

WINTER 2025

ESPORTS NEXT

TRACKING THE INDUSTRY PULSE OF ESPORTS

A DECADE OF GROWTH

HOW A DECADE OF SUCCESS SETS UP THE HARDEST CHAPTER YET.

BRIDGING THE GAP

RETHINKING THE LEAP FROM CLASSROOM TO CAREER.

THE ESPORTS EFFECT

HOW COLLEGIATE ESPORTS UNLOCKED 95% GRADUATION RATES AND BECAME HIGHER EDUCATION'S SECRET WEAPON



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EsportsNext Magazine Mission

As the official publication of the Esports Trade Association, EsportsNext Magazine aims to advance the esports industry through in-depth reporting, insightful analysis, and compelling storytelling. Reflecting ESTA's mission, we strive to unify, advocate for, and promote the broader esports community, providing a platform for professional development, innovation, and industry insights.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

After a decade of treating scholastic esports as an experimental side project, educational institutions are discovering what the data has been screaming all along: this isn't about gaming. It's about solving problems that traditional approaches never could.

Our cover investigation reveals the infrastructure shift redefining American education. Ten years and 680 collegiate programs later, fresh research from the most comprehensive study ever conducted shows 95% retention rates and 3.38 GPAs among competitive players, while Atlantic City's district-wide implementation proves equity and innovation don't have to be opposing forces.

What we're witnessing represents something more significant than adding gaming PCs to recreation centers. The programs succeeding aren't the ones with the biggest budgets—they're the ones that cracked the code on systematic integration, translating student engagement into institutional priorities and leveraging student leadership as their most powerful asset.

In these pages, you'll discover why scholastic esports has reached the same inflection point that traditional athletics navigated decades ago. You'll see how districts and universities are engineering career pathways that meet students where their interests already are. You'll understand why retention and STEM pipeline development aren't happy accidents but predictable outcomes of programs built on authentic belonging.

Most importantly, you'll learn why the next phase won't be defined by hypergrowth metrics but by the quality of bridges being built between educational levels, industry partners, and career outcomes that actually deliver.

The smart administrators have stopped asking whether esports justifies investment. They're asking whether their infrastructure is sophisticated enough to leverage what's already working.

Game on,



Megan Van Petten
Editor-in-Chief
EsportsNext Magazine



The Scholastic Esports Inflection Point

The Winter 2025 Issue explores how educational institutions are discovering competitive gaming isn't an extracurricular experiment—it's workforce development infrastructure that happens to use controllers.

The Decade That Changed Campus Forever examines ten years that produced 680 programs, \$190 million in facilities, and \$1 billion in tuition revenue. The 2024-2025 Collegiate Esports Trends Report captures an industry hitting its first major inflection point.

The 95% Solution documents the most comprehensive collegiate study ever conducted: 95% graduation intent, 3.38 GPAs, and 22.5 weekly practice hours. Programs accidentally engineered a retention machine powered not by scholarships but by authentic belonging.

Press Start to Save Public Schools investigates Atlantic City's unprecedented move: esports facilities across all ten K-12 buildings simultaneously. No pilots. District-wide equity from day one, with integrated learning ecosystems connecting gaming to real career pathways.

Building Better Bridges reveals findings from the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab. Forty-five senior leaders developed frameworks for converting infrastructure into career pipelines. With 200,000 high school students engaged, the missing ingredient isn't funding—it's intentional architecture.

Together, these investigations reveal education's graduation from treating esports as optional programming to leveraging it as systematic infrastructure for retention and workforce preparation.



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Building Better Bridges

How Esports Education Is Reinventing the Career Pipeline

How do you transform explosive educational growth into career pathways that actually deliver on the promise?



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The 95% Solution

How Collegiate Esports Cracked the Code on Student Retention That Traditional Sports Never Could

While universities scramble for enrollment strategies, competitive gaming programs are quietly producing STEM graduates with 3.38 GPAs who actually want to stay in school



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The Decade That Changed Campus Forever

Inside Collegiate Esports' Breakneck Rise

From student-led clubs to \$190 million in facilities and \$1 billion in tuition revenue, collegiate esports proved its permanence in just ten years. Now 680 programs are using the data to write the playbook for what comes next.



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Press Start To Save Public Schools

A Look at Atlantic City's District-wide Esports Program

Atlantic City is betting that competitive gaming is the future of career education. The nation is watching.



Collegiate Esports Has a Coaching Problem. AI Might Be the Answer

How artificial intelligence is scaling coaching capabilities to match college esports' explosive growth

By Lindsay Heatley

Picture a college esports coach hunched over their desk at midnight, scrubbing through their third consecutive hour of Valorant gameplay footage. They're searching for that split-second positioning error that cost their team the round, trying to spot patterns across dozens of matches while juggling spreadsheets and handwritten notes. Tomorrow they'll need to do it all over again—for a different team, in a different game.

"Limited feedback was a huge problem," admits Jared Connell, former coach at Graceland University and now working with multiple esports startups. "As a coach, you're trying to give feedback to multiple teams across multiple games, and it's just overwhelming."

This exhausting reality—coaches spending upwards of 50 hours weekly reviewing gameplay, yet still missing crucial insights—was the catalyst for a recent Esports Trade Association discussion on how artificial intelligence is transforming the coaching landscape. Hosted by Shubber Ali, CEO of Omnic.AI, the LinkedIn Live session revealed how the data deluge threatening to drown college esports programs might actually be their greatest opportunity.

Connell witnessed the explosive trajectory of college esports during his transition from competitive wrestler to

coach. "When I first went to Graceland, my very first year, I was still a wrestler. They were a club team that trained in our library," he recalls. "By the time I took over the program, we had invested \$25,000 into a whole lab."

That four-year transformation mirrors a pattern rippling across American campuses. The University of Southern Maine just unveiled a state-of-the-art esports arena. Colorado State University built an established program from nothing in six years. "You saw tons of that growth of just these passionate people sparking up everywhere," Connell explains. "It's exponential."

Feeding this collegiate boom is an even more dramatic expansion at the high school level, where platforms like PlayVS now serve over 10,000 schools. This creates both unprecedented opportunity and a fundamental challenge: How do college programs evaluate this massive influx of talent when human coaches are already maxed out?

Enter artificial intelligence—not as a replacement for human coaches, but as their force multiplier. Omnic.AI's platform has already processed over 130,000 matches across Valorant, Rocket League, and League of Legends, extracting insights impossible for human eyes to catch.

The AI develops what Connell calls a "fingerprint" for each player—a unique profile of playstyle, habits, and tendencies that becomes more accurate with every match. "As it learns your fingerprint, it learns what your patterns are," Connell explains. "It gives continuously more accurate feedback—not just about what everyone else is doing, but specifically what you're doing."

A ChatGPT-like interface allows players to ask specific questions about their performance—should I use a different weapon here? Am I rotating too slowly?—and receive answers based not just on their own gameplay but on data from tens of thousands of players using similar characters and strategies.



The platform's most sophisticated element is its ability to segment insights by skill level. "You don't want to give really basic information to super experienced players," Ali notes, drawing an analogy to traditional sports. "No one's telling Serena Williams, 'okay, you want to throw the ball up and make sure you're holding your wrist this way.' She's got that part figured out."

Future updates will formalize this tiering, delivering foundational tips to novices while providing advanced players with nuanced adjustments that separate good from great. The AI's training process reflects this sophistication—an eight-to-twelve-week development phase, followed by beta testing until the system reaches 95% accuracy, then continuous improvement as more players use it.

Throughout the discussion, both Ali and Connell emphasized that AI isn't displacing human coaches—it's freeing them to focus on what technology can't replicate. Coaches build team culture, manage interpersonal dynamics, and provide emotional intelligence. What AI does is eliminate the mechanical grunt work of reviewing endless footage, giving coaches back time to actually coach.

The most successful programs won't be those that hand everything over to AI, but those that thoughtfully integrate it into their coaching workflow—using automation for data analysis while reserving human expertise for strategy, leadership, and player development.

As the session concluded, one message resonated clearly: AI-powered coaching isn't emerging technology—it's current reality. The programs that embrace these tools will gain measurable advantages in talent evaluation, player development, and strategic preparation.

For coaches drowning in VOD reviews and spreadsheet management, the question isn't whether to explore AI coaching assistance. It's whether they'll adopt it before their rivals do.



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In an industry where yesterday's innovation is tomorrow's standard, ESTA's LinkedIn Live series has become the essential gathering place for esports' most influential voices.

Where Real Conversations Happen

The discussions featured in this article aren't one-offs—they're part of an ongoing digital symposium where industry leaders, academic pioneers, and next-gen innovators dissect how competitive gaming is fundamentally rewiring education, business models, and cultural touchstones.

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Don't miss the next broadcast. Follow the Esports Trade Association on LinkedIn and join the conversation that's defining gaming's future.



building better bridges

How Esports Education
Is Reinventing the
Career Pipeline

By Reece Hartle – SHI Public Sector Education Strategist Team Lead

When 45 senior leaders and students from across North America's esports ecosystem gathered this summer for the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab powered by SHI, they weren't there for another conference panel about the industry's bright future. They came to solve a puzzle that's been nagging at everyone from high school coaches to university administrators to industry hiring managers: How do you transform explosive educational growth into career pathways that actually deliver on the promise?

The growth numbers are genuinely remarkable. High school programs now engage over 200,000 students—a figure that's doubled since 2020. More than 240 colleges field varsity teams, creating competitive opportunities for 15,000+ collegiate athletes across North America. Graduates from established programs land jobs at a 78% placement rate, proving that when the system clicks into gear, it really works.

But the lab participants didn't gather in their breakout sessions to high-five over hockey-stick growth charts. They came to diagnose why success feels like lightning in a bottle—and to reverse-engineer what makes it strike.

The Architecture of Opportunity

What emerged from those intensive collaboration sessions wasn't a list of problems to lament. It was a blueprint for systematic change, developed by the people who actually run these programs, coach these teams, and hire their graduates.

