# THE ARCHITECTS OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

## BRINGING ESPORTS TO CAMPUS

Uni Esports Group

## AN INTERVIEW SERIES FEATURING

MARK DEPPE, UC IRVINE ESPORTS
GLENN PLATT, MIAMI UNIVERSITY ESPORTS
AJ DIMICK, UNIVERSITY OF UTAH ESPORTS

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# INTRODUCTION

SHARING EXPERT KNOWLEDGE ON COLLEGIATE ESPORTS PROGRAM CREATION

An esports program becomes effective when those leading the rollout are empowered with knowledge and guidance to facilitate a smooth program launch. Expert knowledge about collegiate program development is a resource that, until now, has been largely decentralized: imparted most often at industry conferences or on fact-finding pilgrimages made by aspiring program leaders to prominent schools.

This document is our attempt to bring together the knowledge and wisdom of some of the leading voices in collegiate esports today. We held interviews with three collegiate esports veterans—Glenn Platt (Miami University), AJ Dimick (University of Utah), and Mark Deppe (UC, Irvine)—each of whom has played an instrumental role in developing the esports program at their respective schools.

Each interview covers topics including: articulating a case for esports in a resource-scarce environment, the importance of student involvement and voice, and how to build a program that has longevity. Our goal is to provide an accessible and actionable document oriented at those who are interested in launching a collegiate program but who may not know where to begin, or who lack direct guidance about how to launch an effective program on campus.

Each transcript is accompanied by a series of critical questions drawn from the interview. (All the questions can be found **here**.) These may serve as the basis for a strategic plan for bringing esports to campus or as mere food for thought. Taken together, we believe these questions help to map the solution space for a high-quality esports program.

We thank our contributors, Mark, AJ, and Glenn, for their powerful contributions to this document. If you have any questions, or wish to learn about the other resources we provide to schools exploring esports, don't hesitate to contact us.

# UC IRVINE

## MARK DEPPE
DIRECTOR OF ESPORTS

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The UCI Esports program, founded in 2016, quickly emerged as one of the most well-developed and competitively successful esports programs in the country. UCI holds the distinction of being the first public university to offer an official esports program. The program, housed in a 3,500-square-foot arena on campus, is founded on five core pillars: Competition, Academics & Research, Community, Entertainment, and Careers. Under the leadership of Director Mark Deppe, UCI Esports emphasizes community outreach and inclusion alongside competitive excellence.

## ABOUT MARK

Mark led the effort to create the world's first esports program at a public university. Since 2010, he has advised student government and coordinated some of UCI's largest and most successful events. Mark, a leading voice in the world of collegiate esports, is an accomplished esports educator. He has presented information about the intersection of collegiate esports and education to many audiences, including members of Congress. Mark also acts as Commissioner for the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF).

## PROGRAM FACTS & HIGHLIGHTS

- The UCI program hosts academic symposia showcasing research in the fields of esports and gaming, as well as an annual conference on the intersection of esports and education.
- The UCI program was at the center of a 2019 ESPN2 documentary about collegiate esports.
- The UCI LoL team were the winners of the 2018 college LoL Championship

# THE ARCHITECTS OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK DEPPE
## UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

**The following conversation was held between Mark Deppe, Director of UCI Esports, and Alex McNeil, President of Uni Esports Group.**

**Alex McNeil, Uni Esports:** Thanks for sitting down with me today. Let's start with a question about development. In your mind, what were the different phases of the UCI program's development, and which were the most difficult to navigate?

**Mark Deppe, UC Irvine:** When we were building our program, one of the key moments was when we brought our gaming students to an open office hours for the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs. It was a way to have the very first conversations with a senior campus leader about games, the community, esports programs, and the idea of providing resources for the gaming community in a casual, low pressure setting.

It's hard or impossible to walk in your first meeting, throw a business plan on the table, pitch your university leaders and say, "I need a yes or no. Do you want to do this?" You have to build slow momentum, allow people to warm up. It was my boss's idea to suggest Student Affairs [as a place to start]. I didn't know how to have that first conversation with a campus leader until then.

I think that [meeting] was the first time a campus leader had heard of esports and gave us the initial blessing to pursue space and sponsors. That was impactful.

**AM:** Some of the more successful conversations we've had with both Student Affairs leaders and Athletic Directors have been held when students were present. Do you feel that having student voices in the meetings was something that made a decisive difference, or were the wheels already in motion?

**MD:** I could have gone in myself and it would not have been nearly as impactful. We had students who told our Vice Chancellor that they had come from Atlanta or from Korea to be a part of the gaming community at UCI. Those were unique stories that our Vice Chancellor wasn't ready to hear: he was really surprised by that. We had some women in the room, too, and he was surprised to see the diversity we had brought in. That was kind of strategic, as well.

