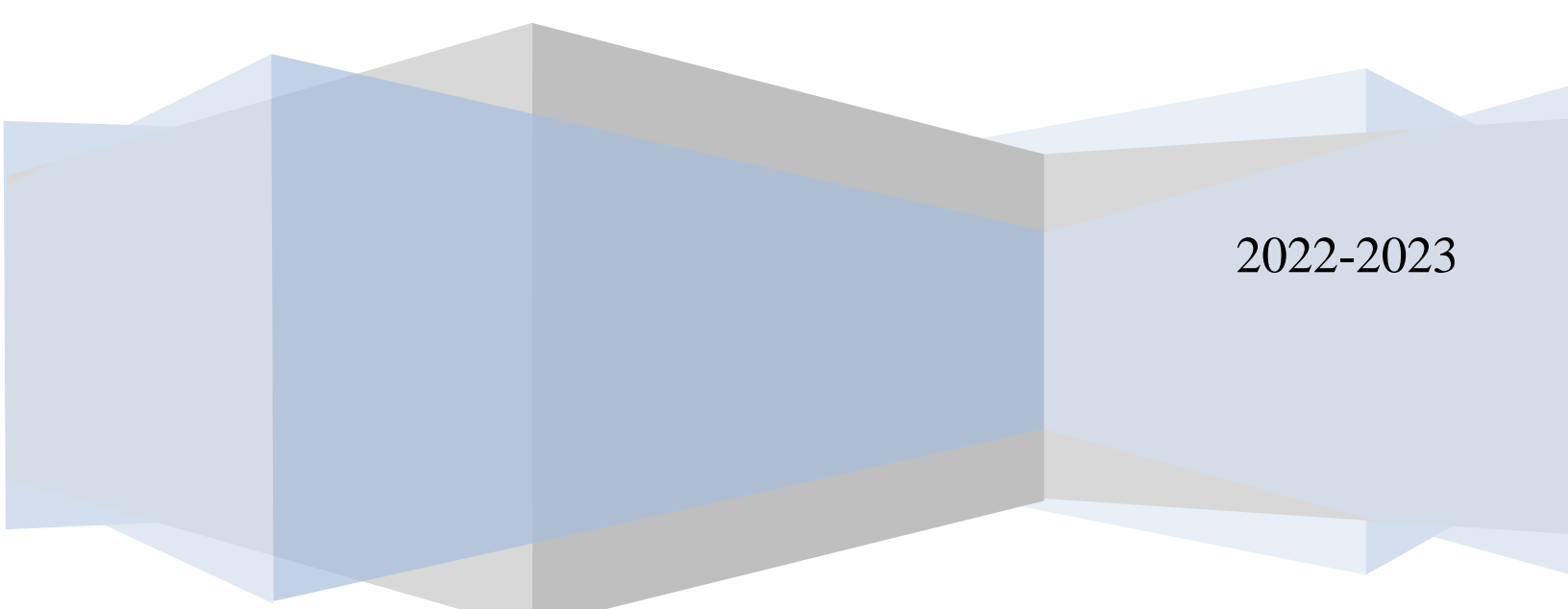


# Castleton University

## **Title III External Evaluation Year Four Report Development Institute, Inc.**



2022-2023

**Castleton University**  
**TITLE III EXTERNAL EVALUATION**  
**Year Four Report**  
**2022-2023**

Castleton University began its Title III Strengthening Institutions project—*Pathway to Graduation*—in October of 2019. The overall purpose of the project is to improve retention to graduation through three inter-related components: a strengthened First-Year Experience; improved teaching and learning excellence; and increased workplace readiness. With a focus on student success, Castleton will increase first-to-second year retention by 8 percentage points; increase four-year graduation rates by 5 percentage points and increase experiential learning by 14 percentage points. Additionally, the University’s Senior Exit Survey scores will show a 17-point increase in their rating of the Castleton experience as a measure of engagement and overall satisfaction.

During the inaugural year of the Title III project, the University contracted with Development Institute, a Boston consulting firm, with Dr. Katherine German, President, and her colleague, Dr. Philip Sbaratta, serving as the external evaluators. Drs. German and Sbaratta have been involved with the design, implementation, and evaluation of similar programs since 1980 and have held a variety of leadership roles within higher education over the past forty years. They are currently working with numerous institutions developing and evaluating Title III and Title V projects as well as other change efforts within higher education.

The evaluators conducted a virtual annual assessment on January 10, 2024. Prior to each assessment event, the evaluators reviewed the University’s overall five-year project plan and projected implementation strategies with a focus on the year under review; subsequently additional documents relative to online registration, Connections Seminar 1 course for first-year students and the Financial Academic Career Trajectory (FACT) Plan, as well as the budget were also reviewed.

During the assessments, they outlined the evaluation criteria specified in the project implementation as indicated through project objectives and anticipated results. These criteria have been incorporated into the evaluation report for use as benchmarks against which to measure the progress of the project to date.

As part of the evaluations, Drs. German and Sbaratta conducted structured interviews to assess the progress that occurred within the elements of the overall activity under development. During these discussions, the evaluators met with Kelley Beckwith, Title III Project Director/Vice President of Student Success, Chris Boettcher, Activity Director, and VTSU President David Bergh, as well as the following project participants to review activity development and impact as well as project organization, management, and budget:

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Title</b>
Nolan Atkins	Provost
Sarah Chambers	Director of Learning Technology
Jessica Duncan	Director of Career Development and Innovation
Jen Garrett-Ostermiller	Director Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation
Svea Howard	Associate Director of Advising
Irene Irudayam	Associate Vice President of Institutional Research and Development

Throughout the assessments, overall discussion focused on the achievements to date, issues that have arisen, and plans looking forward. Throughout the evaluations, participants described their involvement, accomplishments, and enthusiasm for the project. As part of the review, the evaluators shared their overall perceptions of project implementation, the experiences of other institutions addressing similar initiatives, and preliminary recommendations for continued development with the Title III leadership team and the President or his designee. The report which follows documents the progress of the project to date as well as the commendations and recommendations provided for consideration as the implementation process continues.

## **Pre-Project Needs Assessment**

The University engaged in a thorough analysis of strengths, weaknesses, and major problems inhibiting self-sufficiency during the application development process. The analysis was drawn from multiple sources including IPEDS data, course evaluations, Faculty Survey, Graduating Student Exit Survey, Student Experience Survey, PERTS, and University financial records.

Building on the institution's academic, management, and fiscal strengths, *Pathway to Graduation* addresses the following six specific weaknesses in Academic Programs, Institutional Management, and Fiscal Stability that inhibit student success:

- student offerings that do not align with new delivery models or serve all student populations;
- under-utilized advising tools and inconsistent advising practices;
- inadequate staffing in professional support and insufficient institutional research capacity;
- limited support for student career readiness;
- under-utilized technology tools; and
- high tuition dependency, deferred expenditures, and multiple negative external factors.

These weaknesses result in a single, major problem which serves as the focus of the project:

Only 7 out of 10 entering students are retained to the second year,  
and only 4 will graduate on time.

To address this problem, the University's comprehensive development plan projects transformative improvements in the student experience from entry onward, expanded support for teaching and learning, and an intentional focus on career readiness—all aiming to increase student engagement, achievement, retention, and graduation over the next five years and beyond and increase institutional vitality.

## **Scope of the Project**

*Pathway to Graduation* melds curricular reform with the development of a robust support system. To improve the student experience, an enhanced registration and orientation will include

an online component along with online advising. Additionally, a revised first-year curriculum will be grounded in integrative learning theory with special emphasis on the first-year seminar and the general education program. To support these initiatives, a developmental advising model will use analytics and predictive models to monitor student progress.

Concurrently, a Teaching and Learning Center will consolidate professional development to support active learning and course redesign and delivery along with upgraded classroom technology to enhance instruction. Additionally, a Digital Learning Commons will provide student support in a virtual “one-stop” that connects students with academic services and other supports. And finally, an office of Institutional Research will centralize ongoing research, assessment, and data storage.

To increase workplace readiness, new financial literacy, career exploration and professional readiness curricula will be developed and coordinated with the General Education curriculum for first-year students. At the same time, experiential learning will be enhanced along with new curriculum that enables career exploration leading to a “purpose first” approach aligned with four-year academic planning.

Designed to transform the institution, by the end of Year Five, the Activity will produce significant increases in achievement, retention, graduation, and engagement measured against the baseline data provided. With a commitment to institutionalize *Pathway to Graduation* upon project completion, the increases achieved in student success over the span of the project will continue to accrue into the future.

#### **Year One Interim Assessment (October 2019 – March 2020)**

The Castleton project is structured around a constant set of objectives with incremental increases anticipated over the five-year grant period; however, in the first year of implementation

as the project was inaugurated, personnel hired, services established, and systems installed, improvements were not anticipated across all the objectives. That said, for the inaugural year only two of the objectives were so designated using an asterisk (\*) – those addressing student perceptions of their experience and post-graduate planning and support – were expected to demonstrate any impact. For Year One, the following metrics applied:

- Increase first-to-second year retention from 70% to 70%
- Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 38%
- Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was “excellent on senior exit survey from 28% to 30%\*
- Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 68% to 68%
- Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 55% to 55%
- Increase student the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 68% to 70%. \*

With the leadership team in place, essential progress on the Activity required development work in three major areas: First-Year Experience, teaching and learning, and workplace readiness. Despite the lock down caused by the pandemic, significant progress was made in all three major components, and, in fact, ahead of schedule on several fronts.

**Component One: Strengthen the First-Year Experience** involves enhanced registration and orientation, review of the First-Year Curriculum, and improved advising.

During the inaugural year, a modularized online orientation using University talent was developed in conjunction with the American Design Group (ADG). Responsive to the individual student, the orientation provides easily accessible, useful information where and when they need it. This new orientation initiative was coupled with an onboarding process facilitated by three new Success Coaches hired with Title III funds, and four part-time Success Coaches hired with institutional funds, each assigned to first-year students. With targeted training for coaches, they quickly adapted to Zoom technology to establish and maintain contact with students. Through remote counseling from April until August, coaches interacted with all 425 entering students.

To facilitate a smooth start, a detailed registration flow chart laid out the onboarding and registration process, along with the hand-off to first-year advisors and student leaders known as SOS ambassadors once registration was completed. This process enabled the staff involved to provide clear direction and direct assistance to students throughout their first year of study at Castleton University.

