COLLEGIATE ESPORTS ELIGIBILITY WHITE PAPER

Voice of Intercollegiate Esports

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Introduction

Over the past ten years, esports in higher education has emerged as a distinct point on the timeline of collegiate athletics. Since the first varsity-sanctioned collegiate esports program emerged in 2014 at Robert Morris University, collegiate esports has quickly grown into a core component of university life at many institutions, drawing parallels to traditional sports in terms of competitive spirit, community building, and educational opportunity. Yet, as collegiate esports proliferates across universities, complexities and challenges arise. Central among them is the issue of eligibility.

While traditional college sports have benefitted from decades of policy development under the oversight of organizations like the NCAA, collegiate esports is relatively new, celebrating just its 10th anniversary. As such, it lacks standardized eligibility criteria, underscoring the need for more developed governance and policies.

Eligibility in collegiate esports currently faces a host of challenges, stemming largely from a lack of consistency and standardization across different leagues and conferences. Variations in definitions of a "full-time student," acceptable GPA levels, amateurism, and what constitutes academic good standing have led to a disparate landscape where inconsistency emerges as the only constant. Furthermore, the lack of rigorous verification processes, with many leagues relying on self-reporting and minimal oversight, raises concerns about the effectiveness of governance and implementation.

In response to these issues, VOICE is releasing a white paper aimed at providing a detailed analysis of the current state of eligibility in collegiate esports. This research seeks to shed light on the pressing challenges and opportunities for making the collegiate esports ecosystem more fair, transparent, and academically aligned. We then present a series of policy suggestions aimed at addressing key issues identified in this white paper, accompanied by VOICE's commitment to supporting their development and implementation.

Methodology

To analyze the landscape of collegiate esports eligibility and propose actionable recommendations, this white paper uses multiple research methods, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The approach is designed to capture the breadth and depth of eligibility standards within collegiate esports, juxtaposing these with traditional collegiate activities and athletic associations to distill best practices and commonalities. The methodology is divided into several key components.

1a Analysis of Current Collegiate Esports Eligibility Standards

The analysis of current collegiate esports eligibility standards involves a detailed examination of the existing rules across major collegiate esports leagues, conferences, and tournaments. This includes reviewing the rule sets from prominent collegiate esports tournaments organized by Riot Games (CVAL/CLOL), Blizzard Entertainment (ABC/CCL), as well as standards from the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC), Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC), and smaller leagues such as the Collegiate Carball Association (CCA), American Video Game League (AVGL), and Southeastern Conference (SEC). This data is collated into a comprehensive list, highlighting both the normalized rules widely adopted across these platforms and those unique to specific leagues.

1b Comparative Analysis with Traditional Collegiate Activities

This section evaluates the criteria and rulesets of traditional collegiate activities that have demonstrated success in fostering academic and athletic excellence. This includes athletic associations such as the NCAA, NAIA, and NJCAA, STEAM competitions across various disciplines (Robotics, Music, Programming, Debate, and Mathematics), and game competitions like Chess and Fishing. From this analysis, the NCAA emerged as the most restrictive, providing a benchmark for stringent eligibility standards. The study integrates these findings, comparing all seven esports criteria with eleven criteria from the aforementioned traditional activities.

1c Summarization of Current Landscape

A summarization of the current eligibility landscape within the established criteria is presented in a structured table format. This visual representation aids in identifying commonalities, gaps, and areas requiring attention or standardization across collegiate esports.

2 Research on Criteria Effectiveness

Research was done to survey the state of academic literature on topics related to eligibility rules and student success. While little research exists on esports specifically, this literature review focused on understanding whether any connection existed between holistic student success and traditional eligibility rules or norms.

3 Eligibility Survey

An eligibility survey was conducted among 71 Esports Program Directors, Coaches, and Faculty, encompassing a wide range of questions designed to capture the nuances of eligibility concerns within collegiate esports. Questions spanned directors' roles, institutional types, perceptions of eligibility importance, core issues surrounding eligibility, and opinions on standardization, among others. This survey provided qualitative insights into the practical challenges and perspectives of those directly managing collegiate esports programs.

