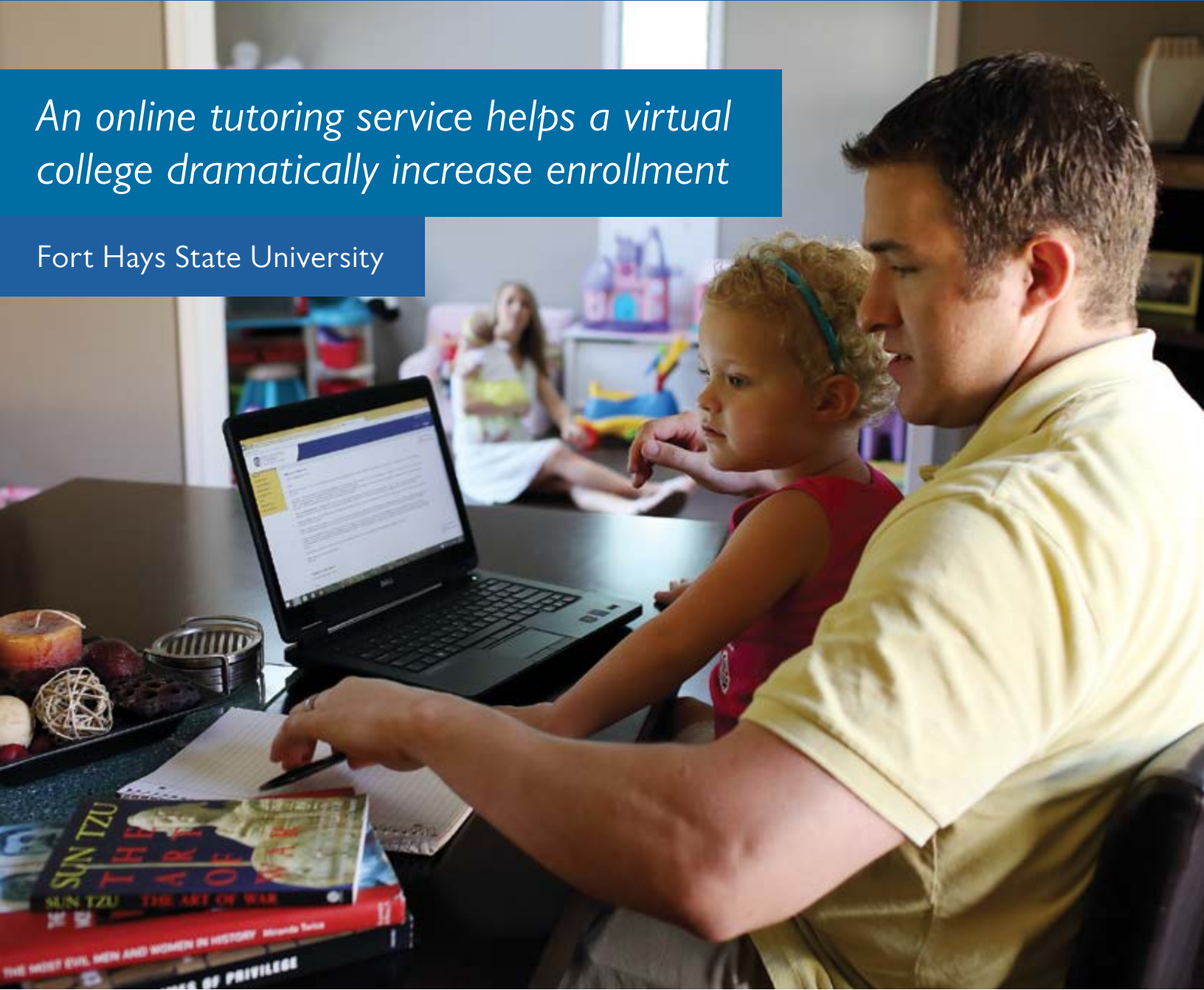


*An online tutoring service helps a virtual college dramatically increase enrollment*

Fort Hays State University



## Overview

In 1999, Fort Hays State University (FHSU) in Hays, Kansas, created the Virtual College, which offers over forty online degrees designed for adult learners. The university's goal is to offer the same high-quality services for students off campus as it does for students on campus. To that end, FHSU implemented an online tutoring service in 2002. Providing flexible, one-on-one support, the service has received high ratings across the board from students.

# Challenge

FHSU's distance education students come from all fifty states. The average age of the students is thirty-four. One of FHSU's goals in launching the Virtual College was to give adult learners the opportunity to go back to school.

Originally, the Virtual College tried to provide academic writing support to distance education students through the on-campus writing center and tutoring services. The college found, however, that this was not an effective means for providing high-quality services to virtual students because of the limited hours that were available for the services and a lack of training and proper tools for online support.

Within five years, student enrollment in the Virtual College more than doubled, increasing from 839 students in 1999 to 1,920 in 2004. As the distance education program rapidly grew, FHSU needed to find an effective way to support virtual students. It decided to implement an online tutoring service.

# Solution

The director of career exploration and advising, Dr. Patricia Griffin, learned about Smarthinking, Pearson's online tutoring service, at a conference. To find out more about the service, FHSU invited a Smarthinking representative to campus and subsequently decided to implement the service.

