Dean's Committee - Online Tutoring

Final Report

Nov 2010 – April 2011

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Committee Charge

To explore the possibility of providing online tutoring to supplement the existing campus services available to students;

To consider the extent to which the availability of online tutoring might contribute to the success of students by providing assistance for: online courses, evening and weekend courses, courses for which tutors are not readily available, courses offered at DCC South, at-risk students who might be reluctant to ask for help face-to-face, and students who are unable to travel to campus for tutoring assistance or have time constraints that make it impossible for them to get tutoring support;

And to develop recommendations regarding the attributes and types of online tutoring services that would be most advantageous in serving DCC students.

Committee Workflow

- A literature review was prepared to introduce committee members to the concepts and fundamentals behind offering online tutoring to students.
- Committee members reviewed the literature available and conducted an unofficial poll of students in their classrooms to assess possible interest in online tutoring.
- An analysis of the benefits of online tutoring supported by sufficient interest among students led the committee to conclude that online tutoring should be available to DCC students as a supplemental service.
- The committee chose to review tutoring services that provided both a software platform and available tutors. The vendors selected were Smarthinking and Net Tutor.
- Both vendors provided a demonstration and Q&A session for the committee, with supplemental questions and answers passed through email.
- The committee made a recommendation of a vendor to pursue based on these conversations.

Committee Recommendation

The Dean's Committee for Online Tutoring recommends **Net Tutor** to provide supplemental online tutoring services for the following reasons:

- A diverse offering of subjects including Math (in English and Spanish), English/Writing, Allied Health and Nursing, Humanities, and others.
- A strong willingness to customize the service to meet DCC needs.
- Central location for tutors, allowing for oversight and a cohesive experience.

Dean's Committee – Online Tutoring

Final Report

The Dean's Committee on Online Tutoring was appointed in November 2010 to explore the possibility of offering supplemental online tutoring to students who may have compelling reasons for not being able to take advantage of existing tutoring solutions. Students with family or work obligations that require them to seek assistance for college studies outside of the typical schedule have few options currently at DCC, where most or all tutoring support is offered on campus in a traditional timeframe. Students attending classes fully online are also not able to easily partake of the current services offered by DCC. The addition of online tutoring would seek to address these needs and allow more DCC students to access academic assistance when needed.

Background

DCC offers on-campus face-to-face tutoring through three major offices – Academic Services, the Writing Center, and the Math Center. Supplemental tutoring and homework help is also available at the department-specific centers such as the AHBS Open Lab, the Business Center, and others.

According to reports submitted by each of the tutoring centers on campus, requests for tutoring services have increased exponentially. Academic Services has reported a 160% growth in student usage of services over a two-year timeframe (Spring 2008 to Spring 2010), with an increase in tutoring visits for the Writing Center (46% growth between SU2008 – SP2009 and SU2009 – SP2010). Over the time period FA2008 to FA2010, Math Center usage increased by 81%.

Tutoring services at DCC are comprehensive and well utilized by the traditional student population. However, they are generally offered on campus from Monday through Friday between the hours of 9:00 am and 7:00 pm. These times may not meet the needs of many non-traditional students who attend classes in the evening, on-line, or have family and work obligations. In order to serve these students, online tutoring was proposed as a possible supplemental service to those already in place on-campus.

A literature review was conducted by the Teaching Learning Center to provide background information for the work of the committee:

- Can online tutoring be as effective as face-to-face tutoring?
- What are some of the challenges faced in developing online academic support services?

The literature review found that, given the correct training, environment, and situational awareness, online tutoring can be just as effective as face-to-face tutoring. The online medium itself is not a panacea for all tutoring needs – it only offers additional flexibility and accessibility for students seeking assistance.

The challenges involved in implementing such a service are two-fold – challenges involving human interaction or the lack thereof, and challenges of training and implementation . The "distancing" effect that online interaction may pose for some students will always have an impact – thus the need for

online tutoring to be a supplement to currently available face-to-face tutoring. To mitigate the training and implementation issues, the selection of a fully-staffed online tutoring service forestalls many of the issues with local selection of tutors and training in the online medium.