Concurrently, a proposal to reform the First-Year Seminar was developed by a faculty committee working in parallel with the project. The proposed “Connections” provided the tenets of a first-year seminar addressing college success strategies embedded within selected courses. This is the first of three yearly integrative courses proposed for inclusion in the program. To support the six-section pilot of this concept in the fall, the faculty defined the following six course goals to strengthen student abilities to succeed at Castleton:

1. Read, write, speak, listen, and think critically;
2. Appreciate the joys as well as the challenges of academic work;
3. Understand that the freedom of college life brings with it responsibilities as well as opportunities;
4. Identify and access support services to help them succeed;
5. Learn to engage with new ideas and perspectives, and become informed, constructive citizens; and
6. Become life-long learners.

The proposed goals were aligned with the overall goals of the general education program to ensure that the program provided a sustained introduction to the life and values of the university as it supports students’ efforts to transition from high school to college successfully:

1. encourage students to make connections throughout academic courses, cultural events, and co-curricular activities;
2. engage students in a wide range of disciplines, leading to adaptable and flexible thinking;
3. teach students to search for, critically appraise and implement knowledge;
4. prepare students to convey ideas through multiple means of expression;
5. prime students to value different perspectives and cultures;
6. promote students to be engaged as active citizens on campus and beyond; and
7. stimulate intellectual curiosity, preparing students to be life-long learners.

<http://catalog.castleton.edu/content.php?catoid=18&navoid=1515>; circa 2018)

These goals were also guiding a broader reform of the general education curriculum as a whole. The program was clearly outmoded and unwieldy; the development of a staged integrative component for the program is consistent with current research and theory on general education program efficacy. This needed reform was expected to be completed and voted upon by faculty in the fall.

Students completing the Connections pilots will be advised by their Connections instructor until they receive an advisor in their majors in the spring. With a strong focus on ‘Think 30’ at the University, Connections will need to be synchronized with efforts to support student career exploration and development during the freshman year.

Meanwhile, work began on the advising process itself. Degree plans have been developed for all majors along with the students’ individual Financial, Academic, Career, Transformation (FACT) Plans. The FACT Plan was offered as a pilot for six FYS Connections courses in the fall of 2020 and is divided into three categories, each with specified delivery options and outcomes: Individual Assessment, Career Exploration, and Financial Literacy. Complementing these efforts is the installation of Aviso retention/advising software. Now in Phase 1, the Connections faculty piloted the new advising software in the Fall of 2020.

**Component Two: Improve Teaching and Learning Excellence** involves the establishment of a Faculty Teaching Center and a Digital Learning Commons, the creation of model classrooms and upgraded classroom technology, and the establishment of an Office of Institutional Research.

The second component focused on teaching and learning with the centerpiece being the development of the Center for Teaching and Learning. While space options are under consideration, the main professional development activity occurred virtually during the pandemic, moving from integrative learning concepts aligned with the Gen Ed reform to remote teaching



with an emphasis on Canvas, Zoom, and online learning. To that end, throughout the summer, a variety of professional development opportunities were held. Sixty faculty members undertook a self-directed course on online learning and LMS course design. To pace the work, the faculty members worked in small groups facilitated by peer faculty mentors. Weekly virtual workshops were conducted with 50-60 faculty and staff participants examining pedagogy and best practices, a process that continued into the fall of 2020. At the same time, Gen Ed reform moved forward, and returned to its original mission, the Center playing an important role in implementing the integrative learning elements of the new program. The Faculty Assembly's standing Teaching and Scholarship Committee serves in an advisory role and actively supports faculty engagement. Additionally, three instructional design consultants were hired with Title III funds to further facilitate the faculty's transition to remote instruction for the fall 2020 semester.

Meanwhile, work also progressed on the development of upgraded classrooms to ensure that they were on track to enable active learning. Two specific classrooms were outfitted with integrated video projection systems, document cameras, and Blu-ray players, all controlled through a uniform system with a central administrative hub. Beyond these classrooms, a full interactive teleconferencing upgrade was in the works and work progressed on the development of an active learning classroom and teaching lab complete with moveable furniture, electronic whiteboards, and electronic teaching tools.

And finally, to support data-driven decision-making, an Office of Institutional Research was established. Though in its infancy, the intent is to evaluate the effectiveness of assessment instruments; centralize data collection, storage, and reporting; and promote continuous assessment.

**Component Three: Improve and Increase Workplace Readiness** addresses the development of new financial literacy curriculum, enhanced experiential learning and workplace readiness, and career exploration underscored by a 'purpose first' approach implemented through four-year degree maps with attendant advising.

The third component built on the new degree plans, the new Aviso advising/retention system, and the development of the FACT plan. To support the financial component of the FACT plan, the University purchased iGrad, a comprehensive software application that addresses money management, including paying for college, as well as career exploration and development and beyond. Additionally, to support the expansion of career readiness, the University began to expand upon its investment in experiential learning, e.g., co-op, internships, apprenticeships, service learning, study abroad, and civic engagement. With 99 designated experiential learning courses currently offered in 33 of 75 majors, the goal is to offer a required credited experiential learning course in each major. As the effort progresses, expansion of career readiness options is expected to grow with work underway on the refinement of the internship protocol, the expansion of web listings, the development of a career readiness toolkit housed in Canvas for Connections, and the initial realization of the FACT plan in the fall for the designated pilot courses.

And lastly, as part of the overall PTG effort, an all-faculty and staff Communication Day was held on August 10, 2020, at which participants focused on collective efforts to foster institutional change and identify the ways in which each community member contributes to student success and educational mission.

### **Impact**

Though difficult to assess at this juncture, each of the three components made impressive progress during the first eight months of implementation despite the turmoil of COVID-19. Moreover, developments within each component were viewed systematically, each making its contribution to the overall student trajectory, whether on-site or on-line. And finally, the leadership of the project wisely pivoted to focus development efforts on the virtual world, ensuring essential support for students, faculty and staff as the learning environment is transformed. Coaches,

orientation, Connections, and advising are poised to strengthen the first-year student experience; institutional research and professional development already began to impact teaching and learning; and the investment in financial literacy, FACT planning, and career readiness is sure to excite continuing students. Hard to believe it was only the first year of implementation!

### **Year One Assessment (October 2019 – September 2020)**

The first year was critical in establishing the foundation for the five-year term of the grant. Many initiatives need to be started simultaneously, requiring intensive planning and development. As mentioned previously in the Interim Report, the project is structured around a constant set of objectives with incremental increases anticipated over the five-year grant period. Overall, the following six objectives establish intended outcomes:

- Increase first-to-second year retention from 70% to 70%
- Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 38%
- Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was “excellent on senior exit survey from 28% to 30%\*
- Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 68% to 68%
- Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 55% to 55%
- Increase student the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 68% to 70%. \*

For Year One, two of the objectives – those addressing student perceptions of their experience and post-graduate planning and support as designated by an asterisk – were expected to demonstrate any impact. Despite the upending of the normal life at the University caused by the pandemic, this year Castleton was able to make substantial progress on the three central components of the project: First-Year Experience, teaching and learning, and workplace readiness.

**Component One: Strengthen the First-Year Experience** involves enhanced registration and orientation, review of the First-Year Curriculum, and improved advising.

Using Slate, the CRM Platform, several onboarding processes were developed including application, orientation, and registration with the assistance of a coach, and finally a “handoff” to

a faculty advisor. As part of this effort, American Design Group was hired to develop an online orientation, using University talent. In Fall 2020, approximately half the students participated in the virtual orientation; however, in Spring 2021, orientation will be required of all new students.

In terms of the first-year curriculum, the current Connections course was enhanced with the development of the F.A.C.T. – the Financial-Academic-Career-Transformation - Plan as a guidepost for the student journey. Under development in Year One, the FACT plan was piloted with 108 students to develop financial literacy and wellness, academic exploration, and career readiness and understanding. This individualized student plan begins with assessment and goal setting in each of the three designated areas and leads the students to develop their own paths toward self-understanding, actions, and awareness in the outlined three specific content areas.

Presently, this initiative is drafted to allow ease of offering in an ‘a-la-carte style’ to be incorporated in the first-year seminar experience. Connections Instructors can select from the sessions offered within the listed content areas. The F.A.C.T. Plan in full capacity consists of six in-person staff/instructor led sessions and concludes with a collective academic showcase in the form of a campus-wide major and minor fair in the spring semester. Depending on student need and professor/Connections group goals, this initiative can also be adapted to restrict face-to-face session time. In its most limited capacity, two in-person sessions can be offered with the remainder of the program sessions and content to be offered as asynchronous and independent learning via video and email presentations. A break-out of the individual sessions identifies the outcomes:

Category	Sessions/Activities	Student Outcomes
<b>Individual Assessment</b>	a.) Gallup Strengths Assessment b.) Gallup Strengths Follow up Activity c.) Motivated Skills Cards Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Understanding of individual strengths to assist in determining or confirming major selection and how to best align with career goals.</li> <li>▪ Further develop personal academic, career, and personal</li> </ul>

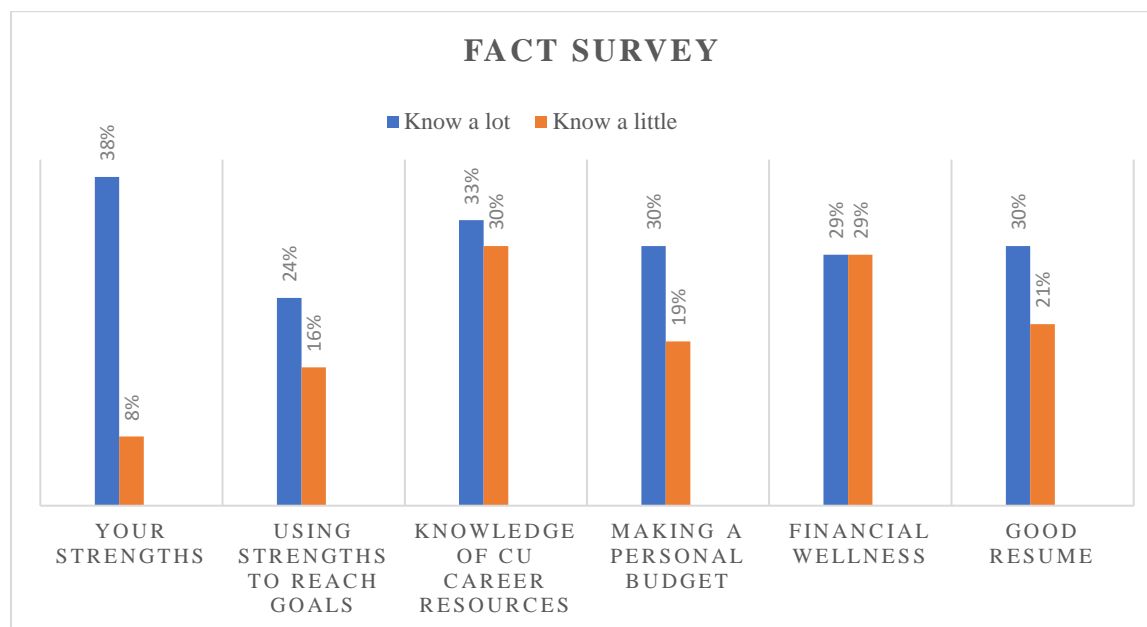
		<p>goals. Align strengths, values, and interests with career path.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To identify motivated skills and align with potential career paths using ONET OnLINE.</li> </ul>
<b>Career Readiness and Exploration</b>	<p>a.) Career Tool Kit: Resume, cover letter, references, LinkedIn profile, NACE career competencies.</p> <p>b.) Bucket list activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop skills to attain employment using professional products. Gain awareness of staff supports offered at CU. Product of resume and cover letter.</li> <li>▪ Ability to envision and further career paths.</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Literacy and Wellness</b>	<p>a.) iGrad introduction</p> <p>b.) iGrad challenge (<a href="#">iGrad</a> is a financial literacy platform that offers self-paced courses on understanding and financial wellness beginning with assessment followed by in person support, courses, assessments, calculators, counseling, data tracking, community, job and scholarship boards, articles, and tailors the user experience based on history and select preferences.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase understanding of financial literacy and individual financial wellness.</li> <li>▪ Create a budget. Understanding of student loan repayment.</li> <li>▪ Ability to explore basic financial wellness software.</li> </ul>

