Esports emerges as game-changer for higher education

A successful on-campus esports program may not only mean wins in the arena. It can also lead to a more engaged student body – and possibly even be a game-changer for admissions offices at a time when they could really use a boost in the face of declining enrollments.

A growing number of colleges and universities are turning to Lenovo for help setting up their programs, and not just because they want to buy state-of-the-art Lenovo Legion gaming PCs. Lenovo Esports Solutions for Education has been helping higher-education institutions kickstart new programs that best match campus needs.

This Market Brief examines three universities' unique approaches to esports, and provides a peak into how Lenovo's experts contributed to their success.

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Analyst: Mike Feibus

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Executive Summary

In the fast-growing world of collegiate esports, it's not just about whether you win or lose. Contrary to popular belief, it's not even about how you play the game.

Beyond notoriety and prize money, colleges and universities are finding that active, engaging esports programs can also give admissions offices an edge in attracting a generation with a growing preference for online competition over traditional sports.

"Kids aren't necessarily picking a university based on esports," said Jeff Kuhn, Director of Esports at Ohio University. "But when they're down to their final three choices for political science or zoology or whatever, the best esports program can really push it one way or another."

After more than a decade of declining college enrollment, schools are actively looking for new ways to stand out. And tapping into the $1.4 billion esports phenomenon is emerging as an attractive way to achieve that. Which explains why the number of on-campus programs has been exploding nationally over the past five to 10 years.

> Schools might see a spike in visibility from powerhouse varsity programs. As well, an active, vibrant club scene may grab attention from applicants. Certificates and degree programs – even traditional majors with an esports twist – could influence prospective students who hope to pursue careers in the business.

Most commonly, schools will benefit from a mix of all three aspects of campus esports. How that mix takes shape depends on myriad factors, including campus culture, staffing, existing degree programs – even what facilities might host an esports center.

As more schools navigate building on-campus programs, a growing number of directors are turning to Lenovo Esports Solutions for Education, a team of specialists within Lenovo's Solutions and Services Group, or SSG. More than supplying Lenovo Legion gaming hardware, Lenovo offers esports customers a personal touch that belies the company's juggernaut status as one the world's largest computer hardware and service providers.

"Our program is all about making these schools successful," said Alberto Sandoval, Executive Director of product marketing and go-to-market activities at Lenovo SSG. "Of course, we're competitive on price. But more importantly, we work with schools to understand their goals. That way, we can help ensure they are equipped with the best systems and services for their program."

With the help of three US university esports directors sharing their own experiences, this market brief is designed to help illuminate the path forward for schools that are just starting their journey. Even though the directors each have their own priorities for programs in different stages of development, they all have items on their to-do lists in common. For example, they all set up Discord servers to support their organization. They all broadcast tournaments on Twitch. And beyond buying Lenovo Legion gaming PCs, they all turned to the esports experts for help and advice along the way.

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Analysis

Background

The foundation for modern-day esports really began to solidify in the early 2000s, as a combination of computer hardware and gaming consoles gained the ability to communicate. The explosion of home internet broadband service was another important driver.

At the same time, cyber cafes and LAN parties – gathering spots where gamers' computers were physically connected to each other on-premise via ethernet – took off. As games grew in popularity, tournaments built around multiplayer games with high-profile players attracted crowds of people who wanted to watch their favorite teams and players compete. Improved internet connectivity also helped, giving rise to livestreamed events that helped to grow interest.

With that heightened interest came an expansion from homes and small cafes to stadium-style venues. And with larger in-person crowds and even larger streaming audiences, prize money offered by tournament organizers, game distributors and other sponsors began to mushroom as well.

In 2011, game publisher and distributor Valve hosted the first The International (TI) tournament. TI turned heads by offering total prize money of $1.6 million, which was unheard of around the turn of the decade.

> By that time, college clubs were already sprouting. And in 2014, Robert Morris University became the first US college to create a varsity esports program. Others followed, often with their own first-ever qualifier. In 2016, for example, University of California at Irvine (UC-Irvine) opened the first esports arena on a public university campus. It also set up a scholarship program and debuted its first varsity teams as well.

Riot Games, which produced League of Legends, one of the more enduringly popular arena battle titles, helped design and fund the UC-Irvine arena, something that caught the eye of gamers at schools across the country.

Grassroots Beginnings

Seton Hall University's esports organization was created in 2013, the year before Robert Morris set up the first varsity team. Like many early on-campus organizations, it was a grassroots club. Victor Gomez, who is now the esports manager at Seton Hall, was a freshman at the time. He helped create an avenue for esports as part of the Seton Hall Gaming Sector, a gaming club formed that same year.

"You'll hear a lot of stories like mine from those days, where there's one person who's very passionate, who works really hard and eventually gets to a place where they create an organization," Gomez said.

