

Smarthinking.com: Learner Support Solutions and Online Tutoring Services

with Burck Smith

Smarthinking operates under the theory that by aggregating the demand and supply for tutoring, we can create a better service than any single school can do on its own.

The company grew out of a need to provide a greater level of support for college students. With Smarthinking, schools purchase a certain number of hours of tutoring, or use another pricing plan, and we provide the tutoring for students.

We're kind of like a customer support company for education. Instead of answering complaints about your cable bill, we're answering

questions about algebra, critiquing papers and answering questions about statistics and accounting. We use the same principles that a business applies to customer service.

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The Internet allows things to be done that could never be done before. We have math tutors available 24



BURCK SMITH is the co-founder and CEO of Smarthinking, a live, online academic support and tutoring service for colleges based in Washington, D.C. The five-year-old company evolved out of research Smith did while he was in graduate school at the Kennedy School of

Government at Harvard University and free-lance writing post-graduate school relating to the use of technology in education.

After graduate school Smith, a Baltimore native, worked as an independent consultant in

education and technology, doing marketing, strategic planning, economic analysis and business development. In addition he wrote for magazines such as *Wired*, *University Business*, and *Converge Magazine*.

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hours a day, 7 days a week, and also have an online writing lab where we can turn around papers in 24 hours.

We support statistics, accounting, economics and chemistry, and will be adding additional subjects over the next semester or two. We're exploring whether to offer physics, biology, languages and IT courses next fall.

Our Internet sites use private labels, so students see the service as an

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extension of the school itself.

Students can get help when they need it, not necessarily when the learning

assistance center is open or when the student can get back to campus.

It is a service that can increase retention, save money and help students. Cost savings come in through aggregating services across multiple campuses, as outsourcing learning assistance and tutorial services makes it more efficient.

Using Smarthinking also frees up facilities for alternative uses. In addition, an increase in retention is a dramatic increase in revenue.

Smarthinking can be more than a support service. At Tallahassee Community College, our service has been built into the English course. The school has increased teacher ratios, made some other changes and built us into that course.

We're the human infrastructure that has allowed them to offer better service, improve student performance and save money at the same time.

We're not really a support service for them, we're part of the course.

Filling the Gaps

I became aware of a need for a service like Smarthinking while doing graduate work, when I noticed a gap

in the use of technology in education.

I found there had been a great deal of work done to put content online, build course management systems and work with the administrative side of education, but there were very few applications about connecting students and teachers in ways they hadn't been connected before.

Most online courses mainly replicate the face-to-face environment with some minor changes. We took a stab at creating a new way of structuring the way students and teachers get interactive over the Internet and developed a way that works much better for students.

Smarthinking is funded by venture capital. There are individual investors as well as firms such as Collier Enterprises, based in Naples, Florida, in addition to Steve Walker and Associates and Calvert Ventures.

Bringing Clients on Board

First-time clients receive 10 hours of tutoring for \$2.95 per FTE student during the first year. A school can really get a ton of value.

The first-year rate allows a school to get an idea of how many hours of service it is going to use, how the faculty will respond and how it will be integrated into their courses.

We can quickly integrate a school into our system. After a school purchases the service, we can have it in place within two weeks.

After the first year, a school moves to our student hourly model that costs between \$27 and \$32 per hour. The school buys a certain number of hours and we keep a running total of the service time used by students.

We deliver all service online. A student has an account, and may log in directly or through the school's portal.

Once a student gets to us there are a variety of options. A student can work with a tutor, schedule tutoring, or submit a question that we will respond to within 24 hours. A student can also search the schedule to see when a certain tutor is available.

In addition, students can submit an essay to the first available tutor or to one of our various sub-specialists, who work in areas such as ESL or business and technology.

Qualified Tutors

Our tutors are screened based on their competency, to make sure they do what they say they can do. Once they pass that screening, we train them using distance learning. The process includes:

- What is good tutoring?
- What is good tutoring in the subject in which they're tutoring?
- How do they use the technology?
- How would they respond to students in given situations?

We save everything for the student, school and our company, and use the saved archives for quality control and professional development.

This lends itself to a significant quality control process, and I'd wager we have some of the best tutor quality around. Eighty percent of our tutors have master's or doctorate degrees, and we have a record of everything they do.

What people don't see when students are using the service are the tools we use to manage our virtual workforce. We know when the tutors have logged in and when they've logged out, how many interactions they've had and how many essays they've critiqued.

Accountability comes through the tracking of tutors and students.