In addition, each core session was aligned with germane general education outcomes:

<b>Connections Core Session #1: Gallup Strengths Assessment</b>	<b>Connections Core Session #2: Career Tool Kit</b>	<b>Connections Core Session #3: iGrad Introduction</b>
2 engages students in a wide range of disciplines, leading to adaptable and flexible thinking	2 engages students in a wide range of disciplines, leading to adaptable and flexible thinking	2 engages students in a wide range of disciplines, leading to adaptable and flexible thinking
3 teaches students to search for, critically appraise and implement knowledge	3 teaches students to search for, critically appraise and implement knowledge	3 teaches students to search for, critically appraise and implement knowledge
5 primes students to value different perspectives and cultures	6 promotes students to be engaged as active citizens on campus and beyond	4 prepares students to convey ideas through multiple means of expression
6 promotes students to be engaged as active citizens on campus and beyond		6 promotes students to be engaged as active citizens on campus and beyond
7 stimulates intellectual curiosity, preparing students to be life-long learners		7 stimulates intellectual curiosity, preparing students to be life-long learners

To assess the pilot, a satisfaction survey was conducted. The first part of the survey asked students to rate the increase of their knowledge of key concepts using a four-point Likert scale ranging from

1 representing “Know a lot” to 4 representing “Don’t know much.” The following chart compares the percentage of the highest score (Know a lot) with a weaker score (Know a little):



From the survey the “Know a little” response represented an area for further investigation. Two categories seem to stand out—knowledge of CU career resources and financial wellness. As the University collects additional data, an analysis may suggest adjustments to the curriculum.

Connected to the work on the FACT Plan, a work group focused on enhancing advising. To establish a clear philosophy of advising, the following action plan was developed for implementation in the spring:

- **By Jan. 15:** Review the literature (36 articles) on higher education advising approaches. (Incorporate other resources if appropriate.) Teams of three will each review six articles and recommend any that are especially relevant for a short list.
- **By Jan. 29:** Determine common bibliography of articles to serve as common resources for the committee’s work.
- **By Feb. 12:** Determine the philosophical advising approach that is the best fit for Castleton based on the literature and submit to the Faculty Assembly Executive Council for consideration at the Feb. 18 meeting.

- **By March 2:** Faculty Assembly considers endorsement of Joint Committee’s recommendation for a philosophical advising approach, fulfilling the Joint Advising Charge.

Once the preferred approach is identified, an implementation timetable was also developed with a series of next steps identified for Year Two.

As part of this effort, the FSSE – Faculty Survey of Student Engagement - was conducted with a topical survey on advising. The results would suggest that the faculty are model advisors, ranking advising as a top priority. With the exception of having enough time to do advising, the faculty report that they are engaged and work with students in a variety of ways. That said, while the data does not appear very helpful in terms of the development of the advising model, it does appear to bode well for its subsequent implementation.

**Component Two: Improve Teaching and Learning Excellence** involves the establishment of a Faculty Teaching Center and a Digital Learning Commons, the creation of model classrooms and upgraded classroom technology, and the establishment of an Office of Institutional Research.

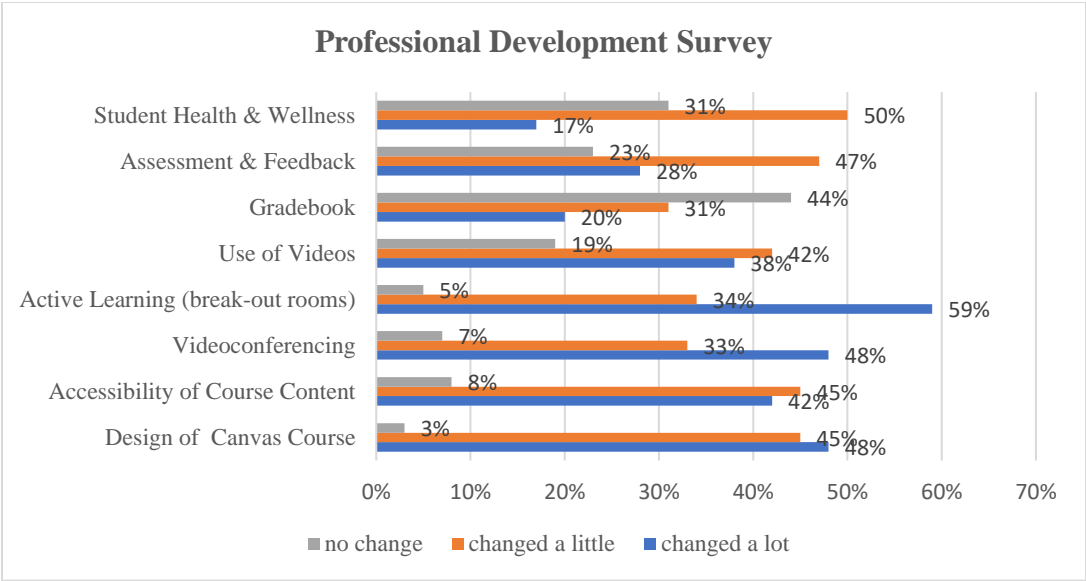
A central initiative of this component is the articulation of the General Education Outcomes entitled “Connections” particularly as related to the three Connections seminars that span the student’s academic journey. The following table presents the general education map with information literacy threaded throughout the program:

<b>CONNECTIONS - General Education Program</b>		
<b>Transferable Skills</b>	<b>Areas of Understanding</b>	<b>Seminars</b>
English Composition (3cr.)	Mathematical Understanding (3cr.)	Connections Seminar 1: Creating Connections (4 cr.) <i>(transition to college-level inquiry and engagement; reflection on 4 Soundings events; initiating Connections Portfolio)</i>
Effective Speaking (3cr.)	Scientific Understanding (3cr.)	
Writing Intensive (WI) 2 courses (6cr.)	Social/ Behavioral Understanding (6cr.)	Connections Seminar 2: Critical Connections (3 cr.) <i>(critical reading and discussion on important issues across the curriculum, reflection on 4 Soundings events; adding to Connections Portfolio)</i>
Speaking Intensive (SI) course (3cr.)	Aesthetic Understanding (6cr.) World Views: Cultural/Historical/	

Computing Intensive (CI) course (3cr.)	Philosophical Understanding (6cr.)	Connections Seminar 3: Culminating Connections (1-3cr.) <i>(projects integrating curricular and co-curricular experiences; reflection on 4 Soundings events; finalizing Connections Portfolio with culminating essay)</i>
To ensure breadth of experience, students can take no more than one course with the same prefix for credit throughout the “Areas of Understanding.”		

The culminating element is the digital Connections Portfolio, which includes evidence of student learning outcomes and student reflections. With this groundwork, the University established a timetable for implementation covering the remaining four years of the project.

At the same time, the pandemic required intensive professional development to effect the shift to online learning. With the assistance and timely support of three instructional designers, faculty adjusted their teaching to incorporate synchronous and asynchronous elements; in addition, 99 faculty participated in a series of nine workshops hosted by the Center for Teaching and Learning. An assessment of the professional development was conducted by the Office of Institutional Research in Summer 2020 with the results highlighted below:



The results indicated that the workshops appear to have had a significant impact; however, it was somewhat difficult to interpret the results since faculty perceived they were already doing some of



the items being rated. Based on this data, it appeared that workshops on remote course design, videoconferencing and break out rooms produced the most “change.”

**Component Three: Improve and Increase Workplace Readiness** addresses the development of new financial literacy curriculum, enhanced experiential learning and workplace readiness, and career exploration underscored by a ‘purpose first’ approach implemented through four-year degree maps with attendant advising.

Much of the work completed this year in Component Three was fully integrated into the Financial, Academic, Career-Transformation (F.A.C.T.) Plan, a learning experience which addresses the development of financial literacy and wellness, academic exploration, and career readiness and understanding through the creation of individualized student plans. To support this initiative the Director of Experiential Learning and Workplace Readiness and her team assisted with the creation of a F.A.C.T. Plan Career Services Toolkit with a series of activities to support the development of an initial resume and cover letter and the use of CollegeCentral.com, a national career resource center. This inaugural session will subsequently be augmented with additional learning experiences addressing the identification of references, the development of a LinkedIn profile, and the acquisition of NACE competencies to prepare them for internship and employment opportunities related to their individual goals. Augmenting the focus on career services are additional sessions addressing the assessment of students’ individual strengths using the Gallup Clifton Strengths Assessment, an instrument which provides personal insight relevant to career exploration and development, and sessions addressing the development of financial literacy with access to iGrad to support the learning experience. These three initial sessions provide an entrée to an expansive opportunity for individual exploration, linking personal strengths with career and financial considerations – a growth trifecta! In short, the continuing development and integration of the three key components of the F.A.C.T. Plan provide an essential opportunity to engage students in determining a personal path to the future. Initiated in the first-year seminar through six

sessions and culminating in an academic showcase at the end of the year, students in the initial pilot indicated that they “knew a lot” about their own personal strengths, though not necessarily how to use them to reach their goals, and that they had much more to learn about careers and financial literacy.

