College Esports: What You Need to Know

Brett E. Shelton & Chris Haskell
INTRODUCTION

It was the beginning of summer in 2017 when Dr. Chris Haskell approached me in the hallway. “Brett, you are aware of the college eSports scene? I think this is something we need to take on.” I was skeptical, not because I wasn’t somewhat aware of what was happening nationally and internationally with video game competitions, but because I wasn’t sure that we were the right people, in the right situation, at a major university with other professor duties. Our jobs as professors were keeping our plates overflowing already, how could we take on something else?

“I’ll tell you what, Chris. Send me a little video or story every morning for a week, and then we can meet and discuss this.” On day three, I called him up. “Okay, I’m in.”
Since that day, our lives have been filled with all things college eSports. It turns out, eSports was not like anything else at the university. It wasn’t debate team or other academic campus clubs. It wasn’t spirit squad or band. It wasn’t a club sport, and it wasn’t an athletic scholarship fit. We had to make it something new. We spent an entire summer contacting student services, deans’ offices, student representatives, legal and contract services, and upper administration. We did the legwork and the homework, and discovered a completely different level of understanding of the university system in the process.

Fast forward 12 months, and we have major construction of an eSports arena on our Boise State campus—planned to be the largest in the country. We have 45 vetted, varsity eSports athletes who competed in over 100 organized matches and tournaments. We have a dedicated group of eSports broadcasters and technology specialists who cast over 250 hours of live eSports events. These events have been viewed by over 100,000 individuals. We have development officers, sponsors, benefactors, and scholarship earners. And we offer academic classes in eSports that partner with data-driven research efforts. It’s gotten huge in a very, very short time.

Chris and I are always being asked, “How did you put it together? What kind of advice can you give me at my
university? What organizational structure do you use?” This book is an attempt at describing what we did and how we did it. It is specifically meant to be read as a conversation where you, the reader, is ease-dropping on our conversation. We did not want it to be a textbook in a traditional sense, rather, something that you can use to expand your own attempts at considering the college eSports landscape and what your university might do to create a program. We wish you the best in your efforts to navigate this crazy space of eSports!

Brett, July 2018
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brett E. Shelton earned his PhD from the University of Washington in Curriculum and Instruction, and holds additional degrees in engineering from Arizona State University and the University of Idaho. He is the Department Head and Professor of Educational Technology at Boise State, and is the co-Director and General Manager of the Boise State Varsity eSports Program. He has researched games and learning for 20 years, which makes it remarkable that he is a horrible *Fortnite* player. Dr. Shelton’s special skills and abilities include creating meaningful technology-based data visualizations, and quoting lines from *Seinfeld* and *The Big Lebowski*. 
Chris Haskell plays video games for a living, or at least that’s what his friends think. Dr. Haskell is the Director and Head Coach of the Varsity eSports Program at Boise State University, where he earned his EdD. As Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Technology, Chris’ research focuses on the impact of video games, virtual worlds, social media, and digital culture. He has published several books and has given dozens of keynote addresses. His special skills and abilities include creating unique and transformative learning environments for use in the classroom, collecting full-size arcade games from the ‘80s, and getting Brett to say “yes” to his requests.
Chapter 1

NAVIGATING THE UNIVERSITY SPACE

In this chapter, we talk about the structure that exists within colleges and universities, and how a college eSports team might best be positioned within that structure. What advantages does an academic department have over an athletic department? What does eSports contribute to a university academically, and how does it support a university mission? How should an eSports team be structured? How does a varsity program navigate existing gaming clubs and the university administration? What makes it an official entity recognized by the university, and why is that important? These are some initial questions
we explore and give you our perspective on reasonable answers to these questions.

Brett: Okay. We’re talking navigating the university space, Chris.

Chris: Yep.

Brett: So, let’s think about it in general. What does eSports contribute to a university in terms of academics and the university mission?

Chris: Gosh. I think it – are those the only two categories we’re allowed to fulfill there?

Brett: Let’s start there, and let’s see where it goes. Like, I could say when I read the university mission and the programs that are offered at the university, I think about enhancing the student experience, right?

Chris: Yep.

Brett: So what is it that students come here, to college, to university, what do they come here looking for? Why do they choose to come here as young adults? And, again, how do we make the experience the best we possibly can, because that’s what the university is interested in doing. They want to bring students here.
Chris: Well, I think it’s a marriage, right, between what the student wants and the experience that we want them to have. If we just put it all in their hands, “Tell us exactly what you want and we’ll do it for you,” then they miss out on enriching activities. But if we say, “No. You’ve got to do this because it’s the way you become a contributing citizen,” they’ll resent it as well. It’s got to be a blend between those things. But eSports programs, like every other sporting program, gives students an opportunity to represent their university, to make it an unselfish experience. They may choose to play the eSports because they want to excel in these sports. It might be a “me” decision, but it ends up being a “we” benefit. You discover things once you’re inside of an environment like traditional sports and eSports that you didn’t know when you went in, and that’s okay, that discovery.

Brett: Because universities are about discovery, right? They’re about discovering and becoming – it’s a part of a maturity process about becoming somebody better.

Chris: Yeah.

Brett: It’s about improving. And sometimes they don’t know what that is until they get here. But what they do is they know that they like participating in certain activities. We want to be able to give them the opportunities to do those things, which they come to the
university for, but also to help them find pathways of growth that they hadn’t had experienced or had knowledge of before they got here.

Chris: You and I talk about this regularly. Sports and eSports provide and offer the same things at a university. They give you a chance to be a part of a team, to learn to lose with grace, to win with humility. They allow you to prepare for something that you’re not completely in control of, which is rare. Right? And that experience itself, where your actions affect other people, is really critical. You have some of those experiences before you go out and start a family or you go out and you lead a business. You have to know that you can control some things, you can’t control others, and sports teach that.

They also do a really nice job in allowing you to represent something bigger than yourself. I mean, I say regularly, the only difference between sports and eSports is the “e”. Right? They offer the same thing. The only difference is the “e”.

Brett: So it makes sense at a university, because part of that university’s mission is growth. It’s to create citizens that are going to contribute to society. It’s about learning, obviously, but it’s so much more than that, right? So it’s what is it that you can learn that makes better, well-rounded individuals.
Chris: And that tends to be more in the “us” column than “student” column, right? The faculty column versus the student column. Students appreciate those things eventually, but those aren’t things that they’re going to select from a menu that they want to accomplish.

Brett: I agree with that, but as far as the university’s perspective, this is why they exist. A university exists to do these things. Whether or not the eSport athletes know that that’s what they’re getting before they come here, they’re leaving with it.

Chris: Yeah. Well, what about the students who don’t participate in eSports? What value does eSports or any sport have on the other students?

Brett: That’s a great question.

Chris: Right? I mean, it gives them something that belongs to this university that they can follow, support, root for, even contribute to with things that are not related to the athletic or eSport endeavor.

Brett: And that goes along the same lines as any of the activities – whether it’s a club related sport, or one of national exposure –

Chris: Debate team.

Brett: They take pride. Debate. Spirit squad. Music. Any of those activities ends up being contributory to an
overall good experience by that individual. It’s a feeling of belongingness, it’s participation even if it’s at a peripheral level. It becomes important for those students.

Chris: Yeah. Cool.

Brett: So what do you think is an appropriate varsity program structure, because when we think about how eSports is structured, was structured, with the first eSports teams that came out at universities, they were integrated into programs that had athletic programs as well as other all-encompassing kinds of programs. So we’re talking about smaller schools with a relatively smaller student body, maybe 5,000 students or less. Liberal arts colleges, and smaller private universities, where everything is sort of enveloped under one roof. It’s kind of a one-stop shop there. Right? So you have the debate club president with also the athletic department representative, which might also the computer labs specialist, right? And it’s like the one place that the college people go to congregate.

And the teams have been, and still are, self-organizing for college students. The heroes of the dorm tournament that initially helped gain notoriety at the university levels because it’s the team eSports that were self-organized.
Chris: Right. Not a lot of student leadership. Well, if you think about most of the big early successes in varsity eSports, they are schools that had made a decision to go all-in on athletics, right? Schools like Maryville, which has 1,400 students, 900 of them are student athletes. A school like Robert Morris, which has a little over 1,200, 800 of those are student athletes. Every imaginable sport. So taking eSports and dropping it in allows them to attract. One of the biggest values of eSports at a university is that someone on the outside can look into that university and see that there is a place for them. Whether they’ll be a part of that doesn’t matter, their community is represented there.

Brett: Inclusion.

Chris: Inclusion. Right. Community. It gives them a chance – so you see those things, and it may make the university more attractive. Well, these schools have gone all-in on this idea of, “We want people to come to our university, if they’ll play eSports, they will attend for a much longer average than normal, because they’re associated with something concrete that they may not want to give up.” When school gets difficult, your desire to stay involved in cheerleading and band and athletics often will get you over those uncomfortable humps. So the survivability, the continuance of a degree, the success rate of students goes up – and these are well-founded in
research literature – when they are tied to some activity or community on campus to which their participation is dependent on academic success.

Brett: In terms of programmatic structure, though, so because these were relatively smaller units, as eSports has grown, popularity has grown, varsity programs have gotten larger.

Chris: Yeah. They didn’t need that much. They needed an account code, they needed some computers they could use, they needed a coach, and, well, there it is. Right? You have another team. Now let’s add field hockey. Now let’s add beach volleyball, right? And then –

Brett: So when we think about universities that have a much larger student population, that are more modularized in terms of how things work –

Chris: Siloed, in a sense.

Brett: -- we see that traditional club or self-contained eSport activities were often under the guise of a student affairs office.

Chris: Student affairs. As a club, just like the Greek club or Quidditch. Right? Your Quidditch club.

Brett: They exist in those spaces, they get club recognition and get whatever amenities are offered to other clubs that are self-organized. Once we move into the
varsity program kind of structure, there’s different options for where that might belong. They can and still do, exist under a student affairs kind of organization.

Chris: About 40 percent of schools now fit under that category.

Brett: Then there’s the office of student affairs, and it’s sort of – it’s not an academic department, it’s not an athletic department, but instead, it’s organized under, the guise of student-organized programs and everything else that doesn’t fit.

Chris: Right. Parking and enforcement, often security, the pool, recreation center. Those are all typically housed under student affairs and have their own leadership.

Brett: But in this case, to become a varsity program, and be recognized as such what might that mean? What does it mean to be a varsity program?

Chris: One of the ways that varsity programs are often described is that you are an official recognized entity of that university. Not a club, but an officially recognized entity, which gives you the right to – but not in every case – space, leadership and guidance from faculty. Sometimes that means money. Access to unique scholarships. Again, you’re not guaranteed a scholarship, but you have access
to scholarship structures, which the university then helps to distribute and administrate in many of these places. As a scholarship program that has its own scholarships associated with it, it requires more bandwidth for a university to administrate. Right?

So a university has to take on those things. “Varsity” means those things, but it also means that you have the right, the unique right, to wear your school’s color and represent your school’s name in official competition. That varsity distinction then enables you access to other benefits. Some schools provide additional access to tutoring, to additional training opportunities, to academic or athletic advising.

Brett: Sure. To me, navigating that university space is really how you navigate the groups on campus. If there is – and there likely isn’t – a perfect fit for something like a varsity eSports in most school’s existing structure, that’s why you see it in different places as eSports is continuing to grow and ends up in different areas. For university officials, whenever you have an official designation, there’s many facets that have to be coordinated to make it happen. But they inherently involve space and money.

Chris: Where are you going to put it? Who’s going to pay for it?
Brett: Right. And one of the key aspects is an existing measure of accountability along with decision-making that goes along with having a designated varsity program. To me, it is a critical piece of the puzzle in terms of making or breaking how successful a program’s going to be. We mentioned the student affairs office. You also want to, if there’s a separated athletic department, you’re going to want to talk to the athletic folks. You are definitely going to want to talk to the academic colleges and figure out what majors, what academic space this may or may not be a good fit for, and you want the leadership in terms of deans, the provost and president also to be on board in order to get that “varsity” designation. And of course, there’s the little pieces like legal, which you want to approve any agreement that brings the “varsity” kind of status.

Chris: Gosh. I think part of it is – and we have this conversation a fair amount of times. I’m convinced – and this is my opinion – that in order to get a university to move into the varsity space, it has to have a permanent advocate in place to lead that process. And this is not to disparage students in the least, but they are temporary citizens of this country. They’re on a four or some year, sometimes ten-year, visa to this country called university, but they’re temporary. And that, again, that’s not to disparage their passion or their work, but often a question
will be, “Who’s going to handle this when that student leaves?”

Brett: It’s about sustainability. Right?

Chris: Sustainability.

Brett: It’s about sustainability and it’s about scale as well. So that has to be part of the plan if you are to ever get it approved at the university level.

Chris: Yeah. So a lot of students will say, “Gosh, our university hates us.” No. They don’t hate you. They, in fact, love what you do, but they know they can’t do what you do. There isn’t somebody who wants to do what you do. And so starting this up and then having you leave is a problem. Right?

Brett: Absolutely. So you need a champion.

Chris: You do.

Brett: At some level. And that champion, can that be a staff person?

Chris: It can be a staff. It can be faculty.

Brett: Yeah. So somebody that’s saying, “I’m going to take ownership of this program. I’m going to work with existing student groups. I’m going to reach out and make those connections with student affairs and athletics and legal and leadership and all those other kinds of pieces.”
Chris: Well, another thing that I think that has to happen in this process is you have to have a vision for what you anticipate that it’s going to look like. Because you’ll be asked questions that you haven’t considered, but if you have your vision in mind, it’s easy to adapt that. Right? It’s easy to go, “Oh, well I guess that means we would have to do this, too.”

Brett: Fine. So now you’ve found the champion. That permanent staff person. How do you go about convincing that person to take on the responsibility, first of all, to do all that self-organizing? Is there a salary that comes with this?

Chris: That’s what you have to determine. Universities were organized and bargained on principles of workload, right? They recognize that you can’t do everything, but you have to do something. And let’s put that in the column. Let’s understand exactly what that is. And that’s organized annually. And the problem with that is that if you’ve got a great idea this spring, we can put it into action next year. We say all the time, universities are battleships. They’re very powerful.

Brett: But very slow moving.

Chris: They don’t turn very quick.
Brett: Nope. But one easier route might be something like suggesting to offer release time.

Chris: Yep.

Brett: It may be something to where if you’re adding certain staff, you can dedicate portions of that staff person’s time. And then there’s the question of how many champions do you need. Do you need, initially, to have a structure of one person that’s the champion? There are plenty of examples out there of people that we know that have organized themselves. They’re a one-person shop for all things eSports for their university. They’re the ambassador and the recruiter.

Chris: Or they began that way.

Brett: They’re the head coach.

Chris: And then it expanded.

Brett: Right? So all those duties that come with that leadership starts out on one person. However, as we have seen, these teams and these programs get large very quickly. There’s even more hoops to jump through. There’s more decisions to be made. Spreading that accountability across multiple individuals seems to make sense.

Chris: It does. It’s always valuable to call upon models created in other athletic or academic entities to see
the way they do things. A college tennis or golf team tends to be a small operation in personnel terms. So how do they do it? What is the job of the coach? Does the coach also schedule the games? Do they help schedule the travel? Who checks on eligibility of the players, their grades, their professional status? You can start to ask those kinds of questions: “Well, what kind of structure do you have in place to do this?”

Brett: It’s certainly key to borrow upon the expertise of those structures that already exist, and then say how are you doing this? How are you navigating that space? What should this look like for someone who doesn’t know or is stepping in initially and saying I may know eSports, but I don’t know how travel works for the volleyball team.

Chris: Yeah.

Brett: And I don’t know what kind of grade requirements exist for the debate team. And how do I enforce those? Where do I find the resources on campus that are going to help me recruit and retain student athletes in the eSports program?

Chris: And you need time to search out those connections. You have to think about your workload and how much time you have in a day. You have to figure out how many of those things you can accomplish in a week,
because there’s a never-ending string of those kinds of questions.

    Brett:  So let’s talk on the particular situation in which you and I are in. The structure we chose was to formulate our eSports varsity program within an academic department. Now is that a common thing? What are the drawbacks and what are the advantages?

    Chris:  In an academic department, it’s interesting that of about the 62 varsity programs at United States colleges at this time, only five of them are attached to academic departments, which is curious. Right? One of the reasons that these large institutions have done that is because, as big battleships, that’s the fastest way to do it. A department has resources and space that they then decide this is important and they move over and they say, “We’d like to do this. And here are the people that are going to do it. Here’s the space that we’re going to use and here’s the money that we’re going to use to take care of some of the immediate needs.”

