



BLURRED LINES IN VARSITY ESPORTS

Over 60 schools now participate in collegiate esports leagues such as TESPA, EGF, and NACE. Recognizing their potential as a recruitment tool, some of these schools have put esports alongside their other varsity teams. This may seem like an odd fit, and that's because it is. Here's why:

1. **Program Incongruity** - Traditionally, varsity teams compete against other varsity teams. In collegiate esports leagues it is common for student-led club esports teams to face off against

departmentally sponsored esports teams. Leagues are able to accommodate teams that receive different levels of support from their school.

2. **Departmental Differences** - Sports programs are traditionally founded by athletic departments. For esports, some schools are kicking this trend and directing their programs through academic departments. One example is Boise State's **recently announced varsity esports program** which was founded through their education technology department.
3. **Blurred Lines** - In traditional sports, the NCAA protects players' amateur status by preventing them from earning money on their athletics. In collegiate esports, competitors are often awarded with scholarships and cash prizes. Furthermore, there are no restrictions on collegiate esports athletes from participating in professional tournaments. Players may be both professionals and amateurs.
4. **Monetary Flexibility** - Unlike the NCAA, esports leagues do not govern how sponsorship money can be spent. This provides flexibility to schools that may choose to use the money for academic purposes. The University of California at Irvine **partnered with iBuyPower** to fund an esports practice arena that also doubles as a computer lab.

Looking forward, as the collegiate esports space evolves, varsity programs will continue to mature and mimic traditional sports in

the following ways:

1. **Student Recruitment** - Following familiar patterns of traditional athletics, varsity esports programs will incentivise players to apply by offering scholarships. Robert Morris University **was the first school** to provide athletic scholarships for esports.
2. **Program Sponsorship** - Just like in traditional sports, varsity esports programs will seek partners that will help fund their teams and build new facilities.
3. **Sanctioned Play** - Varsity esports programs will have express permission from their school to use its logo and represent them in tournaments. Some leagues work with an on-campus coordinator to ensure that their participants have been sanctioned by their schools. Without consent from their administration, a team cannot truly represent their school and therefore label themselves varsity.

Takeaway:

While the larger industry matures, the collegiate esports landgrab will continue. As more schools participate, rules about the definition of a varsity team will solidify. Until then, the collegiate esports space remains messy and unpredictable.





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