Additionally, as mentioned at the mid-point of the year, Castleton began to expand upon its investment in experiential learning - co-op, internships, apprenticeships, service learning, study abroad, and civic engagement – with the goal of offering a required credited experiential learning course in each of the University’s 75 majors. To that end, work was already underway on the refinement of the internship protocol and the expansion of web listings. Off to a great start, the implementation of the career readiness initiative will continue in future years as efforts to integrate financial literacy intensify and alignment with program maps and advising proceeds.

Across each of the three components, during the first year of project implementation Castleton University made significant progress despite the impact of the pandemic on the University community. However, what was most impressive was the level of engagement and collaboration established throughout the inaugural year of the project, a hallmark that bodes well for the future both in terms of project impact and ultimate University ownership.

### **Year Two Assessment (October 2020 – September 2021)**

Year Two builds on the foundation established in the first year as the initiatives originally established create the roadmap for the future. A set of objectives with incremental increases over the five years guide the project. Year Two objectives include:

- Increase first-to-second year retention from 70% to 72%
- Increase student satisfaction scores with first-year programming 5 percentage points to 26% over baseline (21%).
- Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 38%
- Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was “excellent on senior exit survey from 30% to 35%

- Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 61% to 68%
- Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 55% to 58%
- Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 70% to 76%.

As a backdrop to Year Two initiatives, a merger of Castleton with Northern Vermont University and Vermont Technical College was also underway. In early summer, the Vermont State College System (VSCS) launched a massive transformation project involving the redesign of all aspects of the organization to support a successful merger. Anticipating the upcoming approval of NECHE, the combined institutions will be known as Vermont State University.

**Component One: Strengthen the First-Year Experience** involves enhanced registration and orientation, review of the First-Year Curriculum, and improved advising.

This year significant progress was made in the development of first-year programming. Of note, 99% of first-year students completed an online orientation. Supported by the newly hired Manager of Student Success Support, Success Coach training doubled in spring of 2021 to include a broader foundation on introducing the Castleton Way, Connections/Gen Ed, and campus resources to students:

Success Coach Training Overview	
Session 1	• Introduction and Resources and materials
Session 2	• Responsibilities of success coaching and Connection to Pathway to Graduation
Session 3	• Importance of agency and self-direction and the Castleton Way
Session 4	• CU Advising and Mindset for success
Session 5	• Coaching and student aspirations and Available resources
Session 6	• Understanding graduation requirements and Using degree plans
Session 7	• Using self-service and SC questionnaire in Slate
Session 8	• Accessing caseload and Collaboration with Admissions
Session 9	• Balancing Connections enrollment and Sample schedules by major

In preparation for the start of the semester, nine success coaches facilitated 434 first-year students making the transition to Castleton and choosing fall courses during summer 2021. Additionally, *Pathway to Graduation* sponsored and partnered with other campus departments to deliver

orientation online and in-person, Welcome Days, and Commuter Events. Overall, the onboarding process was mapped identifying responsible parties, timeline, and outcomes.

An important emphasis in this process is on enhanced advising. As a foundation, an advising committee composed of faculty and staff was formed and tasked with making recommendations for advising reform. After an extensive review and analysis of research and best practices, the committee recommended a three-pronged approach this is simultaneously holistic, developmental, and agile:

- **Holistic:** a holistic approach to advising is needed that more effectively: a) responds to diverse student needs; b) helps students' pace for graduation/degree completion; and c) mentors and supports (continuously) students' academic and post-graduate professional success.
- **Developmental:** advisors "engage" and support students' academic and personal growth through conceptually different, developmental advising complements strengths-based/appreciative advising in which advisors engage students in recognizing and leveraging their strengths to achieve their academic and personal success.
- **Agile:** there is a clear understanding of who does what, and how key advising functions are performed and evaluated in terms of outcomes. This inherent structure is then balanced with the ability to quickly adapt the advising model to meet the changing backgrounds and needs of our varied student population. Most importantly, everyone understands and speaks the "same standardized language."

With Faculty Assembly endorsement and presidential approval, work subsequently began on choosing an advising model and identifying student learning outcomes for advising. To assist in ongoing advising efforts, the Castleton Support team modified its practices to better leverage Aviso in support of improved retention and student success. At the same time, the Center for Teaching and Learning sponsored two Aviso workshops for faculty advisors along with one-on-one support to faculty and staff as needed for assist with the full usage of the Aviso platform.

As the first-year experience, the Connections program also continued to develop. Members of the Connections 1 Committee including Trish van der Spuy, Andy Alexander, Rich Clark, Katy

Culpo, and Phil Whitman taught five pilot sections of Connections (CNX) in the fall 2020. In the spring of 2021, Andy, Katy, and Phil were joined by Kelley Beckwith, Chris Boettcher, and Gillian Galle to debrief and develop final plans for the course. These groups designed and tested the curriculum and developed new approaches to faculty coordination and assessment that would support the success of CNX 1. Subsequently, faculty participating in CNX course revision during the summer committed to the following guidelines:

- Incorporating the common first reading assignment and the culminating CNX assignment;
- Planning instruction and activities to address the two common CNX course goals;
- Planning CNX Hour activities as part of the work on the course goals;
- Integrating Soundings events and student activities around those events into the class;
- Planning to conduct any requested surveys and assessments; and
- Planning a sequence of scaffolded instructions for the CNX Portfolio.

Tremendous advances occurred in the design of the Connections 1 course during the year which will provide the platform for continued expansion in the year ahead.

**Component Two: Improve Teaching and Learning Excellence** involves the establishment of a Faculty Teaching Center and a Digital Learning Commons, the creation of model classrooms and upgraded classroom technology, and the establishment of an Office of Institutional Research.

In Year Two, the project invested in major classroom enhancements. The Library Media Viewing Room was refurbished as a 32-seat active learning classroom and Telepresence room supporting in-person and remote course delivery. Likewise, an Innovation Lab was designed as a 16-seat telepresence room outfitted with modular workstations for multiple seating arrangements aligned with a satellite lab including a digital maker space. In combination with CRF funds, 38 classrooms were upgraded, removing existing equipment and replacing it with a PTZ faculty facing camera, microphone, recording, and streaming equipment. These tools allow faculty to stream their classes and provide remote access to students who are unable to attend class in person.

With this substantial emphasis on instructional technology, a faculty survey was conducted in Spring 2021 inquiring of their engagement with technology and related training:

**What pieces of technology do you use typically use in a classroom when you teach in-person?  
(Select all that apply)**

Item	% All	% FT Only	% PT Only
Projector	84.4	94.6	75
Doc. Cam	22.9	28.6	17.3
Interactive Panel	10.2	14.3	5.8
Blu-Ray	11.1	14.3	7.7
Class Cam/Mic	30.6	32.1	28.8
None	2.8	1.8	3.8
Other	24.8	21.4	28.3

Clearly faculty are using technology at least at the most fundamental level, with some faculty, both full and part-time, making extensive use of the equipment.

**Have you attended any of the trainings, workshops, and/or discussions offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning this academic year?**

	% All	% FT Only	% PT Only
Yes	66.0	81.5	47.8
No	27.0	13.0	43.5
Not Sure	7.0	5.6	8.7

Likewise, many faculty – particularly full-time faculty - have participated in professional development opportunities, though there is room for increased engagement in the future.

To that end, a key component of the development work was sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Aside from pandemic related professional development, the CTL offered a wide range of support:

<b>CTL Activities – Highlights</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborating with Gillian Galle to publish <i>The Educator</i></b>, an online newsletter for Castleton faculty and staff, 23 issues, 4-5 articles per issue on all areas of instruction and student support (blogs.Castleton.edu/ctl).</li> <li>• <b>Referring Castleton Faculty to 3 Instructional Design Consultants (IDCs)</b> who met with them online; about 20 faculty made use of these services, most of them PT faculty.</li> <li>• <b>Coordinating 3 Zoom workshops</b> offered by IDCs: 18 participants in live workshops and they were recorded and posted on the RDR site:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Flipgrid with Nick Edwards</b>; September 24, 2020 (12 participants);</li> <li>○ <b>Canvas Analytics with Jasmine Rocco</b>; October 15, 2020 (6 participants);</li> <li>○ <b>Advanced Canvas Design with Gary Ackerman</b> (canceled at Gary’s request);</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Due to low participation, we shifted to making workshop materials available on Canvas; 3 workshop modules were published by Gary Ackerman.

- Calling a reflective meeting for faculty and staff (December 15, 2021) and publishing online reflection opportunities.
- Continuing to convene the **Faculty Assembly ad hoc faculty committee for Remote Learning**; published “The Case for Standards in Canvas Usage” December 10, 2020.
- Coordinating “**Connect, Uplift, and Empower in a Time of Disconnect,**” a campus-wide presentation by leadership and student success expert David R. Katz III on January 12, 2021 (79 attendees); follow-up held on January 27.
- Presenting two January workshops:
  - **Big Questions in Synchronous Teaching**; Jan 19, 2021; 2 participants;
  - **Course Design Charette**; Jan 26, 2021; 6 participants.

In addition, the CTL was directly involved in the curricular development work for Connections 1 including supporting 5 fall 2020 pilot sections of CNX 1 for first-year students; participating in a follow-up working group throughout spring 2021 to establish two common learning goals for CNX 1 courses; participating in a working group to design the Connections Seminar 2; supporting development of an e-portfolio system for the program and program assessment; planning four course design workshops for CNX faculty in June and July 2021 with 16 of 24 CNX 1 faculty members participating in at least one workshop.

**Component Three: Improve and Increase Workplace Readiness** addresses the development of new financial literacy curriculum, enhanced experiential learning and workplace readiness, and career exploration underscored by a ‘purpose first’ approach implemented through four-year degree maps with attendant advising.

Work progressed apace on curricular enhancements to increase workplace readiness. In Fall 2020, 108 students in six Connections Seminar 1 courses piloted the Financial, Academic, Career Transformation (FACT) involving Career Resources including NACE Competencies and College Central Network platform, Gallup Clifton Strengths Assessment, and Financial Literacy & Wellness on the iGrad platform. Approximately 60% of students engaged subsequently

completed a feedback survey with impressive results: under 5% of respondents claimed they “don’t know much at all” when referring to content delivered, and around 95% of respondents claimed to “know a little” or “know a lot” regarding the content delivered. A great start!

To broaden internship opportunities, the University is participating in the Internship Hub, a co-working space for Castleton students participating in remote internship opportunities either locally or outside the Rutland Region. This setting also allows an opportunity for local employers without a physical space available to host an intern in a professional setting they otherwise would not have experienced. The designated space can hold 6-7 interns, has high speed wireless internet, a kitchen space, a coffee bar, a conference table, and a lounge area. The Intern Hub is hosted by one of Castleton University’s lead partner organizations, the Chamber and Economic Development of Rutland Region (CEDRR). A terrific innovation!

