In the following report, Hanover Research reviews effective practices in retaining online students. The report also benchmarks common online support services and academic metrics across 18 institutions.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Though the number of students enrolling in online coursework continues to increase across the United States, the attrition rate for online courses remains significantly higher than for their onsite counterparts. Some estimates suggest the attrition rate for online courses is as high as 20 to 50 percent. As online learning claims a larger percentage of total student enrollments, higher education administrators are under increasing pressure to ensure online students persist – and succeed. Accordingly, this report reviews effective practices for online student retention. The report is divided into the following two sections.

- Section I provides a literature review that summarizes the factors affecting online student retention, which students are at the highest risk of attrition, and effective practices for retaining online students.
- Section II benchmarks online student support services and other practices across 18 institutions, including traditional universities and those with a large number of online programs.

KEY FINDINGS

- Research indicates that retention rates for online courses are roughly 10 to 20 percent lower than for face-to-face courses. According to the Online Learning Consortium’s most recent survey of over 2,800 U.S. colleges and universities, 45 percent of chief academic officers agreed that retaining students was more difficult in online than in face-to-face courses. This sentiment is more prevalent now than it was a decade ago.
- Student persistence in online courses is influenced by many factors, including personal motivation and study habits, engagement with course content and the university in general, and the perceived quality of the education students are receiving. While institutions often cannot control for the personal factors that influence retention, they should work to ensure that students feel connected to the institution and that they believe their courses are high-quality. For that reason, many of the most popular retention strategies today are designed to promote academic and social integration among students and to guarantee timely and actionable feedback from faculty.

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Students with limited university-level experience, low prior academic performance, previous withdrawals from online courses, or no prior online learning experience are at heightened risk of attrition. Institutions may therefore wish to target retention efforts to students with one or more of these characteristics.

Convenience and flexibility remain important considerations for online learners. The quality of an institution’s support services does not matter if they are not available when students need them. To accommodate the schedules of online learners, institutions should work to make technical and tutoring support available to online learners 24/7, potentially by partnering with a third-party provider.

- While 24/7 live technology support is an ideal, most of the institutions benchmarked in this report do not provide such constant service. Of the 18 institutions reviewed for this report, fewer than four provide on-demand technology support at all hours. Instead, most colleges and universities provide technology support through a campus help desk during extended business hours, and may provide tutorials, email support, or a ticketing system during off hours.

- Alternatively, the majority of benchmarked institutions have begun offering 24/7 tutoring support for at least some subjects through third-part providers. Services such as SmarThinking, ThinkingStorm, and Tutor.com have grown in recent years as a means of providing readily accessible tutoring for high school and college students through web-supported chat and video conferencing. Many institutions contract with these companies to provide free tutoring to their students as a means of improving student success.
SECTION I: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the literature related to online student retention, focusing on the practices that have been shown to create positive retention outcomes in fully online courses and degree programs. The section begins with a discussion of several factors underlying the high attrition rates among online students.

FACTORS AFFECTING RETENTION RATES FOR ONLINE STUDENTS

With retention rates for online courses roughly 10 to 20 percent lower than for face-to-face courses, improving persistence levels of online learners is one of the key challenges for online educators in the United States.\(^2\) According to the Online Learning Consortium’s most recent survey of representatives from over 2,800 U.S. colleges and universities, 45 percent of chief academic officers agreed that retaining students was more difficult in online than in face-to-face courses.\(^3\) Interestingly, though online education has been increasing in popularity over the past several years, a smaller percentage of chief academic officers agreed with this statement a decade ago, as shown in Figure 1.1 below.\(^4\)

Figure 1.1: Chief Academic Officers Agreeing with the Statement “Retaining Students is a Greater Problem for Online Courses than it is for Face-to-Face Courses”

Source: The Online Learning Consortium\(^5\)


\(^5\) Ibid.
WHY STUDENTS LEAVE

A great deal of research on the causes of attrition in higher education draws from a model created by Vincent Tinto in the 1980s. Tinto’s model proposes that student persistence is influenced by a variety of personal and institutional factors, including family background, personal motivation, previous educational experience and achievement, and institutional support. His work also suggests that “institutions should focus on the degree to which the learner is able to be socially and academically integrated with peers and the institution, as a way of ensuring retention.” Many online retention strategies popular today are designed to promote academic and social integration among students, particularly those at highest risk of dropping out. Despite the challenges inherent in forming connections to professors and peers in an environment where students are often unable to physically interact, providing a sense of “virtual community” can build a sense of camaraderie and emotional support that can help online students feel less isolated and better manage setbacks.

However, Tinto conducted his research among campus-based undergraduates, who tend to be quite different from the typical online learner. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 70 percent of U.S. online learners are older than 25 years old and 68 percent are employed. Thus, some reasons why online students fail to persist might be very different from the reasons why on-campus undergraduates fail to persist. Namely, online learners are more likely to face competing personal responsibilities, which may hinder their ability to complete a degree or course. According to a team of researchers from the University of Illinois-Springfield:

Online students generally are older; juggling careers, families, and college; highly focused on earning their degree; and paying most of the tuition with their own money. On-campus students generally are younger; although many work, fewer work full time; fewer are the breadwinner for families; and many have significant financial aid from sources including their parents. These varying factors may have an effect on persistence and time to degree completion.

