# Esports and Independent Colleges:
## Ready Player 509 (and Counting)

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James C. Hearn, Julianne O'Connell

A RESEARCH BRIEF FOR

The Council of
Independent Colleges

JUNE 2020

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an association of 770 nonprofit colleges and universities, state-based councils of independent colleges, and other higher education affiliates that works to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private education's contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities. CIC offers conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, student outcomes, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conferences of college and university presidents and of chief academic officers in the United States. Founded in 1956, CIC is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit *www.cic.edu*.

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## Authors' Note

The research and analysis for this project were completed in January 2020, prior to any idea of how the COVID-19 pandemic would affect college life. Several of the major associations sponsoring esports tournaments, including the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) and the Riot Scholastic Athletic Association (RSAA), shut down spring tournaments.

However, esports offer a kind of competition that can be conducted in quarantine or under conditions of social distancing. As such, a number of college teams have continued to compete, and RSAA and Tespa, another association, have sponsored modified competitions for college teams.

As colleges consider how and whether to resume coursework and other activities of college life, rekindling esports competition may be an option unavailable for other sports.

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# Preface

**T**he dizzying pace of technological change creates new issues for higher education stakeholders that were inconceivable even a decade ago. This new research brief, produced for the Council of Independent Colleges by David Welch Suggs, Jr., Jennifer May-Trifiletti, James C. Hearn, and Julianne O'Connell, focuses on one such issue: the rapid rise of esports on college campuses, particularly at CIC member institutions. These computer-based games take many different forms, including virtual simulations of professional basketball, football, and soccer; games where a player can assume the role of a military operative (whether in a modern or science-fiction universe); and competitive card games.

Esports may seem unusual or faddish to administrators and faculty members who were not raised on video games. And esports may seem far afield from activities offered on traditional college campuses. But they are part of the culture for many current students at American colleges and universities as well as to collegiate, independent, and professional esports players both in the United States and abroad. Thus this brief explores the emerging issues of governance, diversity, intellectual property, cost, and enrollment in the collegiate esports arena in order to provide presidents, chief academic officers, and other interested parties a primer on the current state of play, what the future may hold, and what college leaders might consider as they choose whether and how to involve their campuses in the esports universe.

**Richard Ekman**
*President*
*Council of Independent Colleges*

*June 2020*

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# Introduction

It's the first week of the season. A squad from Saint Peter's University is taking on rivals from Manhattan College. It probably is not getting the audience of, say, the Xavier University–Seton Hall men's basketball matchup across town, but anyone in the world can watch this matchup on the Twitch web platform.

As the match is about to get under way, viewers see a static screen with some gentle "on hold" music. The screen notes today's competitors—Siena College, Canisius College, Saint Peter's University, Manhattan College, Rochester Institute of Technology, Marist College, Quinnipiac University, and Niagara University. We note two broadcasters, who in this world are known as just "casters": Cavan "Navac" Dignan and Gus "Upmind" Franco. (The nicknames are their player names.) As they come online, there is an awkward pause—the casters, who sound like college students, evidently didn't prepare to discuss these two teams.

Nonetheless, the match begins with a character who looks like a ninja in a space suit facing off on a platform against an oversized duck in earth-toned fur robes wielding a giant mallet. The two appear to be in the middle of a giant arena amid a crowd of cheering throngs, and they proceed to go at each other hammer and tongs.

"It seems like we have a button check, oh shoot, looks like, wait, I guess not, oh my God, already, well, okay Ricardo, sick get! Captain Falcon so far, we thought it was going to be a button check, so Jermaine here, coming out of here, it's Ricardo against Jermaine, got the recovery and for a second I was like, is that an SD? We are seeing Ricardo with a huge lead, huge, absolutely with just the reactionary knee there from the Captain Falcon and Ricardo putting his team up two stocks…"

And on it goes. As you may have guessed, this is not a real-life competition between Manhattan and Saint Peter's; it's an esports matchup. *Super Smash Bros.*, to be precise, taking place on a Saturday afternoon in January. The Captain Falcon avatar is being controlled by a player named Ricardo from Saint Peter's.

He proceeds to pummel the duck, known as King Dedede, who is controlled by a Manhattan player, who appears onscreen as Jasper01 but who the casters refer to as Jermaine.

The dialogue between the casters is hyperkinetic and inscrutable; the action moves so quickly it's difficult to follow, at least for someone from outside the realm of esports. Nonetheless, this kind of competition is growing faster than any athletic sport on college campuses, particularly at private, nonprofit colleges such as those belonging to the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC).

Esports are not a conventional fit with a traditional model of college life. However, this has not stopped them from becoming extraordinarily popular, particularly among independent colleges. By scanning

> *Esports are not a conventional fit with a traditional model of college life. However, this has not stopped them from becoming extraordinarily popular, particularly among independent colleges.*

college and league websites and contacting teams via social media, we found that 509 colleges and universities that are members of CIC, or about five out of six of the total membership, appear to have some form of esports on campus. Many of those programs have emerged or become formalized in the past three years. Of those colleges with roster information online, the median roster is 18 students, with a minimum of one and a maximum of 68.

"We thought lacrosse was growing fast at about ten schools per year," says Michael Brooks, executive director of the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE). "Esports is destroying that. We're at 212 institutions, and that's in about three years."

In the broader culture, esports have an entire ecosystem supporting them. International events can draw crowds in the hundreds of millions, and professional teams are sprouting up across the country to pay players salaries on top of the prize money available in tournaments. A *Fortnite* tournament last summer paid the 16-year-old winner $3 million, and *a recent Syracuse report* estimated that by 2021, esports would have more viewers than any professional league except the NFL.

At the college level, though, adding an esports program is not the same as adding, say, lacrosse. Esports have not evolved as amateur sports the way we know them at the high school, club, and collegiate levels. Prize money and sponsorships are common. Competition does not have to be segregated by gender the way traditional sports are, although demographic studies suggest that esports athletes are predominantly male.[1] Some colleges conduct esports in athletic departments alongside traditional sports, while other colleges house programs in student activities or operate them in conjunction with an academic program. And governance, in the words of many interviewees, is "the Wild West."

