



# Blending F2F Tutoring with Tutor.com to Increase Access to Student Success Resources

A case study of Austin Peay State University (APSU) and Tutor.com, with contributions from Crystal Faulkner, Instructional Technology Support Manager, Distance Education at APSU, and Martin Golson, Director, Academic Support Center at APSU | AUGUST 2019

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Austin Peay State University (APSU) occupies a site that has served the cultural and educational needs of the Clarksville-Montgomery County area for more than 200 years. Clarksville is the state's fifth largest city and is home to Tennessee's youngest population. The school is named after former Tennessee Gov. Austin Peay, a Clarksville native.

APSU is a four-year public, doctoral-level university. Martin Golson, Director of the Academic Support Center, says the University serves a significant population of adult learners and individuals who enter with academic deficiencies.

APSU offers traditional face-to-face (F2F) tutoring as well as a F2F and online writing center with 24-hour turnaround time. The university experimented with offering an in-house online tutoring service, but found the platform difficult to use and the requirement to schedule tutoring appointments in advance during business hours was an impediment to student usage of the service.

Although students had access to F2F tutoring resources, the university recognized the limitations of on-site F2F tutoring, including space, hours of coverage, subject coverage, and the number of students being served in a day. According to Crystal Faulkner, Instructional Technology Support Manager in Distance Education, "students in online courses, whether they live at a distance or locally, need access to high quality, equitable services compared to those available F2F. This is something we believe in and it is a necessity."

APSU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) which provides many resources for institutions including best practices for electronically offered degree programs.\* Faulkner says, "One best practice is that appropriate services must be made available to students that cannot be physically on campus and tutoring is specifically listed. With 52% of undergraduates and 78% of graduates enrolled in at least some distance education, we take this very seriously."\*\*

\* This document is online at <http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/commadap.pdf>

\*\* <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=austin+peay+state+university&s=T-N&id=219602#enrolmt>

## STUDENT SURVEY HELPS SHAPE DEFINITION OF NEEDS AND WANTS

Staff from Distance Education and the Academic Support Center began to research options for providing online tutoring. They developed a list of must-haves (needs) and nice-to-haves (wants). In addition, Faulkner developed a student survey to gauge interest, understand what students would use, and evaluate their expectations for ease of use and access. Students were clear on what was important to them—on-demand access to online tutoring without scheduling an appointment in advance and 24/7 access to tutors.

Based on the responses to the survey and the list of needs and wants, Faulkner and Golson developed a detailed questionnaire to guide their interviews with five online tutoring service providers. After careful evaluation they selected Tutor.com based on the service's ability to meet all the required needs. "Of all the providers, Tutor.com stood out for what it could provide to meet the needs and wants of our students and of our university," Golson says. "In addition, Tutor.com had contracts with five other higher education universities in Tennessee, so we were confident they would provide the implementation and ongoing support we would need to run and sustain a successful program."



Faulkner and Golson pointed to other factors that were key drivers in the decision to choose Tutor.com:

### Flexibility

- Wide subject selection and ability to customize the system to complement F2F tutoring. This helps ensure F2F tutoring is being used in the most efficient and cost-effective way.
- Tutor.com subject areas are linked to specific APSU courses. This guides students to the right place for the help they need and makes it easy to correlate data regarding the courses in which students are struggling.

### Tutor Quality and Availability

- Rigorous hiring process and necessary qualifications in order to be a tutor
- Large tutor pool available 24/7/361; all sessions with a tutor are conducted one-to-one
- Excellent program for training and monitoring tutors to ensure high quality service
- Ability to review transcripts at any time—even for past sessions
- Oversight opportunities that allow faculty to maintain control over what students are learning

### Ease of Access

- Very short average wait time for students (generally under 57 seconds).
- Ability for students to connect with a tutor through the Learning Management System (LMS) without a separate login required.
- Ability to connect with a tutor on demand or, if desired, schedule an appointment with a preferred tutor.
- Access by computer or mobile device. This helps all students and is a benefit to those who might be off campus from time to time such as athletes and musicians.

### Implementation and Support

- Ease of contracting, clear implementation timeline, and step-by-step assistance.
- Dedicated contact person for administrative support.

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## FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE TUTORING: BETTER TOGETHER

The Tutor.com online tutoring service is a joint initiative between Distance Education and the Academic Support Center. From the beginning the two university departments knew that blending F2F with online tutoring would be an ongoing process. Faulkner and Golson say there are many easily-recognized benefits of running the two services together. “Using a vendor tool allows us to break from structural limitations of space and time and focus on providing academic support to our students. We can serve a wider variety of students—online students, students that cannot make it to campus during business hours, students who are late-night studiers, students who are reluctant to ask for help in person, etc.,” says Faulkner.

Understanding the strengths of online tutoring versus F2F tutoring allows APSU to maximize their resources—both human and financial. Golson says detailed analysis of class and student data has enabled them to identify subjects for which there is low demand for F2F tutoring and move those subjects to online tutoring instead. This frees up space and time in the tutoring center for more high demand subjects.