*"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."*

When you're talking to a campus leader, they're interested in things such as costs, interest, the popularity of certain games. After we left the meeting, the Vice Chancellor gave us a piece of homework: to do a campus survey. [The survey] was non-scientific, but an email went out to all undergrads. 72 percent of them said they identify as a 'gamer' and 89 percent said they were supportive of the idea of an esports program. Those data points were really significant. Again, there's very little interest among campus leaders to do stuff that students don't want, so they need to know that students are interested before they really approach a project.

**AM:** I would love to know more about the efforts you've made to build diversity and inclusion at UCI. How have those efforts evolved? Where are you now and where do you want to be in a few years?

**MD:** 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. We do a lot of things. I think it's very important to make sure that there are diverse folks in the room when you're talking about [diversity and inclusion].

Having a very diverse staff is helpful for us. We just hired our second male employee, and now we have a one-third male, two-thirds female staff, which is surprising to lots of people. We have a lot of strong women in our program that have come out of the student ranks -- students who were so good that we had to hire them. We're really fortunate to have a lot of women who are really passionate about the topic and who can serve as really great role models. I think role modeling, having people be able to come into the arena and see themselves reflected, is really valuable for us.

That has not transitioned into our teams yet, though. Until this year, we've had zero women on our scholarship teams. We do have our first on our Overwatch team this year, but we still have a long way to go. A lot of the time, there's a pipeline issue. We need to be starting way before [players] get to college. Elementary school, middle school, high school are when you need to be encouraging young people from different backgrounds; letting them know they're wanted, they're welcome, and helping them get the prerequisite tools and experience they need to be really good by the time they get to college.

We run summer camps, outreach programs, offer an arena tour for local high schools. There's a lot we try to do [to increase diversity]. I'd give us a good grade

for effort, but in terms of results, we're still a long way from where UCI would want us to be and from where we want to be.AM: I know you do a lot of work with the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) and in the local high schools. Do you feel that the presence of the UCI program has had a positive effect on getting women into gaming at the highschool level?

**MD:** Certainly. I'm actually going to go visit a high school this afternoon. We do semi-regular trips to schools, when we're invited. I think our work with NASEF really helps. We see a lot of high schools and counties in our region building infrastructure and teams, attending our campus for a tour. High school play tends to be a little bit more diverse than collegiate, at least in terms of gender, but it's still really abysmal. You're talking 3-5% of high school teams right now are [composed of] women, so gender disparity is an obvious challenge for lots of people.

I think our presence in the high school space is helping. But, like I said, we have a long, long way to go.

**AM:** If you're someone who's starting up a program today, how do you move the program from being something you have to manage to being something with its own life and durability within the institution — something that can survive even after you take your hands off the wheel?

**MD:** Who is leading the effort? If you're a director and have been given the job of creating a program, I think that the onus is on whoever's given you that work to create the structure of support for you. Sometimes a President will say, "We're going to do esports." Then, the obligation [to create sustainability] would be on the President.

For us, no one dictated the need for an esports program. We started our program before anyone here knew how to spell "esports." We're unique in that the program was driven by a few of us individuals. Students don't have enough weight to build a new department. Even though there may be interest there, that's not their job as students. Really, you need to have strong leadership from the university level. I did a lot of that heavy-lifting; my boss did a lot, and we had great support from students around us.

But at the end of the day, whoever wants to make it happen, whoever cares most, that person is obligated to figure it out. If we had not had such great sponsors, if the student center hadn't had such great space to renovate, we wouldn't be here. There are a lot of things that could have stopped our journey. But I will say that you need a strong leader who can take on that burden, because it is a heavy burden. I told people that, for many years, it felt like I was the only one pushing the train. People would jump on the bandwagon and be excited about esports. They would say, "Hey, keep going." But no one else was actively finding funds or defending against criticism. We were on our own.

*For us, no one dictated the need for an esports program. We started our program before anyone here knew how to spell "esports." We're unique in that the program was driven by a few of us individuals. Students don't have enough weight to build a new department. Even though there may be interest there, that's not their job as students. Really, you need to have strong leadership from the university level.*

I would say that—if you're going to build an esports program—you have to have broad shoulders to carry a heavy load. Be ready for that.

**AM:** When we talk to schools, there's always a question about where in the administration a program should fall. AJ Dimick, [Director of the University of Utah's esports program], talks about this, too: It's not always a question of who enthusiastically said "Yes!" to esports, but who didn't say "No." From your comments, it sounds as if you wouldn't view that as a very sustainable origin for a program. You need a champion.

**MD:** Yeah, you certainly need a champion. AJ and I disagree about this a bit. We had talked to Athletics, and they were lukewarm about it. But Student Affairs got excited about it—and they got excited because there was sponsorship money—and we had an innovative Vice Chancellor who was willing to take some risk. All this was a little or medium-sized risk. When people are thinking about where to put this in a university, it needs to be somewhere that can tolerate some risk.