Schools can see how the service was used, for how long and in which subjects. They can see the interactions students had with tutors, as well as the conversations with the tutors.

Our tutors come from all over the map and typically work two to four hours a day. We have college professors, adjunct professors, high school teachers, grad students, stay-at-home moms and a variety of others. People tend to like it because they get to set their own schedule, they get to teach and they get to work from home.

It's a pretty easy way for the tutors to make a little bit of extra money and do what they like to do at the same time.

Erasing Cultural Bias

Another advantage of using the Internet is that it strips out cultural biases. What becomes relevant is the help the student needs and how well the tutor is giving it.

When you're working over the Internet you have no idea what race the person is, what gender the person is, what the person looks like or how old that person is. That works for both the tutor and the student.

Whether it's an adult student, a fresh-out-of-high-school student, a developmental student or an advanced student, it doesn't really make that much of a difference who needs help.

Evaluating Writing

Many people think writing is very subjective and wonder how we can evaluate it. We keep things consistent

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because we have a single training procedure, and can provide a more consistent service than a school does on its own.

The principles of good writing are really the same no matter where you go. At the level we're critiquing, we tend to get people whose papers are 10 pages or less, so if you send us your Ph.D. thesis then you're probably not going to get a real good review.

However, if you send us your typical paper you will get a pretty good review.

It's thrilling to improve schools and see our service make a difference in students' lives.

People overestimate the amount of subjectivity involved in evaluating good

writing, particularly at the lower levels of writing. Our tutors' writing is very disciplined.

Good Teachers Use Tutors

We find that the good teachers are the ones who use us the most heavily, because they are the ones making sure students have access to the resources available to them. Our tutors rarely encounter students who need help because they have a bad teacher.

There's no teacher good enough to solve all the problems that students have, especially when many of the students are in their first two years of college. The best teachers realize Smarthinking is not just a support system for students but a support system for teachers.

In a sense, it can be like a triage service for students. If a student wants additional help after working with us, he or she can go to the faculty member to take care of the most important issues.

Supporting the Basics, and More

The basic skills in writing and math that many community college students are struggling with are skills that many students at career colleges are also struggling with.

Colleges that offer courses in medical assisting and massage therapy often offer associate's and bachelor's degrees, and core courses in math and writing are part of that curriculum.

We can help students learn the basics and give them the support they need. That's why schools bring us on, to increase retention and student success.

Schools also find that we can save them money and increase accountability because there is data about how students are using the service.

When we consider staffing a particular subject, we look not only at how many students we serve but how much those students use it. We have seen little schools use the service extensively, and big schools that don't use the service much at all. It depends on how the service is going to be used at a school.

In general, we use three criteria when we consider supporting a new course:

- Is there a high volume of students? Are there enough students to warrant staffing that course full- or part-time?
 - Is the curriculum standard enough across schools so that you can aggregate those students? For example, we wouldn't normally support a course in romance poets because it isn't necessarily standard across schools.
 - Is it a subject that really needs tutoring? We tried psychology, because many students take it and the core curriculum is more or less the same. However, we found students didn't really use tutors in psychology.
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Most of our clients subscribe to our general service, but we also do custom programs.

We are doing a program with Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, a publisher of medical assisting and other textbooks. We're building a private label to offer an online tutoring service in medical assisting for them that will be part of a textbook.

We also work with Texas Instruments to help support their graphic calculator, and have done things at the high school level for kids who failed high school exams.

Changing the Delivery of Education

We are the only provider of this service in higher education. There is a company that focuses on libraries, but it does not have extensive hours, a writing lab, or the quality control and communication options we have with our tutors.

Certainly within our business there's a motivation to make money and build a successful business, but what we're doing also has the ability to change the way education is delivered.

It's thrilling to improve schools and see our service make a difference in students' lives.

In a sense we are almost a distance learning provider. We know that when schools have the political motivation and the will to redesign their course delivery, we can save them money and improve service.

Those frequently are big issues for schools to confront, but as the whole higher education segment becomes more competitive and value driven that's going to have to happen. It takes time, but it's catching on as schools recognize the value proposition.

Our client retention rates are extremely high. Students love the service, and it also makes the school look good.

I have enjoyed working with people in higher education. This is a great industry, and I have found career and proprietary schools to be the most innovative and active segment of higher education.

They are pushing the rest of higher education to think in completely new ways, and that's only going to increase.

The whole industry is going to be forced to restructure itself and it's great to be part of that.

**Career
Education**
REVIEW

Written by Terri Dougherty.