

ABSTRACT

The Game Changer: A Case for Academic eSports as a Strategic Tool for Student Engagement and Success at Tennessee State University

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been slow to adopt varsity esports programs, despite immense benefits for enrollment, retention, and engagement amongst digitally native minority youth. This proposed mixed methods study will assess the necessity of integrating an official competitive esports program embedded within expanded academic offerings at Tennessee State University (TSU). An integrated academic esports program promotes critical thinking, teamwork, communication, design, and other essential hard and soft skills demanded by 21st century digital economies.

This study has two central aims: 1) Assess student interest levels in competitive, organized varsity gaming at TSU using surveys and focus groups with current and prospective students, and 2) Determine best practices for implementing a co-curricular esports program by benchmarking existing collegiate models and analyzing costs, resources, and infrastructure requirements. Results will showcase how an esports program could provide STEM-focused curricular innovation while bolstering TSU's modernization efforts to attract and retain ambitious young scholars, especially minority students who tend to be early adopters of gaming culture.

Without adding compelling new academic features like esports into the undergraduate experience, Tennessee State risks failing to reverse downward engagement trends that undermine the university's mission to empower minorities and low-income regional students through STEM career-oriented education. This timely mixed methods study will evaluate the necessity and feasibility of varsity gaming at TSU utilizing statistical surveys to gauge student interest, interviews with stakeholders, benchmark comparisons of peer institutions with esports programs, and a critical analysis of relevant academic literature. Findings can help inform TSU's strategic planning to integrate esports, engaging digitally native generations via their preferred pastime while upholding educational standards.