The assessment revealed a pattern that's both encouraging and instructive: Programs are crushing what they set out to do. A striking 80.6% have mastered competitive team development, successfully engaging students and building formidable gaming skills. These programs deliver genuine value—they're just optimized for different outcomes than what the professional world is hungry for.

The real opportunity gap appears in the transition zones, those critical moments when students move between levels. While 65.7%

of programs show developing student leadership capabilities, only 35.5% have built effective industry partnerships. Just 42% have developed strong career pathway programming. And only 33.4% can effectively measure and demonstrate the career-relevant skills that industry partners actually value.

These aren't failures in need of a postmortem—they're design challenges with practical, tested solutions.

Speaking Different Languages Fluently

"There's no NCAA for esports... nobody's really communicating to each other," one lab participant observed. But rather than treating this as a tragic flaw, the working groups identified it as an opportunity to build something better from the ground up—to design coordination rather than inherit bureaucracy.



Igor Bakovic, Director of Sports at the DuPage Sports Commission, engages in a dynamic discussion with fellow participants during the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab powered by SHI at EsportsNext in Dallas, Texas on May 22, 2025.

the esports career paradox



Job placement rate when programs build career bridges

but here's the gap



prepare students for industry careers



ONLY 36% have industry partnerships



ONLY 42% offer career pathways



ONLY 33% measure career-relevant skills

the bottom line

We've mastered engagement.
We haven't mastered the handoff to careers.



Tyler Galvin, Esports Supervisor at Grand Canyon University, contributes to a breakout discussion during the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab powered by SHI at EsportsNext in Dallas, Texas on May 22, 2025.

High schools, colleges, and industry currently operate in parallel universes rather than in sequence. Each level makes well-intentioned assumptions about what others need without systematic coordination. The result: students become accidental integrators of a fractured system, forced to navigate transitions alone even when the path forward could be mapped with stunning clarity.

The solution isn't standardization—nobody's asking for an esports NCAA complete with byzantine eligibility rules and compliance officers. It's systematic communication. Regional coordination between

local high schools and colleges that meets quarterly rather than accidentally. Industry advisory groups that actually inform curriculum development instead of rubber-stamping predetermined decisions. Student transition support that provides clear guidance at the moments when it matters most—not generic “good luck” messages but specific roadmaps.

When these communication structures exist, they transform isolated programs operating on best guesses into integrated pathways built on shared understanding. The infrastructure doesn't need to be complex. It just needs to be intentional.

Your Best Asset Is Already Here

Perhaps the most electrifying insight from the lab: The talent you need to build better programs is already sitting in your Discord servers, streaming your scrim, and competing in your tournaments.

“Students are able to explain expectations to other students... students listen to each other far more than a top-down approach,” participants observed. Yet most programs still position students as participants rather than architects—spectators to their own experience instead of co-creators of it.

Students possess three superpowers that adults fundamentally cannot replicate. They communicate program value to peers with a fluency that makes traditional marketing look like smoke signals. They naturally bridge gaming culture and institutional requirements without breaking a sweat. And they understand what actually works versus what adults think should work—a distinction that matters more than most administrators want to admit.

The programs showing the strongest outcomes—that 65.7% with developing student leadership—are just scratching the surface of what’s possible when students become true program architects: co-designing curricula, leading peer communication, managing industry relationships, and providing the kind of systematic feedback that actually shapes outcomes.

This isn’t about dumping more responsibility on students. It’s about leveraging capabilities they already wield naturally.

Translation as Strategy

Programs that successfully navigate stakeholder relationships have cracked a sophisticated code that sounds simple but proves maddeningly difficult to execute: They don’t try to convert administrators, parents, or industry partners to love gaming. They translate esports outcomes to existing stakeholder priorities with the precision of a simultaneous interpreter at the UN.

“Speak the language they speak,” lab participants emphasized—advice that carries more weight than its simplicity suggests.

For administrators, that means ditching generic pitches about “21st-century skills” and instead connecting esports directly to institutional strategic planning and workforce development objectives. It’s the difference between “our students are learning valuable skills” and “our program reduced chronic absenteeism by 23% while developing project management competencies aligned with your workforce development objectives.”

For parents anxiously wondering if their kid’s gaming obsession has any practical value, it’s demonstrating concrete career opportunities: leadership development, professional networking, portfolio-building project experience, and actual job pathways that don’t involve becoming the next Ninja.

For industry partners evaluating whether educational collaboration is worth their time, it’s showing how programs develop the collaborative capabilities and cultural bridge skills they’re struggling to hire anywhere else—employees who speak both gaming and business fluently enough to translate between worlds.

Successful programs have discovered that when you speak stakeholder language, resistance doesn’t just soften—it transforms into partnership. The shift isn’t about gaming skills at all. It’s about solving problems stakeholders already care about, using gaming as the mechanism rather than the message.

The Strategic Resource Advantage

Here’s where conventional wisdom takes a haymaker to the jaw: The assessment revealed that 76.7% of programs face budget limitations. Yet resource strategy appears to matter more than resource scale, with programs that focus strategically often achieving better stakeholder outcomes than those pursuing comprehensive offerings.

“Use your resources with intention to solve a specific problem aligned with your institution’s strategic initiatives,” participants advised—counsel that sounds almost too simple until you watch programs implement it and suddenly start winning battles they’d been losing for years.

Instead of asking “How do we build a complete esports program?” the more effective question becomes: “What 1-2 specific problems can we solve with available resources while building career-relevant skills?”

For high schools wrestling with chronic absenteeism, that might mean deploying team-based learning that requires consistent participation—gaming as the hook, attendance as the outcome, commitment to group success as the transferable skill. For colleges fighting retention battles, it could mean building inclusive competitive communities that give students compelling reasons to stay on campus. For industry partnerships, it’s about creating collaborative employees who can code-switch between gaming culture and boardroom culture without missing a beat.

This focused approach allows programs to demonstrate clear value before requesting additional investment—and to scale based on evidence rather than enthusiasm.

you can't buy an industry partnership

Most esports programs try to transact their way in: guest speakers, equipment deals, networking events.



Lab participants identified why: You can't buy relationships.

the framework that works

They build partnerships like relationships.

Start small.

Solve one real business problem.

Prove value. Turn pilots into measurable outcomes.

Scale trust.

Formalize what works.

It's slower. It's harder. It's the only thing that actually works.

Industry Partnerships That Actually Work

Only 35.5% of programs have built effective industry partnerships—but the ones that have cracked the code are showing what's possible when collaboration creates mutual value instead of just warm feelings.

Traditional approaches—the occasional guest lecture, equipment donations with logos attached, networking events that feel like speed dating—provide goodwill but not the sustained relationships that actually move the career preparation needle. The partnerships that work move beyond transactions to systematic collaboration that benefits everyone involved.

Project-based learning where industry partners provide real business challenges for student teams to solve—actual problems with actual consequences, not sanitized case studies from a textbook. Structured mentorship that creates ongoing professional-student relationships rather than one-off coffee meetings. Curriculum collaboration where industry professionals help design learning objectives and assessment methods, ensuring graduates show up with capabilities that matter. Systematic career pathway support that provides clear information about requirements and opportunities rather than vague encouragement about “following your passion.”

The three-phase framework developed by lab participants acknowledges that effective partnerships are built like relationships,



Robin Armstrong, Community Manager at the Texas Scholastic Esports Federation, leads a discussion during the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab powered by SHI at EsportsNext in Dallas, Texas, on May 22, 2025.

not purchased like services: starting with value proposition development, moving through pilot implementation, and expanding to systematic integration only after demonstrating success at each stage.

When orchestrated thoughtfully, these partnerships create value that flows in all directions. Industry partners gain access to prepared talent who understand gaming culture and can bridge professional environments—a rare combination that’s nearly impossible to hire from the general talent pool. Educational programs gain relevance validation, resource access beyond their internal capacity, and the kind of enhanced student motivation that comes from seeing real career pathways. Students get authentic career exploration through direct professional interaction, networks that create actual job opportunities, real-world project experience that builds portfolios, and clear pathway visibility from educational participation to professional roles.

Measuring What Matters

The shift from competitive metrics to career-relevant assessment represents one of the most practical opportunities identified by the lab.

Traditional metrics—tournament results, win-loss records, individual gaming performance—measure gaming success but miss the capabilities that create career opportunities: leadership development, communication effectiveness, project management, and professional network building.

The portfolio-based assessment framework moves beyond competition results to document community impact, professional skills, and career preparation. Instead of “How did the team perform?” the assessment asks: “How effectively do students develop and demonstrate leadership? How well do they communicate with diverse audiences? How successfully do they coordinate complex initiatives?”

This isn’t about abandoning competitive success—it’s about measuring additional dimensions that matter for career outcomes. When programs can demonstrate these capabilities, they can communicate value using stakeholder language, whether that’s administrators evaluating institutional impact, parents assessing career preparation, or industry partners measuring workforce readiness.

The Implementation Pathway

The five-solution framework developed by the leadership lab provides a practical roadmap:

Strategic institutional problem-solving: Identifying specific challenges esports can address while building career skills, rather than pursuing generic program development.

Systematic communication protocols: Creating regular coordination between high schools, colleges, and industry to align expectations and support transitions.

Student leadership development as core infrastructure: Positioning students as program architects who co-design systems and manage stakeholder relationships.

Sophisticated stakeholder translation: Communicating esports outcomes using stakeholder language rather than requiring cultural conversion to gaming appreciation.

Strategic resource allocation: Focusing resources on specific problem-solving rather than comprehensive services, scaling based on demonstrated success.

These solutions are interconnected—each one supports and amplifies the others. But they’re also practical: they don’t require massive new budgets or complete program overhauls. They require strategic thinking about resource allocation, systematic coordination, and sophisticated stakeholder communication.

The Opportunity Window

Here’s what the lab participants know that most institutions are still figuring out: The infrastructure is already built. The students are already engaged. The industry partners are already looking for talent. The missing ingredient isn’t money, facilities, or even time—it’s the intentional architecture that connects what exists into something coherent.

