NAVIGATING THE IRON CAGE: AN INSTITUTIONAL CREATION PERSPECTIVE OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

Esports, also referred to as competitive video gaming, are an emerging area of study for sport management scholars. Recent reports estimate the esports industry is valued at close to $700 million, with projections for 2020 in excess of $1.5 billion (Newzoo, 2017). While there is considerable scholarly debate regarding the classification of esports as sport (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018), there is an inextricable link between esports and traditional sport management (Cunningham et al., 2018). For example, the rapid growth of esports has been fueled in part by emerging partnerships between traditional sport and esports teams (e.g., The Philadelphia 76ers and Dignitas), and a growing number of professional sport teams have hired esports personnel in full-time roles (Funk et al., 2018; Pizzo et al., 2018). These trends not only highlight the growing popularity and professionalization of esports, but also underline the growing integration of esports into traditional sport management systems.

Esports are a part of the growing number of novel activities that are influencing the field of sport management. These activities include technological advances in virtual and augmented reality, social media, and multiple screens that are challenging the boundaries of what is considered sport (Cunningham et al, 2018; Funk, 2017; Heere, 2018). Integrating novel activities requires those within a field to learn how to position them to external stakeholders (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Within sport management, the integration of esports at the collegiate level is particularly challenging considering the large number of influential stakeholders that influence U.S. collegiate athletic departments (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

The emphasis of existing sport management literature on esports has, to date, been primarily conceptual and focused on professional sport organizations' relationships with esports entities. However, many U.S. colleges and uni-

versities are beginning to support esports teams. From 2014 to 2018, the number of collegiate esports programs grew from 0 to over 100, with additional universities expected to start recruiting and granting scholarships over the next several years (Morrison, 2018; NACE, 2019; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Scholars suggest that integrating esports programs can lead to increased student recruitment and engagement, as well as publicity and prestige associated with a university supported program (Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich, & Croft, 2017).Yet many universities are unfamiliar with the nascent esports industry, meaning administrators often struggle with problems such as the classification of esports players as student-athletes, athletic regulations and compliance, and a lack of formal governance structures to guide program development (Funk et al., 2018; Keiper et al., 2017).

At the professional level, sport teams and leagues have stepped in to provide the necessary infrastructure for esports to keep pace with their rapid growth. In so doing, they have contributed to the legitimization of esports and capitalized on a burgeoning industry. Yet the same cannot be said for collegiate esports. Compared to professional sport, the collegiate sport context presents distinct opportunities and challenges for esports management (Jenny et al., 2017). While some argue that athletics departments are a logical fit for esports programs due to their functional similarities (e.g., Funk et al., 2018; Keiper et al., 2017), others have identified potential hurdles to housing esports within athletics (Holden et al., 2017). In fact, although some athletics administrators have integrated esports as part of their traditional sport portfolio, nearly half of current collegiate esports programs are located in student affairs (Morrison, 2018). As collegiate esports become more popular on U.S. college campuses, it is important to understand the strategic rationale behind these decisions, and how they influence successful integration of novel activities.

The purpose of this study was to examine how program directors are creating acceptance for esports within the heavily regulated environment of U.S. colleges and universities, and explore how these strategies, and their efficacy, are influenced by program location (i.e., athletics departments vs. student affairs). The study is guided by the theory of institutional work, with particular emphasis on institutional *creation*. Through this lens, the analysis focuses on identifying creation strategies tied to esports integration, highlighting unique challenges that facilitate and/or constrain this process, and exploring differences between different departments (i.e., athletics departments vs. student affairs). The discussion provides theoretical insight on how actors within heavily regulated environments create acceptance for novel activities, and offers practical recommendations for the future development of collegiate esports.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Esports and U.S. collegiate esports programs

Esports have grown into a popular form of entertainment and are becoming increasingly intertwined with traditional sport management systems (Cunningham et al., 2018). At the collegiate level, athletics departments have been highlighted as a natural fit to house emerging collegiate esports programs (Funk et al., 2018). Both esports programs and athletics programs have players, coaches, facilities, scholarships, and practices, all of which form the core competencies of university athletics departments (Funk et al., 2018; Keiper et al., 2017). In addition, athletics departments have a vested interest in housing esports programs due to the vast size and growth of the field (Keiper et al., 2017). Yet not all collegiate esports programs are housed within athletic departments; although approximately 45% of collegiate esports programs are housed in athletics, another 45% are in student affairs, and 10% are managed by academic departments (Morrison, 2018). This dispersion in esports program location stems from differential governance structures, which has led to a lack of clarity regarding rules, regulations, and governance systems for esports at the collegiate level.

Similar to other institutions, U.S. universities have established routines, programs, and rules that are based on stable social arrangements and normative demands (Hughes, 1936; Jepperson, 1991), and they are seen as legitimate when they conform to these expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). They also operate in a climate of declining public funding (Mitchell & Leachman, 2015) and increased questioning regarding the value of higher education (Zusman, 2005), as well as growing accountability initiatives from federal, state, and local government (Schmidtlein & Berdahl, 2005).

However, athletic departments represent an especially unique institutional context within this overall structure. Due to their public notoriety, athletic departments are considered the "front porch" of universities (Pratt, 2013), subject to heightened economic, political, and social pressures (Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Trail & Chelladurai, 2000). They are given access to significant amounts of university resources (Chu, 1985; Wojtys, 2016) and must be cognizant of subjective norms and regulations, as well as issues related to student morale, public relations, institutional profile, fundraising, and student health (Cunningham, 2009; Rocha & Chelladurai, 2013). In addition, athletic departments are influenced by several governing bodies, with two external agencies dominating the governance of collegiate athletics. These governing bodies are the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) and NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics). Both are member-led organizations, with university administrators making decisions regarding regulations, and the NCAA and NAIA responsible for oversight (Jenny et al., 2017). As such, athletic departments operate within the

confines of a broader "iron-cage", as they are "influenced by, and reflective of" the surrounding context (Beyer & Hannah, 2000, p. 106).

