-Johnson (known then as Johnson State College) submitted a proposal that included the most recent year’s (2015-16) baseline data. The proposal received a perfect score from peer reviewers; however, it was not funded in the first round of awards, but rather in fall 2018 when the U.S. Department of Education funded down the slate of proposals received in the 2017 competition. Although several implementation strategies were initiated in 2018-19, as highlighted in this report, the three retention targets were not met by the end of the year. As shown in Chart 1, it is important to emphasize that the rates between the time the proposal was written and when it was funded continued to decline in key areas of retention.



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This continued decline in retention provides further compelling evidence of the critical need for the Title III project at NVU-Johnson and implementation of best practices and evidence-based strategies as described in the proposal.

With a fully staffed Title III team in place in Year 2, and combined with the other resources provided through the grant, NVU-Johnson has an opportunity to continue implementing strategies that have been shown to impact retention. For example, **centralized and improved advising** (Steingass & Sykes, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby, 2013; Light, 2001; and Bettinger & Baker, 2011); **increased student engagement and experiential learning** (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011); and **established and maintained teaching and learning centers** (CCCSE, 2012; Dillon & Fisher, 2000).

It is apparent to the evaluator that NVU-Johnson's Title III project is understood, accepted, and supported. It was clear from conversations with project personnel and President Elaine Collins that everyone associated with the project is knowledgeable about its scope and enthusiastic and appreciative of the resources available through the program. It is the evaluator's opinion NVU-Johnson is well positioned to successfully implement the second year of the project with the overall goals of fostering early and ongoing student success through college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes, and strengthening NVU-Johnson's financial future.

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