



Diversity & Inclusion in Collegiate Esports:

Challenges, Opportunities, and Interventions

October 2019

Introduction

Esports—formalized competitive gaming—has been a part of video gaming since the beginning. From the earliest days where arcade machines allowed players to battle it out to see who was the best, to the rise of consoles and eventually personal computers, the desire to engage in competitive play has been present. Perhaps unsurprisingly, college students have been involved since the start.

While their participation in early esports was more informal and based around one-off events (for example, the “Intergalactic *Spacewar* Olympics” which was held in a Stanford computing lab in 1972 and featured one of the first video games ever created),¹ by the 2000’s formal gaming clubs hosting competitions were emerging. Princeton, one of the first campuses to have a club, hosted an intramural for the title *StarCraft* in 2008 and then, in 2009, created a competition to take on both MIT and later Tsinghua University in China².

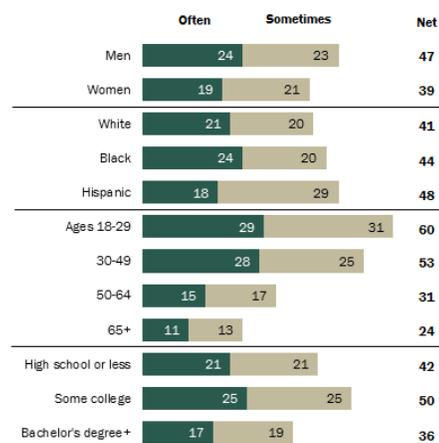
Though esports has been around for decades as a fairly niche activity, this has changed significantly in the last five years. Audiences for esports have grown into the millions worldwide and people are playing competitive titles from the amateur to the professional level. Three major factors play a significant role in its growth: 1) the overall shift to gaming as a mainstream leisure activity, 2) the rise of live streaming, and 3) significant investment, including from sports leaders and organizations, into esports.

Gaming as mainstream leisure activity

Games are no longer a niche activity, nor just the domain of young boys. As games have come to be accessible on devices like

mobile phones, portable handheld systems, and consoles (historically more affordable than a personal computer), and as newer genres catering to shorter bursts of play have become popular, the mainstreaming of gaming has only grown. Significant numbers of adults now report playing games and they are doing so across the life cycle. College-aged adults do so at an even higher rate.

% of adults saying they often/sometimes play video games on a computer, TV, game console, or portable device like a cellphone



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals due to rounding. White and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 13-27 and April 4-18, 2017.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

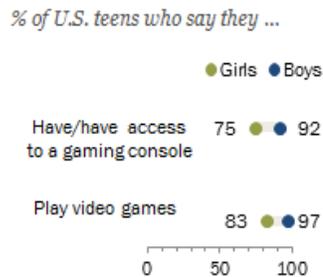
Figure 1. Stats on % of adults playing games “often” or “sometimes,” Pew Research, 2017.³

Of particular note for the purposes of this report are the growing numbers of girls and women playing games. Though they have long played games, they can be an invisible player base, both to themselves and others. Before the recent boom in gaming across broad demographics, girls and women who played often hid their gaming to avoid stigma or relied on legitimacy and access given by boyfriends and family members who shared or passed down devices, such as consoles or PCs, and games themselves.⁴ As gaming has become an acceptable leisure activity and as access to a variety of devices that games can be played on has become

more equitably distributed, this has begun to change.⁵

Amongst teens, a majority of both boys and girls now have access to gaming devices and report playing video games.

Most teen boys and girls play video games

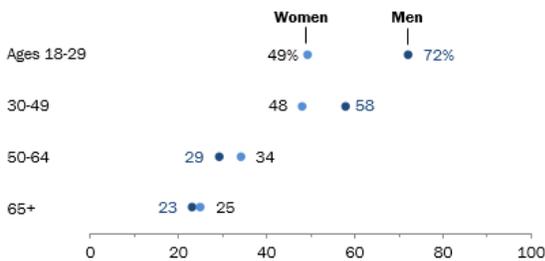


Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 10, 2018.
 "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018"
 PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. Teenagers and gaming, Pew Research, 2018.⁶

The presence of gaming in people’s lives is not constrained to teenagers however. A growing number of adult women now also regularly play, across a variety of devices.

% of U.S. adults who say they often/sometimes play video games on a computer, TV, game console, or portable device like a cellphone



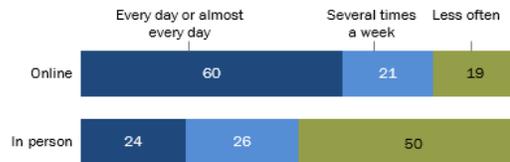
Source: Surveys conducted March 13-27 and April 4-18, 2017.
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Figure 3. Women and game playing, Pew Research, 2017.⁷

While there remain important gaps in participation rates between men and women (addressed in more detail in what follows), it is crucial to understand the baseline empirical reality that girls and women do play games and at rates that warrant serious consideration.

It is also vital to note that gaming is now significantly tied up with online experiences. This doesn’t just mean that people play games with strangers online (which they do), but that very often their offline social relationships—friends, family, even dorm mates—are facilitated and maintained through online platforms.

% of U.S. teens who say they get together with friends online or in person (outside of school or school-related activities) ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
 Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 10, 2018.
 "Teens' Social Media Habits and Experiences"
 PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4. Friendship and online use, Pew Research, 2018.⁸

In addition to platforms like Instagram or Twitter, the ability to play games together via the internet is an increasingly important part of social life. For many young people especially, online experiences are seen as a normal and positive part of life.⁹

Rise of game live streaming

The growth in people playing games has been further bolstered through sites like YouTube and Twitch which also allow players to spectate games, extending their fandom and often helping them learn tips and tricks.¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the

ability to broadcast gaming like this has amplified esports. While it used to be a lot of work to be a fan, now being able to watch your favorite games, teams, and players 24/7 by simply hopping online has grown the audience, and interest in, competitive gaming. The widespread growth of these new forms of media broadcasting dovetails powerfully with the fact that college students regularly play games. The result has been an explosion of collegiate esports at both the amateur and varsity levels.

Increased investment, including from traditional sports outlets

While esports has historically come from community-based outlets and grassroots organizing, the last five years has seen significant monetary and organizational investment in esports from a variety of sources. In addition to venture capitalists, industry sponsors, and advertisers, a number of traditional athletic organizations and individual leaders, have started backing professional esports teams.

