



KAY FLOYD CONSULTING GROUP

Resource planning and development solutions for colleges and universities

**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 4: October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022

Prepared for: Northern Vermont University

By: Kay Floyd, Evaluator

January 20, 2023



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

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I. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

In October 2018, Northern Vermont University (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. NVU’s project goals include (1) fostering early and ongoing student success through college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes; and (2) strengthening NVU’s financial future through an increased endowment.

Through this Title III project, NVU is addressing 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).

Figure 1: NVU Title III Strategies





b. External Evaluator

Kay A. Floyd, President/Principal Consultant of Kay Floyd Consulting, served as the external evaluator for NVU's Title III grant in 2021-22. She is a member of the American Evaluation Association and has conducted numerous 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, Title III Hispanic Serving Institutions STEM and Articulation Program, and Title V Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions Program. She was not involved with 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 4. A year-end virtual site visit occurred on December 12, 2022. Project staff and administrators met with included the following:

- Les Kanat, Title III Project Director and Interim Academic Dean
- Daniel Regan, Title III Project Advisor
- Nolan Atkins, NVU Provost
- Adam Johnson, Title III Research and Evaluation Specialist
- Brady Rainville, Academic Advisor/Title III Committee
- Jeff Tunney, Director, Center for Teaching and Learning/Title III Committee
- Lisa Zinn, Assistant Professor, Environmental and Health Sciences Department
- Amy Wright, Director of Career Services
- Isaac Eddy, Associate Professor, Chair, Performing Arts
- Kathleen McCarthy, Director of Wellness Center
- Mary Martin, Professor, Co-Chair, Fine Arts
- Michele Feiner, Director of Academic Support and TRIO
- Janet Bennion, Professor, Anthropology and Sociology
- Emily Mixon, Writing and Humanities Specialist

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;
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; and
7. Discuss plans for the final project year.

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 project implementation and management for the final year of the project.

II. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

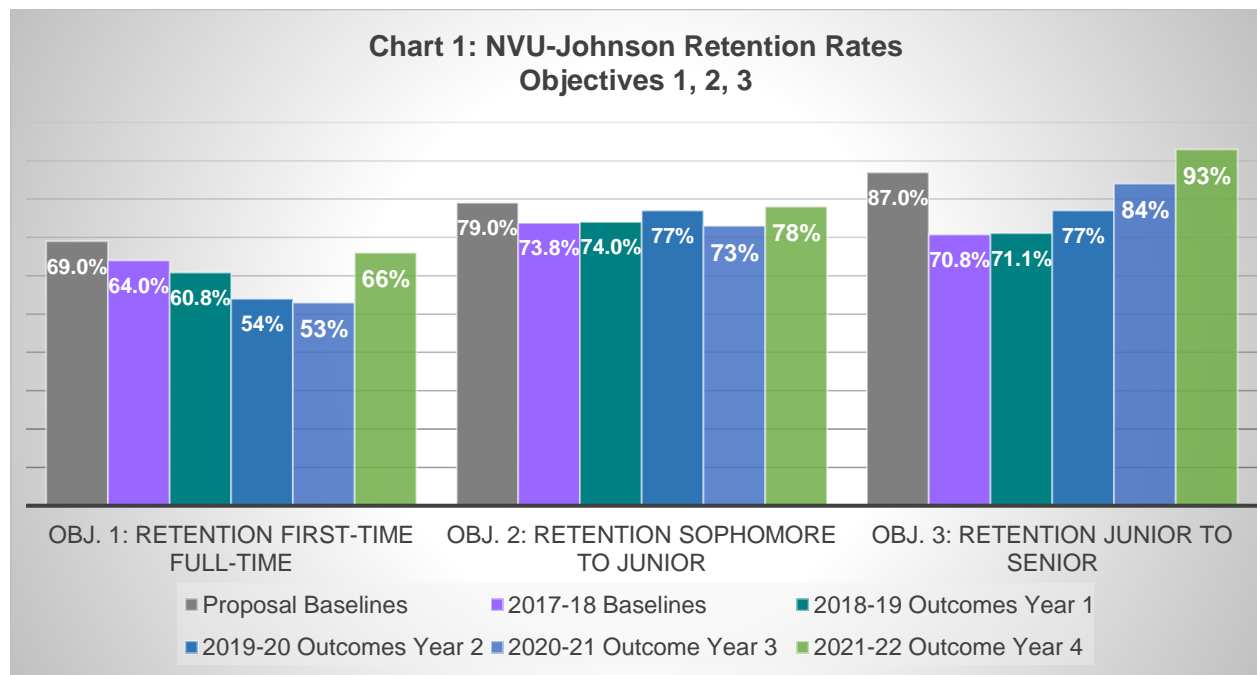
Measurable outcomes for Year 4 are highlighted in the table on the following page. Data and information for the eight objectives were provided by project staff and detailed in reports shared with the external evaluator. NVU met or exceeded targets for objectives designed to measure retention of students from their junior-to-senior year (Obj. 3), the six-year graduation rate (Obj. 5), overall student satisfaction with advising (Obj. 6), and increases in endowment (Obj. 8). NVU missed targets for objectives designed to measure fall-to-fall retention of first-time, full-time students and sophomore-to-junior (Obj. 1-2) and failure/withdrawal rates in gateway courses (Obj. 7). Regarding the objective for near-completers (Obj. 4), NVU changed the way this objective was measured in Year 4 due to a Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) contract with ReUp to re-engage stop-out students, including near completers. What is reported for Year 4 is the percent of eligible near-completer stop-outs defined as having 105+ credits, Johnson students, not online, with a last enroll date no earlier than fall 2016 and who have graduated by September 1, 2022. This is discussed further in Section III. Project Activities.