4 Conversations with Competition Operators

To supplement the survey data and document analysis, the research involved engaging in conversations with prominent leagues, conferences, and tournament organizers within the collegiate esports space. These discussions provided a richer understanding of the eligibility challenges and opportunities from the viewpoint of those organizing and regulating collegiate esports competitions. This triangulated approach, combining rule set analysis, comparative traditional activity standards, direct feedback from program directors, and insights from industry conversations, ensures a thorough and informed basis for the recommendations and conclusions drawn in this white paper.

Analysis of Collegiate Esports Eligibility Standards

The process of understanding the current landscape of collegiate esports eligibility begins with an exploration of the rulesets governing participation across various leagues and tournaments. Towards this end, regulations from leading collegiate esports competitions organized by Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment have been gathered and reviewed, extending to frameworks established by the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC), Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC), and the National Junior College Athletic Association Esports (NJCAAE), among others. This investigation has culminated in an enumeration of widely accepted rules alongside those specific to a select few leagues, thereby painting a comprehensive picture of the current standards in collegiate esports eligibility. Together, these criteria compose the framework within which collegiate esports operates.

1a Analysis of Current Collegiate Esports Eligibility Standards

1. High School Diploma or Equivalent: A fundamental prerequisite, tacitly mandated across all tournaments, underscores the expectation that participants engage in higher education, thus ensuring that all competitors have achieved a baseline level of academic accomplishment.

2. Minimum GPA: A criterion upheld by the majority of leagues, which necessitates that participants are "in good standing" academically. The interpretation of this standard, however, is delegated to the respective educational institutions, introducing a layer of variability in its application.

3. Full-Time Enrollment: Universally enforced, this requirement affirms that competitors are deeply invested in their academic journey, ensuring their primary commitment lies with their educational pursuits.

4. Degree Seeking: Another widespread expectation, this stipulation demands that athletes are on a path towards academic achievement, further reinforcing the student-first paradigm inherent in collegiate esports. Here too, the onus is on individual institutions to define this pursuit.

5. Ethical Conduct: Championed by the majority of competitions, this mandate upholds the moral compass of college esports, ensuring that participants adhere to principles of fairness, integrity, and respect. It signifies a commitment to upholding high ethical standards, with direct oversight from leagues to maintain adherence.

6. Character Expectations: While not universally required, this criterion embodies the ethos of sportsmanship and personal integrity, crucial for fostering a positive and respectful competitive environment. Enforcement may escalate to league intervention in instances of widespread disregard, emphasizing the collective responsibility towards maintaining decorum.

7. Semester Participation Limit: Instituted by a select few, this guideline delineates the temporal boundaries of competitive engagement, typically capping participation at 4-5 years. This limitation accounts for the academic trajectory of the student-athlete, inclusive of any transfers, thereby safeguarding the equitable distribution of competitive opportunities.

1b Comparative Analysis with Traditional Collegiate Activities

Expanding the lens to traditional collegiate activities, this analysis delves into the eligibility standards of established athletic associations such as the NCAA, NAIA, and NJCAA, alongside competitions in the realms of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics), including robotics, music, programming, debate, and mathematics, as well as game competitions like chess and fishing. This review reveals the NCAA as the benchmark for stringent eligibility standards.

1. Athletic Associations
    a. NCAA - National Collegiate Athletics Association
    b. NAIA - National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics
    c. NJCAA - National Junior College Athletic Association
2. STEAM Competitions (Science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics)
    a. Robotics - Variety of local competitions
    b. Music - Variety of national and local competitions
    c. Debate - AFA and local competitions
    d. Math - AMA (American Mathematical Association) and other national competition
3. Game Competitions
    a. Chess - Pan-American Intercollegiate Team Championships
    b. Fishing - National competitions in the ACA (Association of Collegiate Anglers)

The synthesis of these findings has led to the juxtaposition of seven core esports eligibility criteria against eleven from traditional activities, making it possible to view the parallels and divergences that characterize these domains. This comparative exercise not only highlights the unique aspects of esports eligibility but also offers a gateway to aligning these standards with the best practices that have long governed traditional collegiate sports and activities.