This brief aims to provide college leaders with more information about the concept of esports and the benefits and challenges it presents. While esports could prove to be a significant draw for students—particularly male students—the complicated structure of competitions and leagues may or may not be a good fit on a given campus. Nonetheless, the rise of esports is a cultural phenomenon that may provide colleges with opportunities to innovate and connect with students as well as with potential sponsors and employers.

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1 For example, Pizzo, A. D., S. Na, B. J. Baker, M. A. Lee, D. Kim, and D. C. Funk. 2018. "eSport vs. Sport: A Comparison of Spectator Motives." *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 27 (2). And Zalik, D. 2015. "Surveying the Scene: Examining the Demographics of Esports." Downloaded from *https://www.esportsbets.com/news/who-makes-up-esports-community*.

"A lot of people will wrinkle their noses at it, but they don't recognize the benefit of esports," says Jason Mulligan, director of athletics at Rockford College, which added an esports program last year. "It's no different than other sports, with practice times and coordination. *League of Legends*, when you look at it, is five guys who have to play together, take on different roles. They're not on the field or court, but they're learning valuable skills of communication and teamwork, how to problem-solve, and all sorts of things that make them better able to handle things as students and in the future."

*Some colleges conduct esports in athletic departments alongside traditional sports, while other colleges house programs in student activities or operate them in conjunction with an academic program.*

# The Culture of Esports

To understand the world of esports, we need to eliminate some myths.

## Misconception #1
### Esports are video games.

Students have been playing video games ever since *Pong* was released in 1972, but esports are not played in arcades or on Xboxes or PlayStations. Instead, players compete on networked computers typically in teams of up to seven. These computers are often set up in "arenas," which are designated spaces for computers on local area networks that may or may not have seating for in-person spectators. Some contests can draw live crowds, but most esports spectating happens online: Tournaments, teams, or individual players will stream competitions such that viewers can see both real-life players and the game play at the same time.

## Misconception #2
### Esports are a monolithic activity.

Within most esports programs, players specialize in specific games. Among CIC members, we found that *League of Legends* is the most common game sponsored, followed by *Overwatch* and *Rocket League*. Other games sponsored include *Apex Legends*, *FIFA* (soccer), *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *Defense of the Ancients 2*, *Fortnite*, *Hearthstone*, *Heroes of the Storm*, *Madden NFL*, *Magic: The Gathering*, *NBA 2K*, *Paladins*, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, *StarCraft*, *Smite*, and *Super Smash Bros*. *Overwatch* and several others are "first-person shooter" games in which players see the game from the perspective of an avatar holding a gun, but *League of Legends* is a "multiplayer online battle arena," in which the perspective is of a set of characters battling below the player's vantage point. One of the most popular, *Rocket League*, features robot cars playing a version of soccer.

## Misconception #3
### Esports are not physical sports.

Possibly the biggest conceptual issue those in "traditional" sports have is the idea that competing on a keyboard lacks in the innate physicality of competing against opponents in physical space. While size and strength are not germane to competition, skills like reaction time, focus, and concentration are, meaning that teams train together and coaches expect athletes to strength-train and work on their aerobic fitness for overall health. Although esports do not have a "season" per se, there are a combination of league competitions that can last for several months (generally contained within a semester) and shorter tournaments that take place over a weekend.

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**TABLE 1**

## Characteristics of Popular Esports Games

| Game | Publisher | Description |
|------|-----------|-------------|
| *Apex Legends* | Electronic Arts | First-person shooter in teams of three in a science-fiction universe |
| *Call of Duty* | Activision | First-person shooter with modern special-operations missions |
| *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* | Valve | Multiplayer first-person shooter in which "Terrorists" battle "Counter-Terrorists" |
| *Defense of the Ancients (DOTA) 2* | Valve | Multiplayer online battle arena in which teams compete to destroy each other's "Ancient" structure |
| *FIFA* | EA Sports | Series of world soccer simulation games |
| *Fortnite* | Epic Games | First-person shooter survival game in which players build or destroy structures while killing each other |
| *Hearthstone* | Blizzard Entertainment | Online card game in which players battle as fantasy characters by playing cards to damage opponents |
| *Heroes of the Storm* | Blizzard Entertainment | Multiplayer online battle arena in which teams of five attempt to destroy an opponent's "core" |
| *League of Legends* | Riot Games | Multiplayer online battle arena in which teams compete as fantasy characters to destroy the other team's "nexus" |
| *Madden NFL* | EA Sports | Series of NFL simulation games |
| *Magic: The Gathering* | Wizards of the Coast | Digital card game in which wizards battle one another by playing cards to cast spells |
| *NBA 2K* | EA Sports | Series of NBA simulation games |
| *Overwatch* | Blizzard Entertainment | Team-based, multiplayer first-person shooter game in which teams compete in the future |
| *Paladins* | Hi-Rez Studios | First-person shooter game in which players compete as science-fiction special forces |
| *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* | PUBG Corp. | Multiplayer shooter game in which up to 100 players fight one another until a winner is left |
| *Rainbow Six Siege* | Ubisoft | Online shooter game modeled on Tom Clancy novels |
| *Rocket League* | Psyonix | Soccer played by acrobatic cars in teams of two |
| *Smite* | Hi-Rez Studios | Multiplayer online battle area in which teams compete to destroy each other's "Phoenixes" and "Titans" |
| *StarCraft II* | Blizzard Entertainment | Science fiction strategy game featuring battle of different creatures |
| *Super Smash Bros.* | Nintendo | Single-combat fighter games with anime characters |

# Esports Go to College

Far more than the actual games played, the critical differences between esports and traditional sports for colleges are manifest in how the latter have been managed at the intercollegiate level. Are esports intercollegiate sports? Are they more like club sports? Or should they be seen as academic pursuits? These questions are not just administrative decisions; they bring to light historical and philosophical differences between esports and traditional sports.