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As online students tend to have more competing responsibilities than traditional students, designing courses with flexible curricula and delivery systems is crucial.\(^\text{12}\) Also important is ensuring that students can access support services at times that are convenient for them – for instance, a technical support office that is only accessible during regular school hours would not be conducive to online learners with full-time jobs.\(^\text{13}\)

Another reason why online students may withdraw is due to the “misalignment” between what students expect online learning to be versus what online learning actually is.\(^\text{14}\) For instance, some students elect to take an online course because they think it will be easier or less time intensive than the face-to-face version. However, in reality students usually need to be more disciplined to succeed in an online learning environment.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, experts recommend orienting students to the expectations and workload of each online course before the start of the semester. According to the literature, “a heavy workload is not necessarily problematic as long as students have a realistic expectation of what will be involved” and “students who actively plan to accommodate workload tend to be persistent.”\(^\text{16}\)

Beyond personal motivation levels and external circumstances, students may choose to withdraw from an online program due to the course design or quality of instruction. In a recent survey conducted by the higher education consulting firm Noel-Levitz, online student respondents rated academic quality and the timeliness of faculty feedback as areas of both high importance and low satisfaction.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, these issues represent two of the greatest challenges of online learning.

According to multiple studies, the responsiveness of online faculty members is one of the largest influencers of student satisfaction levels in online courses.\(^\text{18}\) Students favor

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\(^\text{15}\) 68 percent of academic officers surveyed agreed with the statement “Students need more discipline to succeed in an online course than in a face-to-face course.” See: Allen and Seaman, Op. cit., p. 23.
\(^\text{16}\) Hart, C. “Factors Associated with Student Persistence in an Online Program of Study: A Review of the Literature.” Journal of Interactive Online Learning. p. 31. http://iteideas.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/58620369/Factors%252520Associated%252520With%252520Student%252520Persistence%252520in%252520Online%252520Program%252520%252520.pdf
professors who answer questions quickly and who give feedback about student progress that is individualized, clear, and quickly turned around. Professors who are better able to engage their online learners, both at an individual and classroom level, have better success in retaining them. However, an academic program’s perceived quality is not a function of the teaching faculty alone. The institution itself has a responsibility to ensure that courses offered online have been well selected, that they are adapted to fit an online learning environment, and that the professors teaching them are trained in effective online-specific teaching strategies.

A recurring theme across these various factors of online retention is student engagement. According to a commonly cited review of the influencers of online persistence rates, “engaging students as early as possible and keeping them engaged is the key.” In particular, retention models stress the following integrated forms of student-institution engagement as contributing to persistence (see figure 1.2 below). Many of the effective retention strategies discussed in the remainder of this section seek to foster these three types of engagement.

**Figure 1.2: Model of Student-Institution Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Individualization</th>
<th>Interpersonal Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students have the opportunity to interact with university representatives (professors, advisors) on a one-to-one basis.</td>
<td>• Students have individualized interactions with university representatives, based on their specific needs and goals.</td>
<td>• Students' interaction with university representatives is mutual and reciprocal, with the achievement of learning and performance goals as the focus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *EDUCAUSE Review*

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STUDENTS MOST AT RISK OF ATTRITION

In addition to studying why students fail to persist in online environments, researchers have also grappled with the question of who is most likely to withdraw. Research indicates that students with one or more of the following characteristics are at heightened risk of dropping an online course:

- **Limited university-level experience**: A recent study published in *Research in Higher Education*, which tracked online course withdrawals among undergraduate students at a large public university, found academic experience to be the best predictor of attrition. The study found that withdrawal rates were highest among first-year students and decreased incrementally for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Unsurprisingly, students who are closer to graduation are also less likely to withdraw from an online program.

- **Low cumulative GPA**: Prior academic performance, as measured by GPA, is another strong predictor of a student’s likelihood to withdraw. In a research study led by Dr. Justin Cochran of Kennesaw State University, students with a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher were shown to be more likely to persist than those with lower averages. Experts surmise that students with higher GPAs are more likely to possess the study skills and self-motivation that online learning demands.

- **Previous withdrawals from online courses**: Cochran’s study also found previous withdrawals from online courses to be statistically significant in predicting who was more likely to withdraw from a subsequent online course.

- **Youth and lack of online experience**: Data from the 2013 Noel-Levitz Online Student Readiness and Satisfaction survey indicate that younger students (24 and under) are less satisfied and less prepared for online coursework. In addition, the survey found students with no prior online learning experience to be less prepared.