**AM:** What is the right balance between students developing an esports program and a top-down implementation?

**MD:** I may have a radical opinion on this. I think it is one-hundred percent the obligation of the university to do the heavy lifting. I think it is their obligation to do all the hard work, to build the program, to create a structure that aligns with values, and to build everything that needs to be built. I also believe in bringing in student voices and in hearing from the community about what's needed, what's wanted, and what will be successful. But at the end of the day, I think you're kidding yourself if you think that students will be able to build a department, run an office.

There's a group of people, and AJ is part of this group, who believes that a program is generated out of great student leaders. It's really not. It's about champions on campus listening to student voices and building what they think would be good for campus. There are so many examples of amazing gaming clubs and communities that have no varsity program at their campus. You look at UC San Diego or University of British Columbia: dominant teams, huge club, great culture, won championships and titles. A lot of Canadian schools don't have varsity or institutional support, and it's not because they aren't great clubs.

But it is one-hundred percent, in my opinion, [the responsibility] of a champion—who either emerges or is selected by the institution—to build a program. And once that champion is empowered and given support, they need to work closely with students to weave in their opinions and thoughts. But [esports] is a university department, through-and-through, and needs to be led by university leaders.

**AM:** What would have been important to know as you started building the UCI program? What are the one or two pieces of advice you would offer to someone starting out today?

*"I think it is one-hundred percent the obligation of the university to do the heavy lifting. I think it is their obligation to do all the hard work, to build the program, to create a structure that aligns with values, and to build everything that needs to be built."*

**MD:** Again, when we built the program, we were asking: "How do we get to Yes? How do we make this happen?" At times, you're treading water to get everything done. When you're in that mindset, you don't look around to find all the potential stakeholders that should be involved, that might have an opinion about being involved.

Generally, my broad piece of advice would be to do a landscape scan. Consider all the stakeholders in a more thoughtful way. You need to work closely with the Information Technology people if you're going to build an arena. We worked closely with the Title IX office, the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity, and the Counsel of Trademarks and Licensing.

While we have a lot of faculty who are interested in games, and who were part of our conversation, we didn't work as closely as we should have with the Faculty Senate. A lot of our critiques have come from the Faculty Senate, and we've had to continually address their questions and concerns. We now have a faculty advisory board, made purely of faculty, to allow them to weigh in and look at how we run our program.

There are many campus stakeholders: Communications, Media Relations, Student Center, Student Affairs, Admissions, Financial Aid. It's a massive group, and our stakeholder group continues to grow.

When you're building a program, think of what initial stakeholders you may need to get the program up and running. But once you're up and running, you need to know that nearly everyone on campus will be a stakeholder if your program is successful. Find a way to weave in those thoughts, opinions, and voices.

**AM:** Do you think that an advisory board has been a good structure for the UCI program? Is that something you think other programs should emulate or adopt?

**MD:** One-hundred percent. Nobody wants a rogue games department to be running around, unsupervised. Everyone wants to feel the assurance of more people in the room advising the program. We initially had an advisory group that had everybody—from housing, to club leaders, to community members, to some faculty, to Student Government. It was really ineffective. But people liked it because they knew they were in the room. They could have a conversation with the director and hear updates. We got nothing done, but it was comforting for people to know there was an advisory board: it wasn't just Mark running around doing whatever he wanted.

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. But, again, if you look at the stakeholders on campus, they're going to want to know that a couple people aren't running around doing something that will drag the university name through the mud. I don't see anyone else [using an advisory board structure], but I certainly think they should be.

**AM:** I haven't heard of anyone using an advisory board outside of your campus.

**MD:** Yeah, and that's shocking to me. Not only do we have a faculty advisory board, but we have to have it on our website. Our Provost needs to be able to steer grumpy faculty to that and say, "Look: this group exists, here are their bios, here's where they meet." It's been absolutely essential for us.

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**AM:** Last question. Do you have any thoughts about the NCAA and their recent decision to amend their rules around amateurism?

MD: I think it clears a hurdle for them. I think to this day a lot of people have hesitancies about the NCAA getting involved with esports. I have been a longtime critic of theirs, especially around the amateurism piece. So that eases my concern on that element.With that said, I do think that some group that can represent all universities needs to exist. It does not exist yet, despite efforts to create one. I do see that as being one role that the NCAA can fill. Whether they're the right group or not remains to be seen. I still lean away from them doing everything they do in traditional sports. But certainly they've done some great things in terms of finding ways to determine eligibility, tracking rules and compliance. It's a big, hairy beast to build that from scratch. It needs to happen or we need to find a way to work with a group like the NCAA that already has the tools.

There are many campus stakeholders: Communications, Media Relations, Student Center, Student Affairs, Admissions, Financial Aid. It's a massive group, and our stakeholder group continues to grow.

When you're building a program, think of what initial stakeholders you may need to get the program up and running. But once you're up and running, you need to know that nearly everyone on campus will be a stakeholder if your program is successful. Find a way to weave in those thoughts, opinions, and voices.

# CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. Who at your institution would make a good program champion? Is there someone who has shown drive the initiative to launch esports? How could that person be empowered or supported to launch esports at your institution?

2. How will your program incorporate key stakeholders in a formal governance process or body? What kind of oversight, and from whom, will your program need to be successful?

3. Is there a plan in place for maximizing student engagement with esports on campus? How can esports be welcoming to a diverse group of students on campus, and not just to one or two core constituencies?

# MIAMI UNIVERSITY

## GLENN PLATT

ESPORTS PROGRAM DIRECTOR

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Miami University Esports holds the distinction of being the nation's first D1 varsity esports program. The championship program is housed in the university's AIMS department (Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies), an academic unit that provides a space for students to "explore the intersection of technology, design, business, and how digital technology is transforming traditional areas of inquiry." In addition to its reputation for competitive excellence, the Miami program is also a leader in esports education, offering a range of classes on esports and gaming in addition to summer camps for high school students.

## ABOUT GLENN

Glenn Platt, C. Michael Armstrong Professor of Network Technology, has been Director of the Interactive Media Studies Program at Miami since 2000. He is a widely-cited expert on digital classroom practices and spearheaded the creation of the esports program at Miami University. In addition to his responsibilities as a professor and department chair, he currently acts as esports program director.

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Miami University offered the first DI varsity esports program in the country.
- In 2017, Miami University Esports was crowned the national champions for Overwatch in the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) season
- Miami University Esports is housed in the AIMS program, recently nominated as the #1 games program in the country

# THE ARCHITECTS OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GLENN PLATT
## MIAMI UNIVERSITY

**The following conversation was held between Glenn Platt, Director of Esports at Miami University, and Alex McNeil, President of Uni Esports Group.**

**Alex McNeil, Uni Esports:** What, in your mind, were the most important phases of the program's development, and which were the most difficult to navigate?

**Glenn Platt, Miami University:** I have a predilection for things in threes, so I'll talk about three difficult periods. There was the initial building of momentum, which is difficult with any academic program. In higher education, new things are difficult to get started, and there are all sorts of interesting reasons why that happens. Higher ed is really bad at getting rid of things; it's better at adding them. The flip side of this is that adding new programs becomes hard without taking something away. When considering adding an esports program, you have to deal explicitly with the question of whether this means resources will be taken away from athletic offerings. Answering this question and getting the initial buy-in from resource-concerned decisionmakers was difficult for us.

A second layer of difficulty consists in the fact that universities are not top-down organizations. If we were Procter and Gamble, and the CEO were to say, "We're going to have an esports team," then it would just happens. Everyone reports to that person and the strategy is dictated from above. In higher education, on the other hand, we're basically a collection of independent contractors. Strategy is nominally coming from above, but honestly, nobody has to abide by it. Every university comes up with a strategic plan, but the faculty and staff are rarely if ever judged against that. Building consensus is critical to getting something like [an esports program] off the ground. You have to build enough inertia that the program can sustain itself beyond the fact of institutional directive.

That, at least, was the case in 2016. Now, today, Presidents of universities say, "Hey, we should have an esports team," which wasn't the case before. I expect that creates a whole different set of challenges. University of Akron is a good example. Akron was in a major financial crisis: they cut eighty majors, and the President said: "And... We're going to build an esports team and arena."

When direction comes from above like that, you may face an opposite problem of securing buy-in from the average member of the university community. If I'm in a department that just had their major eliminated and I hear the university is spending money to create a new esports program, I may be thinking, "What the hell is going on? You're building this at my expense." So, depending on the resource climate of the institution, initial buy-in is a hurdle.

A second problem is overcoming a set of objections in the esports space that, seriously, I could address in my sleep. They're question you always get asked. In the early days I thought these questions were just a hurdle that, once everyone became enlightened, would pass. But I don't see that happening. You know the objections. "Esports isn't really a sport." "There's nothing academic about this." "Video games contribute to violence." "Video games are addictive." "What about diversity and equity in the space?" There are others.

*"Consensus building is critical to getting something like [an esports program] off the ground. You have to build enough inertia that the program can sustain itself beyond the fact of institutional directive."*

Those objections need to be addressed early and with absolute certitude. If any of them take root at your institution, they can really undo what you're trying to accomplish. I know there are some leagues and schools that are trying to draw the moral line about which games they play and which they won't. That's a slippery slope: maybe Overwatch isn't a shooter because there's no blood—so is "blood" the criteria? Once you open that door, it's bad news.

Another thing: If you don't treat esports like a sport, if you treat it like a hobby that your computer science department is funding, it may become hard to grow the program. Hobbies funded by computer science departments don't tend to receive travel budgets or scholarships. You need to have a really tight narrative about your program and socialize it extensively. That took a lot of time and political capital.