## Amateurism, or Lack Thereof

One of the critical components of esports as practiced outside the collegiate setting is the complete lack of amateurism even considered in the concept. As early as high school or even before, esports athletes compete in tournaments for cash prizes. The best are recruited to join teams that pay salaries. Those teams have sponsors, such as telecommunications firms or consumer-goods manufacturers, whose goods must be used or logos displayed on players' uniforms—jerseys not unlike

soccer uniform tops—or in-game. And athletes themselves have sponsors who compensate them for using their goods or discussing them while live-streaming games on platforms such as Twitch (owned by Amazon), YouTube Live, Facebook Gaming, and Mixer (owned by Microsoft).

At the college level, the use of sponsorships, prize money, and student scholarships is complicated and evolving. Teams stream competitions in real-time and allow fans to view saved versions as well. Tournaments provide funds directly to college teams, which can remit funds directly to students, just like student workers, or add funds to students' financial aid package. Because esports teams operate outside the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), they do not have to abide by athletic scholarship limits imposed by those organizations. Juniata College, for example, is an NCAA Division III institution but offers scholarships worth up to $2,500 to esports athletes based on "program engagement and participation."

*One of the critical components of esports as practiced outside the collegiate setting is the complete lack of amateurism even considered in the concept.*

"We think of it on our campus similar to Eagles Abroad—our program in which students commit to language learning, get the scholarship, and study abroad," says Matthew Damschroder, vice president for student life and dean of students at Juniata. Esports reports to his department. "It's similar [to] our school of music—we have talented performers and events that benefit the college."

As with other aspects of esports, though, colleges are adopting a number of different approaches. "Our membership is split on the issue of student amateurism," says Brooks of NACE. "The recommendation from our board is to let institutions have more flexibility to find the route [where] they'll have success. NACE leaves amateurism entirely unstated—it's a bit strange in the same association to have some institutions allowing students to go compete to win prize money and others compete with prize money going to the institution to support scholarships and budgets, but…that mix, as chaotic as it sounds, has proven successful for attracting more institutions. No matter what the [institution's] president decides, there's a place for them here."

## Intellectual Property

Another key difference between traditional sports and esports is that no single entity owns a traditional sport like baseball, but developers own the games used in esports, and the licensing agreements that come with the games specify that nobody can stage a tournament in a given game without express permission from the developer. If an organizer wants to put on a

tournament for college teams to compete against each other in *League of Legends*, they must get a license from Riot Games to do so. Last year, the Mountain West Conference, a Division I league consisting of mostly public universities in the Intermountain West, sought to do so when they created a conference *League of Legends* tournament, with a championship match taking place alongside the league's basketball tournaments in Las Vegas.

Licensing "is the hardest thing to understand coming from a traditional sports perspective," said Carolayne Henry, senior associate commissioner of the Mountain West, who found herself in charge of negotiating the licensing agreements to sponsor the tournament. Henry said she had to develop relationships with the game developers as well as a production company that began working on esports after broadcasting poker games from Las Vegas. She is now chair of the Riot Scholastic Association of America (RSSA), the school association for Riot Sports, which developed *League of Legends*. While other athletic conferences have moved into esports competition, most have elected to do so by sponsoring competition within an association sponsored by one of the game developers rather than creating their own contests. This highlights the knottiest aspect of esports: Who is in charge of it all? What is the governance structure?

## Governance

The NCAA announced in 2019 that it was tabling a study of sponsoring esports and would not provide any explanation of its decision. The NAIA created NACE in 2016; it provides a governing body that establishes rules for athlete eligibility and recruitment and includes member institutions of all sizes, sectors, and missions within higher education. Members pay dues, can participate in NACE's seasons and contests, and must abide by national rules and standards set by the association.

But this is only part of the governance of esports. Riot Games has its aforementioned association, the

**TABLE 2**

**Number and Percent of CIC Colleges and Universities Affiliated with Select Esports Associations, 2019**

| Association | Games Promoted | Number | Percent* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Any esports association | | 509 | 78% |
| Collegiate Starleague (CSL) | *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), Defense of the Ancients (DOTA) 2, Fortnite, Hearthstone, League of Legends, Madden NFL, Overwatch, Rocket League, StarCraft II, Super Smash Bros.* | 497 | 76% |
| Riot Scholastic Association of America (RSAA) | *League of Legends* | 106 | 16% |
| National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) (Governance organization created by NAIA) | *CS:GO, Fortnite, Overwatch, Paladins, Rocket League, Smite* | 88 | 13% |
| Tespa | *Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm, Overwatch, StarCraft II* | 65 | 10% |
| American Video Game League (AVGL) | *Brawl Stars, Clash Royale, Fortnite, League of Legends, Rocket League, Smite* | 22 | 3% |

\* Some colleges participate in multiple associations.

Note: Data are from each esports association's website. A CIC college or university was counted as "offering esports" if it was listed as a member on a given website.

RSAA; and many colleges belong to Tespa, an organization that has partnered with ESPN and Twitch to create collegiate championships in games such as *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch*. Others compete in the Collegiate StarLeague or the American Video Game League, which sponsor competitions in *League of Legends*, *Super Smash Bros.*, *Rocket League*, and other titles. Other for-profit organizations, including the Electronic Gaming Federation and PlayVS, sponsor competitions in many games for both high school and collegiate competitors. Many colleges belong to more than one association and compete in an assortment of games that may be sponsored by multiple organizations.

Except for NACE, all these organizations lack the overarching membership structure of an association such as the NAIA or NCAA. But at the same time, many traditional athletic conferences have developed their own esports programs. Several of these include CIC members, such as the East Coast Conference (ECC)

and the Landmark Conference. The Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC), which hosts championships and events for colleges in all three NCAA divisions, also sponsors esports. Winners of *League of Legends* championships in these leagues can advance to a national tournament sponsored by the RSAA.

