College Esports: Grassroots Hobby Turned Unregulated Industry

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COLLEGE ESPORTS: GRASSROOTS HOBBY

TURNED UNREGULATED INDUSTRY

By

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ABSTRACT

When traditional sports teams formed on college campuses, it took decades before they looked anything like college sports teams do today. College football is noted as beginning in 1869 (Parlier, 2022), NCAA formed in 1906, and the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision launched in 1978 (NCAA, 2023). In 2009, one of the first recorded college esports matches took place. In 2014, Robert Morris Universty started the first varsity-level college esports program. Now, there are an estimated 500 college esports programs amassing thousands of student participants. It took decades, if not a century, for college football to achieve these numbers. For an area that is seeing exponential growth, there is a lack of resources, structure, and research in college esports. College esports is expanding rapidly due to the digital age, and its stakeholders struggle to keep up. The research involves a review of existing literature and current regulations as well as conducting a series of one-on-one interviews with six college esports professionals. College esports lacks a governing entity (like the NCAA) causing a lack of agreed upon standards. The landscape is currently fragmented; there is little to no consensus to be seen on the basic regulations, structure, and terminology. Interview subjects noted frustrations with inconsistencies in competition regulation and nonstandardized models of operation for esports organizations. In order for college esports to achieve its full potential, stakeholders need to find a way to standardize operations and regulations surrounding competition, compensation, expectations, and eligibility.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Activision Blizzard Collegiate
CCL	College Call of Duty
ECAC	East Coast Athletic Conference
FSC	Florida Southern College
ITC	Intent to Compete
LTU	Lawrence Technological University
MiHSEF	Michigan High School Esports Federation
NACE	National Association of College Esports
NAECAD	National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors
NAIA	National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NCSA	Next College Student Athlete
NECC	National Esports Collegiate Conference
NIL	Name-Image-Likeness
NJCAAE	National Junior College Athletic Association Esports
OSU	Ohio State University
RMU	Robert Morris University
RSAA	Riot Scholastic Association of America
RSO	Registered Student Organization
SLICE	Student League for Intercollegiate Esports
SPIN	Stay Plugged In
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UBC	University of British Columbia
UCI	University of California at Irvine
UH	University of Hawaii
UMD	University of Maryland
UST	University of St. Thomas
VOICE	Voice of Intercollegiate Esports
WHAC	Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

RAPID GROWTH

An esport is a multiplayer video game that is played competitively, often for spectators, either over a local area network or online. Defining esports is an ongoing debate, but this is typically the most simple, accepted definition (McClellan et al., 2020, p. 2). The most common types of esports are first-person shooters and multiplayer online battle arenas, played typically with teams, last-person-standing battle royales, multiplayer online battle arenas, online card games, fighting, strategy, and games modeled after traditional sports, all of which can be played individually or with teams of varying sizes. Some of the most well-known games in college esports currently include *Call of Duty, Rocket League, League of Legends*, and *VALORANT*. As video games are updated and new ones created on an ongoing basis, college esports game popularity shifts regularly.

Esports is a rapidly growing industry, especially in recent years. Esports was estimated to generate $1.38 billion in revenue by the end of 2022 with a year-on-year growth of 16.4%. By 2025, global revenues are expected to exceed $1.86 billion (Newzoo, 2022). At the collegiate level, there were an estimated 500 collegiate esports programs either structured as a club or varsity program in 2019. This number does not include esports programs that may be housed in other areas of institutions or those that operate as registered student organizations (RSOs) (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 23). Though the majority of North American college esports programs are three or more years old, approximately 25% have been in existence for a year or less as of 2022 (Postell & Narayan, 2022).

COLLEGE ESPORTS HISTORY

Varsity-level support for collegiate esports is pinpointed to have begun in 2014 when

Robert Morris University (RMU) started offering esports scholarships (Jin, 2021, p. 269). Small

to medium-sized, lesser-known institutions saw this as an opportunity to compete on a larger

scale against more notable institutions (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 21).

Following RMU, Maryville University began its program in 2015 and was the first to

offer full scholarships (D. Clerke, personal communication, September 20, 2022). The following

year, the University of California at Irvine (UCI) started its varsity esports program, making it

the first large-scale public university to have one. Though these are official programs, college

esports has a grassroots history that goes back even further. One of the earliest, if not the earliest,

collegiate esports match was recorded to have taken place in February of 2009 between

Princeton and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in a game of *StarCraft*. Seeing

the success of collegiate *StarCraft*, the University of Texas at Austin followed suit and

established an esports RSO in 2010 (Jin, 2021, pp. 264-266, 270).

WHY ESPORTS?

Many people ask why institutions of higher learning should care about esports and what

incentivizes those who do. Esports can provide institutions with increased enrollment, revenue,

student career opportunities, recognition, and inclusivity. Esports is seen as being cost-effective

because when compared to other recruitment initiatives, it is less expensive to implement and

yields a high chance of getting sponsor, donor, or partner dollars in return (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 21-22). Just under 64% of respondents in a study conducted by Esports Foundry had secured financial sponsorships in 2022 (Postell & Narayan, 2022). One director in research conducted by Harris et al. (2022) said that college esports gives small colleges a way to win national titles which generates invaluable publicity for that institution.

Dr. Charles M. Hueber, dean of students at Schreiner University and co-founder of the Student League for Intercollegiate Esports (SLICE), says that esports, when implemented properly, can take some institutions from surviving to thriving. Hueber says before developing esports programs, institutions should take three crucial steps. The first step is to develop a committee of both students and faculty to answer questions about how your esports program should operate. Second, develop a solid, thorough plan. Do not rush into esports and make sure there is buy-in from your community. Third, consult an expert. Many institutions make mistakes because of a lack of knowledge about the collegiate esports space. Time and money can be saved by having esports experts evaluate the climate and particular campus situation (Hueber, n.d.).

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

The purpose of this chapter is to explain and describe the methods used to investigate the current state and future of college esports by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How is college esports currently structured/operated?

RQ2: What issues does this structure/operation cause, and how does it affect those involved?

To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews from September 2022 to December 2022. I developed my core interview questions after an initial round of research into the subject and discussion with college esports stakeholders (see Appendix D for the question guide). Semi-structured interviews are a common strategy to collect qualitative data in which the interviewee has a high level of participation. By using semi-structured interview approach, it allowed me to ask other questions based on where the predetermined ones led the dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). On May 12, 2022, the Institutional Review Board at the University of Mississippi determined my research as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

I recruited interviewees through my knowledge of and connections in the college esports space. After receiving responses, I scheduled and conducted the interviews virtually via Google Meet. I then analyzed the interviews in conjunction with esports literature to determine current issues within the space and common themes in responses.

POPULATION

Interviewees had to be employees of esports organizations with stakes in college esports. Five out of six interviews were with directors of college esports programs with one outlier from a third-party organization that works with college and high school esports. Table 1.0 lists participants and their position respective to college esports.

SAMPLE

Purposive sampling was used (Robinson, 2013) and identified professionals in the space that were viewed as experienced in regard to college esports. Their contact information was collected via social media or their institutions' websites. Eleven (six men and five women) esports professionals were contacted and six (five men and one woman) responded for this study. Qualitative interviews can be conducted effectively with a range of participant numbers. For Creswell (1998), five to 25 interviews are ideal. Morse (1994) indicates that at least six interviews should be conducted. In general, it is acceptable for a researcher to conduct interviews until little to no new information emerges.

ANALYSIS

Primarily, a template approach, tagging segments of data then sorting them by content into categories to identify major themes, was used for analysis. This was complemented by an editing approach in which during the organizaton of the data, emerging patterns were identified (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The analysis of the research is presented throughout the text in the form of paraphrased comments and direct quotations in response to certain topics. The dominant theme of the findings is an overall sense of uncertainty about the future of college esports and concern for the current state. Participants all noted similar issues within the landscape, but there were varying levels of agreement on how to approach these issues.

Table 1.0 Interview Subjects

Name	Current	Previous	Date/Length
Sergio Brack	Esports Director (UMD), Board of Directors (VOICE, NECC), Co-Founder (CCL), Esports Talent Acquisition (Cxmmunity)	Esports Director (Ottawa University), President (Ole Miss Esports), Call of Duty competitor (High School and College)	9/6/22, 45min
Nyle Sky Kauweloa	Esports Director (UH), Board of Directors (VOICE)	N/A	9/11/22, 66min
Adam Antor	Esports Director (Florida Southern), Competition Council (NACE)	Board Member (MiHSEF), Head Esports Coach (West Catholic High School, Aquinas College)	9/20/22, 49min
Daniel Clerke	Esports Director (Maryville), Board of Directors (VOICE)	CEO (Enemy Esports), General Manager (eUnited)	9/20/22, 51min
Clarence Collins	Director of Operations (Carolina Esports Hub, SPIN, Charlotte Phoenix)	U.S. Army Esports, Halo competitor (High School)	9/23/22, 55min
Danielle Sirekis	Head Esports Coach (LTU), Board of Directors (NACE), Chair (WHAC Esports)	Awards Committee, Eligibility Enforcement Committee (NACE)	12/8/22, 60min

CHAPTER 3: THE STUDENT

COMPETITORS

In answering RQ1, responses from the interviewees indicated that college esports attracts students who are not interested in athletics or other activities and provides a way to be engaged in their institutions. Students involved in esports often note a greater sense of community and pride at their institution compared to before they were involved at esports. Some esports players identify with being a "student-athlete" and have aspirations of competing professionally. This can involve skill development and a rigorous training schedule, as seen in traditional athletics. Esports players and traditional athletes both have the opportunity to grow their skills in leadership, effective communication, and teamwork through the pursuit of competitive excellence (Jin, 2021, p. 270). Ryan Arnett, former esports competitor and current esports professional, recalls the importance of skills development when he was competing in *Player Unknown Battlegrounds* for Hog Pen Esports: "We overcame any hardships and obstacles by focusing on our common objective of getting better as a team" (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 75).