Table 1a: Eligibility Criteria Overview

Requirement	Explanation
HS Diploma/GED	Essential for all athletes, signifying completion of secondary education.
Minimum GPA	A standard measure of academic performance, often pegged to a 4.0 scale.
SAT/ACT Scores	College readiness assessments, gradually becoming optional.
Amateurism	Prohibits professional play to maintain collegiate sports' integrity.
Age Limit	Restricts competition to traditional college-age students, with specific exceptions.
Full-Time Enrollment	Ensures athletes are committed primarily to their academic pursuits.
Degree Seeking	Mandates progress towards an academic degree, emphasizing the student aspect of student-athletes.
Transfer Rules	Regulates athlete mobility between institutions, maintaining competition fairness.
Ethical Conduct	Requires adherence to high moral standards both on and off the field.
Character Expectations	Values integrity, respect, and sportsmanship, crucial for team dynamics and personal development.
Semester Limit	Caps the number of competitive seasons to ensure fair play.
Residency	Sometimes ties eligibility to geographic location.
Physical Exam	Ensures athletes are physically capable of competition, safeguarding their health.
In-person Classes	Promotes engagement with the campus community and academic life.
Redshirt Rules	Allows athletes to extend eligibility under certain conditions, like injury or personal growth.
APR (Academic Progress Rate)	Monitors teams' academic achievements, influencing postseason eligibility.
Scholarship Limits	Controls the distribution of athletic scholarships to ensure equity across sports.
Equipment Restrictions	Standardizes competition equipment, preventing any unfair technological advantages.

Table 1c: Summarization of Current Landscape Within Given Criteria

Requirement	NCAA	NAIA	NJCAA	Esports (generally)	Collegiate Chess	Collegiate Robotics (generally)	Collegiate Fishing	Collegiate Music (generally)	Collegiate Debate	Collegiate Math
HS Diploma/GED	Explicitly Required	Explicitly Required	Explicitly Required	Institution Controlled	Institution Controlled	Explicitly Required	Institution Controlled	Institution Controlled	Institution Controlled	No
Minimum GPA	2.3/2.2 (D1/D2)	2.0	2.0	Varies by Institution	3.0/2.0	Varies by Institution	2.0+	NA	In Good Standing	Semester Completion
SAT/ACT Scores	Phased Out	18/970	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Amateurism	Required	Required	Required	Varies	Under 26/30	NA	NA	Institution Controlled	NA	NA
Age Limit	Eligibility Clock	No	No	NA	No	NA	NA	19-26 Years Old	NA	No
Full-Time Enrollment	12 Hours	12 Hours	12 Hours	12 Hours	6 Minimum	12 Hours	12 Hours	Specific Majors Required	12 Hours	12 Hours
Degree Seeking	Core Classes	Required	Transfer Aim	Institution Controlled	Required	Major Specific	Required	Required	Required	NA
Transfer Rules	Limited	24/36 Rule	Free Transfer	NA	NA	Free Transfer	NA	NA	Free Transfer	NA
Ethical Conduct	Varies	Institution Based	NJCAA Oversight	Varies by TO	FIDE Oversight	TO Oversight	TO Oversight	Institution Controlled	TO Oversight	NA
Character Expectations	Institution Based	Direct Oversight	NA	Varies by TO	NA	NA	NA	NA	TO Oversight	NA
Semester Limit	4 Seasons	First 10 Semesters	2 Seasons	4-5 Year Limit	6 Years	NA	NA	NA	5 Years	Prize Limitation
Residency	No	No	Some Flexibility	NA	Within Reason	NA	State ID Required	US Citizen	NA	NA
Physical Exam	Annual	Annual	Annual	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
In-person Classes	Implied	Implied	Implied	NA	Residency Implied	NA	State ID Implied	Major Specific	NA	NA
Redshirt Rules	Allowed	Injury Only	Allowed	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
APR	930+	2 of 3 Rule	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Scholarship Limits	Sport Specific	Sport Specific	Sport Specific	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Equipment Restrictions	Dependent	Dependent	Dependent	NA	Required	Required	Required	NA	NA	NA

Research on Criteria Effectiveness

In this section we draw upon the experiences of analogous associations and policies in traditional collegiate sports to understand the efficacy and transferability of established eligibility standards.