By knowing who is most likely to withdraw, institutions can target retention efforts to individual students or populations. For instance, because younger students with no prior online learning experience are at heightened risk of attrition, Noel-Levitz recommends that:

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27 Hart, Op. cit., p. 31


These students should receive focused communication messages to address satisfaction issues and to establish appropriate expectations. Older, more experienced students may benefit from these efforts, but if budgets and resources are limited, then colleges and universities will want to be sure to target their efforts to the younger, less experienced student populations.

**EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR RETAINING ONLINE STUDENTS**

The following sub-section highlights best practices for retaining students in online courses and degree programs. Many of these practices seek to address the persistence factors previously discussed – with a focus on student engagement, course quality, and institutional support. The section begins with findings from a national survey tracking the most prevalent and effective strategies private universities use to retain online students.

**BENCHMARKING RETENTION PRACTICES FOR ONLINE LEARNERS**

In the spring of 2013, Noel-Levitz conducted a survey of officials from nearly 200 private universities to measure the effectiveness of common strategies designed to boost undergraduate retention and completion rates. Figure 1.3 displays the percentage of institutions that reported using ten different strategies specific to retaining online students. The figure also summarizes the perceived effectiveness of each strategy based on the percentage of respondents who rated the practice as “very effective.”

According to this study, the three practices for retaining online learners that are most commonly believed to be “very effective” include:

- **Mandatory online interaction between students and faculty;**
- **Required training program for online faculty; and**
- **Technical support to address online connection issues.**

Surveyed officials were largely in agreement that mandatory interaction between students and faculty is an effective retention practice, as approximately 80 percent of respondents rated the practice at least “somewhat effective.” However, requiring faculty members to undergo training prior to teaching an online course was a more divisive practice. While a large percentage of respondents found the practice to be “very effective,” a slightly larger percentage considered the practice “minimally effective.”

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30 Ibid., p. 11.
Figure 1.3: Usage and Effectiveness of Practices for Retaining Online Learners for Four-Year Private Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention Strategy</th>
<th>Institutions Using Strategy</th>
<th>Very Effective</th>
<th>Somewhat Effective</th>
<th>Minimally Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory online interaction between faculty and students</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required training program for online faculty</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical support to address online connection issues</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty development and support for online technology and online teaching pedagogy</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic support services specifically for online learners</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student services geared to online learners, including registration and financial aid</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early-alert and intervention system for online learners</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation program for online learners</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty advisor assigned to each online learner</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback mechanisms to identify program improvements for online learners</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Noel-Levitz

Creating feedback mechanisms to identify program improvements for online learners was considered by survey respondents to be one of the least effective retention practices in use. Less than 14 percent of respondents rated the practice “very effective” while nearly 40 percent considered it “minimally effective.” This understanding notably runs counter to the academic research on the topic, which considers data gathering of multiple types to be an essential component of successful retention practice. For example, Cochran recommends that institutions follow-up with students after they first withdraw from an online class to not only “mitigate further withdrawals,” but also to gain a better “understanding of withdrawal behavior within major fields of study… (to) help administrators and faculty develop strategies to increase retention rates.”

Effective Practices in Online Retention

Through a review of the literature, which included academic journal articles and relevant industry publications, Hanover identified a number of strategies that are consistently cited as effective in retaining online learners. This sub-section groups these strategies into three

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main categories: Faculty-Student Engagement, Course Design and Delivery, and Support Services. The majority of these strategies were designed to maximize retention among undergraduate online students; indeed, research focused on the retention of graduate students online is a gap that experts have previously noted in the literature. While many of these practices are likely to provide retention benefits for students at all levels, institutions should weigh the applicability of each practice for a given audience before implementing it.

**FACULTY- STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

As noted previously, online students highly value regular interaction with their professors as well as timely and personalized feedback on their progress. Faculty-student engagement can also help to mitigate the sense of isolation online students often feel and ensure their needs are being met throughout the course. Therefore, “professors who are actively engaging learners have much more success with student retention.” Scholars have outlined a number of “social presence” strategies for encouraging faculty-student as well as peer-peer interaction during online courses. These include:

- **Faculty Presence:** One of the most commonly cited best practices for online retention is also one of the easiest to achieve – faculty members should consistently demonstrate their presence in the online environment. Instructors should establish their availability at the outset of the course, and should clearly notify students of their preferred methods of contact and what to expect regarding responsiveness. Faculty members should appear in an online course several times per week through “liberal use of communication tools such as announcements, discussion board postings, and forums.”

- **Orientation Exercises:** At the beginning of a new course, students should be oriented not only to the material and available resources, but also to the professor and each other. Sources recommend the use of “virtual ice breakers,” student/faculty biographies, or even video in which the professor orients students to the institution’s physical campus.

Class Discussion: Faculty should encourage class discussion and active learning whenever possible in online courses. Experts have noted the effectiveness of synchronous discussion sessions, though these come at the expense of reduced flexibility. Other ways to foster discussion include: informal chat sessions, asynchronous discussion boards in which students can post comments at their convenience, and group projects. Particularly in graduate degree programs, faculty can draw on the personal career experiences and unique perspectives of students through such means.

