

# UNI ESPORTS PROGRAM RUBRIC

LESSONS FROM THE FIRST WAVE: AN EMPIRICAL  
FRAMEWORK FOR INSTITUTIONALIZING ESPORTS ON  
CAMPUS

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## UNI ESPORTS GROUP

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# INTRODUCTION

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Higher education leaders are challenged to navigate their institutions through a time of great peril and opportunity. Radical shifts in the economy, employment, and demography are key drivers for the current moment in higher education. To survive and thrive, institutions must find new ways to make education attractive and relevant to a changing pool of students.

While formal studies are still sparse, our original research shows that esports programs have the capability to move an institution to higher ground, attract new pools of students retain old ones, and improve educational outcomes. The early evidence is in: a campus-sponsored esports program can advance a school's mission and provide a substantial return on investment for stakeholders, even in the current environment.

But what are the practical challenges of launching an esports program? And beyond the launch, how can stakeholders effectively integrate the program into the cultural fabric of the institution (a process we refer to as “institutionalization”), thereby securing its longevity within the political community of the campus?

This paper seeks to address these questions by convening the work distilled from three previous sources to offer a preliminary map for navigating the new terrain of building and institutionalizing a collegiate esports program. These sources include:

1. The survey responses collected from 998 senior-level administrators in colleges and universities across the country about esports and program institutionalization.
2. Three in-depth interviews with leading collegiate program directors about common obstacles, strategies, and outcomes associated with the launch and growth of a high-quality esports program.
3. And dozens of informal conversations with directors of esports programs, administrators, and private third parties about program building and institutionalization.

The findings were aggregated using content analysis and grounded theory to create a cline of development (from “initial” to “highly developed”) that spanned the sample, profiling the key patterns that emerged from the narratives. Working from these data, we posit a rubric intended to help users evaluate the current baseline of program development on campus, as well as to envision and plan for the program goal state.

The dimensions selected are by no means exhaustive, are fairly abstract, and deserve much more granular treatment in separate rubrics. The performance indicators in each cell are included to suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Our thanks go out to Mark Deppe (UC Irvine), Glenn Platt (Miami University), and AJ Dimick (University of Utah) for sharing their knowledge and wisdom about esports program building and obstacles.

lines of evidence and dashboards for monitoring and reporting progress.

The rubric is offered to aid professionals who are preparing to launch esports or seeking to advance an existing program on campus. It is intended as a tool to incite critical thought about obstacles and to inform program planning and evaluation. More importantly, it foregrounds the possibilities for esports to create a richer, more inclusive, and more engaging campus culture for all students.

This is, at present, only an informal diagnostic: a tool for assessment and reflection in unique contexts. As such there is no expected rating for the nine selected dimensions. The tool is submitted to readers as a work-in-progress to stimulate thinking in a nascent area of practice. We encourage you to apply it honestly to your context and contribute to this discussion.

For a personal version of the rubric or this paper, please contact Alex McNeil at [alex@uniesportsgroup.com](mailto:alex@uniesportsgroup.com). What follows is a brief description of each section of the rubric with questions to guide your assessment and planning.

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## 1. PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

Esports programs are typically spearheaded by a “champion” who devotes significant time and energy to laying the groundwork and manifesting a functioning program. But a single champion can only get so far on their own. The effort to develop a program gains momentum and stability as it is taken up by more stakeholders. The driving question here is: How robustly are stakeholders engaged as decision-makers, influencers, or advisors in the esports program?

The healthiest esports programs have gained deep support at the grassroots levels and among senior administrators. As campus leaders and other stakeholders routinely refer to an esports initiative as “ours” and not “theirs,” an institution is moving closer toward being “highly developed.” Our respondents suggest that attention to leadership and stakeholder engagement is critical in the early stages and throughout program development. The senior administration and Board of Trustees are the loci of power for all major initiatives and esports will always benefit from one or multiple “angels” at this level.

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## 2. GOVERNANCE

As numerous respondents have indicated, an esports program can be greatly stabilized through the creation of a formal governance structure consisting of stakeholders from across the university community.

Highly effective esports program governance will involve a diverse group of university members regularly engaged in program goal-setting. This does not mean, however, that all decision-making will occur by committee. Individual leaders will still be responsible for setting the direction of the program and for seeing to daily business. In a highly developed program, however, leaders will be accountable to a group of stakeholders that represent the interests of all major stakeholder groups, including students, staff, and faculty members. In more developed programs, governmental advisory boards will support the special work of the unit as needed.

*"I certainly think that, like any big company, you need a group advising you. They'll supply support, mentorship, and help you avoid pitfalls. They'll connect you to the people you need to be working with."*

**- Mark Deppe**

Esports Program Director

University of California, Irvine

(From "The Architects of Collegiate Esports,"  
an interview series by Uni Esports Group)

Driving question: How well do governance structures and processes support the program and how should they be developed as the program builds to scale?