While some scholars suggest the unique institutional position of athletic departments makes them amenable to integrating esports, others have highlighted several challenges (e.g., Jenny et al. 2017; Keiper et al., 2017). For example, many of the most popular esports (e.g., Fortnite, League of Legends, Overwatch) are played predominantly by males, which may be problematic considering collegiate athletics is one of the most contested spaces for Title IX policy implications (Heckman, 1997). Title IX, as applied to athletics, dictates that women and men must have equitable access to athletic participation, funding, and resources (e.g., equipment, supplies, support services; NCAA, 2017b). If the male-dominated activity of esports were to become an NCAA sport, athletic departments will need to consider strategies to remain compliant with these regulations. Conversely, Jenny and colleagues (2017) argued that esports could help shift gender imbalances, both in esports and college athletics. Emerging NCAA sports are intended to provide additional athletic opportunities to female student-athletes, and integrating esports as a co-ed or women's only activity could help increase female esports participation while also allowing NCAA member institutions to maintain compliance with Title IX.

Another key consideration is player amateurism. Many collegiate esports teams and players regularly participate in competitions with cash prizes and generate revenue from streaming their esports skills and strategies on platforms such as Twitch (Keiper et al., 2017). This violates NCAA bylaw 12.1.2 on Amateur Status, which states that a student-athlete is not eligible for intercollege competition if the individual uses their athletic skill for pay in that sport, accepts a promise of pay following competition in intercollegiate athletics, or enters into an agreement with an agent (NCAA, 2017a). However, not all NCAA athletes are subject to such rules. For instance, in tennis, a prospective student-athlete may accept up to $10,000 per year in prize money, and money accepted thereafter is admissible if it does not exceed their competitive expenses. If esports were to be regulated by NCAA member institutions, special provisions would be needed to accommodate esports players who currently have no cap on their earnings.

Finally, one of the more pressing concerns related to collegiate esports relates to licensing and game rules. In esports, the "sport" itself is owned by the publisher of the video game title. Esports publishers standardize the game rules (Funk et al., 2018), making direct involvement by governing bodies especially difficult (Jenny et al., 2017). This is a major hurdle for athletic departments. The publisher could change the rules of an esports title at any time, meaning many athletic departments are apprehensive to commit resources to esports programs until long-term licensing agreements are made. As more schools

begin to integrate esports at various levels, deciding whether esports falls within the guidelines of traditional university athletics governance remains an open question (Dave, 2017).

Theoretical framework

Institutional work provides a useful theoretical lens to examine the strategies of actors influencing the integration of esports within U.S. universities. By shifting the unit of analysis to specific actors, institutional work unpacks the "black box" of institutions, which is a common limitation associated with the parent institutional theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Institutional work focuses on the "myriad, day-to-day equivocal instances of agency" among actors who shape institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 53), such as the actions of university department directors who create acceptance for their emergent esports programs. Moreover, institutional work accounts for variation within institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011; Lounsbury, 2008), such as how and why esports programs have developed across different university departments (i.e., athletics and student affairs).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) outlined three broad areas of institutional work: creation, maintenance, and disruption. Creation work refers to various activities undertaken in the formation of new arrangements or changing arrangements (Suddaby, 2010). Likewise, maintenance work involves the activities of those seeking to support the activities of the institution (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Finally, disruption work refers to the practices associated with actors attempting to undermine institutional arrangements (Lawrence et al., 2011). Although sport management scholars have increasingly adopted institutional work perspectives to understand how actors create, maintain, and disrupt sport institutions, this line of research has focused primarily on institutional *maintenance* strategies used by the NCAA in response to legitimacy threats. Research in this area has examined the individual and collective actions of actors with the NCAA in response to legal (Nite, 2017), technological (Nite & Washington, 2017), and competitive threats (Edwards & Washington, 2015). For example, Nite (2017) demonstrated how the NCAA developed defensive narratives in response to legal challenges in order to *maintain* the institution (i.e., the NCAA).

A related body of research has taken a broader approach, focusing on all three areas at once (i.e., creation, maintenance, and disruption). For example, the work of Dowling and Smith (2016) explored how a temporary Olympic athlete development organization, Own The Podium (OTP), took actions to become a permanent organization. Specifically, the authors found that actors within OTP took small strategic actions (e.g., creation of a newsletter) to incrementally garner support from existing stakeholders. Particularly relevant to the current study is the work of Woolf, Berg, Newland, and Green (2016), who adopted an institutional work perspective to understand how actors within a

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) training facility took actions to aid the development of an emerging and stigmatized sport (i.e., MMA). Woolf and colleagues identified how actors within an exemplar MMA facility took actions to legitimize MMA despite stigmas, misconceptions, and uncoordinated talent development systems. Specifically, Woolf et al. highlighted the importance of refinement and barrier work. Refinement work included efforts by actors to make MMA more social acceptable, such as MMA gym owners deliberately referring to fighters as athletes. Conversely, barrier work inhibited the growth of MMA, and included the artificial requirements imposed by the strong subculture surrounding MMA.

Within sport management, institutional *creation* remains a viable area for future research. Sport management scholars have recently highlighted a host of novel activities that are challenging the boundaries of what is considered sport (Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk, 2017). Although sport organizations are often favorably positioned to capitalize on these emerging opportunities, they are also subject to heightened stakeholder influence and intense public scrutiny that confines their action (Washington & Patterson, 2011). This is problematic, as sport managers may overlook or neglect opportunities for growth. While integrating novel practices (e.g., esports) undoubtedly creates tension and uncertainty within institutions, actors are capable of mitigating these issues and demonstrate fit (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Institutional creation provides insight into the strategies associated with this process and can inform the successful integration of novel practices into heavily regulated and institutionalized environments, such as U.S. universities.