Think about what’s actually on the table: 200,000 high school students already showing up, already engaged, already passionate. Another 15,000+ are competing at the collegiate level. Industry partners who aren’t just tolerating educational partnerships but actively seeking them out. And a 78% job placement rate for graduates from programs that get the formula right.



Erik Anderson, President of FaZe Esports, leading an engaging breakout discussion at the Next Gen Esports Leadership Lab powered by SHI during EsportsNext Dallas, May 22, 2025.

The blueprint developed by these 45 leaders doesn't require revolutionary change or massive capital investment. It requires five strategic shifts that programs can begin implementing Monday morning:

Stop building generic esports programs and start solving specific institutional problems. Stop working in isolation and start coordinating systematically across educational levels. Stop treating students as participants and start positioning them as architects. Stop trying to convert stakeholders to love gaming and start translating outcomes to their existing priorities. Stop pursuing comprehensive services and start focusing resources strategically.

Each shift reinforces the others. Each one amplifies the impact of the rest. And each one can begin with the resources programs already have.

What Happens Next

The most successful programs won't be the ones with the biggest budgets or the flashiest arenas. They'll be the ones that crack the code on systematic integration—that figure out how to position themselves as essential institutional infrastructure rather than optional student activities.

They'll leverage their students' natural capabilities to bridge worlds that adults struggle to connect. They'll speak fluent stakeholder whether they're talking to

university administrators about retention metrics, parents about career preparation, or industry partners about workforce development. They'll measure what matters for careers, not just what's easy to count in competition.

And they'll do all of this not because someone handed them a massive budget increase, but because they chose to think strategically about the resources they already control.

The frameworks exist. The evidence is documented. The stakeholder wisdom has been captured and codified. What happens next depends entirely on whether you're ready to stop optimizing programs in isolation and start building the bridges that turn educational infrastructure into genuine career pipelines.

For the 200,000 high school students, 15,000 collegiate athletes, and countless industry professionals waiting for those connections to get built, the question isn't whether someone will eventually do this work. The question is whether you'll be among the programs that lead—or among those scrambling to catch up once the competitive advantages become obvious.

The choice, as it turns out, is remarkably straightforward. The implementation roadmap is sitting right there, built by practitioners who've already done the hard thinking. All that's left is deciding whether to use it.

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From Play to Profession

How PlayVS Brings Esports Education Into the Classroom

Alex Hirbe, Education Manager at PlayVS, on turning high school gamers into future-ready professionals



At PlayVS, scholastic esports is more than gameplay—it's a curriculum. We sat down with Education Manager Alex Hirbe to learn how the company's Gaming Concepts courses and Blueprint platform are reshaping what it means to integrate esports into classrooms across the country.

What drew you to the world of esports and education?

I spent years teaching in classrooms and supporting teachers with educational technology. I saw how students—especially those struggling in traditional settings—lit up when learning involved gaming, collaboration, and creativity. That sparked something in me. I realized esports could be more than a hobby; it could be an academic pathway.

How do Gaming Concepts and Blueprint actually work in schools?

Gaming Concepts is a curriculum designed by licensed teachers that connects esports to academic standards, digital literacy, and real-world skills. Courses like Digital Life Skills, Streaming & Shoutcasting, and Computer Applications go

beyond gameplay—they develop communication, teamwork, and career readiness. Our Blueprint platform supports that work by helping teachers deliver content, track student progress, and even build custom learning modules.

What does success look like for your program?

It's not just about winning matches. We look at growth: improved attendance, better collaboration, and increased student confidence. Our Mental Health Moments embedded in the curriculum also help students build emotional literacy—something that's just as important as technical skills. When students feel a sense of belonging and discover their potential through esports, that's the real win.

What inspired the way you built this program?

Honestly, it came from watching students thrive when given space to learn through play. We took inspiration from project-based learning, social-emotional development, and CTE models to design something that feels purposeful and modern. At its core, it's about meeting students where they are—and helping them go further.

What does your partnership with ESTA bring to the table?

ESTA connects us with industry leaders, which helps ensure our curriculum stays relevant to what the esports workforce actually needs. It's helped align our programs with real job pathways in media, production, and technology.

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Why Your Esports Startup Probably Misunderstands PR (And How to Fix It)

JSA+Partners breaks down the myths, mechanics, and marathon mindset behind effective esports public relations

By Lindsay Heatley

The promise sounds almost too good: Pay someone to write glowing articles about your company. Watch the coverage translate directly into sales. Become an industry thought leader overnight.

“Not true,” says Casey Borisoff, Director of Public Relations at JSA+Partners, ticking through the most persistent myths plaguing esports founders. “PR doesn’t control journalists. Reporters don’t send articles for approval—that would be called an ad. And PR results don’t happen instantaneously.”

This reality check kicked off ESTA’s recent “Public Relations 101” training series, where the JSA+Partners team—led by founder Jennifer Acree alongside Borisoff and PR Manager Nick Moran—spent two sessions dismantling misconceptions and teaching practical PR fundamentals to an industry that desperately needs both.

Their client roster speaks for itself: Electronic Arts, SYBO (the team behind Subway Surfers), Red Bull Gaming, and Exploding Kittens. But expertise alone doesn’t bridge the gap between what founders think PR does and what it actually accomplishes. That requires confronting some uncomfortable truths.

The Marathon, Not the Sprint

“PR is really about the long game,” Borisoff emphasizes. “It’s about relationship building and establishing credibility. You can’t just become a thought leader overnight.”

This long-game mindset clashes with startup culture’s obsession with instant metrics. Worse, publications rarely link directly to products—their goal is keeping readers on their own sites, not driving traffic elsewhere.

“PR is first and foremost a brand awareness driver and thought leadership play,” Borisoff clarifies.

The challenge intensifies when you consider what reporters face daily. “We’ve asked reporters that they receive between 150 and 700 email pitches each and every day,” Moran explains. “The number could be as high as 1,000. That’s a baffling amount of emails.”

Standing out requires what Moran calls “killer strong messaging” aligned with overall company goals. It’s not enough to have news—you need narrative, perspective, and authority that journalists actually want to cover.

What PR Really Is

If PR isn’t about controlling coverage or guaranteeing sales, what does it actually do?

“PR provides the bridge between companies and the public,” Acree explains. “Think about it as a two-way mirror. We’re not only looking at how the public perceives the company, but how the company interacts with the public.”

This reputation management extends far beyond media coverage. The JSA team emphasized that their toolkit includes thought leadership development, content strategy for owned channels like LinkedIn and company blogs, conference speaking opportunities, award submissions, and crisis prevention—the unsexy work of ensuring consistency across every public touchpoint.



"It can take one news cycle for things to go downhill," Acree warns. "You want to make sure that's not going to happen. Those are the day-to-day strategies and tactics that we employ as communications people."

Thought leadership, despite becoming buzzword territory, remains central to effective PR. Moran points to Exploding Kittens CEO Elan Lee's podcast appearances—where he's not pitching products but sharing innovation strategies and behind-the-scenes insights only he can provide.

"He's telling the secret sauce behind his strategy," Moran notes. "Which will hopefully translate into interest in the company, but not inherently."

Timing and Strategic Alignment

When should esports companies start PR? The answer defies simple formulas.

"It's nice to have a moment in time that you're using as a launch pad," Borisoff suggests—a funding announcement or product launch that justifies introducing the company to journalists. But waiting for perfect timing can backfire.

"PR isn't really something you can just turn on," she continues. "I think it's important to engage an agency a month or two ahead of when you're trying to announce something. The most important thing is laying a really strong foundation."

The team stressed that PR strategy must align with business objectives that shift as companies evolve. What works for B2B partnerships differs dramatically from B2C campaigns aimed at general consumers or hardcore gaming enthusiasts.

For esports companies still treating PR as optional or purely transactional, the JSA+Partners training offered a sobering perspective: In an industry where credibility determines survival, reputation management isn't a luxury—it's infrastructure. The question isn't whether you need PR, but whether you understand it well enough to do it right.