One-on-One Communication: It is important for faculty members to get to know students on an individual level. Several professors of online courses have qualitatively noted the effectiveness of the “five-minute phone call” in accomplishing this objective. This strategy can also be used by mentors, tutors, and program coordinators, particularly if the professor does not have the time to phone everyone in the course. Other strategies to increase one-on-one communication include weekly faculty office hours and individualized e-mail responses.

Regular Feedback: The importance of timely, individualized, and meaningful feedback in online courses cannot be understated. This feedback applies to both individual assignments as well as overall progress within the course. As is true in an in-person setting, feedback for online assignments should contain actionable suggestions for future progress and should be delivered in enough time that it can be incorporated into the next assignment. Patrick Lowenthal, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Technology at Boise State University and an expert on online education, suggests giving video feedback on select assignments to compensate online students for the lack of face-to-face feedback that students often receive in the classroom.

Course Design and Delivery

Unsurprisingly, if an online course meets or exceeds students’ pre-existing expectations, they are more likely to persist. Conversely, if a course fails to meet expectations or is different than what students expected, they are more likely to drop out. These best practices are meant to ensure that online coursework is convenient, engaging, and meets students’ expectations.

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• **Accelerated Format:** To accommodate the needs of non-traditional learners, an institution may consider offering accelerated online courses, which condense classes into shortened, more intensive time periods. According to the Dean of Arizona State University Online, offering online courses in a condensed format makes sense because non-traditional students “need quick wins to stay on track” and “require more flexibility and focus.”46

• **Learning Cohorts:** Research points to the value of learning cohorts, in which students within a particular degree program progress through their coursework together.47 In an online learning environment, cohorts can foster social engagement, helping students to feel less isolated and more supported throughout their program of study. Coastline Community College’s STAR Program, which moves students through their degrees as small cohorts, is instructive. According to Coastline’s manager of instructional design, Bob Nash, the program has been one of the institution’s most effective techniques for improving persistence. “Just like the research tells us, it works very well... the retention numbers in that group are very high,” Nash says.48 However, while the retention benefits of learning cohorts are well established, they carry certain challenges of their own, including decreased course flexibility for students and added expense.

• **Small Class Size:** The idea that smaller class sizes improve student learning and retention for in-person courses is well-established in the academic literature.49 However, in a market where the financial benefits of large class sizes are clear, many institutions have hesitated to enforce strict limits on online class sizes. Nonetheless, many researchers suggest that small class sizes benefit online learners by providing them with more individualized interaction and by encouraging social engagement. The benefits of this practice have been seen at the University of Illinois at Springfield, which caps many of its online courses at 25 students “allowing students and faculty to develop close relationships over the 15-week semester.”50

• **Pre-Registration Orientation:** As discussed previously, many first-time online students drop out because their perceptions of online learning are very different than the reality of online learning. For this reason, some universities require students to complete an orientation before they are allowed to register for any online courses to ensure they understand expectations (the “hidden curriculum”) from the outset.51 A preliminary study by researchers at Kennesaw State University

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also suggests that a face-to-face orientation meeting can greatly improve retention rates, although the difficulty of implementing such a program for all online learners may make such a practice unfeasible.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Case Study: Boosting Online Retention Rates at the University of Illinois – Springfield}
\end{center}

Facing major challenges with online student persistence, the University of Illinois at Springfield has implemented a variety of strategies which successfully boosted online course and degree completion rates (so that they are now only two to three percentage points below onsite completion rates). The University credits the “incorporation of online programs into the fabric of the institution” to the model’s success – the majority of online instructors are tenure-track professors who also teach courses onsite and all new online programs are developed within the same academic departments as onsite programs. A few key components of the model are described below.\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{itemize}
\item **Extensive Faculty Support:** Online instructors are supported by the Center for Online Learning, which provides technology training, pedagogical support, and one-on-one training sessions. Additionally, the University of Illinois offers online workshops and certificate programs through its membership in the Sloan Consortium as well as classes in online teaching development.
\item **Online Program Coordinators:** Faculty are further supported by online program coordinators, who are responsible for:
  \begin{itemize}
  \item Recruiting students
  \item Tracking of student schedules and progress toward degree completion
  \item Encouraging and facilitating communication between students and faculty members
  \item Advocating for students in administrative and bureaucratic matters
  \item Supporting students who confront individual challenges in moving toward degree completion
  \end{itemize}
\item **Peer mentors:** As experienced online students, peer mentors can also ease faculty workloads and provide students with additional support in online coursework through:
  \begin{itemize}
  \item Facilitating discussions
  \item Tracking participation
  \item Training on classroom technologies
  \item Answering questions about the course
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Support Services}

The literature recommends a number of support services for online learners, including technical support, career counselling, registration support, and library services (See Section


\textsuperscript{53} Boles et. al., Op. cit. Sub-bullet points taken verbatim.
II for complete list). However, the support services found to have the greatest effects on online student retention are those that contribute to academic engagement.