Committee Workflow

The Dean's Committee was initially convened to discuss the review and decide whether pursuing the option of online tutoring would be a viable decision for DCC. Committee members were selected from a broad range of academic and student support departments. Each faculty member on the committee was selected due to familiarity with the online medium. Representatives of the largest tutoring areas on campus (Math, English, Academic Services) were also invited to take part.

Considerations included cost, scope of the project, and the level of student need. The committee decided to assess student interest by taking informal polls of students in their classes in preparation for the next meeting, to judge whether students would make use of the service.

When the committee next convened, members presented the results of the informal poll conducted in their classes. The majority of members found that there is enough interest from those students to warrant moving forward with the possibility of online tutoring at DCC. Two types of services were then examined – fully-staffed tutoring services and "software-only" services that required an institution to provide their own tutors. It was quickly apparent that the issues driving DCC to consider online tutoring would also make it prohibitive to select a "software-only" solution, such as lack of tutors in specialty subjects and scheduling for tutors. The choice to consider fully-staffed tutoring services was made, and the two major services selected for consideration were Net Tutor and Smarthinking.

Each company provided a demonstration and Q&A session for the Committee. Committee members were able to speak with representatives of each service and view the service provided by each. Any supplemental questions for the vendors were discussed through follow-up emails.Add something about trial logins.

Committee members were asked to provide pros and cons for each service demonstrated, and at the final meeting of the committee these pros and cons were discussed, culminated in the selection of a possible candidate.

Committee Recommendation

The Dean's Committee for Online Tutoring selected **Net Tutor** to provide supplemental online tutoring services. Throughout the demonstration and subsequent communication with the company, Net Tutor had shown a strong willingness to customize the services provided and work with faculty and staff to create "rules of engagement," which would allow DCC staff to shape the flow of tutor interaction with students. Net Tutor also provides tutoring services from a central location, allowing for supervisor oversight and a cohesive experience. Net Tutor offers a strong diversity of subjects, including Math (in both English and Spanish), English/Writing, Sciences, Nursing and Allied Health, Humanities, and many others.

Net Tutor allows for many options that seek to provide students with a comfortable and useful experience as well. Students are provided with names and pictures of tutors, and have the option of selecting the tutor they wish to work with – allowing for students to continue a dialog with a tutor as they would in a face-to-face session. Students are also provided the opportunity to watch anonymous tutoring sessions in progress as they wait, which may help the student learn the process or may even answer the student's question preemptively.

Net Tutor interface can be customized to display the DCC logo, and configured to provide a single point of sign-on through myDCC for students. DCC staff will have access to a multitude of reports in order to track student usage. These reports include which class a student requested tutoring assistance for, what time a student requested a tutor, how long spent with the tutor, and can also include aggregate results like number of tutoring requests from a certain class or subject, number of tutoring requests by a single student. Graphs and charts of usage can also be generated.

Committee Considerations

While the committee did select Net Tutor as the candidate for implementation, a number of topics were raised during the process, some of which were outside the scope of the committee's charge. Other interests, such as funding for existing tutoring services on campus and distribution of Perkins funding to tutoring areas are topics that may best be addressed by committees specifically dedicated to funding. The last point, of possible overlap between a contracted online tutoring service and existing online services offered at DCC is a concern that may best be addressed after implementation and when comparison data is available.

Conclusion

With the discussion of the matters involved in the delivery of online tutoring, the identification of what important attributes faculty and staff members want in an online tutoring solution, and the selection of Net Tutor as the most viable candidate for implementation at DCC, the charge of the committee has been completed. Thanks must be given to the input of all the members of the committee, without which the process would have been much more onerous.

As the online tutoring initiative moves forward, the ideas and solutions outlined by this committee will continue to shape the program and help tailor the final product to meet the needs of all DCC students.

Online Tutoring Initial Review

As distance education and online courses become both more prevalent and more in-demand by students at all levels, online student support services must evolve to accommodate the growing needs of this demographic. These support services, which include Library services, business and financial services, and online student academic services, are of growing interest to both educators and administrators.

Of particular interest at Dutchess Community College is online tutoring services. DCC boasts comprehensive tutoring centers for Math, Writing, Engineering, and Business, along with a fully functional one-on-one and group peer tutoring service offered through Academic Services, but offers little in the way of these services for distance learners and off-hours learners. Students who cannot travel to campus have limited access to the excellent services offered to students on-campus.

