Flexible Program Scales to Meet the Needs of a Growing University

A case study of Abilene Christian University and Tutor.com, with contributions from Jessica Manning, Associate Vice President for Enrollment at ACU and and Dr. Sarah Lee, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs at ACU | Sept. 2019

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Founded in 1906, Abilene Christian University (ACU) is a private Christian university in Abilene, Texas. Students can choose from 77 baccalaureate majors that include more than 135 areas of study, 30 master's degree programs and three doctoral programs. ACU Online was established in 2015 to expand service to the non-traditional adult student population, including working professionals. ACU serves more than 5,000 residential and online students, of which 1,200 students are enrolled in an online program. ACU is affiliated with the Churches of Christ and is one of the largest private universities in the Southwest.

NEED TO EXPAND WRITING HELP KEY FACTOR IN CHOOSING TUTOR.COM

According to Dr. Sarah Lee, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs, ACU Online had previously implemented online writing support for its doctoral students in the Doctor of Education (Ed.D) in Organizational Leadership program and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program. "Our doctoral candidates are involved in writing-intensive programs where they need a deep level of support," Lee says. "Our online writing center provides this support, but we wanted to expand writing assistance to additional programs and allow our writing center to go deeper with our students by funneling lower-level writing assistance to Tutor.com. In addition, our online program was expanding to undergraduates and we needed a way to support this new category of student."

Lee points to two primary reasons ACU Online started looking for an online tutoring solution from an outside partner. First, she says, expanding the online program to incorporate undergraduates would bring in students whose needs were different than the graduate students ACU Online was already serving. And, secondly, the university recognized the need to increase writing support to master's and doctoral degree candidates beyond the high level they were offering in research and dissertation preparation.

Jessica Manning, Associate Vice President for Enrollment, says that adults going back to school to pursue a degree require a different type of support than more traditional students. In the area of writing, while doctoral candidates might need help with structuring their research and organizing their dissertations, undergraduates need more basic help in areas such as APA formatting, grammar, sentence structure, etc.

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Commenting further, Manning says ACU Online desired to serve these students during non-standard hours. "Ensuring support for our students on their schedules is critical to their success. We realized we needed to provide a self-service tutoring program for them that would enable them to engage one-to-one whether they needed help at 9:00 p.m. or 2:00 a.m."

In addition, Lee and Manning highlighted other factors driving their decision to investigate online tutoring solutions. These key drivers included:

- Ensuring students receive support in a timely manner and build confidence in the work they are doing
- Freeing up the university's writing center to focus on in-depth service rather than basic level writing challenges more common for undergraduates
- Offering undergraduates access to tutoring in a wide range of subjects, which differed from graduate students' need for more focused help in a limited number of subject areas
- Providing non-traditional students access to tutoring services on their schedules

FLEXIBLE, SCALABLE PROGRAM HELPS ACU DELIVER ONE-TO-ONE ON-DEMAND TUTORING

Prior to selecting Tutor.com, Manning says they looked at one other online tutoring provider but did not feel that vendor could meet their needs. "The other vendor we looked at could provide tutoring only at the introductory college course level. We were very impressed with Tutor.com's transparency around their tutors. They were able to share with us details about the specific qualifications of their tutors; the level of expertise their tutors could bring to our students—including our doctoral students; and the rigor of their recruitment, training, and oversight process. This transparency

and level of detail about the tutors who would be working with our students helped us ensure that our stakeholders—faculty and administration—would feel comfortable with this relationship."

ACU Online began implementing Tutor.com in the spring of 2018, starting with the Ed.D program and then adding several other programs, including the Doctor of Nursing Practice, Master's of Marriage and Family Therapy, Master's in Business Administration, and Master's in Conflict Management. Lee says that as they added programs, they added Tutor.com coverage in subject areas related to those programs. Most recently they have added Tutor.com's Career Center for all of their students.

"We really value the way that Tutor.com has worked with us in a phased implementation as we have brought on new programs and subjects," says Lee. "They have been very accommodating and flexible, which has given us the opportunity to drive the program in accordance with our needs."

Manning also points to the benefit of having Tutor.com integrated with Canvas, their Learning Management System (LMS). "The Tutor.com student experience is amazing," she says. "The fact that there is a single login through Canvas makes it so easy for students to access the help they need from Tutor.com when they need it, without having to log in to a separate system."

In reflecting on the value they see in providing Tutor.com to ACU Online undergraduate and graduate students, Manning and Lee highlight three primary areas, as follows.

Student Experience
Prior to implementing Tutor.com, it was more difficult for students to engage with someone during the hours they needed the help. With

Tutor.com, students can connect to a live person on their schedules, 24/7. They can receive asynchronous writing support and get feedback on all the issues in their papers at one time, without having to submit their papers multiple times. They also receive guidance on proper APA formatting from the Tutor.com tutors.

Account Management and Customer Service
ACU Online has been very impressed with the responsiveness of Tutor.com customer service, both to the program manager as well as to the students. They appreciate that if a student experiences a technical problem accessing the service, customer support responds directly to the student quickly to resolve the problem.

Reports and Analytics
In addition to the Early Alerts that identify students who might be struggling, Manning appreciates Tutor.com's superior reporting functions and analytics that she can use to track frequency of use, amount of time spent in each session, the subjects in which the most help is needed, etc. The ability to access transcripts of every session allows faculty to see exactly where students are struggling and also provides faculty with a level of comfort about the help their students are receiving.

"The online program at ACU started with a limited number of graduate programs before expanding to serve undergraduates," says Lee. "This created a unique challenge for us to ensure these adult learners, who have a different academic profile than our graduate students, would receive the support they needed, in the subjects they needed, when and where the help was needed. Tutor.com has allowed us to meet the needs of these students and even expand our services through the Career Center, while continuing to broaden the service we were offering to our graduate students." ▪

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