The phenomenon of emerging collegiate esports programs provides a unique opportunity to explore institutional creation practices within an important sport context. Despite their potential, the widespread integration of collegiate esports has been limited by stigmas, misconceptions, and a lack of coordination. In addition, esports have a strong subculture that has been described as toxic, particularly towards traditionally marginalized populations (Consalvo, 2012). This has not only slowed the rate of adoption among U.S. universities, but also caused trepidation among athletic administrators who face pressure stemming from their university affiliation and unique organizational field (e.g., Cunningham, 2009). An institutional creation perspective can not only provide nuanced insights on how novel practices such as esports are integrated, but also account for variation in esport program location (i.e., athletic departments vs. student affairs) from the perspective of key actors (i.e., department directors). Accordingly, the current study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What institutional creation strategies have actors utilized to integrate collegiate esports?

RQ2: What are the challenges associated with integrating collegiate esports programs?

RQ3: How do the challenges differ between athletic departments and student affairs departments?

METHOD

The purpose of the study was to identify the institutional creation strategies and challenges associated with integrating collegiate esports programs, and to assess any differences based on program location. An explanatory qualitative approach was considered appropriate to achieve these objectives. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to generate data, with a focus on understanding participants lived experiences and interpretation of the described phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The following sections provide a more detailed description of the data generation and analysis procedures.

Data generation

Data was generated between June 2017 and August 2017. Online websites for collegiate esports leagues (e.g., Collegiate Starleague, National Association of Collegiate Esports) were used to compile a comprehensive list of 41 U.S. colleges and universities who integrated esports. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit directors from both athletic and student affairs departments. In addition to department location, employment rank was considered a key selection criterion so that directors could clearly explain the strategies and perceived challenges they faced (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). A total of 16 directors agreed to participate[1]. Eight directors were from athletics departments and six directors were from student affairs departments. In addition, two directors from athletic departments that *did not* integrate esports, but were in the same athletic conference as universities that did, were also purposively selected for interviews. These deviant cases were intended to improve the width of analysis by providing different ways of seeing or experiencing the phenomenon under study (Flick, 2014). Deviant case analysis also enhanced the dependability of findings and provided a deeper understanding of the specific strategies and challenges related to athletic departments. Table 1 provides a list of all participants and pseudonyms, employment rank, institution type, and the location of their esports program within the structure of the university.

All interviews were conducted through Skype by a single researcher. Skype was chosen over telephone interviews since it allowed the interviewer to maintain synchronous visual interactions with the subject throughout the interview (Hanna, 2012). To mitigate issues commonly associated with interviews conducted over Skype, the interviewer utilized visual and facial cues to

[1] The total sample size of the current study was *N*=16. Approximately 34% (14 of 41) of collegiate esports programs were represented at the time the data were collected.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Participant	*Pseudonym*	*Title*	*University Status*	*Esports Program Location*
1	Emma	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
2	Darren	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
3	Ava	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
4	Logan	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
5	Harper	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
6	James	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
7	William	Director of Athletics	Private	Athletics
8	Terrance	Director of Athletics	Public	Athletics
9	Riley	Director of Student Affairs	Private	Student Affairs
10	Chloe	Director of Student Affairs	Private	Student Affairs
11	Owen	Director of Student Affairs	Private	Student Affairs
12	Madison	Director of Student Affairs	Private	Student Affairs
13	Isaac	Director of Student Affairs	Public	Student Affairs
14	Zoey	Director of Student Affairs	Private	Student Affairs
15	Ben	Director of Athletics	Private	N/A
16	Nora	Director of Athletics	Private	N/A

convey understanding throughout the interview, and emailed participants several times prior to the interview to strengthen rapport and comfort (Seitz, 2016). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, with an average of 70 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to identify the strategies and challenges associated with esports integration. Since participants came from different departments, interview questions were designed to be flexible and open to their experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011). The interview guide consisted of three general types of questions: open ended, theory-driven, and probing. Open questions introduced the participant to the topic of collegiate esports and solicited their expertise. An example of an open-ended question is: "Can you please tell me what you know about collegiate esports?" Theory-driven questions related specifically to institutional creation, such as: "How did you phrase your response to key stakeholders?" Finally, probing questions were used to gain additional depth, detail, and illustration on participant responses (Rubin & Babbie, 2011).

Data analysis

Data were transcribed by the lead author and analyzed by members of the research team via the six-step qualita-

tive content analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, interview data were transcribed verbatim, prepared for analysis, and reviewed to get a general sense of the text. Second, all transcribed data were read to understand the underlying meaning and develop initial codes. Third, codes were reviewed and broadly classified into two parent categories related to (1) institutional creation strategies and (2) challenges. Fourth, data extracts were organized into themes and reviewed in relation to their parent category. At this step, the source of data extracts was also reviewed to uncover any salient differences between athletic directors and student affairs directors. Fifth, themes were given clear names and definitions. Finally, supporting data extracts were selected to produce the report. The research team strived for multivocality in the selection of supporting extracts to enhance the credibility of the research process (Tracy, 2010). The research team also strived to provide thick descriptions to enhance the confirmability of categories through detailed and vivid extracts that offer a sufficient level of depth (Flick, 2014). Throughout the data analysis process and selection of supporting extracts, viewpoints from all research team members were considered to enrich and support the accuracy of the findings.

FINDINGS

Findings are organized under the broad themes of (1) institutional creation strategies and (2) challenges. Salient differences between athletic departments and student affairs departments are discussed within each thematic section.

Institutional creation strategies

Directors from athletic and student affairs departments engaged in similar institutional creation strategies to integrate esports. A heavy emphasis was placed on controlling the narrative surrounding esports by using traditional sports to create a frame of reference. Interestingly, results indicate student affairs directors *relied* on athletic departments to model their programs and provide resources (e.g., access to medical staff) that offered functional benefits. In particular, three strategies were identified: (1) *structure and resources*, *(2) imagery and branding*, and (3) *alignment with existing values of athletics*.

