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# Game On:

**Designing a Successful Higher  
Education Esports Program**



# Introduction: The Growing Esports Ecosystem

When the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) formed in 2016, seven colleges and universities had varsity esports programs. As of 2019, more than **170 schools**—94 percent of all varsity esports programs in the U.S.—have joined the network, representing more than **5,000 student athletes who have received \$16 million** in esports scholarship and aid.<sup>1</sup>

By 2022, total esports monetization will reach **\$3 billion**, up from \$655 million in 2017, according to Goldman Sachs.<sup>2</sup> Last year's League of Legends World Championship, the most popular gaming event, drew more than 100 million unique viewers—more than the Super Bowl.<sup>3</sup>

As the coronavirus pandemic has caused some schools to cancel live sporting events, it is no surprise colleges and universities are rapidly building out esports programs to create new revenue streams. With college admission enrollment down, many schools are considering collegiate esports as a tool for attracting students and funding, teaching career skills, and enriching life on campus.

But the esports ecosystem is new, fragmented, and ever-changing. Administrators have questions about the best way to set up and run a program to maximize the benefits of their investment. This guide provides tips and resources for creating a sustainable esports program that delivers value to participants while achieving the college or university's unique goals. It also includes examples of **collegiate esports programs done right**—programs your school can learn from and emulate.



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“Nurturing your top [esports] talent will obviously lead to recruiting opportunities, but also, media opportunities, sponsorship opportunities, and new revenue opportunities for colleges, and just overall increases in school morale, support, and pride around those teams.”

—Jason Kirby, COO, Generation Esports

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<sup>1</sup><https://nacesports.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup>Goldman Sachs, “Esports: From Wild West to Mainstream,” October 2018; <https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/pages/infographics/e-sports-report.pdf> <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2019/10/esports-coaches-share-lessons-learned-path-building-new-program>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.businessinsider.com/league-of-legends-world-championship-100-million-viewers-2019-12>

# Understanding the Wider Esports Opportunity: Maximizing the Benefits of Esports

Esports programs teach career readiness skills such as leadership, communication, critical thinking, STEM principles, and hard work and resilience. Like other sports, only a small fraction of collegiate gamers will go on to play professionally. But the **\$159.3 billion esports industry**<sup>4</sup> has created myriad career opportunities, beyond game play. Participating in a collegiate gaming program can prepare students for careers as coaches, broadcasters, educators, consultants, marketing specialists, event planners, and more.

Colleges and universities can also involve other student groups in aspects of esports, including equipment setup, building and configuring computers, tech support, event planning, and streaming competitive gameplay. In this way, the benefits of launching an esports program extend beyond the athletes.

## New Revenue Streams

In the world of competitive gaming, where top players make millions from streaming their gameplay, winning cash prizes, earning endorsement and sponsorship deals, and selling media rights.

It's not just players who stand to gain. Esports may prove as, or even more, lucrative than college football programs, which can generate more than **\$100 million in annual revenue** for the school.<sup>5</sup>

Esports is especially important at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has caused many schools to cancel live sports events. In addition to using esports programs to improve recruitment, schools can generate revenue by building esports stadiums that stream competitions. Then, they can sell tickets, media rights, sponsorship, and merchandise, similar to how they monetize college football.

### ***Pro Tip:***

Esports is so popular, colleges that don't offer programs risk losing prospective students to those that do.<sup>6</sup> While recruiting students to join a club or competitive team should prove easy, educating faculty, administration, board members, and donors about the benefits of esports could be more challenging. Be prepared to teach school constituents about the important role gaming can play on campus.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/#esport>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/chris-smith/2018/09/11/college-footballs-most-valuable-teams/?sh=13422b7f6c64>







## Esports Resources

While only a small fraction of players will play professionally, colleges should consider creating a “path to pro,” a pipeline designed to nurture top talent and connect them with professional gaming opportunities. This could include collaborating with professional teams or partnering with game publishers to create internship opportunities and other valuable experiences for your students. Path to pro programs will help recruit serious gamers, as well as gaming fans.

## Schools to Watch: When ‘E’ is for Everyone

Esports allow students who may never have dreamed of playing sports in college to take part in exciting competitions. At Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) in Pennsylvania, esports participants are considered varsity athletes. The program’s motto is “‘e’ is for everyone,” and its goal is to foster an inclusive community.<sup>6</sup> It teaches students about mental and physical health, in addition to gaming mechanics, and expects members to adhere to strict academic standards.

## The Diversity and Inclusion Opportunity

When people think “gamers,” they often think of males. But esports is a coed sport with a unique chance to foster inclusivity because there is no barrier to entry—anyone can play. Schools should make sure women are not left behind as esports popularity soars by fostering an environment of inclusion for all types of gamers within their program.” Schools should also consider scholarship programs to promote racial and socioeconomic diversity.

