Online Tutoring Services versus
In-House Online Tutoring:
A Cost Analysis

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Authored by: Amy Anthony
                 Director, Online Tutoring
                 Link-Systems International, Inc.

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4515 George Road, Suite 340
Tampa, FL 33634
813-674-0660
www.link-systems.com

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Introduction

This white paper discusses how using an online tutoring service rather than creating "in-house" online tutoring to provide online tutoring to students can be cost effective. Using an online tutoring service to handle online tutoring rather than using an in-house solution will lower costs because a university or other educational institution can avoid hiring and training additional tutors; paying tutors for additional hours worked and overtime; hiring, training, and paying tutoring managers; paying for tutoring resources, such as computers; and so on. In addition, the online tutoring service will have a director and staff to handle the hiring, training, and monitoring of tutors at no additional cost.

Background

As students' needs grow, educational institutions across the nation aim to provide students with greater access to support services. Although most institutions find it easy to provide on-campus support in the form of peer tutoring, many institutions grapple with the best way to provide support to students who cannot or do not wish to be on campus. In recent years, distance education has developed to include services that are provided online, which allow students to obtain assistance almost anywhere and at nearly any time. An online environment theoretically allows students to receive assistance that is similar to or identical to the assistance they would receive on campus or in a "face-to-face" environment. This assistance includes tutoring. Since the mid-1990s, online tutoring services not associated with educational institutions have emerged as a solution to the need to provide students with online support. Although no two services are alike, in general, online tutoring services can provide students with convenient, easy-to-use, and integrated support. Of course, it is possible that an institution's in-house online tutoring could provide these benefits as well. However, it's important to look at the costs that are associated with providing online tutoring support, especially 24/7 support, and managing and monitoring the tutoring. Often, it appears that institutions struggle with providing support during "peak" hours (approximately 8 p.m. to 1 a.m., every day) and managing and monitoring tutors during those hours. Institutions must also consider the cost of paying additional tutors or paying for additional support hours, which includes paying tutors during "idle" time, paying overtime and employee benefits,

paying for tutor training, paying a manager to oversee the tutors, paying for resources (electricity, computers, and so on), and possibly paying for the use of a platform that will allow for synchronous interaction between tutor and student.

Solution

It is proposed that institutions interested in reducing costs while providing high-quality online support services use an online tutoring service rather than using in-house online tutoring. One of the clearest advantages of using an online tutoring service is the savings per hour. An institution must pay its tutors by the hour regardless of how much of that hour is spent actually tutoring students; the online tutoring service is only paid for the time spent tutoring. If, for example, an institution pays a peer tutor 12 dollars per hour and the tutor only spends 20 minutes (the average length of most tutoring sessions) of that hour tutoring, the institution is paying 12 dollars for 20 minutes of tutoring. On the other hand, if the institution were paying an online tutoring service at an hourly rate of 29 dollars but the institution only paid for time spent tutoring, the institution would pay approximately $9.67 for 20 minutes of tutoring. Furthermore, the institution would likely need to pay a tutoring manager to oversee the tutor's work, which could cost at least an additional 12 dollars per hour, if not more. Therefore, the price per hour becomes 24 dollars (12 dollars for the tutor and 12 dollars for the tutoring manager), regardless of the time spent tutoring or the number of students served.

Let us say a peer tutor works an eight-hour day at 12 dollars per hour. That equals 96 dollars per day, regardless of the time spent actually tutoring. Let us say a peer tutor averages about one 20-minute session per hour, equaling 160 minutes total, or 2.5 hours per day. That means an institution is paying $96.00 for 2.5 hours of tutoring, or approximately $38.40 per hour of tutoring. Obviously, this amount is much higher than the amount the institution would pay per hour for an online tutoring service. (At 29 dollars per hour, the institution would pay the online tutoring service $72.50 for 2.5 hours of tutoring.) Furthermore, this amount does not account for the additional cost to manage and monitor the tutor during the entire eight-hour shift, and it does not account for the cost of electricity and resources. In addition, the savings over time are relevant. For example, if the institution were paying $96.00/day for 2.5 hours of tutoring, that is a cost of $672/week, $2,688/month, and $32,256/year, whereas the cost with the online tutoring service would be as follows: $72.50/day, $507.50/week, $2,030/month, and $24,360/year. That is a savings of at least $7,896/year, not including the additional costs of managing and monitoring the tutors, staffing tutors during peak hours, training tutors, and resources.

In short, according to Wright (2002):
- A peer-tutoring program (PTP) requires that the school hire at least one additional full-time employee (the Peer Tutoring Program Supervisor),
- A PTP requires use of school premises for tutoring,
- A PTP requires tutor and "tutee" buy in,
- And, finally, a PTP requires extensive record-keeping procedures.

Using an online tutoring service would allow an institution to only pay for the time spent tutoring students rather than paying an hourly rate for peer tutors. In addition, the cost of staffing tutors during

peak hours, managing and monitoring the tutors, and all other costs would be included in the online tutoring service's hourly rate. Obviously, the institution would not have to pay for tutor and staff benefits, tutor and staff overtime, and additional resources, as this would be handled by the online tutoring service.