- **Online Faculty Training & Pedagogical Support:** Though not a support service for students, the literature consistently stresses the need for institutions to provide support to faculty members who are new to online teaching that transcends basic technology training. Faculty should be taught strategies (particularly student engagement techniques) specific to teaching online and should be able to work with instructional designers when creating new online courses. The University of West Georgia, for instance, requires new-to-online faculty to take an online class about how to teach online. This gives instructors “first-hand knowledge of the frustrating road blocks online students face as they learn.” Effective faculty training translates to higher quality courses that are better at engaging, and retaining, online students.

- **Mentoring:** Mentors provide individualized support to online learners while tracking student progress to degree completion. Particularly in large online courses in which it is not feasible for the instructor to establish a personal relationship with every student, mentors ensure students stay motivated and socially engaged in their program of study. Unlike instructors, mentors also “know more about what is going on in that individual adult student’s life,” including their personal goals and potential challenges they might face. Mentors can also help to connect online students to other academic support services depending upon their personal needs. The case studies included in this report – examining the University of Illinois at Springfield and the University of Georgia – both demonstrate that the effective use of mentoring through program coordinators (faculty or professional staff members who act as academic advisors for students throughout their course of study) can help improve online retention rates.

- **Tutoring:** Tutors have also been shown to increase the retention rates of distance learners, though limited research exists specifically for online tutoring. A model that has been particularly successful is the use of course-specific peer tutors. These are often experienced online students who may assist with facilitating class discussion, tracking student participation, providing training on classroom technologies, and answering students’ questions. Peer tutors also help to free up

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instructors’ time so that they can “focus on course content and facilitation rather than routine tasks.” In a 2009 study tracking perceptions of effective online tutoring, students expressed a preference for tutors who could contribute subject expertise, vocational guidance, and emotional support. The study also suggested that “tutors could encourage greater retention if students were supported in their study strategies and academic integration.”

- **Accessibility:** Responsive and integrated student support services – including technical support services, academic support services, and financial services – contribute to student persistence. However, a key factor in delivering support services to online students is that they should be convenient, easily accessible, and available when they are needed. According to a report on online student services published by the Blackboard Institute, “many institutions understand the importance of providing 24/7 technical support because students are doing coursework at all hours of the day.” This level of service is typically facilitated by third-party providers. Some institutions have similarly moved to implement 24/7 academic support by outsourcing the service to third-party provider such as SmartThinking.

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**Case Study: Online Mentoring at the University of Georgia**

Students in the University of Georgia’s Master of Adult Education program work with one advisor, who is a professor within the department, throughout their course of study. According to Janet Truluck, the program’s director, the advisor acts as “a point person” for each entering cohort, providing students with guidance as well as social/emotional support. Most importantly, the advisor “actually knows about them and who they are and what they’re trying to accomplish.” According to Truluck, there are seven key components to UGA’s online mentoring program:

- The advisor telephones each student prior to the start of the program to establish a personal connection and alert them to program requirements and rigors.
- The advisor teaches one of the first courses in the program.
- The advisor opens a “coffee shop” in each course to foster casual discussion.
- The advisor uses WebCT tools to reach students.
- The advisor holds weekly “virtual” office hours using online chatrooms.
- The advisor telephones students again halfway through the semester to follow up on how the student is progressing and to address any potential issues.
- The advisor conducts a final exit interview at the end of the program to better understand how to improve student satisfaction moving forward.

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63 Ibid.
SECTION II: BENCHMARKING ONLINE SUPPORT SERVICES & PRACTICES

In the following section, Hanover Research provides information on the online retention practices of 18 higher education institutions. The information in this section was compiled using information published by the *U.S. News and World Report* as well as through a review of institutional websites.

Figure 2.1 displays the institutions that are included in this analysis. The list includes a range of institutions, including institutions that have historically served predominantly on-campus, traditional students and those with large online programs. The list also includes a number of universities that rank highly for student retention in the *U.S. News and World Report’s (USNWR)* 2015 rankings for Best Online Bachelor’s Programs.66

![Figure 2.1: Benchmarked Institutions](http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/bachelors/rankings?int=999208)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
<th>ONE-YEAR NEW STUDENT RETENTION RATE (2014)</th>
<th>SIX YEAR GRADUATION RATE</th>
<th>OVERALL ONLINE BACHELOR’S DEGREE RANK (USNWR)</th>
<th>TOTAL ENROLMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois - Chicago</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah College of Art and Design</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Florida</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Hays State University</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin – Superior</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Missouri – Kansas City</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concordia University – St. Paul</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Central Florida</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8,425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue University</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linfield College</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise State University</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Leo University</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>21.3% (5 year)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty University</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>40,444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia College</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>14,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethel University</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>No Rank</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Canyon University</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>No Rank</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana Wesleyan University</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>No Rank</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivet Nazarene University</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>No Rank</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: USNWR67

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66 *USNWR* defines one-year retention rates as the percentage of new entrants who re-enrolled sometime within one year after first enrolling.

http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/bachelors/rankings?int=999208
BENCHMARKING EXPECTATIONS FOR FACULTY

Providing training for online instructors is a standard practice among benchmarked institutions, although the specifics of those training programs vary. For example, it is common, but not universal for institutions to offer institution financed training for online instructors. Of the 14 benchmark institutions with online bachelor’s programs ranked by USNWR, 13 provide institution-financed faculty training. Linfield College, however, does not provide funds for online faculty training.