With the recent initiative by the Ritz Library to offer all services but the physical books equally on campus and online, the various tutoring centers on campus are poised to join the library in offering equal access to their services for distance students.

In order to fully explore the possibilities of online tutoring, this review was conducted to use existing literature to answer the following questions:

- Can online tutoring be as effective as face-to-face tutoring?
- What are some of the challenges faced in developing online academic support services?

Effectiveness

Scholarly studies of specific online tutoring programs in terms of overall effectiveness are few and far between. Two studies found originated from The Open University in the UK and were published within months of each other. The first surveyed students in an international development course on their experiences with online tutoring as compared to face to face tutoring. This study concluded that students receiving online tutoring reported poorer experiences than the face-to-face tutoring. (Price et. Al. 2007) Price went on to conclude that experiences with online tutoring for these particular students may be colored by their view of tutoring as a "pastoral activity," as in, a place to find encouragement and social support in general instead of simple course tasks. In order to better serve the community, both tutors and students needed to be better aware of communication without physical cues and the ability to discern facial expression.

While this particular study may cast a pessimistic view over online tutoring in general, a second follow-up study made a different conclusion. This second view of online tutoring cast a wider net and concluded that for students in more generalized business studies courses, the effectiveness of online tutoring vs. the effectiveness of face-to-face tutoring had no significant difference, both in the perception of academic quality and the approaches to studying adopted by the students. (Richardson

2008) This conclusion was also supported by a similar study of online tutoring used by humanities students. (Richardson 2009)

In Richardson's own literature review, he extracted a particular statement on the effectiveness of blended learning that can be applied to distance learning as a whole and to online tutoring:

"The use of a particular information technology did not, in itself, result in improved quality of learning or productivity of learning. Rather, a range of factors … are necessary for a successful project outcome, the most critical being the design of the students' learning experiences." (Alexander and McKenzie 1998)

The dichotomy between the two studies of students from the same university seems to bear out this conclusion – Richardson states that the negative results of the previous study may have been exacerbated by the subject matter, which was a multidisciplinary course covering many different fields of study. His own survey touched on courses with a much smaller focus, perhaps allowing for a more comprehensive amount of knowledge provided by the tutors themselves. Richardson also goes on to confirm Price's conclusion that training in both subject matter and online communication is essential for both students and tutors to accomplish an effective online tutoring environment.

A last and important point Richardson makes in terms on online tutoring effectiveness is the possible difference in perception of workload between face-to-face and online tutoring. Students who attended scheduled face-to-face tutoring sessions reported their level of workload as being higher than those who used online tutoring resources, despite the workloads in the courses involved being functionally identical. Richardson notes that this difference in perception may be explained by the face-to-face sessions being schedules and the online sessions being more flexible.

A final study in tutoring effectiveness measures average success rates of students in developmental writing classes when students use an online tutoring service. This study reported a significant difference in the success rates (A, B, or C grades) between students who chose to use online tutoring and students who did not get tutored at all, or did some face-to-face tutoring. Students who chose online tutoring has a success rate of 75.28%, while students who did not had a success rate of 67.41%. (Calfee 2007) These success rates could possibly be offset by the fact that students who actively choose to be tutored at all tend to be motivated and academically aware, but these still show statistical significance for the effectiveness of the online medium, or at least the particular online tutoring program employed.

Is online tutoring effective? Given the correct training, environment, and awareness, yes. However, designing or choosing an effective online tutoring strategy must take into account that the online medium itself is not a cure-all for academic issues. Online tutoring allows for more flexibility in strategies and accessibility for busy and distance students, but requires a structured concept integrating pedagogical techniques with knowledge of the communication medium. With a solid plan in place, offering online tutoring in concert with face-to-face opportunities could only expand the effectiveness of academic services to student populations it may not reach.

Challenges

As mentioned in the above literature, there are challenges to providing an effective online tutoring program. These challenges must be faced and addressed in the planning process for any new program.