And then, in the mature phase, our big challenge is around the arms race for resources necessary to be successful in esports, especially scholarships. It doesn't matter if they're under $2,000. Many scholarships are work study, where you may receive a scholarship but have to work on the team. But it doesn't matter. That's the perception: How many scholarships do you have? I'm spending far more of my time now fundraising and building resources than I ever thought I would. It remains a significant challenge. I made a seven-figure ask for scholarships from a major donor a couple weeks ago. When we had first started, I never thought that would have been something I had to do.

**AM:** Maybe that theme—the need to treat esports as a sport rather than a hobby, as well as the arms race around "sportifying" esports through scholarships—is a good segue to the next question. How do you deal with keeping the program in your academic

department while treating it as something that emulates athletics?

**GP**: They talk about how light is both a particle and a wave, depending on how you look at it. Esports is similar. My belief about where or how esports ought to be organized, and why I believe that placing it in an academic department is best, does not mean that esports shouldn't be placed in athletics.

*"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."*

In some talks I've given, I've said that esports is a sport of the third kind. It's not entirely academic, but it's not athletic in the traditional sense of sports. It's in a category of its own, which is why it can be housed in a number of different places in the institution. As an academic institution, our commitment is to the students—to help them be successful and make the world a better place, and help them understand all the things that are going to shape their world when they graduate. I think that not talking about esports in an explicitly academic context is withholding a piece of the world that is growing quickly.

I think esports will be central to the world of tomorrow. I know this is a bit fantastical of a vision, but if you just look at the amount of time being spent on esports by people your age and younger, it's not hard to imagine that esports will be everything in thirty years, the new Monday Night Football. 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.

The second reason esports belongs in academics is because the real opportunity for esports requires leveraging the full ecosystem, not only the gaming component. By putting esports into athletics, you're focusing the spotlight on the five people sitting in front of the computers and the coaches standing around them. But the jobs in the ecosystem range from hardware, software, game design, game development, betting, fantasy sports, network communications, streaming platforms, broadcasting, media rights, advertising. All of those are things we already teach; they're things that are available in degree programs. As a university, embracing esports should be about embracing the entire ecosystem and not just the five people sitting in the center of the room.

I mentioned at a recent conference that we have a new online graduate degree in esports management. We're going to offer it on Twitch. We think the whole ecosystem needs to be part of what we do. That's why we chose to build esports in an academic department. It comes with problems, no doubt. Sponsorship and all these other things that athletic organizations have already figured out? We don't know anything about that.

**AM:** At a recent conference, someone asked whether you thought the esports program would still live in your department in five years. If I recall correctly, you said you didn't think that it would. Can you expand on that?

> *"But the jobs in the ecosystem range from hardware, software, game design, game development, betting, fantasy sports, network communications, streaming platforms, broadcasting, media rights, advertising. All of those things are things we already teach; they're things that are available in degree programs. As a university, embracing esports should be about embracing the entire ecosystem and not just the five people sitting in the center of the room."*

**GP:** I think what is likely to happen over time in my department is that our gaming program will split from the rest of the department. In our department, we have close to one-thousand students. They study all things interactive: websites, apps, robotics, useability, interactive video screens. Our game program is part of that. The game program is, in fact, the highest ranked major at the university right now. I just got an email this morning that our game program is the highest ranked program in the country. I think the demand for the game program will continue to be strong, and that esports will attach itself to the games program and evolve into a department of games.

**AM:** Placing yourself in the shoes of someone who's starting a program today, what advice would you give for "institutionalizing" an esports program, for getting it to a place where it can live in the institution beyond a single advocate or champion?

**GP:** Yeah. That's an important question. In my twenty-six years in higher education, there are certain truisms that I have recognized. One of them is that, in higher ed, things rise and fall because they have a champion. There are very few things that are institutionalized in higher education. So figuring out how to institutionalize esports is definitely the million-dollar question.

Arenas and spaces can be reused. They're basically computer labs or performance arenas. So I don't think that finding space alone institutionalizes the program. To speak fairly cynically—but bluntly—it's all about money. If we're able to close the deal on this seven-figure gift, that money goes into an endowment, and that endowment is forever. The uses for that money then become more specified and locked in. We're creating a Master's degree, which represents at least a multi-year commitment to the students who enroll in it. So I think creating degree programs locks it in.

Sponsorship agreements also provide a short-term lock. At the moment higher ed everywhere is in a bit of a panic about revenue, so anything that has an annuity or some form of long-term revenue stream will be much more untouchable when things get tight. When things get tight, they're going to cut the debate team, which has no revenue coming in. Those are all things that would make an esports program somewhat "unmovable."

If the program were in athletics, it would be a different story. Athletics has their own way of locking things in. As a sort of in-between answer to the question, I believe that as the shakeout around leagues happens—which I expect it will in the next year or two—another form of commitment and stability will emerge. When you have a football team and you join the NCAA, there are certain

commitments you have to make. If you pull yourself out, there are financial penalties in the millions. If you're in the Big 10, let's say, and decide you no longer want to be in the conference, there are insane consequences that accompany that decision. So as structures evolve in college esports that require a greater degree of commitment, that will lend stability to the scene.