Collegiate esports players who compete at the highest level are commonly known as "varsity" players (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 24). Daniel Clerke, the director of esports at the University of Maryville, is explicit in defining esports as "the pursuit of excellence with video games as a conduit." These varsity members have practice schedules, train regularly, and have to meet competitive and academic standards. This can create an environment of high stress with

long hours, a potentially isolating lifestyle, and the demand to meet expectations from coaches, fans, sponsors, and others on top of the requirements of being a student. Though former competitive player Arnett did not play for his institution, he said his professional team was dedicated to practicing 3-5 hours a day, six days a week:

We made individual sacrifices at times, such as putting in long hours, missing social gatherings, and staying on weekend nights. All players on the team had freedom to sacrifice. We weren't kids with nothing better to do. We made our choices knowing those sacrifices, and I do not regret making those choices (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 12, 75).

Like student-athletes, esports players are students with academic commitments and physical and mental care needs. As gaming, specifically online gaming, has known issues with a discriminatory culture (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 86-87), esports players of marginalized identities may need extra resources in navigating the space and maintaining their mental health. Arnett says this behavior is less prevalent in league/tournament play due to the threat of repercussions, but it still happens (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 78). Clarence Collins, director of operations at the Carolina Esports Hub, believes this is one reason why in-person play is important because it does not allow players to "hide behind a screen" and be conflict-avoidant when it comes to important discussions and issues (personal communication, September 23, 2022).

Some esports players are prone to looking at a screen for hours without stretching, hydrating, eating, sleeping, or socializing. Though one can socialize through video games, Arnett notes that in-person communication is important in maintaining health and wellness (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 78). In his experience in the professional scene, Clerke says he often encountered people who were socially inept due to spending several hours a day alone playing video games.

This is why he advocates for college esports to take place in a live, in-person environment where players can learn important social skills.

According to Clerke, Maryville Esports also pushes its players to be active members of society by requiring them to help with local high school esports initiatives as well as other community service and volunteer opportunities. Similarly, Sergio Brack, director of esports at the University of Maryland (UMD), said Terp Esports' players are required to take part in philanthropy events on campus as well as help with local high school esports students and programs (personal communication, September 6, 2022).

Socializing and involvement are important to keep players mentally well outside of gaming and within gaming. Providing players with proper techniques to handle stress, frustration, and pressure is critical (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 78-81).

There are also multiple structures in place to keep students physically healthy. Clerke talked about how Maryville provides players with diet recommendations, sleep schedules, and team fitness sessions. According to Brack, Terps Esports players must exercise with their team twice a week. They are also provided with trainers on campus to help with injury assessment and show players proper techniques to avoid developing arthritis, carpal tunnel, and other gaming-related health issues (Brack). Arnett says universities can go even further in helping players avoid poor physical health by providing proper equipment, such as blue-light protection glasses, gaming chairs that support good posture, and desks and peripherals at different heights and sizes for different players. Along with mandating exercise, esports programs can also implement required stretch breaks during practices. According to Arnett, an investment in a player's physical health is also an investment in their mental health (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 80-81).

COMMUNITY

Though esports is, in nature, a competitive environment, it is important to not lose sight of other pillars of these programs - such as content creation and community. Esports programs are sometimes split into two pillars, varsity and club. As aforementioned, varsity would be those who are competing at the highest level often with rigid practice schedules of 10 or more hours a week. These are the typical scholarship players sometimes with aspirations to go professional, if not already competing at the professional level. Club teams still compete but usually on a less competitive level with players choosing their level of time commitment. This creates an environment not seen in traditional athletics for all levels of skill to compete against other institutions which distinguishes it from intramural sports. The club side is also where general members may reside, such as casual gamers, hobbyists, and fans (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 43-44). Maryville is one of those programs split this way, but Clerke is adamant that the community side is not undervalued. Clerke said if he could create a scholarship, it would be for community management because club leaders deserve the same amount of support that the varsity level gets.

Students that put the extra time into managing the community deserve a substantial scholarship. It's essentially a full-time job. When there's someone that is essentially maintaining a 2000-3000 person club at some of these large institutions, and getting nothing in return, that's very unhealthy to me.

Without administration buy-in or support, many college esports programs begin with students, sometimes a single student, being willing to put in the time to build community and take on a leadership role, said Adam Antor, director of esports at Florida Southern College (FSC) (personal communication, September 20, 2022). These students will then have to constantly

promote their efforts and show significant growth and interest before typically becoming visible to the administration. This leads college esports to historically be dependent on student labor. Nyle Sky Kauweloa, director of esports at the University of Hawaii (UH), believes these organizations, even after obtaining budgets, still rely heavily on student labor, which often leads to a lot of members feeling exploited or unrecognized for their effort and commitment (personal communication, September 11, 2022). On the other hand, there is also a belief that, for college esports programs to be successful, it must be largely student-run to prevent the administrators from overhauling the program in ways the students dislike (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 39).

> Brack, like Clerke, believes that dedicated students deserve scholarships.
> Sometimes I gave scholarships to a really, really good player, but that's all they were. They weren't a good student. They weren't a leader within the program. I'd rather find students that go above and beyond to make esports successful on campus, not because they want anything out of it, but because they care about it and want to see it thrive.

Brack calls these people the "champions" of esports programs.

Video games, including esports, act as a cultural force that influences individuals in many different ways in regard to identity and relationships (Jin, 2021, pp. 306-307). Esports does this by providing a unique digital space in which participants locate themselves in a community with which they identify. The relationships that come out of this space traverse physical and digital worlds. Because of this, esports players not only identify with a community but sometimes even realign themselves due to the influence of the community (Xue et al, 2019). Part of their identity becomes defined by the activity of college esports (Kauweloa, 2019). Arnett compares the sense of identity he felt from his esports relationships to the bonds he had with his fraternity brothers (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 75).

Active participants in communities often feel like they receive noticeable benefits from their involvement. These benefits include but are not limited to being provided support from fellow community members, inclusiveness (with a special nod to subcommunities by genre of game), and sharing not only similar interests with people but also values (Jin, 2021, p. 307). This is why community building can be a crucial, deciding factor when it comes to the success of an esports program. Collins believes that the foundation for anything esports related is going to be built on relationships and the communities in which those relationships form. "If you want to find more success, you'll push for the community." This community-centric approach is what he used to build and maintain the United States Army Esports, Stay Plugged In (SPIN), Carolina Esports Hub, and Charlotte Phoenix.

Esports programs often see a peak in activity at the beginning of semesters due to new and old faces returning for tryouts. The University of Hawaii often capitalizes on this activity by immediately starting community events following the tryout period in hopes to keep community retention, according to Kauweloa. "Anything that taps into a diverse range of interactions that allows students to understand that this is not principally just about competition."

CONTENT CREATION

As aforementioned and backed by Kauweloa, college esports is heavily dependent on student labor which includes content creation for marketing and promotion. Content creation is the process of creating entertaining or educational material to be expressed through any medium or channel, especially digital content for social media (Lenkert, 2020). Danielle Sirekis, head esports coach at Lawrence Tech University, says that she wants to develop a scholarship based on esports leadership with experience in marketing, graphic design, casting, and streaming, but it is hard to get her institution to understand the need for one (personal communication, December

8, 2022). Kauweloa says content creation is such a staple in his program that he actually views his program as a media, entertainment, and arts program more than a competitive one, and Clerke emphasizes that without content creation, esports programs will suffer in regard to visibility.

Student labor, specifically in the area of content creation, benefits institutions in a number of ways. Student production of content typically increases the quality of and legitimizes the university's brand via esports. Esports students may produce podcasts, graphics, live streams, videos, and articles for the sole purpose of building or expanding an esports community at their institution, but at the same time, the institution directly benefits because the content has the potential to increase the university's brand value and expand brand perception via esports. Other benefits may include the use of student content for student recruitment, as well as a tool to launch new student learning initiatives. Often these students not only produce this content on their own but also manage the distribution channels, especially Twitch (Harris et al, 2022).