Structures and resources. All directors expressed that the structures and resources from traditional sport were needed to provide templates and strategically position emerging esports programs. William, an athletics department director, noted how certain athletic regulations were being directly applied to esports programs to respond to administration concerns, stating, "We are cutting and pasting some of the commonsense guidelines that exist within the NCAA…we are going to have the same GPA requirements as the NCAA while players [are] on scholarship." Chloe, a student affairs director, also highlighted how similar academic standards and regulations from traditional athletics

were applied to the esports program to address faculty concerns:

> Once we came in and told them our esport teams will be structured just like an athletics team, the players will be monitored for GPA and other regulations and there will be a coach, after that they understood what we were doing, and they were on-board.

Interestingly, this reliance on the existing resources of athletic departments was especially strong among directors from student affairs. Madison, a student affairs director, stated, "We have consulted athletics in everything we have done, we absolutely need their expertise [because] they know many things we do not know." Similarly, Isaac, a student affairs director, explained how resources allocated to athletics were used to help his support program:

> I have been borrowing from athletics and speaking with their coaches. For example, one of our player's hands and elbows were hurting. I reached out to our athletics training staff and asked them to come out and give our athletes a talk. They gave our players some exercises to do and before you know it, they were not hurting anymore.

Ava, an athletics department director, discussed the benefits of using the existing structure and resources of athletic departments, stating, "esports aligns best within athletics [because] there are synergies where athletics can help, whether its access to athletic trainers, the fitness center, class schedules, the academic and tutor support, it just fits all around…it makes the most sense." Owen, a student affairs director, expressed similar sentiments, explaining, "esports belongs in athletics, you can [either] use all of the existing functionality that an athletic department has—compliance, ticketing, administrators, coaches—or you will have to solve the exact same problems and replicate the same mechanisms [outside athletics]."

However, not all elements of traditional collegiate sport management were transferable to esports. For example, one area where traditional athletic departments structure and resources was not transferrable was for player recruitment. Directors indicated that the existing recruiting structures of athletic departments, and the strategies they employed, did not translate to esports. Zoey, a student affairs director, described that unlike traditional sport, there is no existing pipeline for talented esports players, stating, "our athletic director tells me how to recruit, but a lot of his methods do not apply to esports [because] reaching out to that potential audience is more of a challenge than you think, everything is not in place yet." Similarly, Harper, an athletics director noted that, "in a traditional sport, you get film or watch them play, or get a roster from a coach, but in esports, you cannot tell who the participants are from watching them."

Imagery and branding. In addition to the structure and resources provided by traditional sport, all directors noted the perceptual benefits of adopting strategies to mimic traditional sport imagery and branding. For example, Madison, a student affairs director, specifically mentioned how having esports jerseys

that aligned with traditional sport helped gain support from university stakeholders, stating, "it is an easier buy in when people hear the comparisons to sport. I think the school does not know what esports athletes look like… administration has no idea what they look like, and things like sport-like uniforms help." Similarly, James, an athletics department director, explained how aligning with prominent traditional collegiate sport brands helped gain support:

> We have to make competitive references to traditional sports. My pitch is that we want to be the Duke Basketball of esports. Everyone knows Duke Basketball. They have the best players, coaching staff, resources, community, and culture. Not everybody likes them, but you have to respect what they have built. That is an easy way for us to compare the benefits of gaming. Everyone understands that Duke Basketball adds value to their university. That is the value I want to communicate to people. With esports there is campus spirit, excitement, benefits, and revenue streams down the road. Basketball is a 5 on 5 game, making it very easy to compare to the 5 different roles you play in League of Legends.

Directors also emphasized that their strategy was to present esports in a way that was familiar to stakeholders, which typically entailed traditional sport language. Harper, an athletics department director, described his strategy:

> We present esports in a way that is familiar to them so that they give it a chance. We have a varsity and junior varsity esports team here. When I talk to a professor or parent, they understand that varsity is the top tier. By giving them something to compare esports to, they understand it and have an easier time accepting it.

Moreover, directors referenced how multiple sports make up track and field, similar to how multiple games make up esports teams. Logan, an athletic department director, stated, "We describe esports as similar to track and field or gymnastics. It helps relay the concept behind esports when we introduced our four [esports] teams—they both have multiple events." This strategy allowed directors to introduce esports as a singular and relatable concept. Moving forward, Madison, a student affairs director, explained how esports athletes could benefit from implementing more of the imagery and branding traditionally associated with athletics:

> Most of these esports players never had the same structural support as athletes. There were no pep rallies or coaches for these kids. Why should we give all those benefits to just one group of students? esports players may rely less on their physical skills, but it still involves the same fundamentals as sport, teambuilding and comradery.

Alignment with existing values of athletics. Directors adopted strategies to legitimize esports by connecting the potential benefits with the perceived values associated with athletic departments (e.g., character development, inclusion). This strategy was employed by directors from both athletics and student affairs, and directly addressed the perception of esports as antithetical to the mission of higher education. Darren, an athletics

department director, discussed how he responded to initial resistance against housing esports in athletic departments:

> I make it clear that athletics and higher education are here to help create better character through the classes and activities [students] are going to. Just because the vehicle is a video game, makes no difference than putting a round leather ball into a hole.

Similarly, Owen, a student affairs director, stated his forward pitch to university administration:

> It is incidental that this is about games, this is about bringing your assets and passion to join the campus culture and connect with the university. Gamers do not need the institution's help playing games or getting access to competitive games, this is about identifying yourself as a Utah Ute, USC Trojan, or Michigan Wolverine, and letting this community take part in that part of college culture.

Logan, an athletics department director, described how he emphasized the potential for inclusivity when he explained the benefits of esports to administration, stating "esports has the potential to lead the way for inclusivity. You do not need to be 6'5" and male to play, there are fewer physical requirements." Several directors suggested how, from this perspective, esports provides an opportunity to attract non-traditional athletes, with James, an athletics department director, stating, "there is no archetype of for an esports player, but most [players] will tell you that they never fit into the athletic clique. Esports gives them a way to integrate their competitive side with what they are passionate about."

