



# Houston Community College

## News Release

**For Immediate Release – December 11, 2006**

**CONTACT: Sheila Briones**, Interim Public Information Officer: 713-718-5117 Cell: 281-685-8133

**Carole Keeney**, Interim Assoc. Vice Chancellor, Communications: 713-718-2335 Cell: 713-851-3069

### **Students get help with best of both high-tech and personal touch**

HOUSTON—While some prefer the convenience of “store-bought,” others swear that “home-grown” is best.

When Houston Community College faculty began looking around for a better way to provide online English tutoring for its students, they discovered a little bit of both would not only save the institution money, but provide better services.

Through a pilot project that combines state-of-the-art technology—and HCC’s own “home grown” faculty tutors—the college now has an online writing tutoring program that 1) provides better services, 2) saves the college thousands, and 3) has become so popular with students, it’s become a system-wide department.

While HCC has offered online tutoring in English for several years, the high cost of the program meant the services could be used only by selected groups of students. In addition, the tutors were from other institutions and not necessarily even HCC college faculty.

Looking for a new way, a team of HCC administrators, faculty and technicians found AskOnline, a company that provides the online “environment” and allows HCC to provide its own “content” system—the tutors.

“We were paying about \$27 dollars an hour to have student papers read and reviewed by tutors who reviewed papers for thousands of students from all over working for an online service,” says Doug Rowlett, instructional design coordinator, professor of English and one of the developers of the new online system. It was so simple: who could be better to provide tutoring to HCC students than HCC tutors and faculty members who know our students, our philosophy and our curriculum and assignments.”

That points out an indirect, but key, benefit of the “home grown” tutoring system: student retention. According to Mac Dougherty, founder and president of AskOnline, this kind of service is a innovative strategy, which provides more “personal” help, keeping college students on track to pass courses, instead of dropping out.

The program’s convenience and ease of use is popular with regular HCC tutoring staff and 23 of them now do part of their tutoring work online. Other HCC teaching faculty members are also getting onboard, doing the online tutoring in lieu of holding office hours.

“In just nine weeks, we’ve had over 12,000 hits to our online tutoring site, and we’ve provided services over 3,300 times, which includes reviewing 1,800 papers,” said Deborah Hardwick, one of the co-developers, a 15-year veteran of English tutoring at HCC’s Southwest College, and now director of the new Online Student Services Department.

“We are now receiving about 350-400 papers every week,” she said, “and, as the semester winds down, we expect that number to increase greatly. And we’ll be ‘open’ during HCC’s Holiday Mini-Session, from mid-December to mid-January.”

The end of semester usually means students must write a “term paper,” which many professors

require to pass the course. With its new English online services, students can submit the paper via the Internet to a tutor who will read it, make suggestions and point out problems (but not rewrite it) and send it back, generally within about 5 1/2 hours.

It's the perfect system for HCC's students, most of whom juggle work and family duties while attending school, said Rowlett. "It's available 24/7 so they can use it anytime, anywhere, without having to come to campus.

Besides the convenience of the online tutoring, the program also appeals to students because there is still some stigma associated with going to get help from a tutor.

Using a computer with a Flash-enabled browser, the students go to askonline.net, which houses the special HCC online tutoring Web site. From there, they can submit papers or ask questions. There are also Chat Rooms with a live, online tutor from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. and they can participate in online discussions about projects with fellow students.

The new system has something to help the tutors, as well. Sandra Vaughn, an HCC adjunct instructor of English as a Second Language at HCC Southwest, has developed a special "macro" file toolbar. Much like the "track changes" program in Microsoft Word, this customized toolbar allows the tutors to insert comments or notes directly into the text where corrections are needed. For example, there are special buttons for pointing out problems with subject/verb agreement, comma splices, spelling, slang and over 40 other possible problems.

"We offer guidance and point out where there are problems," says Hardwick, "but we always try to find something to praise in a paper." If there seems to be a problem too big to deal with online, however, the online tutor will refer the student to work one-on-one with a tutor at one of the HCC campuses.

Because the program has proven so cost-effective, HCC is able to offer online tutoring to students at all levels of English competency, from those in English as a Second Language classes all the way to taking sophomore literature.

"We work with anything written in English, says Hardwick, "and that includes papers for other disciplines, such as the sciences or social sciences. We work with the English, not the content, although we use tutors familiar with those subjects. In fact, Hardwick hopes to take the Online Tutoring up a notch as early as next semester by adding other disciplines in addition to English composition, such as mathematics, accounting, the sciences and social sciences.

HCC is one of 65 educational institutions, approximately 10 in Texas, using AskOnline, which has offices in Cambridge, MA. "What is unique about the HCC online tutoring program," says company founder and president Mac Dougherty, "is the scope of services it provides and the commitment it has made to serve students at all levels and all locations."

HCC is an open-admission, public institution of higher learning offering associate degrees, certificates, academic preparation, workforce training and lifelong learning opportunities that prepare individuals in our diverse communities for living and working in an increasingly international and technological society. HCCS is composed of six colleges serving Houston and surrounding areas.