    Brett:  So the buy-in, at least at the department level and the college level, can exist without having too many hoops to jump through in terms of that battleship.

    Chris:  Right.
Brett: And moving a little more quickly in the sense that workload release can be provided in the form of organization and a creation of such a program. Is there any other advantages to being within an academic department versus something, say, within student services or within athletics?

Chris: Usually departments have a smaller leadership structure, so little things that aren’t really little, like deciding you need a piece of equipment and ordering it and paying for it, the approval process is pretty linear. The person requesting through a specific channel to a decision-maker who verifies, “Okay. There are funds. Yes. We’ll do that thing.” And then it gets ordered. I don’t know how convoluted other structures are, but I’m aware that some athletic departments have to declare a budget at the beginning of the year of exactly what they’re going to spend in each category. Now they can go over or under, but it’s much harder to deliver on something like that in an environment where you’re all competing for resources. So an athletic director has to make a determination. “Am I getting this for the tennis team, but not something for the volleyball team?” A department doesn’t have to do that.

Brett: A key piece could be that the way the money flows in and out of athletics versus an academic department is somewhat different. So I believe, and I don’t know if this is the case everywhere, in setting up an
eSports program that is, in essence, a self-support program. So what that means is that it may take a little bit of funding in terms of start-up equipment, organization. There are ways that the eSports team can support itself as it grows to more mature status. So that could come in the form of LAN parties in a rental or pay-to-play structure of your eSports facilities and equipment. There could also be tournament and prize money that could provide income back to the eSports team. There also could be sponsorships, corporate sponsorships, that could come in the form of cash or equipment.

Chris: Fees for events and camps.

Brett: Fees for events, camps, public participation kinds of events that your eSports athletes might be participating in. So, in that sense, the program would support itself. You’re not asking for state monies. You’re not asking for other university monies. It’s not draining any of the existing, already-stretched budgets that exist on campus, but instead the idea is that this is a program that can sustain itself. And I think there’s plenty of potential. It’s one of the great things about eSports programs is that it actually has the potential of earning some of that money back and they’re not doing bake sales in order to replenish the money that’s coming out of jersey money or equipment money or travel money. So that’s an important piece. The other piece that’s important to talk about why
eSports belongs in an academic structure rather than some other structure is because it lends itself so well to an existing job market, an emerging job market and a diverse array of skills and academic industry that work along with it.

Chris: It’s industry. Right?

Brett: I mean, you often talk about the amount of knowledge and understanding that comes when you’re broadcasting event. There is data acquisition and data analysis that goes on not just for players in assessing play, but also just in keeping track, archiving, information about team and team members and team performance. There are coaching aspects. It lends itself very well to much of the teaching landscape when it comes to collaboration. How you provide a division of labor within team-like environments and what elements does it take to be successful? I mean, that’s project management 101, right?

Chris: It is. It gives students practical application of those skills. Now they’re in some ways, tangential to the program. You could say the same of football, the things that you have to do to prepare to take on an opponent in football teaches you a lot about life. They may be mirrored in courses that you’re taking about, but they’re tangential to the actual program. But, like nursing, eSports also leads into a field. If you are participating in nursing, or we can
jump the tracks and go to, say you’re participating in athletics and you take courses in athletic training, you’re building knowledge in both spaces so that you can move more easily into the workforce of those spaces.

And a good program will also introduce you to the industry itself in a way that allows you to go into it with your eyes open. In some ways, students in eSports serve a practicum – in some places credited, and others an uncredited practicum – where they have the opportunity to try on different roles from professional player all the way through manager, broadcaster, observer, statistician, all of those things which could become careers for them. I’ve always been of the belief that one of the most valuable things you can do in a college program is learn enough about a career to know it’s not for you. Right? To venture down a path and then hit the brakes.

Brett: Right. And if you really want your hobby to turn into your career, that’s one of the things that you need—that practical experience at university in order to make those kinds of decisions.

Chris: Because it may not be the thing that you think that it is. I think almost everyone I know has gone down a path of, “I want to do this for a living,” and then learned enough about it to go, “Oh, no. That’s not what I thought it was.”
Brett: Sure. So I think we’ve now seen some evidence here of why an academic department may be an appropriate choice, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be the only choice. It may depend on the size and structure of the college or university in which you are at. It may depend on who the champion of a particular program is and how well it aligns or doesn’t align within an academic space. One thing is for certain is that eSports athletes come from all walks of life. They have different interests in terms of career.

Chris: And different personalities.

Brett: Career preparation classes and choices, whether it’s theater, whether it’s art, whether it’s math, whether it’s computer science... having an academic department for a home for a place like eSports can help foster that process of your students first, your eSports athletes second.

Chris: Yeah. That’s cool.

Brett: So what makes it an official entity? I think that is going to depend, probably, on what choices you make in terms of how you want to situate your eSports program within your particular school.

Chris: Yeah. Who’s going to have ownership of it within a university? And a lot of people forget that
universities are collections of colleges, and those colleges are their own unique entity with their own funding sources and leadership.

Brett: They have a certain amount of autonomy within a larger structure.

Chris: They do.

Brett: So colleges, in that respect, have a little bit more flexibility in terms of decision-making, as you mentioned earlier. So you must develop a plan. In an academic department, you need leadership from the department to go with that champion, you need to outline a vision in terms of structure, in terms of space, in terms of money and where those funding sources are going to come from. You need to have some evidence of worth, evidence in how it aligned well with your department, college, university's mission and goals, and some evidence of the number of students that are going to be participating in the activity. In our particular case, we then went to legal and asked them to draft –

Chris: An MOU. Memorandum of Understanding.

Brett: To take that information and draft an internal MOU that would then be agreed upon through signature of the leadership – academic leadership – that went from department to college and to provost. Basically, the MOU
has the date of incorporation, if you will, of the university eSports program. It discusses naming and references and who it’s going to be describing within that internal MOU. It specifically names the cooperating department that is involved, as well as the college leadership that’s involved. And may or may not include aspects – I’m going to say not rules and regulations, but outlines decision-making power when it comes to eSports competitions and the university’s representative membership, which is exactly what you want, right? You don’t want to show up at a eSports competition as the varsity program from your school and have another group that’s there with something they bought from the university bookstore and they showed up and said, “Yeah. We’re the” –

Chris: Official.

Brett: Right.

Chris: Well, no. You’re not the official.

Brett: You’re not the official and we have the paperwork here to prove it. But this sort of helps with that recognition as well. So additional language would be about the academic department in which the program is based, describing that the program would have the ability to provide student scholarships consistent with university financial aid requirements. The program may avail itself of sponsorships pursuant to the requirement of the existing
university scholarship policy with their directorship. The program may receive grant and gift funding subject to all applicable university policies and procedures.

The program may brand and advertise itself in conformance with university brand requirements, including the director of trademark and licensing. And then it gives some additional information about termination of the MOU and what would be required there. I want to call it legalese, but just some things that are very important to the university in having a permanent structure. In witness thereof, then you have the directorship of your eSports program, you have your college – again, your department, your college and your provost signatures. And then you can go ahead and rack that up as it being official.

Chris: It’s just as easy as that.

Brett: It’s just as simple as that. I don’t know why everybody’s not doing it.

Chris: Seriously. I think you can pick up an eSports program at the 7-11.

Brett: What’s an appropriate timeline to expect to get all this done?
Chris: Schools work comfortably in annual and semester driven pieces. And to get something off the ground like this, you probably will need at least a year. We didn’t wait on that. We moved much quicker, but velocity adds discomfort. Right? Things that are not quite in place at the time that you want. Often, it works well to pick the date you’d like something to begin and work backwards from there. If we want to start competing on this day, when do we need to have our team selected? Well, when do we need to notify? When is the team selection going to happen? When are we going to notify people of the team process and how are we going to take players? What all the deadlines are – and just work backwards.

Brett: At the same time, selling that the program exists to all those myriad of entities in a university space that have to be introduced, at some level, to your program. That’s a ton of presentations to alumni organizations, departments around campus, leadership meetings, and so on. And I would say in the first six months of our particular program, we have split time presenting the eSports team between quite a number of different departments at the university. And that would include marketing and branding, it would include heavy involvement in sponsorships, actually.

Chris: Sponsorships. Right.
Brett: We’ve had meetings with admissions. We’ve had meetings with, actually across two different colleges, and a number of the support staff and personnel there. Everything from purchasing to hiring of work study folks to information technology. Presentations to alumni associations, to athletic associations, to foundations.

Chris: Maybe the biggest and most important piece of starting a program like this, in addition to recognition, is being prepared to tell the story of what this is, where it fits and how it will go forward. There’s always a danger in trying to give people too much information. Crafting the kind of story you need to quickly set someone at ease about what eSports is and how it fits is really important. Your message design must be on point or you won’t be successful. If it’s muddled with all of the little nuances from eSports’ connections to the NBA all the way through to even more minutia driven elements, you won’t find the support that you want. But if they can wrap their mind around it referentially, they get what it’s connected to, they get what it’s like, that this is the X of Y. They’re like, “Oh. I understand it now.”

Brett: So maybe seek out your instructional design specialist on your campus and say this is the message in which I need to produce.

Chris: How do I get this message out? Yeah.
Brett: And then how do I breadcrumb that message to the appropriate people?

Chris: Can you talk about breadcrumbing a little bit as a technique?

Brett: I do like the idea of breadcrumbing. And what that means is you’re giving your audience, whomever that may be, a little bit of the story at a time. You’re giving them just enough for them to follow, without overwhelming them with information. And again, when you’re starting your program, you’re making this presentation to a lot of different people that have different interests. You have the people that are just concerned with money, just concerned with space, just concerned with workload. And then in order to tell that story, all the way up to your university president.

Chris: Yeah. Who will see what you do as you’re an opposition to order. Right? Because they have it in order.

Brett: It’s something new and it’s disruptive. It’s not falling within the existing space cleanly and easily, in most cases. So you’re providing little pieces as you go, and you don’t want to hit them over the head with the hammer here. You want to be able to provide that message just a little piece at a time. And if you do it effectively, which is very – it’s pretty easy to do with eSports because it’s a compelling story to begin with. And all the evidence is
there. It’s just a matter of feeding it to your audience in the right size over the right amount of time in order to get them to A) back you and your idea and B) to help you move things as swiftly as you need them to. Because, invariably, everyone that’s reading this, they’re already going to feel like they’re behind.

Chris: Yeah. A good way that I think to describe it is you want people to approach the consumption of more knowledge about eSports like a little bowl of pistachios. Right? You can take just a couple and you figure out how it works and you enjoy those, but then you want a little bit more. Right? It’s always available to just get a little bit more. It’s not a meal, but it allows someone to just take in a little more and a little more and a little more, comfortably.

Brett: Yeah. Although I have a hard time getting pistachios open. Especially if they’re cracked just a teeny bit. I’ve got to try to open them on my bottom teeth, which is pretty difficult.

Chris: Well, you’ve got to – no. You’ve got to bail on the ones that are just not split enough. You’ve just got to throw them right back in.

Brett: Oh, you throw them back in?

Chris: Yep.
Brett: You handle them first and then you throw them back in?

Chris: Well, they’ve got a shell on them, so they’re alright.

Brett: That’s disgusting.

Chris: Get your fingers out of my pistachios.

Brett: Remind me not to eat mixed nuts in your company.

Chris: Yeah. You don’t want to do that.

Brett: Alright. I think that’ll do it for this session.

Chris: Alrighty.

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To summarize the points covered in this conversation, Chris and I recommend the following.

When thinking about becoming a varsity program at your university:

• Create a plan – include student affairs and clubs early on

• The plan must address:
• How eSports enhances the student experience, how it aligns with the university mission.

• Money – funding for the program

• Space – practice and tournament facilities

• Scalability and sustainability – permanent (faculty or staff) leadership within the proposal

• Find your champions at your university for gaining varsity status – breadcrumb them along if needed

• Model your plan after other programs that exist at your university with “varsity” status, and if none exist, model them after a program at a sister university

• Academic departments may hold advantages over other departments to host the team, in that they may:

  • Be able to approve requisitions faster, with fewer channels of approval

  • Have self-support academic models already in place

  • Have scholarship structures already in place

  • Have scholarly activities around eSports activities that already exist

• Serve as job market preparation units for professional activities in eSports
Once the plan is set and all structural components are organized, have your legal department draft an internal MOU that gets signed by university leadership, recognizing your status as a varsity program.

Be prepared to present about eSports to the rest of your university. Be message design focused, and breadcrumb the principles as needed.
Next, we talk about the eSports teams themselves, and how to best organize the daily activities of the students. Who should be part of the local administration of the team? How much time goes it take? What is the compensation? What is the budget, and who is in charge of controlling it? What is the space (practice, arena), and how will it be maintained? What is a self-support model, and why is it important to consider? Should you consider scholarships, and how will they be administered? Are you
choosing to travel, and what does that entail? Here we delve a little deeper into eSport team structure and provide our recommendations when thinking about what to include in your plan.

Chris: Hey there, Brett! So we’re here to talk a little bit more about leadership of an eSports program, and organization of an eSports program, as in, what kind of people you need, and what in the world they’re going to have to do. Let’s start it out with an important question about who’s involved in the administration of a collegiate eSports program? Who do you see involved in that? Who have we gotten involved in that?

Brett: Well, clearly it starts at the student leadership level, in that there are already normally is some organization around student teams. There are either captains or there are organizers that are involved with student clubs. Once you reach out, you bring those organization or club related pieces into the bigger picture.

Chris: Yeah, and what role did they play? What’s the job of a team captain?

Brett: Team captains already have the contacts with the players themselves, so they already are familiar somewhat with ability levels, positioning, and organization
of the different teams. Perhaps you have student leaders that are familiar with more than one title or game. So for example if you are hosting a team or want to make your varsity program that consist of a number of different teams, you may already have some idea of that self-organized aspect. But bringing together those team leaders that already have that respect, the understanding of those players at your university that are already playing competitively, that is going to be a big piece. Now what responsibilities that student leader may have beyond that is a really important question for the university or college administration. Because, as you have rightly pointed out, those student leaders are ephemeral, right? They’re temporary, they don’t last forever. They graduate and move on.

Chris: Right. They have to have a job that is transferrable to the next person in the line. Worth pointing out too, is that students who have dominion over other students are immediately incredibly unpopular. So having team captains or student leaders is also to place them in a position where they can be successful, and not ask them to deliver punishment to determine rosters. Any of those things. I’ve found that our team captains are best when their first and primary responsibility is to communicate what the team feels to coaches and leadership.
Sometimes they’ve got additional organizational responsibility, like I'm going to place this on you so that we know what sizes of the t-shirt we need. I'm going to ask you to take care of that. And the one that they like the best is they’re often asked to speak on behalf of the team and the program, but always to support the program.

Brett: The team captain needs to be that representative that acts as a mouthpiece back to the rest of the management portion. And again, when I say management, I'm thinking university affiliated individuals. Those people who aren’t the temporary people, the people that are shepherding the team from point A to point B.

Chris: Right. That person is a communicator, that person is not a schedule or scrimmage organizer. They’re not a competitive liaison. Those issues with students especially, as full as their time can get, from time to time will fall through the cracks. It doesn’t set them up for a success if you give them things that will wear them out, or that they won’t be able to deliver successfully.

Brett: So when we talk about the administration of an eSports team at the collegiate level from that organization perspective, that university perspective, there are a large number of coordination, events, decision-making roles and responsibilities that are included. And we actually have created is somewhat of a list – a partial
list I should say -- of what those duties involve. Maybe applying time and effort to each one of those pieces that varies from time to time, but it’s quite a list of duties. And it’s something that everyone who considers creating an eSports team at the collegiate level needs to account for. So as part of those duties, I could go ahead and just describe the list.

Chris: Yeah, we can just go through this list. I can jump in –

Brett: And then we can talk about how they’re broken up after that. So in bullet list form, if you’ll indulge me for a minute, it makes sense just to go over these things and get those noted. So you have the duty of administration, of player and team tryouts, and selection of those players. A very important component, I might add.

Chris: Right.

Brett: And these are things you don’t want student leaders to do.

Chris: Exactly. Exactly.

Brett: You need overseeing of a practice schedule and a scrim schedule.

