

# 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 2: October 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020**

**Prepared for: Northern Vermont University**

**By: Kay Floyd, Evaluator**

**October 4, 2020**

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

### **Evaluation Report Year 2: October 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020**

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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 Title III Strategies**

Through this Title III project, NVU 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 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’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's Title III grant in 2019-20. She is a member of the American Evaluation Association and has conducted several evaluations over the past decade for projects funded through the U.S. Department of Education, including 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's Title III project.

## **c. Evaluation Procedures**

As guided by NVU's application, the external evaluator communicated periodically with project leadership to discuss progress throughout Year 2. A year-end virtual site visit occurred on September 10, 2020. 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, NVU President
- Nolan Atkins, NVU Provost
- Shannon Billings, Grant Accountant (Vermont State Colleges System)
- Elaine Harvey, Director of Student Engagement and Persistence/Title III Committee
- Brady Rainville, Academic & Study Away Advisor/Title III Committee
- Sara Kinerson, Director of Advising/Title III Committee
- Michele Whitmore, Assistant Director of Student Life/Title III Committee
- Beth Walsh, Director of Career Services/Title III Committee
- Aimee Pascale, Director of Center for Teaching & Learning
- Hannah Miller, Assistant Professor, Education
- Tyrone Shaw, Professor, Writing & Literature
- Leslie Johnson, Associate Professor, Behavioral Sciences
- Isaac Eddy, Assistant Professor, Performing Arts
- Anna Kern, Part-time Faculty, Behavioral Sciences
- Julie Theoret, Professor, Mathematics

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 3 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**

Measurable outcomes for Year 2 are highlighted in the table on the following page. Data and information for the objectives were provided by project staff and detailed in reports shared with the external evaluator. NVU exceeded targets for two objectives designed to measure decreases in failure/withdrawal rates in gateway courses (Objective 7) and increases in endowment (Objective 8). Although targets for objectives designed to measure sophomore-to-junior (Objective 2) and junior-to-senior (Objective 3) retention were not met, rates were 3-to-6 percentage points higher in Year 2 compared to Year 1. First-time, full-time student retention (Objective 1) and completion rates of "near-completers" (Objective 4) were not met. The six-year graduation rate (Objective 5) is designed to be measured in Years 3-5. Objective 6 could not be measured due to COVID-19 which disrupted plans for conducting a Spring 2020 survey.

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Table 1: Key Overall Goal and Objectives Year 2 Measurable Outcomes (preliminary data for Obj. 1-3)			
Goals	Objectives in Measurable Terms	Year 2 Results	Status
<b>Overall Academic Programs and Institutional Management Goal:</b>  Foster early and ongoing student success through implementation of college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes	<b>Obj. 1:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase fall-to-fall retention of first-time, full-time students to 71%.  Original Baseline = 69% Most Recent Baseline = 64% 2017-18	54% (76/140)	Not Met
	<b>Obj. 2:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from sophomore to junior year to 81%.  Original Baseline = 79% Most Recent Baseline = 73.8%	77% (150/184)	Not Met (Progress made compared to Year 1)
	<b>Obj. 3:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from junior to senior year to 89%.  Original Baseline = 87% Most Recent Baseline = 70.8%	77% (121/157)	Not Met (Progress made compared to Year 1)
	<b>Obj. 4:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase completion rate of “near-completers” to 55%. Baseline = established 2017	8% (22/237)	Not Met
	<b>Obj. 5:</b> Increase six-year graduation rate	To be measured in Years 3-5	N/A
	<b>Obj. 6:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase student overall satisfaction with advising to 55%. Baseline = 2017 survey	Survey not conducted in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19	N/A
	<b>Obj. 7:</b> By September 30, 2020, decrease failure/withdrawal rates in three gateway courses by 20%. (Year 2 target = 22.1%)  Baseline= avg. 27.7% (25% Bio 1210; 28% MAT 1080; 30% ENG 1072)	18.4% avg.  BIO 1210 = 21.8% MAT 1080 = 25.0% ENG 1072 = 8.5%	Exceeded
	<b>Fiscal Stability Goal:</b> Strengthen NVU’s fiscal future	<b>Obj. 8:</b> By September 30, 2020, increase NVU’s endowment by an additional \$160,000.  Baseline =\$3,742,523	\$174,330 (includes in-hand of \$63,915 and pledges of \$110,415 anticipated by Sep. 30)

## III. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Organized within each of the four project strategies, this section highlights key implementation activities related to the project's goals and objectives for Year 2 (October 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020). Sources of information on the activities, as detailed on pages 21-35 in the original proposal, were provided by project leaders and discussed during the site visit.