Figure 2.2: Institution Financed Online Instructor Training among USNWR-ranked Benchmark Institutions

Moreover, the length of this required training differs considerably between institutions. Several – including the Savannah College of Art and Design, the University of Florida, and Saint Leo University – maintain initial training periods of 10 hours or less. At the same time, institutions such as Central Florida University and Bellevue University require 40 or more hours. While practices are less clear among un-ranked institutions, Grand Canyon University claims to offer “dedicated full-time faculty and fully-trained adjunct instructors,” suggesting that it too provides instruction to new online faculty before putting them in a virtual classroom.

Most online higher education providers also take steps to ensure that instructors of online courses are available to students. For example, the institutions analyzed in this report generally expect online instructors to respond to student questions within a timely manner. As is shown in Figure 2.3, the typical expected response period is no more than 24 to 48 hours. Moreover, many institutions have policies in place that govern the number of office hours that online faculty members are expected to offer. Figure 2.4 shows the office hour expectations of the 10 benchmark institutions that reported this data to U.S. News. It shows that approximately two-thirds of these institutions expect a commitment of one to six hours for this purpose. In addition, Grand Canyon University, which is not ranked by USNWR and is thus not included in Figure 2.4, expects full-time online faculty members to be available for

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 “Online Degree Programs.” Grand Canyon University. http://www.gcu.edu/Academics/Online-Degree-Programs.php
five hours each week “outside of normal work hours to answer urgent questions, take phone calls, and attend meetings.”

**Figure 2.3: Expected Faculty Response Times**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOURS</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 24    | Concordia University – St. Paul  
     | Grand Canyon University  
     | Linfield College  
     | Olivet Nazarene University  
     | Saint Leo University  
     | Savannah College of Art and Design  
     | University of Florida |
| 30    | University of Illinois-Chicago |
| 48    | Bellevue University  
     | Columbia College  
     | Fort Hays State University  
     | Liberty University  
     | University of Central Florida  
     | University of Missouri-Kansas City |

Source: U.S. News & World Report, Institutional Websites

**Figure 2.4: Weekly Office Hours Available Remotely**

Source: USNWR

Note: Percentages based on 13 institutions with available information

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CREATING A COMMUNITY

While faculty presence is one means of instilling in students a sense of belonging, other forms of connection are also valuable. Every institution reviewed for this report appears to offer some form of personal academic advising for online students. This is a useful retention practice for many reasons, including ensuring that students do not enroll in courses that are beyond their level and demonstrating clear pathways to graduation. However, the websites of many institutions also show that academic advisors – or, sometimes, mentors – also help retain students simply through serving as a solid connection to the campus and providing a sense that someone at the institution cares about their success.

The dual role of the advisor is perhaps most clearly elaborated at Indiana Wesleyan University. There, academic advisors help students with scheduling, answer questions about online learning or coursework, and “give advice on how [students] can best achieve [their] educational goals.”72 However, the advisors also serve in a personal support role. As stated by academic advisor Allison Toren in a promotional video, “one of the things I really appreciate about my job at Indiana Wesleyan is being able to pray with our students. They are going through so much... and we get to come alongside them and we get to pray with them, either by email or by phone.”73

Community is also built peer-to-peer through connections between students. As discussed in Section I, a cohort program can be a useful tool for building comradery between students, but it can also be difficult to scale across an institution’s entire online learning program. A simpler alternative is to maintain small class sizes, which gives students the opportunity to get to know one another better and to recognize classmates who they meet in multiple courses. Most of the benchmark institutions examined in this report manage class sizes well; of the 14 institutions for which Hanover was able to find an average undergraduate class size, 10 reported average classes of 20 or fewer students while another two reported average class sizes of 21.74 In addition, Indiana Wesleyan University’s specific average class size is publicly unavailable, but the institution advertises on its website that “class sizes are capped to create an intimate learning experience.”75

It is also common for online higher education providers to reinforce student bonds by providing them with opportunities for synchronous interaction. Among the 14 benchmarked institutions that are ranked on the U.S. News Best Online Bachelor’s Programs list, online chatrooms are a universal feature.76

72 “Experience IWU Online.” Indiana Wesleyan University. https://www.indwes.edu/admissions/online/online-delivery
73 Allison Toren promotional video. Ibid.
NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION

Experts also advise online education institutions to provide orientation sessions to new students. Orientations can be useful opportunities to introduce students to the institution and to start building their connections with it. They also serve a functional purpose by introducing students to online learning and the resources that are available to them, which may prevent frustration later.