Chris: College students are limited to the number of hours they can apply toward a school sanctioned event.
Each school is different. NCAA has their own requirements. But part of a practice schedule is not just making sure there’s enough practice, but making sure there’s not too much.

Brett: Right. And this is a point of contention largely amongst players. And we get a lot of pushback from eSports athletes as to how much time they can spend playing, because they want to spend more time playing.

Chris: A student gave me a practice schedule that included 10 hours on Saturday, 12 hours on Sunday. And I said no.

Brett: Completely not feasible in terms of inclusivity.

Chris: Right. Right.

Brett: Also coordination and coaching, because the coaching isn’t going to be in control of that. And we can talk about the importance of proper coaching when it comes to team success later on. But as part of that piece is to coordinate coaching, so you may have in-person coaching, or you may have some other options –

Chris: Distributed coaching.

Brett: – such as distributed, remote coaching,
Chris: But also, it’s finding the right people to be the coaches of the things that you need, whether that’s for a specific game title or if it’s for a coach that can teach communication across all titles.

Brett: Sure. Absolutely. But you need coordination of whatever that coaching looks like. You need to coordinate the evaluation – you’re saying, how do the team members relate, respond, and apply those coaching pieces.

Chris: And what is the technical success or acumen of their play? Are they fulfilling their role properly? Are they breaking in-game rules if it were football? Somebody’s got to determine that your tight end is running the wrong routes. When you call that play, they need to be responsible for what their jobs are.

Brett: And that’s a key part of the evaluation.

Chris: Yes, that’s evaluation.

Brett: And also to evaluate improvement, that is, what individuals, as well as strategies, need to be concentrated on in order to improve.

Chris: And part of evaluation too, is opponent scouting. Or just awareness of what the other teams are doing. Now that doesn’t mean that the head coach has to do it, but the coaches may have to make sure that it’s being done. And sometimes you can place something like
that on a group of trustworthy students. Maybe not as a full team, but rather individual players. “You’re always doing this, but this week I want the two of you to sit down and watch this game from our opponent and tell me what you see.”

Brett: Then there’s the actual physical space in which they practice and scheduling that. Scheduling practices and scrimmages around other events, around open play time, depending on the kind of facility that you have. That’s going to need some oversight.

Chris: If that lab is in some way self-support and actually draws financial gains, you have to be responsible for making sure that that is reported properly. Also, since these are computers and these are students who are limited by time, you also have to be able to report on their use of that space and that they’re not overusing it– that they’re within limits.

Brett: That’s a good point. So you also have to coordinate perhaps as part of that scheduling, the lab monitors that may or may not be within that space at that time. And then you’ve got broadcasting. And you’ve got to train those personnel. And who’s going to be in charge of that – that coordination, that training? The selection of broadcasters, the different combinations of people. All
those challenges are a key to achieving a successful broadcast.

Chris: Everything that goes into a broadcast from what’s on the screen behind you to the lower thirds and tickers, and all of that technology, that’s a big responsibility.

Brett: And then you’ve got some duties when it comes to IP permissions. And again, this is sort of thinking about competition and broadcast. So the coordination of Tespa, of ULoL, and event structures.

Chris: Yeah, making sure that your accounts and that you are registered for the tournaments you want to play in. Somebody’s got to be responsible for that, and it shouldn’t be a student. We mentioned broadcast talent, making sure that that’s there. We’ve chosen to set very specific limitations on our seasons so that we don’t overextend the students or ourselves. And the number we like right now is a ten-week season. We’ve got a 16-week semester, it makes sense to not go all the way into finals week with competitive play. But someone’s got to determine who we’re playing, when it’s happening, and make sure that folks are there for those – it’s just like an athletic director would for varsity athletic programs.

Brett: So it’s a ten-week in spring and fall?
Chris: Correct. Two ten-week seasons.

Brett: Two ten-week seasons. We’ve got the broadcasting. And if there’s a regular broadcast as far as that schedule goes, we should and could talk about the importance of broadcasting when it comes to collegiate broadcasting. And that may be a different chapter on its own.

Chris: Yeah, yeah.

Brett: Okay. Coordinating of the social media, this is key.

Chris: Right. The video production and all those pieces. Yes, social media is really important, especially in the communication of when you’re playing, what the result of that playing was, updates, fixes, things like that. Visual marketing.

Brett: That’s to do with how good your broadcasts look.

Chris: And the other visual marketing, too, which could include team jerseys, it can include banners within your area, or billboards, or things that might show up on video billboard kind of deals.

Brett: Right. And that also has to do with just promotions in general, right? Marketing promotions.
Chris: Yeah. And all that’s associated with the team and a lot of the players and the time that they’re spending. But that’s only one piece of the puzzle. Maybe we’ll talk just a little bit about budgeting and purchasing. We talked about the role of a general manager a little bit, because someone’s got to make budgeting and marketing decisions.

Brett: Right, and in compliance with university standards and practices. So what kind of purchases are allowed? What sort of vendors are you able to use? How much are you allowed to spend on any one aspect of a particular event or a season or a player?

Chris: Travel, if you’re going to travel students, someone’s got to be responsible when are we going, how are we getting there, where are we staying, who’s paying for it, how are we going to feed them? Who’s eligible to go?

Brett: Who’s buying the water?

Chris: Exactly.

Brett: Who’s getting the sweatbands when a player’s losing? Traction.

Chris: Yeah, you got to have that traction.

Brett: You have to know who is monitoring the play during the actual event.
Chris: Hand warmers, et cetera. Most programs of any kind have a media guide, someone you can hand out that tells them who the players are, what the schedule is, something like that. But that has to be designed and delivered by somebody.

Brett: And that information on all the players, what their majors are, what year they are, those kind of information is important again for that broadcasting, and marketing and can all be filtered into a designated media person. But someone’s got to coordinate the creation and distribution of that.

Chris: Somebody has got to be a direct connection to the sponsors to make sure that they’re both receiving what they want, and providing what they’ve offered. And finding those sponsors in many cases.

Brett: Finding and working with those sponsors to make sure that the ask--and the appropriate ask--is there, so that you’re helping them, at the same time they’re helping you. Especially in a self-support model where someone’s interested in the budgets. For sure, how sponsorship is progressing is to be really, really important to kick your program off the ground.

Chris: In our case, our general manager also is responsible directly for uniforms and gear. Making sure that those meet university brand and that the right logos
are where their supposed to be, and that everybody’s happy. And in kind, the sponsor is happy with their placement, and that they feel like they’re being represented well.

Brett: And has to make sure they look badass.

Chris: Yeah, they have to look badass. And associated with that all the branding and marketing. I mean, can’t you just throw your university logo on anything you want and just throw it out there?

Brett: It seems like people have an issue with that. Which kind of brings me to legal as well, because the communications with legal services with your university, it turns out they are an important piece and actually take a long time, so you need to plan ahead when it comes to things like creating contracts, agreements with anything that’s outside the university.

But also marketing and branding when it comes to – and we haven’t talked about student athlete handbooks yet, but that’s a big piece of the puzzle too. So that you get official university legal involved in almost every one of your major decisions.

Chris: Yeah, so that you’ve got all the support that you need there. And all of these are well established patterns that exist within a strong and historically
meaningful athletic department on a campus. But they’ve built this into an organization, and for many folks starting they’re going to do it from scratch. I mean this is going to be a new world.

Brett: A lot of athletic departments have a lot of the branding, marketing, and legal aspects of varsity programs down cold, because they have specific individuals that are solely responsible for any one of these items. For those new folks in eSports, the ones coming from academic areas or student support areas, you’re going to have to figure all this out. And you can definitely leverage resources within your university or your college to do some things, but you’re still really plowing new ground here.

Chris: And even if you are super smart and leverage existing policies or resources like in athletic handbook, and then modify it so that it says what you want, it’s still going to require university and legal to approve the new language because students sign off on it. They have to be held accountable for it. It’s still a process that doesn’t happen instantly. Player eligibility is another important one. Whatever you determine as your player eligibility, somebody, and in our case the general manager, is responsible for determining player eligibility.

Brett: And so we have a GPA requirement we’re talking about. We’re talking about perhaps full-time
student status rather than just part-time student status. It may depend on how many years this person has gone to that school. Do they have the same sort of red shirt status that maybe someone in the athletic department would? Or is it four years of eligibility? Right now there’s no written rule book on capping the number of years the player may be eligible. There’s not even a cap on a professional versus amateur, am I right?

Chris: Right. There’s a lot of those details still to be determined. And one of the other issues as it relates to players not just coming into your program, you see the head coach helps with that tryout and selection. But when somebody leaves your program, whether they graduate and move on, what happens when they decide they don’t want to play anymore. Or if there’s some disciplinary action which makes somebody ineligible and they’ll no longer be part of that team moving forward.

All those things are true, someone needs to be a part of that process to conduct that exit interview. In this case it’s the general manager, so that you can have a clear understanding of what the separation means, what rights they retain, what rights they no longer have. What their responsibility is, what the university’s responsibility is.

Brett: Behaviors in terms of interviews, in terms of social media. And interactions and involvement with the
team after they leave. All these pieces are challenges that we’ve run into already with our group, and important issues to consider when you have an exit interview. This guidelines is what it means before you join the team, this other guidelines is what it means when you’re on the team, and this point-of-agreement is what it means after you leave the team.

Chris: So a player who says well, I'm going to leave and I’m going to go professional, they need to have an exit interview to understand that we wish you best of luck. We think this program is going to be amazing. But do not speak ill of this program. Do not speak ill or try to coach your teammates after you leave. This exit is a separate entity, and any of the negative interactions will affect your ability to participate ever again if you should choose to. And here’s the terms by which you could come back if you wanted to – if your school program will even allow that to happen.

Brett: And these contingencies are an area that’s really well covered and actually done effectively by most athletic departments. And in the borrowing of that information from athletic departments, and how they work and how they operate, this set of player guidelines is yet another example of, “Let’s borrow one from the playbook from athletic departments and let’s do it right.”
Chris: It’s a well-traveled path in athletics. And it’s always good to borrow those policies. So how much time does it take for all this management?

Brett: Wow! That’s actually yet to be determined. Probably given that we don’t know, because as we’d like to say, we’re building the plane as we’re flying it here between Dr. Haskell and myself, it’s taking a lot more time and effort than I ever expected. But part of that was because we made the decision as we first moved along that we were going to attempt to do this correctly; we were going to attempt to do this in the best interest of the university. And we had to put in the time and resources, personally, into making that happen.

Chris: And I’ll add to that, we wanted to do it correctly but we also wanted to do it quickly. That waiting was counterproductive to the momentum we thought we could generate. Thinking about it for a year, putting pieces in place, proving the viability, was hard for us to do – the idea was, “Well, let’s build this structure and then show why we need someone else to help with it.”

Brett: And once that horse leaves the barn there’s no turning back.

Chris: No.
Brett: So just to provide some context here, using us as the example, have close to 300 students who are interested in participating in some way, shape, or form in the varsity eSports program; have 50 eSports varsity athletes that are currently competing on teams. We have a head coach which is in charge of three-quarters or two-thirds of the duties that we just went over. We have a general manager which is in charge of the rest of those.

Chris: I’d say a good solid third. Yeah.

Brett: And that’s probably two full-time jobs right there, if done effectively. We also have help – let’s be honest, we have people in sponsorships at our university that have stepped up and said yes, we will help you find the right connections in the industry, locally, people who’d be interested in partnering with us to create a varsity eSports team. We have administrative help that the academic department has supplied through administrative support, as well as things like website support.

We have volunteers that have helped us from marketing and branding, who’ve assisted us with things like jerseys and legal issues. We have help with compliance, not only athletics and academics, but also conference affiliations and major connections for the university. And I'm not even counting the other various meetings that we’ve had with support areas like university admissions, athletics, student
services, deans of various sorts, the provosts. All those meetings, all those happenings, those are all key for university involvement and buy-in.

Chris: And it’s very similar to – for us at least – a sense of football or basketball that the time spent in season is much greater than an average nine to five. You spend much more time.

Brett: Dedicating to eSports-related tasks as the general manager, I would say, probably six hours out my normal eight hour day would be dedicated to that. And some days more. This is in-season, of course. I do not reduce hours spend on my normal academic tasks. But I know that pales in comparison with what our head coach puts in.

Chris: Yeah, during season it’s probably nine to ten hours of an eight hour day.

Brett: Right. I'm not sure if that time ever gets made up in the off season. Off-season tasks that fall through the cracks are non-time-sensitive items to address. So, changes and updates to a student handbook, for example. Re-familiarization with university guidelines or NACE guidelines or new rules in Tespa need to be considered. I have the feeling that those catch up tasks are going to take up more time than in the off season we would even –
Chris: Maybe so. And in fairness, one of the assists is that we’ve gotten a little bit of help from part-time individuals that are supporting the program that have made tasks like scheduling much easier. They handle some of those scheduling pieces, and if we find that there’s an opponent we’ve scheduled who now can no longer make the trip, they'll help to fill those in.

And they actually field requests from other programs to say we’d love to have a scrimmage against you or play against you. We would like to be a part of what you’re doing, can we schedule, and then they’ll find a place to put them in if it’s appropriate. But, yeah, it’s a lot of time. Now granted we’ve got five varsity games and about 60 varsity athletes. That would be less if it were say, two teams.

Brett: Yeah. And so we could have made it easier on ourselves, or we could have even made it more difficult by saying we’re going to support ten of the teams. We’re adding Fortnight, midseason or something – you know what I mean?

Chris: Yeah, exactly.

Brett: We could make it even worse. But again, that’s a question of money and space. So speaking of money and space, what is your budget, and who's in charge of controlling that budget?
Chris: So, the budget is really fluid. We’re still developing a budget, but the department head – the department that is sponsoring it, is ultimately responsible. We are bringing in some sponsorship dollars which help to offset what we are spending. But also we intend that the self-support model, where the lab itself will generate monies back to the program by selling hours on the computers and subscriptions to gaming time, should help to self support.

Now that doesn’t necessarily cover a faculty line at this point, but it does help to supplement. We’re also at a university where we know we’ll recoup some of what’s being spent on this in the number of students that we bring in to different classes that we hold related to eSports, whether they be graduate or undergraduate courses associated with gaming in eSports. Those classes, and summer camps, help to return money back to the program that’s putting it out.

Brett: And you’re talking revenue possible sources. Definitely that’s one of the biggest keys. If you’re trying to start up an eSports program, there are certain sunk costs that you’re not going to be able to avoid. You are going to need a practice space, a face-to-face practice facility, a space equipped with gaming machines and peripherals. That is a guarantee. Whether you can offset some of those
costs through sponsorships that is something that I would suggest you pursue.

When it comes to other really expensive items, I can tell you right now it’s travel. So if you are taking the team and traveling to a face-to-face tournament, showcase, exhibition, whatever it is, you are going to probably need to ask for assistance from the organizers of whatever those events are to help offset travel costs. It can get up there really quickly. For example, we have a three-day showcase event coming up next month. We’re taking roughly 15 players for that showcase for a three title match over three days and that cost is over $20,000.

So when you think of it in terms of, “Well $20,000 isn’t much in terms of an athletic budget,” when you’re self-support and you know you’ve got to replenish that money from somewhere else, you better have incoming contribution from whomever is sponsoring the tournament. You have a foundation, a donor, an angel, someone that’s coming in and saying that’s right, I'm going to help send the team for this particular thing.

So who’s in charge of controlling that? Hopefully, if the department head, if it’s an academic area, that person along with the dean of that department is going to control
the purse strings. But you also have to have some oversight and maintenance from a business operations manager, likely donated either from the college of that department who oversees your eSports athletic budget.

Chris: Absolutely.

Brett: Space. What is a good space and how do you maintain that? Do you need one? I mean everyone's playing in the dorms themselves, do you actually need a practice space?

Chris: You do need a practice space if you’re going to facilitate training and coaching, and you’re going to make sure that that environment is consistent with the university expectations for student athletes and participants. When people are communicating via comms from their dorm room, it is not the same professional environment that you have in a practice facility.

Brett: What kind of practice components can you not replicate when you’re face-to-face? When you’ve got ten students in a League of Legend match that are practicing against each other what are those key reasons why you need a practice facility in the first place?

Chris: Well, part of the practice facility is that you need to be able to watch film together. And there are video tools that allow you to stream directly to gaming
machines, but that’s not the same as having them engage in communication. Good teaching in a digital age – it’s not just connecting them with digital tools, but intentionally disconnecting them from any distractions so you can focus on what is important.