Predominantly, the scrutiny of eligibility criteria has focused on the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which is known for its rigorous and evolving eligibility standards. The NCAA, as a benchmark of regulatory stringency collegiate athletics, offers a comprehensive backdrop for evaluating the adaptability and impact of eligibility policies. A notable instance of the NCAA's dynamic policy landscape is the phased elimination of standardized test score requirements for incoming student-athletes, a change initiated in Fall 2023 to foster racial equity and better harmonize with the admission protocols of its constituent institutions.

Over time, the NCAA has adjusted its academic eligibility requirements to emphasize core GPA over standardized test scores, introducing the 10/7 Rule for Division I recruits and a 2.2 core GPA requirement for Division II athletes, effectively prioritizing academic preparedness over test performance. This shift underscores the NCAA's commitment to balancing academic rigor with athletic participation.

The importance of such balance is supported by research like that of Garcia et al. (2023), which highlights the role of motivational, identity-based, and self-regulatory factors in the academic achievements of collegiate student-athletes. This underscores the necessity for collegiate esports to adopt supportive frameworks that enhance academic motivation and identity in tandem with competitive success.

Over the last few decades, scholarly and public scrutiny of intercollegiate athletics has intensified, perhaps in response to disparaging graduation rates in Division I football and men's basketball (Harper, 2018), academic fraud cases (Sack, 2014; Willens, 2015), major clustering (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Gurney & Southall, 2013; Paule-Koba, 2015, 2019; Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010; Schneider et al., 2010), and misplaced spending priorities (Desrochers, 2013; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics [Knight Commission], 2010). Ineffective engagement strategies for college athletes' learning

exacerbate this concern (Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2013a). Calls for reform have come from within colleges and universities and beyond (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Knight Commission, 2010).

In an attempt to respond to some of these concerns, NCAA rules limit athletes to 20 hours per week of supervised practice and training time during the season and eight hours per week in the off-season, as well as restrict the number of athletes who live in the same resident hall (Oriard, 2012). In 2005, the NCAA enacted the Academic Progress Rate (APR) initiative to improve college athletes' eligibility, retention, and graduation in team sports (NCAA, 2011a). To this point, research from 2019 shows that "Student-athlete graduation rates have significantly increased in recent years, with the NCAA believing their retention and graduation rates now outpace the general college student population." (Huml, 2019)

The transition of esports into the collegiate sports framework invites a reexamination of what constitutes a student-athlete in today's digital age. By leveraging insights from the realm of traditional sports, collegiate esports programs are poised to spearhead innovative practices that not only enhance the academic and competitive outcomes for their athletes but also challenge prevailing stereotypes associated with gaming and gamers.

Eligibility Survey

An eligibility survey was conducted among 71 Esports Program Directors, Coaches, and Faculty, encompassing a wide range of questions designed to capture the nuances of eligibility concerns within collegiate esports. Questions spanned institutional types, perceptions of eligibility importance, core issues surrounding eligibility, and opinions on standardization, among others. This survey provided qualitative insights into the practical challenges and perspectives of those directly managing collegiate esports programs.

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1. Eligibility Standards, Verification, and Governance

- In your opinion, how important is eligibility in collegiate esports?
- In your opinion, what are the core issues surrounding collegiate esports eligibility?
- Do you think eligibility requirements should be standardized across the industry?
- How do you verify the eligibility of students in your program?
- Should programs have to submit transcripts or some other proof of enrollment/GPA in order to be eligible?
- Should "in good standing" as is commonly used by many leagues become a formalized term with a specific meaning?
- Who should enforce eligibility requirements?
- Should there be eligibility limits like the NCAA has where students can only compete for a certain number of years?

Importance of Eligibility in Collegiate Esports
The consensus among program directors is unanimous regarding the importance of eligibility, with an average importance rating of 4.34 on a 5-point scale. There was an absence of "1" or "2" responses.

Core Issues Surrounding Collegiate Esports Eligibility
Responses to the question of perception of core issues revealed many different concerns around eligibility standards and verification. The lack of consistency and standardization across leagues emerged as a primary challenge, highlighting varying definitions of academic good standing and full-time enrollment. This inconsistency is exacerbated by the minimalist approach to eligibility verification, where reliance on self-reported compliance undermines the integrity of the competitive ecosystem.

Additionally, some respondents were concerned about professional and semi-professional competitors within the collegiate ecosystem.