### **Strategy 1: Centralize and Improve Advising and Student Success Services**

1. **Student Opportunities/Emergency Fund.** Nearly \$6,000 of Title III funds were budgeted for student presentation and travel opportunities in the spring; however, the COVID-19 pandemic rendered those opportunities obsolete. Instead, funds were used to provide access to laptops, internet service, and other essential course materials for students through the NVU COVID Emergency Fund.
2. **Student Outreach.** Staff members created a system to make individual contact with every campus-based undergraduate during the time of remote instruction. These student well-being check-ins were an important endeavor for retention. These efforts continued with the development and implementation of a student survey about their remote experience and with a second round of contacting students prior to the beginning of the fall semester.
3. **Exit Interview Process.** Elaine Harvey was hired as the Director of Student Engagement and Persistence to spearhead retention efforts on campus. She is creating ways to better serve students by implementing a new exit interview process, investigating methods to re-engage “near-completers,”—a target population of the Title III grant. She has convened a retention round-table group made up of staff and faculty from a variety of departments.
4. **Degree Audits.** Degree audits for all sophomores, juniors, and seniors were conducted and results sent to students and advisors to help them create a clear pathway to graduation. A second round is underway.

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5. **Predictive Modeling.** Greg Petrics, mathematics professor, has been working with VEERA software (purchased with Title III funds) to analyze student data and begin predictive modeling around student retention and persistence. He produced a series of white papers highlighting retention trends related to students' home location in relation to campus, race, and other factors. He studied student engagement in Canvas, NVU's learning management system, and found major differences in student engagement. For example, more than half of students who exited the university did not engage with Canvas at all. Further, students who engaged less on all types of Canvas activities (e.g., assignments, discussions, and quizzes) were more likely to exit the university. This analysis provided a foundation for future work with the John N. Gardner Institute's Gateways to Completion team. The partnership between NVU and Gateway to Completion is discussed below in Strategy 2 highlights.

## **Strategy 2: Increase Student Engagement and Experiential Learning**

1. **Survey Results/Actions.** Four nationally recognized surveys were conducted to collect baseline data about incoming students, as well as data about the NVU student experience after the first semester, during sophomore year, and during the senior year. A second round of surveys is currently underway (fall 2020). Data analyzed from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey identified students' need for a stronger connection between their coursework and their future career possibilities. In response, an RFP was initiated for Career Focused Course Design work—one type of course targeted for sophomores and another for seniors. One of each is being piloted in academic year 2020-21.
2. **Student Listening Tour.** 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



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persistence. Data will be reviewed by the Title III Committee and used to inform project activities.

3. **Course Redesign Mini-Grants.** \$10,000 in course redesign mini-grants was awarded to six full- and part-time faculty members during the January break 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). \$10,500 was awarded to seven faculty members to redesign courses over the summer for the fall semester. Many courses focused on incorporating open educational resources (OER) to lessen costs for students and integrate more interactive pedagogies. Other awards centered on making art classes possible in remote environments.
4. **Professional Development/Experiential Learning.** Title III funds supported professional development and experiential learning opportunities for faculty and students, e.g., attendance at a digital humanities workshop for a faculty member and a student. The faculty member launched 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.
5. **Sophomore Experience.** Through grant sponsorship, the Office of First-Year Experience launched a sophomore experience during the spring 2020 semester. It involved events geared towards building community within the sophomore class with a focus on career exploration.
6. **Guest Lecturers.** With classes turning remote in the spring, the Title III grant sponsored many guest lecturers and speakers to engage students more deeply in their courses.
7. **Gateways to Completion Initiative.** Title III staff and NVU leadership engaged in multiple conversations with John Gardner from the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, ranging from discussions about courses with high withdrawal, failure, incomplete rates to the development of a new vision for NVU. These

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conversations led to NVU's participating in two Gardner Institute projects beginning in fall 2020—Gateways to Completion and Retention Performance Management. These projects are aligned with Title III grant goals and objectives. Supported with Title III funds, the three-year project consists of three phases: First Year—Analyze and Plan; Second Year—Act and Monitor; and Third Year—Act and Refine. The majority of the work will consist of teams of faculty and staff working to redesign six gateway courses. Redesign efforts will prioritize pedagogy and university-wide policies that can inadvertently serve as barriers to access and course completion and delay on-time graduation. (For more information see Attachment A: Title III High-Impact Progress Report, Summer 2020.)

