Why Esports Is Integral to Student Recruitment — and How to Bring It to Your Campus

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Esports, or competitive video gaming, has seen phenomenal growth in recent years, with professional esports leagues and tournaments now attracting a significant following. This popularity has reached college campuses as well: In response to increasing interest among students, a growing number of colleges and universities have created esports programs.

If your institution hasn't embraced esports yet, it's time to consider doing so. With its popularity on the rise, esports is poised to play a significant role in student recruitment over the next decade and beyond.

This white paper will examine how the quality of an institution's esports program could play an increasingly vital role in attracting and retaining students, and it will offer practical advice on how colleges and universities that are new to esports can launch a successful program of their own.

## Esports is surging in popularity

According to one estimate, the worldwide market for professional esports is growing by nearly 20 percent each year and will reach $2.2 billion by 2023.[1] There are now professional esports leagues or tournaments for popular video games such as *League of Legends*®, *Overwatch*™, *Rocket League*®, *Call of Duty*™, *Fortnite*™, *Halo*™ and many more.

Green Man Gaming, a British online gaming retailer, has compiled some eye-popping statistics about the size of the global esports market:

> During the 2018-19 school year, some 200 U.S. colleges offered about $16 million in esports scholarships

- By the end of 2019, worldwide esports revenues exceeded $1 billion, up from $162 million in 2013. The total amount in prize money from esports tournaments was an estimated $173 million in 2019, up from $23 million in 2013.
- The number of professional esports athletes more than tripled in the last five years, jumping from just under 8,000 in 2014 to more than 25,000 in 2019.
- Fueling this meteoric growth has been a dramatic rise in esports viewership. With 443 million viewers in 2019, esports had a larger global following than American football and rugby combined.[2]

Streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch allow viewers to watch online as their favorite gamers play a match. But as esports has become more popular, traditional TV networks are getting into the game as well — with networks such as Turner Broadcasting Service (TBS) and ESPN now airing live or prerecorded coverage of esports tournaments throughout the United States.[3]
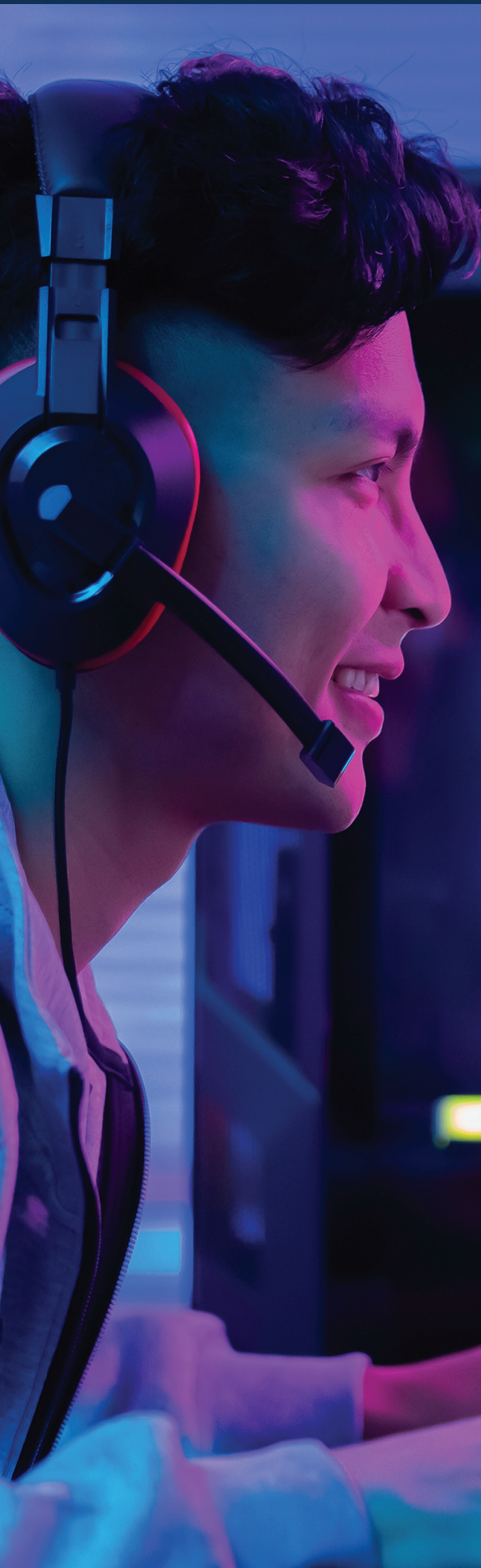
Gaming is part of Gen Z's culture

Generation Z, those born in the mid-1990s through 2012, is pivotal to the growth of the esports phenomenon. In fact, members of Generation Z are more than twice as likely to be interested in esports (34 percent) as other generations combined (15 percent), according to Nielsen Sports[4] — and this is the generation that will be attending college through at least 2034.

Gaming is a huge part of Gen Z's culture. About 90 percent of teenage boys and 75 percent of teenage girls own or have access to a gaming console, eMarketer reports.[5] While this isn't all that different from Millennials, Gen Z is forming a deeper connection with gaming through community building and social engagement on platforms such as Twitch.

> More than three in four Gen Z males say they regularly watch video game matches, a 25-percent increase over Millennials and a key driver of the growth in esports.

Alex Strauss, who leads consumer research for Whistle, focuses on understanding Gen Z and its content consumption habits. He notes that with the release of the Sony PS2® in 2000, Gen Z has always grown up with the ability to play against thousands of players worldwide instead of just two or three others hooked up to the same console — and this ability has shaped their lives in profound ways.