Though there are competitive scholarships and prize winnings, many student media esports workers are rarely and minimally compensated for their work, which is a direct benefit to their programs and institutions. If what these students do is considered important, there are those who wonder why they are not compensated. Many students see their participation as career-guaranteeing though the esports industry is one of the most unstable in regard to employment. Institutions may use this career-building mentality to their benefit to reinforce the idea that free labor is needed in order for success, as often seen in unpaid internships (Harris et al, 2022). Research shows social media production, especially streaming, is a key component of being a professional player. If students see content production for collegiate esports as an

investment in their prospective careers, that effort could actually serve as more beneficial for developing their personal brand (Kauweloa, 2019).

Collins says that every player's first responsibility is to be a player, the second is to be a streamer, and the third is to be a content creator. He emphasizes the importance of a personal brand through the lens that a person cannot be a professional player or collegiate player forever. If a collegiate player does not go professional or a professional player leaves the space or is dropped, having an established brand outside of being a competitor can help them after the fact. Brack agrees with the importance of collegiate players investing in a personal brand by saying that if collegiate players aren't streaming or making content, they're doing a disservice to themselves (Brack, 2022b).

CHAPTER 4: STRUCTURE

PROGRAM NECESSITIES

Though esports experts all have different opinions on what it takes to have a successful collegiate esports program, they all mostly agree on one component - a facility. A facility, commonly called an esports arena, is often considered a necessity for a functional collegiate esports program. Facilities typically include high-speed, wired internet access, gaming computers and consoles, and peripherals (keyboard, mouses, controllers, headsets, microphones, monitors, etc.) (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 46).

- "If you're claiming to be an esports program, and you don't have, or you're not planning to build a facility, it's going to be really tough to recruit any kind of esports talent." - Brack

- "Logistically, if you're running an esports program, I think that having a facility is paramount." - Clerke

- "You need computers and a space. It gives them (the students) their own place to belong on campus." - Sirekis

- "Players will be drawn to who has the coolest esports arena with the best community that comes and watches them play." - Collins

Another item that was listed as a necessity by two participants was esports scholarships, but there were more conflicts to that answer than the almost unanimous agreement on the

importance of a facility. In 2022, Esports Foundry found that 69.3% of participants in their study were offering at least partial scholarships compared to 92.9% of participants who have facilities. Of the 7.1% of participants who did not have facilities, 44.4% were currently in the process of developing a facility (Postell & Narayan, 2022). UH focuses on esports research providing students with a pathway to the industry through collaborations with professional esports entities and businesses. Kauweloa says he never intended to build a "championship" program but instead is more career- and research-oriented while still being rather successful in competition. Antor put it like this, "What every school needs is going to vary. Some organizations have the pull of student involvement and community, but don't have scholarships or coaching. On the other side, you have private universities that can offer full rides and full-time coaching, but they're not going to be able to give students a D1 [division one] experience or certain majors. I think that every program needs to talk to students truthfully about what they have to offer."

RQ2 asked how college esports is structured/operated and how it affects those involved. The interview subjects described a variety of structures that operate differently, but mostly still needed the same tools to be successful regardless of where their program was housed at their institution.

CLUB

It is important to distinguish between student-led esports clubs that go unrecognized or unsupported by their institution and clubs that are supported and serve as a less competitive, more casual level of esports at institutions with already established and highly competitive programs (Baker & Holden, 2018). Research indicates that 45% of collegiate esports programs are operated as clubs (Pizzo et al, 2019) while others speculate that the percentage may be even higher (Baker & Holden, 2018).

Many collegiate esports programs get their starts as clubs or RSOs and then are turned into varsity-level programs once the university makes the decision to enter the space. Institutions often begin their involvement in esports with RSOs or clubs because it usually only takes a few interested students and one faculty or staff adviser to get started, along with a small budget for events, tournament or league fees, or merchandise (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 23-24). The student-led approach can cause problems, if not properly supervised, by giving students the power to appoint others to positions and decide rosters amongst their peers. Collins believes that due to this potential bias, clubs should exist solely for the casual gamer and not as a competitive entity if at all possible.

Though Kauweloa does not believe esports should be permanently situated as a club due to the recognition official programs offer, he does believe that retaining club-like aspects is essential because it is important for students to be able to organize and participate in esports. He said, "the ability of students to organize around an issue or topic is fundamental to student movements." These club-like aspects can align students socially with their peers and the institution in order to provide a positive college experience (Pizzo et al, 2019).

Maryville Esports refers to its club sector as less competitive than their scholarships program players. The Maryville Gaming Club gets the same budget as other student clubs, such as the chess club (Clerke). This split is becoming more and more common among programs. It is seen as a way to offer a noncompetitive and competitive option for students or to separate the club from the official program by the level of competition (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 43-44). Lawrence Tech Esports plans to make this same split somewhere down the line (Sirekis). University of California at Irvine (UCI) also operates like this; its club, The Association of Gamers, is the largest student club on campus and is sometimes speculated to be the largest one

in the country (Kauweloa, 2022). FSC still houses its competitive and non-competitive sides together, but Antor sees his job as being split - half competitive, half club. Research from Esports Foundry shows that 59.1% of institutions have a club separate from varsity though 24.7% of those clubs are managed by their respective esports programs (Postell & Narayan, 2022).

Though scholarship programs with university support are seen as the strongest, it is important not to underestimate the level of competition achieved by some student-led clubs and RSOs. In the 2016 North American Collegiate Championships for League of Legends, hosted by the game's publisher, the final two teams were a scholarship program (RMU) versus a student-led team from the University of British Columbia (UBC), which won two years in a row (Kauweloa, 2019).

ATHLETICS

Some earlier sources suggest that approximately 20% (Baker & Holden, 2018) of collegiate esports programs are housed in athletics departments while more recent sources estimate 40% to 45% (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 25; Pizzo et al, 2019). Much like traditional sports, when esports is situated in athletics, it is organized and managed by the institution and its administration. Athletics departments can be apprehensive about housing esports for various reasons, such as recruitment issues (Jin, 2021, pp. 270-271), preserving the definition of what is a sport (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 2), and governance issues within the collegiate esports space (Pizzo et al, 2019). Recruitment causes problems for athletics-based programs because high school esports is far less established than collegiate, which creates the need for a different recruiting style than that of traditional sports (Jin, 202, pp. 270-271). Though recruitment platforms such as Next College Student Athlete (NCSA) do exist in esports, esports recruiters still use social media, specifically Discord and Twitter, as their main source of recruitment with

esports recruitment website, SPIN, being the most popular second choice. Compared to 85.8% of recruiters using Discord, 76.4% using Twitter, and 52.8% using SPIN, only 29-30% use NCSA and direct high school contact (Postell & Narayan, 2022). The debate over defining esports as a sport is a long one with some saying the teamwork and participatory nature of it make it a sport and others saying to be considered a sport it must involve substantial amounts of physical activity (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 2-3). Though this is contradicted by Sirekis who says some sports are more physical than others comparing golf and football, for example, and she notes there is still an important physical component to esports. The physicality of esports can be noted through increased heart rates, as well as all of the health-related aspects mentioned previously. In an esports meeting of an unnamed Division I National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) school which Kauweloa attended, a member half-jokingly referred to esports participants as student-athletes. Though the comment was made as a joke, the group quickly started to note similarities between esports players and athletes even though esports is not inherently physical. The group decided that the term student-athlete was the most appropriate term and used it for the rest of the meeting to refer to esports players (Kauweloa, 2022). Kauweloa calls using terminology such as "student-athlete" as language for the administration, not the student. "It is a language of legitimization, not the language of recognition." The research participants were less concerned with the terminology used to refer to the players and more concerned with the level of recognition the players receive. RMU's former associate athletics director and original esports director, Kurt Melcher, refers to esports players as a "new type of college athlete" that deserve the same level of recognition as traditional sports athletes (Kauweloa, 2022).

Some suggest that housing esports anywhere but athletics is a poor choice. This idea comes from the belief that esports needs all of the same organizational aspects of athletics (coaches, compliance, administration, etc.) to function so that if an institution is to house esports anywhere else, it will have to replicate these processes (Pizzo et al, 2019). Though Clerke does not necessarily agree that esports should be in athletics, he does agree with the sentiment that esports should operate similarly, if not the same as, an athletics department. In contrast, Brack says that at his previous institution, when placed in athletics, esports still felt separate and experienced a sense of isolation from the rest of the athletics program.

ACADEMIC

Esports programs housed in academics are estimated to make up 10% to 13% of the space (Pizzo et al, 2019). Schools that host esports in academics are typically looking to build either curriculum (McClellan et al, 2020, pp. 22-23, 25) or research surrounding esports (Kauweloa). Esports curriculum can include courses, minors, majors, internships, or practicums. Among the institutions to offer esports curriculum (courses, certificates, degrees) are the University of Oregon's Warsaw School of Sports Marketing, Syracuse University in partnership with Twitch, Miami University, the University of Nevada Las Vegas, the University of South Carolina, UCI, Ohio State University (OSU), Shenandoah University, Becker College, and Emerson College (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 21). The University of Mississippi is expected to be added to this list in Fall 2023 (J. McDermott, personal communication, February 28, 2023). Not only do institutions offer curricula, but some completely align themselves and fully house their programs within academic departments. The University of Utah esports curriculum is aligned with its Entertainment Arts and Engineering program (Kauweloa, 2022) as a way to add to its already established game design curriculum (Jin, 2021, p. 270). It is also fairly common to see

esports partnered, organized, or housed within information technology, computer science, or journalism/digital media programs (Brack).