### 3. ALLIANCE BUILDING

*"Also remember that you're going to have to socialize esports across the entire institution. If esports is positioned as something that a single person at the institution wants, no matter how important they may be, you're going to get pushback. But if you take the time to identify the important stakeholders and, one by one, talk to them, take the pitch deck to them, you'll have a better result."*

**- Glenn Platt**

Esports Program Director

University of California, Irvine

(From "The Architects of Collegiate Esports,"  
an interview series by Uni Esports Group)

A key to program institutionalization is recognizing that people and cultures are equal in importance to the adequacy of technical tools and infrastructure. For a program to become fully integrated into the fabric of the campus and not simply imposed by fiat, unit leaders must actively build alliances with all stakeholders in departments ranging from athletics to academics.

In a developed program, the value of esports is articulated vis-a-vis the unique drivers and motivations of each key stakeholder, and program leaders make efforts to secure

buy-in from a wide coalition of community members on an ongoing basis. Program leaders ensure that the needs of stakeholders are being heard, if not always met.

Guiding questions: How can the value of esports be articulated? Who needs to be at the table? How have their voices and experiences shaped the effort so far?

## 4. BRANDING & CULTURAL SALIENCE

For a program to stand out and to advance an institution's goals, it must become a prominent element of the controlling narrative of the campus, ideally touching on the core of what it means to be a member of the student community.

This dimension of the rubric highlights the journey of an esports program to cultural relevance on campus and, in a more highly developed program, its integration with the institution's larger brand. For many programs, increasing brand salience will be a means to the end of recruiting new students and engaging those who are already on campus.

*"One thing we're trying to do at Utah is associate our collegiate brand, our logo, our culture with the esports space and with that huge population of students on campus who are already fully engaged and activated with esports content. When you give that to students, you're engaging them with the collegiate experience and with the brand of the university. You're giving them a reason to engage with the brand in ways they didn't before."*

**- AJ Dimick**

Esports Program Director

University of Utah

(From "The Architects of Collegiate Esports,"  
an interview series by Uni Esports Group)

Guiding questions: How prominent is the esports program in public and internal marketing? How well is esports embodied in the rituals, language, stories and artifacts of campus culture?

## 5. STRATEGIC PLANNING

The impact of an esports program has a positive correlation to how well it is integrated into the general strategic plan guiding the institution's operations and day-to-day decision making. In initial stages, the connection between esports and strategic planning are implicit. The program's foundational or guiding documents may do little to align the program with the university's larger mission.

As a program begins to develop, the connection between the esports program and larger institutional goals may become more explicit. As the esports initiative becomes a relevant consideration for high-level decision makers in strategic planning processes, the esports program will in turn begin to reflect institution-wide goals in the way it allocates resources and pursues projects.

In developed programs, measures of the program's outcomes are directly connected to tangible benchmarks for major units across the university community (e.g., correlation with better retention and recruitment for admissions pipeline).

Guiding questions: How explicitly is the esports program aligned with strategic planning, goals, metrics and benchmarks for campus units?

## 6. METRICS & TRACKING

Data and evidence about program efficacy are important point of leverage for agents of change. Data on the esports program should be collected and analyzed, especially in the earlier stages when benchmarks and key indicators are being established. The campus offices of assessment, institutional effectiveness and/or research should be tapped as a resource early in the process.

An initial program may have little or no formal process for measuring the efficacy of the program. In contrast, a more developed program on the measurements dimension may have measures in place for collecting, synthesizing, and bubbling up data to decision-makers across the university.

Advanced programs are expert in capturing and making sense of esports data for other members of the university community. Driving question: What data are needed to chart the program impacts and inform planning and implementation? How will data be collected, analyzed, and communicated to various stakeholders?

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## 7. RESOURCES

Resources in the form of dedicated staff, space, and technology are an essential component of any esports program. In early stages of development, ongoing resource commitments beyond startup funds may be insecure, predicated on early student adoption or perceived success, and may involve ad hoc appropriations. As more units from across the university community come on board, dedicated resources may be appropriated as part of a formal budgeting process.

Even in relatively developed programs, funding may require dedicated grant writing, donor asks, and third-party sponsorships solicited by a program leader. External commercial sponsors and branding revenue may offset costs in highly developed programs, moving the program toward cost neutrality. In a more developed phase, institutional funding sources may be designated to maintaining and even expanding a program over a longer period of time.

Driving question: How sufficient are resources to support the current program and to scale up in future to achieve the goal state? How will staff and student teams keep current as technologies and platforms evolve?

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## 8. DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

Any esports effort should strive to match the diversity in program participation with the overall demographics of the campus, if not to exceed this standard. More highly developed programs will make and realize strong commitments to recruit diverse players and to create an accessible and inclusive physical space for all students to enjoy.