Brett: But can you, as a coach, ensure a high level of participation when you’re in a face-to-face environment?

Chris: Body language says lot. If you’ve said something that has caused a player to disengage because they think that you were talking about them when you said this or that. You need those visual cues to determine those pieces of coaching.

Brett: So you would definitely recommend having face-to-face practice facility of some kind?

Chris: It also legitimizes that if somebody from another department can swing by and see a practice and go, “Oh my gosh! You guys are studying film? Oh yeah, well, that’s really cool. I would never have thought that of eSports.” Well no, it’s like – as I’ve said before, the only difference is the “e.”

Brett: But our recommendation here is that the space is not only used as a practice facility, but as alluded to earlier, it is a multi-use space. It’s a mechanism that other eSports related classes can be held, or just regular
classroom activities can be held, in that same space. So it’s a source of income as well as an efficient space in which to improve.

Chris: It also allows you to make sure that your expectations for the program are being met as far as the players. I was watching a stream of one of our opponents recently, and the young man who was playing for their university was on the university’s page, he was streaming his game. And yet, he had his camera in his room and he was vaping during the broadcast – during the game, swearing incessantly, and about 15 minutes into it I realized that there was a woman in his bed behind him. Those types of things don’t happen when you control the facility by which broadcasts are created.

Brett: I’m so embarrassed. I didn’t even think you could see her.

Chris: Exactly.

Brett: Okay, that wasn’t me. No, I get what you’re saying here.

Chris: You create an expectation that you then you deliver on because you can control the environment that they’re in.

Brett: Right. So there’s practice facilities, there’s arenas. Arenas are more designed for the larger scale –
large scale events or pay-to-play situations that cover the entire campus. Those event centers or arenas also cost money if you’re considering outfitting a large space, because either building one from scratch or retrofitting one, there’s going to be some cash involved there.

Chris: A great deal on a gaming computer and monitor is $1500. A great deal on it.

Brett: But it’s a great win for the university, and I think as eSports continue to capture the momentum that it has, more and more administrators are going to say yeah, we actually should make plans in our budget for an eSports arena and they’re going to help offset those costs for you. But initially, you may have to figure it out yourself.

Chris: No one questions whether or not a campus should have a bowling alley, or a space where they can sit and watch TV together. They already create social spaces and gaming is one of those spaces. Many campuses – larger campuses have their own movie theaters, and no one even considers whether or not that’s appropriate. These are things that students do and you want to build these spaces so they can come to campus, it is the safe place to do what they love to do.

Brett: Madison is one of my favorite campuses, and the craft brewery and sausage deck is just – it’s a beautiful
place to go and congregate. I don’t see why an eSports arena wouldn’t be totally congruent with that kind of space. So, are you choosing to travel and if so what are the give and takes of that?

Chris: Eligibility. Can they travel? Who do you take? And why do you take them? You can’t take everybody. So how do you select them in making sure that that selection criteria is available and unassailable? Even if that means we’re selecting people to take based on my decision and students don’t have any influence in that. Because if you give students a vote then people feel slighted. But typically, the student to director separation is one that buffers a little bit more of that discomfort or unhappiness.

Brett: I suggest you have or plan for a liaison that goes with you, not quite chaperone, but again is in charge of ensuring that the student athletes are where they’re supposed to be and when. That they have all the information that they need. If somebody’s not feeling well, or if there’s any information that needs to be passed along to the management that’s traveling with them – coaches, managers, whatever – that a person can then be that buffer. You want to make sure that if you have minors traveling in the group, that those legal and accountability pieces are taken care of. And, that the university knows that those details are accounted for as well.
You definitely have travel considerations that the university is concerned with in terms from a legal standpoint. And how and where you can spend money during those travel pieces. There’s per diem for the players in terms of food and amenities. So again, lean on your athletic department, if they already have those policies to do that. And while that’s not all the details you’ll need, at least we brought up many of them.

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In this chapter, we tried to provide a few more specifics when it comes to team management and required duties to expect when starting your college eSports program. Who should be part of the administration? How much time will it take and what is the compensation? The first two issues when trying to organize your college eSports team will be the financial viability of it -- how much is it going to cost, and two, is there space at the university in order to support such a team. Like it or not, universities are businesses even if the mission and purpose statements don't necessarily specify it (just ask any administrator).
Consider a self-support model that includes help (if available) from departments and colleges that support the students involved in eSports. Strongly consider finding the external support source that, if not providing ongoing support in the form of cash and scholarships, will at least absorb the sunk costs associated with start-up. Search for other sources of income such as eSports-related course offerings, and summer camps for the community. Look for sponsorship partners, and look for volunteers. Space for practice labs, and space for arenas, for broadcasting space, and for support personnel will be required. Consider partnering with an existing computer lab that can be partitioned, if needed. Search for internal university support in planning for an arena, preferably one that can altered for use for lectures and other forms of classroom-ready instruction.

Think about having help in the form of business managers and how they help with managing budgets. Major expenses to consider obviously includes hardware and software. Space, time and effort for those in administration that are supporting the club will need to be accounted for. Other expenses to consider include money for scholarships, travel money, and outside coaching if going with a third party resource.
If beginning with a mid-to-large size eSports program, considering splicing the duties into at least two primary areas for managing the varsity team. Initially, we suggest the following:

General Manager, in charge of:
- Budget & purchasing
- Travel & Big event scheduling
- Media guide
- Oversee Sponsorship
- HS Tournament
- Uniforms and gear
- Branding and marketing
- Student Handbook
- Player eligibility
- Exit Interviews

Head Coach, primary duties:
Administrate Tryouts & Team Selection
Oversee practice schedule
Coordinate coaching
Coordinate Evaluation
Lab Schedule
Lab Finance reporting
Coordinate Lab
Train Broadcast Personal

Coordinate Tespa, uLoL, tournaments
Coordinate Broadcast Talent
Coordinate 10wk Spring Reg Season
Coordinate 10wk Fall Reg Season
Direct Wed & Sat Reg Season Broadcast
Coordinate Video Production
Coordinate Broadcast Schedule
Coordinate Social Media (Twitter, FB, Twitch)
Coordinate Updates & Fixes
Assist with Visual Marketing

We also recommend off-loading parts of these oversight items to additional personnel, as soon as possible, especially if these duties are part of a professional or faculty workload.
Next we talk about which titles and teams you might consider including as part of a varsity program, and why. How many players should you include? How do you communicate with tournament organizers? How do you host your own tournament or friendly?

Chris: So we’re talking about tournaments. We’re talking about organizational bodies, leagues, participation in different game titles and that type of thing.
Brett: That’s correct. So our first topic I want to discuss is which titles and team formations should you include when you’re building a varsity, university eSports program.

Chris: Here’s what’s important to know. Most of the collegiate tournaments that determine national championships are organized and developed by the publisher of that game title. So Blizzard manages all of the tournaments and expects to be in-charge of all the tournaments associated with Overwatch, with Heroes of the Storm, with Hearthstone, World of Warcraft, StarCraft –

Brett: Those are titles specifically owned by the company –

Chris: Blizzard. Those are all Blizzard titles, right? So they have their own organization called Tespa which manages the intercollegiate play of that. It’s part of their business model, right? They create, not just the playground equipment but the playground and the rules of that playground, and that’s important. So choosing your game titles that you’re going to compete in is important because you have to know that there’s either a nice structure for play or that it is a title that you’ve got really complete control over. There are a number of independent
games that some universities play where there isn’t a big structure –

Brett: Give an example of what –

Chris: CS:GO which is Counter Strike: Global Offenses, Valve property. Valve is the company manages Steam, the marketplace, and Metagame engines, some people describe it that way.

Brett: It is extremely popular. However, as a university one of the important factors you want to consider in choosing a particular title is whether or not that title is going to accurately represent the values and missions that you hold as university. In our particular situation, we have chosen certain titles that moved away from any sort of actual shooter games where they’re using weapons that are modeled after real weapons such as assault rifles, etc., in order to hunt or shoot down other people. And we’ve specifically chosen to stay away from those games as well as games that have blood splatter.

Chris: Right, simulated violence is very different than fantasy violence, and the ESRB rating system says that we choose games that are Teen-rated which allows for fantasy violence. Mages, shooting fireballs at orcs versus simulated violence which is a very specific glock 9 which uses a very specific extended clip which you can buy in real life and a shot to the head results in a blood splatter on
the wall behind, yeah. Those would be an M-rated game, Mature rated, and we choose eSport titles that are T-rated. And while they do have combat in them, they’re not kills, they’re eliminations and in every –

Brett: You can always respawn.

Chris: Yeah, it’s not death, it’s simply a penalty.

Brett: It’s timeout of the game and before you can regenerate yourself as a player and then rejoin in the action. In that way it’s not that dissimilar from a sports related game where you might be benched for a certain amount of time before you get to join and play again.

Chris: Yeah, right, penalty box. The penalties for elimination are always temporary.

Brett: So we made the decision to specifically draw the line at fantasy violence and nothing that would be more aggressive than that, and also there would be games that are rated, again, T or less, something like Rocket League which is basically cars playing soccer.

Chris: Now, sometimes cars will explode, right? But again, it’s a three second penalty and then that person is plays back at their defending end of the field with no advantages that they had built up over time.

Brett: Right, but correct me if my wrong, a title such as Rocket League doesn’t include you trying to be
aggressive toward another player. Instead, your goal is to try to get a ball into the other person’s goal.

Chris: Yeah, that’s the overall goal. MOBAs like League of Legends and Heroes of the Storm.

Brett: Massively online battle arenas. MOBAs.

Chris: Right, MOBAs are games where the goal is not to kill each other, the goal is to eliminate the team’s core, which is a structure at the end, or the nexus which is in League of Legends. Overwatch is a game that is about capturing objectives or moving a payload from one location to another.

Brett: So not that dissimilar from a group of kids playing capture the flag on a playground in essence.

Chris: It’s very similar.

Brett: And so, really I think the point here is that in choosing the titles, you want to look for ones that obviously are popular amongst student groups, that competitions may already be well-organized and exist, so that there’s a rule structure, a familiar rule structure that’s already in place. Ones that are rated T or below by the rating association – and enough to represent a variety of different types of games. So for example, a card playing game that’s very interesting, involves a lot strategy, competition, not maybe dissimilar to watching a poker
tournament on television versus ones that are more action-oriented that have more like a three-dimensional large battleground, large team play involved.

Chris: Right. Okay, how large a team should you have, right?

Brett: How large a team should we have?

Chris: This differs with the organization, it’s based on capacity and goal and what you want to try to accomplish with that. Some schools simply pick the exact number of players they need to play the game. Some will choose one more, others will go for a more traditional sports model where you have two times the number of players needed to hold a full game plus a couple so that you can always compete against yourself.

Brett: So we chose for our program five titles. The most involved I guess for multiplayer titles would be six versus six. We also have a five versus five and we go down to three versus three. And then even the single player card type game involves a player that's manipulating the cards, but also two advisors, so it’s really a three on three as well.

Chris: Right, they’ve elected to go with the 3v3 model for that as well. Yeah, there are a couple of other games that were not varsity in but we have participants that are 1v1, like StarCraft.
Brett: And are those considered part of the varsity program? How did we choose these specific five titles? Why stop at five, why not four, why not seven?

Chris: These five represented a handful of different types, represented in our five, we have two MOBAs, we have an autosport game, right, in Rocket League, cars playing soccer, we have a team based kind of strategy shooter in Overwatch, an objective-based, which is a first person view, and we have a card game. Those kind of represented those missing from those is an over sports game like a FIFA or a Madden and there are some teams that play that or NBA 2K, one of those titles.

Brett: And professional sports teams actually have their own eSport teams around those games. I’ll point out professional basketball, has their own eSports league around basketball gaming.

Chris: Yes, yes.

Brett: So that’s maybe something we look at in the future, in adding titles to the varsity program.

Chris: Yeah. And the flexibility of multiple games gives us the ability to reconsider each title, each year based on popularity. And frankly, the opportunity for competition against other schools as a collegiate program, our bread and butter is playing against other schools. And
so we have to, in a sense, make sure that we’re trying to grow on fertile ground. I mean we want to be able to play other schools and have meaningful matches. And if no ones playing that game or not enough people are playing that game then it doesn’t –

**Brett:** It’s not worth it because you end up playing the same teams over and over again, given the current schedule and –

**Chris:** Right. In addition, a helpful reason that these games were selected is because they had strong tournament coordination around them.

**Brett:** Right, that already existed.

**Chris:** It allows us to plug into them.

**Brett:** And then we can leverage their existing tournament structure. I guess the intellectual property holders of those games are excited about moving into a collegiate arena.

**Chris:** Yep, we already have a very big presence.

**Brett:** And they’re very supportive of what it is that we’re trying to do at the college level. So I think you’re going to see as this plays out in the next few years especially, some of that molding around these games, the promotion aspects, the support that collegiate teams receive may change, may wane, or may increase. But the
important thing is that you can maintain flexibility in a sport such as this, and whereas maybe other more traditional sports and athletics, once you get that team and those pieces in place, it’s a little bit harder to change out, change over, modify.

Chris: Right. It’s good to think about eSports also kind of fitting within the track and field model. And there are times when specific events are held and other times when they’re not. Steeplechase, depending on what conference you are in, is a regular steeple of that conference or it’s an event that’s not included – the 3,000-meter steeplechase. Some tracks simply don’t have the facilities to have a water jump and four stationary barrier jumps.

Brett: I did not know that.

Chris: Yeah, so they just don’t have that event.

Brett: Do they do indoor steeplechase?

Chris: They do not do indoor steeplechase, so it’s a requirement of the outdoor season, right? So it’s a specialized thing, so in the same way there are some schools or even conferences that may not play a specific game because they as a conference just don’t play that game.
Brett: Yeah, I always wondered that about swimming, so you got four strokes that are like commonplace in the events, but how come someone doesn’t not come up with a new stroke and adding that to the list of events?

Chris: Well, the Trudgen almost caught the attention in the 1920s.

Brett: What about swimming underwater? Can’t you do an underwater like stroke or what?

Chris: You could probably do an underwater swim.

Brett: Doggie paddle, very popular with the kids.

Chris: It is, it is very popular with the kids.

Brett: So they should look into that I think. So how do we communicate with the tournament organizers?

Chris: Most of the time they have their own portal for communication, more recently they have started to leverage other organizations like Battlefy to do their tournament organization and administration for them, they’ve –

Brett: And that’s, again, a third party?

Chris: Third party, but still through the conference, through the organizer. Riot is one those companies that uses Battlefy as their primary tool, Tespa has created their
own tool called Compete which helps to regulate those – the brackets of those, but we communicate online and through Discord chat with those organizers.

Brett: And how do you go about communicating to them that we would like to host our own tournament or our own friendly, or set-up our own scrimmage maps in a regular schedule type format, is this something that’s difficult, what are the steps?

Chris: Well, there is some difference of opinion about the rights of a school to organize their own play. Most of the terms of service don’t make any mention about any restrictions about you simply contacting another school and saying, “We would like to play.” Where it gets into questions is when you want to organize a large tournament that is not part of this organization.

In most cases what they do, these organizations, is they invite you to participate as your own conference in their larger “circle,” they want to keep all of the play within their own sphere which is a difficult thing to do, it's not something universities are accustomed to doing. I say all the time that Naismith who created basketball doesn’t regulate changes to the rules in the collegiate realm.

Brett: Modern day basketball.
Chris: Modern day basketball, right – not Mayan basketball.

Brett: Yeah, I mean there some ancient peoples out there who would take some issue with that.

Chris: There are some ancient peoples, right. But the idea that he is not going to, he’s dead, but he's not going to come back and make major changes to the rules that the game is now in the public sphere. That doesn’t happen with digital properties, right? They continue to tool and to improve and to change their property to keep them relevant. And so when you play that game, you’re beholden to those changes.

One of the more recent change is the desire for them to limit the competition to just the spheres that they set-up. Again, nothing will prevent a school from contacting another school, but in most cases if you’re going to organize a tournament or a structure through which an entire conference or a group of schools will play, you have to apply for that tournament license from the company.

Unregulated play between schools not prohibited, but an actual tournament that includes many schools and will have a winner or prize money or all of these other stipulations, you do have to apply for that. Now, in most cases you won’t be turned down, you’ll simply be directed
to do it a certain way, which is not a bad thing. It improves the competition quality, but it does add a level that most universities are not accustomed to.