**AM:** If you have a piece or two of advice for someone building a program today, what would it be?

**GP:** I get asked this a lot. We have visitors coming every week, and that's the question they ask. "What should we know?" It's important to put together a pitch deck. It sounds like a small thing, but it's actually big. We have a pitch deck that we modify depending on the audience, but ninety percent of it remains the same. It answers all those questions I talked about earlier: How big is this? How much is this going to grow? Showing things like the Pricewaterhousecoopers study that says esports is the fastest growing sport in the world, faster growing than soccer; or Deloitte's projections that esports will be a $2bn industry by 2020. Having all that material cited, showing the evidence—it goes so far, incredibly far.

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. Take the time to understand their motivations, their KPIs, the things they're evaluated against, and try to position what you do as helping them. It'll go a long way. If you're speaking to the athletics office, for example, and their measurement is attendance, speak to that. When we were in the NACE finals for Overwatch, more people watched that than went to every single football game that year at our university. So figure out which numbers matter, put them together in a pitch, and socialize it.

*"It's important to put together a pitch deck. It sounds like a small thing, but it's actually big. We have a pitch deck that we modify depending on the audience, but ninety percent of it remains the same. It answers all those questions I talked about earlier: how big is this? How much is this going to grow...Having all that material cited, showing the evidence—it goes so far, incredibly far."*

The second thing is to recognize that the bar for entry is low. You just need a nice computer lab. It's not like you're starting a football team. Esports is, relatively speaking, easy to get off the ground; you can bootstrap it. We funded our program out of our academic department. I took a chunk of our department's budget and reallocated it, because it wasn't a lot of money in the grand scheme of things. Just get out there and make it happen.

Another critical piece of starting a program is to engage your club scene actively and from the beginning. Your club scene can be your greatest asset or your greatest liability. If the club thinks that the program is part of their ecosystem, you have an awesome pipeline for recruitment, you have an audience for your stream, and that sort of thing. If your club scene sees you as a competitor or as this snooty thing that thinks they're so much better than the club, you've set up a hostile situation in which getting student buy-in and volunteers becomes difficult. Volunteers aren't going to want to help if you haven't gotten the club on board.

# CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. How will you "socialize" the narrative for esports at your campus? Whose support will be crucial to launching or growing esports at your campus, and how will you frame esports to gain their support?

2. How will esports at your institution advance the strategic goals set by university leaders, such as in a strategic plan? What is the strongest case for esports at your institution, vis-a-vis whatever institutional goals may already be in place?

3. How will esports impact the academic and occupational goals of the institution? What opportunities will students have to translate their passion for gaming into academic, internship, or other co-curricular opportunities?

# UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

## AJ DIMICK

DIRECTOR OF ESPORTS

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The University of Utah esports program is the first varsity-level esports program from any school in a Power Five athletic conference. Supported by and housed in the school's Entertainment Arts & Engineering program, the University of Utah emphasizes the academic dimensions of esports, providing opportunities for research and innovation in games education. Preceded by a large, thriving club scene, the Utah program is a model for student-led program development.

## ABOUT AJ

AJ Dimick, Director of Operations at the University of Utah Esports, leads the Utah program. He spearheaded the effort that led to Utah becoming the first Power-Five conference school to support a scholarship esports program. Dimick is also involved in the University's Entertainment Arts & Engineering program, renowned for its game development.

## PROGRAM FACTS & HIGHLIGHTS

- The University of Utah esports team provides over 30 scholarships to student-gamers.
- Utah Esports is a founding member of the The Pacific Alliance of Collegiate Gamers, a league connecting esports clubs at Pac-12 Schools.
- The esports program is housed by the EAE program, one of the university's leading academic programs and a national leader in games studies. In the last ten years, its students have produced or developed more than 50 games.

# THE ARCHITECTS OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH AJ DIMICK
## UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

**The following conversation was held between AJ Dimick, Director of Esports at University of Utah, and Alex McNeil, President of Uni Esports Group.**

**Alex McNeil, Uni Esports:** Thanks for joining me today AJ. What were the most important phases or periods of the program's development? Which were the most difficult?

**AJ Dimick, University of Utah:** For us, there was Utah Esports before there was any notion of institutional support or structure. The year before there was any institutional adoption, eleven competitive teams held tryouts, had coaches, and competed; some made deep runs in their respective playoffs. All were run by a student organization, Crimson Gaming, which had 600 students. There was a thriving ecosystem already present at the University of Utah for high-level competition and for competitive intercollegiate esports.

From the academic and the club side, we approached the idea of institutionally-supported esports with open eyes, understanding the cost-benefit of institutionalization: there was a lot to be gained from institutional support, a long-term vision for the program, but also a cost associated with doing that. It isn't all a positive outcome: there are drawbacks and elements of institutionalization that the student club didn't like. The biggest milestone here was everyone agreeing that this the direction we wanted to take Esports at Utah. If the student club or the institution didn't sign off on a common direction, we wouldn't have been able to proceed.

