

# Web-based tutoring gives students study aid 24/7

**By Cara Branigan, Associate Editor, eSchool News  
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A commercial, web-based tutoring service is helping high schools and colleges make live instructors available 24-hours a day, seven days a week to tutor students in mathematics. At the moment, this round-the-clock tutoring service is available only for math help, but the company says on-demand assistance is available in additional subjects for nine hours each day.

Gallaudet University, a school for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington, D.C., will begin offering the 24-hour, web-based tutoring service this fall. University representatives say tutoring at Gallaudet requires a diverse approach, because some of the school's students are born and reared with sign language, while others are new to their hearing loss and are better at reading than at using sign language.

Online study help also serves the needs of students who wish to keep their need for assistance confidential. "We suspect there are some students who don't come into our center because they are embarrassed," said Terry Coye, Gallaudet's director of tutorial and instructional programs.

The service, provided by a Washington, D.C.-based firm called SMARTHINKING Inc., will help the Gallaudet reach students who are not well served by the traditional sign-language-based tutoring provided by the school's graduate students.

SMARTHINKING's tutoring sessions are like web chats, the company explained. Tutors and students communicate by typing on a virtual white board displayed on their computer screens. Each "white board" supports equations, annotations, and color-coded dialogue.

Math tutoring is available live, one-on-one, at all times, according to the company. Tutoring in other subjects--including chemistry, economics, physics, biology, accounting, and statistics--is available from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. each day, the company said.

When students log in, they can submit questions to live, real-time tutors, or they can schedule a tutoring session for another time.

If live tutors are busy, a student's question is placed in a queue. While awaiting personal attention, the student sees the dialogue and equations from another tutoring session on his or her screen. It's like being placed on hold, but instead of music, the student sees someone else's tutoring session.

All online interactions between student and tutor are saved, the company said, allowing students or schools to review past tutoring sessions on-demand. Students who can hear are not tied to their computer as they wait for tutors to become available, because an alarm rings when their session comes up. Company representatives conceded this feature will be of limited value for most of Gallaudet's students.

The online tutoring will not replace Gallaudet's face-to-face service, Coye said, because the service is not well-suited to all of the university's students' learning styles. "A great [many] of our students are having trouble communicating through print," Coye said.

Coye nonetheless predicted that math tutoring should be especially popular, because of the unique challenge math instruction poses for Gallaudet. "It's not easy to teach math to deaf students," he said. "Many students come with weaknesses, because they simply haven't taken many courses."

In mainstream classes, deaf students who take math typically learn through an interpreter. "It's very complicated. Deaf students have to look at the interpreter and the blackboard and understand what the teacher is talking about all at the same time," Coye said.

But, "the way the [virtual] white-board tutoring is done, is something that might be an excellent way for some students to learn math." Deaf students, who communicate with their hands, are very visual and will be responsive, he said.

SMARTHINKING's service also includes a writing-critique component, in which students upload their essays and receive feedback within 24 hours on the strengths and weaknesses of their writing.

For first-time clients, the company charges a fixed price for the year based on the number of students. After that, SMARTHINKING charges by the hours used.

Gallaudet, which has approximately 2,000 students, is paying \$2.95 per full-time student. This deal gives each student at Gallaudet 10 hours of tutoring to use throughout the entire year. According to the company, students use an average of 1.5 hours each.

Gallaudet's students access the tutoring service, which can be customized with a school's logo and color scheme, through the school's online curriculum portal.

According to SMARTHINKING, 300 colleges and 50 high schools from coast to coast use its service. In the past year, the company said, it has held some 155,000 tutoring sessions for approximately 70,000 students.

The live tutoring requires students to learn how to use a virtual white board and spend about 25 minutes actively engaged with a tutor.

"Just from the volume of students and repeat students, we know the service gets used a lot," said Burck Smith, CEO of SMARTHINKING Inc. "There's enough students to generate the need for math tutors 24 hours a day."

SMARTHINKING said it will expand the availability of tutoring time for other subjects by an hour starting this fall.

**Links:**

Gallaudet University  
<http://www.gallaudet.edu/>

SMARTHINKING Inc.  
<http://www.smarthinking.com/>

eSchool News Article  
<http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStoryts.cfm?ArticleID=5111>