College Access

Amanda Ochsner

Welcome to Research Roundup. The purpose of this recurring column is to make the vast amount of research related to youth and families accessible to you. To match the theme of this issue, this Research Roundup column focuses on college and career readiness and in particular games that research proves help youth to gain an understanding of the college admissions process.

Learn how games help youth prepare for the college admissions process.

Research suggests that a critical reason why many students do not attend college is not that they are not qualified, but because they lack the knowledge and skills to navigate the process of applying to college and for financial aid. The national guidance counselor to student ratio hovers around 1:450, but in many districts, particularly in urban areas, that ratio can be closer to 1:800.[1] Many schools and communities are consistently under-resourced when it comes to providing quality college guidance, leaving thousands of students across the nation unaware of their postsecondary options.

Over the past several years, the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC) has committed to developing programs and conducting research aimed at understanding how games can be used to cultivate college knowledge and elevate college-going outcomes for low-income and underserved youth. While much of our work is in schools with teachers and counselors, we believe that as brokers of information for young people, librarians can play a powerful role helping low-income youth learn about opportunities for college and financial aid. The following outlines two games—*Application Crunch* and *Mission: Admission*—as well

as an online digital platform that library staff and other information brokers may find useful in their efforts to engage and empower students with information to aid them in navigating the college application process.

Application Crunch

Engagement Type: Card Game
Number of Players: 3–4
Play Time: 60–90 minutes

Application Crunch is a card game designed through a collaborative effort among game designers from USC's Game Innovation Lab, researchers from the Pullias Center for Higher Education, and students and teachers in California. The game is designed to help high school students become familiar with the college application process. Players take on the role of a high school student who has to figure out how to balance time between academics, extracurricular activities, work, and service, all while competing for scholarships and acceptance to colleges. Player goals include getting accepted, acquiring money to pay for tuition and expenses, and developing a character who is college ready. The game is designed to engage students in conversations that help them become familiar with college vocabulary and to learn about the features of successful college applications.

For example, students learn about the differences between types of colleges, the importance of scholarships and financial aid, and the value of extracurricular and service activities.

If you work with low-income high school youth in your library and would like to receive a complimentary copy of the *Application Crunch* card game, email Diane Flores at dianeflo@rossier.usc.edu. Please refer to this article in your email.

Mission: Admission

Engagement Type: Online Video Game and iPad App
Number of Players: 1
Play Time: 10 minutes each day for one week

Mission: Admission is the digital follow-up to *Application Crunch*. Initially developed for Facebook, *Mission: Admission* is now available online in web browsers such as Chrome and Firefox, and can be downloaded for iPads in the App Store. Just like *Application Crunch*, *Mission: Admission* was designed to help students develop knowledge about successful practices for completing college and financial aid applications.

At the beginning of a game of *Mission: Admission* players select a character to guide through the process of applying to college. They choose between three randomly generated characters, each with a unique appearance, family income, and career aspiration. With limited but regenerating energy points, players choose how to delegate their character's time. Successful strategies achieve balance between leveling up the character's academic and extracurricular abilities, requesting letters of recommendation, mastering college essays, and meeting the requirements of college applications and scholarships. Players must keep track of schools and scholarships they want to apply to and get their applications submitted before the deadlines, which occur throughout the one-week game period.

Learn More about Games and College Access

* **First in the World: Improving access to college through games, technology, and social media**. http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/fitw-monograph/
* **Postsecondary Play: The role of games and social media in higher education.** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
* **Ready or Not, Here We Play: The impact of Collegeology Games on college readiness, access and student success.** http://bit.ly/readyornot_hereweplay

Learning Goals for *Application Crunch* and *Mission: Admission:*

- Build college-related vocabulary
- Prioritize how to allocate time toward college preparation
- Learn to experiment with college-going strategies
- Increase understanding of college costs and financial aid opportunities
- Stimulate discussion around college knowledge with peers

Get Schooled

Engagement Type: Online platform
Reaches: More than 5 million so far
Content: Articles, quizzes, surveys, and more

The Pullias Center's current research, with support of the US Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education's First in the World (FITW) program [P116F140097], explores whether *Mission: Admission* is scalable. We want to know, can we design an intervention that any interested high school can access and implement in ways that help their students gain the knowledge they need to successfully apply for college and financial aid? Then, how can we pass those research findings on to schools, libraries, and other spaces where youth spend their time in an easy-to-understand way that empowers them to support students?

To launch an intervention that engages students, we teamed up with the Get Schooled Foundation, a group that has extensive expertise in engaging schools and students. Founded through a partnership with Viacom and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Get Schooled is a nonprofit organization that capitalizes on the media and popular culture to inspire and motivate teens on their educational journey through high school and into higher education. They believe that engaging and motivating today's youth can be as simple as tapping into the sizzle they love while delivering the substance they need to be successful. They use the messengers (celebrities, powerful peers) and the means (mobile, social, web) that resonate with youth, to meet students where they are and deliver resources, tools, and support to help students meet their educational goals. Their website—www.getschooled.com—has reached more than 5 million students in more than 10 thousand schools. ◼

Reference
1. Corwin, Zoe B. 2012. Academia. edu. Report. http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/gaming_the_system_final.pdf (accessed May 09, 2016).

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