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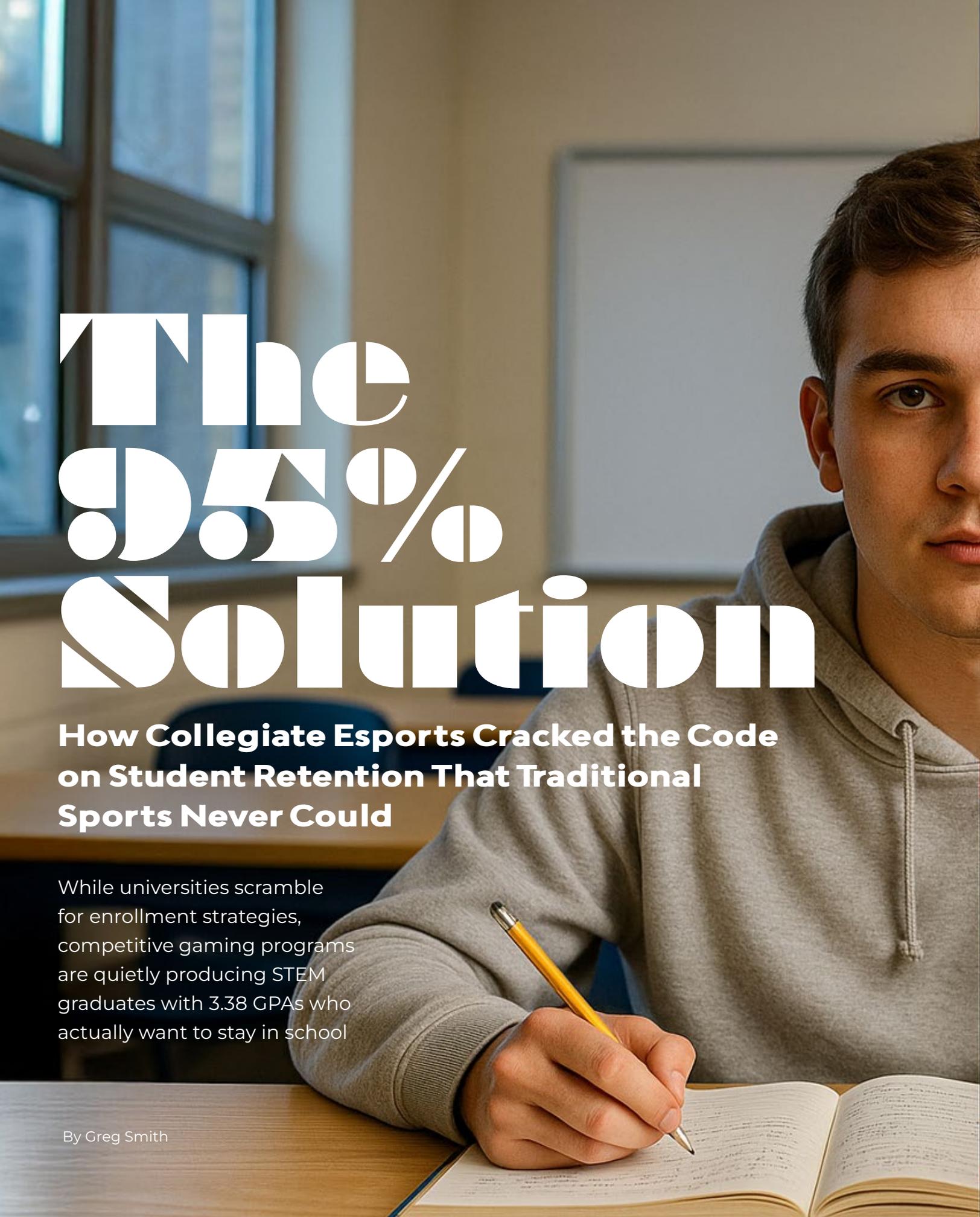
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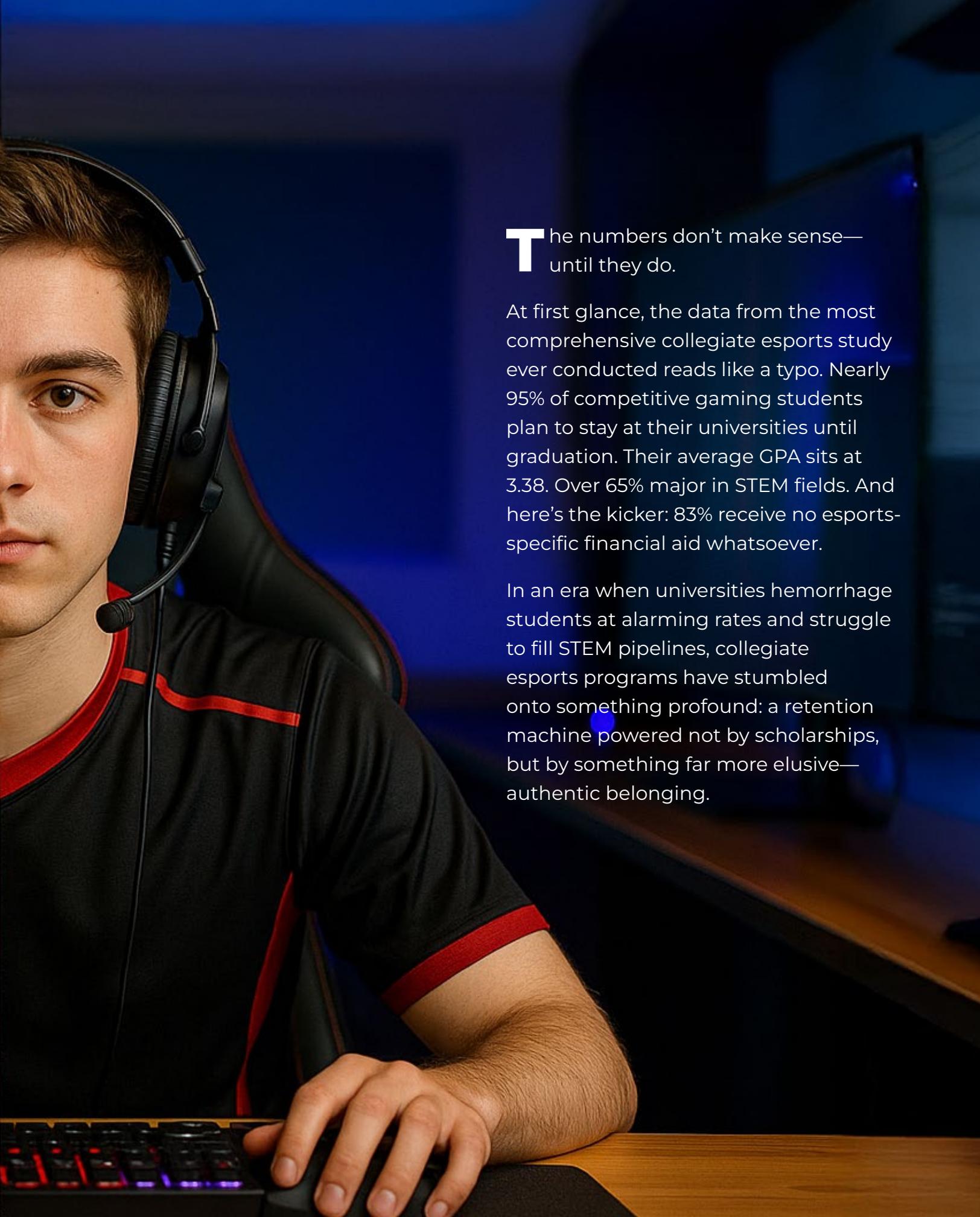


The 35% Solution

How Collegiate Esports Cracked the Code on Student Retention That Traditional Sports Never Could

While universities scramble for enrollment strategies, competitive gaming programs are quietly producing STEM graduates with 3.38 GPAs who actually want to stay in school

By Greg Smith



The numbers don't make sense—
until they do.

At first glance, the data from the most comprehensive collegiate esports study ever conducted reads like a typo. Nearly 95% of competitive gaming students plan to stay at their universities until graduation. Their average GPA sits at 3.38. Over 65% major in STEM fields. And here's the kicker: 83% receive no esports-specific financial aid whatsoever.

In an era when universities hemorrhage students at alarming rates and struggle to fill STEM pipelines, collegiate esports programs have stumbled onto something profound: a retention machine powered not by scholarships, but by something far more elusive—authentic belonging.

The Unlikely Athletes Rewriting Campus Demographics

The groundbreaking Voice of Intercollegiate Esports (VOICE) study represents the most comprehensive analysis of collegiate esports ever undertaken. Led by Dr. Seth E. Jenny, Associate Professor of Exercise Science at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, alongside statistician Dr. David P. Schary of Winthrop University and VOICE collaborators Jesse Bodony and Dr. Russell Hamer, the research spans 12 institutions and nearly 600 player rosters.

What it reveals is a student population that defies every stereotype.

These aren't the basement-dwelling zombies of parental nightmares. They're engineering majors (15%), computer science students (19%), and future IT professionals who spend an average of 22.5 hours per week in practice and competition while maintaining grades that match or exceed the general student body. The parental nightmare—that campus gaming programs will spawn screen-addicted zombies who never see the inside of a classroom—is debunked by the data. “That idea is debunked,” Jenny says, with the confidence of someone holding 600 player rosters that prove it.

But perhaps the most striking finding sits buried in the demographic breakdowns: over 70% of these students never played organized esports in high school. For one in ten, collegiate gaming represents their first extracurricular activity ever.

“This newly found community likely made an impact on them,” Jenny explains, “where they were able to find a home of others with a similar background they could then connect with.”

Universities aren't just recruiting gamers. They're activating ghosts—students who've been there all along, invisible to every club fair and intramural sign-up sheet.

The STEM Surge Nobody Saw Coming

Walk into any collegiate esports arena and you're essentially standing in an unofficial STEM recruitment center. While universities pour millions into attracting science and technology students, esports programs are doing it organically—and Jenny admits even he didn't see it coming.

When asked what defied his expectations, Jenny rattles off a list—but keeps returning to one: “The prevalence of STEM majors. Over 65%. Particularly engineering as the second most prevalent major.” He didn't see that coming.

By The Numbers

95% plan to stay until graduation

85.9% graduation rate

3.38 average GPA

65% major in STEM fields

22.5 hours per week in practice

83% receive NO esports scholarships

55% cite community as the greatest benefit

70% never played organized esports before college

The correlation isn't coincidental. Gaming and STEM share a cognitive DNA—problem-solving, systems thinking, technical fluency. But where traditional STEM outreach often feels forced, esports creates a natural bridge. Players arrive for the games and discover the code behind them.

Consider one university in the study, where 50% of esports players are Asian students compared to 35% in the general population, and half the team studies computer science. At another, 40% of the roster majors in computer science despite the program offering zero esports scholarships. Two different schools, same organic pipeline. Nobody designed it. It just emerged.

The Transfer Pipeline Universities Didn't Know They Needed

Here's a statistic that should make every enrollment manager sit up: over 25% of undergraduate esports players transferred into their current universities. At some institutions, that number spikes to 63%.

Traditional thinking suggests transfer students need aggressive financial packages and specialized support services. Esports players

transfer for something simpler: community. As one player explained, "If it was not for the esports program, I would have probably transferred to another university by now."

Jenny found the transfer phenomenon genuinely unexpected—esports didn't appear to help general recruitment, but it uniquely attracted transfer students. In other words: esports isn't convincing high schoolers to enroll. It's convincing unhappy students elsewhere that they've finally found their school.

The retention numbers tell an even more remarkable story. Directors report an 88.5% retention rate among esports players, with some programs hitting 98%. When surveyed, one student put it bluntly: "It is honestly the only reason I haven't transferred."

The Budget Paradox That Breaks Every Rule

Traditional college athletics operates on a simple principle: money buys talent, talent wins games, winning attracts students. Collegiate esports has shattered this model entirely.