For example, he says, the APSU writing center operates very efficiently, generally with 24-hour turnaround, so it doesn’t make sense to utilize the Tutor.com writing center for student writing support. On the other hand, there is low demand for tutoring in economics and geography but students in those classes still want and need access to tutoring services. It makes sense to move those subjects to Tutor.com to add more F2F hours in high-demand courses, such as statistics. “Our analysis showed we were providing less than one hour per week of geography tutoring. It was costing us more to provide that tutoring for our geography students than to provide that service through Tutor.com. By combining F2F and online resources, we achieve a synergistic effect in which using the

two systems together yields better results than either could achieve individually,” he says.

Referring to the synergy between F2F and online tutoring, Faulkner and Golson say the flow between the resources goes both ways. Sometimes students come for F2F help in the tutoring center but at the end of their session they need additional help that can't be provided with their time constraints. In that case the tutor can refer them to Tutor.com for online help to meet their needs and schedule. It also works the other way. If staff or faculty see that a student has sought online help for the same subject multiple times, they can reach out and suggest the student schedule F2F tutoring. In addition, Tutor.com provides early alerts and reports that help faculty and staff identify at-risk students so that they can receive additional help before they fall too far behind.



resources like counseling, health services, the food pantry, and emergency loans.”

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## BEING RESPONSIBLY RESTRICTIVE

Faulkner and Golson recognized that online tutoring could become very popular with the students. In order to provide equal opportunity for all students and ensure the ongoing sustainability of the online tutoring initiative, they determined the need for being what they called “responsibly restrictive” in two areas.

**Managing student hours.** At the start of the semester each student was allotted 6 hours of online tutoring time. Students needing more hours could contact Golson, giving him an opportunity to understand where the student was struggling and determine if additional hours for online tutoring was the best option or if the student should be referred to F2F tutoring or other resources. Faulkner says, “Often a student may be struggling academically because of personal life factors like family obligations, work, money, etc. A decline in grades, inability to focus, and lack of time for class and studying can be symptoms of a larger issue. Online tutoring is a resource that can meet these students’ academic needs any time, any place. Also, we are able to use this intervention to encourage them to access other institutional

**Managing subject offerings.** Tutor.com offers APSU the flexibility to select the subjects for which it wants to provide online tutoring. In addition, Golson says, the system allows for even greater customization. “When a student logs into Tutor.com, the first option is to select the subject area in which he or she needs help. Once that subject selection is made, a dropdown box lists the specific courses so that the student selects the exact course number and we can monitor through reports how many students are looking for help in specific courses. This helps us manage the synergy between F2F and online tutoring as part of our ongoing process.”

Golson and Faulkner point to their commitment to being responsibly restrictive as key to a structured implementation that will result in sustainability year over year. They are continually monitoring usage data to determine what makes sense for F2F versus online tutoring. For APSU this means close coordination between Distance Education and the Academic Support Center, sharing information across departments to help drive student success and retention.

## RESPONSE AND RESULTS

Golson says the program hasn't been in place long enough to gather meaningful data on Tutor.com's impact on student retention and success. But Faulkner says there's no question that the students love the service. Based on the surveys students complete at the end of each session, Tutor.com is helping students who might not otherwise seek help or have had the time to seek assistance on campus. And, Golson says, if students seeking help are earning the same grades as those who didn't seek help, then that in itself is a measure of success.

“When all is said and done, we want Tutor.com online tutoring to become part of **our learning culture.**”

— Crystal Faulkner, Instructional Technology Support Manager, Distance Education at APSU



APSU continues to work with faculty to reinforce the value of Tutor.com and online tutoring. In addition to providing support when and where students need it, Tutor.com offers access to tutors in more subject areas than APSU was able to cover previously. Faulkner and Golson also work to educate faculty about the ways in which the reports from Tutor.com can assist them in refining their curricula and class management by identifying the students that are struggling and in which course topics.

Golson says when he talks to peers about using Tutor.com he is frequently asked about the quality and sustainability of the service. He stresses to his colleagues the emphasis that Tutor.com puts on recruiting, training, managing, supervising, and mentoring their tutors. He points to the ability of instructors to review transcripts at any time to validate the quality. He and Faulkner review the data and the student survey responses to ensure students are satisfied and that students are using the service.

Regarding sustainability, Faulkner and Golson point back to their philosophy of being responsibly restrictive. “Managing our budget is critical,” says Golson. “We pay for what we need to get the service we want to deliver. One great advantage of Tutor.com is that by successfully blending online with F2F we can tailor the service to meet the needs of our students and the budget of our institution.”

As APSU gears up for 2019 fall semester, all new students will receive an early introduction to this resource that is available to them at no charge. “We want students to expect this level of support from APSU and to know that we provide options to help ensure their success,” says Faulkner. “We’re getting deep usage from those who use it, and now we want greater penetration within the student body. When all is said and done, we want Tutor.com online tutoring to become part of our learning culture.” ■

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