Table 1: Key Overall Goal and Objectives Year 4 Measurable Outcomes			
Goals	Objectives in Measurable Terms	Year 4 Results	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, 2022, increase fall-to-fall retention of first-time, full-time students to 73%. Original Baseline = 69% Updated Baseline = 64% 2017-18	66% (73/110)	Did Not Meet Target
	Obj. 2: By September 30, 2022, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from sophomore to junior year to 83%. Original Baseline = 79% Updated Baseline (as noted in Year 2 evaluation report) = 73.8%	78% (66/85, including 1 grad)	Did Not Meet Target
	Obj. 3: By September 30, 2022, increase fall-to-fall retention of students from junior to senior year to 91%. Original Baseline = 87% Updated Baseline (as noted in Year 2 evaluation report) = 70.8%	93% (77/83, including 10 grads)	Met Target
	Obj. 4: By September 30, 2022, increase completion rate of “near-completers” to 65%. Baseline = established 2017	17% (4 out of 24 eligible)**	See Note Below**
	Obj. 5: By September 30, 2022, increase six-year graduation rate to 38%. Original Baseline = 36%	38% (80/208)	Met Target
	Obj. 6: By September 30, 2022, increase student overall satisfaction with advising to 65%. Baseline = 2017 survey	85%	Met Target
	Obj. 7: By September 30, 2022, decrease failure/withdrawal rates in four gateway courses by 40% (= 16.2%). Baseline= avg. 27.7% (25% Bio 1210; 28% MAT 1080; 30% ENG 1072)	17.1% avg. BIO 1210 =14.9% MAT 1080 = 15.6% ENG 1072 = 20.9%	Did Not Meet Avg. Target (Note: 2 of 3 gateway courses did meet the target)
	Fiscal Stability Goal: Strengthen NVU's fiscal future Obj. 8: By September 30, 2022, increase NVU's endowment by additional \$129,000. Baseline =\$3,742,523 (2016)	\$129,448 (\$64,724 non-federal funds raised to match \$64,724 federal funds)	Met Target
**The process for tracking near completers changed in 2021-2022 (Year 4). The VSC System has contracted with ReUp to re-engage stop-out students, including near completers. This work has superseded Title III's near-completer work. What is reported for Year 4 is the percent of eligible near-completer stop-outs (105+ credits, Johnson students, not online, last enroll date no earlier than fall 2016) who have graduated by Sep. 1, 2022.			