The NetTutor® Online Tutoring Service

Link-Systems International, Inc. (LSI) provides online tutoring through the NetTutor® Online Tutoring Service. NetTutor was created in 1996 by a group of mathematics professors at the University of South Florida in Tampa, where LSI is still based. The NetTutor team – including the director, tutoring managers, and tutors – is required to work from LSI's Tampa, Florida headquarters. LSI believes that having the tutoring team working together from a single location provides many benefits to the team and the clients, including the ability to customize the tutoring by quickly and efficiently disseminating information, policies, and best practices methods pertinent to each client. Moreover, all tutors are under direct and constant supervision as the director and tutoring managers are working in the same office. This allows LSI to monitor tutor work and ensure it is of high quality. Furthermore, all tutors receive initial and ongoing training and one-on-one coaching to ensure online tutoring best practices are being upheld, morale is high, and students are receiving the help they need. A hallmark of the NetTutor service is that the tutors guide students through problems, but never provide answers. In this way, NetTutor helps to develop students' critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and capacity to work independently. Not only does faculty agree with the NetTutor approach, but students like it, too. Being guided through a problem rather than being told the answer is empowering for students. Tutors use a Socratic method to engage students in a dialogue, among other methods, and tutors are trained not only in how to use the software but also in learning theory, learning styles, and empathizing with students, especially adult learners and ELLs.

A unique aspect of NetTutor is its commitment to customized online tutoring. LSI works closely with its clients to establish "rules of engagement" (ROE), guidelines for tutor-and-student interaction. If, for example, an institution wants online tutoring to act as an extension of its on-ground tutoring and support services, this can be arranged. In fact, many NetTutor clients report that their students cannot tell the difference between the institution's tutors and the NetTutor staff. NetTutor can mirror or supplement the student support services being provided at an institution. To provide service that is tailored to the needs of each individual student, NetTutor staff work with an institution's faculty and staff to create ROE, obtain syllabi and other course materials, and even make sure the tutors have the same textbooks an institution's students are using.

Accessing NetTutor is easy–all that is required is an Internet connection–and NetTutor can be seamlessly and quickly integrated with any learning management system at no extra charge to the client. In fact, NetTutor clients receive assistance not only with system integration but also with faculty and student orientation and training (both in person and online, upon request), promotion of NetTutor and marketing materials, and monitoring of and regular reporting on student usage. There is no set-up fee,

no maintenance fee, and clients only pay for what they use–unused hours are "rolled over" at the end of a year or billing cycle. In addition, LSI will work with clients to place governors on usage, if necessary. LSI provides 24-hour customer support in English and Spanish and regular access to the NetTutor director and tutoring managers.

Finally, recent research shows that having access to NetTutor can increase student retention. In an independent study conducted by Dr. Gladis Kersaint, Professor of Mathematics Education at the University of South Florida, students in College Algebra who had access to NetTutor were more likely to complete the course and scored better on the final exam. In fact, Dr. Kersaint's research showed that even one visit to NetTutor increased a student's chances of completing the course (Kersaint et al, 2011).

Conclusion

Using an online tutoring service rather than trying to provide in-house online tutoring can be cost effective for educational institutions. Because an institution must pay tutors an hourly rate, it is feasible that an institution would pay a peer tutor for idle time. On the other hand, an institution would pay an online tutoring service only for the time spent tutoring. Therefore, the money put towards tutoring would be better spent if it paid for tutoring time. In addition, research shows that in-house tutoring programs must account for the cost of paying a tutoring supervisor, and in-house online tutoring is no exception. With an online tutoring service, this provision is already accounted for in the hourly rate. Furthermore, using an online tutoring service allows an institution to save money not only on staffing but also on training and resources. It is estimated that several thousand dollars per year could be saved by using an online tutoring service.

Works Cited

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About Link-Systems International, Inc.

LSI Mission Statement

Link-Systems International is the leader in providing integrated technology and service solutions to educators in order to improve the quality of education and training, ensure student success and retention, and provide affordable education to students, workers, and their families.

Our Company

Link-Systems International, Incorporated (LSI) is a privately held technology services and content development company that has been dedicated to student success and student retention in K-12 education, higher education, and workforce development education since 1995.

Our core technologies include a very flexible online tutoring/teaching platform, an online grade book, an online algorithm engine with metadata and workflow capabilities, and an online business intelligence/data mining technology designed to provide real-time alerts regarding student/school/teacher performance, attendance, and other metrics.

Our core services include content development, consulting, and online tutoring through our NetTutor® brand.

Our customers include K-12 publishers, higher education publishers, virtual high schools, higher education institutions, technology companies, and joint programs dedicated to providing online educational content to members of organized labor and their families.

We are located in Tampa, Florida, a few miles from the University of South Florida. Along with the Moffitt Cancer Center -- one of the premier medical research institutions in the United States -- USF has excellent engineering, computer science, and mathematics programs, providing LSI many of its employees.

Launched in 1995, LSI has created several unique and powerful technologies that facilitate the sharing of content over the Internet. We specialize in mathematics, technical, and scientific content -- the most critical types of online content with respect to student success, and the most difficult to share online.

Today, LSI is recognized by a variety of publishers and educational institutions not only for its high-quality work and dedication to meeting commitments, but also for its unique ability to develop digital strategies that are custom tailored to the needs of its customers.

Our partners and customers have come to value and trust LSI because we are the only company that offers a complete suite of interoperable solutions that address the entire life cycle of the student, with an overt focus on the bottom line: student success and student retention. That student life cycle includes:

* Online Assessment and Placement
* Content Authoring
* Content Recovery, Content Management, and Metadata Management

* Online Teaching, Collaborating, and Tutoring
* Online Homework and Testing
* Online Grade Book Technologies
* Online Real-Time Performance Monitoring and Intervention

Through a relationship with LSI, educators acquire the ability to construct a complete, holistic approach to student success and student retention.

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