As a commitment to academics, programs like OSU (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 23) and UCI have made their esports arenas multipurpose spaces for both competition and academia. UCI is often regarded by participants as the "whole package" by creating a balance between competition and academics (Kauweloa, 2022). Collins says that there is a place for esports in academia, but sometimes curriculum is designed just to sell it to students. Kauweloa expressed a similar sentiment in saying esports is sometimes a "trojan horse" for funding, especially for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) activities. Esports is sometimes put in an academic light not for the sake of esports but as an enabler to achieve other things the institution wants. Kauweloa highlighted this by saying, "Early on in the development discussions around education and esports, I would talk to a lot of educators that made no qualms about esports being a trojan horse." He says that even though this is inauthentic that there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach as long as the institution is upfront with its community.

Esports can also be presented academically at universities without being curricular in nature, such as the MIT's inclusion of esports at their Sloan Sports Analytics Conference (McClellan, 2020, p. 23) and similarly, in 2018, UCI announced an academic conference just for esports - the UCI Esports Conference. This conference is often noted as the first academic event to focus on esports research (Kauweloa, 2022). UH is one of the 146 R1 institutions, which are universities with exceptionally high research activity as measured by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, so it approaches esports from a highly research-oriented perspective. Kauweloa says because of this, he is in a position where the administration does not

see esports as just a program for students, but they see it as an opportunity to set the direction for esports research.

STUDENT AFFAIRS

Along with athletics, student affairs is one the largest homes for esports programs. Research says that 45% to 47% of esports programs operate under student affairs (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 25; Pizzo et al, 2019). Though UCI Esports is not housed in student affairs, the program has a strong relationship with student affairs that benefits both parties through events that increase student awareness and participation (Kauweloa, 2022). McClellan et. al draws the conclusion that the ideal esports director/coach would report to the dean of students, making it a part of student affairs (2020, p. 41). However, one study shows that esports directors believe esports belongs in athletics because they often need to consult and rely on athletics. This study included 16 directors, six from student affairs, and only investigated programs in student affairs and athletics (Pizzo et al, 2019).

OTHER

Different approaches to esports create unique opportunities for every institution. Following the University of Utah's program being housed in Entertainment Arts and Engineering, more programs are being created within various departments (Kauweloa, 2022). Some suggest a hybrid. Jeff Weld, former dean of advancement at Castleton University, described their entrance into esports as a collaborative university effort. Weld says that the information technology, admissions, student engagement, and development offices would all have a hand in esports at Castleton (Castleton University, 2018). Antor reports to both the athletics director and the dean of students, which creates Moccs Esports as an athletics and student affairs collaboration, but Antor also believes that an academic component should be a

part of esports programs. Though Lawrence Tech Esports is moving under the control of athletics, Sirekis says it will be a hybrid of both academics and athletics. The athletic portion focuses on competition, health, fitness, and mental sharpness. The academic portion focuses on programming, computer engineering, game development and design, and media arts.

As someone who works with college esports programs and not in them, Collins, much like Sirekis, says that esports should have both academic and athletic components, but unlike Sirekis, he believes these components need to exist as separate entities. "It's not athletics, it's not academics, it's its own department that has all the same functions as an athletic or academic department." Clerke says that in 10-15 years, we will see esports being its own department on college campuses. Clerke believes that esports should replicate athletics without being housed within athletics as an esports program is hard to scale when fighting for an athletics director's attention against traditional sports while also trying to convince them that esports is worth the attention. According to Clerke, Esports essentially need the same structure as athletic programs, such as an esports director with coaches under them and their own marketing department. When esports gets all of these components, Clerke says it would essentially just become "an athletics department within an athletics department" if not separated.

Terps Esports is an outlier as it is within its institution's recreation and wellness department. Brack believes that esports just needs to be in whatever department has the proper, long-term resources and dedication that esports needs. The department with those resources for the University of Maryland is recreation and wellness, and Brack has no problem with that. Kauweloa says that trying to fit esports in already-established frameworks gives universities the power to limit it from being something else entirely. He thinks esports could have been something entirely different in higher education if it were to have never had sports in the name.

In conclusion, the question of where to integrate esports in a university setting remains without a unanimous answer and looks different at every institution (Pizzo et al, 2019). Every department is regulated, resourced, and managed differently and is culturally different in regard to social norms and outside influence (Baker & Holden, 2018). These different structures have led to confusion over rules and regulations in the wider esports community and have created an almost ungovernable esports system at the collegiate level. "Esports is like the Wild West. Schools do not know what it is and do not know what is coming next" (Pizzo et al, 2019).

CHAPTER 5: STAFF

RESPONSIBILITIES

McClellan et al (2020, pp. 39-42) defines the ideal college esports coach as someone who understands how to connect with and support students as well as understands the ins and outs of the college landscape in order to create opportunities, awareness, and connections. McClellan et al's mock job description includes the responsibilities of:

- Aligning esports development with the college's mission

- Promote student safety

- Monitor progress and eligibility of students

- Establish annual recruitment goals

- Serve on multiple campus committees

- Form relationships with students and their families

- Actively participate in the college's overall community

- Work collaboratively with other university departments regarding student needs and behavior

- Comply with various esports governing bodies

- Establish a fundraising plan

- Prepare an annual budget

- Develop practice and training schedules

- Integrate esports on campus

- Ensure the highest standards for all aspects of the program

- Promote and manage a summer camp program

- Be flexible

- Work late hours to match student schedules

McClellan et al. warns against going after an esports expert or previous professional. They suggests that an esports coach must only have a passion for and a basic understanding of esports whilst also being able to speak the language (2020, p. 40). Sirekis says hiring inexperienced esports staff is setting up the esports program and the individuals for failure. In 2020, the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors (NAECAD) asked 42 esports professionals what qualifications a director should have, and 59.52% of them said playing experience (National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors, 2020).

Esports leaders in the collegiate space also condemn the use of the word "coach" and prefer the term "director." Shaun Byrne, director of esports at St. Clair College, says that calling an esports director a "head esports coach" is the same as calling an athletics director a "head sports coach" and then asking them to be able to coach every sport (Byrne, 2021a). This kind of thinking aligns with Clerke's previous idea that esports should mirror athletics with a director who has coaches working under them. A student at the University of Texas at Dallas called out their own esports program for using "coach" in their job post for an esports staff member. The student said that this was a lie since the staff member would be the only staff for the program and "have to do everything" (Selle, 2021).

Kauweloa also notes the overwhelming pressure in higher education, especially apparent in esports, to work multiple positions within one job description. He says that esports directorship positions typically remained vague or undefined because the one responsibility of the position is to do what you have to in order to develop and sustain an esports program. Kauweloa says "doing what you have to" is typically 20 different things. Sirekis contrasts this by saying her ability to wear multiple hats is what has made her able to be successful as a collegiate esports director.

HOURS

McClellan et al (2020, p. 40) urges esports personnel to be available late hours to align with student availability. This kind of mentality is linked to a discussion of college esports professionals being overworked. When tweeting about the hardships of running a program with no full-time help, Brack (2022d) mentioned working 60+ hour weeks as collegiate esports leaders is not sustainable or healthy. The replies to this tweet include Jacquie Lamn (2022), esports head coach at Minnesota State University at Mankato, saying that getting below 50 hours a week is a struggle for her. Director of Esports at Clarke University, Henry Johnston, said he feels like he doesn't have a choice but to work the extra hours (Johnston, 2022). Antor (2022c) says he had to set the expectation for himself that he couldn't work 80 hours a week. He also says that he wants to give more requirements, such as volunteering, to his players but has shied away from the idea because it inevitably adds another aspect for him to manage. Antor (2022b) once tweeted that he knew of three college esports directors who were hospitalized due to stress. Within the replies to this tweet, many more came forward, including Clerke. Clerke (2022) said the biggest help to relieve the stress of his job was convincing his administration he needed more staff. Antor (2020a) encourages esports directors to work more sustainably by delegating tasks,

and if they have no one to delegate to, looking for volunteer coaches and students interested in leadership positions (Antor, 2020b). Staff can also experience similar burnout to that of a director. UCI Esports director said that the biggest impact of COVID-19 on his program was the loss of staff that had burned out during the pandemic (Kauweloa, 2022).

