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Where Do Amateurs Go to Become Pros? A Comparison of the Current Competition Systems in Collegiate Esports to Traditional Collegiate Sport Environments

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Researchers are interested in how the collegiate esports model can follow that of the traditional sports talent pipelines. This piece seeks to conceptualize the manifestations of collegiate esports unique from traditional sports, as it integrates into the higher education model. In the current esports ecosystem, game developers own all intellectual property associated with the games and thus run the operations of leagues and/or tournaments themselves. Because of this, the pipeline seen in traditional sports is not transferrable or mimicked in the collegiate esports realm. The result is unique considerations for higher education administrators and coordinators regarding the retention of players and their recruitment from other institutions and professional circles. This line of research will lay the foundation for future studies in collegiate esports and assist in building the literature on the esports ecosystem.

Keywords: esports pipeline, esports ecosystem, esports players, intellectual property, esports recruitment

The better part of the last decade has seen the digital phenomena known as esports transcend from relative niche obscurity to the latest fad in big business and sponsorship (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018). Rising in tandem with video game streaming sites like Twitch.tv, the competitive video gaming sector has grown in market size and is now redefining itself for mainstream audiences and partners. Such growth of esports as an industry has engendered several aspects of research subjects, one of which is the collegiate esports scene. This new esports research topic is particularly localized to the North American region, a geographic area that has had a long tradition of education-sponsored sports activities. With the emergence of collegiate esports as an academic discipline, Funk et al. (2018) discussed numerous facets of the collegiate esports experience that need deeper investigation, including toxicity in player behavior and academic outcomes such as retention and diversification. These issues then converge into a more fundamental problem that collegiate esports now faces: the unsettled structure of competitive esports in higher education. The current esports ecosystem and the relationships among the stakeholders are quite distinctive from traditional sports. Similar to previous research examining the similarities between traditional sport and esports in various facets (e.g., Ross & Fisackerly, 2023), there is a present need to investigate esports in higher education to understand what makes collegiate esports uniquely different from its traditional counterpart (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2018).

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The competitive realm of collegiate esports involves the full ecosystem of game publishers, vendors (sponsors and competition organizers), and collegiate esports competitive organizations (their administrators and players; DiFrancisco-Donoghue & Balentine, 2018). In this system, game publishers can license rights to organize leagues and/or tournaments for their titles to organizations or run the operations of leagues and/or tournaments themselves. It is common for game publishers in collegiate esports to license lower-tier competitions and then run the highest-tier competition themselves, as is the case for the game titles such as *Rocket League* (RL), *Overwatch* (OW), and *League of Legends* (LoL). Leagues like the National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC) and the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) run semester-long leagues in the titles, but the winners of these competitions are not considered the publisher's official national champions for those titles. The structure of the collegiate esports competitive realm is uniquely different from that of traditional sports, where no organization owns the rights to organize sport competition. The focus of this manuscript is on competitive esports programs within higher education, encompassing both 4-year and 2-year colleges. In these programs, enrolled students are grouped into teams based on specific titles, aiming to represent their institution in competitions against other programs from different institutions. The competitive collegiate esports scene is not cleanly separated into factions like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Divisions, National Junior College Athletics Association (NJCAA), or National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). In collegiate esports, institutions from all varieties of traditional sport categories regularly compete against each other in collegiate competitions. Furthermore, collegiate esports feature bidirectional movement from collegiate to professional or vice versa. In traditional collegiate sports, players who sign contracts for professional competition lose their amateurism eligibility in the NCAA.

The currently unsettled collegiate esports model, then, presents a system with unique contexts that can profoundly alter how practitioners function in the field. Traditional sport activities like player recruiting and competition scheduling take on subtexts unique to