## Schools to Watch: When You Build a Fortress

Full Sail University’s collegiate esports organization, Full Sail Armada, is on a mission to bring competitive gamers together. It offers competitive play across a number of games, and hosts tournaments and events at the Fortress, its 11,200-square-ft esports arena, equipped to house **100 athletes and 500 spectators.**<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup><https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2020/10/educause-2020-esports-wider-and-more-inclusive-playing-field>

<sup>7</sup><https://armada.fullsail.edu/>



## Designing a Program: Attracting Casual and Competitive Players Alike

Like most sports, players can be divided into two categories: those playing for fun, and a smaller group playing because they want to compete at the college level, or even professionally. With planning and strategy, schools can create a program that benefits both groups.

### Join the Gaming Club

Many colleges and universities have student-run clubs, and several third parties have emerged to support these organizations. Tespa is a leading operator of collegiate esports leagues with more than 120,000 members. **More than 1,350 schools have competed in Tespa tournaments**, which have awarded more than **\$3.3 million in scholarships and prizes**.

Clubs typically meet once a week. Students practice and compete casually against one another. Often, they host parties and events that engage the wider student body and foster school pride. These clubs can attract prospective students and create a sense of community on campus.

When running a gaming club, be sure to create a mission statement and a code of conduct.

While a student-run club may be exciting enough for many students, other recruits will be looking for competitive programs. A number of organizations stepped up to manage tournaments and leagues, including NACE and Collegiate Star League's (CSL). Competitive teams are more structured. Participants specialize in one game and role and try-out to join the team. At practice, students run drills and go over gameplay with a coach to prepare for competition. Players will need to adhere to strict rules to stay on the team, such as maintaining a certain GPA and attending class.



## Collegiate Esports by the Numbers

- Estimated 475+ universities a gaming club on campus
- 178 schools have an official esports program
- 180+ members schools in the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE)
- 11,000 university teams, 1,800 schools, and 70,000 student gamers in the Collegiate Star League's (CSL) system

## What to Play

The most popular competitive esports games include League of Legends, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Hearthstone, Overwatch, Fortnite, Dota2, Call of Duty, Super Smash Bros., Street Fighter V, and Rocket League.<sup>8</sup> While these games have holding power, it is important to remember that games come and go. Colleges and universities should strive to create sustainable programs that can support a diverse set of games.

### ***Pro Tip:***

Be sure to set a clear goal for your collegiate esports program with measurable metrics.



### ***Sound Byte:***

“The interesting thing about esports is that there’s so many different games that can be placed under the esports banner, you never know what you might discover if you’re given the chance.”

—Hai Ng, CEO of esports consultancy, Spawn Point, and the United States Integrity Ambassador for the Esports Integrity Commission (ESIC)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.bestcolleges.com/features/best-college-varsity-esports-programs/#:~:text=College%20eSports%20teams%20play%20a,of%20Duty%2C%20and%20Rocket%20League.>



## So, Who's Running This?

Schools that are serious about esports will need to enlist talented coaches to run their programs and train players. Luke Zelon, founder and CEO of NXT UP Esports, notes that at the competitive level, it is unlikely you will find a coach who is equipped to coach more than one game, just as you are unlikely to find someone who is good at coaching basketball and baseball. Seek council from partners for coach trainings and recommendation.



With over 200 colleges and Universities in North America offering scholarship, students now have a higher chance than ever of getting a full-ride for esports.

Colleges and universities also need partners who understand intellectual property (IP) law. No one owns football. Someone does own League of Legends. **Schools must get publisher clearance** before playing a game as an organized sport. Rules vary by publisher, but it is worth finding a partner that can provide you with contacts or handle licensing on your behalf.

Coaches and administrators must also understand fair play, which varies from game to game, as well as healthy habits, such as taking routine breaks from the screen to rest your eyes and stretch your legs. Hai Ng, CEO of esports consultancy, Spawn Point, and the United States Integrity Ambassador for the Esports Integrity Commission (ESIC), a nonprofit group that enforces, regulates, and monitors integrity in esports around the world, suggests coaches teach students to take a break from the screen every 30 minutes to stare at a point in the distance at least 20 feet away.





## Schools to Watch: When the Gaming Club Takes Off

The University of Southern California (USC) is recognized as one of the top game design programs in North America by the Princeton Review. It also has a **top esports program** that runs casual and competitive games and is sponsored by major brands, including Red Bull and Monster Energy.

The program is open to students of all levels, who get together for practice, competitions, and viewing parties. Founded in 2009, the program is growing faster than ever due to the national expansion of competitive esports.<sup>9</sup> Currently, USC has competitive teams in League of Legends, Starcraft2, Hearthstone, and Rocket League.

## Schools to Watch: When Gaming Defines the Campus

University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine) runs one of the biggest and well-funded esports programs in the U.S. In May 2019, UCI Esports was the focus of a documentary series that aired on ESPN2, “Good Game: UC Irvine.” Its robust esports facility has more than **70 gaming computers** as well as PC gaming gear. Both its League of Legends and Overwatch teams offer scholarships to students.