PAY

When talking about esports directors/head coaches' responsibilities and hours, it is important to also take note of their pay. Antor has created a database where he collects public collegiate esports position salaries as well as takes word-of-mouth salary information from esports directors. When using verifiable data only, the lowest salary is $3,000/year for the part-time esports coach at Johnston Community College and the highest paying position is $273,438/year for the department head/co-director of esports at Miami University (OH). The median salary of this data set is approximately $45,000-$50,000/year (Antor, 2022a). Esports Foundry found similar results in their research, concluding that the average esports director salary is $52,500, though 16.1% of directors are still working for less than $30,000 a year (Postell & Narayan, 2022). Discussion among esports professionals suggests there is a correlation in compensation between the use of "head esports" and "director of esports" though the two titles often do the same things. The correlation is that institutions may use the terminology "head coach" to downplay the role in order to offer a lower salary (Byrne, 2021a). In the NAECAD survey, 31.8% held the title of director of esports; 20.45% were head esports coaches. The participants' salaries averaged $22,000/year. When asked how much a head coach with no head coaching experience should be paid, the participants' answers averaged $34,000/year. When asked the same questions about director positions, the average was $47,000/year. These results confirm Byrne's belief that the terminology does influence how

much people think the individual should be paid. These surveys did not indicate whether the respondents included part-time directors as they are believed to make up a large percentage of the collegiate esports ecosystem. This means these numbers may not only reflect full-time esports staff but also part-time staff (National Association of Esports Coaches & Directors, 2020). Though Brack states that in college esports, part-time does not mean less work (Brack, 2022a).

LEADERSHIP

Despite issues of overwork and poor compensation, there is a unanimous agreement that collegiate esports is in need of strong, innovative leadership. Sirekis says that a program is inevitably a reflection of its leader. "If they're [the leader] all over the place, then your whole team is going to be all over the place." Collins emphasizes the need for experience when it comes to esports leadership. He says if a leader is without experience, they will have difficulty navigating the multi-faceted space of college esports and is more susceptible to giving up. Brack said that leadership is so important in college esports that it sometimes trumps what tangible things programs can offer to students.

Brack says that prospects will feel drawn to a program's leadership over other aspects it has to offer because students want to be seen and respected. Kauweloa notes the impact of leaders on esports students through his research with UCI. Participants at UCI talked of feeling ignored, unheard, and having a lack of control over their identity as collegiate esports players. This resulted in students becoming cynical, and sometimes even resentful, of the program. The impact of leadership is shown through conversations Kauweloa had with one student in particular. This student spoke of feeling punished even though he was trying his hardest. This was so important that the incident the student referenced was a year old at this point but was still

impacting his relationship with the overall program. The student initially saw his director as someone to trust and described feelings of wanting to make his director proud. After taking some of the director's comments personally, he became more cautious in trusting and receiving guidance from the director (Kauweloa, 2022). Sirekis also gives leaders the responsibility of setting an example by meeting a certain level of professionalism, especially online. Sirekis noted esports leadership using the Twitter space to argue and trash talk as a common unprofessional practice in college esports.

Kauweloa described the UCI Esports program's operation as fluid due to how often they brought in (and lost) staff (Kauweloa, 2022). Brack sees this as a larger issue in the college esports landscape as esports programs find themselves needing to fill positions, specifically directorship positions, year after year. Brack believes the flux of collegiate esports leadership is caused by a lack of proper resources, poor compensation, alienation of esports programs on campus, return on investment pressure, and lack of pay raises for long-term directors (Brack, 2022c).

Kauweloa and Brack both list being able to have a sense of ownership and control over their programs as something that has contributed to their ability to be effective leaders. Kauweloa says he is very fortunate for the administration at UH to be so trusting in him and his direction for the esports program as that is not the case for a lot of esports programs. Brack talked about a similar experience when he was choosing between two job offers. UMD offered him a program to grow and shape. The other institution was unwilling to allow him to lead the program as he saw fit and wanted him to fit into a predefined mold, so he chose UMD.

CHAPTER 6: GOVERNANCE

WHO?

Currently, there is no single governing institution in college esports, though there is an overwhelming apparent need for governance, guidance, and regulation in the collegiate esports landscape (Kauweloa, 2022). Jenny (2017) states that with the emergence of multiple organizations running separate competitions, college esports lack institutionalization and that the competition for the right to govern the space has become a "lucrative enterprise." Most esports leaders in the space acknowledge the need for a governing entity, though there is little agreement on who should govern the space (Baker & Holden, 2018).

Collins believes that, in order for college esports to be regulated, someone or some organization will have to "get rich doing it." He says he doesn't mean this negatively, but he's confident no one will do it for free. Collins hopes that whoever ends up regulating college esports has the goal of bettering the space with no malicious intent. He says that it needs to be an experienced person or groups of persons that understand the space, play the games, and approach the task from a grassroots perspective. Collins does not believe a person or entity with the correct intentions or sufficient experience to govern the space exists yet. Brack, expressing a similar sentiment, says he doesn't care who regulates it, but it must be someone with knowledge of the space and who understands what is needed. Brack said the key to knowing if a governing body

will be legitimate is to see who they are hiring and if it is people familiar with the college esports ecosystem. Kauweloa expressed that his primary concern with a governing body is the inclusion and consideration of all college structures (traditional athletic schools, small liberal arts colleges, private institutions, community colleges, etc.) when making regulations. He says that it should not model sports conferences in which the larger institutions remain at the forefront. When the question of governance in college esports arises, three different potential governing bodies regularly come into the conversation: National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), outside organizations, and game publishers (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 109).

NCAA

On August 25, 2017, the NCAA issued a request for proposals to evaluate the possibility of adding esports to the organization (Baker & Holden, 2018). However, as of April 20, 2019, the NCAA voted to indefinitely postpone further discussions about its potential role in collegiate esports. The NCAA has expressed concern about the violent nature of video games as well as gender equity concerns, but this has not stopped people from discussing and speculating how an NCAA-governed collegiate esports atmosphere might look (Kauweloa, 2019). If the NCAA were to step into college esports today, Pizzo et al (2019) says that all current collegiate programs would be non-compliant. For example, the NCAA's amateurism rules are in direct conflict with current collegiate esports operations (Pizzo et al, 2019). Though these amateurism rules no longer prevent profiting from content creation due to the NCAA's recent ruling regarding Name-Image-Likeness (NIL) (Next College Student Athlete, 2023), the amateurism rules still prevent former professional esports players from competing in collegiate settings, current esports players playing simultaneously between professional and collegiate, and collegiate esports players profiting off of competition (Baker & Holden, 2018). Under current NCAA rules, players

would have to give up monetary winnings from competitions or face the threat of losing their amateur status, which in turn would bar them from competing in collegiate settings and remove any esports-related scholarships (Kauweloa, 2022). Players would have to postpone their professional careers in order to pursue an education that is funded by collegiate esports (Baker & Holden, 2018). The executive director of the National Association of College Esports (NACE), Michael Brooks, says that this compliance conflict with the NCAA is intentional and that the majority of esports programs have been structured to be separate from the NCAA. Brooks believes that the NCAA would have to make drastic compliance exceptions for esports programs or would otherwise fail in acquiring college esports (Baker & Holden, 2018).

However, not everyone agrees that the NCAA rules are without merit. Sirekis believes that students should not be allowed to compete in professional and collegiate esports at the same time but agrees that former-professional players should be looked at differently. She says that simultaneous competition can discourage the academic side of esports as professional players may just be seeking the easiest, highest-paying programs in order to win titles and get paid. If the problem gets big enough where there is a large number of esports players who are both professional and collegiate, Sirekis thinks creating a collegiate professional league may be a healthy alternative. The NCAA does not constitute amateurism solely on the premise of fairness and academia but also regarding profit and consumerism. The NCAA claims that consumers will only remain interested in college esports if no professionals participate. If professionals were to be present in any college sports, the NCAA says that the value of those sports would drop as people would view them on the same scale as minor sports leagues. This same school of thought may not hold up in college esports as consumers already value it without the NCAA's amateurism model (Baker & Holden, 2018).

Another issue that college esports would face if it were to be governed by the NCAA is gender equity. Women make up 60% of the college student population in the United States (Adkins, 2022). Though statistics often suggest 50% of gamers are women, this does not translate into college esports (Kauweloa, 2022). Women make up approximately 8% of college esports players and only 4% of coaches/directors (Adkins, 2022). If women play video games, why are they not well represented in college esports? Research suggests that the prevalence of gender equity and harassment issues in esports greatly influences participation among female players (Pizzo et al, 2019). The prevalence of discriminatory behavior against women in esports creates a "chilly climate." Chilly climate harassment is when sexism creates an uncomfortable setting that discourages or disables a person's ability to take equal advantage of opportunities, in this case, collegiate esports (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 92). In anticipation of gender equity requirementst, many programs are making plans to become compliant. Esports leaders have said that integrating women into the male-dominated space has proven challenging (Pizzo et al, 2019). Regardless of regulation, higher education should be proactive in creating equal opportunity and inclusivity (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 90). Directors of esports programs have a responsibility to manage gender equity in their programs (Pizzo et al, 2019). Whether or not college esports programs can create inclusive environments by providing women with equal opportunities has yet to be determined (Jin, 2021, p. 275).