Emma, an athletics department director, captures the fundamental strategy used to position esports to the university administration when initially discussing athletics supporting an esports program:

> The idea was to present esports in a way that was familiar to administration so that they know how to implement it and they know how to work with it – not to present an entirely new model that may dissuade an institution from giving esports a chance.

Moreover, athletic program directors highlighted the benefits of affiliating esports with athletics, as discussed by Harper:

> It is an easier buy in when people hear it is a sport, in that we take our time to promote it, tweet about it, put it on our athletics website, and do all those kind of things. That helps 'traditionalize' it for those that are having a hard time with it.

Challenges

Directors from both athletics and student affairs indicated a myriad of challenges related to institutional creation strategies. Specifically, five key themes were identified: (1) uncertainty among university stakeholders, (2) publisher control, (3) incongruence with traditional sport, (4) external regulatory concerns, and (5) gender equity concerns. Although the first two themes were relatively consistent across athletic and student affairs directors, the final three themes were especially salient for athletic directors. The following sections review these challenges in more detail.

Uncertainty among university stakeholders. Across athletic and student affairs departments, directors highlighted the uncertainty felt by university stakeholders regarding esports (e.g., administration, faculty). The uncertainty surrounding collegiate esports was aptly summed by William, an athletic department director, who stated, "esports is like the Wild West, schools do not know what it is and do not know what is coming next." This unfamiliarity caused anxiety that made some administrators avoid integration. In addition, data indicates the continued growth of esports is making some administrators fear they are missing out on a viable opportunity. For example, Harper, an athletic department director, stated:

> It is showing up on their radar now, they have this angst that they should not touch this with a 50-foot pole, this is going to come and go, but at the opposite end of the spectrum they also have the angst of a train leaving the station and [they] better hop on it.

Terrance, an athletic department director, echoed similar sentiments and indicated the lack of knowledge about esports among traditional collegiate sport stakeholders has been a difficult hurdle. He stated, "they are barely seeing just how big of presence [esports] has, as this has been invisible to them for so long because of how differently this media is consumed by its audience than mainstream sports."

Directors also highlighted the perceived incongruence between esports and the mission of universities. For example, Darren, an athletic department director, described the concerns of university leaders who were uncertain how esports could benefit students, stating, "universities say they do not know how esports fits into any kind of educational model…I understand, it is a new concept." Similarly, Chloe, a student affairs director, indicated, "we did get a little pushback from the faculty, just the general worry that these guys [esports players] are going to be gaming all day and not going to class."

In addition to the uncertainty from internal stakeholders (e.g., administration, faculty), our findings support that directors were confronted with uncertainty from parents as well. Riley, a student affairs director, stated "Parents tend to think esports is just kids sitting in a room for hours and hours. Some kids can be guilty of that, but esports has become much more than that." Emma, an athletic department director, expressed similar concerns from the parents of esports scholarship recipients:

> Parents are as curious as everyone else. They ask a lot of questions. They want to know how long the scholarships last. They are trying to figure it all out. But sometimes it is difficult for them to wrap their minds around that their child is getting a scholarship to play video games [laughs].

Publisher control. The influence of video game publishers was prominent among directors of athletic and student affairs departments. Esports publishers retain ownership of the title, equivalent to ownership of a sport itself, which presents major challenges. As Madison,

a student affairs director, described, "no one owns basketball, no one owns soccer, [but] in League of Legends, Riot[2] literally owns the field you play on." Similarly, Riley, a student affairs director, explained how this meant the competitive rules associated with esports can quickly change, using Activision Blizzard, a leading esports publisher, as an example:

> In basketball and football, the rules do not change very much, [and] the size of the field does not change. But if Blizzard decides to change the rules or promote a different game, it is unnerving not knowing what is coming from one year to the next. If a title is no longer supported, we cannot just pull funding, we have commitments to players.

Logan, an athletic department director, notes how the financial sustainability and success of an esports program can problematic in the long-term:

> If your esports program becomes self-sustaining and financially viable and a publisher starts saying things you do not like or demanding arrangements you do not want to fulfil, their influence raises legitimate concerns

Chloe, a student affairs director, notes similar concerns about the seemingly impending developer (i.e., publisher) control of esports, stating:

> I think [in the] long term developers are going to run their own leagues for their own games just because there is going to be big opportunities there. I do not think they are going to want to allow universities to handle their own game. Developers will want to control the experience if there is money to be made.

Publisher control over game rules and ownership was noted as an ongoing concern among all directors and is a potential source of concern for universities considering integrating esports programs. As noted by Emma, an athletic department director, that "…in the end, the publishers have all the power."

Incongruence with traditional sport. Athletic department directors expressed additional challenges related to the integration of esports. One of these challenges includes the perceived incongruence between traditional sport and esports, especially related to physical activity. For example, Harper, an athletic department director, explained the pushback from faculty and boosters who felt esports contradicts the purpose of traditional sport, stating, "we had faculty and boosters saying that esports go against the traditional idea of sport, to be physically active." Ben, an athletic director from a university that did *not* integrate esports, expressed similar sentiments, saying, "esports go against the traditional idea of sport, to go outside and play, go outside and run around. When you have an activity that you are literally just sitting…now it is go downstairs and play." Similarly, Nora, also an athletic director at a university that has *not* integrated esports, indicated the incongruence with traditional support surrounding esports has led to a wait-and-see approach that reflects the approach of many U.S. colleges and universities considering esports, stating "I

[2] Riot refers to Riot Games, publisher of the esport title League of Legends.

am not anti-esports. I think a lot of it is a lack of understanding on everyone's part. I think it will be very interesting to see how that plays out." Yet William, an athletic department director, notes how the benefits of winning in esports can win over those skeptical of esports:

> Of course, people on campus, like faculty and staff, are going to be skeptical of esports because it is not your traditional sport, but last year one of our esport teams went undefeated and now all of a sudden those same faculty and staff are jumping on the esports bandwagon.