esports. Game publishers owning the intellectual property (IP) of their esports titles gives them a dominant presence over the execution of any competitive participation, a fundamental difference from the NCAA having functional majority ownership of a sports' implementation (Peng et al., 2020; Purewal & Davies, 2016). Though the NCAA has competition from other organizations in the collegiate space, they operate as a de facto monopoly for elite competition (Southall et al., 2023). As such, the pipeline of talent from high school to collegiate to professional seen in traditional sports is not as easily mimicked in esports. Furthermore, the ecosystems of these esports pipelines deal with unique considerations of financial support and governance concerns that are not as systemic in traditional sports. The abundance of opportunity for players to compete creates an environment in which the role of collegiate esports does not serve as the last jumping-off point for professionalism, but rather a stepping stone that can serve as a destination once professionalism is done. Players can return to the collegiate competition to continue their degree once their professional tenure is finished or on hiatus (e.g., Andrew "ckg" Smith, Aiden "Niles" Tidwell, and Spenser "Tempos" White). The implications of this provide academia with a unique research context to explore and observe (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk et al., 2018; Kauweloa, 2022; Kauweloa & Winter, 2019; Keiper et al., 2017). Gaining insights into the status of the collegiate esports ecosystem, which reflects and contradicts the traditional collegiate sports enterprise, can bring clarity to the value of academic research and practical implications.

This manuscript will seek to conceptualize the collegiate esports ecosystem and its role in the pipeline of esports talent, taking care to consider how the contexts of both the traditional sports and esports environments manifest themselves. The traditional sport pipeline will first be examined specifically in the context of collegiate competition in sport environments with minor leagues (i.e., basketball and baseball) and without (i.e., American football). After establishing this context, the collegiate esports system will be discussed with a particular focus on how publisher ownership of the IP dictates the development of competition. This will lay the foundation for discussion of the current esports pipelines and how collegiate esports fits into each title's environment. The manuscript will conclude with considerations for how esports and traditional sports differ because of these pipelines, why collegiate esports may continue to become an epicenter of amateur development, and future research avenues that should be undertaken to understand the competitive realm of collegiate esports and its impact on higher education and esports practitioners. Of pertinent focus to this discussion are the current considerations in the collegiate esports ecosystem that affect the day-to-day operations of a program and, as a result, the manifestations of the competitive esports pipeline.

Competitive Structures

Traditional Sport Pipelines

Sport in North America tends to follow a singular pipeline of amateurism to professional, with little crossover or frequent movement between the two. To simplify the narrative of college sport ecosystems, only American football, basketball, and baseball will be examined for this research line. There is no single entity that owns the exclusive rights to each of these American football, basketball, and baseball, though there are certainly operating monopsonies in collegiate and professional sport that function as such. Hockey and soccer are omitted from this conceptual analysis not because of inherent misalignment with the context, but rather the large focus of international talent that is prevalent in those systems. This is not to indicate that international talent does not exist in the three sports mentioned in this manuscript, but rather that a domestic analysis of talent pipelines is best suited for these three as opposed to the wider, global talent footprint and pipeline for the Major League Soccer (MLS) and the National Hockey League (NHL).

The NCAA serves as the main flow of talent for American football, basketball, and baseball (NCAA, 2020). The NCAA governs over 520,000 players in North America (Media Center, 2022), a daunting number compared with the 77,000 covered by the NAIA (NAIA, 2023) and the around 60,000 covered by the NJCAA (2023). Considering the dominance of the NCAA in the collegiate sports space in both size and opportunity to play professionally, players in American football, basketball, and even some in baseball must "choose" to play for an NCAA institution. As a governance organization, the NCAA exists to, in their own words, cultivate "an environment that emphasizes academics, fairness, and well-being across college sports" (NCAA, 2021). Players and institutions cede administrative authority to the membership-led NCAA but do have a voice through committees and legislative processes.

American football players, for the most part, participate in youth amateur-level competitions in middle and high school. The National Football League (NFL) represents the echelon for players. Though some players may spend time in lower stature leagues like the Canadian Football League (CFL), the bulk of professional players follow the high school to college to professional pipeline. The NCAA (more specifically, Football Bowl Subdivision) serves as the main feeder system for talent into the NFL. New leagues like the Extreme Football League (XFL) (going through its third launch in as many years in 2023) seek to fill in the gap between collegiate and professional, especially during a time frame of the year when American football is not in session during the spring and early summer (XFL, 2022). As will be addressed later in this traditional sports section, any movement in the developmental pipeline is one-way from collegiate to professional. It remains to be seen what the dynamics of the XFL will add to this system, but the NCAA's position on amateurism regulates any player movement in this sphere.