Annual program budgets range from \$15,000 to \$970,000. Jenny flags the disparity as one of the study's most striking findings—some programs operate on

TOP MAJORS

Over 65% major in STEM—nobody designed this, it just emerged



19%

Computer Science



15%

Engineering



31%

Other STEM



When Jenny asked what keeps players grinding through 22-hour practice weeks without scholarship money, the answer wasn't about gaming at all. "What keeps these students so engaged and invested is what over half of them listed as their perceived greatest benefit," he says. "It fosters a sense of belonging, builds friendships, and creates a supportive community."

less than what others spend on equipment alone. The median hovers around \$211,591. Full scholarships exist at exactly one institution in the study. Most programs run on budgets that wouldn't cover a traditional sports team's travel expenses.

Yet they're producing extraordinary engagement metrics. Why?

Because these students aren't here for the money. When asked why they play esports, 35% cite competition, another 35% say fun and enjoyment, and 17% point to community and social aspects. Only 7% mention scholarships or financial benefits.

When Jenny asked what keeps players grinding through 22-hour practice weeks without scholarship money, the answer wasn't about gaming at all. "What keeps these students so engaged and invested is what over half of them listed as their perceived greatest benefit," he says. "It fosters a sense of belonging, builds friendships, and creates a supportive community." Higher education administrators have a term for this: student engagement. It's a major factor in retention.

Translation: these students found their people, and they're not leaving.

The Diversity Crisis Hidden in Plain Sight

Not everything in collegiate esports sparkles. The diversity numbers are stark and troubling: only 6.9% of players in the study identified as female, a mere 1.3% as Black or African American. In scholarship distribution, the disparities become even more pronounced—only 0.3% of female players receive any esports funding. No Black or African American students in Jenny's large sample earned a scholarship. Not one.

The irony is palpable. An activity with virtually no physical barriers, requiring only a computer and internet connection, has somehow replicated or exceeded traditional sports' diversity problems. Every institution in the study showed significant gender disparities, with some programs fielding rosters that were 100% male despite serving student bodies that were over 70% female.

Jenny's prescription is blunt: "Several directors in my study had never assessed their program's player demographics. It is difficult to improve if you don't have a starting point, clear goals, and planned action steps."

But he argues the fix isn't bureaucratic. "Seeing a role model in a leadership position representing a minority group speaks much louder than making players sign a diversity, equity, and inclusion pledge." The solution isn't paperwork—it's putting women and players of color in captain positions, on camera during streams, in the director's chair. Visibility beats policy every time.

The 22.5-Hour Question

Here's where conventional wisdom takes another hit. These students spend an average of 22.5 hours per week on esports during the academic semester—essentially a part-time job's worth of gaming. Parents and administrators might expect academic disaster.

Instead? Grade points averages (GPA) remain steady at 3.38.

"It is important to note that collegiate esports players' GPA is about on par with the general student body," Jenny says. "What that tells us is that despite these players practicing or competing on average 22.5 hours per week, they're still able to be successful in the classroom."

The secret lies in structure. Unlike casual gaming, competitive esports demands time management, scheduled practices, and team accountability. As one player noted, "My grades have improved due to grade requirements, and I've made a few friends in the program."

Moreover, 73% of players take on roles beyond competing—coaching, casting, event organizing, social media management, video production, and fundraising. They're not just playing games; they're running miniature sports enterprises, developing exactly the kind of practical experience employers crave.

The Community Currency That Actually Converts

When pushed to identify the single greatest benefit of collegiate esports, 55% of players circle back to the same theme: community and friendship. But this isn't the hollow "community" of marketing brochures. It's specific, tangible, and transformative.

Scroll through the open-ended survey responses and one phrase echoes like a mantra: "like-minded people." It appears 34 times. For students who've spent years feeling like outliers, esports offers something deceptively simple: a room full of people who get it.

"These players often feel part of a community that they want to continuously connect with and support," Jenny explains. The engagement isn't manufactured. It's organic—and sticky.

One player captured the dynamic perfectly: "It is an introvert's personal haven to act as an extrovert does primarily."

What Universities Stand to Gain (Beyond the Obvious)

While students find their tribes, universities are discovering unexpected benefits. Yes, there's the marketing appeal—nothing says "innovative" quite like a state-of-the-art gaming arena. But the real value runs deeper.

These programs are creating alumni networks in the fastest-growing entertainment industry on the planet. They're producing graduates who understand team dynamics, project management, and digital communication at levels that transcend traditional classroom instruction. They're attracting out-of-state and international students without expensive recruitment campaigns.

Jenny found the sheer scope of activity remarkable. "The average program played in 7 different esports leagues and across all programs 24 different game titles were offered," he notes. That's not a club. That's an ecosystem.

Most importantly, they're solving the retention puzzle. In an era when student success metrics dominate university rankings and funding formulas, esports programs deliver something precious: students who want to stay until graduation.

The Path Forward: Scaling What Works, Fixing What Doesn't

The VOICE study illuminates both tremendous promise and sobering challenges. The retention rates, academic performance, and STEM pipeline advantages are undeniable. But the diversity gaps, inconsistent funding models, and lack of institutional integration remain problematic.

Players themselves offer a blueprint for improvement. When asked what they'd change, their top responses were telling: more scholarships (19%), better competitive development (17%), improved marketing and awareness (15%), and increased coaching support (14%). They're not asking for gaming paradise—they're asking for the same institutional support given to any successful program.

The most successful programs in the study share common elements: dedicated full-time staff (not volunteers), multi-tier competitive structures that include both varsity and development teams, academic integration that goes beyond housing the program in a random department, and critically, metrics tracking that enables continuous improvement.

The Graduation Game

An 85.9% graduation rate. Let that number sink in.

While universities chase elaborate retention strategies and pour resources into student success centers, collegiate esports achieves near-magical graduation rates through a deceptively simple formula: give students a reason to show up that has little to do with classes but everything to do with belonging.

The traditional model says students stay for academics and tolerate the social experience. Esports inverts this entirely: students come for the community and excel at academics because leaving would mean losing their team.

As one player put it with striking clarity, when asked how much the esports program influenced their decision to stay enrolled, "On a scale from 1 to 100, 100% because of the program I wish to stay and complete my degree."

In the end, collegiate esports hasn't just created a new category of student athlete. It's revealed a fundamental truth about human motivation that higher education has somehow missed: people don't stay where they're paid to be. They stay where they belong.

The controllers are optional. The community isn't.

Access the Full Research

Voice of Intercollegiate Esports (VOICE) Benefits of Collegiate Esports Study



Executive Summary



Full Methodology and Results

Led by Dr. Seth E. Jenny, Associate Professor of Exercise Science at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, with Dr. David P. Schary (Winthrop University), Jesse Bodony (VOICE and Pace University), and Dr. Russell Hamer (VOICE and Miami University).

The most comprehensive analysis of collegiate esports ever conducted, examining 12 institutions, 250+ surveys, and nearly 600 player rosters.

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Leveling Up Learning

How Respawn Youth Is Turning Esports into an Educational Powerhouse

Tao Thoma on transforming competitive gaming into a pipeline for student development and workforce readiness



For Tao Thoma, esports is more than competition—it's a catalyst for confidence, character, and career development. As the founder and CEO of Respawn Youth, Thoma is on a mission to reframe how schools, communities, and families view gaming: not as a distraction, but as a launchpad. With a degree in Esports and Gaming Management from the University of New Haven and a decade-long background in personal training, he brings both industry expertise and a commitment to mentorship. We sat down with Tao to learn how Respawn Youth is building the future of esports education one student at a time.

What inspired you to launch Respawn Youth?

I co-founded Respawn Youth with two of my former college teammates from the University of New Haven's varsity esports program. All three of us earned degrees in Esports and Gaming, and I brought over a decade of experience as a personal trainer into the mix. That background helped me understand how structure, coaching, and mentorship unlock personal growth. We saw esports not just as competition—but as a powerful vehicle to help students develop critical life skills. Respawn Youth was built to make that potential real.

How is your program different from traditional school esports clubs?

A lot of school-based esports programs are still treated as after-school clubs. We built Respawn Youth as an academic and workforce development platform from day

one. Every course is led by a trained coach using scaffolded curriculum tied to Common Core skills—things like communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and conflict resolution. It's not just about playing the game. Students learn to analyze gameplay, reflect on strategy, and grow as leaders and collaborators.

What types of programming do you offer schools and students?

We offer three formats to meet different needs. First, our core esports elective or enrichment program is credit-bearing or after-school based. Then there's our Workforce Development Track, which brings in speakers and connects students to STEM careers and esports pathways. And finally, Respawn Direct is our direct-to-student model for learners outside of partnered schools. All three formats are designed to align with what schools already value: academic engagement and career readiness.

How do you define success in your programs?

We measure growth by tracking leadership, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and consistency. Wins and losses matter less than a student showing up, participating, and developing habits that will serve them beyond the game. We want students to leave our programs with transferable skills—and the confidence to use them in whatever path they choose.

Why did you join ESTA?

We joined ESTA in September to stay connected to where the industry is heading. The resources, thought leadership, and networking opportunities have already helped us improve our curriculum and build new partnerships. It's a great community—and we're excited to grow with it.



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Level Up Your Esports Career in 2026



The Decade That Changed Campus Forever

Inside Collegiate Esports' Breakneck Rise

By Chris Postel



From student-led clubs to \$190 million in facilities and \$1 billion in tuition revenue, collegiate esports proved its permanence in just ten years. Now 680 programs are using the data to write the playbook for what comes next.



When Robert Morris University flipped the switch on its first varsity esports program in 2015, administrators hoped it might attract a few tech-savvy students. A decade later, that experimental gambit has mushroomed into a movement reshaping American higher education. The numbers tell an improbable story: 680 programs nationwide, \$190.1 million invested in purpose-built facilities, and \$51 million distributed in scholarships this year alone. The newly released 2024-2025 Collegiate Esports Trends Report doesn't just chronicle the industry's explosive growth—it cap-

tures something more revealing. After ten years of hypergrowth, collegiate esports is hitting its first major inflection point. While some institutions have shuttered programs or reduced budgets, others are going all in - with generous investments that might rival or exceed professional esports organizations. In this era where never-before-seen disparities exist between haves and have-nots, perhaps the biggest question to solve is existential: "What is the universal definition of a scholastic esports program, and what are their expected responsibilities and contributions back to the campus?"