## **Strategy 3: Establish Center for Teaching Excellence**

1. **Workshops.** A monthly workshop series launched in the spring 2019 semester, “Teaching and Learning for Student Success,” continued into Year 2. Each month, faculty and staff gather over lunch to explore topics integral to student success and persistence. Project staff indicated attendance and interest in these professional development events continues to grow. Additional professional development programming is being planned around diversity and inclusion. Current plans include a workshop on social justice considerations for syllabi. In March 2020, the most popular and well-attended professional development event to date was a workshop on OER with Robin DeRosa, who visited both Johnson and Lyndon campuses.
2. **Online Teaching/Learning.** Over the summer, Title III supported expenses of over 75 NVU course instructors who engaged in professional development around online learning to prepare for the 2020-21 academic year. This effort was overseen by the Center for Teaching and Learning.

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3. **Access to Additional Resources.** A year-long 25-seat membership was purchased for resources curated by Academic Impressions, to bring professional development opportunities to all areas of the campus.
4. **New Virtual Series.** A new professional development virtual series was launched in spring 2020 focused on equity, inclusion, and student engagement. Faculty engage in webinars through the Gardner Institute and Academic Impressions, one per week, and then the following week gather for a discussion around the webinars.

## **Strategy 4: Build NVU Endowment**

A High-Impact Endowment Fund was created in Year 1 as a repository for contributions that support the goals of Title III and to strengthen NVU's fiscal future. The endowment will help fund students' participation in transformative academic initiatives, such as internships, service learning, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, lecture and arts programs and programming, professional development, and more. It is designed to foster intellectual, creative, and personal growth. After a slow start during the first year, which resulted in \$26,000 in contributions, the second year resulted in significant growth in contributions. To date, \$174,330 (\$63,915 cash and \$110,415 in pledges by September 30, 2020) has been raised.

**Note:** Since NVU is now a single institution that includes both Johnson and Lyndon campuses, the Project Director made a policy decision to use Title III, wherever possible, for improvements on both campuses. For example, Title III sponsored professional development events are open to faculty/staff across both campuses (both in-person and online) and the course redesign and career-focused mini-grants are also available to instructors on both campuses. Most significant, is that the Gardner Institute partnership is cross-campus. The steering committee is made up of members from both campuses and data is being used from both campuses to guide the work of this initiative.

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## IV. CHALLENGES

There were three major challenges encountered during the year. These challenges and implications for the Title III project are discussed below.

### 1. COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of higher education and in doing so altered many of NVU's Title III plans and activities. For example, some of the professional development events were canceled, e.g., a NACADA trainer, a workshop for frontline staff from On Course, two workshops led by members of NVU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL); faculty/staff participation in NACADA Summer Institute. This, in addition to the inability to have a NACADA representative conduct an advising audit, suspended plans for data-driven advising improvement, a key component of the Title III project. The time and attention of key faculty, staff, and administrators turned to COVID relief efforts. Many students left for COVID-related reasons (e.g., the need to stay home and be near family, disinterest in remote learning, financial setbacks, etc.), which impacted enrollment and retention rates. Enrollment dropped from 1,555 in fall 2019 to 1,220 in fall 2020.

### 2. Announcement of NVU Closure

Compounding the COVID-19 situation, in April 2020, not long after NVU shifted to remote, the now-former Vermont State College System Chancellor, with support from the Board of Trustees, announced plans to close both NVU campuses. Although the university was given at least another year of bridge funding, many students exited after the spring 2020 semester, not willing to take the chance that NVU would close halfway through their college experience. This is likely reflected in the significant first-to-second year retention decline from 60.8% to 54% and the decrease in enrollment. Recruitment became a major challenge as the news spread quickly about the possible closure of NVU. Many staff and faculty members left the institution, including staff instrumental in Title III initiatives, such as the First-Year Experience Office staff and the internship coordinator. The number of advisors was reduced from five to three. With

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fewer faculty and staff and the growing workload due to COVID, the capacity to undertake new initiatives decreased. (Note: Three proposed plans for the future of NVU are currently being considered as of fall 2020.)