The National Basketball Association (NBA) does not solely rely on the collegiate system to fully develop players, as the G League allows draft picks to participate in minor league action with affiliate teams. Top draft picks in the NBA can still play in the top professional league, but the minor league system allows players to adjust to the professional game at a less-intensive pace. This is especially true in the case of some high school players that have moved to the G League instead of participating in collegiate competition (Divens, 2021). College has served as a critical step in the amateur to professional pipeline for basketball, particularly with the "one-and-done" rule put into place in 2005 that required players to be at least 19 years old and 1 year out of high school to be eligible to compete (Zephyr, 2022). Until its removal, though, there is no direct line from high school to professional play. The creation of the Overtime Elite league could help create a pipeline from high school to professional play and even from Overtime Elite to college, but the long-term effects of the league are not yet known given its infancy (Drummond, 2023).

Baseball has a robust minor league system that dates to the early formation days of the professional leagues in the United States in the late 19th century (Cooper, 2019). Today there are four levels of minor league play for players (Low-A, High-A, AA, and AAA). Aspiring players can go straight from high school to minor league play without a stop in the collegiate system. Only four high school players have gone immediately to the majors, with most high school players drafted by Major League Baseball (MLB) teams (and

college players for that matter) spending time in the minors to develop (Catania, 2020). The ecosystem has also seen a sharp reduction in the number of players drafted, with the draft shortening from 40 rounds to 20, and only 616 players selected compared with 1,530 players in the 2011 MLB Draft (Stross, 2013). Though 13 of the first-round picks in the 2022 MLB Draft came from high school, only 118 out of the 616 total picks were high schoolers (Major League Baseball, 2022). This amount decreases even more when considering how many players (both collegiate and high school) elect not to go professional the first time they are drafted. Collegiate players drafted by MLB teams also will, for the most part, start in minor league play before progressing through the system.

Crucially for the three sports mentioned above, there is no sustainable path of movement back and forth between amateur-level play and the professional realm. This model holds even for American sports with sustainable minor league systems like the MLB with its minor league system and the NBA with the G League. The NCAA prohibits players from rejoining their college leagues once they have attained professional status in their respective sports (NCAA, 2022). Though there are competitors to the NCAA, such as the NAIA, no collegiate league compares to the competition level found in the NCAA and as such the governing body serves as the de facto leader in this level of amateur competition. In this manner, the NCAA operates as the de facto source of elite competition. The lower minor league systems do not represent peak professional competition, but all levels of those minor league systems are still professional and not amateur leagues. Figure 1 is a brief sketch of the existing model in place for football, basketball, and baseball players to climb from the ranks of amateur up to professional status.

Collegiate Esports

Researchers have postulated that the sportification of esports has resulted in an ecosystem that is like that of professional sports leagues, with agents, ticketing, media rights, and more (Heere, 2018). Indeed, the same attributes of scholarship players with facilities, amenities, competitive seasons, and even jerseys are elicited in the competitive esports realm. Esports programs pull these attributes from their collegiate surroundings but also from the professional leagues that operate above them. The growth of esports has filtered down into the intercollegiate sphere, laying its foundation and adapting to the amateurism model of a sport organization and competition intrinsic to American universities.

The function of traditional collegiate sport, however, exists without a proprietary claim and is therefore unrestricted in how it may function. Though sport governing bodies can concur on specific rule sets, the NCAA is free to organize multiple sports and the conferences and institutions that compete therein at its own discretion. With esports, however, the video games that serve as the mode of competition are the IP of the developers and publishers that created them. These entities own sole control of how these video games can be licensed and used. This is unlike traditional sports where no entity can, for instance, ban another from organizing a children's soccer tournament. In esports, a developer may at any time pull the plug on a competition, as they own all IPs associated with the games they control. Because of this, the pipeline seen in traditional sport is not as transferrable and mimicked in the collegiate space. Furthermore, not every publisher is interested in fostering an environment of esports competition. The result is a case-by-case implementation of collegiate competition.

This manuscript centers on competitive esports programs within higher education campuses, where enrolled students are organized into title-specific teams to represent their institution in competitions against other institutional programs. In the last decade, the presence of collegiate esports programs has skyrocketed to over 200 programs in NACE alone (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2023). With over 12,800 players from 650 institutions participating in its Spring 2023 season, NACE stands out as one of the key membership associations in the collegiate space (Butler University Set To Host NACE Starleague's Spring 2023 Grand Finals, 2023). NACE was originally formed out of the NAIA in 2016 and offers competitions for a large swath of esports programs, including student-run clubs and full scholarship institution-sponsored teams. NACE is not the only league that teams will play in, though, as >74% of programs compete in at least three competitions (Postell & Narayan, 2022). These can be weekend tournaments like Harrisburg University Esports (HUE) Invitational in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, additional third-party leagues like the NECC, or publisher-run leagues that are usually the upper echelon of competitions. This creates a unique proposition for esports practitioners, who have more options for competitions than their traditional sport counterparts. NACE is considered the leader in collegiate esports in part because of its long tenure as an organization, membership-driven leadership, and wide-ranging titles and competitions for programs.