Riot Games, in fact, heard his story. In 2015, the year before UC Irvine's big move into esports, Riot flew Gomez and another Seton Hall student to Southern California as part of its League of Legends Collegiate Summit, where they shared ideas about on-campus esports.

Paul Fisher, now Seton Hall's CIO, reached out to Gomez in 2018, a year after he graduated. Schools in the university's athletic conference – the Big East Conference, which is perhaps best known for in-person basketball – agreed to organize esports competition.

The club has expanded into varsity teams competing in three of the five most popular esports games: League of Legends; Rocket League, which is kind of like angry, fast-paced soccer in rocket-powered cars; and Super Smash Brothers Ultimate, an arena-based battle game featuring classic Nintendo characters. The teams, which now are recruiting their first-ever scholarship candidates, are four-time Big East champions, one-time national champs and a perennial Rocket League contender.

The esports program oversees the Introduction to Esports course, which is offered within Seton Hall's Stillman School of Business. The course, which Gomez teaches, recently grew from a single credit into a three-credit offering.

Gomez would like to expand the offering into a certificate program that could fold an esports foundation into any degree, like business or communications. He'd prefer that Seton Hall offer certification over a full-on esports degree track, which he thinks offers students more opportunity to tailor their coursework.

When they were outfitting the Esports Lab with PCs, Gomez says, he received insights from Lenovo Esports Solutions for Education which helped provide a head start deciding, for example, what workstation configurations made the most sense for video editing in the production studio.

"The Lenovo team is incredibly knowledgeable," Gomez said. "They have a lot of experts with a lot of insights to offer."

Catch the Wave

Dr. Jeff Kuhn had a front-row seat for the collegiate esports wave. Just 200 miles to the northeast of Ohio University, Robert Morris established the country's first varsity-level esports team, complete with some scholarship money to help attract top talent. And University of Akron, "the Alabama of esports," as Kuhn calls OHIO's Mid-American Conference rival 200 miles to the north, was one of the first 50 schools with varsity esports teams.

"When we first started looking at the landscape, and seeing this steady uptake, we made the pitch to the university that we needed to do this," Kuhn said. In 2019, the University's board of trustees approved the program. And the newly-funded esports program set out to build an

arena. After some inevitable pandemic-related delays, the OHIO Esports Arena finally opened in September 2022.

Ohio University has a varsity program competing in the Mid-America Conference's Esports Collegiate (ESC). The school currently fields teams in four of the five most popular titles: League of Legends; Overwatch from Blizzard Entertainment; Rocket League; and Valorant from Riot.

But Ohio University places a lot of emphasis on club and casual gamers as well as varsity to "get more students involved," Kuhn said. The club itself has about 800 students. They also organize campus-wide events like a FIFA esports tournament with every country represented.

With weekly ESC varsity matches, competition also means that "every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights at 8pm we put on a show," Kuhn said. That draws student volunteers with academic concentrations like computer science, international business and broadcasting to help produce the video livestreams.

The emphasis on broadcasting is no coincidence. Of course, broadcasting on campus and beyond is important for the program's outreach and visibility. The group watches football, Formula One racing and other sports in hopes of gleaning ideas for how to make broadcasts more approachable to viewers who don't live esports.

And as it turns out, the Esports Arena is affiliated with Ohio University's nationally-ranked Scripps College of Communication. Kuhn said they are adding a fourth track to the esports certification program focused on journalism and broadcasting. The existing tracks are: business; game design and development; and telecommunications and networking.

Kuhn said Ohio opted for a certificate program rather than a degree for a few reasons – not the least of which was input from alumni now in esports businesses about what they were looking for in job applicants. Another is that the certificate tracks give students more flexibility to mix and match topics that interest them.

When they were outfitting the Ohio Esports Arena, Kuhn said, the Lenovo team helped organizers get their arms around what else goes into a new facility besides the powerful new PCs, like infrastructure needs.

"We were putting a state-of-the-art gaming arena into a 200-year-old building," Kuhn said.

Program leaders were impressed with how Lenovo listened. In fact, Lenovo "got brownie points" for making changes to the power supply inside Lenovo Legion PC models that Ohio University had recommended.

Even though they plan to refresh competitive gaming PCs fairly regularly, Ohio University decided to buy Lenovo systems, Kuhn said. That's because they have plans to cycle the systems into disciplines with the need for beefy graphics accelerators, like architectural design.

Tops-down approach

At the University of South Florida, you won't hear any grassroots-type origin stories like the one Seton Hall's Gomez tells. Yes, there was an existing club for on-campus esports enthusiasts. But the momentum to fast-track a university program came straight from the top.