Although several strategies were implemented during the first three years, retention rates remained below baselines presented in the original proposal (Chart 1) through the third year. As noted in previous evaluation reports, in addition to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, NVU believes a contributing factor to the decline in freshman retention rates was the result of a situation that occurred during Year 2 when the former system chancellor prematurely announced the closure of NVU campuses. The campuses remained open; however, it had a detrimental impact on freshman retention. NVU believes the three-year partnership with the Gardner Institute is enhancing existing efforts to meet project goals and objectives for the grant and into the future. NVU did, in fact, meet the target for one of the three retention objectives during Year 4, exceeding the pre-proposal baseline by six percentage points (87% compared to 93%). Even though retention rates for the other two objectives were not met in Year 4, they were higher compared to the previous year: first-time, full-time increased from 53% to 66% (Obj. 1) and sophomore to junior increased from 73% to 78% (Obj. 2).



III. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

This section highlights implementation activities related to the project's goals and objectives for Year 4 (October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022). 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 and Strategy 2: Increase Student Engagement and Experiential Learning

The following includes key activities and accomplishments related to strategies 1 and 2.

NACADA Advising Evaluation Conducted

In July 2023, Northern Vermont University, Castleton University, and Vermont Technical College will be unified as one university—Vermont State University (VTSU). As part of Title III activities, a system-wide NACADA evaluation occurred in fall 2021. The evaluation considered advising at the three institutions to inform the work of the transformation team and to ensure continued improvements in advising. The NACADA visit set the stage for development of a new advising model that will be implemented in the unified VTSU.

Gardner Institute Initiatives Completed

As described in previous external evaluation reports, Title III staff and NVU leadership participated in two Title III-supported Gardner Institute projects that began in fall 2020—Gateways to Completion (G2C) (see Figure 2 below for G2C phases) and a Retention Performance Management project designed to use institutional data to identify evidence-based practices and prioritize them as part of an institution-wide retention plan. Both projects incorporated professional development for faculty. During Year 4, both Gardner Institute projects were completed. One result from the work included establishment of a Retention Task Force for the new Vermont State University (VTSU).



Figure 2: Gateway to Completion (G2C) Phases

Year 1 Analyze & Plan	Year 2 Act & Monitor	Year 3 Act & Refine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create Initial Steering Committee • "Complete" Gateway Course Analytics Inventory • Identify Course(s) based on GCAI evidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Round Out Task Force • Administer SLG • Conduct Review of Principles & Key Performance Indicators • Create Initial Action Plan and Implementation Team • Begin and Attend Evidence in Pedagogy and Curriculum • Begin and Attend Teaching and Learning Academy • Attend G2C Community of Practice Meeting and Gateway Course Experience Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement Plan • Update GCAI • Re-administer SLG • Continue and Attend Evidence in Pedagogy and Curriculum • Continue and Attend Teaching and Learning Academy • Attend G2C Community of Practice Meeting • Attend Gateway Course Experience Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine Implementation of Plan and Adjust Implementation Team • Update GCAI • Re-administer SLG • Continue and Attend Evidence in Pedagogy and Curriculum • Continue and Attend Teaching and Learning Academy • Plan to Address Other Courses and/or Continue Refinement with Other Courses • Disseminate Findings • Attend G2C Community of Practice Meeting and Gateway Course Experience Conference

Transfer Student Analysis Conducted

In Year 3 and into Year 4, NVU collected data on the percentage of credits earned and presented for transfer that are accepted by NVU and the percentage of credits accepted that satisfy a requirement, either for general education and/or the major. In Year 4, Dan Regan, Title III Project Advisor; Adam Johnson, Title III Research and Evaluation Specialist; and Loralie Adams, NVU Transfer Coordinator, conducted an analysis of transfer students and presented their findings in a report, *“Transfer Students at NVU: An Analysis of Enrollments, Persistence, Credit Articulation, and Website Materials”*. The report, shared widely with faculty and staff and featured on the Title III website, included six key findings supported by data and analysis:

1. “Transfer student trends are generally positive and encouraging, showing transfer students to be a bright spot at NVU.”
2. “Transfer students are a sizeable portion of the NVU student population and deserve continued, if not additional attention.”
3. “Students primarily transfer in to NVU from outside the VSCS system.”
4. “The typical transfer student is NOT the prototypical 18-to-22-year-old.”
5. “Transfer students retain at significantly higher rates compared to first-time students.”



6. "Transfers who graduate from NVU do not typically have problematic levels of excess credits."

The report concluded with a list of six recommendations for NVU's administration and community to consider. These are being addressed by the Retention Task Force. (See Attachment A.)

