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Using Play to Engage First-Year Students with the University Library

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Kick-Off Clemson is an annual event coordinated and sponsored by Clemson University Student Affairs for incoming first-year students.

Kick-Off Clemson includes programs and activities during students’ first week on campus before the academic semester begins to help students make academic and social connections.

Clemson Libraries participated in Kick-Off Clemson by hosting “Arcade @ the Library,” where students could engage in play to meet new people and become familiar with library spaces, services, and collections.

Clemson Libraries had not been involved in Kick-Off Clemson prior to this event and had not sponsored an event to welcome first-year students since 2007.

Games and Play in Libraries

Games and play in libraries date back to the 1850s (Nicholson, 2013).

The use of play and toys were recognized to help preschool children as reading tools in public libraries (Cawthorne, 1975).

Board games allowed for librarians to think about gaming as a communal experience helping with different literacy skills (Hoenke, 2019).

Gamification, or “the application of game-play mechanics in non-game settings” (Danforth, 2011, p. 84), is used in libraries to help students learn information literacy skills and with programming efforts for teens (Danforth, 2011).

Gamification is also prevalent in libraries for orientation of services and spaces to new users (Brigham, 2015).

The use of play and gamification can be intertwined in the learning process, as games can provide an authentic learning experience for learners, can engage learners, can support social and life skills, and can promote information literacy skills (Becker, Stan, Pistolis, Harries, & Mayer, 2009).

Background

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Overview of Arcade

Arcade @ the Library was held two days before the fall semester began and took place from 3:30-5:30 PM. The theme of the event was inspired by the 1980’s and the Pac Man arcade game. There were 10 stations that students could visit to receive door prize tickets. The tickets served as students’ entries for door prize drawings, which included Airpods and Bose Bluetooth speakers. The more students participated in the games, the more chances they had to win prizes.

Outreach Goals:

- Reduce library anxiety
- Promote collections awareness
- Promote library services awareness

Students were given a map of the games available to them. Students were directed to the Services Desk, where a volunteer gave them a cinch bag to put any prizes and tickets in. Students had the opportunity to visit the following stations around the library:

1. **Puzzle Station and StickTogether Art** - Special Collections and Archives made puzzles students could cut out of paper using primary source images. Students could also participate in a StickTogether art project

2. **5 in a Row/Bingo Station** - We don’t have a bingo license on campus, so we made a 5 in a Row game that included library services and had stampers

3. **Giant Bowling Station** - An inflatable giant bowling set was ordered and we used print journals to make the lanes

4. **Board Games Station** - We used games we already had in the collection, but also purchased a giant Jenga-like set, a giant checkers set, and a giant Connect 4 game

5. **Paper Airplane Station** - Using construction paper and painter’s tape on the floor to make a runway, students created their own planes and competed against one another

6. **Trivia Station** - Trivia questions were created through a collaborative process using Google Slides. Categories included Clemson University History, facts about Clemson University, diversity at Clemson University, traditions at Clemson University, and general trivia questions

7. **Map Games** - The Center for Geospatial Technologies (GIS) of Clemson University set up map-related board games and video games, including Settlers of Catan and Minecraft

8. **Green Screen and Digital Studio** - Students could use a green screen in the digital studio with 1980s photo booth props and could choose their backgrounds. Students were emailed their photos in the subsequent weeks following the event

9. **Video Games Station** - To advertise that the library had video games and consoles to check out, participants could play and use these items at this station

10. **Where are You From? Station** - Using an international and national map, participants could mark where they were from using stickers

Resources

- We made flyers and signs using Canva and Adobe Spark
- Our budget was $1160
  - Grand Prizes: Airpods and Bose Bluetooth Speakers
  - Incentives for students: cinch bags and laptop stickers
  - Supplies and decorations
- Food provided by partner organization cost ~$500
- We had 25 Student Leader Volunteers from the Kick-Off Clemson organizing body
- We had 25 library employee volunteers their time to help the Student Leader Volunteers
- Although we had many volunteers, we would have liked to have had more help
- We reused games we had in circulation and any office supplies we already had to supplement decorations

Impact

Around 250 students attended the event

Volunteers made observations

Debrief/reflective session was held after the event

Received positive feedback from our Student Affairs partner and employee volunteers

Feedback board asked what students liked best and their responses are below in a word cloud:

- Reduce library anxiety
- Promote collections awareness
- Promote library services awareness

References

To view handouts, references, images, and additional resources, select the hyperlinked words that are underlined and in blue