In addition, the Pathway to Graduation team received a \$25,000 grant from the Vermont Department of Labor to provide internship stipends to fifteen students in unpaid internship opportunities from May 2020 to May of 2022. Finally, thirty-two students were provided individualized supports by internship team for internship resources, site identification, matching, application, and follow up from November 2020 to May 2021, while thirty-eight students registered for credited internship opportunities for the spring and summer 2021 semesters. Clearly the effort is off to a strong start!

### **Impact**

Importantly, the Pathway team actively examines the impact of various initiatives on seven key metrics. As with other institutions across the nation, the exigencies of the pandemic continue to influence central operations and activities requiring that results be considered in that light.



**1. Increase first-to-second year retention from 70% to 72%**

The first-to-second year retention was 68%, short of the hoped-for increase; however, the retention rate increased 5% from the first to second year of the grant.

**2. Increase student satisfaction scores first-year programming from 21% to 26%.**

The student satisfaction score unfortunately decreased to 19%. Here the impact of the pandemic is probably most severe. In the coming year, several initiatives will move from pilot to implementation so that more students will experience first-year programming.

**3. Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 38%**

Given the early stage of the grant period, there was no expectation of an increase in the graduation rate.

**4. Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was “excellent on senior exit survey from 30% to 35%\***

Unfortunately, the senior exit survey results fell below expectations at 22%. This is another metric undoubtedly influenced by the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

**5. Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 61% to 68%**

Efforts in experiential learning have paid off; the percentage of students participating reached 67%, 1% short of the goal.

**6. Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 55% to 58%**

The new emphasis on FACT planning seems to have had an impact resulting in 59% success, 1 percentage point above the target.

**7. Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 70% to 76%. \***

It would seem too early to get accurate data on this metric. The result was 52%, well below the goal but 1% higher than the previous year, hopefully a trend that will continue.

Clearly the Castleton Team is just beginning to make an impact, with early plusses in the use of experiential learning and graduating seniors with a post-graduate plan of action – terrific outcomes after only two years of project implementation in the face of an advancing pandemic!

### **Year Three Assessment (October 2021-September 2022)**

With the continuing restructuring resulting from the merger of three institutions into Vermont State University (VTSU), the Title III team has had to balance the shifting organizational structure and the goals of the project. Importantly, several members of the Steering Committee have played key roles in the merger process. With that in mind, the objectives in Year Three advance the priorities established in the first two years. Specifically they are:

- Increase first-to-second year retention from 72% to 75%
- Increase student satisfaction scores with first-year programming 10 percentage points to 31% over baseline (21%).
- Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 40%
- Improve the percentage of students reporting that their experience was “excellent” on senior exit survey from 35% to 39%
- Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 68% to 75%
- Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 58% to 65%
- Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 76% to 84%.

It should be noted that these objectives have remained constant from year to year, with anticipated increases over the five-year span of the grant.

**Component One: Strengthen the First-Year Experience** involves enhanced registration and orientation, review of the First-Year Curriculum, and improved advising.

A central element in the first-year experience is provided by success coaches who support students within specific academic areas: Svea Miller in the College of Health and Science, Ashley Haggerty in the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences, and Debbie Danforth in the College of Business. Three other staff members assisted as Success Coaches for specific populations such as Early College students, international students, and students that need academic accommodations.

Online Orientation, now in its third year of implementation, reached 99 percent of new first-year students: congratulations! In addition, Spartan Days replaced the old pre-pandemic

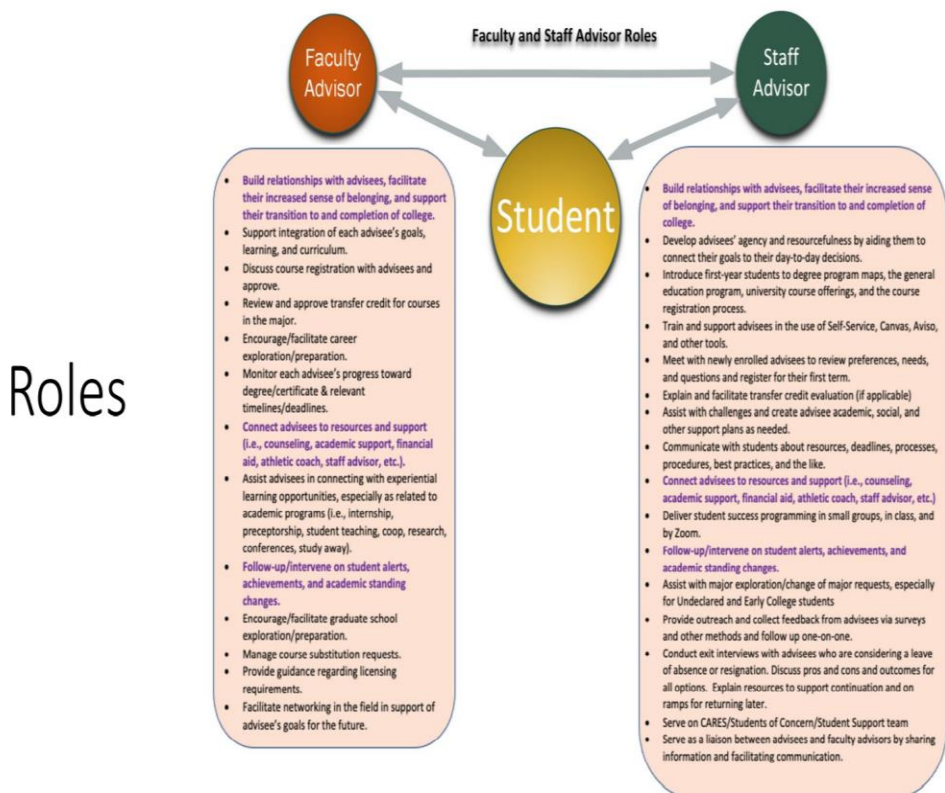
registration days; instead, during Spartan Days students and family are invited to visit and get acquainted with campus without the pressures of schedule selection. For the three scheduled sessions, 168 students and 243 family members participated.

Success Coaches were also effective in following up on alerts and reaching out to students to connect them to resources. In September, Success Coaches administered a first year advising survey as part of a VTSU pilot. The survey, which identifies students who have yet to exhibit a strong sense of belonging, had a response rate of 37% and led to advisees meeting one-on-one with success coaches, connecting them to campus resources, and removing barriers to success.

At the same time, the merger has had a major impact on the development of an advising model that will connect the three participating institutions. As part of the retention effort, an emphasis was placed on the utilization of the Aviso platform. For example, the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Faculty Assembly Teaching and Scholarship Committee sponsored three workshops for faculty advisors. After assessing faculty participation in advising and Aviso workshops, the CTL support team designed and created a prototype instance of a self-directed “module-based” approach to faculty development. It was evaluated by four faculty and staff volunteers in the spring of 2022. The plan is to propose it for adoption as a VTSU strategy for faculty development.

Related to the advising initiative, assessment of the launch of Connections Seminar 1 demonstrated marked outcomes in areas of advising: of responding students, 73% reported that they talked to a faculty and/or staff about academic goals; 82% had looked at degree progress/progress towards graduation screen in Self-service; and 88% had used a degree map/plan either in class, with an adviser, or independently. Concurrently, the support team focused on commuter students. For example, on two separate “Commuter Welcome Days,” two success coaches set up tables by

Jeffords Hall and handed out coffee, hot cocoa, cider, and snacks to commuters as they headed to class. By offering a raffle prize (a CU swag bag), they were able to track attendance through raffle tickets. On the first day, 46 students participated and 56 students on the second. On both days, students shared their appreciation for this gesture.



On a larger scale, advising is a prominent issue during the ongoing merger: In addition to developing a mission and vision, a team is defining the roles of faculty and staff advisors (see diagram above). The refinement of the role definition will be an ongoing process as the merger evolves.

**Component Two: Improve Teaching and Learning Excellence** involves the establishment of a Faculty Teaching Center and a Digital Learning Commons, the creation of model classrooms and upgraded classroom technology, and the establishment of an Office of Institutional Research.

A foundational part of this initiative is the Connections Seminar. A successful launch of the new Connections General Education Program and its integrative Connections Seminars in the

fall 2021 semester included the implementation of a new electronic portfolio component designed in consultation with Dr. Helen Chen of Stanford University and AAC and U, and the expansion of the Connections Seminar 1 to an unprecedented 28 sections in the current semester. In Spring 2022, a pilot of Connections Seminar 2 courses was also conducted. Thereafter, five English Department faculty worked throughout the summer to collaborate on the design of 6 new sections of Connections Seminar 2. Finally, Connections Seminar 3 pilot has begun with an online section of 32 students, largely transfer students who started under the current catalog.

As part of this component, five classrooms were upgraded. In particular, improvements added switching equipment, a Blu-ray player, and document camera to existing equipment. Additionally, a control touch panel allows instructors to easily use and switch between equipment. Improvements to the speakers and screens in these locations were included as part of the upgrade. Thus far, 22 classrooms have streaming and switching equipment. At the same time, the grant has supported the development of informal learning spaces across the campus. For instance, the PTG team collaborated with Social Work Professor Margaret Miles' spring 2022 Research Methods class to identify usage, preference, and types of informal learning spaces across campus. Including student suggestions, the following improvements are planned:

- Charging stations will be added to a lobby in Leavenworth Hall and the Coffee Cottage.
- A 24-hour student printing site will be established in Castleton Hall for residents.
- 13 unique upgrades are planned for the Calvin Coolidge library which include multiple soundproofing operatives, lighting, technology, workstations, and upgrades to meeting spaces.
- Mapping of informal learning spaces and listing the spaces on the website with corresponding location to increase equity and access.