Current and former professional athletes like Rick Fox, Stephen Curry, Michael Jordan, and Odell Beckham Jr., as well as organizations like the 49ers, Steelers, and Patriots (to name just a few) have either invested into or started esports teams. The NBA has created an entire league around the NBA2K title and boasts 21 teams, including the Philadelphia 76ers, Celtics Crossover Gaming and Lakers Gaming. Team owners like Jeff Vinik, Peter Guber, and Ted Leonsis have formed an esports investment company. There are now over 50 professional U.S. sports organizations that have brought an esports team under their banner.¹¹ Within the collegiate space, the Big Ten Network (working with ESL and

Riot) have run a league complete with scholarships.¹² The Peach Belt conducted their own collegiate championship conference, focused on the game *League of Legends*. Finally, broadcasters such as ESPN are now not only actively covering esports, but themselves building out new college championship series in conjunction with longtime collegiate league operator, Tespa.¹³

One upshot of this interest and investment has not just been growth but an overall sense of legitimacy coming to competitive gaming. While esports has been around for decades, it has often been a niche activity. With big name attention, more and more people sit up and take notice. This legitimizing effect trickles down. Students not only find their interests being met with approval, the attention of “serious” athletes and organizations often provides them a foothold for explaining their passion to family and friends. It’s one thing to say you love esports, it’s another if you can tell your parents that big name traditional sports teams (and increasingly schools) are recruiting players like yourself.

These three vectors—the growth of games, the rise of live streaming, and increased investment—have together prompted tremendous growth not only in esports broadly, but its traction on university campuses and in the collegiate experience overall.

The Sportiness of Competitive Computer Gaming

While these data points may prove broadly interesting, one issue often hinders those with an interest in sports from fully taking to heart the empirical realities of gaming’s impact on society—are esports actually

sports? As anyone who has followed the history of sports knows, what gets designated a sport is not a simple objective matter and is usually rife with debate. It's also the case that what gets institutionally recognized as such changes over time. Instead one might consider the issue from a slightly different angle: Is there a meaningful sense of sportiness and embodied engagement experienced by the participant?

There is now nearly a decade of academic research on esports (and several decades of scholarship on computer gaming writ large) which has clearly identified meaningful physical engagement in playing computer games, particular at the highest levels. Esports research has traced out the forms of embodied action—from eye/hand coordination to the body being enacted and “on point” in competitions—that are ubiquitous amongst esports players.¹⁴ Similarly documented is the embodied work of high level play, requiring a mastery of fine motor skills carried out in physical settings which, over the course of a competition, can leave players exhausted.¹⁵ Rather than thinking about the most extreme forms of sporting physicality (for example swimming, basketball, soccer, etc.) we might better understand high level competitive play in games as akin to sports like archery, bowling, curling, dressage, golf, and marksmanship.

Making this connection helps us begin to situate how the technological aspects of computer gaming should not derail our attempts to understand how it can also be sporting activity. Many sports have athletic performance that either directly rely on technologies and materials other than the human body to make them possible (for example, skiing, tennis, baseball, cycling) or

are augmented or altered by equipment (swimsuits and running shoes, for example). Competitive training also increasingly relies on technology and computation to assist athletes in evaluation and workout regimens.

Computer games, though they make this connection perhaps most visible, are not unique for the ways they are built on human action in concert with technologies or other materialities. Competitive computer gaming is simply the latest in a long historical trajectory of new embodied endeavors that, when formalized in particular ways, become a sport. Seeing esports an un-athletic, or not rooted in the body, is a fundamental misunderstanding of this new form of play and games. The stakes are high for not fully acknowledging the embodied nature of gaming. Such an approach can lead institutions that could be posed to meaningfully help address critical questions within esports—indeed *should* help—to ignore real challenges that need to be tackled.

Finally, it is worth noting that team-based competitive games require players to engage in organized practices that are identical to teamwork in traditional sports. Communication, strategic coordination, mediation, leadership, and sportsmanship are some of the important skillsets exercised by esports players trying to help their team succeed. The social context of competitive computer gaming is deeply resonate with traditional team-based sports.

Violence and Visual Representation in Games

Beyond questions about sport, for some computer gaming carries worrying concerns

about the nature of violence in games and the visual representations players encounter. Given issues around violence, including gun violence, on U.S. campuses, this is understandable. But it is important that policies be critically reflective and informed by data. Just as some traditional sports have historic roots in military combat training or are centered around direct intense contact between the bodies of competitors while others involve indirect competition, there is similar variance across game titles in their relation to combat and weaponry. While most esports titles are focused on direct competition, their visuals can vary. Some games will have realistic guns in them (*CounterStrike*), others will have more fantasy-based visualizations (*League of Legends*, *Overwatch*, *Starcraft*). Still others will be more abstract and focus simply on scoring goals (*Rocket League*).

Beyond the issue of how violence is represented in the game is the question of whether or not games cause violence. Far too often sloppy research and ill-informed methodologies have promoted a simplistic causal story, claiming evidence of a link between gaming and aggression. Yet review articles and meta-analyses continue to present divided summaries and reach no definitive conclusions.¹⁶ Dr. Christopher John Ferguson's meta analysis of the literature has in fact shown that, correcting for publication bias, "studies of video game violence provided no support for the hypothesis that violent video game playing is associated with higher aggression."¹⁷

Researchers such as Dr. Dmitri Williams, a communications scholar whose work is focused on gaming, have astutely challenged simplistic research designs and poor theoretical models. His groundbreaking 2005 longitudinal study demonstrated no

strong effects between gaming and aggression and, most importantly, offered nuanced findings that call researchers to account for the differences in gaming content and play contexts. Similar continued work that offers careful study design and pays attention to the specificities of gaming has shown that "violent content in video games had no discernible impact on behavioral or mood outcomes at all, contrary to our hypotheses."¹⁸

Even if there is no scientific correlation between violence, aggression, and gaming, should we be concerned with the fact that people are engaged in forms of combat and battle in games? Again, analogies are helpful. It's important to understand that, as with sports that are built around direct contact, the pleasure involved is not tied an experience of violence but instead focused around the skills involved to take down an opponent, the precise timings and movements required, the skill of playing well in a tough situation, and the adrenaline rush involved with fierce competition. All of these will certainly be resonant to competitive athletes. As we gain embodied competency over our avatars or game characters, we come to experience a satisfaction reminiscent of what is felt when we master a sport or embodied activities in corporeal space. The joy of game combat is then a product of the more elaborate and valuable activity of skilled embodiment, not unlike in traditional athletics. In-game fights are as much an opportunity to demonstrate the qualities of game mastery as anything.