Being able to qualify for that national tournament is a major advantage for the Landmark Conference, according to Katie Boldvich, the league's commissioner. It is directly parallel to one of the top priorities for all athletic conferences: securing and maintaining automatic qualifying bids to national championships hosted by the NCAA and NAIA. Other conferences, such as the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference, have moved in the direction of holding conference championships across a number of games, much like a spring sports festival in which a conference has all of its championships for spring sports at the same host site.

# Models for Management

One of the more challenging questions for campuses to consider is how formally to sponsor esports—and if there is to be a formal structure, administratively where it should be placed. About 300 of the CIC members listed on esport organization websites have no further information on their own websites. This may mean that they are leaving esports to student clubs with little if any organizational oversight. But the rapid growth has come in esports teams officially sponsored by institutions. They have generally chosen one of three structures:

- Within a traditional athletic program;

- As a club sport or student activity within student affairs;

- As an academic program, or allied with one.

## Traditional Athletic Program

In athletics, integrating computer-based competition with physical sports can require a cultural shift, but it allows esports programs to evolve in a context with established processes for recruiting, coaching, cross-training, travel, and event management.

"Being in athletics brings a kind of legitimacy to it," says Mulligan of Rockford. They brought together staff from student activities and information technology to start the program and created a space in the college's student center, but the program reports to athletics. "People will look at it and say, 'You play Butler? You play Purdue?'"

Athletics programs also have the institutional infrastructure to support publicity, communications, and other organizational matters for esports programs. A major question for esports, however, is how to handle sponsorships and prizes. As noted earlier, at a college that provides no athletic financial aid, such as an NCAA

Division III institution, how can an athletic department reconcile financial aid or prize money for esports with "amateur" programs for physical sports?

"Most of my colleagues at conferences have chosen not to deal with this issue," says Boldvich, commissioner of the Division III Landmark Conference. "They just don't view it in the world of athletics. Not that it's not a valid recreational activity, but the disconnect is, is this really a sport? Does this fall under the auspices of a conference office?"

## Student Club Model

Esports teams also can be developed as club sports or activities that are supervised in a student affairs/student life structure. Depending on the campus, the disadvantages may be a lack of familiarity with esports and with intercollegiate competition, but the upside is a flexibility of structure that is not bound by the rules and expectations of intercollegiate athletics. Such programs can have the advantage of being aligned with college enrollment strategies and in touch with student culture.

"There are so many variations out there," says Damschroder of Juniata. "We settled on campus life in part because while esports is competitive and shares some commonalities with athletics, it's not an NCAA enterprise. Club sports fall under campus life, so it made more sense to align in that kind of structure of student life."

## Academic Model

Only a handful of CIC members have chosen the last option. One of them, Shenandoah University, is launching academic programs in esports media, management, and performance under the direction of Joey Gawrysiak, a professor of sport management with an appointment in Shenandoah's business school. The goal is to provide experiential learning opportunities for students enrolled in classes to produce social media and other marketing material for the team along with teaching and research in best practices for esports development.

"We have two sides [to esports]," Gawrysiak says, "an academic side and a competitive side. A student doesn't have to compete to be in the major; they can be in nursing, the conservatory, criminal justice, whatever it might be, and vice versa. There is some crossover, but something I wanted to do was to build on experiential learning in the major working on social media—promotion, broadcasting, streaming content, overlays for our Twitch streams, putting us on YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. The competitive team and program work together symbiotically—they're getting real-world knowledge running events, and the competitive team gets a workforce I don't have to pay that makes them feel like esports are a real thing, connected to the university in the same way a football or basketball player would feel that."

Such programs are in their infancy but are finding places to take root at other universities across the country. Becker College is offering a bachelor's degree in esports management. Ohio State University is developing *a multidisciplinary center for esports.* The University of Kentucky is partnering with a game developer to develop *a lecture series and a certificate program*. These institutions, Shenandoah, and others are following a well-worn path of developing academic programs that look like fun to prospects and thus may boost enrollment. Sports management programs pioneered this approach more than three decades ago; more recently, sports communication and sports business have provided ways to teach skills and content knowledge using subject matter that students may find appealing. An illustration of this concept can be found in a quote from *The Simpsons* cartoon series, whose creators collaborated on an esports episode with Riot Sports in 2019: "…even if you're learning geometry by shooting meteors in a multi-simulator, you're still learning geometry."

# What Esports Look Like

**E**sports are so new that very little data exist. The U.S. Department of Education does not list esports as a sport in its *database of sports statistics* gathered under the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act of 1994, and no other national organization has compiled information on colleges and esports.

For this report, we scanned websites of CIC members listed as belonging to NACE, Tespa, RSAA, AVGL, and CSL. Some esports teams are official college organizations; others are informal clubs of students who enter a tournament as a one-off event; and many appear to be somewhat in between. We attempted to take a census of the 509 CIC members participating in at least one of the five organizations mentioned above and concentrated our analysis on the 159 programs that had official pages on college websites. This creates a non-random sample, and it is heavily weighted to colleges either belonging to NACE, having an esports page on the college's athletic website, or both. Even with these caveats, we could assess how esports are evolving at colleges that have committed at least some institutional resources

to esports as intercollegiate sports, as a student activity, or as an academic pursuit. For some colleges listed but lacking a website we could find using search terms, we emailed or attempted to contact staff via Twitter, resulting in three additional responses. We gathered the year of first competition, number of staff listed, number of students on rosters, and games listed for each team. As such, these data are current as of December 2019–January 2020 and limited to information accessible on the web.

Most of the institutions reporting information on rosters and participation rates were members of NACE and possibly other associations, while those without information readily available tended to be outside NACE. Data on institutional characteristics used in this report were primarily from the U.S. Department of Education's *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)*. Data on selectivity were from the 2004 edition of *Barron's* (the most recent publicly available). For each of these data points, we used the most recent year of data available at the time of data collection.

