

Diversity & Inclusion in Collegiate Esports Whitepaper

Background

AnyKey workshops are private day-long sessions of 10-12 stakeholders and are focused on action points that can be taken up in local contexts and organizations. The goals of each workshop are to identify key areas within the thematic framework and document/brainstorm a range of insights & interventions that can then be developed to address key critical areas. High value is placed on case histories, successful prior interventions, learning from failures, and empirical data. Interventions are not one size fits all but should be thought of as a range of things stakeholders can do within their specific contexts, organizations, and industry. Whitepapers are published to our website [<http://www.anykey.org/research/>] and, when possible, live-streamed panels are then used to distribute the findings of the event more broadly.

Introduction

As esports continues to grow and undergo professionalization, new domains of interest continue to open up. Over the last several years we have become particularly excited about collegiate esports as a space where real interest in diversity and inclusion is already happening and could be further amplified.

Formal esports programs, often with scholarship models akin to traditional sports, have arisen across a number of campuses. These can provide opportunities to consider structural requirements for gender equity, as well as offering opportunities for mentorship and multi-level skills training. Title IX, as well as broader campus commitments to equity, inclusion, and diversity, can provide new initiatives insights and tools to build positive value-driven programs from the ground up.

Outside of formal programs, campuses can harness the power of co-local play, often in student-led club settings. Being able to game with others face-to-face can extend critical opportunities to breakdown stereotypes, invite new people into the space, strengthen and support participation for all members, and provide a rich non-academic home for students. As young people play together in their dorms, living spaces, and campus gaming clubs we've seen that everyday experiences of gaming are often already situated around cross-gender, multi-racial, and LGBTQ communities. Very often campus settings are already involved in thinking about how to foster welcoming, inclusive spaces.

Universities offer powerful opportunities for esports to address diversity and inclusion (as understood in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, etc.). From formal structures and tools (Title IX, codes of conduct, institutional diversity commitments) to social engagement and cultural practices (welcoming spaces, competition in a fun setting, sharing your fandom with others), campuses offer tremendous possibilities for esports to grow and support diverse and inclusive participation. The following are a number of themes that arose during the workshop to address these opportunities.

Major themes

- Women have a long history of participation in collegiate esports
From the earliest days of collegiate esports, women have been actively involved in playing and helping organize the scene. The Collegiate Star League was, for example, founded by Princeton student and player Mona Zhang. Collegiate women currently run a sizable portion of TeSPA clubs. Rather than seeing women as a side audience to esports, the history of collegiate gaming tells us otherwise. Collegiate women make up an active part of the gaming population and are absolutely interested in esports, both as players and fans.
- Title IX matters for esports
Title IX, a law passed in 1972 to “prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity” has played a vital role in fostering gender equity on campuses and in sports. For example, the number of women participating in traditional collegiate sports has grown 600% in just the forty-three years since it’s passing. As esports comes to campuses, organizers must be mindful of the accountability they hold in light of this legislation. They can also take inspiration from possibilities that arise from thinking actively about diversity and inclusive in college spaces. See the appendix below for additional guidelines.
- Support a range of ways to participate
While more formal athletic esports programs and scholarships are a crucial part of the mix at the collegiate level, supporting a variety of ways to participate is valuable. The social aspects of campus clubs are hugely important, and this includes gaming/esports ones. “Fun” matches and low-risk “play days,” different skill-level engagements, viewing parties, group tournament attendance, try-out-a-new-game nights, even cosplay can all be ways to involve students – from newbie to expert – in esports. Support events and activities that bring students together not just for play, but interaction with each other.
- Student-led clubs can be powerful
Student energy and enthusiasm is a powerful activator on campuses. Campus cultures vary from location to location and students working on-the-ground are a tremendous resource. Very often these students are already committed to diverse and inclusive practices in a range of other domains (from dorms to other clubs). Recognize, and support, the unique context of the university and how students already navigate academics, sports, and leisure. Esports should be a part of the collegiate ecology and it will ebb and flow given the context of campus and academic life.
- Pro-active inclusion is critical
Move beyond thinking about just diversity quotas to having plans for building and supporting inclusion. All types of people play games and are interested in esports, how can your organization support that range? What goals can your organization set for the next year or two? How might you actively foster not only bringing in new faces, but making them feel welcome *and* letting them help shape what the club is as well? How are you branding and marketing your club, organization, or team? Are there other campus

clubs you could do joint events with to open up your doors to people you might not normally reach but who would be interested? Think about this beyond gender. How can your organization support people interested in gaming who may not have a laptop to bring to a club night? Who may not have the financial resources to attend events? Collegiate clubs should keep in mind, and be engaging, a diverse student population.

- Put structures in place to foster welcoming spaces

Just because it's about esports and competitive gaming doesn't mean students should have to be brave to participate. At a basic level, your organization should have a Code of Conduct and strategies in place for how to enforce it. Just as important is building a welcoming culture that can live from year to year as old students leave and new ones take over. This ranges from small gestures like greeting people or playing together face to face, to mentoring new officers and helping socialize new members. Keep in mind that college can be a powerful time when people are actively learning to engage with others not like them, where they can (and will) make mistakes yet learn from them. Leverage face to face engagement to build structures of welcoming, guidance, and support.