The administration decided to give the embryonic program a home under Recreation and Wellness. And in the summer of 2020, they brought in Andrew Ross, who had been a graduate student at [USF's Vinik Sport & Entertainment Management program](). And for the next several months, the newly-appointed Esports Coordinator started setting up the program.

"So we made a Discord server. We made a community space for students to gather online," Ross said. "Then we started on plans for a space, a computer lab. We weren't yet sure exactly how or when, but we knew it was something we wanted to tackle in the next couple of years.

"And then covid happened."

As it turned out, the pandemic ended up sending the program into overdrive. Classes went virtual. Everyone went home. And esports, Ross said, gave isolated students a way to engage and interact.

"We affectionately called our esports Discord server the 'Virtual Rec,'" functioning as the online recreation center, he said. "Because it was our home away from home for a really long time."
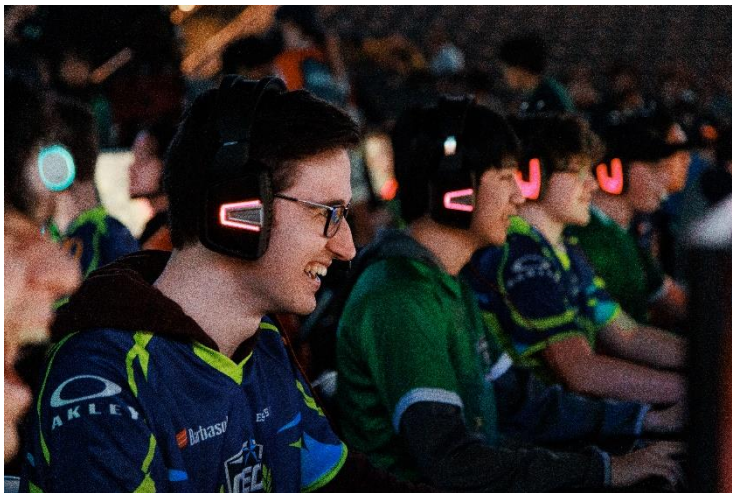
With the help of students, Ross said, they set up clubs for each of the popular game titles. They set up intramural leagues and game nights. Before long, they started putting together more competitive teams.

"That just led to kind of a waterfall of growth all throughout the lockdown and into 2021," Ross said. "And by the time we got back to campus, we had a lot of momentum."

In the first couple of months, the esports program had about 300 participants. Currently, there are more than 3,500 people.

In the fall of 2023, some of the more competitive club teams began participating in varsity tournaments. They've also established a Business of Esports class with the support of the Vinik program faculty within the Muma College of Business.

So maybe this is a grassroots story after all.

Down the line, Ross hopes to create some official varsity teams, as opposed to club teams playing against varsity teams from other schools. And he hopes to have some scholarship money in hand to recruit some elite players.

The program is building a large esports lab within the on-campus Recreation & Wellness Center, which is scheduled to open this coming August. In the meantime, Ross said, it has a temporary space in the Rec, and a satellite location.

"I can't wait for the new lab to open, and the lights go off and you see the 42 Lenovo Legions with all the RGB lights," Andrew Ross said. "It's going to be quite the spectacle."

Ross said that the Lenovo esports team was very helpful during planning for the new lab, as well as outfitting it. The team was also very supportive during the pandemic, ensuring Ross' crew had what was needed to function. And the guidance and connections Lenovo provided helped Ross' team to model the facility.

The Lenovo team "always helped us see the bigger picture," Ross said, which "is a reason that our program is as fully encompassing as it is today."

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Conclusions

The collegiate esports landscape has changed dramatically in the 10 years since the first school vaulted team computer gaming into varsity-level competition. Hundreds of schools now field multiple varsity teams that compete in tournaments built around the most popular games.

As well, established athletic conferences have organized esports league play. Most recently, the Big 10 Conference, the oldest NCAA Division I conference in the country, set up the Big Esports Conference. All 14 teams plus USC and UCLA, which are slated to join the Big 10 in the fall, plan to compete.

Despite the volume of activity, it should be clear by now that establishing an on-campus esports organization is by no means a cookie-cutter undertaking. Yes, there are inevitable similarities between programs. But the most successful operations find a way to tailor themselves to fit the institution.

Indeed, as the three schools we examined illustrate, setting up is easy. Success is hard.

The esports experts at Lenovo Esports Solutions for Education understand this. The team has helped launch a wide variety of on-campus organizations – and are being tapped to help far more. They have the expertise, the insights and the connections to give a fledgling program the best chance for success.

Oh yes, and they have the PCs.

"The product, that's the easy part," said Lenovo's Sandoval. "Of course, we've got competitive product. We've got competitive pricing. Let's focus on what you want to achieve, and we can build around that. Our program is all about making these schools successful."

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