What about the look of game characters, also at times called avatars? In our conversations with people thinking about D&I in esports yet unfamiliar with gaming it is common to hear concerns about the look of game characters, particularly around

sexualization. Players themselves have long addressed this as the “chainmail bikini” issue; i.e. your character is a powerful woman in the game but the designers have decided you have to run around in an outfit totally ill-suited for your role. It is an important one but also warrants more explanation and nuance to understand the state of research on the subject.

Over the last couple of decades feminist and critical game studies scholars have done important work to tackle when and how representation matters in games, both at the personal level to a player and socio-culturally (politically). For example, the look of avatars in multiplayer role playing environments (large scale games like *World of Warcraft* based in an environment in which you construct a character and interact in real-time with other players) can have profound implications for the social experiences of women, regularly affecting how other players in the world will treat you. Women in those spaces often talk about “bracketing” an engagement with their character representation (setting it off to the side of their experience) so they can continue enjoying the game. Yet is also important to recognize that other women relish the juxtaposition of power and sexuality that can come from game characters. Rather than seeing this as simply about objectification, the linking of the two modalities can be felt as empowering to some. This pleasure can be particularly powerful when it is not tied to a multiplayer environment where your character is subject to remarks or harassing behavior from others.¹⁹

More recent research has focused on paying attention to how people of color and LGBTQ people are represented in games. Notable in this space is the research of Dr.

Kishonna Gray, Dr. Bonnie Ruberg, and Dr. Adrienne Shaw whose work takes a deeply intersectional approach to the issue.²⁰ Each show the complex ways under represented players navigate game imagery and the effect on their play experiences. Most recently, other scholars have started to point out how infrequently disability appears in games and exploring one of the few titles, *Overwatch*, that does offer some representation of differently abled bodies.²¹

In the context of esports, many expert players, including women, have remarked that the visual aspects of games become less salient over the course of a high level competitive career where game skill, focused engagement with the opposition, and more mechanical elements of play come in. However the tandem rise of live streaming makes it is reasonable to give careful consideration to the look of characters. With the growth of esports as a spectator experience, the issue of representation takes on broader stakes.

Ultimately it’s critical to realize that different titles will handle representation differently and that the look of a game avatar can “work” in a variety of ways. Some titles provide diverse characters that don’t fall into the “chainmail bikini” trap (*Overwatch* is a notable competitive title on this count) while others tend toward hyper sexualization or racial stereotyping. Some titles avoid the issue entirely and the player’s character is not human (as in *Rocket League* where you are a car). Evaluating specific titles, rather than making a wholesale judgement about representation in games writ large, is key.

State of Collegiate Esports and Women's Participation

Collegiate esports has grown tremendously in the last several years. Michael Sherman, head of collegiate at Riot Games, noted that “Ninety percent of power five schools are involved for 2018, including all of the SEC, Big Ten and Pac-12.”²² The widespread uptake across all kinds of colleges and universities has only grown since then. Unlike traditional athletics which might be easy to “locate” on a campus, collegiate esports currently live in a variety of settings. At times you’ll find competitive gaming—both amateur and quasi-professional—within student-run gaming clubs. These may be officially recognized as a club (complete with members signing off on yearly anti-hazing and non-discrimination policies) or informally organized around a dorm or living community. Over the last handful of years more schools are formally organizing esports initiatives via an athletic department or office of campus life. Faculty and administrator involvement can also vary widely, from having a meaningful mentorship role with student leaders to simply being a figurehead listed on a form. A third increasingly important organizational node is the role game design programs and STEM-focused departments may play in “hosting” gaming and esports initiatives.

Women have been central to collegiate esports since its beginning. We know, through informal feedback, that women hold a significant percentage of leadership roles in Tespa and have been at the helm of founding and building esports and gaming clubs on campuses. The original Princeton club mentioned at the beginning of this report was founded by a student, Mona Zhang, who also launched the Collegiate

Star League, a major tournament organizer for universities that continues to play an important role in college esports. Others were not only crucial in building the early collegiate space but then moved into professional esports. For example, Christina Kelly, who was central in developing Harvard esports (circa 2009) then went on to work with the Collegiate Star League, ESPN, and the *Overwatch* League. Angie Klingsieck who founded the Crimson Gaming club at the University of Utah in 2014 (which boasted hundreds of members), went on to work with Tespa (a major collegiate esports organization) and the NBA, managing one of their first esports teams.

Many of the women involved in organizing esports at their universities have gone on to tremendous professional success after graduating. They can be found working in national league organizing such as through the Collegiate Star League and Tespa, at technology and gaming companies such as Discord, Riot, Blizzard, Unity3D, iBuyPower, Corsair, HyperX, and Twitch, and with professional esports teams like TSM, Dignitas, Utah Jazz, or 100 Thieves, to name just a few.

Despite their prominence at the leadership and organizational levels of esports and gaming in college spaces, women’s participation as either club members or elite players is not proportional to the rates we know they are gaming at. The gap is a clue that things are amiss. While social acceptance around the role of organizer has offered them leadership opportunities in esports, at the same time they continue to face serious barriers to entry and retention as players.²³ While serving in leadership is valuable and important, it’s critical women are able to fully participate at all levels of

activity, from intramural to varsity.

The organizational settings noted above bring with them implications for diversity and inclusion issues. For example, given the low numbers of women and people of color in STEM-fields, having the central “home” for an esports program be in the computer science or engineering department may, unintentionally, carry with it barriers to entry for a broader student population.

It’s also the case that when athletic departments “pick up” esports they may not realize the rates at which women play games and under-attend to them when constructing esports programs. Those not familiar with gaming, and associated research around it, may not understand that the platform for the game—personal computer, mobile phone, or console, for example—can have an impact on access. Research shows, for example, that personal computer ownership remains correlated to socio-economic status and thus centering resources on a title like *League of Legends* which is played only on a PC may have unintended participation consequences.²⁴ It is also critical to remember that while women play games at growing rates, they may have less experience with esports (as a formalized competitive scene).²⁵

Opportunities and Challenges

While the widespread growth in gaming and esports has extended into the college environment, the current state of collegiate esports is a motley mix of models. It lacks uniformity and is often without high-level leadership and governance.