Five Waves, One Revolution

The transformation unfolded in phases, each with its own character and momentum. Global esports growth between 2010 and 2015 catalyzed grassroots clubs on campuses nationwide, incubated by deliberate publisher support. Recognition came next—between 2015 and 2017, universities began treating esports as official campus activities, birthing the first formal programs. Then came the deluge: triple-digit annual growth between 2017 and 2019 as schools scrambled to keep pace with student demand.

COVID-19 paradoxically accelerated adoption. While traditional sports went dark in 2020-2021, esports thrived as the resilient campus activity that could operate through lockdowns. The current wave, from 2022 onward, looks different—maturation replacing mania, with continued expansion now tempered by institutional investment calculations and genuine innovation.

The physical transformation mirrors the programmatic one. Pioneer facilities averaged a modest 1500 square feet with 15-20 gaming stations. Today's spaces span 3000+ square feet with 30-40+ stations, dedicated broadcasting suites, and production capabilities that would make some television studios jealous. This isn't incremental improvement—it's wholesale reimagination of how campus infrastructure engages with the modern student body.

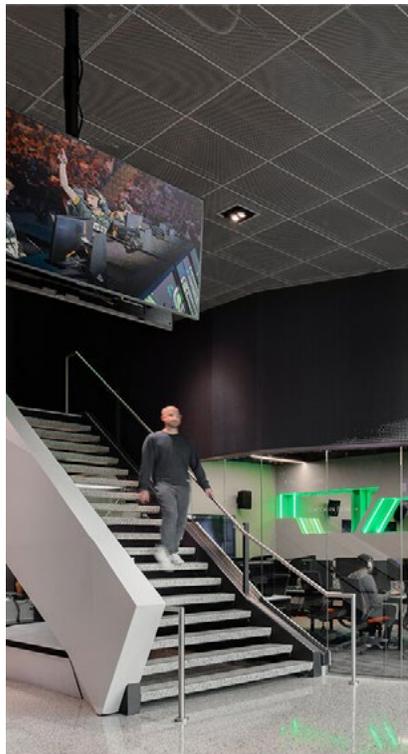
The Students Everyone Wants

Here's what should keep enrollment officers up at night: fifty-five percent of on-campus students identify as gamers, yet most programs struggle to convert that massive potential audience into participants. But those who do get involved? They're exactly who universities claim they want to recruit.

Two-thirds pursue STEM or STEM-adjacent degrees. The average competitive esports player maintains a 3.10 GPA—outperforming overall campus averages. Thirteen percent are first-generation college students finding their pathway to higher education through gaming. Women and female-identifying individuals hold 22% of club leadership positions. Eighteen percent identify within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Perhaps most telling: 63% only participate in esports activities on campus, suggesting these programs create belonging for students who might otherwise remain disconnected from campus life entirely.

“The average esports enthusiast speaks positively to the kind of student most universities seek to attract,” the report notes—then backs that assertion with data showing these students excel academically while bringing diversity metrics that would make any admissions department smile.

University of Texas at Dallas, Comets Landing Esports Facility
Photo Credit: SmithGroup





Gaming and Esports Center at Syracuse University | Photo Credit: Ashley McGraw Architects

The return on investment calculation looks compelling. Examining Dollar-per-user, esports facilities are 1.4x more efficient than average campus recreation centers—and they serve a demographic many universities struggle to engage through traditional programming.

Show Me the Money (And the Challenges)

Follow the scholarship dollars and you'll find the industry's true believers. Seventy-five percent of programs now offer financial aid, with nearly a third distributing over \$100,000 annually to their students. Full rides account for 18% of all scholarships. Students enrolled in esports programs this past academic year represented \$1 billion in tuition—real revenue that university CFOs should take notice of.

Academic integration is happening faster than skeptics predicted. Thirty percent of programs now offer or are developing curriculum connections ranging from esports-themed coursework to full degree programs spanning business, computer science, digital media, and health sciences. Twelve percent of recruited competitive students enroll in esports classes. Schools report measurable increases in both STEM enrollment and retention rates.

When Campus Infrastructure Gets RGB Lighting

The University of Texas at Dallas didn't just build an esports facility—they made a statement. The \$18 million, 14,000-square-foot Comets Landing features over 100 gaming PCs, 23 consoles, varsity team rooms, broadcast studio, and yes, an onsite Buffalo Wild Wings. Three full-time staff and more than 30 student workers keep the operation humming.

Syracuse University took a different approach, investing millions across two facilities (with a third planned) that together provide 9,800 square feet featuring everything from racing sims and arcade cabinets to VR setups and a full competitive stage. Three full-time employees and 35 student workers manage the spaces.

These aren't outliers anymore—they're harbingers. Ninety-two percent of esports supporting institutions have now invested in esports facilities, with total historic spend exceeding \$190.1 million. Average facility costs in 2025 are reported at \$684,231, though the median sits at a much more modest \$200,000. The upper quartile? Schools spending \$500,000 or more, with UT Dallas's \$18 million representing the current ceiling.

But here's where the story gets complicated. The 2024-2025 season delivered collegiate esports' first plot twist: At least 22 institutions—roughly 2.8% of all programs—shut down operations. The reasons? Institutional financial woes topped the list, followed by the departure of key leadership who primarily championed the initiative.

Budget data reveals deepening stratification. Programs with budgets exceeding \$500,000 have increased—as have programs operating in lower budget tiers. Multi-year analysis suggests a troubling pattern: programs face higher likelihood of budget cuts entering year three, when the honeymoon phase of enthusiasm wears off and the program must stand on its own to compete with existing departments - as well as shiny new pursuits such as AI - for dollars and resources.

Non-tuition based revenue generation remains the sector's Achilles heel. Tuition drives success, with programs recruiting 10-15 students annually. Sponsorships? The average cash-based deal in 2023-2024 was just \$14,700, with a median of merely \$2,000. Seventy-five percent of programs handle sponsor relations internally without professional fundraising expertise or integration with their own institutional fundraising offices—and it shows.

A new bright spot that has emerged, however, is camps and events. Successful summer camps can generate tens of thousands in revenue, providing valuable funding that can support core operations. At the University of Mississippi, weekly summer camp revenues exceeded \$7,000. It's not transformative money, but it's a model that both sustains and scales.

Meanwhile, expenses continue to pile up each year: \$5,750 in average conference dues, \$2-10K+ for tournament travel, \$100K+ for staff salaries, and \$2K+ per

device every refresh cycle. The math doesn't always work if the esports director cannot convince leadership of the holistic value proposition or achieved milestones along a multiyear strategy.

The Governance Vacuum and the Fandom Problem

The NCAA's continued absence is glaringly noted - as well as simultaneously celebrated and lamented by industry leaders. More than 45 conferences and leagues exist to offer organized competition —some tied to traditional sports conferences, others as independent ventures. National organizations have stabilized around five major entities and one tournament, with some organization budgets exceeding \$1 million. There's no central authority setting eligibility standards, no unified season structure, no consistent competitive framework - although many organizations are slowly muddling through these conundrums.

Then there's the fandom challenge that won't quit. Average in-person esports attendance hovers between 0-300 people. Compare that to basketball's 16,000-19,000 or football's 41,867. Campus culture around attending esports events as a spectator is, as the report bluntly states, “unilaterally non-existent.”

The digital nature that makes esports accessible to participants actively undermines the in-person spectacle that builds traditional sports fandoms. Most live audiences consist of fellow competitors, friends, and family—not the broader campus community these programs need to reach for long-term sustainability.

Yet there are promising signals. Many programs manage social media that

meets or exceeds institutional brand standards—often outperforming traditional athletics departments in engagement metrics. Sixty-nine percent of broadcast satisfaction ratings hit 7 or higher on a 10-point scale. Students and staff create compelling content without institutional marketing support, suggesting untapped potential if universities actually resourced these efforts properly.

The Crossroads Ahead

Esports is no longer a niche activity limited strictly to facilitating competitive excellence for an elite handful of students —some institutions have fully integrated it into their long-term strategic visions. Universities that understand this are already reshaping recruitment, student engagement, and workforce readiness.



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The data suggests collegiate esports has reached the same bottleneck that traditional sports overcame decades ago. What comes next isn't more hypergrowth—it's consolidation and normalization. Regional conferences will normalize competition between peer institutions. Schools that invested heavily may align with other well-resourced programs. The upper boundary of institutional programs will exist in a category unreachable by lower-tier efforts.

This isn't failure—it's maturation. Community differentiates esports from traditional athletics' historical trajectory. Beyond the core competitive demographic, esports and gaming can engage more students than virtually any other campus activity. The 2024-2025 data highlights many programs pursuing exactly this strategy, using academic integration and non-competitive programming as outlets to allow students to share their passion for gaming without the pressures of competition.

"We repeatedly observe the potential and power of esports being so great and flexible that it will inevitably continue to grow into whatever space it is allocated to fill," notes co-author Kris Narayan.

Those multi-million dollar facilities signal something administrators rarely discuss openly: permanence. By virtue of sunk costs and institutional commitment, college esports has crossed a threshold. It's here to stay, regardless of short-term market fluctuations or even publisher sentiments. The national

landscape has transitioned into "stable-stabilizing" rather than hypergrowth—but that doesn't preclude another surge from the currently exploding K12 ecosystem

Geographic regions with modernized facilities will capture disproportionate student recruitment. The value proposition clarifies with each passing year. More institutions will inevitably invest, restart programs, or upgrade existing efforts. Upper-bound programs will separate from lower-tier offerings—but much like traditional athletics, this stratification may ultimately enable the organized fandoms, rivalries, and compelling narratives that drive sustainable growth.

