

*A credentialed, online tutoring service provides expert support to community college students*

Mesa Community College

## Overview

Mesa Community College (MCC), the largest of ten colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District, prepares its students to succeed in the workforce or to transfer to a four-year college or university. Forty percent of MCC's students, many of whom are nontraditional students, take an online or hybrid course. To support these students, the college supplements its traditional tutoring services with an online tutoring service. Since 24/7 online tutoring was introduced in 2011, approximately two thousand students have benefited from the service.

# Challenge

In 2010, MCC created the eLearning governance group to coordinate online courses across the college. Previously, individual departments offered and supported their own online classes. The governance group was charged with developing guidelines and support services for all of MCC’s online courses. It was also responsible for preparing the college’s subsequently successful application to the Higher Learning Commission for an accreditation to offer 100 percent of its degrees online.

Spurred by the application process, MCC began looking for an online tutoring service to support its online and hybrid students, as well as any face-to-face students who preferred virtual help. Staff members from the in-person tutoring program had provided distance tutoring via phone or online in the past, but they didn’t have the resources to offer 24/7 support or to expand their efforts to meet the projected demand.

# Solution

MCC chose Smarthinking, Pearson’s online tutoring service, as its vendor. Smarthinking provides 24/7 services for a range of subjects and its tutors are credentialed, with 90 percent holding advanced degrees. “A lot of them have a master’s degree and are based in the US,” explained Melissa Carpenter, director, Learning Enhancement Center.

The college announced the launch of the new online tutoring service in 2011 via fliers sent to instructors. Since its introduction, the service has been highlighted in faculty e-newsletters and on the employee intranet site.

Over the years, the number of unique users per year has ranged from 414 to 515. Peak usage is between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m., and the most highly trafficked day is Wednesday. During the 2014–2015 academic year, students requested algebra, Essay Center, chemistry, and single variable calculus tutors the most.

## PROFILE

### City/State

Mesa, Arizona

### Institution Type

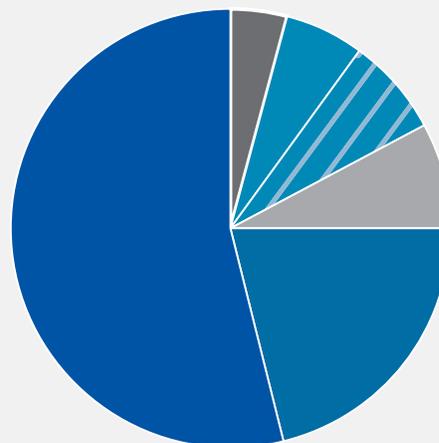
Community college

### Enrollment

23,678 students

### Ethnicity

- 54% Caucasian
- 21% Hispanic
- 7% African American
- 6% Asian
- 4% Native American
- 8% Other



# Results

Although online tutoring sessions make up only 4 percent of the tutoring sessions at MCC, student satisfaction with the service is high. Ben Catlin, coordinator, Learning Enhancement Center, noted, “I know students like Smarthinking because they’re using it multiple times per month. On average, students who use Smarthinking use it 2.6 times per month.”

Exit surveys confirm student satisfaction. From 2012–2015, 86 percent of students gave Smarthinking subject tutors a favorable rating (3, 4, or 5 on a five-point scale), and 93 percent of students gave a favorable rating to essay tutors (see Figure 1). In addition, 90 percent of students would recommend Smarthinking subject tutors to a friend, and 93 percent would recommend essay tutors to a friend.

One algebra student said, “[My tutor was] very helpful with explaining and not giving me the answers, but just letting me figure it out on my own by giving me hints.” An Essay Center user also gave a positive review of her tutor: “The feedback that my tutor gave me really helped me make my ideas clearer and fixed my sentence structure.”

Students enjoy the flexibility and convenience of the online tutoring service. A physics student raved, “SO happy this is 24 hours! I am so appreciative of this service!” Laura Ballard, director, eLearning, explained, “It’s a great customer service piece that rounds out our tutoring services. We’re going to fit it around your schedule whether you are an online or an in-person student.”

“I was near tears. Now I can finish my assignment with confidence :) Tutor was wonderful!”  
—Algebra student

FIGURE 1

## Percent of Students Giving Smarthinking a Favorable Rating of 3, 4, or 5 on a 5-Point Scale

Exit Survey Results, 2012–2015



When asked what advice she would give other colleges considering online tutoring services, Ballard suggested that they check tutor credentials first. Carpenter agreed: “The credentialing and the vetting of the tutors are a very important part because we want to be confident that when we refer students, they’re going to have a good experience.”

After that, Ballard stressed the importance of good reports. “I love the monthly report that gives me a quick visual update.” She recalled an incident when the reports showed a large decrease in usage. Further investigation revealed that an access point to Smarthinking had been deleted, so she and Catlin were able to respond quickly and create a new one.

Catlin made a third recommendation: Colleges need to consider how quickly customer service will react when a problem occurs. He explained, “We need to have an immediate response because students are counting on the service for immediate help that very evening or that very afternoon. There has to be a team that’s ready to deploy and get it to work right away when it’s not working.”

Of the colleges in the Maricopa district, MCC is the largest user of Smarthinking. MCC is happy to share its best practices with other colleges considering online tutoring services.

“The reason why we continue to select Smarthinking is because of the credentialing of the tutors.”

—Melissa Carpenter,  
Director, Learning  
Enhancement Center

To learn more about how Smarthinking can help your students succeed, visit [smarthinking.com/solutions/higher-education](https://smarthinking.com/solutions/higher-education)