The next important hurdle to me is getting endemic space. It's important for an esports program to receive a budget and a permanent place on campus. With the politics of college campuses, I think that space is a lot harder to come by than the money. For us to get even an 800-square-foot room that was just ours, something we didn't have to share with anybody else--that was a big milestone. It was something we worked really hard to get and had to negotiate at the highest levels.

*"If the student club or the institution didn't sign off on a common direction, we wouldn't have been able to proceed."*

The next milestone to me was the huge one: gaining student activity sanction status, recognizing esports as a sanctioned activity on campus. This is a big thing for the growth of collegiate esports. It means our kids can get out of class when they need to in order to participate in these events, which gives you more flexibility with curating events. It allows you to enlarge the scope of esports on campus. It's a big deal.

**AM:** I know you've been outspoken about the importance of the club at Utah, of the grassroots efforts by students to build the team. But given Utah's place in the Power Five, its place as the first Varsity program in that conference, there must have been investment and interest from on-high. How did you reconcile those two energies, the top-down and bottom-up approaches?

**AD:** I think our position in our conference heightens the ceiling of what we can achieve, how big esports can be on campus. That said, getting it off the ground was dramatically harder because of our position. Here, you're sharing the limelight with successful college football and basketball teams that are playing these massive games. I don't think it was easier for us, on the front end, to build a program--especially when you look at the motivations for why most schools get into esports.

Most of the schools who get into esports, to date, tend to be your Division II, Division III, NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) schools who engage in esports for recruitment and retention purposes. It was never going to serve that function at Utah.

Esports is not a recruitment and retention strategy here the way it would be at a small school with an 1,800-student enrollment with few intercollegiate athletics on campus. There are other motivations for why we're involved. On the other end, when other Power Five schools get engaged, other big schools with large brands and marketing footprints, it absolutely can heighten the importance of esports and bring more visibility to the scene.

**AM:** If recruitment and retention aren't the central reasons for adoption at Utah, can you expand on the institution's long-term goals and vision for esports?

*"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."*

**AD:** We engage with esports because we're prognosticating that esports will be one of the major championship collegiate events in the future. Having early investment, being seen as a force that will shape what it will look like, is something we were very interested in doing.

The second reason is that within the student body on our campus, and on most campuses, there is a larger audience of students who don't identify with what their moms and dads considered to be the mainstays of the collegiate experience. I'm speaking of things like football and basketball games.

Today, there's a huge population of students on campus who don't identify with those things, and hence, do not identify as closely with the college and its brand in a way that the previous generation of students perhaps did. There's certainly research that correspond to this space, but 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.

**AM:** I'd like to talk about the rationale behind housing the program in an academic unit at Utah and what the implications of that have been.

**AD:** I think this conversation--about a rationale for why a collegiate esports program is in a particular department--is, at any university, regardless of their circumstance, a false conversation. There is no campus in the country where decision makers are asking "Who has the best capacity for this? Who has the correct mechanisms?" It never works out like that. Usually, there's a conversation about where esports should be housed where all but one person will say "No." Regardless of who that person is, how well-suited they are to do esports, that's who has responsibility for the program. For me, that has been the biggest component of the conversation.

Now, as we move forward, the conversation about program placement has grown far bigger; the subject of those conversations and their tone is so different than it was two years ago. When we were having these conversations originally, we went to our athletics department to see if they were interested in getting involved.

They were very interested and supportive. They thought it was something they wanted to keep an eye on, but they weren't ready to act on it with the data they had at the time. Atr that point, in early 2017, there were only thirty colleges involved whatsoever, and almost none of them were based in athletics. There were no big schools involved, either. Esports wasn't something they were ready to commit to yet.

We wanted to do it anyway, so we found the budget and a methodology. With the President's approval, we eventually put it in the EAE (Entertainment Arts & Engineering) department. We wanted to do that, anyway, to continue our role in the program and in gaming initiatives and space on campus. We felt we were equipped to the task and the program was something we wanted to help form.

**AM:** A common question I've asked in these interviews is about about institutionalization, program longevity. How do you move an esports program to a place where it can live in the institution beyond a single advocate or champion?

> *"Esports should help with research, with student engagement, with the procurement of non-philanthropic arrangements and deals on campus. If esports is tied into the college ecosystem so that it doesn't exist only for itself, but is interwoven with other initiatives on campus, that creates a stable base for a program to exist."*

**AD:** You don't know what you don't know. As for longevity, we don't know what the future holds for collegiate esports. Will it continue on what appears to be a trajectory to become the next great collegiate championship event?

Or will an equilibrium form where we decide esports should be limited to a student activities event? Should non-students have a role in governing esports on campus? We're having those conversations now, keeping in mind of the cost-benefit of institutionalization. They're very fair conversations to be having.