### **3. Title III Hiring Challenges**

Due to the above challenges, hiring for three grant-related positions was delayed or canceled. The search for an institutional researcher was put on hold for a few months and was not filled until much later in Year 2. An internal search for an assistant director for the expanding and popular Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) failed. With fewer faculty and more responsibilities for those who remained as a result, it is a continuing struggle to find someone to serve in this role. There were plans to hire someone to coordinate orientation and launch a new peer mentoring program—that search has been suspended indefinitely as the university navigates COVID and awaits word of long-term funding for the university.

### **V. PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

The procedures to ensure efficient and effective project implementation, as described in the original proposal (pp. 39-41), continued to be followed in Year 2. 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 in Year 1 and includes faculty, staff, and administrators. 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 a consultant to the Project Director and the President on matters related to Title III. Dr. Brinegar meets as needed 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.

Improvements to project management occurred during Year 2 and included the following: (1) To involve senior leadership more intentionally in the work of the Title III project,

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the President and Provost were invited to and participated in Title III Committee meetings. (2) A project checklist was created and used by the Title III Committee to help guide and assess their work during Year 2. It included action items, responsible parties, key notes, status of the action items, and an associated budget for each item as applicable. The checklist is periodically revised and updated as needed. (3) Despite hiring challenges described earlier, a part-time Title III administrative assistant and an accounting support staff person were hired to help with project management.

## VI. BUDGET

The Year 2 original approved budget compared to actual expenditures (as of July 31) is shown in the following table. Additional expenditures are expected through the end of the grant year. Primarily due to delays in hiring personnel, almost 80% of the Title III budget was unspent at the end of Year 1, resulting in carryover funds of approximately \$343,000 into Year 2. It is anticipated that carryover into Year 3 will also be significant; however, NVU has a plan in place for Years 3-5 which includes sponsoring NVU's cross-campus, three-year involvement in the Gardner Institute.

During the summer of 2020, the Title III project was selected to undergo an audit conducted by the Vermont State College System's accounting firm. The audit resulted in no issues or findings.

<b>Table 2: Title III Budget for Year 2</b>		
<b>Projected vs. Actual Expenditures and Carryover Estimates (as of 07/31/2020)</b>		
<b>Grant Category</b>	<b>Original Budget Year 2</b>	<b>Actual Expenditures Year 2</b>
<b>Personnel</b>	\$166,766	\$ 123,881
<b>Fringe</b>	57,882	34,983
<b>Travel</b>	20,000	14,384
<b>Supplies</b>	2,500	1,802
<b>Contractual</b>	21,000	14,000
<b>Other</b>	132,500	131,971
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 400,658</b>	<b>\$321,021</b>

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

The recommendations presented below were developed based on documents, reports, data, discussions, and observations by the evaluator and are offered to help strengthen the overall implementation of NVU's Title III project for the remaining years of the grant.

### **Recommendation 1: Monitor Advising Capacity**

Centralized and improved advising is an integral component of the Title III project (“advising” is mentioned 111 times in the proposal!). The reduction in advisors from five to three may have negative consequences for the project and adversely impact student progression and completion—the opposite of NVU's mission and the purpose of the Title III project. The diminished advising capacity is a situation that should be closely monitored to determine the impact on students and corrective actions developed and implemented, as necessary. Although solid progress is being made with the Title III project, it is important not to lose momentum.

### **Recommendation 2: Develop Title III Policies and Procedures Manual**

As recommended in Year 1, a Title III Policies and Procedures manual should be developed for the project. 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. The manual does not have to be extensive; there are many examples available from other Title III projects that could work for NVU.

### **Recommendation 3: Create a Title III Project Website**

Over the past year, the Title III team has ramped up efforts to raise awareness of the Title III project's goals, activities, and resources (e.g., student listening tours, regular updates—see Attachment A for example). As time permits, consider establishing a website for the project as another way to communicate the project and its benefits.

