

# You think it's not a college sport? Buckle up as esports is now a degree pursuit, too

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For several years, colleges in the hunt for students have transformed campus spaces into esports venues where young video gamers immersed in Dota 2, Fortnite or Arena of Valor could compete at the club and

varsity level.

Now, West Virginia University is taking things further.

It is joining a small but growing number of colleges and universities nationally making esports an academic pursuit.

Starting in fall 2022, WVU will offer a 15-credit minor in esports—video games, played in highly-organized and competitive environments in person or online, as the university describes it.

Students on the main Morgantown campus and both Beckley and Keyser can enroll.

Nine credits will be dedicated to esports coursework offering a foundation in the endeavor's history and ethics, as well as legal, regulatory and cultural issues, said Louis Slimak, assistant provost for curriculum and assessment at WVU. The business of esports, marketing promotion and finance will be available, too, as will elective studies in sports psychology, strategic communication and [social communications](#) including venue and event management.

Some detractors scoff at awarding college credit for what they see as a dorm room obsession. But universities including WVU "need to innovate academically and transform ourselves to be relevant," said Slimak, explaining why his school is betting on an area with job growth in a billion-dollar-plus industry.

"It's not just esports," he added. "The [video game](#) industry is monstrous. It's bigger than the movie industry."

He and others at WVU envision a few dozen or so students enrolling initially, with 60 to 80 eventually in the program at any one time.

WVU Provost Maryanne Reed noted video gaming's huge reach. Her university already has recruited a star player, Noah Johnson, a 19-year-old economics major from Baltimore. He moved to the university in part because of Josh Steger, a successful coach and WVU esports director, who is bringing Mountaineer esports to the main campus with 26,000 of the university 29,000 students.

"I was receiving different offers from other colleges. After having conversations with Josh, I liked the vision and direction of the WVU program," Johnson told the university. "It also helped that Josh was a cool dude."

Nationwide, a handful of schools, notably Ohio State University, are creating degrees in esports and related fields, though it's hard to know the exact tally since federal guidelines do not strictly define how such studies are identified, officials said.

"It looks to me like less than a dozen in the country, but that depends on what people call it," said Slimak.

Esports studies, while embraced in some quarters of academia, also face skeptics who question whether the programs have adequate scholarly rigor and whether—as a career pursuit—the discipline has legs or is merely an enrollment-generating fad.

Institutions that have gone all in on esports see it differently. One Connecticut university put it this way on its web site promoting a new bachelor of science degree:

"The University of New Haven's interdisciplinary major in esports and gaming is designed to maximize our strengths in business, technology, engineering and computer science, to create pioneering opportunities that prepare our students to be the future leaders in this high-growth

field," it reads.

Harrisburg University of Science and Technology offers its own degree.

And, if students are supposed to have fun while pursuing their life's work, an accompanying photo of UNH students in game uniforms cheering wildly and laughing from behind gaming consoles is a pretty good optic. That's not to mention students on esports scholarships.

At WVU, Slimak recalls many years ago when social media's emergence posed a dilemma for educators over its legitimacy as an area of study.

"Social media, when it took off, was kind of this giant money generating thing tied to the Internet," he said.

But with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram now a huge part of the nation's political and personal discourse, the phenomenon and its effects are commonly accepted as legitimate areas of inquiry. Then there's the job potential in studies that span various disciplines.

"Any technological or medical STEM kind of field does pay well," said Slimak. "It's a diverse field which is why I like it. It spans multiple fields. The skills are transferable."

Formed in 2016, the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) initially counted seven colleges and universities with varsity programs. The figure has since ballooned to more than 170 nationally and in Pennsylvania.

Edinboro University was an early adapter, announcing a varsity program in 2018. Edinboro leaders called it a logical tie-in with academic studies in [game design](#), animation and virtual-world development, for which Edinboro is known. It is also offering an admissions niche as state

university enrollments sag.

Point Park University saw another advantage as COVID-19 shuttered campuses. While many athletics endeavors were sidelined, the university found its new esports program—where opponents from other campuses can compete in person or remotely— was doable sport even in a period of disinfectant lotion and physical distancing.

Chris Gaul, esports director and head coach, told the Post-Gazette as much last fall, as his 18-person team competed in the National Association of Collegiate Esports Rocket League Fall Season, as well as the League of Legends.

Their "home turf" is a 1,450-square-foot space in Point Park's Student Center in the former Y building, a studio once used for yoga and Pilates. It has 16 gaming stations and three large-screen televisions mounted on the wall to showcase action at any of the terminals.

Critics including Anthony Hennen of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, a conservative public policy institute in North Carolina, told Inside Higher Ed in late 2019 he was doubtful of higher education's "growth into an entertainment juggernaut."

"Who knows how much sticking power esports has," he said. "It's exploded in popularity, but I would be wary of a college giving a student academics specifically around esports instead of a broader focus. It could be handicapping students in the long run."

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