As mentioned by both Richardson and Price, the limitations of the online medium can place great strain on the relationship between a tutor and a student. The inability to respond to paralinguistic cues can make communication and understanding between users of an online tutoring service difficult, especially when many students consider tutoring to be a pastoral activity as well as an academic activity. (Price 2007) Without being able to connect with a tutor in a "human" way, a student may find the experience less effective even when receiving the academic information required.

In order to offset the lack of "human" connection, both tutors and students must be familiar with the constraints of the online medium. Specific training for tutors can help alleviate the limitations of the online environment, and orientations for new tutees can help from the student perspective. Explicit instructions and expectations for students and tutors alike may also help to alleviate any false notions about what online tutoring is meant to do. (Richardson 2008)

Beyond the limitations of the medium, students and tutors also need to have certain technological skills in order to participate in any form of online interaction. Word processing skills, chat room usage, conferencing techniques, and any other special purpose tools required by a program must be understood, or the message of the tutoring can easily get bogged down in technological details before any real learning can occur. (Barker 2002)

Administratively, the continued increase in enrollment at Community Colleges and DCC in particular has placed a strain on all aspects of academic services. The increased need for tutors of all types, the need for more off-hours academic help, and the increasing push towards offering equivalent services for both distance and on-campus students makes a compelling case for offering some form of online tutoring service at DCC.

At schools that have created online tutoring programs, many have found that students naturally gravitate towards these online sessions. At Saint Joseph College in Connecticut, program administrators found that online tutoring quickly outpaced their face-to-face sessions by a 3:2 ratio, with a projected increase to 4:1. (Artz et. al. 2009) By allowing students a choice in whether they attend face-to-face sessions or interact with tutors online, administrators can alleviate some of the manpower stress on the different tutoring divisions. While online tutoring may not reduce cost overall depending on the ultimate plan for online services, it would certainly reduce scheduling pressure, offer equivalent services to students who may not be reached by current tutoring options, reduce the wait time for matching a tutor with a student in need, and reduce or eliminate the need to turn students away from scheduled tutoring sessions.

Providing online tutoring services locally requires the availability of skilled tutors with the appropriate technological skills at hours that may not be "business hours." While this may not be possible on a local level, the availability of tested external services that can provide this type of attention can offset the inability to provide local tutors. However, there are tradeoffs. An external service has no connection to

the campus, and may not have knowledge of campus culture or specific instructor needs that a former student or current instructor may have. (Artz et. al. 2009)

Conclusion

Providing equivalent support services to online and distance students is a hot-button topic in higher education. In order to successfully serve all members of the college community, a definitive plan that shows awareness of the pitfalls, strengths, and weaknesses of the medium must be developed. With a strong vision and plan for the future, an institution can create a program that both fulfills the increasing need for tutoring services and allows students the flexibility to succeed.

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Richardson, J. T. E. "Face to face vs. online tutoring support in humanities courses in distance education."*Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. 8. (2009): 69-85.

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Pros and Cons

of

Online Tutoring Providers

Aggregated Feedback on Demos of 04.07.11

Vendor	PRO	CON	SIMILAR
Smarthinking	• Experienced Tutors - 90% with advanced degrees • Large range of advanced tutoring options (Nursing, etc.) • More modern tutoring interface and website • Third-party research on effectiveness	• Startup cost is more expensive than alternatives • Less local control of tutor-student interactions. No custom rules regarding tutor interaction with DCC students	• Tutoring interface • Tutoring session flow • What about time availabilities? How do they compare with what is already available on-campus? • Are there differences in subject availability?
Net Tutor	• Highly customizable • "Rules of Engagement" allow institutions to prescribe rules of tutor interactions • Ability to designate what text a class is using/submit syllabi • Ability to observe ongoing tutoring sessions while waiting • Cost • Tutors are named – students can work with a specific tutor over a time period if they desire • Centralized tutoring location for a larger locus of control	• Degree requirements for tutor appear to be lower. Tutors do not necessarily have teaching experience/previous tutoring experience. • Site layout and design is archaic • Customizability may be a weakness in terms of setup, oversight of "rules," and class-specific information • Watching other tutoring sessions – privacy issues for students?	

Other Issues Raised

• Could funds for online tutoring be better spent in the current tutoring areas/allowing faculty more ability for tutoring?
• Will Perkins Grant funds be diverted from other funded tutoring areas for this initiative?