

# Morgan State University evaluates the impact of Smarthinking online tutoring on academic performance

## Key Findings

- Instructors teaching writing-intensive courses indicated that their students' writing skills, confidence, and work quality improved as a result of the interaction with Smarthinking tutors.
- Students expressed appreciation for the fast turnaround and expert grammar and writing assistance provided by Smarthinking tutors.

## Study Specifics

**School name**

Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD

**Course names**

Family Housing and Urban Development  
Early Child Development  
Methods of Observation and Teaching Family and Consumer Sciences  
Intro to Ethics and Value

**Course format**

Face to face

**Course materials**

Various texts with access to Smarthinking via Blackboard

**Timeframe**

Spring, Summer, and Fall 2017

**Administrators and faculty**

Karen Rubinstein, Director of Academic Technology Services  
Joanna Crosby, Associate Professor, Philosophy Concentration Advisor  
Jacqueline Holland, Assistant Professor, Family and Consumer Sciences

**Results reported by**

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

## Setting

Morgan State University (MSU) serves the community, region, state, nation, and world as an intellectual and creative resource by supporting, empowering and preparing high-quality, diverse graduates to lead the world. Morgan State University is officially designated Maryland's preeminent public urban research university. The designation is the result of legislation ([SB 1085](#)) sponsored by State Senator Joan Carter Conway in the 2017 Maryland General Assembly and signed into law by Governor Larry Hogan in Annapolis. The University offers innovative, inclusive, and distinctive educational experiences to a broad cross section of the population in a comprehensive range of disciplines at the baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and professional degree levels. Through collaborative pursuits, scholarly research, creative endeavors, and dedicated public service, the University gives significant priority to addressing societal problems, particularly those prevalent in urban communities.

## Challenges and Goals

Director of Academic Technology Services, Karen Rubinstein says, “I first learned about Smarthinking™ at the Maryland Distance Learning Association conference. Along with our (then) Assistant VP for Academic Affairs, we thought Smarthinking would add value as a complement to our on-campus academic support services. My staff and I organized many workshops to inform our faculty of Smarthinking’s availability and ease of use. As part of that effort, I welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with Pearson on an effort to gather evidence of Smarthinking’s impact. The goal of the study is to gather meaningful quantitative and qualitative data about the impact of Smarthinking in order to promote increased usage of tutoring among Morgan State students.”

## Implementation

The study evaluates comparative outcomes for students required to use Smarthinking versus students for whom Smarthinking use is only suggested, not required. The cohorts consisted of students taking a variety of courses in the humanities in spring term, in summer term, and in January term. Because class sizes are small, instructors were asked to require Smarthinking in multiple courses and/or sections in order to generate more robust participation numbers. The goal of the investigation was to gather both quantitative and qualitative evidence of Smarthinking’s impact. Quantitative evidence would consist of student grades. Qualitative evidence would include instructors’ evaluations of students’ quality of writing and critical thinking and of their growth in those skills and students’ self-evaluations of the same.

Rubinstein states, “Many of our instructors in writing-intensive courses require students to submit drafts. We approached instructors to ask them to require students to engage Smarthinking tutors to review those drafts so that we could measure the impact of the additional writing-specific tutoring assistance on students’ performance. Two instructors agreed to require or strongly recommend that students engage Smarthinking tutors one or more times during the term. A total of five courses across three terms formed our study.”

Professor Jacqueline Holland teaches several courses in Morgan State’s School of Education and Urban Studies. Professor Holland notes, “I always require students to access writing help either through Smarthinking or via the Writing Center or dorm-based drop-in tutors so there is no control group per se. However, I happily signed on to evaluate Smarthinking’s impact because writing is such an essential skill and I want to give my students every motivation to seek writing-specific guidance from trained Smarthinking tutors.”

Philosophy Professor Joanna Crosby concurs, “Morgan State draws primarily from Baltimore City Schools, and our students arrive with a mix of writing skill strengths and weaknesses. Copyediting, content development, and structural analysis are areas where my students can really benefit from a writing-specific tutoring intervention. I offer as much writing feedback as possible within the context of my course. But the need is great. I was happy to build in a Smarthinking requirement for my students and to evaluate the results.”

Professor Crosby continues, “In my Intro to Ethics and Value course, students develop an ethical code over the course of the term. I review students’ first two drafts and provide extensive feedback. Between the second and third drafts, I require that students submit their work to a Smarthinking tutor

for review. The final grade on the assignment reflects how students respond to the feedback from the Smarthinking tutor and from me. In other courses, I assign a take-home final and require that students submit a draft to Smarthinking before they turn in their final, revised work to me for a grade.”

## Results and Data

Professor Holland and Professor Crosby both indicated that their students’ writing skills, confidence, and work quality improved as a result of the interaction with Smarthinking tutors.

Professor Holland states, “Good writers improve significantly with the Smarthinking intervention. Poor writers improve as well but need more than just one or two tutoring sessions to bring their writing up to par. I’d really like those students to visit a face-to-face tutor after the Smarthinking intervention. But students don’t always feel they have the time or motivation to do that second round of draft review with a tutor. This is something I may be able to address with timing of assignments in my syllabus going forward.”

Professor Crosby notes, “Students are positive about Smarthinking. Some were even upset that they didn’t know about Smarthinking before taking my course!”

## The Student Experience

Among students ( $n=64$ ) responding to an end-of-term survey about their experiences with Smarthinking:

- 57% indicated that they appreciated having one-on-one assistance with their writing assignments
- 69% indicated that they liked having a second source of instruction to turn to for help
- 22% indicated that asking an online tutor for help is easier than asking for help face-to-face
- 62% indicated that they liked the opportunity to incorporate the tutor’s feedback before turning the assignment in to be graded
- 83% indicated that they had more confidence in their academic skills after working with Smarthinking tutors
- 89% indicated that they would access Smarthinking tutors for other courses

### Selected comments from students:

“Smarthinking online tutoring was very helpful to me this semester during my injury. My teacher required this service before I submitted my class work to her. I was not able to leave my home for face-to-face tutoring. Smarthinking was there for me. Thank you all very much for this service.”

“Smarthinking was actually more helpful than I had imagined. There is no reason why I shouldn’t get a good grade on my final thanks to Smarthinking. It’s nice having an extra pair of eyes on my work but also not the task of being face-to-face.”

“I wish I had known about Smarthinking before taking this course.”

“Smarthinking is very helpful because I live off campus.”

“The tutors were excellent; I learned great writing skills because of their feedback.”

“Smarthinking was a phenomenal help for me in my grammar and writing overall.”

## Conclusion

Director of Academic Technologies Karen Rubinstein sums up, “Results from participants are positive with both instructors and students reporting benefits from engaging the Smarthinking tutors. We intend to communicate the evidence of Smarthinking’s positive impact during orientations for new and transfer students, in our summer bridge program, in faculty workshops, on our Blackboard student portal—anywhere and everywhere that we can get the message out about this valuable student service. Additionally, we intend to continue our collaboration with Pearson to gather more evidence of Smarthinking’s impact to help inform best practices for deploying Smarthinking to benefit as many students as possible.”