## Growth

Esports growth at the institutions has been exponential. As Figure 1 shows, while NACE has the largest number of members, both Tespa and RSAA have been expanding quickly in recent years.

College rosters at reporting institutions ranged from a single student to 68, with a median number of 18 students listed. Data on gender and ethnic backgrounds were not available, and trying to characterize students based on names and photos carried too high a risk of mistakes. Instead, Figure 2 demonstrates the distribution of roster sizes.

At the median, an esports roster represented 1.2 percent of enrollment at its institution, and at 75 percent of colleges reporting information, rosters comprised 1.8 percent or more of total enrollment.

## Game Trends

On average, colleges reporting data had competitive teams in 3.7 games. The most popular games in terms of participating teams by far were *League of Legends* (with competition sponsored by RSAA, Collegiate StarLeague, and Tespa), *Overwatch* (Tespa and NACE), and *Rocket League* (Tespa and NACE), as shown previously in Table 2. Figure 3 breaks down the games without their competition sponsors.

In terms of the CIC membership, esports participation is spread broadly across the kinds of institutions belonging to the association as a whole, but the more highly developed programs in our sample tend to be among larger colleges that have less selective admissions policies. When considered by admissions selectivity, 27 percent of CIC colleges designated as "less competitive" or "competitive" in admissions by *Barron's* magazine

**FIGURE 1**

**Percent of CIC Members Offering Esports, by Association**
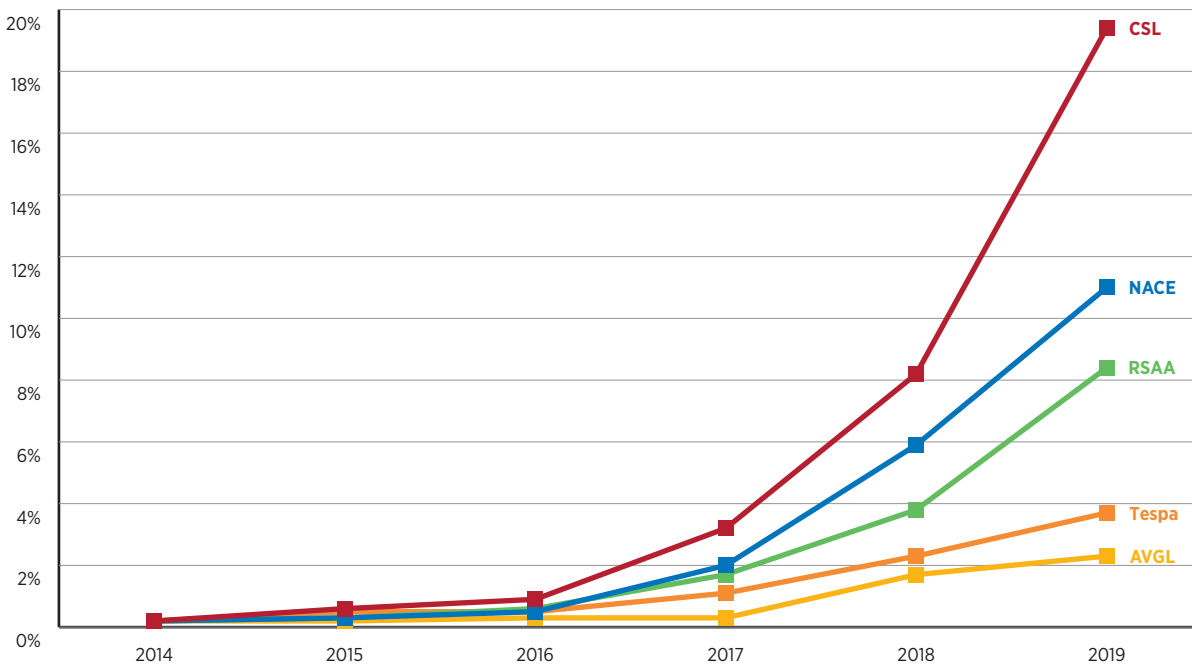


Note:  This figure only reflects the 159 CIC colleges and universities offering esports for which information on year of adoption was publicly available. A total of 509 (78 percent) CIC colleges and universities belonged to at least one esports association (see Table 2).

were involved in esports. Only 22 percent of those designated "very competitive" in admissions and only 13 percent of the colleges with "highly/most competitive" admissions programs fielded esports teams by 2019.

Similarly, esports programs were most commonly found at CIC members in the Master's Larger Carnegie Classification, where 31 percent of those institutions belonged to at least one esports organization. The smallest share was among Baccalaureate/Arts and Science institutions, where only 18 percent did so.

Esports may represent an opportunity for enrollment growth at many colleges and universities, and startup costs appear low. Although specific numbers could not be determined, the number of staff exclusively devoted to esports seems quite small and often done by assigning staff from information technology or other areas of campus. And while gaming computers and infrastructure cost more than a regular student laptop, they are far less than equipment and facilities costs associated with traditional sports such as football or rowing.