Standardization vs. Flexibility

The call for standardizing eligibility requirements resonated strongly among respondents, driven by desire for fairness and competitive integrity. Underneath those responses was a nuanced understanding of the need for adaptability, reflecting diverse institutional contexts within collegiate esports.

Verification Practices

The verification of student eligibility is currently managed through collaborative efforts with academic offices, coaches, directors, and leagues, who leverage direct access to academic records and scheduled grade checks. This approach underscores the commitment to maintaining academic integrity while navigating the logistical and privacy challenges in handling sensitive student information. There was widespread support for requiring transcripts or other proofs of enrollment/GPA for eligibility verification.

Governance of Eligibility Requirements

The responses indicated a preference for eligibility enforcement to be a shared responsibility between conferences and schools, despite prior concerns about the effectiveness of current enforcement practices. This is a paradox, as respondents both expressed frustration with the current state of governance, but also mostly didn't desire for governance structures to change. There was some support for third party arbitration, but the majority wanted shared responsibility.

Eligibility Limits

The notion of imposing eligibility limits akin to those of the NCAA had substantial support. However, there was a diversity of opinions on the specifics of such limits, revealing a dialogue about the correct balance between competitive equity and individual student circumstances.

2. Academic Integrity, Progress, and Student Success

- Do you impose eligibility requirements on your students, and if so, what kind (for example, GPA requirements)?
- What minimum GPA do you think needs to be required of students in order to compete (if any)?
- Should eligibility be focused around creating the highest quality competition, ensuring student academic success, or something else?
- Should students have to meet progress to graduation requirements? (These requirements, for instance, would require that a student isn't just full-time, but that they are making progress towards a degree as evidenced by taking a certain number of courses per year in their major).

Imposing Eligibility Requirements

The vast majority of respondents want to impose a GPA benchmark along with full-time enrollment as core eligibility criteria. The GPA threshold that was desired ranged between 2.0 and 2.5. This standard, while seemingly uniform, is nuanced by institutions' provision for probationary leniency or supplementary academic support, such as tutoring for those on the lower bounds of the stipulated GPA requirement.

Progress Toward Graduation

A majority of voices support progress-to-graduation requirements, advocating for a framework that ensures students are not just enrolled full-time but are advancing toward degree completion. This support is tempered by cautions regarding the operationalization of these sorts of requirements. Concerns include the potential for bureaucratic entanglements and the necessity for clarity and fairness in enforcement.

Balancing Academic Success and Competitive Excellence

There was no clear majority opinion from respondents on this question. A pronounced plurality argued that eligibility should serve as a conduit for aligning academic integrity with the pursuit of high-quality competition, suggesting a model where educational and competitive aspirations are not mutually exclusive. This is not universally accepted, however, with a second group advocating for greater emphasis on academic success, and a third group arguing for prioritizing the cultivation of elite competition.

3. Competition Structure and Player Mobility

- Do you think students should be allowed to compete remotely or should be required to compete from an in-person facility?
- Is it problematic to have players transfer teams/schools mid-semester or semester to semester? If you answered yes to the previous question, please provide your thoughts.
- Should players need to commit to programs for a minimum time period (for example, if they play one game with a university they are ineligible to play for any other university until next academic year)?

Remote vs. In-Person Competition

Responses to the survey highlight a split in preferences for competition formats, with participants dividing into three main categories: Remote Participation Advocates, In-Person Participation Advocates, and Flexible/Conditional Supporters. Those in favor of remote participation emphasize the need for inclusivity and accessibility, arguing that the digital nature of esports should transcend geographical limitations. Their argument centers on expanding collegiate esports to include a broader range of students, such as those in online programs or without access to physical facilities.

Conversely, proponents of in-person participation compare esports to traditional sports, underscoring the importance of physical presence for team dynamics and authenticity in the competitive arena. They believe that the true spirit of collegiate esports thrives on in-person engagement, which nurtures stronger bonds among teammates and ensures fairness.

Flexible/conditional supporters propose a balanced approach, recognizing the benefits of both formats. They suggest creating separate leagues for remote and in-person competitions, allowing remote participation under certain circumstances, and favoring in-person participation while being open to making exceptions.