External regulatory concerns. Directors in athletic departments also noted additional challenges from regulatory bodies that govern and regulate collegiate athletics, namely the NCAA. Although collegiate esports is not currently subject to NCAA regulation, athletic department directors indicated that if esports continued to gain traction within athletic departments and grow to meet the criteria of sport as defined by the NCAA, regulatory issues would become an issue. Most notably, directors indicated that player amateurism is a foundational principle of NCAA regulations that does not fit easily within the current landscape of esports. Logan, an athletic department director, explained, "I do not think it [esports] really fits, I think the NCAA has some archaic structures surrounding amateurism that do not really fit within any esports." James, an athletic department director, also discussed this source of apprehension:

> There is some serious money that can be won. In the University League of Legends [uLoL] series, 1st place took on $30,000 apiece, and 2nd place took home $15,000 apiece. There is a lot of money that is being thrown around, even at the collegiate scene. That is why the NCAA wants to stay away from esports at this point.

In addition, Harper, an athletic department director, alluded to the prevalence of esports players being financially compensated for streaming esports content via online platforms (e.g., Twitch), and emphasized the perceived incompatibility between the NCAA and esports, stating, "If you forced amateurism on esports right now, every single college player would be kicked out." This raised larger questions on governance concerns, as described by James, an athletic department director, who stated:

> Compliance, eligibility, scholarships, you know, do they have to be full time students? All those kinds of things that, if you call it an esports, does it have to follow the same rules and regulations, say a basketball player does?

Gender equity concerns. The stigma of esports as a predominantly male activity was especially salient among directors in athletic departments, who pointed to video gaming's toxic culture of harassment and alienation that dissuaded female participation and might be difficult to eradicate. For example, several directors mentioned that most harassment occurs through in-game verbal communication among esports players using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). This verbal harassment leads to many women abandoning the more popular esports (e.g., Fortnite, League of

Legends) for video game consoles (e.g., PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch), which rely less on VoIP but do not have the same popularity as esports played on high-end personal computers. As Emma, an athletic department director described, "for females playing the competitive esports titles, you are not incentivizing them to continue if they are getting attacked and yelled at."

Nora, a director from an athletic department at a university that has *not* integrated esports, explained how this challenge stopped her from integrating esports:

> Esports is a male dominated thing. Women gamers are out there, and we need to work together to get more females into this space. The culture of gaming is pushing them out. There are more discussions that need to be had before we can get involved. We would need serious social cover if we were to put a competitive esports team representing our athletic department out there right now.

Gender equity concerns are an on-going concern, as Darren, an athletic program director, remarked on some of the larger issues pushing women out of esports:

> To me, one symptom, or rather one cause of the troubles plaguing esports is toxicity. If you have 12 or 13-year olds online and they devise from your handle that you are a female, or if it is their voice, the easiest thing to do is to place blame or call out the girl. Then females playing competitive titles are not incentivized to continue playing if they are getting attacked and yelled at. They must say 'forget it, this is not for me, I do not need it.'

While problematic for multiple reasons, the culture surrounding esports has lead to a dearth of female players at higher levels of competition, which James, an athletic department director, indicated "…makes finding and recruiting female players extremely difficult."

DISCUSSION

The discussion is organized according to the research questions that guided the study. Specifically, the following sections discuss findings related to institutional creation strategies and challenges, and highlight the salient differences between athletics and student affairs when integrating esports.

Institutional creation strategies

Directors from both athletics and student affairs used similar functional and cognitive strategies to integrate esports programs. These strategies included using the structure, resources, imagery, and branding of athletic departments, as well as aligning esports with the existing values associated with sport, to address the challenges surrounding the integration of esports. Our findings support conceptual perspectives (e.g., Jenny et al., 2017; Keiper et al., 2017) that, from a functional perspective, athletic departments offer the most appropriate structures and resources to house emerging esports programs. In fact, most directors from student affairs identified athletics as the ideal home for esports due to similarities between traditional sport and esports management,

and described their *reliance* on athletic departments to operate.

However, most institutional creation strategies targeted cognitive, rather than functional, aspects of integration. This highlights the importance of *aligning* esports with the mission and values of the broader institution (i.e., the university) as well athletic departments (e.g., character building), which supports the general premise presented by Edwards and Washington (2015), Nite (2017), and Woolf et al. (2016). For instance, esports was not typically seen as an activity that contributed to the mission of colleges and universities, a perception that is largely attributable to a lack of knowledge. To remedy this issue, directors sought to align esports with traditional sport activities in order to clarify their value and create a more palatable frame of reference for university stakeholders. Directors in both departments utilized the imagery and perceived value of traditional sport to support and legitimize esports. The use of traditional sport imagery such as college logos and jerseys helped clarify the value of esports and overcome resistance to certain stereotypes, while alignment with athletic policies such as GPA requirements, physical and mental health training programs, and practice guidelines helped legitimize the value of collegiate esports within higher education.

These findings indicate that in the face of uncertainty, directors mimicked traditional sport systems to support emerging esports programs. This is consistent with the findings of Dowling and Smith (2016), and indicates how non-sport actors (i.e., directors from student affairs) are using sport as a legitimizing agent. The use of sport to make emerging activities, such as esports, more attractive to audiences aligns with the concept of "sportification", as proposed by Heere (2018). The findings support the concept of sportifcation's viability to facilitate the integration of the growing number of activities influencing the field of sport management.