Brett: And it’s something that I think will evolve again over time. It already has evolved quite a bit, but the involvement of certain title intellectual property holders, the representatives of those companies, they want to ensure that their product is represented in a fair, good way across all tournaments and that’s really -- from my communications with them -- has been the impetus of their involvement or their level of involvement.

So they see it as an opportunity to take their intellectual property, expand it, bring it to a greater number of people. But I think they're not quite sure, and still figuring out this space as well in terms of collegiate tournaments versus one-on-one plays, scrimmage matches, whatever you want to call them.

Chris: Right, right. So friendlies or just play between universities is easy to host, you simply pick a time and a place.

Brett: Yes, but when it comes to broadcasting and setting up the live streaming of those broadcasters, a little bit more organization is involved in that. However at this point, the tournament organizers, the license holders of
those titles aren’t deeply involved at that level yet until it gets to that tournament stage which we’re talking about.

Chris: Right.

Brett: So let’s talk a little bit about governing organizations and their roles. So when we first created or in the process of creating our official varsity team at our university, we actually joined NACE, the National Association of Collegiate eSports, as a governing body that’s trying to provide some rules, some structures, some oversight, that would exist, that teams could give input on, that teams could become members of, in essence, to find and connect with other collegiate teams in order to play scrimmage, in order to hold future tournaments. And that there would be a set of sort of governance guidelines, whatever you want to call it, procedures in which the people that are participating could agree on in order to ensure fair competitions, is that correct?

Chris: Yeah, that’s the one of the charters of NACE. They are an offshoot of the NAI, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, right. Which is in parallel although a different body of participants to the NCAA, but similar. And their charge was really to add the layer of legitimacy to university so that there was a national organization which represented them. Bowling for example, has a national organization that collegiate
organizations can point to and say, “Well, they are the governing body.” NACE became that governing body for eSports.

They have worked to put together tournaments with their member schools, and they are going through the same kind of processes that everyone is now to organize tournaments through these folks. So while they help to legitimize on a college campus that there is a governing body, most of the tournament play is still organized by the publishing companies. There are two other organizations who have featured previously prominently in this process. One is the AVGL, the American Video Game League. The other is CSL, which is the Collegiate Star League, and they’re just tournament organizers. They bring in schools, they organize the tournament, they match make, they build brackets, they pick a winner. And some of those are live and in-person finales, others are entirely online.

Both Tespa and Blizzard which own majority of the IP surrounding a lot of the games that we play have made their games very difficult to play in those environments and so you see AVGL and CSL playing games like Paladins and Dota and other properties that are not regulated by either Tespa or Riot. Yeah, Blizzard or Riot, so that kind of gives you a sense. So on the side almost you have NACE, which helps coordinate colleges and universities for
eSports. It gives them a head of state as it were. But almost all of the actual governance of these games and the play with them are still held with the software title and IP holders.

Brett: So that brings us to the NCAA and its involvement. So the National Collegiate Athletics Association governs most of the scholarship athletics at – I want to say larger universities, larger university structures. We can say FBS type universities if we want, but also I think there’s even more involved with that because you have this subdivision and you have the FBS.

Chris: And the basketball only schools – yeah.

Brett: But by far the largest number of collegiate athletics that are publicized on television or promoted is regulated through this organization and especially recently the time of this taping there has been piqued interest from the NCAA as to the future of collegiate eSports and whether or not they can or should or want to, three aspects there of being involved and what that might looks like. So there’s a lot of data gathering, there’s a lot of information gathering, there’s a lot of interviews with us as organizers with representatives at the NCAAs.

And this is sort of interesting because this is something that you and I don’t necessarily agree on but it’s – we agree that there’s certain points of contention
that the NCAA is if they are to become involved there are some pieces they’re going to have to overcome. So one of the big things I like to point out is the professional versus amateur status, which under current NCAA regulations require participation at the amateur level. If they are allowed to go professional, either before they join a collegiate team or participate as professional outside of their collegiate activities, then they’d be disqualified for participating on a university squad.

Chris: In some but not all sports, right?

Brett: Well, if they sign a contract as a professional, then they cannot participate in that sport in college. That’s my understanding. So there’s also Title IX inclusion. There are also regulations about the amount and fairness of equity in terms of involvement. For instance, if eSports was added as a male only sport or female only sport what that may do to the ratio of other programs that are meant for inclusivity in intercollegiate athletics.

And then there’s this factor of independent intellectual property, titles and rights where you don’t have to overcome that with something like wrestling or baseball or basketball, but these are privately owned intellectual property titles which right now are the most popular titles that are being played throughout the university. The issues is how might the NCAA try to go
about regulating or organizing tournaments that involve these independent titles.

Chris: There are lots of complications to what NCAA involvement might look like as you kind of go down that list of pro versus amateur. There are some sports in collegiate – well, in NCAA governance – that have very strict rules on amateurism and what that is. Football and basketball are two of the most highly contested of those sports and what it means to be an amateur.

In some cases if you ever take more than 100 dollars in a single year, you lose your amateur status and have to declare as a pro and you lose your eligibility. Yet baseball and hockey college students can actually participate in the draft for that sport, participate in minor leagues during the summer, but not lose their college eligibility.

Brett: So you are saying, based on the actual sport or event, there may be some changes in regulations?

Chris: Right, it’s different.

Brett: Which could allow for some flexibility or NCAA involvement at an eSports level. So maybe making money on your sport is different than signing a professional contract. Is that what you’re saying?
Chris: Yes. And what constitutes a professional status in competitive game play is a much broader conversation because in baseball you don’t have people subscribing to your Twitch channel to watch you hit BP.

Brett: Yeah, completely different, right.

Chris: But you can make thousands of dollars a month streaming on Twitch if you’re a popular player.

Brett: To your subscribers.

Chris: Right, is that a violation of amateur status?

Brett: The digital age adds a whole other layer of complexity as to amateur versus pro and I think we agree on that. In your crystal ball, you think the NCAA steers clear of eSports.

Chris: Yes, okay if I’m going to take a hard side here.

Brett: I’m going to make you say yes or no.

Chris: They steer clear of trying to regulate it. I think that they may dabble in trying to organize it, but trying to regulate who is eligible to play for a college team and who is not, requires so much – so many resources that NCAA is currently not prepared to bring to bear, so we’ll take a ramping up to be able to fight that battle as it were.

Brett: Well, you’ve softened your stance on that.
Chris: No, no, no, no.

Brett: No, you have.

Chris: No, I think they may want to jump in on a tournament and help to organize the tournament or to benefit from a tournament in some way.

Brett: Well, yeah, so this is where my experience in cynicism actually kicks in. I believe the NCAA, when they see opportunity, when they see a forecasting opportunity for revenue, and coming in of course with the view that they are helping in terms of fairness, in terms of competitive allowances and nuances. They’re going to bring their vast experience to bear, find ways to create that revenue and become involved in what is clearly a very profitable enterprise of that is eSports.

Chris: At the time of this conversation there’s currently an investigation going on by an organization called Intersport. And we’ve been contacted by them to kind of give a sense of what’s going on on campus. What I find interesting is that the questions that they’re asking are not revenue related. They are interested to know, I think, to an extent how much external sponsorship and how many scholarships, what some of those dollars look like. But many more of the questions are related to how is it perceive on campus, how do other students perceive your players, and what is the general acceptance. They
have more to do with college culture than I was expected to hear when asked those questions.

Brett: Well, that’s encouraging. That’s the line of information gathering which is taking place. So I guess the real answer is we’ll wait and see. We’ll wait and see what happens there. So when we talk about opportunity, inclusion, gender balance, our recommendation clearly is that while even if we aren’t under NCAA rules and guidelines at this point, we want to adhere as best we can to the rules and regulations that are set forth and supported by an NCAA program.

Chris: By NCAA.

Brett: In other athletic programs, but really ones that represent our college, for example, I’ve heard you say several times is that we want our eSports team to be representative of our student body and who they are. And clearly that means people of different ethnic backgrounds, that means multi-gender, which means a lot of inclusion with whatever decisions you’re making in terms of how you go about making up a team. In how you go about picking starting players for different tournaments, and how you might offer new opportunities for other students to become involved. Whether it’s at the broadcasting level, the analytics level, the technology level, across our
program we push for offering and maintaining a level of integrity when it comes to inclusivity.

Chris: And I will add to that – I mean there are a couple of categories that we don’t mention there. One of them is age, right, that this is a very unique sport where there may not be – to be involved in multiple levels there may not be a simple age bracket that we would expect to see. We expect to see 18 through 22-year-old basketball players, for example male and female. We don’t expect to see many 30-year-old college basketball players. Although they exist and they have happened before. In eSports –

Brett: I still have four years eligibility.

Chris: You do have, you’ve got some time.

Brett: In case anyone is looking for a three point threat.

Chris: The “Three Point Brett” is what it is. The thing that I think is interesting is that it’s not the process of selecting where the real inclusion has to begin. It’s in the process of involving them in participation in tryouts before a final team is selected. Two of our peer schools that we regularly communicate with and find ourselves speaking with at different events, both found themselves in unenviable position of having selected a team which
they felt justified in talent was the right team, but was dramatically lacking in ethnic and gender diversity.

Brett: And when they put those folks in a 6v6 match on a center stage for the world to see, quite frankly, it was a point of contention for them that they had. For instance, if a team is comprised of all Asian males representing their school, which may have been a legitimate selection of perhaps some of the most talented portions of their student body, that may not feel representative of them as a school.

Chris: The question that I think is always worth asking, you mentioned the one, does this team look like us? Are there individuals who with the right time and teaching would be able to be as successful as these others. And if the answer is yes, that we believe that somebody has the acumen to grow to this level, then we have an obligation to ourselves and to our team to make sure that there’s a space for them. That may not be a starting space for that person, but an opportunity to grow and to develop alongside those talented players so that equity is possible regardless.

Brett: It’s consistency again with the university mission, the university values of which your varsity program is built upon. It’s this idea that no matter who you are, where you come from, what you may look like,
you have the same opportunities, you have the same opportunities for growth. And again, what you’re building here is from an academic standpoint, individuals that are able to grow well beyond their perhaps potential capacity initially and become good individuals. And part of that it means working across those diversity issues.

Chris: And from the game developer’s perspective they have already started to model this diversity in culture that we see in the characters that they select. We regularly see African-American, Middle Eastern, unique and different body types in both male and female heroes and champions.

Brett: Excellent point. And people choose characters that most of the time do not look or act like themselves.

Chris: Yeah, they’re not going for a mirror image of themselves. But the important point, and this is their idea that I think we’re bringing into team selection, is that one of the most important things to the success of a game is that a person can identify with someone in that team, right? Either they remind them of themselves or someone that they know and care about. So even within say the world of Overwatch. We have a character, so actually several characters who are in their 50s, right, and that’s not common historically in video games to have hero characters that are outside of that kind of target gender –
Brett: I want a 90-year-old that I can select. Can I –

Chris: Soon, soon.

Brett: And just have like a magical gray hair or something because that’s where I’m working.

Chris: You’re working.

Brett: Yeah, I’m working on it. We got to wrap this up.

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To summarize the points covered in this conversation, Chris and I recommend the following:

Tournament organizers from game titles are quickly becoming more adept at recognizing and inviting varsity college eSports teams into their fold. These tournaments often recognize self-organizing structures you may want to be involved with, such as conference and geographical affiliations. Jump in to as many as makes sense for your program, even in the first years of inception.

Tournament regulators such as Tespa and Riot are becoming more adept at recognizing college structures. While NACE is a representative for the most varsity
participating schools, it is unclear as to the future for college regulatory agencies. While Chris and Brett agree on the issues that the NCAA will have to overcome, we disagree on the future involvement of the NCAA in eSports. Currently, a number of agencies are attempting to enter the regulation and tournament organizing space, while information-gathering and committees are being formed.
Now you are ready to create your varsity college team. How are you going to deal with tryouts? What should you do and what should you avoid in the process? What do you do about managing? What do you do about coaching? Who does scheduling, and is there travel?

Brett: So, you are now creating a varsity college eSports team!

Chris: Fielding a good team is super tricky because lots of folks are going to have to begin with the students they already have on hand.

Brett: Yep, and that’s the biggest resource you have.
Chris: Yes, absolutely. Eventually over time you’ll attract players, you’ll recruit players. You’ll even search for players and invite them to come and participate. But most of the time every school will build an eSports program out of the folks that they have. There are two schools of thought, one is that you build a roster with the exact number that you need. A variation of that is the starters plus one.

Brett: Right, you got to have the alternate.

Chris: You got to have an alternate or something like that. The other school of thought is more akin to traditional sports, although tennis doesn’t necessarily have a backup – I mean doesn’t have two teams. They really just recruit one full team that most of the players play on all the time. There are a couple of alternates the way tennis does it. Same with golf.

Brett: But that other school of thought is more like what you have in terms of an orchestra. I was thinking orchestra, where you have first seat, second seat, third seat. There’s a challenge for those seats in order to make the top spot within the roster. I think that’s the same with college and band and everything.

Chris: Yeah, it is. And for eSports what we wanted to have was a team that could practice against itself if we did not have a scrim partner. And to be able to, for those
players, to not have entitlement at their position. The fact that they have to continue to improve and to get better and that seat is a little bit hotter than they would probably like. The students originally pushed back against this idea. Some of the student leaders said we think that’s a terrible idea. Someone shouldn’t feel uncomfortable or worried that they’re going to lose their spot. And I disagree completely.

Brett: Welcome to collegiate sports or competition at all. The best player plays.

Chris: Right, welcome to life.

Brett: You earn it.

Chris: The best manager manages. I mean that’s the idea is that there’s competitive –

Brett: Right. And it’s just like anything in professionals, once you don’t earn that spot – once you don’t earn your spot on the team, all the other benefits of that roster spot go away.

Chris: Yeah, like the ability to travel.

Brett: The ability to travel, those kinds of things.

Chris: Sweet perks. And so we want two teams plus a couple, so that we’ve got that flexibility that you can sub somebody in. Today in a practice I had one of the players
really frustrated with the play of another. And I gave him the thumb during the practice. I put somebody else in his seat. I said you just stand back here and watch with me, let’s see if you can pick up any new information that you’re not getting while you’re playing. Last week in one of our matchups, I walked up and pulled out one of our starters, who really doesn’t have any real competition for his spot.

He’s really earned it and there’s a big gap between he and the next player. And I said, “We’re doing really well, we’re winning. I’d like to maybe sub you out and sub in another player into your spot to give them more experience against a tougher opponent. How do you feel about that? Because I don’t want to mess with your psyche, but I would like to play –” And he just goes, “Yeah, yeah. Pull me.”

Brett: And so that’s part of the on-hand coaching – on-hand management of the teams once they exist. So in terms of finding that right number of players, you want to have enough so that they can practice against each other. You want to have enough on say, a starting roster, to where you have an alternate. If it’s larger than that, it becomes too cumbersome to manage it in any small point, one space in time.

Chris: Where it becomes exceptionally tricky with collegiate eSports is that we engage in – because the
technology allows us – an inordinate number of scrims, right, that football or basketball don’t get. They go to tournaments to take on early season teams.

Brett: Right, but they’re practicing against each other the vast majority of time, in part because they don’t want to give away any strategies. And those are events that are held once a week. More like baseball, eSports can offer a completely different lineup from day to day to day. Inserting a person here, inserting a person there, could make a difference between winning one day. Luck is always a factor involved – a fortunate play or events that happen within a competition. So maybe an analogy more toward baseball in that it’s okay to play multiple teams in a week, and it all depends on how much you want to balance that schedule with practice.

Chris: And like baseball, I often, depending on the matchup and the day, I will let a player know you’re going to be off on Saturday, I’m going to start this person. And it’s not about your play, it’s about playing time.

Brett: Playing time, so you want to keep the other people fresh. You want to keep them sharp. And yeah, days of rest are not a bad thing. Especially, what you can learn about your own game play by observing your teammates in action without you.
Chris: Yeah, very, very true. So in managing the players, we have selected a unique coaching strategy which we won’t talk about too much here, except to describe that there are really two schools of thought for coaching. And how you manage that process is that you either hire a coach, which some schools hire a former student who’s really good at the game to act as the coach.

The problem is there’s not a lot of distance between player and coach, emotionally and maturity wise, socially. We’ve heard complaints and problems from some of our colleagues at other eSports institutions. Anything from they don’t respect their coach anymore because he broke up with his girlfriend which everybody liked, to my coach has been living with my players and now owes them money. That kind of nightmare stuff.