*"You have to approach diversity and inclusion with everything you do: all day, every day. It's certainly not something you can give to a small task force or committee, or just think about occasionally. It's a huge goal, objective, and challenge for us."*

**- Mark Deppe**

Esports Program Director  
University of California, Irvine  
(From "The Architects of Collegiate Esports,"  
an interview series by Uni Esports Group)

A good benchmark to assess this dimension is the degree to which the esports program meets the Title IX standards modeled by the best athletic offerings on campus or elsewhere. A program's success on this dimension can be evaluated by considering the diversity of recruited students, access to support services for players and casual visitors, retention of diverse students, and graduation rates among players.

Driving questions: How well is the esports program plan aligned with the Diversity Plan, ADA Plan, Title IX regulations or other relevant strategic priorities of the institution? What data sets will inform planning and assessment to make sure the program is representative and student-ready (regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, age)?

## 9. CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

The impact of an esports program has a positive correlation to how well it is integrated into the general strategic plan guiding the institution's operations and day-to day decision making. In initial stages, the connection between esports and strategic planning are implicit. The program's foundational or guiding documents may do little to align the program with the university's larger mission.

As a program begins to develop, the connection between the esports program and larger institutional goals may become more explicit. As the esports initiative becomes a relevant consideration for high-level decision makers in strategic planning processes, the esports program will in turn begin to reflect institution-wide goals in the way it allocates resources and pursues projects. In developed programs, measures of the program's outcomes are directly connected to tangible benchmarks for major units across the university community (e.g., correlation with better retention and recruitment for admissions pipeline).

Guiding questions: How explicitly is the esports program aligned with strategic planning, goals, metrics and benchmarks for campus units?

*"We have an obligation as an academic organization to be where our students are: to speak the language they speak and to operate in the context they operate in. Esports is the context of their lives. As an academic unit, it should be our context as well."*

**- Glenn Platt**

Esports Program Director  
University of California, Irvine  
(From "The Architects of Collegiate Esports,"  
an interview series by Uni Esports Group)

## APPLICATION OF THE RUBRIC

For those who have completed the rubric, some immediate next steps are worth mentioning. Note where your strengths are and consider how you will leverage those strengths to address weaker areas.

For example, if your program has adequate resources but a low public profile, then you may want to embark on a campaign to bolster participation and visibility. Lower levels of resources but higher levels high alliance-building would suggest that your program could frame a successful case for allocations by leveraging support from a diverse panel of stakeholder-advocates. Used in this way, the rubric may be useful as a tool for shaping the strategic priorities of program leaders in addition to mapping the developmental profile of the program.

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## CONCLUSION

The data from our respondents show that founding a sustainable collegiate esports program requires a high level of preparation, strategic planning, and grassroots alliance building across campus. An organizational learning perspective as embodied in the rubric presented can clarify the challenges common to professionals working at the intersection of esports, student life, and institutional culture.

The rubric has been offered as a tool for readers to more explicitly assess their programs' current status across the included dimensions and to understand pathways for development and improvement.

Our hope is that it will be an aid to those who champion mission-based esports programs. Our belief is that a preliminary set of benchmarks--and a protocol for gathering, analyzing and presenting data on these dimensions--will strengthen the case for esports on any campus.

Above all, this rubric is intended to be used. If you have any questions about its application or methodology, please contact Alex McNeil at [alex@uniesportsgroup.com](mailto:alex@uniesportsgroup.com).