*Esports may represent an opportunity for enrollment growth at many colleges and universities, and startup costs appear low.*
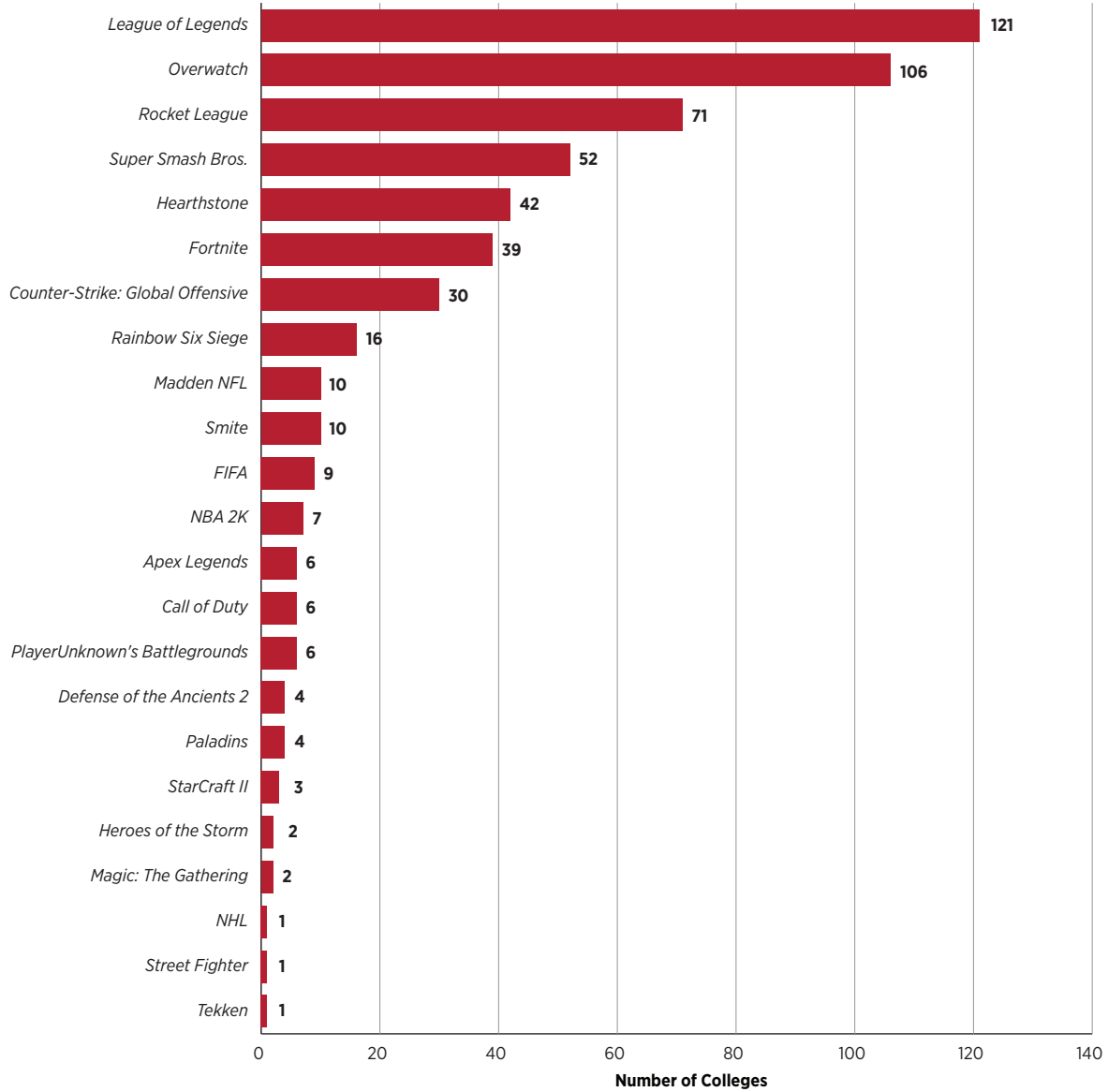
**FIGURE 2**

**Distribution of Esports Roster Size, CIC Colleges and Universities, 2019**
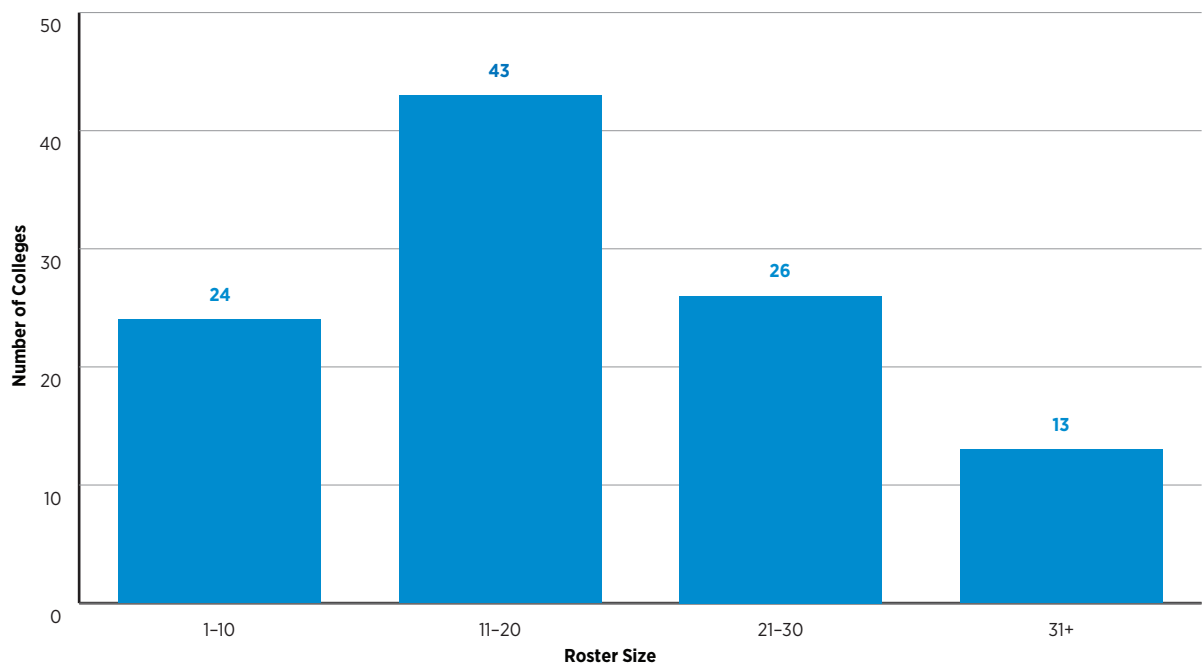


Note: Data were for 106 CIC colleges with esports websites and publicly available data on roster size.

