

Chapter 11

The Implementation of an Academic and Applied Esports Program in Higher Education: A Case of Diversity, Inclusion, and Building Community

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning, this case study describes how a small liberal arts university, steeped in a tradition of innovation and discovery, developed and introduced an interdisciplinary academic and applied esports program. The study describes the importance of a multi-interdisciplinary approach to program development and building community, drawn from the voices and expertise of interdepartmental stakeholders including administration, faculty, staff, and students. The authors share the timeline of events and lessons learned in launching a successful esports program by applying an entrepreneurial mindset and accepting an appropriate level of risk.

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INTRODUCTION

Those who study institutions of higher education have argued that the next generation of college students, often referred to as “Generation Z” or those born between 1995-2012, have vastly different expectations for their college experience compared to previous generations. Specifically, this generation of college students expects more from higher education institutions when it comes to addressing issues of diversity and inclusion, helping them secure gainful employment, and using technology in innovative ways (Selingo, 2018). Because of their concerns about the burden of mounting college debt (Mintz, 2019), some Gen Zers may explore alternatives to traditional higher education, looking instead at on-demand and just-in-time education solutions.

This generation of college students also tends to be avid video game players. In fact, 72% of men and 49% of women between ages 18-29 report playing video games frequently (Pew Research Center, 2018). This serious interest in gaming is reflected in the exponential growth of esports, the world of competitive video gameplay. Once considered a hobby by millions just a few decades ago, esports is now a \$1.48 billion industry and is forecast to reach \$6.81 billion by 2027 (Grand View Research, 2020). Esports provides gamers with opportunities to strengthen skills in critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, while developing creativity and a sense of belonging and community. The true value of gaming is the environment that “creates ‘ambient sociability’...the experience of playing alone together, and it’s a kind of social interaction that even the most introverted among us can enjoy” (McGonigal, 2011, p. 89). Through immersive experiences and constant interaction, gamers can develop a sense of belonging with others in online gaming communities.

Esports programs within institutions of higher education have the potential to contribute to positive educational outcomes for college students by providing opportunities for students to integrate their learning. According to Barber (2012), the integration of learning at the college level refers to students’ “demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesize information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts” (p. 593). Curricular learning and co-curricular experiences, such as those that take place in clubs and student organizations, provide opportunities for students to make connections and improve their ability to thrive in a complex world (King & VanHecke, 2006). Thus, developing an esports curriculum and introducing collegiate competition to William & Mary would address two fronts. First, an esports program recognizes the role of gaming and its prevalence in the lives of this generation of students. Gaming is more than a casual pastime, and players seek community with other players through various media. Second, demand for esports career paths, often mirroring that of physical sports, is increasing. Students may be drawn to institutions of higher education that provide opportunities for them to explore their interests and passion for gaming while also helping them to develop marketable skills for the growing gaming industry.

Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning, this case study describes how a small liberal arts university, steeped in a tradition of innovation and discovery, developed and introduced an interdisciplinary academic and applied esports program. The study describes the importance of a multi-interdisciplinary approach to program development and building community, drawn from the voices and expertise of interdepartmental stakeholders, including administration, faculty, staff, and students.

The authors share the timeline of events and lessons learned in launching a successful esports program by applying an entrepreneurial mindset within the paradigm of entrepreneurship, defined as “a way of thinking, acting, and being that combines the ability to find or create new opportunities with the courage to act on them” (Neck et al., 2021, p. 3). The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and

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