

# Maintaining and Developing Varsity Esports Programs (VEPs) by Understanding Director Roles

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Varsity esports programs (VEPs) are on the rise within the realm of higher education, as evidenced by the participation of more than 12,800 players representing 650 institutions in the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) Spring 2023 Starleague season alone (NACE, 2023). This proliferation represents vast investments by institutions into students, staff, and community through the development of communal gaming arenas and intercollegiate teams (Jenny et al., 2021; Keiper et al., 2017; Pizzo et al., 2019). While existing research has explored the initiation and value of VEPs (Pizzo et al., 2019), a critical gap remains in comprehending their evolution over time. In the realm of collegiate esports, a key challenge arises in the pivotal role of the VEP director—a figure often singularly responsible for program maintenance and burdened with diverse tasks, including coaching teams, recruiting players, and acting as a liaison to both internal institutional stakeholders and external entities (Postell & Narayan, 2022). Consequently, this study aims to dissect the current challenges faced by VEP directors, delving into the intricacies of sustaining VEPs for long-term viability.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the institutional work lens, a conceptual model that delves into how individuals, particularly stakeholders, strategically shape their institutions by creating, maintaining, and disrupting social structures (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Recognizing directors as embedded actors with agency in organizational success, the study asserts that their involvement in institutional work is crucial in both the inception and continual upkeep of collegiate esports programs (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Pizzo et al., 2019). The process of maintaining a VEP, however, is subject to the numerous stakeholders that diversify the responsibilities and roles of directors. Therefore, there is a need to examine the process of program development by identifying the conflicts directors face while balancing numerous roles. This study also seeks to provide guidance on how directors can make optimal decisions in maintaining development and balancing the requirements of administrators, players, governance structures, and publishers.

To achieve these goals, the study adopts a constructivist approach through semi-structured interviews with VEP directors. This method aims to uncover the roles and responsibilities that institutions promote for these positions and to aid in the development of a focus group interview protocol. Maximum variation sampling will be implemented with a target of 12-16 participants, with data saturation determining the final number of interviews. Data analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's 2006 thematic analysis process where codes are assigned and extracted into themes relevant to the content and through the lens of the institutional work. Initial analysis will provide

feedback for the development of an interview protocol, with supplementary interviews conducted until data saturation to both affirm the themes from the focus groups and to provide additional insights into the decision-making process and maintenance work of VEP directors.

Understanding the strategies VEP directors employ in managing their programs will provide insight into how they mitigate multiple roles in maintaining the development of their programs. This study will guide future research regarding the feasible maneuvers that the field could undertake to create a more consistent environment for directors, players, publishers, and administrators.