Brett: Well, that is an issue always when you have a distribution of labor with no clear hierarchy involved, and people are trying to tell other people what to do. Also perhaps what could be unique to eSports is that a lot of players get good at what they do by themselves. So they’re sitting in front of their computer at home. They may be playing with other familiar team members, but they are perhaps not in the same room as them. They’re at a distance, but they feel like, “Hey, I’ve been able to achieve this certain amount of ability and skills on my own. And
now you put me in an environment where somebody’s
telling me what to do, and I have a problem with that.”
And sometimes those players just aren’t coachable.

Chris: It’s true. It’s possible to have somebody who’s
not coachable because – and we call it a solo Q mentality.
And we identify players when they’re playing with a solo
Q mentality. And we often refer to the solo Q and often a
person’s solo ranking in the game as a terrible indicator of
how they’ll be as a teammate. You can be a grandmaster as
a player, but have gotten there because you don’t play good
team play. It’s just because you are manipulating a handful
of things that your favorite heroes do. And often that’s not
shareable, that’s not even transferable. It’s just something
that they do.

Brett: Certain titles that’s okay – that works well
with, because basically it’s a single person that’s in control
whether it be a game like Super Smash Bros. or even a
game like Hearthstone, where you’re a primary player.
You’re getting strategic advice from players flanking you,
but in essence you’re in control ultimately of decisions on
the battlefield.

Chris: Yep, it’s true. The other method of coaching is
to use coaches at a distance that may be expert in their
area, professionals who can come in. The benefit is that
you can get current knowledge, and often you can even
pull down names that players know and they get excited about it. The drawbacks of that approach are they are not necessarily committed to you full time. You don’t know if you ever have their full attention. They’re on their computer at home, you have no camera, they’re just talking to you.

Brett: They may be giving the same strategy to a rival team.

Chris: Exactly. You don’t own their knowledge, you’re just renting their knowledge.

Brett: Financially, which often has great benefits as well, is that rental idea. You can contrast that with the highest paid football and basketball coaches within each state. They’re under contract for seasons, for years. And of course, that contract can be broken, but the amount of time and effort that it takes to switch, change coaching staff, enduring other years of rebuilding a program, and then investing in those coaches – and since you’ve invested so much monetary resources that renting coaches, renting knowledge bases. And oftentimes actually getting that sprinkle of different personality may be something that’s fresh for your team. So it could be something that’s a pretty interesting model in which to follow.

And maybe something in the future that other teams like
basketball, tennis, football might consider doing, and saying like hey, we’ve got you rented for so many hours for the next three months. Come in, evaluate our team, see what it is you see is the main improvements, and then after three months we’ll see, maybe we’ll change it up.

Chris: The benefits to hired locally sourced coaching is that you have a real person in a real room with players who can interact with them, can see things that you can’t see online. They have more stability. The drawbacks are what happens when that coach loses the room, which is possible. Or is no longer able to help them, or gets frustrated with individual players, but can’t really kick them off – you have those frustrations. The benefits of a coach from a distance is that you have access to them, maybe for a little bit less money, because you’re just getting their hours.

You may have access to more current knowledge, and you may be able to pick from a bigger pool of talent. But the drawbacks are that you don’t have them for a guaranteed amount of time, because if they get an offer to go and be a pro coach for this team they’ll leave. They’ll just leave right now.

Brett: That’s true. So there’s no exclusivity. It will come to that, and exclusivity obviously comes with a price.
Chris: It comes with a price. Yeah, so those are just things to consider when considering coaching.

Brett: But the other thing that you mentioned, I think that’s important, is that maybe what we ultimately recommend whichever style of coaching you go with, whether it’s long term like you’re in for the whole season or whether it’s the hire-on-demand, is that we recommend having a person in-house. There’s a face-to-face person that’s in charge of coordinating that exterior coaching.

There needs to be a person that’s standing behind players as they’re playing in order to get people to reflect whatever learning strategies that you happen to be employing. There is someone present. We don’t leave it upon the players themselves. The other thing we truly recommend is having a clear and distinguishable hierarchy between coaches and players. And we actually recommend not having necessarily that player coach if possible due to other – just age, personality –

Chris: That’s been our decision to avoid those things to make sure that there’s enough distance from them in social groupings and strata that those don’t mix. Because, usually, it’s very difficult to have a peer coach. There’s just not enough separation. But to your point, very important to consider having that person on the ground. And it’s really important to point out that that person does not
need to be the expert in the game.

But they do have to be connected to the coaching that’s happening. In our case, we utilized myself who is the learning expert. And I used that learning expertise to make sure that what is being taught by our coaches is actually being applied. I do the assessment.

Brett: So you’re not the in-game expert, and I think that’s an important distinguishing piece. Individually, each one of the players on the teams may be able to beat you one-on-one, in any of the games. But you’re the learning expert, the person that provides that bridge between coaching and applying those coaching toward a team. And so far that system seems to be effective for us.

Chris: Yes. Mike Krzyzewski is no longer able to beat his basketball players one-on-one but he has experience in a game. And experience in the game at a time when the game was very different, but he is well respected, not because of his playing ability but because of his coaching ability which he has learned over time.

Brett: I think that goes throughout all sports. You could look at Nascar driving. The pit crew boss is in charge of all adjustments, having the car ready, in charge of all the individual components on any given team. Speaks with the driver and discusses strategy. He’s not the person in the
car. And I think very rarely those pit bosses have the kind of ability and skill to be behind the wheel that the drivers do. Instead they are the coordinators. They are the experts. And I don’t know if coaches or managers is the right term. We may need to come up with a whole different term for what this person does. But it’s important to have that person that’s there, again –

Chris: Yeah. And to make sure that the message is being delivered the way the coaches intend. And that the players are doing what they’re being asked to do. I like to think of the way that our coaching strategy works is that I’m not a Bill Belichick coach. I'm a – excuse me, not Caroll – what’s his first name? Seattle.

Brett: Oh, that’s my favorite team.

Chris: Right. Right. Pete Carroll.

Brett: Thank you.

Chris: That I'm a Pete Carroll coach – that I manage the coaching and I make sure that we’re executing the plan. And I make sure that the players are rewarded when they’re doing what they’re supposed to do. I help to orchestrate those plans, but I'm not the architect of those plans. And that’s okay. That’s okay. There are lots of different ways to coach. You don’t have to be in the minutia.
Brett: Yes, obviously we’re sharing our knowledge and experience here, but I think there’s probably a whole bunch of different kinds of configurations that different schools are going to come up with based on resources, based on access to expertise. And for certain schools they may be able to say the player coach is all we have. Because, “A”, they’re volunteering their time, and “B,” it’s someone that can make all the practices, and “C,” it’s someone who can coordinate all the scheduling.

Chris: Yeah, scheduling.

Brett: Let’s talk scheduling.

Chris: There are five things that have to be scheduled with the varsity program. They are practice, scrimmages, competitive matches, tournament schedules, and broadcasting. And that doesn’t include any kind of travel, but on a regular basis in any one season, those are the five things that you have to do.

Brett: Isn’t broadcasting tied in with competitions?

Chris: Can be, but doesn’t necessarily have to be. So we will do some broadcasting here in the spring that is broadcasting of individual players of ours individually, or in small groups. Not competitively against other people, but just in the game.
Brett: Oh, I see, so different pieces of a full broadcasting schedule which may include things like highlight reels or interviews.

Chris: Yep.

Brett: Or personality shoots, other bumper bits, interviews and the like.

Chris: Exactly. You know, everything down to a coaches show.

Brett: Everything is promotable at this point. And all you need is the streaming capability and channel time in which to do it.

Chris: Let’s go to practice schedule. Practice schedule is important. As a varsity program there should be a class associated with that time, partly to give credit to the students for their participation. And that can be a charge-for-class, that can also be a charge-for-class where you give fee waivers if somebody meets certain conditions. That’s possible. Some do that. Basketball does that, for example. Not to everyone, but does them to some.

The scheduling of that prevents them from being able to take other classes during the same time, thus guaranteeing you have practice time. Varsity programs do that. Club programs don’t. And because of it, many club programs
have to practice in the evenings after all classes are done. And that creates a real interesting issue with schedule.

You’ll notice that basketball and football is very cognizant about how late their players stay up and how early they’re asked to be at school. They want them in the middle part of the normal human day. Clubs and club gamers tend to push way into the dark hours, partly –

Brett: They’re not under the same rules.

Chris: They’re not under the same rules. Varsity we have to – we know when people are playing online, but we want to try to help them establish balances. So that’s important in the scheduling. What else about scheduling practice – how many hours a week?

Brett: I mean there’s hours per week – we touched on this a little bit in a previous portion where the students come first. They’re student athletes. In every other sport they limit the amount of practice time that’s afforded to them in order to ensure that they have enough time to be well-rounded individuals, to get in all their homework, to study for their tests. And that’s why those limitations and organized practices are put into place. So, timing, you’re right.

Chris: To balance student and athlete.
Brett: To balance student and athlete, but also to coordinate around existing classes for students, so that there’s no conflicts there. And yet, it’s not necessarily killing everyone’s day off during a season, because that rest time, that time away, is just as important.

Chris: Yes it is. Exactly.

Brett: So scheduling – tricky, find that balance, maybe use one of your athletic departments schedules and rules that they used to set up, in order to help you create a model. Or how many scrims per week you want during a season? How many competitive pieces you want per week? If there’s going to be travel involved, how to go about organizing time and resources for that travel?

Chris: Yep. We’ve elected to align our requirement of hours per week of our student athletes with what our athletic department expects. We want to bring them into sameness as much as we can. And it helps the players, our eSports players respect their role as balanced student and athlete so that they’re not equating time with effort. That they’re different things, they can exist in the same plane, but time and effort are different things.

Brett: And also to ensure that they have their priorities straight in life.
Chris: Yeah, it’s very true. So the other things we have to schedule is scrimmages – scrims which can be done online. And in order to do that you really need a person for whom that is their part-time job. Reaching out to different teams through different methods, usually it’s discord. And saying will you scrim us on this night? And then connecting the captains of both of those teams so they can build the lobby, and invite all of their players.

You need to scrimmage other teams even if you have a double team, you know, doublewide team, because you need to see things you haven’t seen before. Eventually over time, we can train our players to model their play like other teams, but nothing raises your competitive level as much as scrimmages. Those scrimmages are important. And they can occur at any time, and there are usually no eyeballs on that.

Then I mentioned kind of regular matchups. Where these are marquee matchups that you might actually have people come and watch, right. Or you might broadcast a regular matchup. We’ll challenge – we did this before our bowl game with University of Oregon, we challenged them to League of Legends as the bowl before the bowl. Or as we call it the brawl before the storm. The idea that we schedule something that other people are going to be
invested in and watch. That’s still a scrimmage because it’s not a tournament, it’s not housed by any of these organizations.

Brett: But timing being as it was, you tried to align it well so it coincided with other athletic –

Chris: Right. We might want to scrimmage a University of Jamestown. That might not be something that will get people interested on campus. But if we play, for us, a University of Nevada, that’s a rival. They care about that. That’s a broadcast match. Now it still behaves like a scrimmage but you have to schedule those.

The next one is the tournament schedule and competition schedule. These are the ones that we talked about. The benefit of a regular season schedule, and this is worth pointing out is that you can set an entire season. You can show somebody what your ten-week matchup schedule looks like. With tournaments, almost all tournaments use a format called Swiss play, which means each week you play a team with the same record. What it does is it tends to press all teams into the middle. You have a lot of two and four teams, a lot of three and three teams, a lot of four and two teams. Very few outliers.

Brett: Like you’re trying to match competitive teams.
Chris: Right. Because you’re trying to match competitive. The problem with that is you don’t know who you’re playing until that week. So you have to coordinate those games. Most of the time those leagues hold specific games on specific nights, and teams can request to play it on a different day. But both teams have to accept the new date to be able to do it which are tricky to schedule.

Brett: But you’re talking about tournaments over a period of time now, it sounds like?

Chris: Weeks, yes. Not individual weekend tournaments. I'm talking like a month long, six week, or two month long tournaments.

Brett: Do those get scheduled during the regular season?

Chris: They can. They can be scheduled during the regular – well, our regular season or –

Brett: I'm confused about what you’re talking about. Because you’re talking about scheduling and I assume – I equate that with basketball. So it’s the championship tournament at the end of a season. But you’re talking about midseason tournaments. I understand preseason, like pre-NIT or something like that.

Chris: Right. Some games do. Games like Rocket League will have multiple tournaments that are just one-
day tournaments throughout. And then they’ll have a season tournament – they all call them tournaments, because ultimately they’re trying to find one winner and there are brackets.

Brett: There are multiple teams that are participating at any single time, whereas scrims we’re talking about one-on-one.

Chris: Yeah, most of the time they’re in pool or region play for six weeks, and then you qualify for the bracket.

Brett: So are there popular collegiate tournaments, like say for Rocket League, that exist during the year end?

Chris: Yes.

Brett: Are we participating in all of those?

Chris: Not all of them, but we’re participating in many of them if they align with our schedule.

Brett: Are those invitations or are those things that we reach out?

Chris: No, you can sign up for Rocket League. Rocket League is a special case because there are so many of those types of things. There are individual tournaments that students can participate in, but collegiate
tournaments which is what we’re focused on, there are
tons of tournaments that anybody can join at any time.

Brett: So how do you decide whether you want or
should participate in an organized tournament during the
college season?

Chris: The first for us is it collegiate.

Brett: Collegiate only, exclusively collegiate.

Chris: Right. You’re going to be just in a collegiate
bracket because that’s what moves the needle for us.
Again, if we play against Michigan State that means
something. If we play against the Trash Hounds – we don’t
know who they are, we can play them but for our students
there’s no tribes in that. We don’t know who the Trash
Hounds are.

The other thing that goes into whether we consider
playing in it is does it fit into our reasonable schedule. We
have elected to not schedule any eSports activities on
Sundays. There are eSports activities that happen on
Sundays, we’ve elected to not open our lab, because we
have to create that hole of rest in the schedule somewhere.

Sunday is the most opportune time to do it. For many
reasons – we have students who have conflicts on those
days anyway. Some students work on those days heavily.
Some of them, that’s their big homework – that’s the day we picked. Not everybody loves that day, but we had to pick a day. We work eSports for six, we’ll take Sunday off. So that’s a consideration, does it fit into our schedule? And does it require any exclusivity? Some tournaments will say you can only enter this. Or you can enter this if you meet these conditions. And we have to evaluate those.

University of League of Legends allows us one team into their collegiate League of Legends season which we competed in. But they’ll have other tournaments that are not part of this bracketed system. We want to make sure we always have one of our varsity teams in whatever the national championship competition is. Whatever that tournament is we want to participate in that as well.

Brett: And that’s scheduled way in advance, and we know when that tournament is going to happen so it’s on schedule.

Chris: The problem is that they are rumored to exist within a particular time, but these companies, as the technology for running tournaments continues to develop, we’re finding out later and later. I famously gave Adam Rosen grief – he is one of the twin brother directors of Tespa – on a panel that I was hosting that we were already in January and we had no idea when Heroes of the Dorm was going to be there. There had seen nothing announced
on it. I gave him grief there.

It began at the beginning of February. We only had two weeks notice for the beginning of that. We only had one week to register. So it is really impossible. And it happened to us in the fall that we were left out of a tournament that we wanted to participate in, because the communication wasn’t perfect. Actually, there were two of them that we were left out of. Even though we had declared our interest in one of them, the other one we were never notified that it even came online. We only found out after someone said hey, I didn’t see you on the list. And we’re like, what list? Rein it in.

Brett: Yeah, scheduling sounds like it could be a whole book of its own. So advice on scheduling, if you wanted to pull out the five most important pieces of information, the five bullet points on scheduling, it’s like...

Chris: The five bullet points on scheduling is that it is so complicated and important to the success of your program that there is one person who needs to do that. If you have a classified employee and their job is schedule coordinator, competition coordinator, you’ll set yourself up for success. Big programs need that.

Brett: Okay. Next bullet on schedule.
Chris: Next bullet item, make sure that you are scheduling enough time for the players to play together in the same space, because that will solve most of your interpersonal problems. If they are together and can see each other, we don’t have disinhibition effect issues where they think someone’s more mad at them. It’s really healthy for them to be in the same rooms. Schedule them in the same room.

Brett: Okay.