Challenges to integrating esports

Overall, concerns regarding publisher control are currently limiting the long-term viability of esports programs. Under the US Copyright Act, videogames are considered audio-visual works, granting publishers the exclusive right to publicly perform the work (e.g., host esports events) and reproduce copies (Rabicoff & Matuszewski, 2017). Directors noted that publishers have complete control of esports titles, meaning they can make changes to esports through software updates, altered game mechanics, and modified in-game performance (Chao, 2017). Legal scholars suggest esports are operating in unprecedented intellectual property territory in this respect (Holden et al., 2017), with a gray area currently between the intellectual property rights of publishers and the rights of other stakeholders (e.g., universities, players; Chao, 2017). Although Nite and Washington (2017) suggested innovations (i.e., television) are often surrounded by risks and uncertainties that challenge institutional arrangements (i.e., the relationship be-

tween the NCAA and its member organizations), the current 'institutional arrangement' between esports publishers and collegiate esports programs is very one-sided. The influence of publishers on collegiate esports programs remains an on-going concern for adopting institutions, regardless of department, with no clear template for mitigation.

Directors in athletic departments noted additional challenges when integrating esports which centered on: esports incongruence with traditional sports, external regulatory concerns, and gender equity concerns. Most notably, findings indicate the distinction between esports and traditional sport remains an important point of contention among athletic department stakeholders. Although aligning with traditional sport helped communicate the potential value of esports, fundamental differences between the two activities were difficult to reconcile. These stemmed primarily from stakeholder uncertainty regarding various dimensions of esports—primarily, that esports "is not" sport.

This is a clear impediment to integrating esports within athletic departments, as athletic directors risk undercutting their existing stakeholders to legitimize a new activity. In addition, directors from athletic departments alluded to unique regulatory issues that must be addressed. Although still in its relative infancy, if collegiate esports was regulated by the NCAA all current collegiate programs would be non-compliant. Thus, policies related to player amateurism would require novel approaches to monitoring be devised to ensure future compliance. Athletic directors also emphasized how gender equity and harassment issues are still a prominent concern in esports that influence participation among female players. Considering collegiate sport remains a prominent context for Title IX policy decisions, the optics of integrating a male-dominated activity such as esports is especially difficult to navigate. Athletic departments considering esports as an NCAA-sanctioned activity need a clear understanding of gender equity implications (Keiper et al., 2017), not just in terms of Title IX compliance, but also specific policies for marketing and management.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Washington and Patterson (2011) highlighted a pressing need for sport management scholars to examine the creation of new sport-related activities and their influence on existing sport institutions. The current study addressed this call by exploring the institutional creation strategies and challenges faced by athletic and student affairs directors integrating collegiate esports programs. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Woolf et al., 2016), the findings highlight the importance of institutional language in the creation of and implementation of a novel activity. Institutional language focuses on the deliberate use of persuasive words to connect actors, interests, and audiences and influence the creation of cognitive categories (Crossan et al., 1999; Suddaby, 2010).

Although athletic departments provide the best functional fit for esports, the most important strategies (and greatest challenges) revolved around creating a cognitive category for esports. For example, directors from athletics and student affairs used deliberate language, such as referring to esports teams as "varsity" or "junior varsity", to provide a framework for understanding a novel practice in relation to an established one. This is similar to the strategies outlined by Woolf et al. (2016), who elucidated how actors in an emerging institution (i.e., MMA) took strategic actions to reduce uncertainty and stigmas, such as referring to fighters as athletes.

Yet findings also indicate that in such a highly regulated environment, institutional language alone was not sufficient to achieve this objective. Rather, strategic management decisions were required to reinforce linguistic associations with traditional sport. For example, directors referenced utilizing GPA requirements, routine practice schedules, and access to mental and physical health support systems to augment institutional language and *create* a cognitive category for esports that aligned with traditional sport. In addition, the visual imagery of uniforms and logos reinforced this cognition and allowed directors to control the narrative around esports. This is consistent with the premise of institutional work, which indicates that while actors are capable of shaping institutions, they are not "hypermuscular supermen" (Suddaby, 2010, p. 15). Rather than relying solely on institutional language, directors also needed to engage other actors to implement tangible practices and policies (e.g., GPA requirements) that favorably framed esports in the minds of key stakeholders. The use of institutional language coupled with strategic management goes beyond the concept of refinement work as proposed by Woolf et al. (2016). Actors integrating novel practices can align them within existing cogitative schema (e.g., perceptions of sport) by using deliberate language to promote a shared reality (Crossan et al., 1999), yet findings indicate this linguistic positioning must be paired with strategic management decisions in highly regulated and institutionalized environments. The interplay of language and management provides a stronger foundation for stakeholders to address the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with integrating novel practices, which is a key assertion of Ziestma and Lawrence (2010).

Moreover, the importance of linguistic and managerial alignment with traditional sport highlights an intriguing consideration regarding Heere's (2018) concept of *sportification*. Heere (2018) defined sportification as aligning the consumption, organization, and regulation of non-sport activities with traditional sport. While this process was largely effective for directors, the overall effectiveness was contingent upon quelling perceived incongruences between esports and traditional sport. In other words, directors needed to create alignment between esports and traditional sport before they could implement sportification strategies to educate

stakeholders, champion potential benefits, or align with institutional values, which was more difficult for athletic directors. Although sport was undoubtedly a viable legitimizing agent, directors first needed to garner acceptance among stakeholders that the novel activity (i.e., esports) was sufficiently "sport-like". Indeed, several directors noted challenges associated with positioning esports as sport, and directors who had not integrated esports programs mentioned this as a major reason why.