In fact, a survey from Whistle reveals that 68 percent of Gen Z males agree gaming is an important part of their identity.[6] For this generation of youth, gaming is more than a hobby — it's integral to their social lives.

More than three in four Gen Z males say they regularly watch video game matches, a 25-percent increase over Millennials and a key driver of the growth in esports. "Twitch has become not just a platform to chat about games; it's a place where Gen Z builds online communities, unified by common interests," Strauss writes.[7]

Esports is becoming a fundamental student recruitment tool

As esports grows in popularity, colleges and universities have begun embracing esports as well. During the 2018-19 school year, some 200 U.S. colleges offered about $16 million in esports scholarships, NBC News reports.[8] That dollar amount has more than tripled since 2015.

"With the growth at the professional level, esports has drawn the attention of college administrations who now realize that it is a legitimate industry — (and one) that appeals to their core demographic," said Patrick Ocampo, director of membership services and sales for the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE).[9]

With esports enjoying huge popularity among teens, it's only natural that high school students would consider whether colleges and universities offer esports as part of their college search process. "It's important for colleges to develop programs in order to help drive enrollment," Ocampo says.

> Offering esports could help colleges and universities improve gender diversity within their science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs.

Community College Daily reports that community colleges around the country are turning to varsity esports as a way to recruit and engage students and create excitement on campus. For instance, Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo, Iowa, recently created an esports program that drew high school graduate David Vest — now captain of the college's League of Legends team — all the way from Lexington, Kentucky.[10]

Aside from making institutions look more attractive to Gen Z overall, offering esports could help colleges and universities improve gender diversity within their science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs. A researcher from the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom found that girls who play video games are three times more likely to pursue a STEM-related degree than girls who aren't gamers.[11]

What collegiate-level esports looks like

Established in 2016, NACE oversees varsity collegiate esports in the United States and has about 170 members, with more than 5,000 esports athletes. Most NACE members offer esports scholarships to students.

NACE provides a standard set of competition rules, professional development for member institutions, student-athlete recruiting services, organized competitions for some games and a private Discord server for coaches and athletic directors.

Competition depends on the game developers who control the licenses to their products. The developers determine whether they want to organize tournaments themselves or allow outside organizations to do so.

In NACE's case, the organization has agreements with the publishers of Rocket League, *CS:GO^{TM}*, *SMITE^{TM}* and *Fortnite* to run national-level competitions in those games. For other games, such as *League of Legends* or *Overwatch*, national competitions are run by subsidiaries of the game makers — but colleges can organize their own tournaments as well.

NACE encourages its member institutions to participate in any collegiate competition, as long as they follow the organization's guidelines. Many colleges also have club teams that participate in non-NACE esports leagues.

The number of athletes on a team varies, depending on the game itself. For instance, *Rocket League* has three players competing for each team, *Overwatch* has four, and *League of Legends* has five. Students typically have a schedule they're expected to follow that includes regular practices, just like any other athlete. Competitions are arranged in fall and spring seasons, with teams competing against other schools online — often multiple times a week.

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What you need to launch an esports program

To create an esports program at your institution, here's what you'll need to get started.

- **A head coach or program director:** Ideally, the head coach will have some experience in gaming and strategy, but what is even more important than these skills (which can be learned on the job) is proven administrative experience and a vision for the direction of the program, Ocampo said.
- **An esports facility:** Colleges and universities will need a separate facility equipped with gaming computers, peripherals and furniture, as well as a dedicated (wired) Internet connection that is only used for esports.
- **Gaming technology:** Each competition station should include a mid-range to high-end gaming computer, as well as a large-screen monitor, keyboard, adjustable mouse, headset with microphone and gaming chair.

Here are the recommended standards for the gaming infrastructure you'll need.

Technology	Minimum specifications
Internet connection	Dedicated, wired connection of at least 1 Gbps, with a ping rate of 20 milliseconds or less
Gaming computer	4.4Ghz processor or greater
Monitor	24-inch or larger, with a minimum refresh rate of 144Hz (144 times per second)

Other advice

Watch esports to become familiar with the sport.

You can find video of esports matches and tournaments — as well as the Twitch channels of NACE members — on the NACE Twitch channel: **twitch.tv/nacesports**.

Approach esports as you would any other varsity program.

Esports athletes need good physical fitness and nutrition, just as other athletes do. Many institutions have created training routines for their esports athletes that include exercises for the players' wrists and shoulders, as well as exercises that develop hand-eye coordination, rapid reflexes and other gaming skills.

Ask others who have esports experience for help.

NACE provides free guidance to help colleges and universities get an esports program off the ground, and peer institutions can also be useful resources.

"Visit other schools, tour their gaming facilities and don't be afraid to ask questions," said Ashley Jones, head esports coach at Park University in Missouri. "Everybody is still learning, and I've found that people are more than happy to help. The more numbers we get, the more collegiate esports will be taken seriously."[12]

Vendor partners can help as well.

Find a trusted provider of Internet, network, voice, TV/video and security services that has dedicated education experts who can help campus leaders plan their IT infrastructure needs for an esports program.

The bottom line

As esports continues to become more popular, it will take on even greater significance as a strategy for recruiting and retaining students and improving the college or university experience. Campus leaders should start planning now to figure out how their institutions can leverage this rapidly growing trend.

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[12] Pierce, "What you need to start an esports program."

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More information about Spectrum Enterprise can be found at **enterprise.spectrum.com/esports**.

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