Player Mobility

The survey responses voice significant concerns about player mobility, particularly regarding mid-semester or inter-semester transfers. A majority of respondents expressed opposition to mid-semester transfers, citing potential negative impacts on competitive integrity, team stability, and student welfare. The primary issues identified include the risk of poaching and disruption to team dynamics, which could lead to unfair

competitive advantages and undermine the cohesion essential for successful esports teams. There are also worries about the detrimental effects of mid-semester transfers on students' academic trajectories and overall well-being.

In response to these concerns, there is strong advocacy for stringent regulations, such as the implementation of a transfer portal or designated transfer windows, aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of unchecked mobility.

Minimum Commitment Periods
The question of whether players should be required to commit to programs for a minimum time period garnered support for commitment restrictions, albeit with a call for clarity on the nature and extent. Supporters argue that some form of commitment is essential for maintaining team integrity and ensuring that participation is approached with seriousness. There is a recognition, however, that the example provided (ineligibility to play for any other university until the next academic year after playing one game) might be too restrictive, suggesting that stakeholders seek a balanced policy that prevents frivolous transfers while not unduly penalizing students for changing circumstances.

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4. Professional Participation and Financial Considerations
- Should pro/semi-pro players be simultaneously allowed to play in collegiate?
- Do you think college esports should have amateurism rules in place similar to traditional athletics?
- Should there be outside earnings limitations on collegiate players? If so, what sort of policy do you have in mind?

Pro/Semi-Pro Participation in Collegiate Esports
The debate over the participation of pro/semi-pro players in collegiate esports also unfolds into three viewpoints: Unconditional Support for Inclusion, Conditional Support, and Outright Opposition. Those in favor of unconditional support advocate for the benefits that pro/semi-pro players could add to the collegiate scene, emphasizing the value of inclusivity and the positive impact of mixing different levels of experience and skill.

The conditional support group welcomes the idea of pro/semi-pro players joining collegiate esports but emphasizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of educational goals. They advocate for establishing clear rules concerning players' engagement in terms of their full-time status, contractual obligations, and earnings to ensure that academic priorities remain unaffected.

The opposition camp raises concerns about fairness and the potential erosion of the amateur ethos within collegiate esports, arguing against the inclusion of pro/semi-pro players. This viewpoint is driven by the desire to maintain an equitable competition environment for all participants.

The responses further shed light on the complexity of defining who qualifies as a "pro" or "semi-pro" player, indicating that any policy on this matter should start with precise definitions. Worth noting, the distribution of opinions on this issue is nearly evenly split, with the inclusion of "semi-pro" players as a variable affecting the consensus. Esports as a whole currently lacks clear definitions of what it means to be a pro player, which likely problematized the responses that we're received for this question.

Implementation of Amateurism Rules
Adoption of amateurism rules in collegiate esports also elicited a divided response, with the majority in support of implementing such regulations, provided they account for the nuances specific to esports. Supporters of amateurism rules advocate for their establishment to safeguard fairness and uphold integrity within the esports domain, drawing analogies to conventional athletics.

Opponents of stringent amateurism regulations underscore the esports ecosystem's distinct characteristics, particularly the blurred boundary between amateur and professional status. Applying traditional amateurism rules could unfairly disadvantage players attempting to juggle educational commitments with emerging career opportunities.

Despite the contention, there's a general consensus on the necessity for esports-specific amateurism rules, with unanimous support for permitting students to generate income through personal streaming and content creation. However, there was near unanimous agreement that collegiate players should not be able to have active Tier 1 contracts, with that agreement starting to fall off as we include T2, T3, etc. As with the previous question, much comes down to how one defines "amateur".

Outside Earnings Limitations for Collegiate Players

On the question of outside earnings limitations, responses overwhelmingly support the idea that collegiate players should not face restrictions on their earnings.

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5. Inclusivity, Flexibility, and Educational Pathways

- Should part-time students be allowed to compete?
- Should eligibility standards exist for dual-enrollment students (students taking both high school and college courses)?

Part-Time Student Participation

A significant portion of respondents voice a clear stance against the inclusion of part-time students, suggesting a preference for maintaining the traditional model of student engagement where full-time enrollment serves as a cornerstone of eligibility. Some respondents expressed support for part-time students, but specifically in narrow situations such as medical challenges, graduate students, graduating seniors, etc.