- Consider co-ed

While there remain good reasons to support women-only teams, there are many other models that operate particularly well within collegiate spaces. Varsity, intramural, and club sports – not to mention how gaming friends play with each other daily in mixed gender or diverse groups – highlight that co-ed spaces hold tremendous potential. Don't, however, simply require teams to put a single woman on them (which can leave the women vulnerable to backlash and targeting). Instead think about *meaningful* co-ed opportunities and harness some of the mixed-gender possibilities that *already* operate in daily gaming lives and amplify them in club activities.

- Support non-player career development

There are lots of ways to be involved in esports beyond just being a top competitor. Helping those who are doing organizational club work to see how their experience might translate into potential career paths is valuable. This is especially powerful when thinking about the women/people of color/LGBTQ doing tremendous behind-the-scenes work fostering collegiate esports. When wanted, let collegiate clubs be an accelerant, not just a sideline, to student's professional development. While becoming a pro-player can be one trajectory as collegiate esports gets formalized, there are many other valuable skills students learn as they organize club activities and these can be meaningfully pulled into their professional trajectory if desired.

Appendix

Title IX and higher education policy: Guiding principles for diversity and inclusion in collegiate esports

Written by Victoria Jackson, Ph.D., Arizona State University

When we think of Title IX as part of broader Civil Rights legislation providing access and equal opportunity in education, we are able to develop an operating philosophy committed to diversity and inclusion.

Title IX applies to all programs and activities in educational institutions. Athletics became the contested space in higher education; this resistance helps to explain why most of the federal government's (the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Education) Title IX guidelines and policy interpretations have to do with athletics. This does not mean the rest of the departments and offices within higher education (and K-12) do not have to comply with Title IX. Actually, framing the issue this way serves as a reminder that girls' and women's equal educational opportunity was not (or at least, was less) controversial in other areas of educational institutions (employment, admissions, and professional schools, for example). Most Title IX litigation concerns athletics, again contributing to more policies and legal precedents related to athletics specifically. In recent years, Title IX litigation (and, therefore, also campus policies) has involved sexual harassment and assault, also covered by Title IX.

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). The equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (specifically Title VII), and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 provide equal educational opportunity (in addition to other civil rights).

A school (or, a club within a school) may be in compliance with Title IX and other civil rights laws if its policies do not discriminate on the basis of any protected categories and use neutral language. The club may not be in compliance with Title IX, however, if its practices are perceived to discriminate on the basis of any protected categories. An individual could file a complaint with a Title IX officer on campus, the Office for Civil Rights—which could open an investigation, and file a private lawsuit in federal court. An individual has the right to simultaneously file a complaint with the OCR and sue the educational institution.

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, and supplies, and financial aid, if provided. As a program expands, the "laundry list" of items also includes "the provision of equipment and supplies; scheduling of games [competitive events] and practice times; travel and per diem allowance; opportunity to receive coaching and academic tutoring; provision of locker rooms, practice and competitive facilities; provision of medical and training facilities and services; provision of housing and dining facilities and services; publicity."

If a school supports the program as mixed-gender rather than gender-segregated, this does not mean Title IX (and other civil rights laws) do not apply. The medical school is a mixed-gender program and must comply with Title IX (and other civil rights laws).

Title IX does not institute a quota system. Title IX eliminated quota systems, often used to cap women (at 10%, for example) in admissions, employment, professional schools, and the sciences before the passage of Title IX.

Policy Recommendations

If policies may not apply to the program right now, this does not mean they will not in the future. Consider this question: Do you want to develop policies to prevent potential future issues or do you want to wait and react to federal government investigation and litigation?

When we study Title IX's application in intercollegiate athletics, we learn that compliance with Title IX often falls short of the commitment to provide equal educational opportunity. If a program is committed to expanding opportunities for girls, women, people of color, sexual minorities, and other protected classes, it could develop a philosophy of equal opportunity to go above and beyond compliance with the law. Operating with this philosophy in mind, guidelines could be developed to increase access and participation to create a culture of diversity and inclusion.

Although not perfect, Title IX regulations concerning intercollegiate athletics could serve as a starting point to develop this philosophy of equal opportunity, keeping in mind that programs may be mixed-gender rather than gender-segregated.

Programs also should adopt as policy the Title IX guidelines regarding sexual harassment and assault provided by the Department of Education and individual institutions of higher education.

Every campus has an office for diversity and inclusion or office for equal opportunity (names vary), to communicate with the Department of Education and to comply with civil rights laws. Programs should communicate with these offices to learn more about how to put policies into practice, and to seek advice with any issues.

Resources

Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education

- <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

Examples of School Offices & Policies

- Arizona State University Office of Equity and Inclusion: <https://cfo.asu.edu/equity-and-inclusion>
- University of Utah Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action: <http://oeo.utah.edu/>
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology Nondiscrimination Policy: <http://referencepubs.mit.edu/what-we-do/nondiscrimination-policy>
- University of California Irvine Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity: <http://www.oeod.uci.edu/>

Additional Title IX Info

- Women's Sports Foundation Title IX Primer: <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/advocate/title-ix-issues/what-is-title-ix/title-ix-primer/>
- Women's Sports Foundation Title IX Issues: <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/advocate/title-ix-issues/>