The 2025 Collegiate Esports Trends Report synthesizes survey data from over 100 program directors alongside national benchmarks across funding, facilities, and diversity. It's designed to inform decisions at the highest levels of campus leadership—and it arrives at precisely the moment those decisions matter most.

Esports is no longer a question of "if." It's a question of "how"—and the answer will define the next decade of American higher education.

Have questions about the report or scholastic esports? Feel free to reach out to Esports Foundry's Chief Gaming Officer and co-author, Chris Postell, at cpostell@esportsfoundry.com

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Most Scholastic Esports Environment Assessments are completed in three weeks. After the initial discovery phase of identifying internal stakeholders, SHI consultants conduct interviews and gather information during the evaluation phase. In the final one-hour workshop, SHI reviews evaluation results and presents you with a proposed roadmap and path forward.

Why SHI

SHI's dedicated team of education and technical experts are taking over the scholastic esports space by helping high schools and colleges discover the power of esports and learn the intricacies of the industry. Whether you are looking to start an esports club, build a campus arena, or design a curriculum, we are here to walk the path with you.



We'll leave no stone unturned to build out your esports program. Throughout the Scholastic Esports Environment Assessment, we'll focus on what's critical for your program's success:

- Space configuration – soundproofing, blueprinting, and computer-aided design (CAD) drawings
- Student special needs – assistive technologies that are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant and designed for hearing or visually impaired students
- Furniture and lighting – gaming chairs, desks, room decoration, and lighting
- Hardware and peripherals – consoles, PCs, monitors, keyboards, headsets, and cabling
- Infrastructure and network – data center; routers; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC)/cooling; and switches
- Cybersecurity – asset management, data protection, secure configuration, and account management and access

To learn more or to get started, contact us at esports@SHI.com or reach out to your SHI Account Executive today.

PRESS START TO SAVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Atlantic City is betting that competitive gaming is the future of career education. The nation is watching.

By Megan Van Petten

On a Friday afternoon in October 2025, Atlantic City High School wasn't celebrating another standardized test milestone or a new wing of classrooms. Instead, students, administrators, and industry partners gathered around a red ribbon blocking the entrance to something unprecedented in American public education: a professional-grade esports facility that was simultaneously opening in nine other schools across the district.

Atlantic City Public Schools had just become the first district in the nation to launch esports facilities in every single K-12 building—all at once. Not a pilot program. Not a proof of concept. Ten schools. Seven thousand students. Day one.

"This initiative was about more than just playing video games," Superintendent Dr. La'Quetta S. Small told the assembled crowd. "The esports program presents an opportunity for students to develop communication, leadership and technical skills—and to explore real-world career pathways in a growing global industry."

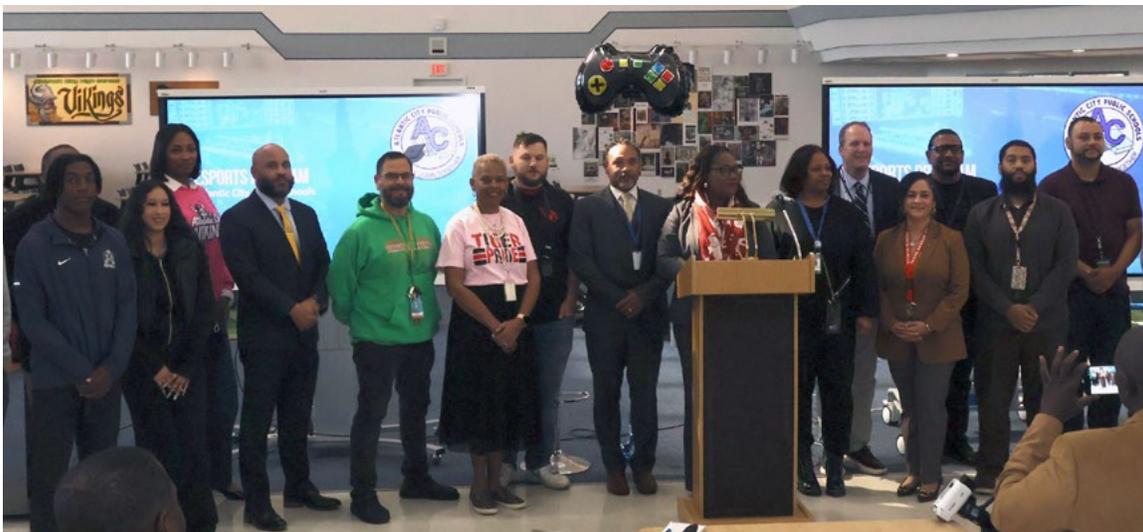


Photo Credit: Mark Tyler / Atlantic City Public Schools Esports Program Labs

The Classroom Nobody Saw Coming

Gaming has evolved into a global juggernaut worth billions annually, spawning professional leagues, massive audiences, and career paths that didn't exist a decade ago. Yet most school districts have treated gaming as something to be managed, restricted, or tolerated—rarely as something to be leveraged.

Atlantic City saw a different opportunity. “Gaming is already a billion-dollar industry,” Dr. Small noted, pointing out that content creation alone is “creating new millionaires” around the world. “We want to provide our students with access to that now. We are exposing our students to these types of opportunities while thinking about their futures.”

But here's where Atlantic City's approach diverges: this wasn't about creating a gaming club or fielding a competitive team. The district engineered an entirely integrated learning ecosystem spanning broadcasting, event management, IT infrastructure, marketing, game design, and

cybersecurity—career pathways with real-world job prospects that happen to use gaming as the entry point.

“This is a first-of-its-kind, district-wide initiative that connects gaming, learning, and career pathways,” said Michael Bird, Director of Assessments and Special Projects. “It opens the field of exposure for our students, enabling them to engage, collaborate, and compete while building the necessary skills for their future careers.”



Photo Credit:
Mark Tyler
/ Atlantic
City Public
Schools
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Systems Thinking Over Shopping Carts

Most districts start their esports journey the same way: they buy gaming PCs, clear out a room, maybe hire a coach, and hope students show up.

Atlantic City understood that this approach—treating esports as an equipment purchase—fundamentally misunderstands what makes gaming a viable career pathway.



Joshua Kell, CEO of Horizon AVL and a key architect of the program, is blunt about why the typical approach fails: “Most districts understandably start

with hardware. They buy gaming PCs, set up a room, and hope the program will grow from there. Atlantic City took a fundamentally different approach.”

Instead of treating esports as a simple equipment purchase, the district approached it as a fully integrated learning environment that blends audio-visual

Photo Credit: Mark Tyler / Atlantic City Public Schools Esports Program Labs

systems, broadcast capabilities, networking infrastructure, curriculum design, and competitive platforms into one unified ecosystem.

“This distinction matters because career outcomes do not come from equipment,” Kell explains. “They come from systems. When broadcast rooms, audio, networking, competition platforms, and curriculum are engineered together, students are not simply using devices. They are engaging with real industry workflows.”

During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Kell emphasized what this means in practice: “Each of the facilities in your schools has been engineered by Horizon AVL and Esports Integration to mirror professional-level esports and broadcast environments. Every facility includes high-performance gaming stations, broadcast and production systems,

lighting and LED displays, and dedicated learning spaces.”

Atlantic City’s integrated design ensures that every room mirrors professional environments across broadcast, IT, production, and content creation.

When students walk into these esports labs, they’re not just sitting down at gaming rigs—they’re entering environments structured like professional broadcast studios, IT operations centers, and content creation facilities.

As Kell puts it: “That is how esports becomes a pathway to careers and not just an extracurricular activity. The infrastructure itself becomes a teaching tool engineered for hands-on learning, not just gaming.”

The platform underpinning this approach is Platform1, a learning management system that connects competitive gaming to project-based learning and academic enrichment. But as



Photo Credit: Mark Tyler / Atlantic City Public Schools Esports Program Labs

Kell emphasizes, making that connection authentic requires much more than adding lessons around gameplay.

“The true operational challenge is ensuring that every system, workflow, and lesson is directly tied to a career pathway,” Kell explains. “Esports Integration solves this by designing environments that reflect real industry settings, by building coursework with measurable competencies that reflect real professional roles, and by ensuring training aligns directly with the hardware students use every day.”

The result is that students don’t simulate professional work—they do it. “Students do not simulate broadcast, production, event management, or IT. They do the real thing in facilities that function the same way professional environments function,” Kell says. “This eliminates the common problem where students only play the game while the career content remains secondary.”

The Anti-Pilot Strategy

Atlantic City made a decision that most risk-averse administrators would never consider: implementing across all ten schools simultaneously rather than starting with a modest pilot program at one or two locations.



Photo Credit: Mark Tyler / Atlantic City Public Schools Esports Program Labs

On paper, it sounds reckless. In practice, it was precisely what made the program both equitable and sustainable.

“Many districts begin with a small pilot at one or two schools,” Kell observes. “Atlantic City made the decision to implement across all ten schools at once, and that choice significantly affects both equity and long-term sustainability.”

Pilot programs inevitably create divisions. One building gets the new esports lab and all the opportunities that come with it. Students at other schools watch from the sidelines, waiting for budget cycles and approval

processes to trickle innovation their way—if it ever comes at all. Kell explains the equity implications: “From an equity standpoint, pilots often create a divide between schools. One building receives opportunities while others wait. Atlantic City ensured that every student from fifth grade through high school had full access on day one. Every building received the same facility standard, the same curriculum, and the same opportunities for competition and workforce development.”

The district-wide approach also creates operational advantages

that pilots can't match. As Kell notes: "From a sustainability standpoint, implementing district-wide creates shared standards across all buildings, a unified curriculum that progresses year over year, consistent staff training, shared competition structures, and purchasing and support efficiencies."

But here's the key insight that made this feasible rather than overwhelming: Atlantic City didn't attempt to manage ten simultaneous buildouts alone. "A project of this scale, with ten facilities built

at the same time across an entire district, only works through centralized coordination," Kell explains. "Atlantic City used Horizon AVL and Esports Integration as its anchor partners to coordinate with others."

