

CHAPTER 6.

PANEL: COLLEGE ESPORTS PROGRAMS AND HOW TO BUILD THEM

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ABSTRACT

Institution-supported college esports programs have been around since 2014, but student-led initiatives began as early as 2009. Hundreds more colleges and universities are also exploring esports at various levels — from student organizations to recreational sports to full-fledged varsity programs. There are so many different flavors of esports programs that it can be a challenge to figure out the best solution for each school. On this panel, we've gathered leaders of programs from around the country and from various types of programs to share their experiences — how they got started (or how they're planning to) and lessons learned along the way.

The panel focused on three areas of esports program creation and development: how to get started, how to adapt to or influence campus culture, and how esports can be used to improve the lives of students, faculty, and people broadly. Panelists discovered several common trends among their approaches and program visions: there was a desire and need to create well-rounded esports programs focused on not just

the competitive success of their players, but also on academics, social emotional learning, and professional development; they had found unexpected allies throughout the various teams on their campuses and discovered the need for many disciplines to get involved with the design and implementation of their facilities and initiatives; students had already established communities for gaming on campus that served as inspiration, if not direct counsel, for campus leadership; and they spoke to the motivation to address issues with representation and behavior when it came to gaming and online spaces. Overall, there was a sense of awe and joy for how large esports has grown, especially now at the collegiate level, and hope for games to continue engaging and improving the lives of students worldwide.

Panelists

Kurt Melcher is the Executive Director of Esports at Intersport and Robert Morris University in Chicago, IL. Through his efforts, RMU became the first university to recognize esports as part of the athletic department and offer athletic scholarships to gamers, helping to legitimize the world of collegiate esports. An athletic administrator and coach for over 15 years, Melcher recognized the core educational elements involved in traditional sports and believes the same hold true for esports. Recently the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) selected Intersport to lead the research and ideation surrounding the association's potential role in collegiate esports. Melcher's visionary program has been highlighted in a number of prominent news sources including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Time magazine, The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Magazine, ESPN, NPR, HBO Real Sports and in the documentary film All Work All Play.

Heath Price has grown up around higher education, having spent over 10-years at two flagship research universities – LSU and the University of Kentucky (UK). Additionally, he had the opportunity to work in the private sector as a partner to many

institutions across the United States. In his current role at the University of Kentucky, Heath serves as the Associate CIO in ITS. Most recently he has been a core member of a cross-functional campus team at UK that is charged with building a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to engaging gaming and Esports through the University-environment. UK believes that esports is a new touchpoint for UK to establish sense of campus community and belonging. They desire to be a leader in building a foundation of esports that focuses on positive gaming attributes, respecting people, intentional reach out to interested parties regardless of race, gender, etc. from the start by tying message directly to UK's emphasis on a strong sense of belonging. Esports can connect across majors for co-curricular learning and experiential/internship opportunities; can help UK drive high school and international student recruitment and connections once these students reach the UK campus; and can be a focused touch-point for efforts at UK around Health and Mental Wellness. The University of Kentucky also hopes to use their position – working in partnership with leaders in this field – to explore challenges associated with the growth of this industry, such as gender and racial equity.