"We considered other providers," said Dennis King, the director of the Virtual College. "We talked to a couple of others and we do so routinely, but we always end up back where we started. Through our due diligence back when we started with Smarthinking, we were fortunate to pick the right service at that time."

King explained that the services and the breadth of the content areas offered by Smarthinking—as well as "the history of success" the Virtual College has had with the company—have compelled the college to continue to partner with Smarthinking for thirteen years.

The Virtual College received training before implementing Smarthinking. However, using the online tutoring service "really has been effortless," according to King. The college has posted training videos and tutorials for students, but "there hasn't been a lot of training. It seems to be very intuitive to the students," he noted.

## PROFILE

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### City/State

Hays, Kansas

### Institution Type

Public 4-year university

### Enrollment

Virtual College: 6,323 students

Rachel Dolechek, the MBA graduate coordinator, College of Business and Entrepreneurship, includes Smarthinking in her advising process. Of the 160 to 165 MBA students in the College of Business and Entrepreneurship, approximately 100 are virtual students. When Dolechek meets with distance education students, she makes sure they know the resource is available to them, and she mentions it in a newsletter she sends out to her advisees every semester.

At times, students who are struggling come to Dolechek and say, “I don’t know what to do. Should I drop this class?” “One of the first things I ask,” Dolechek remarked, “is ‘have you tried Smarthinking?’”

Dolechek estimates that between 15 to 20 percent of the virtual MBA students in her program use the service. Within the first few weeks, they tend to realize they need extra help in a foundation course.

For students, the most helpful feature of the online tutoring service is its flexibility. Students have anywhere, anytime access and the ability to schedule live sessions when it is convenient for them, a great asset for adult learners who may be juggling family and job responsibilities along with their academic work. Students can sign up to work with particular tutors, which personalizes the experience for the distance education students.

From September 2014 to September 2015, the peak usage time for the tutoring services was 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, followed by Wednesdays. During those twelve months, students requested support most frequently from the Essay Center and the Grammar & Documentation Review service, as well as for Introductory Finance, statistics, and physics.

The fact that the online tutoring service offers support in the key areas where students need it is also a great benefit. “Most of our courses can fit somewhere into the content areas,” commented Kathleen Cook, the Virtual College online student communication strategist. When there has been a class that is not covered by the service, Pearson has helped the Virtual College find a solution. King noted that, in general, the college has always been able to bring issues to Pearson’s attention and work with the company to resolve them.

## Results

In the course of sixteen years, enrollment in the Virtual College has grown more than sevenfold, from 839 students in 1999 to 6,323 students in the fall of 2015. King said, “Many people make Fort Hays State their destination of choice because of our people of excellence and our programs of distinction. As the tremendous growth in the Virtual College demonstrates, that applies to both our distance education students and our on-campus students.” He added: Smarthinking “helped us grow the Virtual College,” since online tutoring is a service that prospective students find attractive.

“Smarthinking’s flexibility, the ease of use, and the power of the technology have really been the key to its success.”

—Dennis King, Director of the Virtual College

Students clearly value the service. From January through August 2015, 778 tutoring sessions were held for a total of 505 hours. On an exit survey covering the period of September 2014 through September 2015, 97 percent of student respondents rated tutor feedback and the tutoring process favorably, and 96 percent said they would recommend Smarthinking to a friend (see Figure 1).

Comments on the exit survey reveal why students rated the service so highly. A statistics student described her tutor as “very helpful” and “patient.” One student viewed the Essay Center as a “useful tool to improve [her] writing.” Another student who used the Essay Center remarked, “I really appreciated the quick turnaround on the paper. The comments were very constructive and helpful. I think I will use this service for any future papers!”

Dolechek has heard firsthand why students find the online tutoring service so important. Some have said to her, “It’s prevented me from having to drop a class and delay my graduation.”

Her favorite comment about the service was made by an advisee who came to campus for commencement in May. Although Dolechek had worked with this virtual student for two and a half years, she had never met her before. “I asked her what was the most helpful or valuable thing that I told her during the program. And she said, ‘You introduced me to Smarthinking. That’s the only way I got through Finance.’”

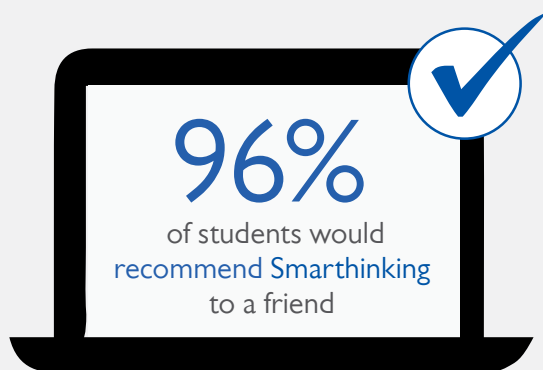
“The process was very simple and fast. The feedback was on point and very helpful.”

—Student, Essay Center

FIGURE 1

## Exit Survey Results for Smarthinking, September 2014–September 2015

Fort Hays State University, Virtual College



### Percent of Students Rating Smarthinking Favorably



TECHNOLOGY



TUTOR FEEDBACK



TUTORING PROCESS

Rating scale: 1 to 5, with *favorably* defined as a 3, 4, or 5

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