Gaming is happening all across campuses in many different forms. Students are regularly playing with each other in dorms, residential communities, off-campus, and throughout their daily lives. Some campuses now host student-run gaming clubs to help facilitate and integrate their interests into their formal academic experience. Others have started programs—sometimes in athletic departments, sometimes through student-life offices, sometimes simply championed by a single department—to meet student interest. Some of these programs field varsity-level teams for competitions, complete with scholarships, while others assist students in intra- and inter-mural or club matches.

While a range of approaches to handle esports is key given the variety of campus cultures, infrastructures, and student populations that exist, there are critical issues that warrant broader consideration that are not being attended to due to a lack of leadership and coherent structure across institutions. These developments pose important challenges that universities must be positioned to address.

Five phenomena challenge the educational and student-life missions on campuses:

Non-university actors

Game companies and more predatory third party organizations are largely leading how esports is developing on campuses. This includes companies focused on selling back to students their own gameplay data to help improve their performance, as well as paid recruiting services.

Commercial models

In the absence of other models or guidance, commercialism and professionalization have become powerful waypoints for much of collegiate esports; values-led and amateur models risk being dwarfed and the quality of student life is a minor consideration at best.

Barriers to equity

While women are playing games at increasing rates and clearly signal a desire to do so, significant barriers to equitable participation—from material conditions to harassment—remain. Though women have historically played a central role in running esports on campuses, their participation as players themselves has been under attended to.

Over-representation of PC gaming

Games that currently have the most institutional take-up are primarily focused around personal computers. Yet the data is clear that access to PC's is not evenly distributed and is strongly influenced by economic factors and other material conditions, causing inequitable access.²⁶

Limited scope of diversity

While there is a growing interest in addressing gender diversity and inclusion in esports, little to no attention is being given to other salient domains like race, sexuality, and disability. Basic issues of access, as well as harassment and discrimination, within these domains pose serious issues to full participation.

Students deserve better

Students deserve equitable and safe environments for all genders, sexualities, races, and ethnicities. They deserve access that is not constrained by socio-economic factors. They deserve playing fields—even digital ones—that attend to a range of physical abilities. The potential and power of collegiate esports is that it can do better than what we have now. It can provide the

ground for broader inclusion and participation. It can move beyond narrow models that are primarily attuned to commercial success.

Students want better

Students themselves recognize the positive aspects of gaming and its potential; they have been working themselves for at least a

decade trying to provide meaningful structures for their fellow students, often without mentorship or assistance from faculty or administrators (indeed sometimes in the face of willful neglect). The tremendous grassroots organizing by students to form their own clubs and to try and educate their campus faculty and administrators all point to their wanting sustainable structures. We also know that the demographic cohort now dubbed “Gen Z” (born 1997-present, ages 22 and under in 2019) report experiences and attitudes that put diversity issues front and center for those working on campuses.²⁷

Universities must respond

Rather than see collegiate esports as a problem-filled space to be avoided for as long as possible, it is a dynamic arena students are already actively engaged in and it infuses campuses. It represents a space of tremendous possibility for educators, administrators, and anyone invested in inclusive access to sporting environments. Student attitudes are primed for structures and interventions that speak to the values embodied in laws like Title IX. In the absence of mentorship and guidance, students themselves have done a tremendous amount of organizational heavy lifting already. But they are now at their limit and are in dire need of institutional engagement, for faculty and administrators to step in and help.

Collegiate esports program are already a reality and they will, sooner rather than later, be recognized as governed by Title IX structures. Instead of playing a game of catch-up, universities would be well served to rise to the challenge, helping build inclusive values-based and mission-focused

programs that are in sync with the vital work that happens on campuses to educate and mentor students both in and out of the classroom.

Barriers to Entry and Retention

Much like traditional sports, women regularly report that their family’s attitude was decisive in shaping their involvement in gaming. Parents attitudes and support toward their daughters playing games can have a profound impact on not only their access, but feelings about what counts as gender appropriate leisure activities. In the same way women have faced stigma for being interested in athletics, or particular sports (such as contact ones), girls and young women can face differential access in their own homes. Some parents make an active effort to ensure equal access to gaming, irrespective of genre (for example strategy versus narrative games) for both their sons and daughters and do not convey gendered notions about games being only “for boys.” For other girls, gaming is permitted but not actively facilitated; having a brother, cousin, or father who enjoyed gaming—and who was more likely to own games—was crucial in their ability to access this form of play. Other girls encounter ridicule or stigma when it comes to computer gaming, either around them playing games at all or particular titles that get coded as more masculine.

For those that have had supportive home environments for their gaming and competitive interests, they often don’t encounter real barriers until their play moves into public spaces, be it online or offline. As one woman we spoke with put it, “I didn’t know gaming was a ‘guy thing’ until way later.”

Barriers can include:

Material access

While broad access to gaming equipment has gotten much better over the years, there can remain important barriers to having access to the basic equipment required to play. This can range from a personal computer, game console, or even reliable internet (required for many multiplayer games). Access to not just games, but a diversity of genres (one method play gets gender-segregated), is also a critical.

Lack of representation

Role models for girls and women are still hard to find in esports, and even more so for women of color. Even with growth in the numbers of girls and women playing competitive games at home, there is a lack of visibility and support around those participants who are pushing through to elite levels of play or demonstrating expert knowledge as casters and analysts in tournament broadcasts. Without those role models being seen in competitive spaces, too few girls and women are inspired or motivated to enter competition themselves.

Social isolation and lack of networks

Some girls and women still report feeling isolated in terms of knowing others they can game with, or can express competitive ambitions to. Yet we know being able to play with others, including those at a slightly higher skill level than you, is crucial to improve. Too often women struggle to find sustained play and practice groups that offer meaningful support and safe gaming environments.