However, this does not mean that NACE has any bargaining power in working with publishers, and they often must follow guidelines publishers create for them. There are scenarios in which winning a conference or league championship can result in further competitive opportunities, though they vary by title. For example, the winner of the 2022 Peach Belt Conference RL Championship, Florida Southern College, did not earn qualification for Collegiate

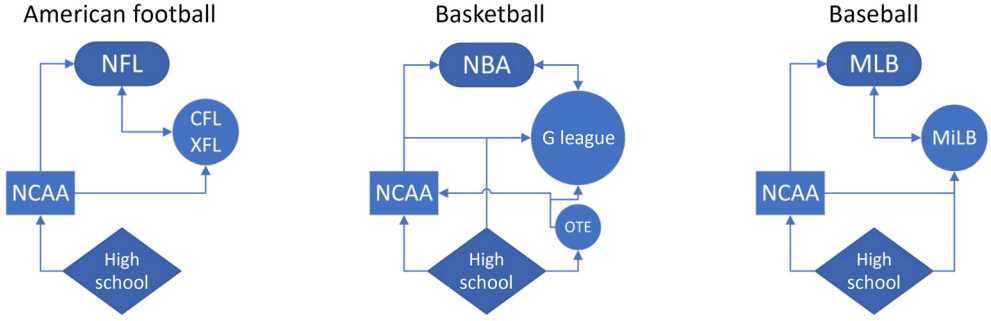

Figure 1 — Competitive pipelines for traditional sports. NFL = National Football League; NCAA = National Collegiate Athletic Association; NBA = National Basketball Association; CFL = Canadian Football League; OTE = Overtime Elite; MLB = Major League Baseball; MiLB = Minor League Baseball.

RL, the top collegiate league for the title. However, the winner of the 2022 Peach Belt Conference LoL Championship, Converse University, qualified for a spot in the Collegiate LoL Championship. Differences within esports implementation do not end there, as collegiate esports organizations recruit players from a multitude of sources, including scholastic (high school) leagues, professional and amateur organizations, and from their own student bodies.

Additionally, a player's eligibility can vary from title to title. For example, Collegiate *Call of Duty* (CoD) lists in their 2023 player handbook that schools must be accredited with a physical campus and that players are deemed eligible if they are full-time enrollees of the institution with a 2.0 cumulative grade point average (CCL, 2023). College *LoL*, on the other hand, also maintains an accreditation requirement with no physical campus necessity and eligibility of players determined by either full-time status or part-time status (with full-time for a majority of their career) with only an academic good standing requirement (College League of Legends, 2021). This does not even consider the organizing leagues like the NECC or NACE that have their own membership eligibility requirements. Because of publisher IP control, there is slim potential for one single entity to regulate all esports, like how the NCAA functions. Such authority would require the NCAA (or a similar entity) to control all the licensing rights for collegiate competition of esports from each individual publisher that are worth more than the legislator itself. Instead, there may be a cobblestoned approach to the regulation of collegiate esports, with each title setting their own standards. That is to say, there would be no NCAA-like entity regulating collegiate competition, but rather an assortment of third-party tournament organizers and game publishers who create their own regulations for each of their own titles.

For the purposes of this manuscript, the only professional esports ecosystems will be those that have substantial collegiate esports footprints in the form of publisher competition organization and program participation in the titles (e.g., *LoL*, *OW*, and *RL*). A survey of 127 competitive collegiate esports programs found that *RL* (87.4%), *LoL* (81.1%), and *OW* (78.7%) are three of the top four games offered by collegiate programs, much higher compared with other titles like *Call of Duty* (43.3%) and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) (8%; Postell & Narayan, 2022). The three chosen represent a large portion of the competitive base as well as the transient movements between amateur and professional spaces. Furthermore, in the example of Redbird Esports, these three titles are often the titles at institutions with hired coaches. There is not "one" overall method that game publishers follow when organizing their esports competitions, and that includes collegiate. In collegiate, there are numerous leagues like NECC and NACE that organize leagues for multiple titles. These competitions may or may not have berths into larger competitions (i.e., a national championship).