New student orientations are standard practice across benchmarked institutions. Of the 14 USNWR ranked institutions included in this review, all but one (the University of Missouri-Kansas City) reports offering a new student orientation. However, the exact nature of the orientation programs in place at these institutions can vary. One of the most common forms of online learning orientation is a short program offered through the online learning portal itself. This is the model in place at Columbia College, where students are asked to complete the following five modules prior to beginning classes:

- **Get Started** – View this module first and learn what to do before you register for classes.
- **Register for Classes** – See how to register and pay for classes
- **Your Online Classroom** – Learn about Desire2Learn (D2L), our learning management system.
- **Success as an Online Student** – Assess your readiness for online learning and view helpful tips for succeeding in an online course.
- **Resources** – Access other helpful Columbia College Resources

STUDENT SUPPORT

Figure 2.5 benchmarks the availability of 10 different student support services among online higher education providers, as reported by USNWR.

---

77 However, UMKC reports that some students may have to report in-person for “orientations,” which suggests that at least some programs provide orientations to new students even if the university itself does not. Ibid.
### Figure 2.5: Benchmark of Online Student Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
<th>ACADEMIC ADVISING</th>
<th>BOOKSTORE</th>
<th>CAREER PLACEMENT ASSISTANCE</th>
<th>FINANCIAL AID OFFICE/ SERVICES</th>
<th>ACCESS TO DIGITALIZED LIBRARY MATERIALS</th>
<th>ACCESS TO LIVE LIBRARIAN</th>
<th>MENTORING</th>
<th>TECHNICAL SUPPORT</th>
<th>LIVE TUTORING</th>
<th>WRITING WORKSHOPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois-Chicago</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah College of Art and Design</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Florida</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Hays State University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin – Superior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Missouri – Kansas City</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concordia University – St. Paul</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Central Florida</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linfield College</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise State University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Leo University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia College</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: USNWR78

---

While the practices of individual institutions differ, this table suggests that many support services are standard across online providers. For example, all institutions shown above offer academic advising services, financial aid support and services, and access to a live librarian. Mentoring and writing workshops, though not as pervasive as other student support services, are still offered by the majority of benchmarked institutions. Given the positive effects mentoring has been shown to have on online student retention, this is a support service that online learning providers would be wise to adopt.

Moreover, all institutions shown above smooth the process of acquiring textbooks by providing online students with bookstore access. Benchmark institutions allow students to purchase textbooks and course supplies by term and course number rather than title. This ensures that students have the correct edition of the textbook and will be less likely to have to return unneeded or mistakenly purchased materials.

**TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT**

While best practices suggest that 24/7 live technical support is a valuable service that aids student retention, few of the institutions reviewed for this report appear to offer it. The University of Florida and Saint Leo University offer technology support by telephone 24 hours a day, but all other institutions appear to offer more limited hours. Instead, most benchmark institutions provide technical support to online students through the established channels for assisting campus-based students. As such, these services tend to be available primarily during the day and early evening.

For example, Bethel University’s Information Technology Services help desk is available approximately 90 hours per week during the academic year, with very limited hours on the weekend. Students who need support outside of those hours can search for a solution using tools and tutorials provided by the University, which are available 24/7, or by submitting a ticket for response by an on-call technology assistant. Olivet Nazarene University utilizes a similar ticketing system to provide computer assistance during hours when its technology Help Desk is closed, which includes Saturdays and Sundays.

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79 For example, see “Ordering.” Saint Leo University. http://bookstore.mbsdirect.net/vb_buy2.php?CSID=AAT2T2MZUWJUAMACUKUOAOSCB&ACTION=top
82 The U.S. News and World Report reports that the Savannah College of Art and Design also provides 24/7 live tech support. However, Hanover was unable to verify this fact on the College’s website.
83 “Orientation to Online Learning at Bethel University.” Bethel University. https://confluence.bethel.edu/display/TLT/Orientation+to+Online+Learning+at+Bethel+University
84 “About the Help Desk.” Olivet Nazarene University.
**Online Student Tutoring Models**

Figure 2.6 summarizes the primary tutoring options available to online students at the institutions reviewed for this report. Several institutions, such as Bellevue University, continue to rely on their own resources, providing tutoring to online students over the phone or by Skype through established tutoring centers. However, a majority of institutions have shifted online student tutoring to third-party providers. Among the institutions reviewed for this report, the most popular of these tutoring contractors appears to be SmarThinking, a service developed by Pearson. By contracting with a third-party provider to offer free tutoring to online students, these universities are able to offer 24/7 live tutoring support for some subjects.