Institutionalization	Initial	Developing	Developed	Highly Developed
<b>Program Leadership</b>	The program is an informal initiative with no or little official status. There may be a champion, but they are low-profile and not proactive.	The program is a formally-recognized initiative but lacks official status. At least one champion is officially recognized and active on campus. Champion is effectively driving towards a higher profile for the program	The program is recognized and has official status. An officially-designated champion is in place with appropriate time commitment and clear mandate. Leadership is moving towards a more distributed model.	Fully Institutionalized leadership in place for esports program with at least one fully committed leader. Integral to normal operations and processes; key players can be swapped out and program will continue to thrive and grow.
<b>Governance</b>	No explicit governance structure in place. There is some informal and/or sporadic consultation with stakeholders. Ownership and decision-making processes are not explicit or properly documented.	Some processes in place for convening key stakeholders in decisions about program governance and direction. Esports are addressed in some important committees and units within normal structure. Some problems are being addressed collaboratively as they emerge.	Functioning esports governance in place spanning the most important stakeholder groups and units, sufficient to respond to pressing issues and advance toward strategic goals.	Esports initiative is a bellwether example of good governance, incorporating decision-making and planning from front line to C-Suite. Leaders at each level have a clear sense of their responsibilities and authority for supporting it. The possible value of the program is clear to assigned leaders and they work proactively and collaboratively in their lanes to claim it.
<b>Alliance Building</b>	Esports leader(s) are not actively building alliances across campus. Informal allies may be in place, but the circle is not growing.	Alliances with more than one unit have been developed. Esports leaders are actively reaching out to build more alliances with key units and players. A more diverse group of stakeholders have been persuaded about the value of esports to their unit and begin to support the program proactively.	At least one working relationship with a member of each core stakeholder group. Esports leaders can solve problems and leverage resources from other units based on reciprocal benefit and mutual respect. A diverse group of stakeholders understand the value of esports to their unit and support the program proactively.	Alliances with core stakeholder groups (faculty, staff, students, administrators, alumni, sponsors) are robust. Esports issues are considered routinely in multiple venues (e.g., C-Suite, academic programs, student life, athletics) and conversations are driven by multiple advocates. All stakeholders understand the value of esports to both their unit and to campus as a whole. Esports becomes a common vector of support and collaboration that transcends groups.
<b>Branding and Cultural Salience</b>	No explicit connection with branding of university or linkage with the student campus experience.	Nascent alignment of esports and institutional branding "under the radar.". Some initial connections between esports and public face of the university.	Esports is explicitly included in brand architecture and strategic market positioning planning. May be aspirational, but some evidence of synergy with brand is evident (e.g., new recruits who name esports as a reason to attend).	Esports is integral to brand and an expected offering for those who attend. The value added is articulated in multiple platforms consistently and is replicated by viral transmission (word-of-mouth, social media, web content, newsletters).
<b>Strategic Planning</b>	No apparent connection with strategic planning. Esports is a rogue or informal effort without visibility or explicit value proposition.	Some alignment of esports with strategic planning with dedicated or re-allocated resources. May be marginal with no benchmarks or offsetting return on investment named.	Esports is formally included in strategic plan with required investments and expected return clearly identified.	Esports fully integrated with strategic plan for all relevant units (e.g., academic, student life, athletics, residence). Ideally spans multiple years and includes explicit benchmarks and mid-course monitoring points for assessing and responding to conditions on the ground.
<b>Metrics and Tracking</b>	No processes in place for collecting and correlating esports data to key success indicators. Success indicators are unarticulated or remain implied.	Some process in place for correlating esports with core institutional indicators such as admissions, recruitment, retention, graduation. May be based on pilot, inconsistent or incomplete data.	A developed process is in place for collecting and correlating esports data with multiple units in the institution. Core values are reflected as well as some department or unit-specific indicators, such as viewership, academic outcomes, or student engagement. Assessment practices are meeting or slightly exceeding the benchmarks established by other units in the institution.	A fully-developed process is in place for collecting and correlating data with a broad range of success indicators from across the institution. Assessment practices are robust and provide a model for other units in the institution.
<b>Resources</b>	Insufficient resources to comfortably pursue any success benchmarks. Dedicated program budget is non-existent and there is no consistent "ownership" of on-campus space.	Adequate resources are provided to pursue some success benchmarks. Budget is established but small and "ownership" of on-campus space may be shared or partial.	Adequate resources are provided to pursue all success benchmarks. Budget is secure, adequate, and there is full "ownership" of dedicated space on campus.	Surplus resources are provided to pursue all success benchmarks. Budget is secure, exceeds adequacy, and there is full ownership of an extensive and well-funded dedicated space. Program is empowered to pursue growth and new initiatives.
<b>Diversity, Inclusion, and Engagement</b>	Low engagement from a population of students that does not reflect the demographic composition of the campus. Program engagement is limited to one or two core constituencies. No effort is made to invite under-represented students into the space and program.	Occasional engagement from a more diverse population of students. Program engagement is anchored by core constituencies but begins to attract a larger demographic of students more reflective of campus composition. Little direct effort is made to invite under-represented students into the space and program.	Increasing engagement from a diverse population of students. Once-important core constituencies are joined by a plurality of students that is reflective of campus composition. Direct efforts are made to invite under-represented students into the space and program.	High engagement from a diverse population of students. There is no clear "core constituency" supporting the program: demographic of users is diverse and institutionally-representative. Direct efforts to invite under-represented students to participate are strong and consistent.
<b>Curricular Integration</b>	No apparent articulation of esports at course or program level.	The curriculum includes at least one or two courses presenting units focused on esports as a site for learning.	At least one course largely focused on esports as a site for learning. At least two faculty members or an informal learning community are exploring related theory and pedagogy. Some formal recognition of related career pathways, including esports development in public-facing content.	Broad and deep curricular integration of esports with at least two different disciplines or departments offering relevant courses. Career paths in esports explicitly connected with specific courses, concentrations or programs are used in marketing and admissions.