Another important contextual note is that of the inclusion of OW in this discussion. The OW *League* drew mass acceptance for *OW* esports upon its release. Recently, though, the league had been mired in controversy and financial difficulty, leading to the league releasing information involving the reconstruction of the professional league. At time of writing, the only certainty involving OW *League* is that of its uncertainty. Though this could provide a blockade for discussion of its collegiate system, this manuscript seeks to formalize the understanding of collegiate esports ecosystems, particularly in how they have already manifested. It is for this reason that inclusion of OW discussion is integral to understanding how the industry has developed. Indeed, collegiate OW teams are still competing in numerous tournaments and leagues well after the announcement of the league's rebuilding phase. It is for this reason that the discussion of the collegiate OW system and its role in the pipeline of talent is still applicable to this manuscript, specifically in context of what has already been observed.

Esports Pipelines

Having established the context of collegiate esports, the ecosystems of the aforementioned esports titles can now be discussed. Competitions mainly fall under the umbrella of either franchised or nonfranchised leagues. Esports titles with franchised teams (e.g., *LoL* and OW*)* tend to have smaller and lower-tier amateur competitions as the ceiling of earnings is limited to the low tier of competitions that they can play. A proxy to this in the traditional sports world would be closed leagues. The top five sport leagues in North America (NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL, and MLS) all operate as closed leagues, and as such, there is limited opportunity for competition in those sports at elite levels. Franchising provides stability for the top organizations and allows for proper player compensation. Nonfranchised titles (e.g., *RL*); however, have thriving amateur organizations (in proliferation, not necessarily in profit) given that there is no roof for their success. One good run in qualifying for a "major" (*RL* terminology for a tournament) could catapult organizations into an environment where they could build their brand and establish their connections and roots. The *RL* ecosystem is the only league among the three discussed not to have franchising. Organizations compete in regional qualifiers to earn berths to international events. Collegiate *RL* is the top collegiate competition, run by Psyonix.

Unlike *RL*, the OW League was comprised of numerous franchised teams in Asia, North America, and Europe. The OW Contenders league featured competition between professional academy teams and amateur organizations. Academy teams were a proxy for minor league teams in traditional sports as they were organized by professional teams to develop talent for the future. Academy teams had their salaries paid for by the main organization and had access to the same amenities a professional player on the main roster may have. As seen in Table 1, OW had by far the most movement between professional and collegiate, with entire collegiate rosters moving to professional teams after their season. OW Collegiate is the top collegiate competition run by Activision/Blizzard.

LoL, like OW, uses a franchise model. The top tiers of competition in *LoL* are the respective franchised regional leagues, with the major league in North America being the League Championship Series (LCS). Before 2023, each of the 10 LCS rosters also had academy teams that compete in LCS Academy, a training ground for minor league players. Though there are some amateur events in *LoL*, the high-profile competitions are fading over time as the franchising model gained favor. This makes collegiate-level events the next best solution for players wanting high-level competition. Collegiate *League of Legends* (CLoL) is the top collegiate competition run by Riot Games for *LoL* and is the only event in where the publisher awards a national championship for this title.

OW players had commonly gone professional and even returned to collegiate play, as presented in Table 1. The players examined are a sample of those who have played collegiately and professionally. In the case of *OW*, the teams shown for each player are not concurrent, as players cannot be on a collegiate roster and a professional roster at the same time. It is difficult to tell whether there is more movement from collegiate to pro or vice versa, and as such should be a line of inquiry for a future research project. The pandemonium in the system results in the ecosystem seen in

Table 1 Example Players With Both Professional and Amateur or Collegiate Experience