Dual-Enrollment Student Eligibility

There is clear consensus that eligibility standards are necessary for dual-enrolled students. Responses ranged from direct exclusion of dual-enrolled students to support for dual enrolled students as long as they met the same eligibility requirements that were imposed on other students, such as being a full-time enrolled student at a university and meeting GPA requirements.

Conversations with Competition Operators

For a deeper understanding of eligibility within collegiate esports, research extended to include discussions with a number of key stakeholders from leagues, conferences, and tournament organizers. These entities offer insights into the operational complexities and pragmatic challenges associated with developing and enforcing eligibility standards. The conversations revealed a wide variety of challenges, hopes, and concerns when it comes to collegiate eligibility. Discussion were held with the following organizations:

- National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE)
- National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC)
- Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC)
- National Junior College Association (NJCAAE)
- Riot (CLoL/CVAL)
- Blizzard (ABC/CCL)

A theme that emerged from these discussions was the spectrum of eligibility policies in place, ranging from robust frameworks with stringent requirements to more minimalistic approaches that prioritize inclusivity and accessibility. This variety highlights collegiate's struggle with finding a common ground that appropriately balances competitive integrity, academics, and the inclusivity of participants.

The approach to eligibility further varies between developer-run leagues and traditional collegiate esports conferences. Developer leagues tend to focus on ensuring participants are students, without delving into the intricacies of academic standing or progress towards degree completion. In contrast, some traditional conferences tend to adopt more comprehensive standards that encompass academic performance, progress towards degree completion, conduct, and even amateurism.

Additionally, a common theme amongst the developer leagues is a desire to follow industry standards. Developer leagues were broadly not looking to be any more stringent than the traditional conferences and were instead interested in following their lead when it comes to eligibility, mirroring the developmental pace of the collegiate ecosystem. This puts the ball mostly in the court of traditional collegiate esports

conferences in terms of defining eligibility, as developers may prefer to adopt the same standards.

The implementation of eligibility standards faces numerous challenges across the board, not least of which is the resource intensity required for thorough verification processes. While some collegiate organizations expressed a desire for rigorous eligibility enforcement, the practicalities of doing so—particularly in terms of verifying academic good standing, full-time enrollment status, and progression towards a degree—are daunting. This is exacerbated by the diverse nature of academic calendars, grading systems, and institutional policies across colleges and universities involved in collegiate esports.

Finally, the conversations highlighted a shared concern over the need for standardization in eligibility criteria across the esports landscape. This concern stems from the recognition that disparities in eligibility standards can create competitive imbalances, complicate transfers and recruitment, and ultimately detract from the goal of fostering a fair and equitable competitive environment. However, efforts towards standardization are hampered by the intrinsic differences between institutions, the varying levels of institutional support for esports programs, and the divergent philosophies of league organizers regarding the role of collegiate esports within higher education.

Policy Recommendations

Below, we present a series of policy suggestions aimed at addressing key issues identified in this white paper, accompanied by VOICE's commitment to supporting their development and implementation.

1. Issue: Inconsistency in Eligibility Standards
- Recommendation: Establish a unified set of baseline eligibility criteria across all collegiate esports leagues.
- Rationale: Standardization ensures fairness and competitive integrity, making the competitive landscape equitable for all participants.

2. Issue: Varying Definitions of Academic Good Standing
- Recommendation: Require "in good standing" to include maintaining a minimum GPA of 2.0, applicable across all leagues.
- Rationale: A clear, universal academic standard supports the academic mission of collegiate institutions while providing a consistent benchmark for eligibility.

3. Issue: Verification of Eligibility
- Recommendation: Implement a centralized verification system where institutions submit proof of students' enrollment and academic standing.
- Rationale: This ensures a reliable and efficient process for confirming eligibility, reducing the burden on individual leagues and promoting trust in the integrity of the competition.

4. Issue: Professional Participation
- Recommendation: Prohibit students with active Tier 1 professional contracts from participating as players in collegiate leagues. Additionally, students who have had Tier 1 professional contracts are barred from competing as a player for 6 months after the end of their contract.
- Rationale: Balances the competitive landscape while recognizing the unique ecosystem of esports, where high-level experience can enhance the collegiate scene without undermining fairness.