Re-Engaging Stop-Outs and Near-Completers (Objective 4)

As a key element of the Title III project, NVU is focused on increasing the completion rate of those who are considered near completion (Objective 4). During the year, the Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) contracted with ReUp to re-engage stop-out students, including near completers. Based on data received from the system office, Re-Up can identify these students and serve as the first point of contact for those who respond to the outreach. ReUp will help students connect with appropriate offices and resources necessary to move them toward successful re-enrollment and/or completion. Although results of this approach are not expected to be available or reported on during the remaining year of the grant, it is anticipated this initiative will have an impact on completion rates in the years following the grant period. This will be tracked and documented by VTSU.

Increased Use of Aviso

Project staff reported high faculty usage of Aviso during the year, with 481 alerts received and closed within 4-6 days of creation. Purchased by NVU and used to complement Title III efforts, Aviso is a student success software solution to help NVU keep students engaged, increase retention, and optimize the chances of degree and certificate completion.

Building a Data Culture

NVU and the Title III research and evaluation specialist initiated and accomplished several outcomes related to building a data culture. These are highlighted below:

- Completed outcomes reporting for the Gardner Gateways to Completion (G2C) project.
- Provided first-year seminar outcomes data to inform summer first-year seminar workshops.



- Completed an analysis of Aviso usage from fall 2020 to spring 2022 and shared findings with NVU Academic Advising to inform their transformation work.
- Created logic models to help organize the work of NVU's Retention Task Force.
- Coordinated near-completer reporting needs and outreach efforts between Title III, ReUp, and NVU/VTSU admissions and enrollment.
- Analyzed first-year advising survey results (September 2022) to inform work of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and to provide academic advising with a list of first-year students who are at risk for attrition based on Title III's predictive model.
- Held focus groups/interviews with NVU students on academic advising to improve this aspect of retention work.
- Updated Title III databases that are used for retention reporting, grant reporting, and predictive modeling.
- Performed probation and transfer student analyses.

Advancing and Supporting Student Success

In Year 4, a modest fund supported a variety of staff, faculty, and student initiatives that advance and support student success. With an expedited process established by the project director, several proposals were reviewed and selected by Title III Committee members. During the site visit, faculty and staff expressed their appreciation for the opportunities presented by the grants and for the quick turnaround between requesting and receiving a grant. A few examples of supported activities are listed below.

- Staff participated in the Complete College America annual convening (Atlanta).
- Staff participated in a Trauma Brain conference (Boston).
- A licensing fee was purchased to allow students to schedule mental health appointments online and thus reduce barriers for those seeking mental health services.
- Students attended the Association of Field Ornithologists annual meeting (Plymouth, MA) and an ACDA dance conference (Middlebury, VT).
- Support for guest speakers and a visiting dance instructor.

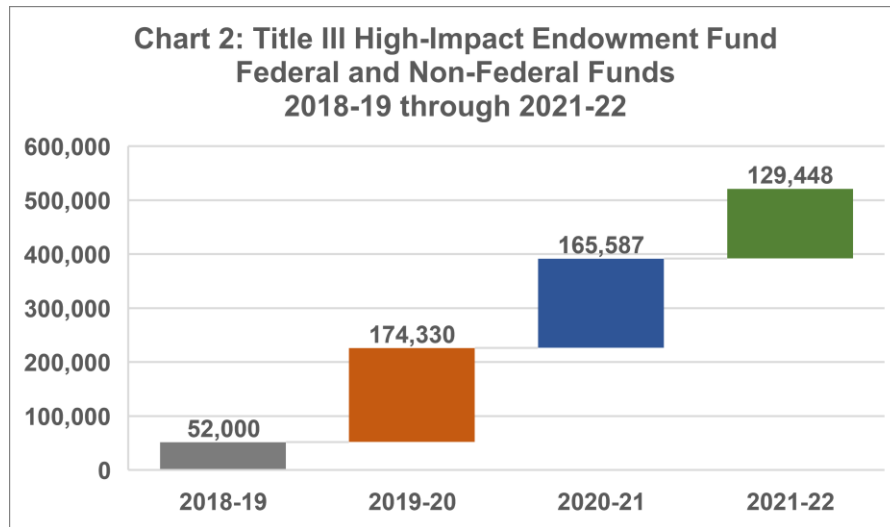


Strategy 3: Establish a Center for Teaching Excellence (CTL)

Through the CTL and Title III funding, multiple resources are available to faculty to help them provide students with the best educational experience possible. Examples of services and resources include faculty professional development programming, faculty learning communities, weekly teaching tips, and individualized consulting. During Year 4, the CTL convened 28 professional development sessions/workshops for faculty and staff; hosted 30 participants to develop and test a new hybrid focused modality, referred to as face-to-face plus (F2F+), which will be central to the new VTSU; and developed several video tutorials that are hosted on the CTL website to improve faculty accessibility to training resources.