Helping to promote enhancement of teaching and learning, the Castleton Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has supported emerging needs from the merger while attending to local issues. As part of its operation, the CTL conducts a variety of surveys of faculty and staff on

a regular basis concerning desired programming and areas of need. Consequently, the CTL Support Team has experimented with new strategies and modes of delivery, including short workshops that are recorded and archived, expanding publication of a variety of articles in *The Educator*, and a pilot plan to create a modular, self-directed system of professional development. This year, the CTL offered: 10 remote workshops; a book club reading Sandra Yancy McGuire's *Teach Students How to Learn* (18 participants; 6 meetings); Castleton Mentors Group/Teaching squares (7 participants in fall 2022); Talking Teaching, monthly informal conversations about teaching (average 3-4 participants); and continuing support for the development and delivery of the Connections Program, including for the design of Connections Seminars 2 and 3. Additional initiatives emphasized:

- **Faculty Reflection:** a variety of activities to promote faculty reflection on teaching such as the mentors/teaching square group, three reflection- focused workshops, and special programming on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.
- **Classroom Technology:** promoted wider awareness of classroom technology through publishing a database listing available resources, convening a classroom committee to elicit faculty input on upgrades and registration procedures for new teleconference rooms, and writing articles with an emphasis on uses of instructional technology for *The Educator* as well as valuable resources from Educause.
- **Use of Innovative Technology:** planning and launching the Castleton Innovation Lab., a 3D imaging and printing space with VR capabilities funded, in part, by PTG. This group has also planned a variety of 3D imaging workshops and outreach to campus and regional constituents such as a pilot afterschool/pre-college program with Fair Haven Union High School.

Connected to all these efforts is institutional research. With Amanda Richardson's departure, institutional research was delegated to a steering committee; however, the University has hired Adam Johnson, who will amalgamate available data sources, including the Post-Secondary Data Partnership Dashboard, to identify student populations at risk of non-retention. Ahead, the PTG Project will have to determine an appropriate way to contribute to system data demands and maintain the capacity to disaggregate Castleton data germane to the grant.

**Component Three: Improve and Increase Workplace Readiness** addresses the development of new financial literacy curriculum, enhanced experiential learning and workplace readiness, and career exploration underscored by a ‘purpose first’ approach implemented through four-year degree maps with attendant advising.

Several specific initiatives were undertaken this year to solidify experiential learning and workplace readiness:

***Gallup Clifton Strengths Assessment***—Based on student and faculty feedback and the correlations between self-discovery and individual assessment, the Connections Seminar 1 pilot team incorporated the Gallup Clifton Strengths assessment and reflective session as a requirement. In fall 2021 90% completed the survey; in Spring 2022, 79%. During class, a session was facilitated by a member of the career workforce team urging students to reflect on their strengths and talents and how to apply them to academics and future careers. Upon completion, students receive a report detailing their top five strengths, which can be used in a student’s resume, LinkedIn profile, and the student portfolio. Student feedback underscored the value of the assessment as a process of self-discovery to recognize and articulate strengths and consider connections to career paths and choices. Additionally, the Gallup Premium Platform was purchased for ease of access, added course materials, better data tracking, the ability to group classes and create class reports, and administrative efficiency

***iGrad***—Interest continues to grow in the iGrad Platform. For example, the Academic Support Center adopted it for financial literacy classes as a part of their TRIO programming; Financial and Registration Services has used the resource to help students understand financial award letters, create a budget, access scholarships, learn about debt and student loans, plan for savings, and assess financial wellness. Over 2021-22, 116 individuals registered for an iGrad account, including 7 staff members. Other interesting data points include:

- 204 students accessed their iGrad account.

- 163 users completed a course on the platform.
- 28 users read articles.
- 176 users updated their financial profiles.
- 40 users completed budgets.

To maintain momentum, a promotion and awareness campaign through the Sparty Says blog incentivized over 73 entrants to complete their user registrations and to explore the financial wellness platform.

***Castleton Vermont Internship Program (CVIP):*** To advance the internship initiative, PTG received a \$25,000 grant from the Vermont Department of Labor to provide internship stipends of \$1,500 to 25 students. Community intern sites included Killington/Pico IT office, Thrive Center of the Green Mountains, University of Albany Athletics Office, PegTv, American Society for Suicide Prevention, Northwest Primary School, Rutland Parent Child Center, Lisbon Regional School, Castleton Community Center, Poultney Mettawee Conservation District, Reclaimed Makerspace, Rutland Herald, and the Boys and Girls Club of Rutland County. With that success, PTG applied for the 2022-2023 CVIP grant and has been awarded a \$40,000 grant to provide internship stipends to 15 students. Additionally, 41 students received individualized support through one-on-one meetings to review internship resources, site identification, matching, and application. Overall, 105 undergraduate students registered for credited internship opportunities for 2021-2022 academic year.

***Internship Hub:*** The Internship Hub at Chamber and Economic Development of Rutland Region (CEDRR), in partnership with Castleton University, is a co-working space for Castleton University students participating in remote internship opportunities either locally or outside the Rutland Region. The designated space can hold 6-7 interns, has high speed wireless internet, a kitchen space, a coffee bar, a conference table, and a lounge area. The Intern Hub has been



underutilized since its inception in the pilot term of fall 2021. Further examination of the value of the resource and the ability to sustain the project will be undertaken in AY2022-2023.

Data gathered from the Class of 2022 Exit Survey Summary (n=367) suggest that the alignment of experiential learning and workforce development during their course of education remains important. The following are key factors:

- 45.9% are employed full-time, volunteering, or in the military.
- 23% are planning to continue their education.
- 74.8% said their plans are very related or related to their studies/activities at Castleton
- 58.3% said Castleton helped them with their plans for next year.
- 70.2% had an internship/practicum, etc. experience, and 28.1% of those were paid.
- 86.9% agreed or strongly agreed that their internship experience provided the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in a real-world setting.

Clearly, this multipronged effort has paid off in terms of student interest, enthusiasm, and success.

## **Impact**

Importantly, the Pathway team actively examines the impact of various initiatives on seven key metrics.

### **1. Increase first-to-second year retention from 72% to 75%**

At the time of the report, data had not been collected and analyzed for the period of evaluation.

### **2. Increase student satisfaction scores first-year programming from 19% to 21%**

The student satisfaction score unfortunately decreased to 18% likely due to a combination of factors as the University transitioned from remote to on campus.

### **3. Increase 4-year graduation rate from 38% to 40%**

Like retention, the data was not available at the point of evaluation.

### **4. Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was “excellent on senior exit survey from 35% to 39%\*"**

The senior exit survey results improved with 28% reporting “excellent,” an impressive 6-point increase over the previous year; however, this still falls short of the target.

**5. Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 68% to 75%**

Efforts in experiential learning have paid off handsomely with the percentage of students participating reaching 70%, though still short of the goal.

**6. Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 58% to 65%**

The collective work of the project has produced very positive results on this front with data indicating 69%, a full 5 percentage points above the goal.

**7. Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 76% to 84%.**

The results on this objective continue to improve with a 6% gain over the previous year from 52% to 58%; however, the targeted results are still a distance away.

Once the key metrics are available, the overall impact of Year Three can be assessed. In the meantime, the major components of the grant continue to develop, mature, and improve.

### **Year Four Assessment**

Year Four presented particular challenges as the consolidation of three colleges into Vermont State University continued to unfold. With Castleton as a “campus” rather than an independent university, the objectives of the project had to be contextualized within the new administrative structure. Thus, guiding the work of Year Four were the following objectives:

- Increase first-to-second year retention from 75% to 77%
- Increase student satisfaction scores with first-year programming from 31% to 36% from baseline (21%).
- Increase 4-year graduation rate from 40% to 43%
- Improve the percentage of students reporting that their experience was “excellent” on senior exit survey from 39% to 42%
- Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 75% to 80%
- Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 65% to 68%
- Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 84% to 88%.

It should be noted that the objectives have remained constant from year to year, with anticipated annual increases.

**Component One: Strengthen the First-Year Experience** involves enhanced registration and orientation, review of the First-Year Curriculum, and improved advising.

Year Four has seen a significant amount of adaptation of Castleton-designed student services and support into the VTSU environment. A primary example is orientation, both in-person and online, shifting from a local campus view to the University level with legions of personnel and extensive videography involved, a major undertaking completed in record time. Key to the overall success of students, particularly during their first year, an impressive 95% of incoming students completed the online orientation. Kudos!

Similarly, a team-based approach to advising has been adopted across campuses with fourteen student success advisors housed within advising centers on each major campus site. At Castleton, four additional SSAs were hired. Using an inquiry-based and appreciative model, they carry a caseload of first-year students and support continuing students on an as-needed basis. SSAs have also completed the three planned advising surveys for first-year students this year; these are individualized surveys intended to trigger SSA intervention for struggling students. Last year 159 students participated in the survey pilot; this year, 239 participated in the first of these surveys, a 50% increase! Concurrently the adaptation of Aviso software for alerts and analytics is in process to expand the University's capacity to support the student success initiative. To date the software has been modified and branded SS+E (Student Success and Engagement), with plans for internal marketing and training to increase faculty participation and usage over the course of the next year and boost the delivery of timely interventions for students in jeopardy.

Directly related to the advising process, Castleton, along with other VTSU campuses, has developed a new, proactive plan for career development beginning in the first semester. The plan launches a continuum of "10 Essential Tasks" based on NACE recommendations reflecting the national emphasis on career readiness and development:

- Introduce students to Career Development resources and personnel (students, alumni);
- Complete self-assessments (i.e., Career Readiness, skills, personality, values, attitudes, interests, strengths, financial readiness, Focus2, etc.);
- Do market research about job and career options:
- Understand major/career alignment;
- Participate in experiential learning;
- Understand job search strategies;
- Write a high-quality, tailored resume or CV and cover letter that articulates career readiness competencies;
- Prepare for an interview/develop interview skill;
- Participate in networking and build a professional network using technology and communication; and
- Access financial wellness resources.

The overall intention is to introduce the first four tasks within the FYE Connections course, aided by “Career Ambassadors.” To support this initiative, an Instructional Designer created interactive modules for the Canvas LMS to guide students through an expanded vision for this CNX 1 integration and completion of the first four tasks. CNX 1 faculty can import the Canvas modules into their individual courses. To date, nineteen sections of CNX 1, or a total of 287 students, have elected to engage with Career Development programming offered through Canvas, a very strong start upon which to build going forward.

A vital part of student success is effective communication. To that end, Student Success Resources was launched as a centralized hub of student-facing information and resources, essentially serving as a ‘Virtual Learning Commons’. Meanwhile, although plans for a physical learning commons in the library were shelved this spring, the ground floor of Woodruff Hall, formerly the main administration building, now houses a new Advising Center and Career

Development suite adjacent to Financial Aid counselors and others in the Registration and Financial Services office. Additionally, *Sparty Says*, a weekly blog maintained by student editor Charlotte Morrison, serves as an aggregator and digest for student announcements. During a sample period of two weeks in October 2023, there were 220 users, 185 being new visitors, generating 419 pages views, 244 cases of user engagement and 279 session starts indicating that users returned in some cases. Taken together these initiatives will continue to contribute significantly to the success of first-year students across the University as the project moves through the next year.