Player	Organization 1	Type	Organization 2	Type	Organization 3	Type
Hydron[a]	Illinois State	College	Florida Mayhem	Pro	—	—
S9MM[a]	Illinois State	College	San Francisco Shock	Pro	—	—
UltraViolet[a]	Illinois State	College	Atlanta Reign	Pro		
Reiner[a]	Illinois State	College	Los Angeles Gladiators	Pro	—	—
Rupal[a]	Illinois State	College	Florida Mayhem	Pro		
Lukemino[a]	Illinois State	College	Maryville	College	—	—
GiG[a]	Los Angeles Valiant	Pro	Uprising Academy	Academy	Illinois State	College
Lep[a]	Northwood	College	Houston Outlaws	Pro		
Landon[a]	Northwood	College	London Spitfire	Pro	—	—
Coluge[a]	Maryville	College	San Francisco Shock	Pro		
Halo[a]	Boston Uprising	Pro	Maryville	College	—	—
Prov1de[a]	Los Angeles Valiant	Pro	Maryville	College		
K1ng[a]	Maryville	College	Vancouver Titans	Pro	—	—
Niles[b]	Maryville	College	Golden Guardians	Pro	GG Academy	Academy
Iconic[b]	Maryville	College	Golden Guardians	Pro	GG Academy	Academy
Hyper[b]	Illinois State	College	TSM Academy	Academy	AOE Crows	Amateur
Tempos[b]	Illinois State	College	C9 Amateur	Amateur	Illinois State	College
Spirax[b]	Maryville	College	FlyQuest	Academy		
CKG[b]	TL Academy	Academy	Team Liquid	Pro	Maryville	College

Note. The list of players is extracted from the esports online community "liquipedia.net."
[a]*Overwatch* players. [b]*League of Legends* players.

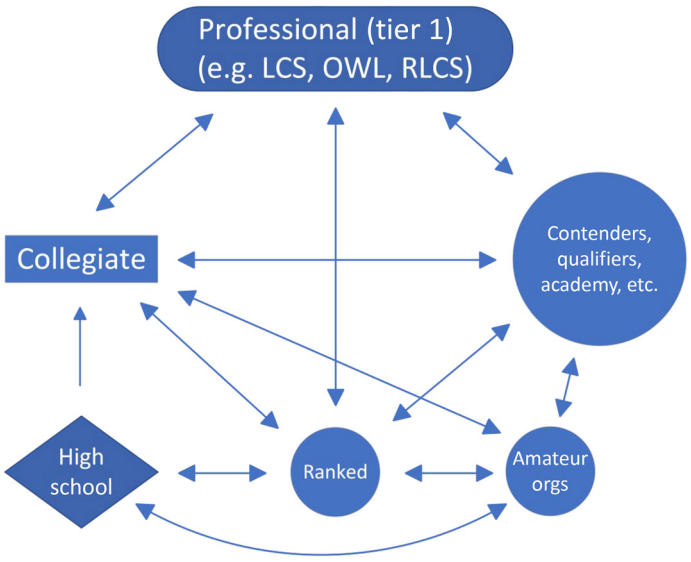

Figure 2 — Competitive Pipelines for Esports. Note. This figure has been adapted from Fisackerly, W. (in press). Esports professional player career process. In S.E. Jenny, N. Besombes, T. Brock, A.C. Cote, & T.M. Scholz (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Esports*. Routledge. The amateur pipeline segment on the right has been simplified for this manuscript. LCS = League Championship Series; OWL = *Overwatch League*; RLCS = *Rocket League* Championship Series.

Figure 2 (Fisackerly, in press). Collegiate programs have numerous competitors to recruit players aside from institutions, including pro and amateur organizations. In some titles, such as *RL*, players may compete on a collegiate team and an amateur organization that is competing in qualifiers for *Rocket League* Championship Series majors. As such, there is a unique opportunity for esports collegiate programs to recruit from the same entities that could pull their players away. No such opportunity exists in traditional sports for players to play in amateur competitions once they have gone professional in that sport. It is important to note that though the integration of collegiate players into professional circuits continues to expand, the movement of players through this method is nascent.

Implications and Considerations for Future Research

The environmental conditions in esports and traditional sports are not exactly equivalent. There are nuances within the gaming sphere that create unique opportunities and, at the same time, give rise to several issues that need to be addressed. Particularly, player recruitment, resource allocation, and program development, and publisher IP control affecting governance are all relevant topics of interest. These areas are of importance to the collegiate esports talent esports pipeline given their impacts on talent development, equitable competition, and institutional operations. Below are discussions of each important consideration in the collegiate esports scene.