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## VIII. SUMMARY

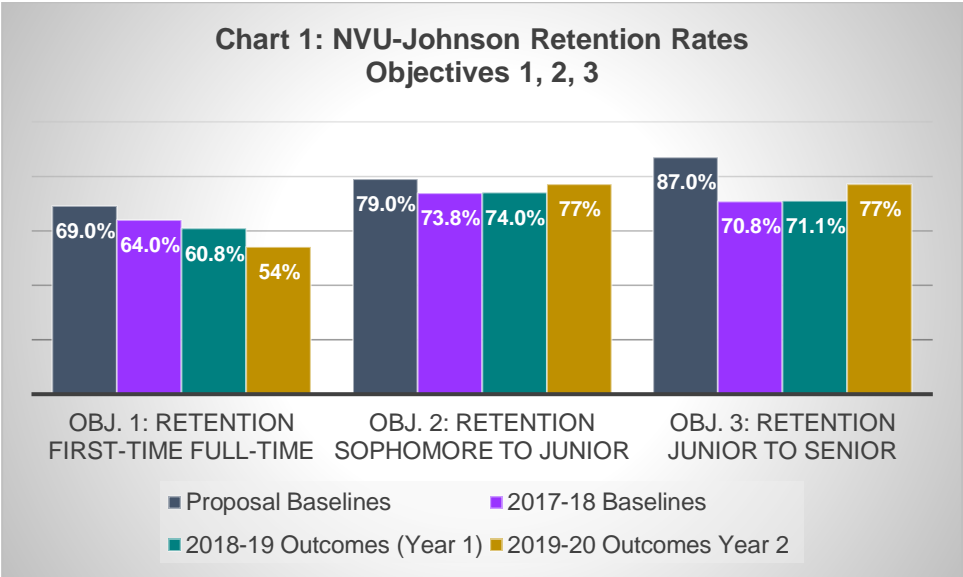
Northern Vermont University faced extremely disruptive situations during the second year of the grant; however, NVU is implementing its Title III project as intended and as demonstrated by the progress made on key activities detailed in this report (pp. 6-10) and by measurable outcomes realized during the year. For example, failure/withdrawal rates in gateway courses decreased to 18.4%, less than the target of 22.1% (Objective 7); NVU raised \$174,330 in cash and pledges for the Title III endowment, exceeding the target match of 80,000 (Objective 8); and retention rates for sophomore-to-junior (Objective 2) and junior-to-senior (Objective 3) improved compared to the previous year.

As discussed in the Year 1 external evaluation report, in spring 2017, NVU (known then as Johnson State College) submitted a proposal that included the most recent year's baseline data (2015-16). 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 implemented in 2019-20, as highlighted in this report, the Year 2 retention targets were not met (Objectives 1-3). As depicted in Chart 1, retention rates between the time the proposal was written and when it was funded continued to decline through Year 1. However, in Year 2 as noted above, retention rates for sophomore-to-junior (Objective 2) and junior-to-senior showed improvement (Objective 3), with junior-to-senior rates showing a substantial six percentage-point increase from 71.1% to 77%. It is possible a contributing factor to the decline in freshman retention rates from 60.8% in Year 1 to 54% in Year 2 was due to the situation that occurred during the spring when the now-former system chancellor announced the closure of NVU campuses. Although the campuses remain open, it is believed to have had a detrimental impact on freshman retention (see discussion in section IV. Challenges).



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NVU should be encouraged by improvements in retention rates for sophomores and juniors and continue to implement strategies that have been shown to impact retention. As discussed earlier, particularly promising is the three-year partnership with the Gardner Institute beginning in grant Year 3. Redesigning gateway courses that prioritize pedagogy and university-wide policies that can inadvertently serve as barriers to access, course completion, and on-time graduation will help NVU meet the goals and objectives of the Title III project.

**NVU’s ability to accomplish the tasks and activities during Year 2 is especially impressive given the extreme disruptions caused not only by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also from the untimely announced threat of closure. It is the evaluator’s belief and opinion that the significant progress made despite these serious events speaks highly of NVU’s leaders—President Collins and Provost Atkins. It is a testament to the determination and commitment of the Title III Project Director, Kathleen Brinegar, Title III consultant and long-time NVU administrator, Dan Regan, and the Title III Committee members, and of faculty and staff who are going above and beyond in their efforts to ensure the success of students served by NVU. It is also the evaluator’s belief the threat of closure may have played a role in the notable increase in endowment matching by**

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**motivating those who care about the region and the university to act by giving to support the mission and fiscal future of NVU.**

It is apparent to the evaluator that NVU's Title III project continues to be accepted and supported through the second year. It is clear from conversations with project personnel, President Collins, and Provost Atkins, 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 is well positioned to successfully implement the third 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's financial future.