That structure worked because it removed the fragmentation that typically derails large initiatives. "Instead of managing multiple scopes, multiple design philosophies, multiple project managers, and multiple timelines, the district worked with one integrated team that shared one roadmap, one

workflow, and one chain of accountability," Kell says.

If the district had tried to manage separate contracts with each vendor independently, the result would have been predictable chaos. Kell lays out what would have gone wrong: "Equipment would vary by building. Network requirements would conflict. Designs would not align with the curriculum. Timelines would slip because each vendor depends on the others. Staff training would lack standardization." By consolidating planning, engineering, deployment, and curriculum development through integrated partners, Atlantic City ensured every school delivered the same standard of

experience and the same industry-aligned outcomes.

"The reason this was feasible, rather than

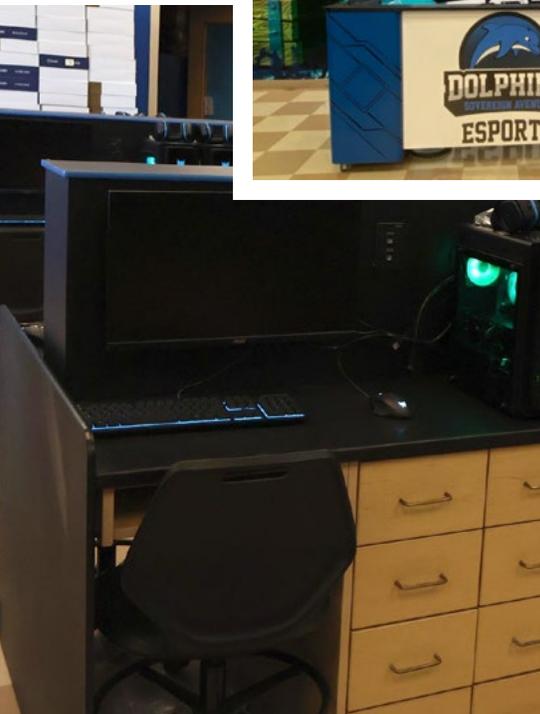
overwhelming, is that Atlantic City did not attempt to manage the process alone," Kell emphasizes. "When the roadmap, engineering, curriculum, and support structure are unified, district-wide implementation becomes not only achievable but transformative."

Career Pathways, Not Just Competition

The facilities themselves are designed to make professional pathways visible and tangible. Michael Bird, serving as emcee for the launch event, laid out the possibilities: "Learn the skills to become a filmmaker, animator or game designer. Dive into the digital world and code your own future as a software engineer or app developer. The possibilities are endless."

Donald Harris, Director of Secondary Education, explained that the program is

Photo Credit:
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being developed as a Career and Technical Education pathway “to help students find direct pathways into high-paying careers.” The goal isn’t to turn every student into a professional gamer. It’s to use gaming as the hook that opens doors to careers in technology, media, event production, business, and digital infrastructure.

Traditional esports programs often suffer from a fundamental disconnect: students play the games while the “career content” exists separately in worksheets or theoretical discussions. Atlantic City engineered its program to eliminate that gap entirely. Broadcasting isn’t a simulation—it’s students operating real equipment to stream live competitions. Event management isn’t hypothetical—it’s coordinating actual tournaments. IT infrastructure isn’t abstract—it’s maintaining networks under competitive pressure.

When the facility itself functions like a professional environment and the curriculum is directly tied to the tools students use every day, career development happens organically rather than as an awkward add-on.

Why This Matters Beyond Atlantic City

Joshua Kell framed the district’s achievement in broader terms: “Atlantic City Public Schools achieved a major milestone, leading the nation with an approach that ties esports directly to future careers. This wasn’t just about playing—it was about learning outcomes and workforce development.”

The implications extend well beyond gaming. Atlantic City demonstrated that districts can meet students where their interests already are and connect those interests to educational and career pathways that grow with them. Instead of asking students to get excited about abstract job titles they’ll encounter a decade from now, the district created environments where students can explore those careers immediately.

This matters particularly for urban districts serving diverse populations. By ensuring every school received identical access to esports facilities and career pathways simultaneously, the district made a clear statement about equity: innovation shouldn’t be something reserved for flagship schools or pilot programs that benefit a select few.

“This groundbreaking program has become a powerful platform that we expect to boost student engagement and connect their interests directly to viable career paths,” Bird said.

The New Standard

Atlantic City’s district-wide esports program represents something larger than a successful technology implementation. It’s a template for how school districts can fundamentally rethink career readiness education by starting with student interests rather than institutional inertia.

For too long, career and technical education has meant steering students toward trades adults believe have merit, with little attention to whether students find those pathways compelling. Atlantic City flipped the equation: start with what students already care about, then engineer rigorous career pathways that leverage that engagement.

As more districts watch Atlantic City’s results, the question won’t be whether esports belongs in schools. The question will be whether schools are willing to build the kind of integrated, system-level infrastructure that makes esports—or any emerging career pathway—genuinely transformative rather than merely supplemental.

Atlantic City didn’t just install gaming computers. The district built a blueprint for what happens when education meets students where they are and gives them the tools to build futures they actually want.



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ESPORTS' BEST-KEPT REVENUE SECRET

How smart organizers are turning hotel bookings into their next growth engine



Picture the chaos: 5,000 esports fans descending on your city, scrambling for rooms on Booking.com at marked-up rates while your event sees zero commission. Meanwhile, your players are crashing in distant suburbs, families are bleeding cash on last-minute bookings, and sponsors are quietly questioning your operational maturity.

This isn't just bad logistics—it's leaving money on the table.

The Invisible Revenue Leak

While tournament organizers obsess over stream counts and ticket sales, they're hemorrhaging a revenue source that could fundamentally reshape their business model. Every attendee booking through third-party platforms represents lost commission and diminished control over their event experience.

Smart organizers have already cracked the code. By centralizing housing through platforms like EventPipe, they're not just solving logistics—they're building recurring revenue that scales with their growth.

Why Hotels Matter More Than You Think

Housing strategy isn't an operational afterthought; it's a competitive differentiator. Streamlined accommodations send a clear signal to sponsors about your professionalism, while centralized booking creates trust with teams and fans. Through bulk negotiations, you

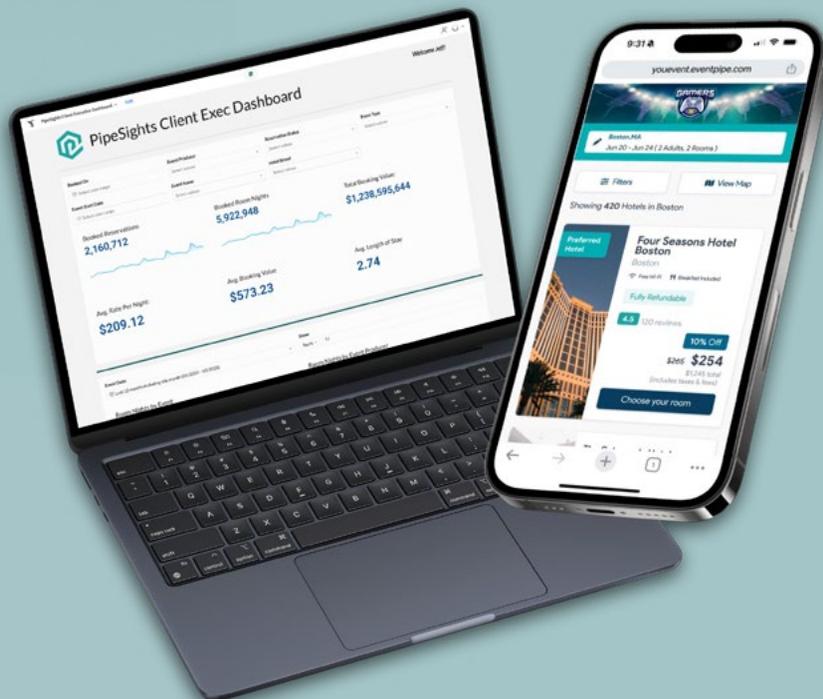
secure better rates that improve attendee satisfaction. Most importantly, capturing commission revenue happens automatically without raising ticket prices.

The real advantage? This revenue grows with your event, not with your stress. As your tournament expands from regional to national to global, your housing revenue scales automatically—providing a reliable income stream that funds future growth without squeezing attendees through higher ticket prices.

The Compounding Effect

EventPipe's approach transforms a scattered, stressful process into a strategic advantage. Their live inventory platform handles the complexity while you focus on the competition. As your tournament grows, so does your housing revenue—automatically.

It's a service your customers didn't even know they needed, yet can't imagine living without once



Hospitality isn't just logistics—it's your first impression. Putting the Attendee Experience at the forefront means better margins for you.

implemented. While competitors wrestle with housing logistics as an afterthought, you're providing a premium experience that strengthens your brand.

While competitors wrestle with housing logistics as an afterthought, forward-thinking organizers are already banking consistent revenue from strategic lodging partnerships. The technology exists. The market demand is proven. The only question is who captures this advantage first.

Esports is growing—shouldn't your operations evolve with it? Lodging isn't just a service anymore. It's part of your brand experience, showing sponsors, partners, and participants that you're ready to scale.

The Game-Changing Solution

EventPipe's live hotel inventory platform makes this transformation immediate and effortless. Launch custom-branded booking sites instantly—no lengthy contracts or commitments required. For events with existing hotel agreements, the platform extends your earning power beyond room block cut-offs, offering below-market rates while capturing every last-minute reservation from fans and guests.

The result? A seamless booking experience that strengthens your brand while building consistent revenue streams.

Where Esports Winners Separate

The next generation of successful esports organizations won't just run tournaments—they'll orchestrate full experiences where every touchpoint, from check-in to checkout, reinforces their brand promise.

The Bottom Line

Your tournament is already generating hotel demand. The question isn't whether this revenue exists—it's whether you'll claim it or let others profit from your hard work.

Transform your event's hidden revenue stream. See how EventPipe's platform turns lodging logistics into competitive advantage. Learn more at www.eventpipe.com

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