According to a 2018 survey, **77 percent of its undergraduates identify as gamers.** The Association of Gamers, the school’s largest club, supports players of all levels. Its esports arena allows students to learn about streaming and esports media, create content, and shoutcast live events.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>9</sup><https://uscesports.weebly.com/about-us.html>

<sup>10</sup><https://uci.edu/top-ranked/innovation/esports.php>



# Secure the Right Technology: Powering an Esports Program

Choosing the appropriate hardware and infrastructure to run a program is challenging. Game selection dictates technology needs, as certain titles require different equipment. A technology partner can help determine costs and choose the right equipment to support clubs and teams. A partner can also help schools and universities navigate their unique opportunity to bring on sponsors to help fund the program.

## Tech Tips

1. **Think modularly:** Look for the ability to swap out components to accommodate different needs and ensure easier, long-term maintenance.
2. **Remember ergonomics and eye health:** Make sure equipment and supporting furniture is supportive of proper ergonomics. Some computers enable you to limit blue light emission to protect eye health. A technology specialist can ensure you set up your equipment to encourage good posture and healthy habits.
3. **Create a collaborative coaching environment:** Arrange the room and equipment to support communication and collaboration.
4. **Be flexible and think long-term:** Invest in the infrastructure to support virtual play, in which students compete or practice from a location of their choice, and in-person play, in which students get together in a lab or arena.



## Consider the following

### Hardware and equipment

- **Gaming PCs** with high-refresh rates, good graphic cards, and lots of RAM.
- **Monitors**, ideally 24" TN Panel, 144hz (Note: Be sure to know league requirements to ensure your equipment is compliant. For example, in some leagues, an ultra-wide monitor is not permitted as it gives players an unfair advantage.
- **Mice** with gaming grade sensor for fast response times.
- **Keyboards** with mechanical switches to provide speed and tactile feedback.
- **High-quality headsets** with microphones for communication.

### Software

- **Cloud-based Esports Management**

**Software:** Educational gaming platforms make it simple for administrators to control all aspects of gaming including game licenses, and to secure lockdown of desktop PCs. Programs like Lenovo Esports ggLeap also enable administrators and coaches to collect valuable data to understand player behavior and progress.

### Network infrastructure and WiFi

- Fast Wi-Fi and a reliable network will ensure students can stream games and compete competitively. You don't want to lose a championship game because your network cuts out at a critical moment.

### ***Pro Tip:***

"You don't need the most high-end custom gaming computer right away. There are phenomenal computers that you can buy pre-built. We work with Lenovo Legions."

—Luke Zelon, founder and CEO of NXT UP Esports





## Schools to Watch: When the OG of Esports Still Leads the Way

In 2014, Robert Morris University Illinois, became the first U.S. college to launch a varsity esports program. It was also among the first schools to offer substantial scholarships: qualified gamers earned up to 50 percent tuition and 50 percent room of board.<sup>11</sup> **Esports was fully integrated into the University of Athletic Department** and competitors were required to maintain athletic eligibility and abide by a code of conduct. The university also built a professional esports facility with elite gaming systems with brand and technology partners.

In 2020, Robert Morris integrated with Roosevelt University. Its working with Roosevelt University to provide students opportunities to play seven games, including League of Legends, Counter-strike: Global Offensive, Overwatch, and Fortnite<sup>12</sup>

## Schools to Watch: When Investing in Tech Pays Off

In 2018, the chancellor of Ottawa University in Kansas expressed interest in starting an esports program. Rather than using an existing computer lab, the school invested in a state-of-the art esports stadium with a video production system and broadcast capabilities. It secured gaming-specific computers with Intel Core i5-9600K processors and NVIDIA GeForce RTX 2060 graphics cards, 24-inch gaming monitors, and headsets and keyboards.<sup>13,14</sup> In 2019, the Ottawa Braves, the school's official esports team, competed for the first time. Since then, the **robust esports program has attracted prospects** and allowed the university to achieve its program goal of training students for careers in esports after graduation.

## Esports Resources

- National Association of College Esports (NACE), [nacesports.org](https://nacesports.org)
- CSL Esports, [cslesports.gg](https://cslesports.gg)
- Tespa, [www.tespa.org](https://www.tespa.org)
- Electronic Gaming Federation (EGF), [egfederation.com](https://egfederation.com)
- Generation Esports, [generationesports.com](https://generationesports.com)
- Esports Integrity Commission, [esic.gg](https://esic.gg)



<sup>11</sup><https://www.rmueagles.com/article/907>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.rooseveltakers.com/article/3294.php>

<sup>13</sup><https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2019/10/esports-coaches-share-lessons-learned-path-building-new-program>

<sup>14</sup><https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/media/video/why-ottawa-university-built-state-art-esports-arena>

## Build Your End-to-End Esports Solution

Creating a game development program that meets the needs of students and schools can represent a complex challenge. Committed to building smarter technology and empowering students and teachers through transformative education solutions, Lenovo is helping students and educators level up the intersections of learning and gaming.

To gain high-level development and gaming performance without the high price, look to the ThinkStation P520c Tower Workstation. Featuring an Intel® Xeon® W-2102 Processor with vPro™, Windows 10 Pro for Workstations 64, and NVIDIA® Quadro® P620 Graphics, it's a solid, configurable workhorse.

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