In addition, although leveraging the organization and regulation of sport is a central tenet of sportification, directors in athletic departments faced several additional challenges in this respect. Although many functional aspects of athletic departments were beneficial to emerging esports programs, there were also limitations caused by their embedded position within the institution (i.e., the university) and the unique regulatory and cognitive norms confining their actions (e.g., gender equity issues). This highlights how actors within athletic departments are especially vulnerable to the paradox of embedded agency, which posits that while actors are embedded within the confines of institutions, they do have the ability to shape them (Lawrence et al., 2011; Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). Actors engaging in institutional creation work within athletics can effectively leverage sportification strategies to integrate novel activities but must position their introduction in relation to existing cognitive schemas. This implication is salient as there are a number of activities and practices within the domain of sport that are challenging what is considered sport and how sport organizations are managed (Cunningham et al, 2018; Funk et al., 2018), which will likely require actors within sport institutions to strategically toe this line in order to garner stakeholder support.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings also inform the practical decision-making process of athletics departments considering esports programs. Athletic departments will need to be aware of publisher control. Publishers can change the competitive nature of a video game, making recruiting decisions challenging. Esports players recruited for specific positions may lose relevance based on changes made by the publisher. In addition, athletic departments need a clear understanding of Title IX implications from both a compliance and policy perspective. Some universities are already developing co-ed or all-female teams in anticipation of external regulation, and while this may not be necessary for all universities, directors need a clear plan for managing and monitoring gender equity issues in esports. Furthermore, athletics departments engaging non-traditional esports athletes must hold them to "student-athlete" standards to gain acceptance. Concepts such as declarations of intent, path to graduation, retention, and recruitment rates are all important forms of institutional language that are relevant to stakeholders of athletics, and

key to creating cognitive categories that align with athletics.

However, as esports continue to increase in both popularity and profitability, athletic departments must be strategic in their involvement and positioning of esports within the existing institutional arrangement of collegiate athletics (e.g., the NCAA). Although previous conceptual studies suggest the success of collegiate esports hinges on synergies with traditional collegiate sport management (e.g., Funk et al., 2018), there is currently very little empirical evidence to guide these decisions. The current study provides support that housing esports within athletics allows directors to utilize the existing functionality of an athletic department rather than simply replicating them in other departments. From this perspective, while athletics may not be the *natural* home for esports, they are currently the best *strategic* fit. Nevertheless, while athletic departments provide a viable temporary home, the challenges outlined in this study are likely to become even more restrictive as the activity grows.

Universities seeking to introduce esports programs can have them initially operate as a club sport and overtime elevate them to a collegiate sport. Club sport teams often compete in regional and national leagues and are not subject to the same regulations as NCAA-sanctioned varsity teams. Moreover, while there are codes of conduct for students involved in club sports, there is far less pressure to meet the type of competitive, training, and academic demands outlined by the NCAA. Club sports also provide strategic alignment with traditional sport and university imagery that could help connect esports to the mission of higher education and values associated with athletics. In addition, club activities provide the social connections and university support to make students feel integrated into the college experience (Haines, 2001). Directors indicated esports appealed to students who may not be involved with traditional athletics, and club sports may provide a more comfortable fit for prospective players. Yet, club sports currently operate under a host of different departments (e.g., athletics, student affairs, campus recreation) and would still need to rely on athletics for support and guidance (e.g., Title IX compliance). Thus, from a long-term, strategic perspective, club sports provide a viable initial home, with athletics a more suitable long-term fit.

If collegiate esports continues along projected growth trajectories, university leaders will face increasing pressure to consider how esports can contribute to their institution. For institutions of higher learning that want to remain relevant and connect with their students, esports offers an opportunity to engage with a more diverse segment of the student body. Currently, collegiate esports programs are spread across different university departments (i.e., athletics and student affairs), with athletics often highlighted as the most appropriate long-term home. While findings suggest athletic departments provide a viable functional home for esports, they also identify a host of perceptual and policy

challenges that would need to be addressed for successful long-term integration. Integrating esports within club sports might allow directors to capitalize on many of the same institutional creation strategies outlined in this study without confronting the unique perceptual or policy issues associated with athletic departments. Although certain challenges (e.g., publisher control) will remain troublesome, actors in club sports appear ideally positioned to navigate the highly regulated and institutionalized environment of U.S. universities to effectively manage collegiate esports long-term.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of the study that must be acknowledged. First, the current research focuses on the actions of directors embedded within universities, yet scholars highlight how internal dynamics within institutions can play a salient role in decision-making (e.g., Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). Exploring perspectives from other actors within the academic institutions, such as university presidents, senior administrators, faculty athletics representatives, and other athletics stakeholders (e.g., students, alumni, boosters) would provide even more nuanced insight on institutional creation strategies and interdepartmental dynamics. Second, while institutional work is an emerging concept to study micro-level phenomena, the use of alternative theoretical perspectives (e.g., institutional logics, pluralism, institutional entrepreneurship, translation) would provide additional insight to enrich the findings. Third, the current analysis is based on insight generated from directors from athletic and student affairs, yet the integration of perspectives from external governing bodies would also be useful. Interestingly, the NCAA has yet to clarify its position on esports and is actively seeking guidance on how to approach esports (Schonbrun, 2017), so future policy-level perspectives might be especially valuable.

Looking forward, there are a number of areas were the study of esports can inform the study of sport organizations and institutions. For instance, an emerging trend is the growth of esports programs in U.S. high schools. There is value in examining the institutional creation strategies within these high schools, as U.S. high schools are governed by state associations and answer to different stakeholders. Moreover, the growth of esports programs is not limited to the U.S. For instance, the British Esports Association is a national organization which promotes esports programs at a variety of institutions across the UK, including colleges, universities, and primary and secondary schools (British Esports Association, 2019). The growth of esports at the high school level (or its equivalent) could help address some of the problems currently plaguing collegiate esports (e.g., player recruitment, gender equity concerns). In addition, as the affiliation between the sport and esport industries continues to grow at multiple levels (e.g., professional, collegiate), examining the ra-

tionale beyond this affiliation can inform the strategic decisions underlying this process. Moreover, as noted by Hallman and Giel (2018), the process by which individuals perceive and interpret esports organizations will influence how perceptions of related sport organizations. As our research findings suggest, sport "traditionalists" may have difficulty reconciling this relationship.

Finally, the influence of esports on sport organizations should not be a one-sided affair. Future research should examine what sport organizations can learn from esports entities (e.g., connecting with new markets) and the implications for the growing sport 'colonization' of the esports industry.

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