Chris: Bullet item three, and I may not give you all five here, is make sure that you are balancing show matches and scrims. Those show matches are like the regular season ones.

Brett: And then try to be flexible when it comes to tournament scheduling?

Chris: Yep. And just be prepared to do it because that’s super important. And really, the last one is do the best you can to balance the competitive level of your players with your opponents. And that’s what that coordinator can help do for you. Because your school needs to see you with wins. But you also need to play people who are going to remind you that you’re not as good as you think you are.
Brett: Yeah, that’s an important point. That’s a great point, actually. Alright, good. Thanks for that.

Chris: You’re welcome. Just to give you an idea of the complexity, just today we have a show match in Heroes of the Storm, followed two hours later by a regional competition match in Heroes of the Storm in the same lab. We’ve got both Overwatch A and B team playing two games – only one of those four total games will be broadcast. But the other three are going to happen nonetheless. All of those people have to be connected and arranged and times confirmed, rosters shared.

Brett: Well I think that’s one of the things that you have to remember too, is that you’re going to have to say no to a lot of invitations. You’re going to have to say no to a lot of potential interesting, fun, profitable kinds of tournaments because they’re not going to fit within your schedule. That’s sort of like, stick to your guns, know your rest times, know when you can and can’t actually schedule scrims. And even though it may be easy to scrim, it also needs to be coordinated closely with which pieces you want to broadcast and make sure that there’s enough lead time, setup time, and down time for everything that you’re going to be casting. Because again, casting is going to be key component to success.

Chris: Broadcasting, wow!
Brett: So we brushed on this just a little bit, so there are certain events which may require travel for your sports teams or for multiple teams. And this would include –

Chris: Invitationals and championships where you fly to a central location for the finals.

Brett: And those are covered in-house – the expenses for those that are expected? The teams will provide the resources in order to get there and stay there -

Chris: For the invitationals, usually.

Brett: – and participate for those invitational tournaments. The benefit of going and traveling to those places are –

Chris: Recruiting.

Brett: – the spectacle?

Chris: The spectacle? Yeah.

Brett: Which helps in recruiting. It helps –

Chris: Expanding the horizons for your players.

Brett: So that you get that national prominence. Which again goes back to recruiting. It helps to support the programs, support the school. Possible sponsorships. Prize money that may be associated with it.
Chris: Yeah. It’s a booster shot to the integrity and the shine of your program on campus to be invited to go somewhere.

Brett: And so an important piece, how do you decide how much travel per individual season per team? So for example, if you’re hosting five individual teams, or supporting five individual teams at a university, how do you decide how much travel is the right amount?

Chris: Well, because those are so hard to predict and they develop so quickly – in one case it was less than two months from invitation to arrival. They are very difficult to plan for and to budget for. So creating a line item in your budget that assumes that someone will travel creates at least the expectation that that might occur.

Missouri schools often do an eSports event where people come in and they do a mini tournament that day. You can probably plan something like thing out six months in advance to a year in advance, because that’s a big in-person tournament. Say we went to the Missouri one, if we were invited and we went to the Missouri event.

Brett: I see, okay.

Chris: That might be a fun thing to do. But you can usually know about those. It’s to put money in your design
or have a pocket patron ready to help pull something like that off.

Brett: So we're being pretty vague here, but maybe one to two events a year per team –

Chris: Oh, you want a number?

Brett: Well, I think it would be important to offer a vague description of how much travel is-- too much versus too little.

Chris: Well, what’s the over/under on this? Are you taking the over if it’s two a year?

Brett: Travel is great for these reasons, not so great for the reasons that it takes students out of school. If you have to deal with that same sort of excused absence policy that other traveling teams within your school have to deal with, whether that’s basketball players missing classes or tests, and reorganizing that. That’s no small feat, for sure.

Chris: Okay, keep going, sorry. I'm with you.

Brett: There are other downsides to travel. There’s the bureaucracy that is universities, whenever you’re taking a team and traveling anywhere. Legal has to know about it. You have to have insurance – you have to have proper coverage for insurance. You have to have someone that’s going to organize everything from flights to cars, and vans that haul people. You’re going to have to think
about chaperones once you get at the event to ensure that people are within curfew, if you’re imposing a curfew.

If you’re going to Las Vegas, you have to ensure that people aren’t hanging out in hotels where there’s age restrictions of where they’re supposed to be. All the distractions that come with traveling to a new place. And even though we’re talking about adults, college level students here, there will be issues with that.

    Chris: Always. And things that you can always count on – or you can always expect or a possibility with those, are illnesses to players. So you have to take more than you need. And the potential –

    Brett: And if there’s any discipline issues once you’re there, you also have to have someone that can stand in.

    Chris: You have to have a plan. You have to plan for if – and I always argue that the plan is for when something like that happens. You never want it to.

    Brett: It’s relatively expensive to take teams on the road and so there are things happening there. I want to circle back really quickly to the actual format of tryouts.

    Chris: Ah yes.
Brett: So you described who – which pool of student you can try to pull from or invite, participate. Everyone – you try to hold a tryout and we’ve talked to colleagues here who have had absolutely nightmare experiences when it comes to holding tryouts on their campus, because every level of player, when you open it up wants to come and play. Everyone wants to come and show their stuff, see what they can do, see how they measure up to other people at their university, when quite frankly there’s a huge disparity between those at the very upper echelon that the bottom crust, so to speak. There must be a plan for the player, “I play on the weekends with my buddies and I just wanted to give it a shot,” kind of thing.

So other tryout questions to consider. Do you hold the open tryouts? Do you hold it for certain people – invitation only, so to speak? What are the repercussions of having that sort of organizationally as an invitation only or drawing upon from a pool of only specific people versus opening it up to everyone? And the logistics of those tryouts themselves and how complicated and how time consuming they can possibly be.

Chris: They can be.

Brett: So what you can utilize are statistics and documentation of a player’s skill level and ability that are provided by certain titles of games that already exist.
Chris: As a key to entry for the possibility that we are looking for players that are bronze and above.

Brett: It’s a creative floor in a sense of those that are eligible to try out, all you need to do is come with that documentation. They submit a link to a third party website for companies that will help you organize yourself in terms of ranking.

Chris: Many. For every game. Rank.

Brett: You can either rely on those companies to help assist you with your selection process. For the selection process itself, do you provide people that are known experts to come in and help analyze and rank the candidates for the team in order to identify who is going to be in that top echelon? So how do you identify the upper crust, the top level players? Is it a face to face tryout? Are you simply relying on performance and rankings? How reliable are those performance and rankings? I think these are all decisions that you are going to have to decide as part of the tryout process.

One task you will have to do when creating a tryout selection process is that you will need to be very careful and document how it is that you’re doing things in order to ensure equity and fairness amongst the players that are trying out for the team. You want it to have some sort of
independence so that it is none of the sort of “friends of friends” that are making those decisions and they’re unfairly loading up to get their friends on your specific team to play for the university, because invariably we have found that so many of our players want to play with people they know and players that they feel comfortable with. However, they may not be the best players, in terms of a fair tryout situation, that are going to make the team.

All of these safeguards and careful documentation in terms of processes and selection are extremely important however you go about doing it. You’re going to want to ensure that everything is documented. That you leave enough time in order to create that sort of tryout piece. Once you have established a team, decide on getting new players on the team and how to provide a competitive and fair environment for tryouts. Does a returning sophomore on a specific team get an automatic pass to join the team? Do they have to tryout just like everybody else does? Part of that process is perhaps documenting and offering the analytics and statistics of your own players that are returning from your past team, and comparing those with the new people that are trying out.

Chris: Yeah. I would also make sure that – our colleagues at other institutions, as we’ve mentioned previously, have found themselves in trouble, because they
failed to make the tryouts open and inviting enough to be representative.

Brett: Yeah. Diversity. Again, inclusiveness and diversity. You want to ensure that everyone gets a fair shake, and offering that sort of floor of ability and skill level and then opening it up. And I was just talking about how you have to ensure enough time. You have to have the resources in place. And then you have to have a fair and impartial system in which to analyze and choose who the varsity players or who’s going to make the final teams.

Chris: Yeah. With outside folks that are not necessarily part of your university eSports, it’s generally a bad idea to invite former players, people who are on your team, or current players to evaluate the talent of their peers.

Brett: Right, it’s unfair. Because there are people that they know and there are people that they like playing with, and they are going to want those people on the team.

Chris: Yeah. Regardless of what the rubric says, they’ll add to the rubric the things that are important to them.

Brett: Part of that floor piece should be right away the eligibility requirements. Whatever you decide, if you’re eligible as a student – are they carrying a 3.0 average
coming into that semester? Do they have the time in which to commit to all practices? Do they have a level of commitment? Somehow try to gauge that so that they know that the team comes first. And they’re willing to make the sacrifices, in terms of maybe behavior outside of team play, so that they remain eligible throughout a season. Because you don’t want to get that player that’s on the team that is going to get kicked off because of illegal activity.

Chris: Yeah. The League of Legends players will tell you that one of my number one axioms is the most important personal characteristic is availability. Because if you are in legal trouble, if you are in grade trouble, then you are not available.

Brett: Right. So availability in terms of both open schedule and in terms of remaining eligible.

Chris: Remaining eligible.

Brett: Yeah. And then another key aspect on a potential player that you may want to consider evaluating during tryouts is coachability. You may want to put them in a tryout situation that’s pre-ordained, pre-planned. That puts them in a situation that they’re not used to being in. They’re playing with an unfamiliar character. They’re put in a no-win situation. Thinking of Star Trek, when they get put into the no-win situation –
Chris: Kobayashi Maru.

Brett: Thank you. I knew you’d know that. That was not supposed to be a dork test, but you passed with flying colors.

Chris: Thank you very much.

Brett: To see how they perform under adverse conditions. And to see how coachable they are. How well they respond to somebody saying, “Hey why don’t you try to play it this way. Outside of your normal zone of confidence.” And see if they respond in a way that they’re going to be coachable for you. I think that’s a really effective way to use that piece in a tryout situation.

Chris: I agree completely. So I’ll just mention I think it’s important to have tryouts multiple times a year.

Brett: Oh jeez. Really?

Chris: Yes. Not once a year, but multiple times a year. Because new talent, new talent is constantly becoming available. And if you don’t have multiple tryouts, every big team will tell you –

Brett: You mean the first tryout? What do you mean, they’re coming in?

Chris: Second semester.

Brett: Not mid semester.
Chris: Not mid semester, but multiple times a year.

Brett: You mean one Spring and one Fall?

Chris: Yes. But I actually think that there is an opportunity for a third one, and let me explain. You have fall tryouts, which is for your fall season, because their availability has to be such for fall season. You’ll have people who say, “Well guess what, the only time I can take this one class required for my major is this.” It’s nice to have the ability to say, “Well, this isn’t your semester then because this is when our class is.”

Brett: But aren’t you just holding the tryouts before that season? Why are you trying to –

Chris: Yes, but there are two seasons a year. There’s a fall season and a spring season, unlike other sports.

Brett: In all?

Chris: Most.

Brett: So a tryout before each season. That’s a lot of overhead on managing a team.

Chris: It is. Which is why it’s got to be so tight. But you’ll have attrition throughout a semester anyway. Because that’s just the way – and I want to have a May tryout for the fall team, that is incomplete. It basically gives us the ability to identify players for whom we might
try to assign a scholarship with. And you need that kind of run time on that. Every major sport and ancillary varsity program does tryouts in the springtime so that they can assign scholarships.

Brett: So maybe an appropriate thing to do is really, say, you need to work hard to develop a rubric for a specific team and a specific title that can help you gauge. Not only provide the floor of the minimum of what you want before you’re able to tryout and prove it. But then a way to gauge new talent before it comes in.

Chris: And I always reserve the right in that process to invite anyone to join the team at any time. So that I –

Brett: Isn’t that problematic when you start talking about scholarships and commitments?

Chris: That person’s not scholarship eligible that semester.

Brett: So you’re inviting a walk in?

Chris: Yeah, it’s a walk on.

Brett: It’s a walk on.

Chris: One hundred percent walk on. And that there’s a walk on tryout the week before school starts. Because often – which allows those other people – not the starters that have already been selected from the previous
semester. But anyone who’s new on campus who didn’t know about it, who didn’t hear about it. You may have a lot of talent there. But those are walk ons also.

Brett: Assuming you’re in a position where you’re able to offer scholarships to certain team members, what is the commitment level there? Is it like any sport where, yeah, we’re committing to you for five years?

Chris: No. It’s a year-to-year –

Brett: One full year? And then those scholarships may or may not be freed up at the end of each year?

Chris: Correct.

Brett: So it’s like no promises and so you may end up with a person that came here on scholarship, didn’t perform well as a freshman, and then saying, “I’m sorry, we’re taking your scholarship and giving it to somebody else now.”

Chris: They have to tryout for their scholarship again. Preferential consideration offered to those who are still performing at a high level, who are applying for a scholarship again.

Brett: How do you provide that preference?
Chris: Simply that they are evaluated again. Is this person still providing the value and providing the grades to receive this.

Brett: But I’m just thinking – take the case in which, you’re forming a team of six players, or whatever, and you have scholarships given to those six players. Based on their performance during that year, you get a whole slew of new talent comes in that kicks the crud out of four of your former six scholarship players. You’re going to take away the four scholarships to those four players to give to –

Chris: Everyone will determine how the scholarships are – not just how they’re awarded but what is the criteria to whom they’re awarded to. One of those for us, is need.

Brett: Not normally. Not in athletic scholarships.

Chris: But this is an academic department. Right? So academics and performance –

Brett: Right. So you’re forming scholarships around the academic side? Or the skill level side?

Chris: We don’t have enough time to flush that out. Because I don’t necessarily have a great answer for that yet.

Brett: Yeah. I didn’t – to say that there would be parts of it based on need is completely out of left field for me. But that’s an interesting concept.
Chris: A consideration. If somebody is –

Brett: That gives a lot of arbitrary power to whomever says, “You get a scholarship and you don’t.”

Chris: Yes.

Brett: Without having that established rubric. That’s an interesting conversation.

Chris: You got to have a rubric for sure.

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To summarize the points covered in this conversation, Chris and I recommend the following.

When thinking about becoming a varsity program at your university:

• Create a plan – include student affairs and clubs early on

• The plan must address:

  • How eSports enhances the student experience, how it aligns with the university mission.
  
  • Money – funding for the program
  
  • Space – practice and tournament facilities
• Scalability and sustainability – permanent (faculty or staff) leadership within the proposal

• Find your champions at your university for gaining varsity status – breadcrumb them along if needed

• Model your plan after other programs that exist at your university with “varsity” status, and if none exist, model them after a program at a sister university

• Academic departments may hold advantages over other departments to host the team, in that they may:
  
  • Be able to approve requisitions faster, with fewer channels of approval
  
  • Have self-support academic models already in place
  
  • Have scholarship structures already in place
  
  • Have scholarly activities around eSports activities that already exist
  
  • Serve as job market preparation units for professional activities in eSports

Once the plan is set and all structural components are organized, have your legal department draft an internal MOU that gets signed by university leadership, recognizing your status as a varsity program.
Be prepared to present about eSports to the rest of your university. Be message design focused, and breadcrumb the principles as needed.
Running a varsity college eSports program is complicated and will encompass several people in full-time responsibilities. Consider building a program policy manual and player handbook for reference and to build continuity. What guidelines should be included? What information should be collected and monitored regarding your roster? What rules need to be expressed, what is the structure for adhering to those rules, and how are those rules enforced?
Chris: When we made the head coach / general manager change to our structure, it actually empowered me to do things that I didn’t think I would need to do but have totally had to do. Which is, I remind the eSports teams that I’m not your strategic coach, but I am your communication coach. And you’re going to use the communication strategies. You’re going to curb stuff that doesn’t have value. We’ll get buy-in from coaches and stuff like that, and I’m always going to be working on your head, on the psychology of it. We’ve been spending a lot of time just talking about flow theory.

Brett: That’s what we’re experts at.

Chris: Exactly. Exactly.

Brett: So there’s no other resource that you could go to that’s going to say something different. I’m actually the expert in this, so this is the deal.

Chris: Exactly. And so when I’m in your game, that’s assessment. That’s what I do. So yeah, so it was super helpful, and I sent a message to the teams late last night, and the message was essentially, “Things feel hard because they are hard. That we’re struggling with these things, we’re having to work on communication, where all of these things, yes, are true. And they’ll get better. They’ll get better incrementally. Some of them with just almost disappear overnight, some of them will struggle with – as
long as you’re here working, try to get better at.”