Discrimination

This can including teams having rules (formal or unwritten) about grouping with girls or women based on fears of “drama” or men simply not wanting to scrimmage with them for fear of losing to a woman and imagined ensuing ridicule.²⁸ Discrimination can also led to girls and women players to have to “jump through” more hoops than the men playing. For example, some still believe women simply can’t be as good at certain games and when a woman is excelling online, her identity as a woman will be called into question, often with ensuing harassment. These challenges can be deeply hurtful and take tremendous energy to fight. For women on color, trans women, and queer women, the attacks and costs can be even more vicious. High profile women regularly simply decide to leave gaming or esports (at least in any public capacity) given the toll such attacks take.

Harassment and sexism

This often involves direct public attacks on one’s identity, interests, sexuality, race, or physical appearance. As one woman put it, “Being insulted is a regular part of the job.” Many esports competitors we’ve spoken with over the years talk frankly about of the ongoing gauntlet of abuse and harassment they face, especially as public figures. Because so much gaming happens online (from games themselves to broadcasting platforms to Twitter), harassment regularly occurs by perpetrators who are using pseudonyms. The publicity that comes from tournament broadcasts

often guarantees an uptick in harassment. In addition to tournaments, pro players may regularly spend multiple hours per day behind the camera broadcasting their play online to thousands of viewers, additionally exposing them to ongoing abuse.

While game companies regularly have reporting mechanisms for such infractions, their effectiveness is woefully inadequate. And far too many organizations do not moderate their ancillary spaces, like broadcast channels or forums, conveying the message that *all* speech (including hate speech or incitements to harassment) is allowed. Game companies (much like Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are devoting insufficient resources to ensure safe environments free of harassment. At its most extreme, this targeting can involve “doxxing” (publicly releasing information about a person’s home address, phone number, etc.) or “swatting” whereby a target’s local police department is called with a false hostage or threat report at the person’s address, resulting in instances of police entering streamers’ homes looking for armed persons.

It is critical to note this constant culture of harassment and sexism has tremendous impact. Participants speak of the toll it takes on their professional lives. Both offline and online harassment have caused women in esports to not respond out of fear for professional retaliation or even their personal safety. It has also resulted in some withdrawing or leaving the sport due to the wear and tear of constant harassment. While women players express a tremendous amount of resiliency, it is clear that they regularly have to navigate very difficult terrain.

Unfortunately these barriers are all too common. It is worth thinking about each of these examples in light of how familiar they are historically to the way women have been challenged when trying to enter traditional athletics. From baseline access or lack of equipment and athletic fields to attacks on one’s gender identity and sexuality or assumptions about what kinds of sports are suitable for girls and women, the story is all too familiar. Women who enjoy games—especially via the competitive focus of esports—face similar barriers to the ones we find in traditional athletics.

Title IX implications

Too often gaming issues are seen as sitting offside of core equity issues on our campuses. This is wrong. Title IX matters for U.S. Collegiate esports. The 1972 law

“prohibit[ing] discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity” has had a profound impact on all aspects of life on campuses, from academics to student housing to athletics.²⁹ Dr. Victoria Jackson has noted that “The Department of Education’s Title IX Regulations require that schools effectively accommodate the ‘interests and abilities’ of girls and women. The regulations and policy interpretations have defined this as providing equal access to equipment, facilities, supplies, and financial aid, if provided.”³⁰

As is hopefully apparent at this point, girls and women have clear interests and abilities in gaming and esports that require being attended to. We can see how analogizing from traditional sports to esports can be helpful. Access to physical playing fields and equipment might be thought about in

light of making sure women have access to both physical campus gaming clubs and equipment to play on, as well as non-harassing online environments.³¹

Collegiate esports can no longer push off its accountabilities to women and to Title IX. Policies and practices need to be put in place to attend to its requirements and values. The responsibilities that come with Title IX impacts student gaming and in turn, esports. Athletics directors, student life administrators, and faculty must be attentive to the women gamers on their campuses in light of this legislation. While the future of collegiate esports is still unfolding, smart leadership will proactively attend to Title IX rather than waiting for potential future federal investigation and litigation. Even better, universities can proactively embrace the values guiding the legislation and start working now to make sure esports on campuses are in alignment.

Basic Guidelines

Since its founding in 2015 AnyKey has worked to both research and provide recommendations on diversity and inclusion in esports. The following are some baseline suggestions for collegiate environments. Given the heterogeneity of campuses, different contexts will require unique mixes and may need additional programs. But at the most fundamental level, we recommend the following be considered on all campuses.

For more procedural details on the following, including specific policy recommendations or technological tools to help facilitate diversity and inclusion in esports, please see our two key white papers on gender inclusion and moderation practices provided at the end of this report as appendices.

Checklist recommendations:

1. Perform a diversity audit and create a plan for inclusion

We encourage organizations to undertake a diversity audit to clearly assess not simply where they stand in raw participation numbers, but how their materials, language, policies, and community norms are working when it comes to the diversity of their organization.

It's critical to realize, however, that diversity alone is not enough. Inclusion—the second critical component—is about making sure that once involved, people are meaningful members that have real impact. An honest organizational assessment will also include accounting for those who may have started on a team, come to a club event, attended a scrimmage, but no longer participate. From here organizations can, and should, formulate a esports gender equity plan (one we'd suggest is engaged with the suggestions offered throughout this report).

2. Take preventative approaches before punitive ones

As an underlying principle we strongly recommend all initiatives centered on diversity and inclusion not just be focused on identifying, eradicating, and punishing bad behavior but also clearly signal positive values and model desired practices. While it is crucial to have in place mechanisms to address things like harassment or discrimination, it is just as important for organizations, leagues, teams, coaches, and other staff to affirmatively signal, and model, positive values.

3. Provide a code of conduct and enforce it

Codes of conduct (CoC) are a guideline of values and behaviors that you expect from all students and staff. They signal what is expected, prohibited, and valued by an organization. They help frame who is welcome and what civil participation should look like. Keep in mind that the absence of a Code of Conduct often alerts people that a space may not be safe for them. Two key elements should be in place: 1) a visible Code of Conduct and 2) a mechanism for reporting and enforcement.

AnyKey has developed a CoC which it has made freely available for organizations to utilize/modify (see Appendix). The focus is on a positive statement of values (versus simply listing what isn't allowed). It also takes into account the networked nature of esports.