5. Issue: Amateurism and Earnings
- Recommendation: Introduce esports-specific amateurism rules that allow for personal streaming and content creation earnings.
- Rationale: Recognizes the unique landscape of esports, where personal brand building is integral to player development, without compromising the amateur status of collegiate athletes.

6. Issue: Player Mobility and Transfer Rules
- Recommendation: Adopt a transfer window system with the window being in summer (May 15 - August 15). Additionally, establish a minimum commitment period of 1 year for players. This transfer rule does not apply to Community College students who are transferring to a four-year institution.
- Rationale: Minimizes internal and external disruptions to team dynamics and competitive integrity, fostering a stable environment for student-athletes to develop. This system guarantees students commit to programs for a minimum of one year.

7. Issue: Remote vs. In-Person Competition
- Recommendation: Allow leagues to offer both remote and in-person competition formats, with clear guidelines for each. Additionally, over time, conferences and leagues should move top-level divisions to in-person.
- Rationale: Acknowledges the digital nature of esports while supporting inclusivity, team cohesion, and the benefits of physical presence.

8. Issue: Academic Progress, Degree Completion, and Enrollment Status
- Recommendation: Require evidence of progress towards a degree as well as full-time status, via the submission of unofficial transcripts. Evidence of progress towards a degree requires that students complete 24 semester hours of degree credit each academic year.
- Rationale: Ensures student-athletes are not only engaged academically but are also making substantive progress toward degree attainment, reinforcing the student-first principle.

9. Issue: Eligibility for Part-Time and Dual-Enrollment Students
- Recommendation: Part-time students may compete only during their last academic term prior to graduation due to degree completion. Dual-enrollment students may compete only if they fulfill prerequisite eligibility criteria.
- Rationale: Enhances accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring a broader demographic can participate in collegiate esports.

10. Issue: Extenuating Circumstances
  - Recommendation: Each league and conference should establish an eligibility appeal process and committee in order to accommodate students and schools who face extenuating circumstances. The committee should include at least one student representative.
  - Rationale: Students with extenuating circumstances like medical leaves of absences should not be unfairly disbarred from competition.

VOICE recognizes that the implementation of more stringent eligibility rules and the establishment of a comprehensive verification system represent a significant undertaking for collegiate leagues, conferences, and institutions. These recommendations are designed not just as directives but as a framework for collaboration and evolution in collegiate esports.

The realization of these policies will necessitate additional resources, including time, financial investment, and administrative effort. VOICE is acutely aware of the challenges this may pose, especially for smaller institutions and leagues. However, the long-term benefits—enhanced competitive integrity, a more equitable playing field, and the reinforcement of academic values within esports—justify these investments. VOICE is committed to supporting this transition, offering guidance, resources, and expertise to assist leagues and schools in navigating these changes.

Future Thoughts

As the White Paper's findings note the importance of eligibility standards in support of competitive excellence, VOICE also draws upon research that examines eligibility from important critical perspectives to highlight emergent thinking on the topic. For example, in a 3-year longitudinal study on collegiate esports, Kauweloa (2022) highlights that eligibility in college esports continues to be a double-edged sword of opportunities and constraints. In particular, argues Kauweloa, well-defined standards, while at the heart of esports, fair play, and competitive integrity, tap into questions beyond competition that center the relationship between different regimes of eligibility to student well-being and player mental health. The hope for the White Paper, consequently, is to provide a baseline for eligibility while also to be a guide for future research on key topics about eligibility in college esports.

In particular, VOICE sees the need for further development of something akin to NCAA's APR rule, as that rule has had a demonstrable impact on the outcomes of traditional student athletes. However, the current collegiate esports ecosystem is not yet well equipped to implement and handle such a system. There is significant needed infrastructure work to be completed prior to such an undertaking. Nonetheless, VOICE thinks that a system akin to the APR would be beneficial for collegiate esports as a whole and should be a goal that is moved towards.

Pushing towards such goals requires more research and more infrastructure, and VOICE fully plans to support such development in the future such as further research similar to Dr. Kauweloa's in order to understand how eligibility impacts students academically, mentally, and competitively. VOICE will also work with leagues, publishers, programs, and universities in order to better understand how moving towards an APR-like system could best be implemented in a manner that supports student success without unduly burdening programs and administrators. VOICE sees these steps as integral to improving our ecosystem and will devote resources to their development and support.