*Figure 2.6: Online Tutoring Models Used by Benchmarked Institutions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION OF TUTORING MODEL</th>
<th>WEBSITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois - Chicago</td>
<td>Academic Center for Excellence provides math and science tutoring as well as one-on-one mentoring from academic coaches; This service is not specific to online students.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uic.edu/depts/academic/mentoring.shtml">http://www.uic.edu/depts/academic/mentoring.shtml</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah College of Art and Design</td>
<td>Peer tutors (upper-level, high-achieving students) available for one-on-one appointments for online students</td>
<td><a href="http://www.scad.edu/academics/elearning/student-experience/student-services">http://www.scad.edu/academics/elearning/student-experience/student-services</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Florida</td>
<td>UF Online offers transition advising, major advising, and group advising for online students as well as a number of videos designed to improve students’ study skills. UF Teaching Center tutors have also created over 1,500 videos designed to assist students in specific courses that include video solutions for previous semesters’ exams, exam reviews, course-specific concept videos and general study skills.</td>
<td><a href="https://teachingcenter.ufl.edu/tutoring/video-resources/">https://teachingcenter.ufl.edu/tutoring/video-resources/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Hays State University</td>
<td>Free online tutoring (live tutoring, online writing lab, question submissions) provided through SmarThinking</td>
<td><a href="http://www.fhsu.edu/virtualcollege/student/smarthinking/">http://www.fhsu.edu/virtualcollege/student/smarthinking/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin – Superior</td>
<td>24/7 tutoring available through Tutor.com; Writing Center provides extended hours to help accommodate distance learners</td>
<td><a href="https://www.uwsuper.edu/dl/current/academic-support.cfm">https://www.uwsuper.edu/dl/current/academic-support.cfm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Missouri – Kansas City</td>
<td>24/7 subject-specific tutoring available through NetTutor</td>
<td><a href="http://online.umkc.edu/learning/online/learning-tutoring/">http://online.umkc.edu/learning/online/learning-tutoring/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concordia University – St. Paul</td>
<td>Live tutoring certain subjects, video library, writing lab, and email support through Brainfuse</td>
<td><a href="http://www.brainfuse.com/highEd/liveTutoring.asp">http://www.brainfuse.com/highEd/liveTutoring.asp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Central Florida</td>
<td>Peer Assisted Learning (group learning led by a peer tutor) sessions available on a schedule via Adobe Connect; Sessions are not exclusive to online learners</td>
<td><a href="http://sarc.sdes.ucf.edu/opal">http://sarc.sdes.ucf.edu/opal</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION OF TUTORING MODEL</th>
<th>WEBSITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue University</td>
<td>Subject-specific tutoring available by appointment through phone and Skype; Questions also answered via email</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bellevue.edu/student-support/tutoring-services/tutoring-and-study-skills">http://www.bellevue.edu/student-support/tutoring-services/tutoring-and-study-skills</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linfield College</td>
<td>Subject specific tutoring in 13 subjects provided by Western eTutoring Consortium, includes live chat and asynchronous question answering</td>
<td><a href="https://www.etutoring.org/login.cfm?institutionid=248&amp;returnPage=">https://www.etutoring.org/login.cfm?institutionid=248&amp;returnPage=</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise State University</td>
<td>Subject specific tutoring provided by Western eTutoring Consortium, includes live chat and asynchronous question answering</td>
<td><a href="https://ecampus.boisestate.edu/students/support/etutoring/">https://ecampus.boisestate.edu/students/support/etutoring/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Leo University</td>
<td>Subject-specific tutoring available by appointment; Tutoring support also available through SmarThinking</td>
<td><a href="http://www.saintleo.edu/resources/learning-resource-center/tutortrac.aspx">http://www.saintleo.edu/resources/learning-resource-center/tutortrac.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty University</td>
<td>One-on-one, subject-specific tutoring available 24/7 through Tutor.com; Online Writing Center provides live and asynchronous assistance</td>
<td><a href="http://www.liberty.edu/online/free-online-tutoring/">http://www.liberty.edu/online/free-online-tutoring/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia College</td>
<td>Tutoring not provided for online courses; Writing Center staff are available to support local online students enrolled in certain courses through face-to-face instruction</td>
<td><a href="https://web.ccis.edu/Offices/AcademicResources/Tutoring.aspx">https://web.ccis.edu/Offices/AcademicResources/Tutoring.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="http://web.ccis.edu/Offices/AcademicResources/WritingCenter.aspx">http://web.ccis.edu/Offices/AcademicResources/WritingCenter.aspx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethel University</td>
<td>Tutoring in 14 subjects and a writing lab provided through SmarThinking; tutoring in some subjects is available 24/7</td>
<td><a href="https://www.betheluniversityonline.net/mbacollege2/smarthinking.htm">https://www.betheluniversityonline.net/mbacollege2/smarthinking.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Canyon University</td>
<td>Live, subject-specific tutoring is available 10-4 AM EST through ThinkingStorm, up to 10 hours per year is free; Online students can also book a tutor through the GCU Learning Lounge</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gcu.edu/LearningResources/Lounge/ThinkingStorm.php">http://www.gcu.edu/LearningResources/Lounge/ThinkingStorm.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana Wesleyan University</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivet Nazarene University</td>
<td>Tutoring in eight subjects and a writing lab provided by SmarThinking.</td>
<td><a href="http://graduate.olivet.edu/students">http://graduate.olivet.edu/students</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Institutional Websites
PROJECT EVALUATION FORM

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