Diversity and Inclusion in Esports Programs in Higher Education:
Leading by Example at UCI

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ABSTRACT

The last 2 years have witnessed a tremendous rise in esports in the US and, with it, a growing concern about the lack of diversity and its underlying probable cause: toxicity toward women and minorities. The popularity of this new pastime among undergraduates has skyrocketed and club leagues are quickly transitioning into collegiate sports, leaving universities to rapidly catch up with student demand in order to attract and keep a technologically-adept incoming student body. The University of California, Irvine has become a leader in collegiate esports programs, boasting a centrally located, dedicated esports arena, an active gaming student body (72%), and undergraduate scholarships. The goal is to be a leader not merely on the digital field, however. The goal is to also live up to the long-standing commitment to diversity and inclusion across all aspects of campus life. In this article, the authors detail the strategy for accomplishing this. As university esports programs emerge nationwide, so too must campus policies and practices that ensure a welcoming and safe environment for all students.

KEYWORDS

Diversity, Esports, Higher Education, Inclusion, Policy

DOI: 10.4018/IJGCMS.2018040104
INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a tremendous rise in esports on college campuses in the US (Wingfield, 2014). Growing out of student-led campus clubs and organizations and now evolving into organized intercollegiate programs, competitive video game play is rapidly transitioning from a popular student pastime to a formal competitive spectator sport following trends in the professional sports arena both here in the US and abroad. In esports, players compete individually or in teams on video game titles ranging from multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) such as League of Legends to first person shooter games like Overwatch to classic fighting games like Super Smash Bros. Viewership for such competitions has exploded, rising 43% from 204 to 292 million in the last two years alone (Lofgren, 2017). As the popularity of this new pastime skyrockets and club leagues become varsity sports, universities are having to rapidly catch up with student demand in order to attract and keep a technologically-adept incoming student body.

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) has joined the game, with premier space in the student center now serving as an esports arena for the student body and sponsor-raised scholarship money offered to 22 undergraduate top esports athletes. As the first major research university to legitimize and accommodate the esports movement, the entire nation has its eye on UCI. National press given to our efforts over this past academic year has only increased: ESPN, LA Times, New York Post, and other news and tech outlets that reach a broad audience. As such, UCI is positioned as a national leader in this space. As collegiate esports flourishes, UCI has been branded as the “big name” to watch (Chan, 2016).

Yet, a significant challenge faces esports, collegiate, professional, and amateur leagues alike. While participation of women in computer and video game play in the US has remained remarkably steady over the last decade, hovering around 40%, the diversity of players and fans of esports remains low: Only 15% of the esports viewer audience is female and only 35% is Hispanic or African American (Statista, 2017a, 2017b). Few empirical studies of the lack of diversity have been published yet, but leading esports scholar Taylor (2017) suggests that a primary cause is the toxicity of the esports community culture toward non-male, Hispanic and African American players. The esports community has a checkered history of racist, sexist discourse and online harassment of female players. To date, there are very few coordinated and institutionalized efforts to impactfully and intentionally address the issue. Given our experience and commitment to inclusive excellence-- as evidenced by our longstanding Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity, bolstered by an NSF ADVANCE grant in 2000 and further strengthened by the development of the Office of Inclusive Excellence in 2014-- we see an opportunity and obligation for leadership in this newly emerging collegiate sports scene.

The campus’ long-standing commitment to serve as a national leader and global model of inclusive excellence in all aspects of campus life, includes collegiate sports programs and undergraduate student life. Excellence through diversity defines our campus community; our new esports program is no exception. Through UCI Esports’ commitment to competition, academics, community, and entertainment, we have embarked upon a journey that we hope will inspire others to help us to contemplate, act, and transform the professional, collegiate and amateur arenas. We aim to demonstrate our leadership in inclusion and esports by tackling the challenge of inclusion in esports head on. Toward these ends, we established the “Diversity and Inclusion in Esports Task Force” on campus in March 2017. Comprised of selected UCI leadership, faculty, students and alumni, this task force was charged with developing a strategy to maximize diversity and inclusion within the esports program.

This article details the outcomes of the Task Force’s deliberations. Here, we outline our strategy to increase inclusion and therefore diversity among the esports program. As mentioned above, UCI is a leader in campus equity, diversity, and inclusion. We are radically committed to inclusive excellence in all our programs and esports is no exception. This commitment is fundamental to advancing our campus mission as a public research university. We believe that there is great opportunity to create a competitive esports environment that transcends geography, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual
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