Antor says that, though a transition of college esports into the NCAA would not be smooth, at least institutions would recognize it as a governing body and follow their regulation or else their programs would lose relevancy. Brack believes that the NCAA does have a chance to do it right if they hire the proper people with adequate knowledge, but if the NCAA were to treat it as lesser than sports and task it to random employees who are uneducated about esports instead

of hiring experts, it would go very poorly. Collins believes the involvement of the NCAA in esports is inevitable, "They can do it whenever they're ready to with all their endless money, so whenever they decide to, there'll be no stopping them." He does warn that if the NCAA were to do it incorrectly, the community outcry would be so severe that they would eventually have to hire experts in the space. Baker & Holden (2018) believe there are different principles that esports and the NCAA could adopt from each other. The NCAA could reform its amateurism model to that of esports, but conversely, the esports landscape could benefit from stricter academic regulations as we see in the NCAA. Either way, Baker & Holden (2018) believe that the NCAA should not be viewed as an esports governance savior but instead as an organization that is largely ignorant of the landscape.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

The most notable organization trying to regulate esports is NACE (McClellan, 2020 et al, pp. 109, 111). The non-profit organization was formed in July 2016 with the intention of being a league to host competitions (National Association of College Esports, 2023). In 2019, NACE started its journey to become an esports governing body. At its 2019 convention, NACE members met and ratified bylaws and a constitution creating regulations unlike any previously seen in the space (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 111). NACE has more than 240+ member schools, 5,000+ students, and $16 million in esports funding for students. As of June 2019, 94% of all varsity esports programs in the United States are a part of NACE, which makes them the largest member association of varsity esports programs. NACE says it is "collaborating to lay the groundwork in areas such as eligibility, paths to graduation, competitions and scholarships (NACE, 2023)." Baker & Holden (2018) says that NACE's approach to collegiate esports "makes sense" because it has modeled itself after esports tournaments and leagues that already

exist. NACE officials have said that they would work with the NCAA in the future if it were willing to approach esports differently than traditional sports (Morris, 2017). NACE has already incorporated the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) by having the group's President and Chief Executive Officer Jim Carr on its board of directors (NACE, 2023). NACE provides a list of things it provides to member schools:

- Standardized rules and compliance

- Lobbying arm with media and publishers

- Professional development

- Business intelligence

- Student-athlete recruitment

- Competition between varsity programs

A more recently formed non-profit organization looking to revolutionize the collegiate esports space is the Voice of Intercollegiate Esports (VOICE). VOICE does not serve as a league and makes it clear it does not identify as a governing body. Formed in 2021, VOICE was created to bring collegiate esports leaders together to build consensus about and create solutions for issues in the college esports scene. VOICE wants to be a trusted source of information in college esports by developing best practices across programs, providing industry data, and creating common standards for fairness across esports (VOICE, n.d.). When working with UCI, Kauweloa (2022) described a meeting where the director said that one of collegiate esports' most pressing problems was the lack of a common set of values. UCI's director is now part of the organization (VOICE, n.d.). VOICE has developed a board of "trusted experts" that "come from all types of institutions - from large public research universities to small private liberal arts

schools to community colleges" with Kauweloa being one of these experts (VOICE, n.d.). VOICE lists the following elements of what it offers to college esports:

- Provide organization and leadership

- Create a unified voice to advocate for universities and students

- Represent the interests of higher education through issues in college esports

- Help programs be more diverse and equitable

- Advocate for higher education to publishers

- Provide training for people entering the space

- Provide advanced support to those who are established in the space

- Author thought leadership and scholarship that will pave the way for college esports

Though VOICE does not identify as a governing body (VOICE, n.d.), many of the issues it is aiming to address directly correlate to esports governance issues.

The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) has a league called NJCAA Esports (NJCAAE). NJCAAE is the only national esports association exclusively for two-year institutions (National Junior College Athletic Association Esports, 2023). There are individual conferences within the NAIA and NCAA that have also formed their own leagues. In the NAIA, the Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference (WHAC) hosts an esports league in *League of Legends, Rocket League*, and *Overwatch 2* (WHAC, 2022). In the NCAA, the Eastern College Athletic Conference hosts an esports league with over 10 different esports titles (Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Esports, 2023), and the New England Collegiate Conference formed the National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC) which hosts a league in six different esports titles with over 100 participating institutions (National Esports Collegiate Conference, 2023) compared to its athletics conference which has four participants (New England Collegiate

Conference, n.d.). With these options and many more, Antor says that no one organization currently has the power to be a governing body for all of collegiate esports because, if a program does not like the way a certain organization operates, the program can choose to become a member of a different organization or compete in a different league. On the other hand, programs can be members of and compete within multiple organizations (McClellan et al, 2020, p. 62). Of the programs that participated in the 2022 Trends Report, 52% competed in more than five leagues (Postell & Narayan, 2022).

PUBLISHERS

Potentially the biggest difference between esports and traditional sports is that esports are intellectual property and therefore are owned by their publishers (Baker & Holden, 2018). Publishers not only own the games but create the rules and terms of agreement surrounding them which creates a challenge for governance by any outside organization. "No one owns soccer, but in *League of Legends,* Riot Games literally owns the field you play on." Game publishers can change the rules and terms of agreement of the game at any time and alter the game itself via software updates, changes in game mechanics, and other in-game functionalities which can change the title completely for esports. Publishers can also decrease or stop providing maintenance altogether for games whenever they see fit. If publishers were to make drastic changes to games that directly affect esports without notifying stakeholders (universities, leagues, players, etc.), students on scholarships for competition could lose their funding if the game becomes less relevant in esports or if their skill declines due to the changes. Publishers can choose to work with the esports space, against the esports space, or be indifferent to the esports space. The lack of long-term licensing agreements between publishers and collegiate esports entities has made some institutions wary of committing resources to their esports programs

(Pizzo et al, 2019). For example, at the 2013 Evolution Championship Series, Nintendo tried to have *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, which they own, pulled from the event (Baker & Holden, 2018). Ultimately, the publisher backed down after public outcry, but this is only one of many examples of Nintendo interfering with esports events (Polay, 2020). On the other hand, companies like Riot Games (Kauweloa, 2019) and Activision-Blizzard (formerly just Blizzard), are known for working with the college esports space (Baker & Holden, 2018).

It is not unheard of for publishers to partner with organizations or form their own organizations surrounding esports (Baker & Holden, 2018). Epic Games, creators of *Fortnite* and owners of *Rocket League*'s publisher, Psyonix, often partners with esports platform eFuse for collegiate events and leagues (Competitive Fortnite Team, 2023). Blizzard hosts tournaments for *Hearthstone* (Blizzard, n.d.) and includes collegiate *Overwatch 2* as part of its *Overwatch* Path to Pro initiative (Overwatch League, 2023b). Blizzard also has a portion on its Path to Pro website that encourages third-party organizers to fill out an application regarding the details of their event to see whether they need a community or custom license from them to operate (Overwatch League, 2023a). Similarly, Riot Games created the Riot Scholastic Association of America (RSAA) with the purpose to "govern varsity competition for Riot's games and foster the development of gaming as a meaningful and complementary part of the high school and college experiences" (Riot Scholastic Association of America, n.d.). Though they run their own league, Riot still partners with outside organizations for competitions in their esports titles, *VALORANT* and *League of Legends*. Though Riot primarily partners with NCAA and NAIA athletics conferences to promote esports participation in "legendary rivalries," they also partner with individual esports organizations. Riot says that non-athletic organizations are subject to a higher level of scrutiny, so Riot requires them to share business and publishing plans as a part of the

partnership application process. Partnership with the RSAA is free for both athletic and non-athletic organizations and must all meet the RSAA's requirements:

- All participating member institutions must have a school faculty or employee point of contact for each member institution

- Conference must verify enrollment status and player eligibility for all participants

- Minimum participation of eight schools, or two-thirds of the conference membership (whichever is smaller)

- Maximum participation of twenty-four schools (sixteen for non-traditional conferences, scaling up after first season)

- Conference must provide Riot the rights to use conference and school names, logos, and marks for College Season publication and marketing purposes (Riot Scholastic Association of America, n.d.).

There is speculation that NACE has recently lost its access to Riot Games' *League of Legends* due to the fact that as of March 10, 2023, their website FAQ answers the question "Will League of Legends be offered this season?" reads "We are still finalizing our plans with Riot Games and hope to announce plans for this soon" (Playfly, 2022).

Though publishers have a great deal of power (Pizzo et al, 2019), that does not stop people from wishing they didn't and from viewing their participation in college esports as a negative. For example, Antor describes the RSAA as a "PR stunt." During Kauweloa's research at UCI, he described being able to participate in a "rare" event that was six hours long: Riot Games representatives met in person with university esports leaders. In this meeting, UCI's director stressed to Riot Games that publishers needed to take a backseat to universities when it comes to operating college esports (Kauweloa, 2022). Antor agrees with this sentiment saying

that college esports needs to be governed by an organization independent of publishers, but first

the publishers must allow it to happen, and then every university would have to follow the

standard set of regulations or lose the right to compete. Brack sees the ideal outcome for college

esports as a relationship between publishers and a separate entity where all leagues can be hosted

under one organization.