**Component Two: Improve Teaching and Learning Excellence** involves the establishment of a Faculty Teaching Center and a Digital Learning Commons, the creation of model classrooms and upgraded classroom technology, and the establishment of an Office of Institutional Research.

In the main, the heavy lifting of advancing general education and the Connections model on a system-wide basis has occurred. VTSU Connections General Education Program, whose integrative pathway and overall program concept is inspired by Castleton’s model, was approved by VTSU faculty in December 2022. The program is designed to be launched through a “phased implementation” over the next five years, mainly to limit the amount of new design and adaptation required by system faculty:

- **Connections Seminar 1:** Implemented Fall 2023 with 21 sections offered at Castleton and 61 system-wide
- **Connections Seminar 2:** Launching Spring, 2024 with 6 pilot sections revised as a reading and writing across the curriculum course and supported through course development grants
- **Connections Seminar 3:** Designated for phase-in Fall 2025 as an ePortfolio sequence, an experimental version of the course was launched in 2023 with 7 sections in the fall and 6 sections in the spring, supported by course development grants.
- **DEI-inspired Learning Outcomes:** Designated for phase-in Fall 2024 for all Gen Ed courses.

While professional development continued to support key grant initiatives through Castleton's Center for Teaching and Learning, a major shift occurred with the launch of VTSU Center for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation. On July 1, 2023, the CTLI assumed the sole management of professional development. Under the direction of Jen Garrett-Ostermiller and Associate Director Jeff Tunney the CTLI has developed a thriving slate of programming. These include an extensive array of online web resources, a regular and varied workshop schedule, and a comprehensive program of consultation and support for academic areas during the Transformation process. Importantly, the DOE granted permission to extend professional development resources to include system efforts and faculty. As a result some major collaborative projects included:

- Development and implementation of the design plan for the CTLI.
- Support for the F2F+ pilot and scaling plan for F2F+ bi-modal classroom/remote access courses continued through the year with 16 faculty participating. The Activity Director, who joined a group to plan further scaling through a "faculty mentor" model, serves as a faculty mentor and facilitated a course redesign section with 6 faculty members in the summer. Scaling of the mentorship program will continue into the next year.
- VTSU Connections Program support was directed by a steering committee with campus representation from across the University. This committee navigated the logistics of rolling out the program and conducted extensive professional development and faculty community building.

As part of the emphasis on improved teaching and learning, instructional technology plays an important role, especially in providing state-of-the-art teaching environments. For Year Four, the following enhancements have occurred:

- 4 classrooms were updated with new screens, speakers, Blu-Ray players, and control systems.
- 6 classrooms received an added side display for remote students. • 5 classrooms received an interactive panel in the front of the room.
- 20 classrooms received an additional microphone to the classroom system, improving audio for remote students.

- 20 classrooms received a front of the room interactive display.
- 1 classroom received streaming equipment (camera and microphone).

In addition, a new one-touch recording studio is being developed in conjunction with the Communication Department. This will provide easy access to stationary recording equipment for both faculty and students. Another major investment is the Technology Enabled Active Learning (TEAL) room, which is intended to assess new technologies and pedagogical approaches on the model of PTG's previous support for large-scale upgrades. At the same time, PTG supported the testing of 3 classroom redesign models to support active learning and F2F+ instruction and continued to support the development of informal learning spaces across campus.

Finally, academic and student success initiatives are bolstered by the analysis of data as a means of demonstrating impact. To that end, the system Coordinator of Intuitional Research conducted a three-part Castleton-specific analysis of retention:

***Analysis of retention patterns.*** Analysis confirmed some hypotheses formed after Castleton began to experiment with the PDP Dashboard of the National Student Clearing House. Dis-aggregated data demonstrated that some specific student populations were retained at significantly lower levels than other student groups. These data were presented to the faculty and discussed with the Castleton Admissions and Retention Committee of the Faculty Assembly for further consideration and action.

***Analysis of Aviso usage patterns.*** An analysis of faculty usage of Aviso with a focus on academic alerts revealed usage significantly below that of faculty on other campuses. This data were used to plan for the system redesign previously discussed.

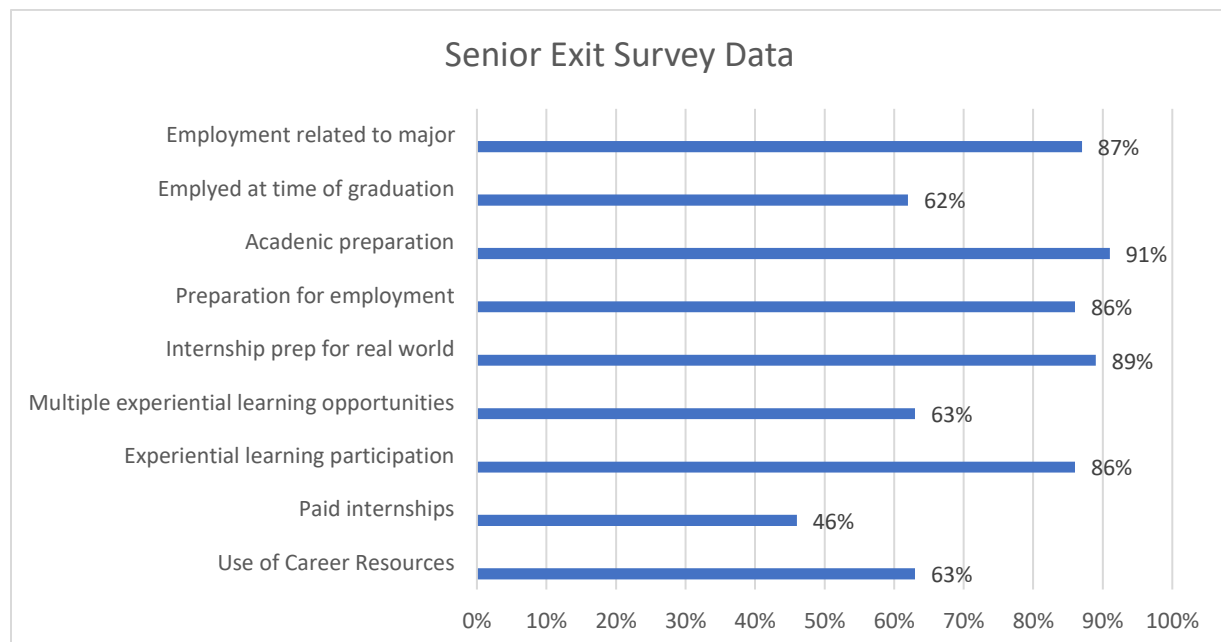
***Analysis of Exit Survey data.*** This analysis demonstrated that the survey information collected by Castleton does not indicate discrete causes of departure but does indicate that financial considerations and health and wellness are major correlational factors in students' departures. These data were used to initiate a discussion about how to align health and wellness data with Aviso alerts data and update the exit process.

With its emphasis on retention and graduation, the project has served as a building block for system-wide strategic priorities and initiative, a development that was totally unanticipated when the project was funded and shows tremendous promise systemwide.

**Component Three: Improve and Increase Workplace Readiness** addresses the development of new financial literacy curriculum, enhanced experiential learning and workplace readiness, and career exploration underscored by a ‘purpose first’ approach implemented through four-year degree maps with attendant advising.

As with other aspects of the project, career development has been subsumed within a consolidated systems organization as efforts in providing career support through personalized services and access to a variety of software platforms continued. In a new direction, a new process for hiring federal work-study and direct hire student employees was launched in August. As a coordinated effort between Career Services, Financial Aid, Human Resources, and student worker supervisors, the process provides University students with a fully online process to search, apply, accept, and complete onboarding tasks for all student employment opportunities University-wide. To date, over 300 students have been hired throughout the university, a significant increase intended to contribute to their overall development, preparation and retention to graduation.

To help inform future directions, a senior exit survey was conducted with a 66% return rate. The survey provided a snapshot of student experience in relation to their advising experience, academic experience, experiential learning engagement, satisfaction, and career preparedness.





Importantly the survey results demonstrate the strength of graduates' sense of their academic, career and community preparation underscoring the intentions of the various initiatives undertaken over the last four years. With a strong return rate, the data gathered through the Exit Survey provide a sense of the current status and a launching point for continued efforts in making career development and preparation front and center as VTSU becomes firmly established.

### **Overall Impact**

That the team has maintained the focus and aims of the Title III project despite enormous disruption, monumental change, and personnel upheavals is a testament to effective and dedicated leadership. At the same time, it is important to assess the progress the project has made.

**1. Increase first-to-second year retention from 75% to 77%**

The achieved retention rate was 69%, a 2% increase over the preceding year. Although the target is still a distance away, the trend is positive, and the recent re-envisioning of student support can hopefully result in improved retention.

**2. Increase student satisfaction scores first-year programming from 31% to 36%**

The student satisfaction score has bounced back from last year's low of 18%. In Year 4, the satisfaction rate jumped 10 points to 28%. This most likely is attributable to a return to normalcy and the continued improvements in first-year programming.

**3. Increase 4-year graduation rate from 40% to 43%**

Given that the full scope of the project has not been implemented, it is not a surprise that the graduation rate has not improved. Thus far, it has remained in the mid-30% range, making this objective a major challenge.

**4. Improve the percent of students reporting that their experience was "excellent" on senior exit survey from 39% to 42%**

The senior exit survey results remain flat in the mid-20% range, and in fact show a decline from the previous year. At the same time, it is difficult to determine how the VTSU reorganization has influenced students' perception of their overall collegiate experience.

**5. Increase the percentage of students participating in experiential learning from 75% to 80%**

The University has made significant strides in the area of experiential learning. Year 4 documented an 87% participation, achieving and exceeding the five-year target. As a result this objective has been met.

**6. Increase the number of graduating seniors reporting full-time employment, military service, volunteerism, or ongoing education from 65% to 68%**

An impressive 75% of graduating seniors report employment or ongoing education, far exceeding the target of 68%. Indeed, the five-year objective has been met and exceeded.

**7. Increase the students reporting post-graduate planning and support from 84% to 88%.**

With the continuing evolution of student supports, advising, and career planning integration, there has been a gradual rise in students' perception of "post-graduate planning and support." In Year 4, there was a 5-point increase to 63%.

Clearly the project has reshaped the way VTSU does business, employing the best practices from different campuses and adapting them to a wholly new enterprise, and the news is good: student satisfaction, experiential learning, retention, and post graduate planning and employment are all on the rise which is sure to pay off in increased graduation going forward.

