Gadsden State Community College assesses the impact of Smarthinking online tutoring on student success and completion

School Name
Gadsden State Community College, Gadsden, AL

Timeframe
2012-2016

Results reported by
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Administrators and faculty
Dr. Cheryl Cephus-Vickers, Association Dean of Student Services, Director of Counseling Services and Advisement
Kathy Gillison-Parker, Outreach Advisor
Pamela Johnson, Associate Dean of Institutional Advancement & Community Services, Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning & Research

Key Findings

- Average GPA of students who accessed Smarthinking online tutoring is 2.8242 compared to an average 2.2679 GPA for all students enrolled Fall 2016.
- Graduation rate among students who accessed Smarthinking online tutoring is 47.5 percent compared to Gadsden State's Right to Know graduation rate of 20 percent.

Setting

Gadsden State Community College is a public, open-enrollment, comprehensive community college dedicated to meeting the changing needs of citizens in its service area. It offers the first two years of a four-year degree, a number of technical and certificate programs, and non-credit programs that include continuing education, skills training, and adult education.

Challenges and Goals

Gadsden State Community College leaders added Smarthinking online tutoring services to their portfolio of student services to ensure that students had access to expert, one-on-one academic tutoring around the clock and on-campus or off. But the Gadsden leaders recognize that access is not sufficient, especially for first-year students who are navigating a higher education environment much different from high school. Therefore, Gadsden leaders asked Pearson to collaborate on an impact study that could demonstrate evidence of Smarthinking's value. Such evidence could be integrated into messaging to students and faculty that encourage behaviors—like seeking academic tutoring—that are clearly linked to student success.

Dr. Cheryl Cephus-Vickers explains, "We recognize that students most in need of academic tutoring often find it difficult to ask for help–out of shyness or because of a perceived stigma or simply because it's new and unfamiliar. We also know that students who form a habit early in their college career of accessing resources/services perform better and feel a greater sense of belonging and ownership of their learning. These outcomes lead directly to higher rates of persistence and completion. Our challenge as educators is to help all Gadsden State students adopt the behaviors and habits that lead to success."

Outreach Advisor Kathy Gillison-Parker says, "Our administrators understand the value of on-demand academic tutoring based on the experiences of our students. But to make the best case for students to step out of their comfort zone and seek tutoring help, we want to analyze the data for evidence of improved outcomes. When we present that evidence to students, we not only make a compelling case for the value of tutoring but we equip students for evidence-based decision-making, an important career and life skill."

Implementation

Gadsden State's administrative leadership has undertaken a series of initiatives to communicate the availability and value of Smarthinking online tutoring to both faculty and students. Periodic "Lunch and Learn" events enable faculty to experience the ease of accessing a tutor and to share strategies of how best to leverage Smarthinking for maximum student benefit. Faculty are encouraged to require students to access Smarthinking so that they experience the benefits first-hand and are thus more likely to engage a Smarthinking tutor to review an essay draft or identify strategies for approaching a difficult math problem.

In Fall 2015, Gadsden State assessed the impact of Smarthinking online tutoring among students in an online, accelerated, co-requisite Writing Lab course. Writing Lab instructor Heather Greene stated that requiring students to engage with academic tutoring resources was a productive exercise. Greene reported that, after receiving detailed feedback from Smarthinking tutors, students showed improvement on their subsequent essay drafts. The full case study can be found here.

Building on the findings of the Writing Lab course impact study, Gadsden leaders engaged Pearson to investigate the impact of Smarthinking institution-wide:

- GPA: Are there differences in achievement/performance between Smarthinking users and the overall student population as measured by Grade Point Average?
- Completion/graduation: What percentage of Smarthinking-tutored students achieved their goal (degree/certificate/credential) compared to Gadsden State's overall student population?

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—Kathy Gillison-Parker

Results and Data

Pamela Johnson, Gadsden State's Director of Institutional Effectiveness, conducted the analysis. Her team matched the Smarthinking usage reporting from January 2012 through June 1, 2016 to individual student records in Gadsden State's student information system.

Analysis identified 608 unique Gadsden State students who accessed Smarthinking online academic tutoring one or more times between January 2012 and June 1, 2016.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Smarthinking users	All students
2.82	2.27

Table 1. Average GPA among students who used Smarthinking (*n*=608) compared to average GPA for all students enrolled Fall 2016 (*n*=5018)

Graduation rate

Smarthinking users	All students
47.5 percent	20 percent

Table 2. Graduation rate among students who used Smarthinking (*n*=585) compared to overall right-to-know graduation rate (*n*=993)

A net total of 585 Gadsden students who used Smarthinking one or more times had detail reports showing completion outcomes.

Of those 585 students:
- 47.5 percent graduation rate
- 278 total graduation awards
- 171 awards at their original college: 146 of those at GSCC
- 107 awards were at a subsequent college where they transferred, including 38 who transferred from GSCC to another college to graduate.
- 22 earned Bachelor's degrees

For comparison:

Gadsden's Right to Know Graduation Rate: 20%*

*Federal Student Right-To-Know legislation requires disclosure of program completion and transfer out rates for the Fall class of full-time, first-time freshman who are degree or certificate-seeking students. Students completing their programs within 150% of the normal completion time are counted as completers. Students who transfer to other colleges within 150% of the completion time but do not graduate from Gadsden State are counted as transfers.

Dr. Cephus-Vickers commented, "These results confirm the value of Smarthinking as an impactful component of our student services. So many learning moments happen outside the classroom. With Smarthinking, our students have easy access to expert, one-on-one academic tutoring whenever and wherever they are learning. And we have compelling evidence to share with students that quantifies the benefits of Smarthinking and links those benefits to students' stated goals—successful college completion and a path to career."

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> —Dr. Cheryl Cephus-Vickers

Conclusion

Gadsden leaders are pleased to have evidence of Smarthinking's impact on student success, persistence, and completion institution-wide. They plan to communicate the results of higher GPA and increased completion rates to students and faculty as part of their ongoing campaigns to encourage students to access services, like Smarthinking, that are linked to improved outcomes and can help students realize their academic and career aspirations.