Once a CoC is in place, make sure there is a clear mechanism for education and enforcement. At the minimum make sure all participants—either online or off—see the code and agree to it. Have trained people on hand (scaling up the numbers to accommodate gatherings) who are known to the entire staff as the point people for handling issues that may arise. Establish clear processes for students to give feedback on their program experiences and report problems or bad behavior. The current lack of uniformity or standardization across collegiate esports can cause confusion among students about where to turn if problems arise. Creating a clear path for how to safely report misconduct not only answers the question of what to do, it can help vulnerable persons in the space feel more confident that their concerns will be heard and fairly handled. Setting up a process for regular feedback also invites under represented group members to raise concerns and make constructive suggestions, while allowing organizers to track improvement.

4. Develop programs for diverse levels and forms of participation

While it may be compelling to think first and foremost about supporting varsity level (with scholarship) esports, we strongly encourage programs to consider participation broadly across a range of skill levels, forms, and settings. Given the low representation of women at the uppermost level of esports (and indeed in the professional player ranks), it is clear more needs to be done to support and cultivate talent earlier. This means making sure esports has a place at the club, intra/intermural, and varsity levels. Models that involve not only athletics but also student life offices who could lend a hand in reaching across student groups, dorms, and other organizations can be helpful. Concrete ideas for broad participation support include:

Welcome console and mobile gamers

Too often gaming and esports clubs focus solely on PC titles (part of a longstanding issue in esports that often stigmatizes play on other platforms). This can have the unintended consequence of limiting the range of people inclined to turn up to events or compete. Make sure the space includes console games which often draws in a more diverse audience. Similarly, don't stigmatize mobile play. Look for opportunities to foster competition around titles that might have a broader player base.

Organize exploratory and newbie-friendly events

Much like early organizers offered "play days" to introduce women to various sports, organize low stakes play events that allow people to learn about a game and try out playing in a supportive, low risk environment. The focus should be around fun and teaching "newbies" (new players) the basics or helping group up people of similar skill levels to skirmish.

Facilitate partnerships between on-campus clubs

Foster ongoing collaboration between the campus esports teams/gaming clubs and underrepresented student clubs (for example, a campus women's center, LGBTQ club, or Black student union) that do not have a gaming focus but will certainly have people who play games in them. Partnering up for special events that bring people into the gaming space, give them access to equipment, and provide opportunities to build bridges can be useful in both practically and symbolically signaling that the gaming space is for all.

Offer gaming bootcamps

Short, intensive training "bootcamps" can allow aspirational players a chance to really focus on improving their play. Tie into varsity programs to allow opportunities to skirmish with those better than them and receive some coaching. These opportunities do not equitably distribute naturally but we know they can be a powerful boost for confidence, skill, and social networks.

Host tournament or event watch parties.

Support viewing parties where enthusiasts can get together to spectate live esports tournaments and gaming events. In esports there is currently a strong correlation between playing a game and being a fan/viewer; watch parties allow an organization to tap into that energy in a low stakes environment that can then expand out into creating welcoming play spaces.

5. Encourage co-ed play

Support co-ed play not only at the varsity level but in low stakes environments. Many students already experience co-ed gaming experiences in their living environments so centering that as a practice in more formal settings can offer an important transition to public gaming for women. Face to face engagement is also a powerful lever to disrupt stereotypes for those who may not get regular engagement with those unlike them in a gaming situation. It can also allow for inviting new people into the space, strengthen and support participation for all members, and

provide a rich non-academic home for students. Co-ed intramural leagues in traditional sports offer constructive models for considering how to develop co-ed participation in collegiate esports. This kind of explicit framing of co-ed participation invites women into the space while simultaneously encouraging participating men to make their leagues and teams welcoming.

6. Establish networks of support

Women gamers often don't know where or how to find other women gamers. This can lead to a defeating sense of isolation both in gaming communities and industry environments. Over the years of our work with women in esports we've heard time and time again finding other women that share in their passion for gaming and competition was key to their growth and that there is a power in seeing women support each other. A consistent pattern has been the positive impact of having both role models and a support network. Women who have thrived in esports regularly talk about the important role other women played in not only bringing them into the scene, but keeping them there. Support networks are a key factor in helping women navigate the challenges they currently face. Having someone who is committed to your success is key. This means someone who can give you honest but supportive feedback, who can cheer you on, who can help you when you face particularly challenging moments. Support networks operate as powerful sites of inspiration for the women we've worked with over the years, who simultaneously support each other as peers but also look up to one another.

7. Use inclusive language and establish non-discriminatory policies

We strongly advocate for a policy of “you are who you say you are” when it comes to gender identity. Anything that varies from this must bear a significant policy burden and be carefully and cautiously argued. Resist letting a fear of people abusing the policy drive you to make decisions that set up unreasonable barriers to entry and unfairly shift the burden to women rather than those undermining the integrity of the policy. Events should take up the most expansive set of practices possible given any actual, and not just imagined, formal jurisdictional constraints. This also includes being attuned to anti-discrimination laws or policies that may actually *prohibit* making distinctions between cis and trans participation. Avoid “gender investigation” as much as possible. Much like with a Code of Conduct, we suggest designating a point person on the local organizing team to be educated on these issues so they can sensitively respond to cases that require additional nuance or care.

Make sure your language signals inclusive values. Using “woman” rather than “female” and offering adaptive pronoun use is important. Be inclusive to all women, both those who gender identify with the biological sex they were assigned at birth (“cis”) and those who do not (“trans”). In most instances simply saying “women” is sufficient, but if you need to specify further, phrases like “all women, cis and trans” is recommended.

8. Offer meaningful diverse representation in media broadcasts

We encourage organizers to make sure visual materials reflect diverse participation. Saying you have a club or program open to all but only having pictures of men sends a counter message. Pay

similar attention to having diverse racial representation. Additionally, think about the representation present in any broadcasts and video content. Make sure you not only have women “on camera” but also that they aren’t pigeonholed into non-expert roles. For example, many esports broadcasts have play-by-play game casters, post-game analysts, and hosts who introduce and interview. Casters and analysts are more often considered game experts by the audience. Women should be represented in the game expert roles, not only the host role.

9. Formulate holistic selection criteria for varsity teams

While it can be all too easy in computer gaming to distill down to metrics and analytics that the game makes clearly visible, we strongly recommend a more holistic approach when identifying top talent for selective teams or scholarships. Simplistic quantitative markers of skill or achievement can unfortunately dwarf the broader range of competencies that make a good competitor and are needed for a successful team. Being able to communicate, work well with others, accommodate to the needs of the group, and have an attitude that fosters participation amongst players that may not be like you, should be given serious weight when considering team makeup and scholarships.