### **Project Management**

Castleton University's Title III project was strategically managed and fully integrated into the institutional structure with the Provost of the University, Tom Mauhs-Pugh, assuming overall leadership responsibility prior to the merger; now with the merger complete President David G. Bergh, Ed.D. has stepped into the role on behalf of Vermont State University. The Title III Project Director, Kelley Beckwith, Vice President for Student Success, reports directly to the President on the project and works directly with Professor Chris Boettcher, Activity Director, and the members of the Vermont State University Leadership Team.

The Project Director's responsibilities include the organization, management, and oversight of the project in its entirety with full authority and autonomy to administer the project,

supervising all project initiatives, expenditures, and personnel. In this capacity she promulgates Title III policies and procedures as well as data collection and reporting, approves all grant expenditures, supervises the evaluation process, and engages the University community's support for the project. Director Beckwith also serves as the institutional liaison with the Program Officer, Yolande Badarou.

A Title III Leadership Team including these principals provides oversight for the project, assesses progress, and promotes implementation, modification and policy decisions as needed, addressing issues impeding progress and opportunities to accelerate and enhance impact. Responsible for all components of the Activity, the Team members address project tasks and refine implementation strategies to meet challenges and ensure progress within the University culture. In accordance with the Policies and Procedures Handbook developed to ensure effective project management, staff hired for Title III positions are selected in accordance with established hiring procedures at the University with position descriptions and annual evaluations on file for all program personnel. Those paid directly by the project or contributing their time in accordance with the project plan also maintain time and effort tallies to document their efforts in accordance with federal regulations.

All program expenditures are initiated by the appropriate individuals, reviewed for compliance with Title III regulations, processed through the Project Director, and approved by the Chief Budget and Finance Officer of Vermont State University to ensure compliance with the approved budget. All documentation relative to expenditures is maintained on file by the Project Director and the VTSU Grants Accounting Office. The budget is reviewed monthly, reconciled as necessary and audited periodically. The budget for the fourth year of the project was \$449,989; with carryover, approximately \$573,633 was available to invest in project implementation. During

the year, approximately \$424,781 was spent, leaving about \$148,851 to be carried into the final year of implementation. During the year ahead, the annual budget is \$449,434; with carryover, approximately \$598,285 will be available to invest in project completion and institutionalization.

With the start of the project and the establishment of the Office of Institutional Research all relevant data has been stored in a data warehouse to ensure appropriate benchmarks through the implementation of the project. A comprehensive evaluation plan outlines the data to be examined to assess increased retention and graduation, as well as participation, satisfaction, and engagement. Additional metrics developed to augment the evaluation plan as outlined will be identified as the implementation progresses and impact intensifies. By the end of the five-year effort, the Institutional Research Office will document substantive change resulting from the full realization of the project activity, both in terms of impact on the key goals and objectives and in terms of the various initiatives undertaken.

Reports addressing program accomplishments are prepared and shared regularly throughout the University community. A Title III website houses the project and artifacts of implementation including minutes of meetings, reports, and other documents such as annual performance and evaluation reports. And a newsletter keeps the entire community apprised of development and opportunities on a regular basis. As such, the project has been fully integrated across the University with widespread involvement and extensive support, a hallmark of Vermont State University. Moving forward, the developments within this project will surely inform enhancements to the student experiences across Vermont State University (VTSU) system.

### **Conclusions, Commendations and Recommendations**

Clearly much happened regarding the implementation of *Pathway to Graduation* at Castleton University despite the pandemic in the first two years of the project and the recent

merger! Each component has moved forward apace with faculty and staff – educators all – aboard. Moreover, the University’s ability to pivot and refocus key initiatives to respond to the current situation has been commendable. Kudos to the project leadership, the implementation team, and all the faculty and staff for their engagement and responsiveness!

Because Title III is a five-year effort, the first year set the agenda for the duration of the effort; it established the infrastructure to strengthen the institution and created a framework for sustained progress during the grant period and beyond. It was clear from the accomplishments in this first year of implementation that the Castleton University project has both effective leadership and enthusiastic faculty and staff participation. The Team identified the ways and means of planning, implementing, and assessing impact both within and across the multiple initiatives included in the Activity, working in a collaborative manner that is paying off as the project moves forward. As a result, the onboarding experience was significantly improved as was the clarity of the First Year Experience, the cohesion of the new Connections General Education Program, and the potential of the Workplace Readiness. Clearly the implementation of strategies employed during the initial year would continue to make a significant difference in the student experience going forward.

However, as with any new project, getting started presented challenges as unanticipated issues arose which required attention as the project continues. At the mid-point of the year, it was suggested that the Title III Team focus on coach training, advising model identification, the FACT plan integration, and the Center for Teaching and Learning, all of which made substantive progress. As the project moved through the second year of implementation, the Title III Team was encouraged to consider four recommendations: first, as work continues, it was important to establish links among the initiatives so that coaching, advising, and FACT planning were inter-

related and moving together; second, as the campus got back to normal, it was critical to ensure an effective rollout of Aviso so that the process of alert, intervention, and feedback became a part of the responsibilities of faculty and support staff as a matter of course; third, the nascent Center for Teaching and Learning was encouraged to develop plans which articulate with University expectations of faculty; and finally, the data collected was expected to help determine where *Pathway* resources should be invested in order to produce desired outcomes.

In the second year of such a project the emphasis is on the effort to expand the redesign of various new elements of each component of the Activity as initiatives continued to emerge. At Castleton University this challenge was handily met and exceeded, as work continued with pilots of registration and orientation, the First-Year Seminar, and advising; instructional development, a digital resource site, model classrooms and classroom upgrades, and Institutional Research; as well as financial and career exploration curricula, workplace learning infrastructure, and the general education curriculum. Most impressive this year was the support and training provided for the success coaches, a key to future success, the implementation of Connections Seminar 1 and the pilot of Connections Seminar 2 fully loaded with the FACT Plan materials. Then, too, the infusion of technology was astounding as the University created both an active learning classroom and an innovations lab with a digital makerspace while also implementing significant classroom upgrades. And, finally, the level and quality of professional development and training provided by the CTL expanded considerably with a strong focus on the use of technology even as the University embarked on a new, innovative partnership with the regional Chamber and Economic Development Council of the region to provide a multi-faceted Internship HUB in downtown Rutland, a prime opportunity for CU interns to engage and collaborate as they complete virtual internships. Quite an impressive array of accomplishments which, building on the work of the

previous year, were just beginning to pay off in improved retention, learning, and workforce engagement. To fuel the expansion of this initial impact it was recommended that the team keep a clear eye on the leitmotif of the success coaches to avoid “mission-creep” while ensuring that others in support and advising roles are clear about their responsibilities; that faculty share insight into what is and is not working to support adjustments in professional development and training; that more information be garnered regarding student retention and attrition; and that the team capitalize on additional opportunities to incorporate career exploration and choice with the majors so that they are more prominent in the student’s overall educational experience.

By the conclusion of the third year of implementation – the mid-point of the project – all initiatives are in motion and proving their mettle even as the project team moves into new roles at the newly merged Vermont State University! That said, the team was incredibly successful in affecting the merger AND continuing the three-step transformation from discovery and design to development. To that end, a new advising model was approved which uses a ‘team-based’ approach with faculty and career readiness staff working through a digital learning commons; a new strategic plan was approved for the development of a Student Success component administered by a newly created vice presidency; and third, a Center for Teaching and Learning was projected with a new director who will coordinate staff across the University. Meanwhile, both online orientation and coaching were really taking off, setting the pace for VTSU to become a ‘digital first’ university even as each component of the project continued to move forward apace! Clearly it was a dizzying year – and yet the team made tremendous advances, bringing their colleagues across the University with them! Bravo!!!!

Now at the end of the fourth year all components of the Activity are designed, piloted and moving toward full implementation across VTSU – a significantly larger institution than

anticipated when the project was developed. At this juncture it is most important that the University assess the potential and impact of the initiatives taken in an effort to inform further refinement during the next year and ultimate institutionalization – a tall order for any university, and especially challenging at VTSU as the full impact of the merger affects the entire community. And still, under the most challenging circumstances, the *Pathway to Graduation* never fails to amaze! This year the First Year Experience was strengthened through the ubiquitous adoption of orientation advising, early alert and intervention strategies developed and refined during the year – all now supported with SSAs as well as NACE career readiness initiatives and significantly increased access to student services virtually as well as locally – a huge lift! Likewise, the effort to expand Teaching and Learning Excellence resulted in the adoption of the Connections Model across the system through three seminars to be infused with DEI-inspired learning outcomes in the year ahead, the development of the Center for Teaching, Learning and Innovation (CTLI) and the expansion of the F2F+ initiative as well as a host of classroom upgrades topped with the development of a recording studio – another significant advance. And finally, the Improvement of Workplace Readiness which initiated a dramatic new change in the use of financial aid funds to expand the student experience and link the results to both experiential learning and career development initiatives on which students thrive proved its mettle. The impact of these combined efforts were already beginning to impact student satisfaction, preparation and retention, an impact that is expected to grow in the year ahead, moving the needle on the graduation rate as well!

To fuel this trajectory as *Pathway to Graduation* moves through the final year of implementation toward institutionalization consideration should be given to the following three recommendations intended to ensure the ultimate refinement of initiatives underway and intensify the impact as the project is institutionalized throughout the system:



- First, developing a tactical plan with attendant budget for “the day after Title III” should be a major priority in this final year. Indeed, spending carry-over money wisely can help to spur further development in areas that have an impact on student success.
- Second, as the Connections continuum evolves along with shifts in advising, it will be critical to clarify titles, roles, and purpose. If support staff, advisors, and faculty are all “advisors,” it seems unlikely that students will be able to distinguish whom to see, when, and about what.
- Finally, with the end of the grant fast approaching, it may be useful to target measures that relate specifically to graduation, a metric that has remained stubbornly unchanged. For example, how can VTSU leverage participation in Complete College America to spearhead initiatives that focus on timely completion? Perhaps the code to increase graduation rates lies at the intersection of Pathway to Graduation and CCA.

Throughout the last four years, despite the pandemic and the merger, Castleton University – now Vermont State University - has successfully implemented *Pathway to Graduation* with each of the three components of the Activity established and developing to ensure a solid foundation for the continuing expansion that will occur in the final year of the effort. Building on this incredibly strong initiative, the Title III Leadership Team is challenged to continue the trajectory so effectively established and move ahead expeditiously, creating whole cloth from the threads that have been spun so far to increase the impact on student retention and satisfaction, graduation, and workplace readiness across the system.

Congratulations to the leaders, participating faculty and staff of Vermont State University Title III Team for their creativity, tenacity, enthusiasm, and collaborative spirit!  
Now let’s see you stick the landing!