CHAPTER 7: REGULATIONS

Since there is no governing body in esports, regulations surrounding student status, GPA requirements, accreditation, etc. are not standardized across all leagues, with leagues and publishers all setting different precedents for what is required to be eligible to compete (Antor).

INSTITUTION ELIGIBILITY

Membership-based organizations often have a set of standards institutions must meet and maintain in order to be members. Among four different membership-based esports organizations (ECAC, ACE, NJCAAE, WHAC), two required programs to have staff/faculty representatives and to be officially accredited institutions. For a full list of these standards, see Appendix A.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY (COMPETITIONS)

Leagues and tournaments often have different rules and regulations individual players (students) must meet in order to compete. Out of 11 organizations, seven require institutions to be accredited and students to be full-time. Only four had specific GPA requirements, and only one had any sort of regulation regarding professional players. For a full list of these standards, see Appendix B.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY (PROGRAMS)

Not only do leagues and tournaments have standards, but institutions also have separate standards students must meet and maintain in order to be a part of their programs. Out of the six

research participants, five listed having GPA requirements and four required students to have full-time status. For a full list of these standards, see Appendix C.

CONCLUSION

Antor has concerns about the lack of consistent regulations across college esports: "You have things like *Overwatch* that have GPA requirements in their collegiate league, but then you have *League of Legends* that doesn't. You have some leagues that allow two players from the same school to be on a team, but the other three players can be from a different school. Then you have other leagues where all the students have to be from the same school. There's no true regulation across the board. NACE does a little bit of it, but even their ITC [intent to compete] process is a joke, and anyone could lie about it. Even the attempts at regulation right now in some of the leagues, don't meet the mark or do what [they are] supposed to do."

When asked about why Maryville's GPA requirement (3.0) is higher than most programs, Clerke said that players receiving hefty scholarships (as Maryville's are) should set an example on campus and that he doesn't feel comfortable with the thought of players having a GPA any lower. Collins counters by suggesting that a player's GPA may need to be reviewed on a case-by-case basis instead of instituting a blanket GPA requirement for every student. His rationale was that "a 2.0 can be good for somebody and a 3.5 can be good for somebody else." Research from Esports Foundry shows the average GPA for esports competitors is 2.9 (Postell & Narayan, 2022).

Antor said leagues and programs cheat students out of an education by letting them compete when they are underperforming academically. Brack says the past College League of Legends champions, the University of St. Thomas (UST), had three failing players on the winning roster. Brack described this as "completely unacceptable." Clerke's *League of Legends*

team was the one competing against UST. He said he had to bench players for the championship

who were trying their best academically but weren't succeeding, so it was especially

disheartening to lose to a team in which some of the players were failing.

Brack also mentioned nonaccredited (or soon to be nonaccredited) institutions, such as

Bay State College and the University of North America, competing in esports while their

students are not working towards what he considers a meaningful degree. Brack said that an

institution's intentions need to be more thoroughly evaluated in collegiate esports, "What kind of

institutions are competing in collegiate esports? For what reason? Are they competing to

ultimately make a better experience for students?"

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In analyzing the findings related to RQ1, which asked how college esports is currently structured and operated, it became clear that there is no uniform structure. Esports programs can include varsity or club teams or both; they can be housed in athletics, academic departments, or student affairs with outliers falling elsewhere, and the player eligibility requirements are all over the map.

Attempts from organizations and video game publishers to regulate and structure programs have made little progress,. For example, the NCAA's initial investigation in esports left them with concerns about gender quity and violence portrayal in some esports titles, which resulted in them putting any efforts to become the governing body for esports on pause.

Research participants largely agree that a cohesive set of standards for operation would increase esports legitimacy, expand recognition, encourage greater participation, and improve efficiency, but they were unsure or in disagreement over how to achieve this.

In exploring responses related to RQ2, which asked what issues the current structure and operation of esports creates and how stakeholders are affected, the respondents indicated that the lack of uniform regulations creates inconsistencies in esports programs that can lead to a lack of accountability both academically and behaviorally. Organizations and institutions may hold participants to different standards of academic performance, inclusivity, and sportsmanship. Interview subjects indicated frustration with other institutions and esports organizations that allow students to compete despite poor academics and sportsmanship.

Participants also indicated a desire to compensate, via scholarship or otherwise, students for work outside of the scope of participation. They acknowledged their programs rely on student labor in areas of management, leadership, and content creations and they are uncomfortable with this effort going unrecognized and unrenumerated.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include no perspective from the player point of view. The sample size is small, so a large-scale survey of college esports leaders would be useful uncovering more about the overall structure and operation of esports programs. The findings of this research study could inform the focus and scope of additional research.

FURTHER RESEARCH

College esports is an area rich in research opportunities to further develop literature and understanding of the space. This research can be further expanded upon and each part (history, structure, regulations, staffing, student participation, governance) are all areas that could be researched in even more depth. Each organization structure, athletics, academics, student affairs, and others, could be research topics of their own to further provide context and details of benefits and limitations of each structure as well as a further analysis of the difference in operation of each.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Put the student back in college esports. College esports, as our interview subjects have indicated, exists on the back of student labor and passion. If students and their academic, physical, and mental wellbeing begin to take a backseat, college esports will have failed those who created it. Shine the same spotlight, or a brighter one, on academically successful students as esports does on competitively successful ones. Shine an especially bright one on those who

are both. Students deserve to, at the minimum, be recognized on a much larger scale as well as compensated. Though there is a struggle in compensating student laborers when institutions are not paying their full-time staff or hiring enough full-time staff.

Stay open-minded. These issues will never be an overnight fix but a general sense of willingness to hear out other voices in the space, especially institutions and individuals who may not usually be heard, could allow college esports to revolutionize in a way we have not seen. College esports as a whole is experiencing these issues, just in different capacities and severities and each unique voice will bring a different approach. College esports professionals need to be willing to change their minds.

Strive for greater unification. Whether it be officially or unofficially, college esports staff needs to create a union that reflects as many institutions and program structures as possible. College esports cannot grow and deal with outer sources (outside organizations, publishers, NCAA, etc.) if the professionals cannot discuss with and lift each other up internally. Every professional wants (or should want) the betterment of college esports; though everyone has different opinions on what that means, it is important to remember that everyone is fighting towards the same goal. As an industry, staff are underpaid and overworked. When college esports advocates choose to have unproductive conversations with colleagues at other programs, if one professional is tired and frustrated, chances are the other one probably is too. Lend empathy to other collegiate esports leaders.

Let it be its own thing. As college esports looks more and more to athletics, the space is veering in a direction to be potentially shaped into a corporate-business model the same way athletics is. Though this may not be a bad thing and will serve esports with much of the validity it wants, college esports has a unique opportunity to be something devoid of other established

influences. College esports does not need to model something else and can instead become a

model itself. Though rooted at the heart of its creation, competition should be viewed as just a

part of the college esports landscape because college esports has the opportunity to lead student

success in all areas and should not be limited to just creating professional-bound competitors.

For the time being, some college esports programs will have to be "housed" at their institutions;

it is strongly encouraged institutions in the long-term to develop a plan for college esports to be

its own home.

Create an inclusive environment. College esports should not be afraid of gender equity

requirements. As mentioned in chapter six, research shows women play video games as much as

men, but this does not translate to esports. Why? College esports has not cultivated an

environment that is welcoming to minorities. The example used here is cheating. When someone

in esports cheats, they are typically permanently banned and their esports career is typically over

or at least forever tarnished. When someone in college esports is toxic or discriminatory, they are

typically punished on a much smaller scale. Is cheating morally worse than discriminatory

behavior? Is that a precedent college esports aims to set? Discriminatory behavior and toxicity

need to be discussed and dealt with. Not only blatant discrimination but also microaggressions

and biases that go undiscussed. Though this is an immediate action that should take place, this is

considered a long-term goal because creating a diverse space is something that college esports

participants will have to work towards each and every day.

Develop high school esports. Though this poses its own series of issues, further

developing high school esports is nothing but a good thing for college esports. This allows

students to learn what it means to be an esports competitor before they even step foot into the

collegiate domain. High school esports will also have a greater demand for structure as these

entities are far smaller and more highly regulated due to the involvement of minors. This also

can help gain publisher attention.