**FIGURE 3**

## Games Offered by CIC Colleges and Universities, 2019

| Game | Number of Colleges |
|------|-------------------|
| League of Legends | 121 |
| Overwatch | 106 |
| Rocket League | 71 |
| Super Smash Bros. | 52 |
| Hearthstone | 42 |
| Fortnite | 39 |
| Counter-Strike: Global Offensive | 30 |
| Rainbow Six Siege | 16 |
| Madden NFL | 10 |
| Smite | 10 |
| FIFA | 9 |
| NBA 2K | 7 |
| Apex Legends | 6 |
| Call of Duty | 6 |
| PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds | 6 |
| Defense of the Ancients 2 | 4 |
| Paladins | 4 |
| StarCraft II | 3 |
| Heroes of the Storm | 2 |
| Magic: The Gathering | 2 |
| NHL | 1 |
| Street Fighter | 1 |
| Tekken | 1 |

**Number of Colleges**

Note: Data were for 146 CIC colleges with esports websites and publicly available data on games sponsored.

# The Challenges of Esports

**E**sports, however, can represent both strategic and programmatic challenges to an institution. As noted, the differences between esports as presently conducted and what NCAA president Mark Emmert describes as the "collegiate model" of amateur college athletics are stark. Michael Wisnios, coach of the esports team at Robert Morris University in Illinois, notes that corporate sponsors often do not understand the restrictions on paying athletes, limiting sponsor space, and other issues meant to limit the appearance and reality of commercialism in college sports, complicating negotiations. Somewhat ironically, the current push in state legislatures to allow athletes to profit from the use of their names, images, and likenesses has its roots in a lawsuit filed by former UCLA basketball player Ed O'Bannon about the use of his likeness in a video game—EA Sports' *NCAA Basketball*. Such profits are endemic to esports as currently practiced, with players earning money from corporations sponsoring their live streams. That said, it appears that most of the gamers who can make significant money from their streams have gone pro without entering the college ranks.

Unlike traditional sports, collegiate esports have not yet emerged as a developmental opportunity for professional gamers. Promising prospects are recruited to professional teams, *as described in a recent* New York Times *story*, but there is neither a draft nor a union as one might find in American basketball, baseball, football, or hockey.

Moreover, whether esports could become as important to a university's brand as traditional athletics can be is an open question. Given vast spectator interest in esports, one would expect some colleges to adopt the strategy of becoming the "Notre Dame of esports": building an identity through athletics. But this has yet to happen: Esports functions at the scale of college club sports, such as cycling and rugby.

## Diversity

Another issue is diversity. Few demographic studies of esports exist, but athletes appear to be primarily white and Asian American males. This can create challenges

for colleges' strategic plans regarding diversity. Wisnios notes that one of the reasons that esports participation in the United States has not diversified much beyond white and Asian American players is the lack of sophisticated computer setups in low- and moderate-income homes: Students in lower-income families do not have access to the gaming computers used in esports, and so they cannot make the leap from playing on Xboxes and PlayStations to networked esports.

A larger challenge may be gender. Unlike most traditional sports, esports are nominally coed, but esports culture has been described often as hypermasculine, and many women have reported harassment both online and in person. Harassment itself raises significant Title IX issues, which could be compounded if players experiencing such harassment are minors. Also, given that most collegiate esports teams are predominantly male, colleges may face issues with the athletics regulation of Title IX. Simply put, to comply with the law, colleges must have 1) roughly the same proportion of female athletes as there are female students, 2) a history and continuing practice of expanding opportunities for female students, or 3) demonstration that they are fully and effectively accommodating the interests of women on campus. Known as the *"three-part test" in Title IX guidelines*, this standard is applied program-wide, not on a sport-by-sport basis. As such, a college that has a student body that is 60 percent female and an athletic program at which 40 percent of athletes are female (both roughly the national averages) would have a challenge documenting Title IX compliance if it added a team with 30 men and five women.

However, Brooks of NACE argues that female gamers are out there, even if they aren't showing up on college teams. "If a school's esports club is mainly white males, that's because they're recruiting that," he says. "The population [of potential players] is so large that you can field a team of any race/gender mix you want; the players are there. Esports is one of the first and only competitions where you can field students of any background, gender, or race…Physical strength does not have anything to do with you being able to compete, so by its very nature, everyone has [the] exact same opportunity."

Boldvich, of the Landmark Conference, pointed to research showing that female gamers were more drawn to strategy games than to shooting games, including multiplayer arena contests such as *League of Legends* or card-based games such as *Hearthstone*, suggesting that a variety of esports offerings might attract interest from a more diverse group of athletes. Brooks added that it is the responsibility of institutions to ensure that esports athletes do not experience gender-based harassment during games, but NACE has created a grievance process with a national appeals committee that could be used to resolve issues that arise during competition.

> *Given that most collegiate esports teams are predominantly male, colleges may face issues with the athletics regulation of Title IX.*

"Absolutely it's the responsibility of the representatives of the institution in question to provide the support and resources to all of their students," Brooks said. "…This is something unique to the varsity space where communication is monitored and there are actual employees of the institutions who are able to take action—as opposed to a club organization or individual actions by the general population."

Finally, some college presidents have expressed discomfort with getting involved with first-person shooter games, given the level of violence in games such as *Overwatch*. Wisnios and Gawrysiak note that such games are a matter of cultural expression, similar to movies with violence or other forms of art. That said,

meta-studies on the topic find evidence for an increase in aggression among users of video games, particularly first-person shooters.[2]

"NACE does not take a stand on forbidding or allowing any particular kind of esport," Brooks says. "If enough of our institutions are interested in fielding teams in a specific game and we can get a license from the publisher to run that competition, those are the two things we look at." Some institutions exclude games with simulated killing of humans, or those with avatars that raise concerns about racist or sexist stereotyping.

