

## D2 ADA



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### Winning with a Culture of Belonging

The past four years have been a humbling experience as I embark on my fifth year as director of athletics at San Francisco State University. The honeymoon phase was definitely over after the 2018-19 year as we learned to navigate through the beginning of a worldwide health crisis, scrambled to provide the much-needed mental health support that our student-athletes, coaches and staff vitally needed, and socially addressed the systemic racism, classism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy that exists in our country AND in our culture of intercollegiate athletics. The latter is a social pandemic that has existed in the fabric of our history and bubbled up and off the back burner in the past four years, forcing us to respond.

Through a resurgence of focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), we as an industry are all given the reminder and the opportunity to address the culture on our campuses and in our programs that we all claim we strive for: a culture of belonging that is healthy, safe and nurturing; a culture that attempts to understand each other and respectfully talk about and admit what we do not understand in each other; an authentic desire to go deeper than just being a team; to be examples of identifying what needs to be dismantled to create meaningful connections with each other.

During the pandemic, wonderful and inspirational things happened. As members of the D2 ADA Board, we had the privilege of being introduced to Nevin Caple's Return on Inclusion (ROI) and were enrolled in the ROI certification program. I was inspired by the national conversations around DEI awareness and endeavors. Action was occurring ... not just talk. Then, as members of the California Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA), we were introduced to Ivy Watts, and she addressed the mental health crises for many student-athletes that often are overlooked and urgently need addressing. I started to think more deeply about how much the systemic cultures in athletics contribute to the overall mental health of our

student-athletes and all of us.

So, while the AD honeymoon was over, the humanizing was accelerated. The focus on how we can make each day impactful for all of our student-athletes was heightened. When the Xs and Os were paused through the humbling experiences of the pandemic, our lenses focused on health, safety and nurturing. As an industry we invited honest conversations and began dismantling the dominant narratives and uplifting the counter stories of those who are most marginalized. Instead of merely issuing DEI statements and theories, many began to take action toward knowing and respecting each other to implement a much-needed culture change.

In Gator athletics we emphasize that no matter what results transpire from competition, we want to ensure that we go to bed at night feeling like winners to the core; that student-athletes are succeeding in the classroom, the community and in their personal connections. Winning on the court does not act as a band aid for underlying feelings of stress and exclusion. Rather, it should spread like a frosting, for happy, healthy, balanced humans who KNOW they belong and are loved in our intercollegiate communities. This is why we do what we do. I am so grateful we were reminded.

## D2 CCA



**Dave Brunk**

**Peach Belt Conference**

Commissioner



**Bob Dranoff**

**East Coast Conference**

Commissioner

### Collegiate Esports Continues to Grow in D2 Conferences

The growth of collegiate esports has been significant and there are no indications it is slowing down. Almost every campus has students participating in esports at some level, whether it is played independently or organized under the auspices of student life or athletics/recreation departments. As colleges and universities work to attract and retain all students in this everchanging world of higher education, many have found collegiate esports to be a very positive addition to their campus programming.

The Peach Belt Conference (PBC) became the first NCAA conference to offer esports as a league championship in 2017.

Beginning with the popular game "League of Legends," the PBC has expanded their offerings and membership and is now home to esports programs from Florida to Hawaii. The East Coast Conference (ECC) followed shortly after, starting in 2019 with six member schools, and now has over 12 schools competing in five games. Both conferences committed from the beginning to offer esports in a manner consistent with other, more traditional conference sports.

One of the major features for both the PBC and ECC is providing in-person championship competition for their teams. The PBC held its 2022 Fall Showcase in partnership with the Florence, S.C. County Parks and Recreation Department. Over two days, the PBC hosted and streamed over 20 live games, while welcoming in hundreds of high school and other players for free play tournaments, demonstrations and the opportunity to meet with college recruiters.

After a two year in-person hiatus due to the pandemic, the ECC will return to an in-person championship in the spring of 2023. Playing at the state-of-the-art "BrookLAN" internet café in Brooklyn, N.Y., the conference will crown

champions in four games as well as offer a college information session for interested high school and junior college students.

Advances in technology have provided new partnership opportunities for both conferences, helping them improve operations, increase exposure and provide new championship events. Generation Esports, one of the largest online systems for gamers, serves as the host platform for both the PBC and ECC, helping with league and tournament play. EsportsU supports both conferences through streaming broadcast production and hosting championship events on their dedicated channel. Finally, the Collegiate Esports Commissioners Cup (CECC), presented by Collegiate Sports Management Group (CSMG), brings together esports teams from around the nation in-person and has included participation by several PBC and ECC teams.

Research shows that K-12 schools as well as universities are finding that esports teams as well as emerging academic programs in gaming are becoming excellent promotional, recruiting and retention tools. Esports offers students new campus engagement and campus life opportunities and schools can determine just what level of investment and commitment they wish to make as they develop their programs.