10. Invest in moderation infrastructure

It is critical to understand the role broadcasting through online live streaming plays in the esports (and gaming) space. Many students and teams aspire to share their performances, either in practice settings or via competitions. Yet online platforms remain a place participants can encounter the ongoing gauntlet of abuse and harassment. This can range from the accompanying chat that happens on streaming sites to Twitter or various forums.

Perhaps one of the best ways of thinking about this again by analogy. Schools would certainly not allow disruptive and harassing spectators in their stadiums or stands, yet too often digital equivalents are left unregulated and unmoderated. It is incumbent on schools and other organizations to see their responsibility to providing safe spaces of participation as extending into these domains.

In the case of broadcasting sites like Twitch, there are a number of tools and practices that can be utilized. These range from moderation tools built into the platform itself to the use of third party “bots” (small pieces of software that help automate some processes) that all help set certain speech parameters for participants. Beyond this however is the important role of human moderators that work both behind the scenes positively shape the space, be it live chat or a discussion board. Schools should always be making sure they have moderation plans in place for their activities and any broadcast—casual or competition-focused—being run.

11. Provide formal training for bystanders and allies

In our work with women involved in esports there is a growing feeling that there is a necessary and critical role for male allies to address issues of discrimination and harassment, as well as any diversity efforts going forward. Though women we work with at times spoke of individual men

in their lives who had acted as behind-the-scenes support, the lack of high profile visible allies who would actively speak up, take action, and get involved in helping shift cultures of toxicity and harassment remains an issue. Educating and empowering male allies is a critical next step in change.

More sustained attention needs to be given to providing formal bystander and ally training throughout the collegiate esports space. Some institutions, like UC Irvine, have already begun his process for their esports program (via Green Dot training and REACH workshops) but this is not widespread. Care needs to be paid to addressing the specificities of allyship in online environments, where so many students spend their playing time.

12. Incentivize and reward good social leadership

Support motivated and inclusive student leaders and outstanding clubs with recognition. Encourage positive role models who lead by example and make sure organizational work addressing diversity and inclusion is celebrated and rewarded. Explicitly and symbolically tie good social leadership to club success and include diversity and inclusion metrics when assessing program growth and campus activity. Giving visibility and support to successfully inclusive and growing clubs also provides recognition and legitimacy to the leaders who may be from under-represented groups, such as women who over-index in collegiate esports leadership. Explicitly value and reward diversity and inclusion work in the same way successes like winning a championship would be celebrated.

Women's Tournaments

Perhaps one of the most important interventions to consider when it comes to gender equity issues in collegiate esports is the role of women-only tournaments. In professional esports, they have a long history dating back to at least 1997 with a *Quake* competition co-sponsored by its game developer, id Software. Women's tournaments have largely been organized around the game *Counter-Strike* and such competitions have often been run during other major tournaments. This remains the case with the tournament AnyKey partners with Intel on, the Women's Intel Challenge that happens every year at ESL's annual Intel Extreme Masters finals tournament. Thus far there have been no women-only college tournaments nor designated leagues,

though UC Irvine has held special esports training camps in the summer for girls.

Given the serious barriers to entry and retention women currently face in esports, gender segregated tournaments can be a powerful tool in supporting their participation. They offer competition opportunities that might not otherwise be available given current structural and cultural barriers or costs in terms of harassment. They can provide an aspirational path for players who want more competitive settings but also need stepping stones to moving into a co-ed space. They also offer terrific opportunities to highlight role models; as Billie Jean King said, "You have to see it to be it." Finally, they can provide a safe space of competition for trans women and non-binary players who face

even higher rates of harassment and discrimination.

If undertaken, they need to be well thought through and should only be one component to an overall equity strategy. Organizers should be aware of possible backlash and the targeting of participants and take steps to ensure safety and a good playing environment for all involved. Care should be given to making sure participants not feel they are second-class competitors nor that any potential “separate and unequal” status develops around the event. Finally, gender should be inclusively defined to include both cis and trans women.

If part of a larger equity plan and attending to the potential pitfalls, all-women tournaments can provide spaces where participants feel they’ll be less likely to encounter harassment, and that even if they do, there will be other women around them for solidarity. Being one of many can be a buffer against the feelings of isolation that often result from harassment. And as discussed above, finding a network of people with similar life experiences and interests can feel supportive and validating. Playing among other women can also reduce the feeling that every win or loss will be judged as representative of the gaming potential of all womankind. This is not an uncommon or unreasonable feeling. Being the one representative of a minority in a competition exaggerates competitive pressure and judgment.

It’s critical though to frame women’s tournaments as alternatives, not replacements. Segregation should not be the long-term strategy. Women’s tournaments are most supportive of players and communities when they are framed as alternative competitions rather than as

parallel to the main events. If the goal is to guide women into the premier tournaments, then it’s important to underscore how these all-women’s tournaments are stepping stones, not replacements for the main events.³²

Finally, there must be a focus on creating equitable events, not afterthoughts. The risk of setting up women’s tournaments as alternatives is that they can feel like an afterthought or low priority, which does a disservice to the skills and efforts of the participants. Women’s tournaments do not have to be identical in size and scale, but they must be run with the same rule sets and same standards for production quality as the main events.

Done well, and within a larger equity plan, women’s tournaments can offer current players a powerful, positive opportunity to compete in ways they might not otherwise be able to given current structural and cultural barriers.

Conclusion

Collegiate esports has been growing for well over a decade and we are now at a pivotal point where institutions can step up and help make sure the future of competitive gaming on campuses will be inclusive to a range of participants and driven by values-focused goals rather than being led by commercial interests. Collegiate esports are not just a media product to be handled by marketing teams but vibrant spaces of competition, community building, and personal growth that universities as a whole should be attending to.

There are a number of basic things campuses can be doing to make sure



diversity and inclusion are front and center to collegiate gaming going forward:

1. Perform a diversity audit and create a plan for inclusion.
2. Take preventative approaches before punitive ones.
3. Provide a code of conduct and enforce it.
4. Develop programs for diverse levels, and forms of, participation.
5. Encourage co-ed play.
6. Establish networks of support.
7. Use inclusive language and establish non-discriminatory policies.
8. Offer meaningful diverse representation in media broadcasts.
9. Formulate holistic selection criteria for varsity teams.
10. Invest in moderation infrastructure.
11. Provide formal training for bystanders and allies.
12. Incentivize and reward good social leadership.