> *As colleges consider whether or not to add esports, a critical question will be how well such a program will fit within the culture a college has, or perhaps the one it is trying to build.*

As colleges consider whether or not to add esports, a critical question will be how well such a program will fit within the culture a college has, or perhaps the one it is trying to build. Does an institution's athletic program have the resources to provide the services an esports program might need? Could participating in esports lead to the potential for *cyber attacks*? Are there coaches who can engage in recruiting, which is at least as time-consuming as in traditional sports because esports often provide tryouts for players and must find recruits in a rapidly changing high school landscape? And from a student activity standpoint, are there resources to support a program that will provide travel to games, need access to facilities on campus, and have staff to support player development? Finally, from an academic standpoint, would esports be a good fit with the faculty and the student body? Would a program allow the institution to capitalize on current strengths, and would it open new enrollment markets?

The answer to these questions will vary from campus to campus. Faculty members at some institutions have expressed disdain for the very idea of officially recognizing video games as a sport. Others, however, see esports as a natural evolution of technology and sport in broader society, noting the need for colleges to engage with the topic either in curriculum, cocurricular activities such as esports teams, or in research.

Experts did mention the need for colleges to have a specific plan for recruiting a diverse range of esports athletes, both in terms of race and gender. There also is a need to be conscious of the toxic masculinity that has been found in the broader community, *as with the Gamergate controversy that raged in the last decade*. Although there are female and diverse esports enthusiasts out there, the population appears to be much smaller. A 2016 report found that 15 percent of U.S. esports viewers (as opposed to participants) were females, while the overwhelming majority of viewers were white or Asian American.

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2 See, for example, the following studies:
- Barlett, C. P., R. J. Harris, and R. Baldassaro. 2007. "Longer You Play, the More Hostile You Feel: Examination of First Person Shooter Video Games and Aggression during Video Game Play." *Aggressive Behavior: Official Journal of the International Society for Research on Aggression* 33 (6): 486-497.
- Calvert, S. L., M. Appelbaum, K. A. Dodge, S. Graham, G. C. Hall, S. L. Hamby, L. G. Fasig-Caldwell, M. Citkowicz, D. P. Galloway, and L. V. Hedges. 2017. The American Psychological Association Task Force Assessment of Violent Video Games: Science in the Service of Public Interest. *American Psychologist* 72: 126–143.
- Hopp, T., S. Parrott, and Y. Wang. 2018. "Use of Military-Themed First-Person Shooter Games and Militarism: An Investigation of Two Potential Facilitating Mechanisms." *Computers in Human Behavior* 78: 192–199.

## The Future

There is no disputing that esports have taken hold in current culture, both in America and overseas. As such, some of the most recent trends bear watching.

First, many professional teams in traditional sports like football and basketball have started their own esports programs. These primarily function in games with real-world analogues, such as the *FIFA*, *Madden NFL*, *NHL*, and *NBA 2K* franchises. In Atlanta, for example, Atlanta United of Major League Soccer signed its first esports athlete to compete in eMLS in 2020, and in Washington, the Caps Gaming team signed one of the top NHL esports pros to its roster under the same organization as the Capitals of the physical NHL. And of course, other professional esports teams compete in cities and across the country in the games mentioned above. *High schools* have begun fielding esports teams across the country, with state championships now occurring in at least 15 states. This creates the possibility of a talent pipeline much as is seen in physical sports.

One of the newer trends in esports is combining physical exertion with virtual competition. *Zwift* is a game in which cyclists pedal on stationary trainers connected to apps on their phones or computers. In the app, cycling avatars ride together in virtual worlds: "Zwifters" race each other with the app measuring power output from the bike trainers and using it to simulate races. Australia and the United Kingdom, among others, host national *Zwift* championships with prize money. This year, *USA Cycling is sponsoring Zwift races in its collegiate division*. Cycling is a club sport, not a varsity sport, in American colleges, but opportunities for new physical/virtual competition are expanding rapidly. *Zwift* has a running component in which athletes can attach pods to their shoes and run on treadmills, and virtual ergometers (rowing machines) are entering the marketplace. It is not hard to imagine other opportunities to merge the real and virtual in competition.

# Conclusion

The existence of esports is rising dramatically across the membership of the Council of Independent Colleges. The culture of esports is likely to continue to evolve, but whether the chaos around governance and eligibility will be resolved is anyone's guess.

Esports proponents, such as Brooks of NACE, point to the pervasive popularity of gaming among young people. "This is where the audience has moved to," he says. "That's not to say people are not playing sports, but gaming is a common denominator across the next generation of prospective students. If you don't have a program in place to capture those students, the question becomes how well have you situated your institution to be successful in [the] near future."

Esports may continue to expand at the meteoric rates observed here, or they may stabilize among the population Brooks is describing. In either case, many questions remain to be answered. Among them: Will colleges gravitate to NACE as an analogue to national sports organizations such as the NCAA and NAIA, or will they splinter into a multitude of developer-owned organizations? At the NCAA Division I level, colleges are facing similar questions: The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics recently announced it would examine "new models to restructure college sports," potentially setting up a move to sport-by-sport governance.

Another question regards the commercial future of esports: Will colleges and associations coalesce around a model for directly compensating athletes, indirectly sponsoring them through scholarships? Or will they move to a format where colleges choose

*Esports are not a conventional fit with a traditional model of college life. However, this has not stopped them from becoming extraordinarily popular, particularly among independent colleges.*

to compete within different models of financial aid, like the NCAA? This issue also raises similar questions in traditional sports: The commercial essence of esports, allowing gamers to build their brands using streams, sponsors, and tournament victories, seems analogous to the debate over athletes being able to capitalize on their names, images, and likenesses. That debate is taking place in state legislatures across the country.

As such, the overarching question seems to be whether esports will reshape traditional college sports, or whether traditional college sports will absorb esports. The outcomes will be significant for CIC members and institutions of all shapes, sizes, and missions.

## Other Recent CIC Reports

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