Amid Dramatic Enrollment Growth, Robust Support Helps Increase Student Retention and Grades

Greatest Gains for At-Risk Students

A case study of the University of North Alabama (UNA) and Tutor.com
January 2023
Enrollment:
10,000+

Partner Since:
2021

Institution Type:
Public university offering diverse programs for on-campus, online, international, adult, dual-enrollment, and early college students

Most Popular Subjects:
Essay drop-off review
Algebra
Live writing help
Chemistry
Algebra-based physics

Access:
All UNA students can access Tutor.com on demand at any time via single sign-on through the University’s learning management system (LMS), Canvas®.
Growing Enrollment and a Need for Scaled Support

While higher education institutions nationwide are facing enrollment declines, the University of North Alabama (UNA) has experienced a surge of new students, with a 13 percent enrollment increase from 2021 to 2022.

To ensure that all UNA students would get the support to succeed and progress through their studies, UNA sought to expand and scale its support services in 2021. Allie Mills, Director of the UNA University Success Center, characterized her mandate: “Figure out tutoring.”

The University’s existing services weren’t comprehensive—and they weren’t ideal for students who couldn’t be on campus during daytime weekday hours. Mills described the initial offerings and areas of need: “We had peer tutoring for some 100-level classes, but the program wasn’t widespread, was staffed with whoever we could find, and didn’t have consistent training or hours.”

“We were looking for something that could be a service to all of our students, especially those off campus and online.” — Allie Mills
Director, UNA University Success Center

In addition to supporting just a handful of introductory courses, UNA’s in-person tutors weren’t available on weekends or past 6:00 p.m. on weekdays. This meant that only students who were on campus, available during traditional office hours, and able to secure time with the limited number of tutors benefited from the resource.

“We wanted to provide support for students who work or have extracurricular activities and aren’t even free until 8:00 or 9:00 p.m.—and we couldn’t pay student peer tutors to sit there until midnight,” said Mills.

The challenge: Provide round-the-clock support for all students, on and off campus

The goal: Drive student success and increase retention rates

The solution: Partner with Tutor.com to provide 24/7 individualized online tutoring, writing review, test prep, and career help to all students across the UNA community
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Key Support Program Features and Benefits

The program launched at the beginning of the fall 2021 term. Reflecting on the high usage rate, Mills recalled, “We came back five times to buy more session time.”

“Our Tutor.com program took off in a way I never could have imagined.”
— Allie Mills
Director, UNA University Success Center

Accounting for its popularity, Mills identified five critical Tutor.com program features:

1. **24/7 tutor availability**
   Allowing students to log on whenever their schedules permit

2. **On-demand access**
   Facilitating both planned and last-minute studying

3. **Session anonymity**
   Protecting students’ privacy and enabling them to seek help without fear of embarrassment

4. **Quality control**
   Maintaining high-quality expert help across thousands of sessions

5. **Wide variety of subject offerings**
   Ensuring every student can access support quickly in any topic

“I really think it helps to have someone available outside of regular school hours. Most of the time I don’t get to work on homework until well after the regular tutors are gone for the day. Thanks!”
— UNA sociology student
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One statistics student wrote in a post-session survey, “This was a really helpful resource, considering I am working late in the evening. I appreciate this being available 24/7.”

Another student who participated in a discrete mathematics session expressed, “I love this service so much! It is especially helpful when it’s short notice and you can’t get in contact with professors. My course only has office hours for two hours a week, and it can be hard to make them. I love that I can get individual help and instant feedback on my work.”

Similarly, a student who accessed live writing help shared, “I love the real-time feedback for last-minute fixes…. And it’s a Saturday. The fact that this service is also available on the weekend is amazing. I don’t know how I did last semester without this service, and I hope my school keeps offering it.”

Mills shared further insights into student usage trends: “We see with our male student athletes especially that they’re embarrassed to come and ask for help. If they use Tutor.com, nobody’s going to know.” She added, “It’s low stakes for students. They can log on at any time, get help from a quality tutor, ask their questions, and log off.”
Three Amazing Outcomes, with Noteworthy Gains for Students Who Are Struggling

To track the efficacy of the program, UNA has monitored retention, grades, and GPAs for Tutor.com users and non-users.

The results have been indisputably positive for Tutor.com users, consistently demonstrating measurable success for those who seek support.

One of the most exciting outcomes is the positive effect of Tutor.com engagement on students who were not in good standing.

1. Higher Retention Rates

From fall 2021 to spring 2022, 88 percent of Tutor.com users were retained, compared to 83 percent of non-users. Outcomes were even more impressive for learners who were not in good standing. When these students used Tutor.com, they were retained at a rate of 85 percent from fall 2021 to spring 2022. Their peers who didn’t engage with the program were retained at a rate of only 70 percent.

At-risk students who used Tutor.com had better retention rates than the overall population of students who did not use Tutor.com.

Retention Rates (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

- Non-Users
  - Overall: 83%
  - Students on academic warning, probation, etc. (not in good standing): 70%
- Users
  - Overall: 88%
  - Students on academic warning, probation, etc. (not in good standing): 85%
2. Higher Grades

Another benefit of the program: **Tutor.com users earned higher grades than non-users.**

This is reflected in DFWI rates (percentage of students with grades of D or F, withdrawals, or incompletes) among the macro-population of UNA students overall as well as the micro-populations of new freshmen, students enrolled in English courses, and students who were not in good standing.

In every group, there was a **lower DFWI rate for students who used Tutor.com.** Among students not in good standing, there was a five percentage-point difference in DFWI rates for Tutor.com users as compared to their peers who did not utilize the service.

**DFWI Rates (Fall 2021–Fall 2022)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Users</th>
<th>Users</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New freshmen</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students on academic warning, probation, etc. (not in good standing)</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EN 099 Basic English students</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
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</tbody>
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3. Higher GPAs

During the fall 2021 term, Tutor.com users achieved higher GPAs than non-users.

As with DFWI rates, Tutor.com engagement correlated with better results for students who were struggling. Among students not in good standing, Tutor.com users earned an average GPA of 3.03, while non-users earned a 2.63 on average.

What’s more, students not in good standing who used Tutor.com made significant gains that helped them earn GPAs nearly equivalent to those of the overall student population.

### GPA (Fall 2021)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Users</th>
<th>Users</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students on academic warning, probation, etc. (not in good standing)</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>3.03</td>
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Students have been quick to share their positive experiences in post-session surveys:

“I love my experience so far on this site! My tutor was extremely helpful in leading me in the right direction, but allowing me to solve the question on my own. Great experience, I am so happy my university has this tool!”
— UNA statistics student

“It really helps me that UNA offers this. I use it at least once a week!”
— UNA computer science student

“Excellent feedback and very helpful. This service is so awesome to have as a student and future nurse educator.”
— UNA nursing and healthcare student

“I am so glad this service is offered for students who are enrolled in online classes.”
— UNA microeconomics student

As one of the program’s foremost advocates, Mills wasn’t shy in echoing the sentiment: “I sing y’all’s praises all the time.”

Mills explained that the initial push at launch was to encourage students to use the program. Given student enthusiasm for and success with the program, the focus now is on promoting faculty engagement, and guiding faculty members in how to make the most of Tutor.com’s early-alert system to provide additional support for at-risk students.

With ongoing awareness-building initiatives, UNA plans to continue its upward trajectory, supporting increasing enrollment with 24/7 tutoring at scale—and improving outcomes for both the institution and its students.