

It's Academic

In March 2020, every single U.S. public school building closed. From kindergartens to law schools, instruction became a virtual experience as communities attempted to stop the spread of the coronavirus. While many statements can be made about what has changed since that fateful month, it undoubtedly normalized online learning.

The absence of in-person instruction turned some parents into teachers, while others reached out to tutors. Tutors were—and continue to be—heavily sought-after to avoid the "COVID slide," the learning loss that resulted from physical school closures. Local tutoring services struggled to move their offerings online, but one company was already up and running: TutorMe.

It all began in 2015 at the University of Southern California when co-founder Myles Hunter met future co-founder Alex Convery—not through mutual friends, but when Hunter began *tutoring him in accounting*.

Surprisingly, Convery had struggled to find effective tutoring options on campus. So, the duo began thinking through the process, and "in our gut" they felt online tutoring would become popular in the

With instant access to 15,000 tutors all over the world in 300 subjects, TutorMe's in-demand services are all the rage today in a pandemic world.

very near future. The duo concluded the sessions could be as enlightening—and perhaps even better—online.

In the years following graduation, they labored to develop exactly what they wished they had access to as students: a fast, easy platform to search and access a tutor at any time of day. Today, they offer that—and much more.

TutorMe's system is powered by a smart-matching engine that uses AI. Once a student is registered, they can connect with the most qualified tutor in their subject within 30 seconds. Students learn via video chat, screen-sharing, and virtual whiteboards, and can even access fully animated online test prep courses.

Tutors themselves, of which there are currently over 15,000 on the platform, provide genuine academic support, set their own schedules, and have online tools to provide the best student experience. Analytical dashboards are available for school administrators, enabling them to monitor usage and progress for their students. Each party plays a role in a student's success, much as they do in traditional, in-person learning.

Fittingly, TutorMe's first university partner was USC, which Hunter says was a pivotal part of the company's early success and certainly helped them get the attention of higher education tech services company Zovio, which acquired TutorMe in April 2019 and included the company in its suite of solutions almost a year before coronavirus hit the global education system.

Talk about good timing. Interest in online tutoring had been steadily growing in the years leading up to the COVID lockdowns. Tutoring has been a mainstay in countries like China and India, where college-bound students work with tutors to be the best in their class, not just to get help in certain subjects, and parents spend as much as 15% of their discretionary income to help with academic development.

Today, TutorMe features tutors from Yale, MIT, Berkeley, Princeton and Stanford.

While the company has seen consistent growth since its inception, nothing compares to the number of inquiries they saw once schools shut down. "Our team worked long hours to meet the demand," Hunter recalls. Yet, he adds, as many new clients enrolled, they also had huge numbers of teachers and college students apply to become tutors and supplement their income. "It was a well-balanced surge."

TutorMe's team ensures that there are always enough tutors to meet the demands of their clients. "In late March 2020, we had inbound requests from school districts, universities, and even companies, to reach out and help their employees with what's now the 'new normal.' This need happened overnight in a very accelerated way," he says. "What we expected to happen in terms of online adoption over the next few years happened overnight. COVID was the catalyst."

As the pandemic nears its one-year anniversary and schools gradually return to hybrid or in-person schooling, TutorMe's growth will clearly continue. "We've demonstrated that there's value there, and you don't need to sacrifice anything to use a platform like ours," Hunter says.

Today, TutorMe's client base is nearly double what it was a year ago. "It's been a snowball effect. Schools that weren't open to the idea of online tutoring before the pandemic now work with us and even refer us to other schools."

Students are looking for two things, Hunter says: convenience and real, academic help. TutorMe provides "a tutor that's going to help them develop and do well in that particular class. Allowing the students to better themselves academically as opposed to just giving answers."

TutorMe tutors work to ensure students are actually learning, grasping, and retaining their studies, which is crucial in STEM classes, like science and math. K-12 students request the most help in those subjects, while the top college student requests are accounting and statistics. In response to user requests, in 2020 TutorMe launched a writing lab where students can drop off their essays for review and feedback from an expert writing tutor.

Based on the explosive growth in demand for online tutoring, Hunter predicts there will be increased adoption of all things online. "In the U.S., we're going to see a newfound interest in e-learning and online educational tools. I think we're going to see a really great new ecosystem develop, where online learning tools will be utilized and shown to be effective at the school level. Online tutoring will be a big part of that, not just from schools, but from parents themselves when schools do not provide it. They'll spend more of their discretionary income to help their students succeed, and it's going to be a huge shift. The pandemic will be a driving factor in this adoption of online learning."

Hunter also says this summer, which may see a slight return to what was considered normal for students, will be critical. Parents and students will scramble to make up for lost time and erase any remnants of a COVID slide. "It's going to be a summer like no other." — By Victoria Kertz, California Business Journal

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