Player Recruitment

Since the regulation of collegiate players currently does not forbid the professional experience of its students, there is an entirely new avenue of player recruitment accessible to practitioners that is not available in the traditional sports sphere. The result is unique considerations for higher education administrators and coordinators regarding the retention of players and the recruitment of players from other institutions and professional circles. Postulations about

professionals in collegiate play are not without basis. Spring 2023 saw professional *RL* Player sosa competed in both RL Championship events for KOI at the professional level and the Collegiate RL World Championship for Fisher College. Former North American *LoL* Professionals Niles and Dardoch faced off in the 2023 Collegiate League of Legends Championship between Maryville and University of St. Thomas. *OW* players have routinely moved between professional and collegiate as previously mentioned in Table 1. It cannot be overstated how the pool of professional players available to collegiate institutions fundamentally alters the incentives and opportunities for recruitment. Perusing player database sites like Liquipedia reveals that the leading institutions frequently showcase talent that has progressed through the amateur to professional pipeline. Recruiting a star player from a professional team upon their retirement from pro play or even while they are still active professionally could drastically affect the performance of a collegiate side. There could be potential negative effects of this movement, though, especially when considering moving rapidly between professional and collegiate competition. Kauweloa noted in his dissertation the experience of one player that had moved repeatedly between the two scenes and how that negatively affected that player's mental health and confidence (2022).

Noteworthily, the professional scene is not the only potential source of player recruitment. The recruitment could additionally be from amateur and casual participants of esports titles on campus. Recruitment of current students in this manner could function as a form of continued retention efforts of the institution and function similarly to the idea of a walk-on in traditional sport, while the recruitment of professional players would function as an admission source that traditional sport does not have a proxy for. These players, and indeed any collegiate esports player, could study online at an institution while competing off-campus. The sum of these practices yields a difficult environment in which collegiate esports is incredibly accessible for competition at the potential cost of academic integrity and competitive performance.

Resource Allocation and Program Development

There is a clear distinction of resource allocation for each level of competition in traditional collegiate sports with a clear separation between club and varsity competition. For esports, however, the line between a club and a varsity esports program (VEP) is blurred, making it important to precisely define the context of competition, particularly in the concept of an esports program or an esports player. As defined by this manuscript, a VEP is any entity on a higher education campus, consisting of enrolled students, that organizes into title-specific teams to represent their institution in esports competition against other similar programs. The students that participate on these teams are players. A competitive esports program can be community-driven with minimal institutional support such as club teams, or highly organized and funded such as VEPs. The separation between club and varsity is a holdover from the traditional sport ecosystem.

There are some complexities that make specific distinctions between club and varsity in the esports space difficult. Scholarships awarded for athletic ability could potentially be considered a requirement for varsity status, yet some organizations like Shenandoah University that operate traditional athletics in NCAA Division III do not offer such opportunities for esports players. Additionally, many NCAA players across all divisions may play on partial or no athletic scholarships, giving credence to the notion that scholarships as a varsity indicator are a flawed proposition. The result, then, could be a combination of dedicated practice and competition space for teams, hired personnel to oversee esports, and school funding for competitions and travel. Future research should examine the financial support of institutions for esports to provide better understanding of the club to varsity spectrum of collegiate esports.

Esports program implementation in higher education indeed takes a variety of forms. Part of the variety of program implementation could be attributed to factors such as the varying experiences of stakeholders in relying on traditional sport structures and resources, working against the grain of stakeholder uncertainty of decision making, and the volatility of game support and rules from publishers (Pizzo et al., 2019). Esports programs attract various stakeholders on campuses, and the backgrounds of such individuals affect the implementation of programs. This is especially true of the students themselves, who often function as the players and operators of esports endeavors (Harris et al., 2022; Taylor, 2020). In general, the involvement of multiple stakeholders with diverging interests in collegiate esports programs can lead to inconsistent oversight and organizational challenges (Cote et al., 2023).