But the kicker of this is, “You have our full confidence. You have our full respect, and trust, and support. You are a leader.” And so I say, “In preparation for this match, I’m trying to set our mindset in preparation for this final big push of a week. I have to get better at what I do, you have to get better at what you do, and we’re going to ask everyone else to get better at their jobs as well. But it starts with me, it goes immediately to you, that we all have to do better in order to get as much out of this last week as we can.” And the captain of the Overwatch team was so appreciative of that.

Trying to instill that change begins with a kind of mentality, rather than playing a game, which is what’s been happening a lot. Anyway, so that’s just to bring you up to speed on that. It was good. It was a tough one.

Brett: So let’s talk about the college handbook for players. This is probably the single most important document you’re going to have, maybe besides your charter, that gives you the recognition from the university that, yes, you are the official eSports varsity program for your university or school, the next best thing.
And I think this applies all the way down through high school, and multi layers. Any time you have an organized group of eSports team that’s representing something, having a program/player handbook is a good idea.

Chris: Yep, I agree. And a lot of these players may not have necessarily ever had a traditional sports, and a traditional team experience. We’re seeing more and more students now that didn’t play soccer or football, or haven’t for such a long time that they don’t remember team code and dynamics, and what you do affects everyone else, and your responsibility –

Brett: Right, some of them have no experience of being as part of a team. This is a new experience, and they also have never been beholden to a hierarchy or a structure, in which, yes, you are responsible for your individual actions because they reflect on the entire organization. So here is their first introduction to that for most folks. And these are kids coming in 17, 18 years old, so it’s not surprising that this is new to them.

Chris: This document doesn’t replace responsibility training, but it outlines the curriculum and the expectations.

Brett: Absolutely. So what guidelines go into your handbook? Well, we have created one. Your first resource of a good one to borrow, as we’ve said before, is if you
have an athletic handbook or guideline, that’s a good one to start with. Does it need to be modified? Absolutely. And partly because there is information within the athletic handbook because they are NCAA regulated that may not apply to your eSports teams. However, most of those guidelines are good to have, and the resources provided are important as well. So those things may include the codes of conduct –

Chris: There's often a student code of the university, expectations for all students.

Brett: And that’s good to reiterate here. If there’s an additional one that your athletic department has adopted, we have one that emphasizes integrity. What does it mean to have integrity? What does it mean to represent your school at an event, which normal students don’t have to adhere to?

Chris: It’s a statement of cultural value. They’re part of a culture that they may not have been an active citizen of before, and they need to know what that culture expects, and what that culture wants. And they have the ability after reading something like this to go, “You know, I’m not interested in that.” But it is part of the contract to be part of the team. It’s not suggestions, it is a document which tells them exactly what people who are part of your team, whether it be eSports, or soccer, are expected to do.
Brett: Right. So in terms of contract, the legality of that, that’s something again, these handbooks are to be reviewed by whatever legal resource you have for your college and campus, have it be reviewed and approved by those bodies.

Again, I hesitate to use the word “contract,” even though it feels as such because it should have a page at the very end of the handbook from each player that they turn in that says they have received a copy of the handbook. They’re acknowledging the contents of it, and they are saying that they understand what the contents are. Because there are the rules, regulations, and consequences.

So after the code of conduct, it’s a good idea then to start including rules, and the consequences for breaking those rules. This may include a wide variety of topics including resources where you go with grievances, the resources that they have when they have any sorts of questions or concerns, or any questions as to interpretation of what those codes of conduct are.

Chris: Part of that code of conduct is responsibility in ethics, what do you do if you suspect that one of your teammates is suffering from depression, or might want to harm themselves, that kind of issue Those are all wrapped
up into those pieces. That they have a responsibility as a teammate not to look the other way, but to seek help.

Brett: It would also outline a process or procedure for those who are exiting the program, whether they’re graduating from the university, or for whatever reason, they’re dismissed, or they choose to leave the team behind, that exit interview, and what topics are to be covered, what information is to be gathered. Again, there are, of course, strict rules about gathering personal information, and sharing any of that information. But those are important pieces of the big picture to consider.

Again, we talked about resources. So there’s academic resources that are included in there. There’s student services, there’s discussion of drugs, and other illegal substances. Here again, we’re not talking about mandatory drug tests like many other athletic teams have. But instead, we mostly fill it with resources, reiterate state laws, and university, I guess, codes that would involve things like illegal activity, illegal drugs, or substance abuse.

And then again that final page. That’s key, is the acknowledgement of the handbook, that they’ve received, and they understand its contents. And that is something you’re going to want to collect and keep.
One of the things that a university is very concerned with is press, and social media. What are student athletes allowed to say and do on social media? How much discretion do you think that the managing and coaching staff has when it comes to those things?

Chris: Well, the managing and coaching staff is definitely responsible for helping to create the expectation within the group, and the culture. And if there is a culture where it’s okay to criticize your teammates when asked a question about them, then there’ll be consequences from that cultural decision.

So if that’s something you don’t want, maybe that’s part of the training, and again, made available in the handbook. When asked questions by media, compliment a teammate’s play, but don’t ever blame a teammate. Don't ever talk about they’re not doing very well. Don’t talk about their health. Players cannot – that’s a football rule, that players are not allowed to talk about the health of one another.

But it also is really important that any restrictions in communication that you might give also be accompanied with maybe the right way to say things. You don’t want to make them robots, and give all the clichés, right? You want to be honest, you want to be forthright, but you also want
to be complementary and proactive. If that is what you want your culture to be, it just needs to be outlined.

Brett: And I think most athletic teams, at least football and basketball that I know of, they actually have team rules –

Chris: Yeah, they do classes.

Brett: Yeah, they have classes on them, but they also just recommend curbing most social communications with specific reference to their team during the season, and even outside the season except for the organized media events, which they receive instruction and coaching. Just like you said, it’s more about honesty, it’s more about saying things that you know about, what you feel about, and it’s totally okay to say things like, “I don’t know,” to a media-based question.

So I guess I would say it’s up to the eSports coach and managers to decide how much of that they want to discuss with players in terms of outside media communication. Obviously, with these players, their social media is just ubiquitous in their everyday life. This is something that they don’t think twice about, tweeting about how they did in last night’s scrim.

So it’ll be interesting to see how that works. And of
course, we’re making a big deal out of this, but we would be surprised if any of these negative events happen to you or your team. They certainly haven’t happened here. It’s more about taking precautions, it’s more about having a hierarchy and a structure in place that can address these concerns if – and when -- something will arise.

Chris: It’s another opportunity to teach about consequences and unintended consequences. And that, as a person in a prominent limited position, there’s a greater expectation. For those players, what’s the old line? Those with great power have great responsibility. Something to that effect, right?

Brett: Well, that’s from Spider-Man I think.

Chris: Is that, is that what it is?

Brett: Yeah. That’s Spider-Man. Peter Parker’s uncle said that to him.

Chris: Maybe so. I thought it was from Star Trek.

Brett: With great power comes great responsibility. That’s Peter Parker.

Chris: No, I’m pretty sure that was Captain Pike to Scotty.

Brett: Was this a nerd test and I failed?

Chris: They went on a shuttle ride. Kobayashi Maru.
Brett: Yeah, Kobayashi Maru.

Okay, one of the things I wanted to mention on this topic is that one of the advantages of having a structure like we have, where we have a head coach, you, more of a general manager position, like me, is that I don’t want to call it, good cop, bad cop, but there’s a way you can outline within the handbook the things that are taken care of through the coach and through the general manager.

So for instance, we recommend having final roster decisions are always made by the general manager. And that takes the pressure off the head coach, and that he or she is now the facilitator, works with the players, makes recommendations to those effects, but doesn’t have to have the axe fall as one of his responsibilities, or her responsibilities. Which I think frees you up in some way to be what you are. What the head coach duties are, where you’re worried about matches– you’re worried about strategy, you’re worried about teaching, you’re worried about those kinds of pieces, whereas the final roster decisions can be –

Chris: Eligibility –

Brett: - yes, shoveled off to a different person.

So again, I think this is, having a structure in place where
there’s multiple people involved in the hierarchy is much more advantageous than trying to have a single person do it all. Even with small teams.

Chris: Yeah. That’s true.

Brett: So what does the future hold for eSports? Well, pull that crystal ball out of your bowling bag, and take a look in there, and insert Harry Potter references here, but try to figure out what’s going to happen next. Like –

Chris: Well I’m confounded by the confundus charm for sure. No, I think we’re going to see exponential growth in the number of schools that add eSports over the next few years. I think as officially sanctioned varsity programs.

Brett: And at what level they compete, or at what form of organization, what department they’re going to place it in? Who knows? But we’re going to see a lot more people – or universities, declare, for lack of a better word there, that they have a varsity program. Sort of like how you declare bankruptcy. Bankruptcy!

Chris: Bankruptcy! I think we’re also going to see a greater amount of control for a short time, placed from publishers on how play can take place, how competitive play can take place.

Brett: Definitely.
Chris: But I think those restrictions will loosen as schools basically –

Brett: Use the product. They’re using it, they want to use it the right way, and so I think there’s a reshaping coming, if that –

Chris: There is. So I think that in the initial stages, they’ll be a limiting characteristic. And then schools will start to play games that don’t have those restrictions. And the marketplace will then readjust.

Brett: Absolutely. And I think it could adjust in a big way. Just yesterday, I was asked again about a title, which we don’t have because it is a first-person shooter type of game. I explained why our recommendation is to choose non-shooter type games. And it made a lot of sense to them. And at the same time, they thought, “Well, these tournaments are still going to be going on because of the popularity of that title,” and they’re going to just operate outside the realm of varsity college programs.

And I think that’s true. I think that’s in the offering as well. And we’ll see how the marketplace will change. Will it embrace more types of simulated violence, versus fantasy violence?

Chris: Yeah, exactly. The interesting thing is that these other game titles are valuable, but they’re also
beholden to the marketplace.

Nike, and Adidas, and Under Armour all are so heavily invested in colleges, not just for brand recognition, but to build loyal consumer bases over time. Right? There’s such a large number of universities, and university students. These games rely on the same market principles as shoes do. Because you build a loyalty within a universe, and you tend to use those.

So I think we’re going to see a little bit of a relaxing of some of these restrictions on maybe some of the bigger titles in how they can be played. Especially as their comfort level with the broadcasting comes up. And they realize that they’re into micro markets. So this a lot of minutiae.

Brett: If you could narrow down your thoughts on titles, and which titles are being selected, which titles are being played by universities five years from now, what would be your –

Chris: I’ll even go into just in general genres. We’ll see more sports games. Right?

Brett: I agree.

Chris: Major sports games whether they be soccer, baseball, basketball, or football driven. We will see a
continued interest in highly strategic MOBAs, Massive Online Battle Arenas, like League of Legends, like Heroes of the Storm, like Dota 2. It may be one of those, it may be multiples of those, but they’ll always be that segment.

I think that we’re going to see increased interest in card-based games, and other strategic card-based games, like Hearthstone. Gwent is another one that’s out that could start getting more play. It’s not under the same umbrella as say Hearthstone is. Action arcade games like Rocket League still have those – I think we’re going to see more side-by-side fighting games, like more like a street-fighter variety. I think we’re going to see a few more of those as they rush in. And again, that’s a good space to be in.

And finally, I think we’re going to see more squad-based fantasy combat games like Overwatch in prominence. But multiple titles of each of these.

Brett: So if I was to predict, I would agree with you definitely on the games that mirror, or closely mirror existing sports. Maybe even combination of those sports. I see increased interest in team-based activities rather than individual play.

Chris: Team, yes.
Brett: And I don’t necessarily agree in my crystal ball about card play, and those kinds of games. Rather I think, because I think for a wider audience, the action-oriented games draw a little bit better in terms of broadcasting. Also involve again, seem to be more team oriented, and strategic oriented. So I think you’re going to see those kinds of games continue to rise to the top. But will there be changes atop that? Yes, and it’ll be interesting to see what sort of commercial enterprises are trying to find the next big thing in college eSports. I think that’s going to be one of the big headlines, if you will, over the next few years about which games are gaining momentum, which games are waning, and for which reasons.

One thing I do really think, is that if developers don’t have an ear, and design specifically toward the collegiate audience, they’re going to be missing out. And I think the developers that aim specifically toward this particular field, that is going to be a game that grows quickly.

Chris: To your point – and I would agree that the developer’s involvement in this is super important. Games that are highly spectatable, that offer spectator client replays, have all of these things built in, and many of the big companies are doing these things, are infinitely more attractive as an eSport because they are about the storytelling. We don’t view the game from the player’s
position exclusively. We have another view. And the games that allow and give many tools for that view are spectators.

Brett: Right. I also predict an increase in complexity within games. That because it’s going to make that upper echelon of players even more valuable. And so by making certain games that are even more complex and challenging, to be really good at, are going to gain in prominence.

Chris: And that does it for our fabulous interview. There are going to be so many collegiate jobs in this. This is a highly specialized field. And early in any big movement, there’s a scramble for what we think is the talent. But most of those people who are going to be really successful in this are current players, they’re in it now.

Brett: I think just the word “evolving” captures a lot of this, and so we can relate it to other sports that have gained more in popularity over the years. We haven’t seen a ton of new sports enter the collegiate atmosphere in recent years the way it did maybe back 60, 70, 100 years ago, where there was a lot more interest in starting new programs. This is really one of those things that has come up out of nowhere that is – it’s probably the newest of its kind, like I said, so it’s tough to compare.

But I see everything is evolving, so I think coaching and managing will evolve. The amount of attention and money
that universities and colleges put toward these programs, will continue to evolve. Building of arenas and practice spaces, those things will continue to evolve. The interest of sponsors. Everything right now is in a huge state of growth. It’s difficult to see where that ceiling’s going to be in terms of where the evolution will start – that evolution curve will start flattening out again.

But I think it’s not coming that soon. We’re talking about 10 years from now. The eSports landscape will look way different. That we know.

Chris: Yes. But there will still be fans.

Brett: Yeah, did I say there wouldn’t be fans?

Chris: No, it’ll look very different, but there’ll still be fans.

Brett: Absolutely, as long as people are playing them. And another question that often comes up is like, “Don’t you think this – is this just a fad? The popularity of this.” Well, was Pac-Man a fad? No. Was Pong? No. What started with Pong has evolved to this. It’s tough to predict what this will evolve to. But we know that for the last 40 years this has evolved to this stage. I don’t predict that it’s going away any time soon.

Chris: No. No.
Brett: It’s a matter of getting on board quickly, of getting organized quickly, and doing the right things, making the right decisions at the outset in order to help your program evolve along with the –

Chris: With a very kind of Lewis & Clark mentality of you don’t have a map. But you know you got to go in that direction. You get the best information that you can, but you just got to start.

Brett: Yeah. You’re always thinking metaphor, aren’t you?

Chris: Always.


Chris: And... scene.

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To summarize the points covered in this conversation, Chris and I recommend the following.

Along with creating a division of labor within your eSports executive / coaching team, consider building a player handbook. Obtain permission to start from your
athletic handbook, if you have one, as a good jumping-off point for expectations of the participants.

The handbook should contain:

• The hierarchy structure of your program and the roles of those involved

• Restate the student code of your college and university for integrity

• Provide a statement of cultural value and representation as responsibility of the player

• Team guidelines and rules

• Consequences for breaking team rules

• List of contact agencies, both internal and external, as resources for the players, if they have any questions, grievances, substance issues, etc.

• Details of exit interviews expected of them as they leave the team / graduate

• Expectations of media and social media conduct

• Structure of final roster decision-making and general season schedule expectations

• Player eligibility requirements
The Handbook should be approved by your contracts/legal department.

We think the future of eSports will have some sort of more formal governing body or bodies associated with it, it may develop from NACE or be a division of NCAA (or something similar), but there will be competition and we will see something emerge from the mail sooner rather than later.

We predict that even more schools will declare their varsity eSports teams until most, if not all, have something organized and in place.

There will continue to be more game titles emerge as strong leagues for competition. We think more traditional sports-themed games will be adopted, and more team-related titles in general. We hope that the trend is to accept more fantasy-related titles as we continue to look toward T-rated titles as being accepted. That is, we draw
the line at fantasy violence and will not move toward simulated violence, and we see this as a trend as well.

That’s it for now, good luck, and good gaming!