Strategy 4: Build NVU Endowment (Objective 8)

In the first year of the grant, a High-Impact Endowment Fund was created to serve as a repository for contributions to support student success and 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 fundraising start during the first year, which resulted in a total of \$52,000 in contributions and federal funds, the second year resulted in significant growth of an additional \$174,330. In the third year, \$93,087 of non-federal funds were raised to match \$72,500 of federal funds for a total increase of \$165,587. In the fourth year, NVU met the target with \$129,448 of federal and non-federal funds combined. At the end of Year 4, the endowment fund corpus totaled \$521,365 (Chart 2). In line with the rules and regulations governing Title III endowment funds, no more than 50% of the endowment fund income will be used for the stated educational purposes.



IV. CHALLENGES

During Year 4, project leaders reported that many NVU faculty, staff, and administrators were focused on the demands of creating the new Vermont State University (VTSU). The current situation was exacerbated by other major challenges in recent years including a unification of the Johnson and Lyndon campuses into Northern Vermont University (NVU), the pandemic, and the damage caused by an ill-conceived plan, announced by a former chancellor, to close the campus before it was ultimately rescinded. These stressors and the energy expended by faculty, staff, and administrators combined to shift some of the focus off Title III efforts during the year.

V. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A change in project directors occurred at the end of Year 4. Dr. Les Kanat, Interim Academic Dean, accepted the role. He reports to Nolan Atkins, Provost, and is assisted by Dan Regan, Title III Advisor. Dr. Kanat meets on a regular basis with other NVU leaders 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.



The procedures to ensure efficient and effective project implementation, as described in the original proposal (pp. 39-41), continued to be followed in Year 4. As guided by the procedures outlined in the Title III proposal, 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.

VI. BUDGET

The Year 4 approved budget compared to actual expenditures is shown in the following table. Primarily due to delays in hiring personnel, almost 80% of the Title III budget was unspent at the end of Year 1 which resulted in significant carryover funds into Years 2 and 3. NVU used the carryover funds to support a campus-wide three-year involvement in the Gardner Institute and the Gateways to Completion and Retention Performance Management initiatives. There were no carryover funds reported from Year 4 into Year 5. The total available budget (approved and carryover) was \$541,846 with total expenditures of \$542,208 for a difference of -\$363.

Table 2: Title III Budget			
Year 4: October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022			
Grant Category	Carryover Balance from Previous Year	Budget Approved Year 4	Expenditures Year 4
Personnel	\$123,072	\$110,321	\$253,104
Fringe	74,371	31,304	75,145
Travel	49,681	30,000	2,353
Equipment	-957	0	0
Supplies	10,993	4,000	44,208
Contractual	-10,598	21,000	12,500
Other	-28,339	62,500	83,779
Endowment	-2	64,500	71,119
Total	\$218,221	\$323,625	\$542,208



VII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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

Recommendation 1: Plan for final close-out activities.

Before the end of the grant period, it is recommended that NVU leaders identify who will be responsible for completing final reports and conducting other close-out activities. Data and information about the project should continue to be compiled regularly to help streamline preparation of final reports, especially as project leaders and staff assume new roles with VTSU and elsewhere. The budget should continue to be closely monitored and actions taken to guard against over- or under-spending.

Recommendation 2: Develop/implement institutionalization plan.

Discussions about continuation of successful Title III activities and initiatives occurred during Year 4 and are ongoing. Information provided during the site visit indicated the intention to incorporate the following as part of the new VTSU: (1) Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL); (2) development of a new advising model that will be used by VTSU; (3) experiential learning; (4) work of the Retention Task Force, e.g., list of recommendations that resulted from the transfer student analysis; and (5) many of those who are associated with Title III will have positions within VTSU. If not already developed, a plan should be created to further ensure successful components will continue post-grant and include details for how it will be accomplished, e.g., identify which activity/initiative, budget implications and source of funding, prioritization, reassignment of duties, etc.