One thing that's extremely important to creating longevity is the investment in resources and space that are endemic to esports, owned by esports. It's also important to not treat esports in a vacuum, but to engage it as a part of other offerings on a college campus. That helps give an esports program a reason to exist. Esports should help with research, with student engagement, with the procurement of non-philanthropic arrangements and deals on campus. If esports is tied into the college ecosystem so that it doesn't exist only for itself, but is interwoven with other initiatives on campus, that creates a stable base for a program to exist.

That's something we still have to do. There's a conversation that frequently happens about money: Where will it come from? How do we pay for this program? To me, that's the second conversation you need to have. The first conversation should answer the question of how esports fits in with the academic mission of the university.

**AM:** How do those exigencies--to show fit with current program offerings and the larger academic mission--differ from the model of athletics, which seems to stand on its own as an institution within the university?

**AD:** Well, athletics has an economic model with far bigger scope and precedent on college campuses. They can make money. But they're also already interwoven with academic initiatives on campus. Because athletics is such a big economic force, they generate other secondary or tertiary interests from academics. What is sports? Why does it exist? What are the economics, the psychology of sports? Athletics has a more than one-hundred-year history of being involved with these disciplines while having an absolute economic stability to rely on. Finally, athletics is completely interwoven with the meaning of the "collegiate experience," with student expectations about what it means to go to school and become part of the community.

For us, in esports, we don't have any of those things. Any notion of economic stability, of how collegiate esports can become economically sustainable or revenue-neutral on a campus, is important to explore. How can esports shift from being a drain on university resources? How can we tie it into the academic offerings of a university? We're making it up as we go along a little bit.

**AM:** In a way, athletics offers a model for the successful integration of a program into the bottom-line, the culture, and the academic mission of a university.

**AD:** There are gigantic investments in academia focused on mainstream sports. There's tons of research in that area, and part of that is due to the fact that athletics is such a massive economic force that investments will be made to understand its dynamics and drivers. That can be the same on a smaller scope with esports—and it should, it must be to justify the existence of esports on campus.

**AM:** What does success look like to you for your program?

**AD:** To me, success is still about students on campus that feel disinvited from the mainstream collegiate experience because they don't identify with it in any way, shape, or form. I've always been a gamer and a

nerd, but a "dual-citizenship" nerd: I do tend to identify with those traditional experiences on a college campus. So I see the large population of students on our campus—a substantially larger population than many realize—who are disinvited, and I understand what they're missing.

The success state for our program is not only tolerance for esports at University of Utah, but full incoporation. Esports should be seen as part of the mainstream culture and the collegiate experience at the University of Utah. That will allow us to give those disinvited students a home and a hub. Then, esports will still meet the same function as a club, but we'll be able to grow and expand the program to reach the level of the college brand itself. That will allow new students to identify with the school, have a place to call home, and consider themselves included in the college experience that so many previous students have identified with.

That's the success state to me. We're probably a long way away from being able to meet that goal. We have to grow the program in scope and provide more resources and facilities for it. The facilities have to serve not only the varsity teams but the gamers in our larger community.

*"The success state for our program is not only tolerance for esports at University of Utah, but full incorporation. Esports should be seen as part of the mainstream culture and the collegiate experience at the University of Utah. That will allow us to give those disinvited students a home and a hub. Then, esports will still meet the same function as a club, but we'll be able to grow and expand the program to reach the level of the college brand itself."*

There has to be synergy, a reason for everyone to get behind esports: the mainstream sports community, the research and academic community, and the community of gamers on campus all need a reason to get on board. Giving everyone a reason for esports to thrive would be a success to me.

**AM:** If you have one piece of advice to share with someone setting off to build a program today, what would it be?

**AJ:** There's no promise of money here. The narrative of the exploding money in esports, how big an economic force it is, may exist in esport generally, but it doesn't touch the collegiate space. Motivations for being involved in collegiate esports should not be those, because it simply doesn't exist.

The other thing I would advise people to understand is that esports already exists on campus. Many people who are trying to get involved with esports do so ignorant to the many gaming initiatives that already have a place in the campus community. You have to locate those initiatives, those pockets, where students are already engaging with esports. You have to involve them, and their involvement in the formation of esports on campus has to remain constant. They have to have a voice in the process. You need to include them in order to gain their support, and they know how esports should look. There's no one-size-fits-all model: you have to build an esports program that's appropriate to conditions on campus, and you have to involve students who are already putting their time and effort in.

# CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. To what extent have existing student esports or gaming groups been included in the conversation about rolling out a “formal” program on campus? What level of student inclusion is necessary or prudent to building a successful program?

2. How will the esports program at your school inform the student experience? In a perfect world, what effect would esports have on the brand of your university? Who would experience a sense of belonging on campus who previously did not?

3. Will your program have adequate facilities for casual and competitive play? How can the program provide access for students at different levels of skill and commitment?