

# Exploring Esports Student Athletes' Transition Experiences to the NAIA Affiliated Colleges

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## Abstract

2024 marks a decade from the implementation of the first Esports program in college athletics by Robert Morris University in Illinois (RMUI) (Reames, 2018; Robert Morris University, n.d.). According to Walton and colleagues (2020), while the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) does not include Esports in their sports (NCAA, n.d.), there are several organizations from varying fields, including corporate, collegiate, etc., that are organizing inter-collegiate Esports leagues. Among them, the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) boasts its size with more than 240 member institutions, 5,000 student-athletes, and \$16 million in Esports scholarship and aid as a nonprofit membership association (NACE, n.d.). However, considering that the typical college age is from 18 to 24, Esports student-athletes are the ones who have made their choice to give less prioritization to their pursuit of professional career since Esports professionals, on average, age between 16 to 20 (Hattenstone, 2017) and some of the prospects even leave their school at premature age to pursue their professional Esports player career (Hattenstone, 2017; Martin, 2019). In addition, Esports players have relatively short careers, retiring in their early to mid-20s (Lee, 2022).

Nevertheless, a scarcity of studies has been done that support this population's preparation for transition to society. For instance, studies have been done to support student-athletes who compete in traditional sports for their career transition (e.g., Coffin et al., 2021). Regarding professional Esports athletes, Hong and Hong (2023) conducted a study that emphasized the role of mentorship and realistic talent assessments for better career transition after retiring as a professional Esports player. However, although many previous studies are available regarding Esports student-athletes, the majority of them are concentrated on improving their playing condition (e.g., Buzzelli & Draper, 2021), with the scarcity of research available regarding the perception of this population's experience (e.g., Hwang & Kim, 2022). Hence, more studies are needed to support Esports student-athletes preparing to transition to society just as their traditional sports or professional Esports counterparts. Therefore, this study aims to expand the college Esports literature by providing a case for Esports student athletes' transition and implications to support this population's transition to society.

The theoretical basis of this study is grounded on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. According to Schlossberg (1981), a transition occurs when an event or non-event causes one to change their perception about themselves, which requires their adaptive behavior to change. This study utilized focus group interviews (FGIs) with a semi-structured questionnaire asking Esports student-athletes about their transition experience to the college Esports based on the timeline, such as their Esports career experience before college, their current experience as Esports student-athletes, and how they are preparing for their future. This study recruited 12 Esports student-athletes at an NAIA institution through purposeful sampling and planned to conduct three FGIs, each focus group encompassing four Esports student-athletes. The FGI will take place in early February in the Esports practice venue of an NAIA institution. This study will adopt a content analysis method to analyze the participants' responses (Elo et al., 2014).