Consider the institutional department that oversees a VEP at any given institution. There is a split in the collegiate esports field between athletics programs and student development departments controlling the programs and funding them, with some programs even housed in academic units. Survey data of 127 collegiate programs indicate that nearly half of all programs are housed under athletics (e.g., Northeastern and Oakland) and less than a quarter under student life (e.g., Washington and Oregon; Postell & Narayan, 2022). Some collegiate esports programs can be likened to track-and-field programs found within Division I institutions. Though there are multiple esports titles and genres that teams compete in, each individual esports title team at an institution reports to a specific coach for that title. Programs are led by an overall director that may or may not additionally coach a team but mainly handles recruiting efforts, community building, and budgeting (Postell & Narayan, 2022). For example, Illinois State (Redbird Esports) is led by a director whose "responsibilities include the development, coordination, and administration of all Esports varsity, club and recreational activities" (Illinois State, 2023). The director is supported by coaches for specific titles (OW, *LoL*, and *RL*), a program manager, and a graduate assistant (Illinois State, 2023). It should be noted; however, that the initial infrastructures of collegiate esports programs are not as built out. The initial coordinator or head coach for a collegiate esports program may oversee multiple esports titles in addition to director responsibilities for recruiting and budgeting. This is the case of Florida Southern College, a NCAA Division II institution that only advertises one staff member (director of Esports) for their esports operations (FSC Mocs, 2023).

Publisher IP Control

The unique structure of collegiate esports is due to publishers having direct control over the licensing of competition for their IP. Publishers benefit from their esports titles having functional ecosystems as they continue to generate interest and participation naturally for the game titles off which to thrive. Due to the dominant power of publishers, professional competitive organizations often have limited revenue streams and operate at a loss in the short term in building toward long-term sustainability (D'anastasio, 2022; Lokhman et al., 2018). The profitability issue extends into other

organizations like colleges that operate in the game titles. An example of this can be seen in the North American *LoL* ecosystem. Riot Games issued a statement on May 12, 2023, declaring their intention to rescind the mandate that obligated all LCS franchises to have academy teams (Fernandez, 2023). Subsequently, it was revealed that in the summer split of the North American Challengers League, only three professional teams would maintain academy teams, accompanied by five amateur organizations, and for the first time ever in academy history, a collegiate institution, Maryville University (LoLEsports Staff, 2023). Riot Games outlined their future plans, which included the introduction of promotion and relegation in challenger-level competition and the integration of the North American academy system with South America, ultimately creating an Americas region akin to the existing VALORANT scene (Fernandez, 2023).

With many large and small esports organizations not able to turn a profit in competition, the influx of a "company" or group of entities that can bear the cost of competition would inject the field with stability. Indeed, certain collegiate esports teams currently receive support from their institutions, either through budget allocations within athletics or by establishing profitable business partnerships and securing sponsorships. Instead of having to pay salaries to players and necessitate streaming responsibilities or brand partnerships from them so that the organization is profitable, collegiate programs can operate at cost and provide high-end competition to players. Scholarships form the basis of incentivizing, but the overall value of a college degree forms the crux of the value to the player. This, however, leads to the question of regulation of the collegiate programs and determining the eligibility of their players. The challenge of inconsistent governance and regulation persists across different gaming titles.

These considerations do not represent the totality of facets in which traditional sports and esports will have differences in implementation. Rather, these should serve as a stepping stone for research of collegiate esports. As the literature deepens for collegiate esports, researchers should seek to build an understanding of the esports context that both builds a connection with existing sport management theory and develops into potentially a new sphere of theory specific to its environment. In doing so, collegiate esports research can aid in the development of both the traditional sports and esports spheres.

Conclusions

Though collegiate esports is in its infancy stage, it is already integrating into the higher education model as it can best fit. There is a question of how, if at all, the collegiate esports model can follow that of the traditional sports talent pipelines. Because there are no regulations regarding players as professionals competing in collegiate circles, there is bidirectional movement between amateurism and professionalism that is not found in traditional sport. This difference impacts collegiate program recruitment, which is not constrained to the high school system seen in traditional sport, but rather can additionally pull from professional leagues, amateur organizations, or even ranked play leaderboards.

There are numerous questions that need to be addressed regarding collegiate esports, and no one manuscript could begin to cover the numerous systemic forces that inherit the space. However, examining the collegiate esports ecosystem will provide stakeholders in higher education with information regarding the impact of programs on institutional academic and student life outcomes, and vice versa. This line of research will lay the foundations for future study in collegiate esports, including research on collegiate esports player development and funding. There is also a general need to assist in building the literature on esports management research. The current small footprint of esports research has expanded in recent years with the launches of new esports journals from reputable publishers, including *Journal of Electronic Gaming and Esports*, the *Annals of Esports Research*, and *International Journal of eSports Research*. Research in collegiate esports ecosystems will aid in the foundation of the esports context within management research as the field begins to transfer from a fad into an established domain.

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