

Esports in Michigan 'too big to ignore'

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Western Michigan University unveiled a new Esports Arena Friday, Oct. 5, where the new club team will compete against other universities in video games.

More than 400 universities in the United States and Canada sponsor some type of esports competition, with 15 colleges in Michigan jumping into the esports world.

And more, according to State Champs esports tournament director Andrew Blanchard, will follow suit.

"People that tend to assign themselves to gaming are people who are driven to work with computers or into tech fields," Blanchard said.

"Those are the students drawn to it, students that are going into growing industries and students that colleges want to attract.

"Most schools are starting to index into it. It's gotten too big to ignore."

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Michael Brooks, executive director of the National Association of Esports, said NACE is the main governing body for collegiate esports and oversees 129 programs.

"In five years, I expect us to be over 1,000 institutions," Brooks said. "It's not a big endeavor for a college program, yet it impacts such a large group of students who, in general, have higher GPAs, higher test scores and higher graduation rates."

"We are on the ground floor right now of something that is growing at an exponential rate. It's kind of a mixed bag right now of what people are doing, but there is no argument about the growth potential of the entire esports competition industry."

Blanchard helps run the high school esports tournament that ends with a championship match at Lawrence Tech. Each member of the five-member winning team earns a \$16,000 scholarship if they attend Lawrence Tech.

"They are basically half-rides to Lawrence Tech ... there are huge amounts of money available," Blanchard said. "That doesn't include what other schools are giving. There are college teams that scout our tournament."

"If you are getting scouted and playing on a high school's Team A, you're getting a good scholarship so that not only are you getting money to go to college, you're pursuing something you're passionate about."

According to Brooks, competitions such as the one held by Lawrence Tech are crucial for esports collegiate programs.

"There are approximately 16 million college students involved in esports programs in the United States and Canada right now," Brooks said. "There's a reason Lawrence Tech is doing this. They're trying to

recruit students. It is a major challenge right now trying to recruit players for the collegiate level.

"Coaches can watch games online, but all they can get is a user name. We don't know anything else. We don't know age, gender, residence ... nothing. Recruiting is one of our pain points because publishers of games won't release information about its users. It's proprietary information. We've actually developed partnerships with some traditional recruiting databases ... BeRecruited.com and NCSAA.com. That's been growing pretty fast."

The 15 Michigan-based programs range from NAIA (Siena Heights) and Division III (Alma and Adrian) to the Big Ten (Michigan, Michigan State) and Mid-American Conference (Central Michigan and Western Michigan). Aquinas announced that it will add an esports team and join the NACE.

Davenport and Northwood universities recently jumped into the esports pool and joined Siena Heights and Alma as members of the National Association of Collegiate Esports. Aquinas would become the fifth NACE-member program from Michigan.

"Right now, there are universities sponsoring esports, but not all in the same way," Northwood athletic director Dave Marsh said. "For instance, at our university, esports falls under student services. At other universities, it falls under athletics.

"We talked for months about the possibility of adding it. The popularity is beyond what I imagined. You worry that you're endorsing an activity that has students cooped up and playing video games for hours on end. Some students do that anyway. This way they're doing it in a way

that has constructive results."

Marsh has begun interacting with other college athletic directors from universities that sponsor esports. He also attends informational sessions about the pluses and minuses of university-sponsored esports programs.

"It's really amazing what has happened at some universities that have esports programs," Marsh said. "Students who joined esports teams have increased participation in other activities. One AD said that the members of the team started going to basketball games, something they didn't do before. Being part of the esports team made them feel more involved and more a part of the school.

"I talked to an AD that started it eight years ago, and they saw a lot of benefits from it. The university provides the opportunity, and students find their place. It's organized. Members learn teamwork, camaraderie, school pride, time management, leadership. It's all a part of esports, just as it is in traditional sports."

That does not surprise Brooks.

"It's a tried-and-true proven way to get a student to become passionate about the university," Brooks said. "The most passionate and most likely to stay are student-athletes and students within the Greek system. It keeps them engaged on campus. It's an anchor to the school. The results of esports competitors are matching what happens with traditional athletes on a college campus."

In October, Western Michigan University finished work on a \$500,000 esports arena, turning the Little Theater into an arena that features 36

gaming machines, gaming chairs, special keyboards and seating for 190 spectators.

"If universities are awarding scholarships, it would be silly as high school administrators not to look at it for our students," Lapeer athletic director Shad Spilski said. Spilski is on the Michigan High School Athletic Association task force investigating the potential for esports as an official MHSAA sport.

"Universities are seeing the benefits. Universities around our state are advertising it as part of their curriculum. We need to be part of that conversation."