Recommendation 3: Continue to monitor unification.

Related to recommendation 2 above, and as recommended last year, project leaders should remain vigilant to ensure Title III final activities are closely monitored during the remaining months of the grant. Because the unification has implications for institutionalization of

Title III activities post grant, this will help to increase the likelihood that successful activities initiated with Title III will continue as NVU becomes VTSU.

VIII. SUMMARY

There were no major areas or issues of concern discussed with or observed by the evaluator during the site visit. Even with the challenges that occurred during the first years of the grant, NVU has continued to implement its Title III project as intended. Described earlier as a major challenge, events over the past few years (i.e., the unification of Johnson and Lyndon campuses into NVU, a pandemic, and a poorly-timed and inaccurate statement of closing) and the latest activities related to unification as one Vermont State University, have required sustained levels of high energy and effort by faculty, staff, and administrators.

Although project staff reported that these stressors combined to shift some of the focus off Title III efforts during the year, NVU has continued to demonstrate its commitment to Title III. This is evidenced by progress on key activities detailed in this report and by the measurable outcomes realized during the year. For example, the 93% increase in retention of students from their junior-to-senior year exceeded the target of 91% (Objective 3); the six-year graduation rate increased to 38% (Objective 5); overall student satisfaction with advising increased to 85%, exceeding the target by 20 percentage points (Objective 6); and an endowment increase of \$129,448 (Objective 8). The average failure/withdrawal rates in three gateway courses decreased to 17.1% and, while this did not quite meet the target of 16.2%, it represented an improvement from the previous year's rate of 17.6% (Objective 7). It should be noted that NVU met targets for two of the three gateway courses (BIO 1210=14.9% and MAT 1080=15.6%). Another indicator of satisfactory progress included spending grant funds at an acceptable rate. After significant carryover funds from the first year, NVU is on track with expenses.

It is apparent to the evaluator that NVU's Title III project continues to be accepted and supported throughout the fourth year. It is clear from conversations with Nolan Atkins, Provost; Les Kanat, Interim Academic Dean and Title III Project Director; Dan Regan, Title III Advisor;



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and project personnel that everyone associated with the project is knowledgeable about its scope and enthusiastic and appreciative of the available resources over the past four years. It is the evaluator's opinion that NVU is well positioned to successfully implement the final year of the project and to fully realize the goals and objectives as set forth in the initial proposal: fostering early and ongoing student success through college-wide initiatives, systems, and processes, and strengthening NVU's financial future through an increased endowment.



Attachment A: Excerpt of Title III Recommendations

Transfer Students at NVU:

An Analysis of Enrollments, Persistence, Credit Articulation, and Website Materials

Initiated & Conducted via NVU's Title III Grant

Dan Regan, PhD | TIII Project Advisor

Adam Johnson, PhD | TIII Research & Evaluation Specialist

Loralie Adams | NVU Transfer Coordinator

Spring 2022

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TIII Recommendations

1. NVU should make more visible and explicit the portion of the institution's success story that has to do with transfers, especially as conveyed in key documents and on the public web site.
2. NVU should continue to gather systematic data on transfer students, as they are too often ignored in routine data-gathering and analysis, which tend to focus on the Federal Cohort.
3. There is much we don't know about transfers to NVU: for instance, even the extent to which they wish to be regarded and served as transfers, as opposed to merely integrated into their respective NVU graduation classes. Personnel should be deployed (or added) as necessary to engage in these conversations, if they prove difficult to accomplish in time-sensitive admissions or advising meetings.
4. NVU should consider joining NISTS, the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students.
5. Using the Clearinghouse, NVU should track students who ultimately depart for (and eventually graduate from) other institutions.
6. Finally, NVU should consider regarding such students as part of the institution's success story, instead of a series of marks against retention. From the perspective of student (rather than institutional) success, helping someone prepare for and negotiate a transfer, which leads to eventual graduation, could be part of the NVU story, instead of a footnote or addendum or, worse, an unmentionable. It could also be regarded on the plus side of the ledger for the sending university, instead of a failure.