Collegiate esports is here to stay. Gaming is integrated into student's lives and has become an important part of campus culture. Esports can be a positive space of personal expression and growth, as well as a powerful place for community building. If a school is following the recommendations provided here, and more generally guided by the spirit of them, they will be well positioned to address this tremendous opportunity in ways that align not only with Title IX, but broader values of diversity and inclusion.

About AnyKey

AnyKey is an advocacy group that supports diversity, inclusion, and equity in competitive gaming. We amplify, connect, and empower underrepresented players and their allies through research and strategic initiatives.

Through our programs we aim to increase representation, improve participation, and foster more positive community spaces in gaming for players of any kind. AnyKey is made possible through a partnership between ESL and Intel.

Learn more at www.anykey.org

Endnotes

¹ See http://www.wheels.org/spacewar/stone/rolling_stone.html.

² See <http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2018/04/e-sports-at-princeton>.

³ From <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/11/younger-men-play-video-games-but-so-do-a-diverse-group-of-other-americans/>.

⁴ See Nick Yee, “Maps of Digital Desires: Exploring the Topography of Gender and Play in Online Games,” in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, edited by Yasmin Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008 and Jen Jenson & Suzanne deCastell, “Her Own Boss: Gender and the Pursuit of Incompetent Play,” *DiGRA Conference Proceedings*, Vancouver, 2005.

⁵ It is important to note, however, that computer ownership is significantly tied to income levels (<https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>). This is a critical issue when thinking about inclusion and gaming, which will be discussed further below.

⁶ From <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>.

⁷ From <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/17/5-facts-about-americans-and-video-games/>.

⁸ From <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/11/28/teens-friendships-and-online-groups/>.

⁹ Girls, notably, report that online groups are especially helpful to them during difficult times. See <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/11/28/teens-friendships-and-online-groups/>.

¹⁰ Pew Research notes 85% of teens report using YouTube (<https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>).

¹¹ In Europe, significant investment is happening through professional football (soccer) clubs.

¹² See <https://esportsoobserver.com/riot-games-extends-big-ten-partnership-2019-offers-490k-scholarships/> and <https://esportsinsider.com/2019/02/esl-big-ten-network-league-of-legends/>.

¹³ See <https://tespa.org/news/22990044/collegiate-esports-championship-viewer-s-guide>.

¹⁴ See Emma Witkowski, “On the Digital Playing Field: How We “Do Sport” with Networked Computer Games”, *Games and Culture*, 7: 5, 2012.

¹⁵ See T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: Esports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012.

¹⁶ See Dmitri Williams and Marko Skoric, “Internet Fantasy Violence: A Test of Aggression in an Online Game,” *Communication Monographs*, 72: 2, 2005 for a look at early research and Ferguson et. al., “The (Not So) Evil Within? Agency in Video Game Choice and the Impact of Violent Content,” *Simulation and Gaming*, 48: 3, 2017 for a more recent summary.

¹⁷ See Christopher John Ferguson, “The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: A Meta-analytic Review of Positive and Negative Effects of Violent Video Games,” *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 78: 4, 2007.

¹⁸ See Ferguson et. al., “The (Not So) Evil Within? Agency in Video Game Choice and the Impact of Violent Content,” *Simulation and Gaming*, 48: 3, 2017. Interestingly this study notes, “Also to our surprise, female participants were as likely to select violent games as males and were no more stressed by such games. Thus, H3 was not supported. Although the effects were null, we find them to be important in contrasting with common gender stereotypes of female players as being less inclined toward action oriented violent games than males.”

¹⁹ See T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

²⁰ See Kishonna Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*, Routledge, 2014; Bonnie Ruberg, *Videogames Have Always Been Queer*, NY: NYU Press, 2019; Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

²¹ See <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/a-better-world/>.

²² See <https://esportsoobserver.com/riot-games-overhauls-college-esports/>.

²³ Very often of gendered nature of the role, and labor, is visible via language that gets used like “team

mother” or “den mother.”

²⁴ See <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/> for more on usage and platforms.

²⁵ We also want to highlight the serious limitations with surveying women about their interests in esports specifically at this historical moment. One could imagine how unhelpful it would have been to query women fifty years ago about their interest in soccer or athletics more generally. If you had done that survey, you would have likely come away with a judgment of that there was little interest and not pushed for any change. But that wouldn’t have gotten you to an understanding of how interest and participation develops, and how to look for potentials and plant seeds for growth.

²⁶ See, for example, https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/pi_2018-05-31_teenstech_0-04/

²⁷ See <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/11/28/teens-friendships-and-online-groups/> and <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

²⁸ While much of this happens informally, in 2018 one pro team in the *Overwatch* League, the Houston Outlaws, cited concerns about co-ed housing (team housing is not unusual in professional esports) as one of the reason they didn’t pick up top player Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon (who now plays with the Shanghai Dragons). See <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2018/01/no-overwatch-league-team-signed-the-games-most-notable-female-pro-to-their-roster/>.

²⁹ As Dr. Victoria Jackson, who participated in one of AnyKey’s early workshops, notes, “A club or intramural activity is an educational activity when it is sponsored or officially sanctioned by the educational institution. Therefore, the program must provide access for all students, including all students in protected categories covered by civil rights legislation (race, color, religion, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy, citizenship, familial status, disability status, veteran status). From AnyKey’s Diversity and Inclusion in Collegiate Esports Whitepaper, 2016. <http://www.anykey.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity-and-Inclusion-in-Collegiate-Esports.pdf>.

³⁰ From AnyKey white paper, Diversity and Inclusion in Collegiate Esports, November 2016. Available at <http://www.anykey.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity-and-Inclusion-in-Collegiate-Esports.pdf>.

³¹ In some ways this is an extension of the ways campuses have started to address the use of their networks. Some now have IT policies that include non-harassment rules, for example.

³² The NCAA’s Emerging Sports program could provide one model for how to implement an all-women’s collegiate esports league as a temporary strategy for growing the participation of women at the varsity esports level. There would be many detailed considerations to make as part of a transition from Emerging Sport to co-ed Championship Sport, but the ultimate goal of properly supported gender inclusion and integration, as well as care for the women competitors, should serve as the guiding principal.