

Chestnut Hill College deploys Smarthinking online tutoring to boost students' academic skills

Key Findings

- Performance data and instructor observations indicate that Smarthinking online tutoring was a factor in some students passing their courses.
- Students reported using Smarthinking online tutoring in subsequent courses.
- Returning adult students specifically noted the benefit of Smarthinking online tutors' help in strengthening rusty math and writing skills.

Study Specifics

School name

Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia, PA

Course name

Developmental Math
Survey of Math
Social Science Research Methods
Communications and Thought I and II

Course format

Face to face

Course materials

Various texts; Smarthinking online tutoring

Timeframe

Spring 2017–Spring 2018

Administrators and faculty

Elaine Green, Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Chestnut Hill College
Sa'eed Abdul-Khabeer, Instructor
Michael Bradley, Instructor
Brian Haughton, Instructor
Melissa Heinlein, Instructor
K. Hudson Saffell, Instructor

Results reported by

Lauren Gill, Senior Results Manager, Readiness, Progression, & Employability

Setting

Located in northwestern Philadelphia, Chestnut Hill College was founded in 1924 as a Catholic, four-year, liberal arts college for women. Today, Chestnut Hill College provides a rigorous liberal arts education to both men and women and has expanded to offer master's degree programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology, and in Education and Administration of Human Services as well as a doctorate in clinical psychology. The mission of the college is to serve the surrounding community as well as its global neighbors with distinction and with love.

Challenges and Goals

Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies Elaine Green states, “Our goal with the Smarthinking™ study was to gather meaningful quantitative and qualitative data about Smarthinking’s impact. We are particularly interested in learning which students benefit and under what circumstances so that we can effectively promote Smarthinking to generate the strongest possible outcomes for the greatest number of students.”

Implementation

Elaine Green says, “I recruited faculty in different departments and asked them to participate in our investigation by requiring students to engage with a Smarthinking tutor one or more times during the term and reporting on the results. Instructors then built the Smarthinking requirement into their syllabi and talked with students about the importance and the benefit of accessing the tutors for additional instruction, for problem solving assistance, or for writing review and feedback. From this pool of participants, we hoped to glean both quantitative and qualitative evidence about the impact of Smarthinking and on the best ways to promote and deploy the service going forward.”

Results and Data

Enrollments in some courses are small, especially during the summer sessions. Additionally, the Research Methods and Senior Seminar courses proved less useful for the purposes of the study because students were completing final projects in capstone courses and were therefore less motivated to participate.

To counter these limitations, Dean Elaine Green asked instructors to participate for multiple terms and across multiple courses or sections.

Instructors recorded the following observations:

“For students engaged in our accelerated education program, Smarthinking plays a key role. Its role is key because of the highly detailed feedback provided by Smarthinking coaches. It is often the case, too, that students may think they understand the wickets of an assignment during class, but what about when they go home? Format and style have a lot of rules to follow, and we all forget rules from time to time. When it comes down to writing assignments, the more eyes a writer can get on her writing, the more a writer can shape his essay to fit the assignment. I feel as if students can breathe a little easier knowing those Smarthinking eyes are always open.”

--Hudson Saffell, English instructor

“Usage data shows that some of my math students are accessing Smarthinking tutors in their subsequent courses for assistance with writing and other skills. This confirms what students told me about their positive experiences with Smarthinking and their intention to continue using the resource.”

--Sa’eed Abdul-Khabeer, math instructor

“I am pleased to make Smarthinking a part of my course. Many students entering my Communications and Thought course haven’t done any academic writing for a while and are very rusty. Students sometimes aren’t

even aware of which skills they are missing or what questions to ask. A caring and knowledgeable tutor, one who is not in charge of determining a student's grade, can be a powerful ally and source of instruction."

--Michael Bradley, English instructor

"In one section of eight students, half of the class engaged Smarthinking tutors. One student used the tutors numerous times and performed well in the class; she had struggled in a previous class. Two other students who engaged Smarthinking tutors also performed well and passed. It appears that students who truly needed the extra help engaged the Smarthinking tutors and performed well, leading to strong overall class performance."

--Sa'eed Abdul-Khabeer, math instructor

"Students in my Senior Seminar engaged Smarthinking tutors and reported that the tutors were helpful with both the research process and with writing. Both were more complex than students expected, so the help from tutors was appreciated. While I am disappointed that some students didn't follow through and engage Smarthinking tutors, the students who did so turned in the strongest papers and earned A's. I'll definitely use this evidence of Smarthinking's impact to encourage ALL students to take advantage of the Smarthinking tutors in subsequent classes."

--Melissa Heinlein, social science instructor

The Student Experience

Among students responding to an end-of-term survey ($n=9$) about their experiences with Smarthinking:

- 50% indicated that they appreciated having one-on-one assistance with their assignments
- 50% indicated that they liked having a second source of instruction to turn to for help
- 75% indicated that they had more confidence in their academic skills after working with Smarthinking tutors
- 100% indicated that they would access Smarthinking tutors for other courses

"I believe it would have been helpful to spend more time on this assignment in class. Since we missed that option [due to a snow day], I used the internet to search potential topics. After I found something interesting, I emailed the professor to confirm my topic was acceptable. He helped me think about what exactly I wanted to cover on the topic. I also utilized the Smarthinking service he suggested. Within 24 hours, they reviewed my paper and provided some great feedback."

--Student

Conclusion

Dean Elaine Green summarizes, "Despite the limitations of our study, we have learned valuable information. Both instructors and students noted the ease of using Smarthinking online tutoring. Instructors recorded improved student performance after the tutoring intervention. Students appreciated having a second, easily accessed source of instructional assistance. Students, noting the positive impact of Smarthinking, indicated that they would use Smarthinking again and would encourage their peers to take advantage of the resource. We learned that introducing Smarthinking to students during their first-year coursework enables students to form a healthy habit of accessing support services. We'll continue to encourage faculty to require or strongly recommend Smarthinking to their students and to share the evidence we've gathered to motivate more students to participate. We intend to continue gathering evidence so that we may refine our marketing outreach with students and faculty."