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Company assists professors in grading students

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by Anna Sanders

With teaching and research occupying most of their time, many college professors are hard-pressed to find the opportunity to give students adequate feedback on their assignments.

One Virginia-based company, EduMetry Inc., is looking to help them out with its Virtual-TA program, which allows professors to outsource students' papers to its employees in India, Singapore and Malaysia for assessment.

Although the company currently has no clients at NYU, its vice president of client services Tara Sherman said that this project is extremely valuable for helping students learn.

"The best way to encourage the development of [writing] skills is through written assignments, and the reality is that very few professors are able to provide the necessary feedback to really support [student's improvement]," she said.

Assessors, who are required to have at least a masters degree, are provided with syllabi, lecture notes, course materials and rubrics in order to give the paper feedback that is structured on the professor's own expectations.

"If they don't have something, then we can help them develop it, but it's critical that it's customized to them," Sherman said.

She emphasized that Virtual-TAs do not assign grades — that is left completely up to the professors.

Holly Suarez who teaches online for West Hills Community College said that the Virtual-TA program has helped her retain students and she said that she has seen marked improvement.

"Students are appreciative of the detailed feedback," she said. "Many have made comments that they are thankful to get this kind of feedback, and I would recommend this to a fellow professor."

But many, like NYU professor of higher education Ann Marcus, say they don't believe that a third party should even be in charge of giving feedback for papers; rather, it should be left to professors or their teaching assistants from within the university.

"The idea, on the face of it, is a very unsettling one," Marcus said. "Maybe there might be some very straightforward introductory courses where this would be possible. But most college work should have issues of interpretation, argumentation, multiple perspectives, etc."

Instead of coming up with alternatives to professor-student relations, she said, universities should work on improving their current situations.

"I hope that we can imagine a future where all colleges have enough faculty to teach courses of manageable size or, alternatively, be able to have teaching assistants — an excellent way to prepare the next generation of teachers," Marcus said.

CAS freshman John Maloney agreed, and said he feels more comfortable with someone affiliated with NYU commenting on his papers.

"I think that the system they have now, with the TAs working for the schools, is a lot better," he said. "Just because

there's more reliability and they're directly linked to NYU."

Floyd M. Hammack, Steinhardt associate professor of educational sociology and higher education, called the project a "lousy idea."

"I much prefer that the graders would be in class so that they knew what discussions had taken place, what issues students were struggling with, etc.," he said.

But Stern freshman Kevin Mun said that he sees the advantages of the project.

"I think it's good because [it's] less biased and it gives [professors] more time to do other things," he said. "Just in general, I think it's a good idea."

However, Mun said he was glad that professors would still assign grades.