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APPENDIX A

ECAC Esports

- Member programs must be recognized by their institution as an official esports program

- Members must designate a full-time staff or faculty member to serve as a representative

- Members must not discriminate against people for reasons such as: race, gender, color, religion, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation (Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Esports, 2020)

NACE

- Member institutions (shortened to members) must be fully accredited by an authorized higher education accrediting agency

- Members provide a designated space (esports lab or arena) for players to compete

- Members must have a non-student campus official to oversee NACE activities at their institution

- All matches must be played at the designated space with the exception of:
  - Team travel
  - Inclement weather, campus closure, etc.
  - Campus internet/power issues
  - Institution has online players that joined before Fall 2022

- Maintain high ethical standards

- Promote gender equity and minority inclusion (National Association of College Esports, 2022)

NJCAAE

- Member institutions (shortened to members) must be fully accredited by an authorized higher education accrediting agency

- Members must establish and maintain high standards of ethics and fairness

- Members must agree that the NJCAAE has final say over all broadcasts of NJCAAE related events

- Members agree to have their name, logos, and trademarks used by the NJCAAE (National Junior College Athletic Association Esports, 2021)

WHAC Esports

- Members must be four-year colleges who are members of the NAIA

- Members must be committed to enhancing educational and character values (Wolverine-Hoosier Athletic Conference, 2017)

APPENDIX B

College Carball Association and Collegiate Rocket League

- Players must attend an accredited two- or four-year institution

- Players must maintain a 2.0 cumulative GPA

- Players must be enrolled full-time

- Cannot be an employee, relative of an employee, or living with an employee of Psyonix (Rocket League Esports, 2023)

College Carball Association featuring Fortnite

- Players must be at least 18 years old

- Players must attend an accredited two- or four-year institution

- Players must be enrolled full-time

- Players must be in good academic standing

- Players must provide proof (e.g., transcript) of eligibility

- Cannot be an employee, relative of an employee, or living with an employee of Epic Games (Competitive Fortnite Team, 2023)

College Call of Duty

- Players must attend an accredited two-year or four-year institution.

- Players must maintain full-time status

  - Players in their last semester can reach out to CCL staff to apply for exemption.

- Players must have a valid university provided email address

- Players must maintain a 2.0 GPA

- Players must be 18 years or older

- Players become immediately ineligible for competition if they have played professionally during the current title

- CCL reserves the right to ask any player to provide proof of eligibility for any reason (College Call of Duty, 2022)

ECAC Esports

- Players must be in good standing as determined by their organization

  - GPA requirements are up to the individual program

- Players must be considered full-time or part-time by their organization

- If requested, players must be able to provide proof of enrollment (Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Esports, 2023)

FACEIT

- All players must be from the same institution

  - A player unable to find a team at their school may request to join a team of a nearby university. This is reviewed on a case-by-case basis

- Players must be attending an accredited institution that provides at the minimum a 2-year program

- Online universities are ineligible with exceptions on a case-by-case basis

- Must be currently enrolled in a full-time course

  - Part-time students may receive one-time exceptions if they have a good academic history and are part-time due to medical, personal, or financial reasons. This is reviewed on a case-by-case basis

  - Graduating students are exempt from a full-time courseload if they can provide documentation, they were full-time for the duration of their studies

- Must be in good academic standing

- Graduate and PhD students are permitted to compete as long as they meet the requirements for being full time

- Work-study or co-op students in the work section of their program may be eligible but must be approved by FACEIT admins

- Transcripts must be submitted by all players to verify eligibility (FACEIT, 2023)

NACE

- Players are only allowed to complete for one school

- All players on a roster must be enrolled at the same school except under the following circumstances:

  - Cross-Campus Eligibility: Determined on a case-by-case basis by NACE officials but typically is allowed if varsity athletics can compete between campuses and if the campuses share a course calendar

  - Cross-School Eligibility: If students are apart of a shared or integrated program with multiple schools involved, cross-school eligibility will be considered

- Must have a valid email address provided by their school

- Must be a full-time student in regard to their institution's definition of "full-time." Exceptions:

  - Graduating students in their last academic semester/term if enrolled in the minimum number of hours to complete their degree. This is allowed a one-time use per student

  - Co-op/work study: Work-study or co-op students in the work section of their program are eligible

- Academic Standing: Each student-athlete must be in "good-standing" as determined by their institution. Exceptions:
  - If an institution has different academic requirements for student-athletes, those requirements will be considered by NACE officials upon request
  - If a player is in their first semester/term, they will be considered to have met the academic standing requirement
  - NACE officials reserve the right to request a transcript at any time (National Association of College Esports, 2023)

NECC

- Players must be a full-time student as defined by their institution
- Players must meet academic eligibility requirements set by their institution (National Esports Collegiate Conference, 2022)

NJCAAE

- Student-athletes must be making satisfactory progress toward degree completion
- Student-athletes must be in good standing as defined by their institution
  - If recently graduated from high school players must have state department of education approved academic diploma or general education diploma
- Maintain a 2.0 GPA
- Students must be enrolled full-time
  - Graduating students in their last academic semester/term if enrolled in the minimum number of hours to complete their degree. This is allowed a one-time use per student (NJCAAE, 2022)

Overwatch Collegiate Championship

- Be enrolled in an institution that provides associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctorate degrees and is accredited by an accreditor that is recognized by the Secretary of the U.S Department of Education (or is located in Canada)

- Be enrolled with at least half-time status

- Cannot be on academic probation during any point of the competition

- Cannot be an employee or a relative of an employee of Blizzard

- Upon request may be required to provide proof of eligibility (Major League Gaming, 2023)

RSAA

- All players must be associated with an accredited higher learning institution

- Different campuses of the same school are treated as different institutions but can request the RSAA officials to be viewed as one institution

- Must be 17 years or older

- Players must be enrolled in a degree program lasting at least two years

- Players must be in good academic student as determined by the institution

- Players must be enrolled full-time

  - Players can be part-time if they are former full-time students within one academic year of graduation

- Upon registration, Riot will review players' official Riot accounts to determine they uphold good sportsmanship in games during the current school year.

- Cannot be employed by Riot Games (Riot Scholastic Association of America, 2022)

APPENDIX C

Lawrence Technological Esports (Lawrence Tech University)

- Not required but typically considers students with a minimum 3.2 GPA

- Must be a full-time student (Sirekis)

Maryville Esports (Maryville University)

- Must maintain a 3.0 GPA

- Full-time student

- Hybrid institution so students can be fully online or partially online as long as they can still be physically present on campus (Clerke)

Moccs Esports (Florida Southern College)

- Must maintain a 2.0 GPA

- Full-time student

- Must volunteer 10 hours per academic year (Antor)

Terps Esports (University of Maryland)

- Full-time student

  - Unless in graduating semester

- Maintain a 2.5 GPA

- Must attend philanthropy events as mandated

- Must attend content shoots as mandated (Brack)

UH Esports (University of Hawaii)

- Part-time or full-time

- On track to be receiving a degree

- Must maintain a 2.0 GPA (Kauweloa)

APPENDIX D

1) What is your background in esports/gaming? How did you get involved?

    a) Were you a previous competitor?

2) How long has your university had an esports organization?

3) What do you think esports offers for players and others involved?

4) Do you believe esports is best treated as an academic sector, athletics sector, or club?

5) Does your organization have a strategic plan for the future?

    a) What does that plan look like?

    b) Does that plan involve working with the administration? If so, how?

6) What tools do you believe collegiate esports programs need to be appealing to prospective players/students?

7) What players should esports recruitment target ensure diversity, skill, talent, and leadership? High schoolers? Nontraditional? Exchange?

    a) How do you find/target these players?

8) Is your university using esports for recruitment/marketing?

    a) If so, in what way? Do you see that the university benefits from it?

        i) Do you like how it is structured? How can it be improved or expanded?

    b) If not, do you think the university would benefit from doing so? What do you think those benefits would be?

        i) How would you want the recruitment/marketing to be structured?

    c) For esports programs with little to no budget, how do you suggest they recruit players or obtain a budget?

9) In an ideal situation, how should marketing and recruiting for college esports look?

10) What do you think is the best way to reach those who do not know what esports are?

    a) How do you think you reach parents whose students want to attend a college for esports?

11) Does being a part of your esports organization have any requirements (GPA, volunteering, age, traditional, full-time/part-time, undergrad/grad/doc)?

    a) If not, do you think there should be?

    b) If there was an added GPA requirement, do you think you would lose players?

12) If you were deciding the parameters for an esports scholarship, what would they be?

    a) Based on leadership? Skill? Both?

13) Do you think esports is adequately regulated within the collegiate sector (teams, players, leagues, etc)?

    a) If it needs to be more regulated, who should make those rules? How would that process and regulation look?

    b) What would happen if the NCAA started to regulate esports leagues and participation?

APPENDIX E

Hello [insert name],

I hope this finds you well.

My name is Grace Ann Alexander, and I am a senior Sally McDonell Barksdale Honors College student at the University of Mississippi.

I am messaging you in hopes to interview you for my honors thesis project. I am conducting research on collegiate esports. Through my research and study this year, I am curating a thesis project on collegiate esports.

I would be extremely grateful to interview you as I understand you have a history in/have worked with college esports.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me! My contact information is listed below.

Thank you for your time,
Grace Ann Alexander
OhMyGA#5840
galexand@go.olemiss.edu
(601) 748-3300

APPENDIX F

I _____ am willingly participating in this interview for the purpose of research to be used in Grace Ann Alexander's thesis for the University of Mississippi's Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

I am aware my answers will be used as research for the project, and I am aware that I may be quoted.

_____   _____
Participant   Date

_____   _____
Grace Ann Alexander   Date