Research Progress Report
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In the last decade, the environment surrounding college admissions has entered the Internet age. Technologies and websites such as the Common App and College Confidential present applicants with new resources and challenges as they navigate an increasingly competitive process. This summer I researched and undertook an educational documentary film considering the impact of this change in the admissions landscape on the multiple actors it principally involves: students, parents, admissions professionals, and educators.

Material engagement with the project’s background began by conducting library and archival research into the history of college admissions in the United States, in order to situate the admissions developments of the past decade into a broader historical context of admissions practices. On-camera interviews were then conducted with student applicants, high school counselors, college admissions professionals, and independent application consultants, including extensive and helpful conversations with the founders of College Confidential, the largest online forum for college admissions in the world. Interviews with students and applicants took the form of structured discussions, concentrating on how Internet resources had affected their experience of the admissions process — and later their academic interests in the humanities, sciences, or other fields once at college — while interviews with admissions professionals focused on broader questions concerning adapting to the consequences of these digital evolutions in the admissions landscape.

With interviews and the production stage nearing completion, the project will be entering the editing and then distribution phases after the remaining interviews are completed this fall. The collected interviews and archival footage are presently being reviewed, analyzed, and collated to assemble the documentary film. Once complete, the documentary will be released for free online, and distributed through educational screenings and discussions.

These collected interviews shed an interesting perspective on the effect rendered on the key stakeholders of the college admissions world in the Internet age. Many interviewees reported that while Internet resources provided ease of access to a greater variety of colleges and universities, in many cases this access created a problematic cycle of students applying to a large number of schools, which in turn increases competition, leading future students to apply to even more schools to increase their chances of admission. Likewise, counselors suggested that the twin factors of shrinking career income opportunities and rising competition for placement at elite universities are limiting factors for many of their students who are initially interested in pursuing a traditional liberal arts curriculum. Finally, the founders of College Confidential have detailed the unforeseen impact their site has had on college admissions preparation and the role it now plays, having been purchased by a major educational resources conglomerate.

This project has sought to catalogue the experiential consequences of a novel development in higher education – a development that, in many cases, has not been previously considered, and whose effects are just beginning to become apparent after a
decade of radical evolutions in the proliferation and profusion of Internet resources in the area of college admissions.