

Motorsports is More than Entertainment: A Case Study About the Perfect Vehicle for Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Campus Cohesion

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Abstract

An intellectual focus on motorsports provides a compelling setting for abandoning academic silos, creating a collaborative space for scholars to reach across campus, and developing valuable learning experiences for students. This case study describes how faculty at a small regional institution leveraged research in motorsports to build campus collaboration and introduce students to career opportunities that are often unexplored. With support from university administration and deans across multiple colleges, a cross-campus event, Motorsports Is More Than Entertainment, was developed to engage students, faculty, staff, industry professionals, and the local community. The event brought racing professionals to campus and highlighted careers in engineering, technology, data analytics, logistics, business, marketing, project management, media, healthcare, and related fields. Although motorsports careers are often initially perceived as driver-centered, the industry represents a rich interdisciplinary ecosystem requiring transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, leadership, conflict management, and cultural competency. This paper presents the origin, development, implementation, and observed outcomes of the case, with particular attention to campus cohesion, student marketability, community engagement, and future curriculum development. Findings suggest that motorsports can serve as an effective platform for experiential education, workforce readiness, institutional identity building, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords

Motorsports, interdisciplinary collaboration, experiential learning, project management, transferable skills, STEM education, STEAM

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly challenged to demonstrate value to students, families, employers, and communities. This challenge is particularly visible at regional public universities, where institutions must compete for students, resources, visibility, and community relevance while also meeting the educational needs of diverse, first-generation, commuter, adult, and place-bound learners. Traditional academic structures often divide colleges, departments, and programs into separate administrative and intellectual spaces. While specialization remains important, excessive silos may limit creativity, reduce efficiency, and prevent students from seeing the interconnected nature of modern work. At the same time, employers consistently identify a need for graduates who possess both technical competency and transferable professional skills. Students must be able to communicate, collaborate, manage projects, solve ambiguous problems, work across differences, and adapt to changing technologies. These capabilities are not confined to one major or discipline. Rather, they emerge through experiential, interdisciplinary, and applied learning environments.

Motorsports offers a powerful context for this type of education. To the casual observer, racing may appear to be centered primarily on drivers and entertainment. However, motorsports are a complex global industry involving engineering, aerodynamics, data science, logistics, supply chain management, sponsorship, marketing, finance, media, safety, medicine, hospitality, law, project management, and community engagement. It is, in short, a mobile laboratory of interdisciplinary work.

This paper presents a case study from a small regional university that used motorsports as a vehicle, quite literally and figuratively, for cross-campus collaboration. The initiative began with research in motorsports culture and STEM engagement and developed into a campus-wide event titled Motorsports Is More Than Entertainment (MIMTE). The event connected university units, community members, students, and racing professionals around the shared goal of exposing learners to hidden careers in racing and related industries. The central argument of this paper is that motorsports can function as a practical and engaging platform for campus cohesion, interdisciplinary learning, and workforce readiness. The case illustrates how a single theme can connect STEM, STEAM, business, management, communication, community engagement, and student success.

2. Background and Problem Statement

2.1 The Challenge of Academic Silos

Universities have historically organized knowledge through disciplinary structures. Departments, colleges, and programs create intellectual homes for faculty and students, but these structures can also produce barriers. Academic silos may be physical, academic, cultural, or financial. Units may compete for students, budgets, credit hours, recognition, and external partnerships. In resource-constrained environments, this competition can reduce collaboration and create duplication rather than innovation.

The issue is especially significant for smaller regional institutions. Unlike large flagship campuses that may rely heavily on tradition, brand recognition, and extensive resources, regional universities must often be more creative in attracting students, building community partnerships, and demonstrating relevance. Collaboration is not merely desirable; it is necessary.

2.2 Student Marketability and Transferable Skills

A second challenge concerns student preparation for academic and professional success. Students need disciplinary knowledge, but they also need transferable skills that allow them to move across industries and job roles. These skills include communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, time management, leadership, cultural competency, conflict management, customer service, and project management.

The skills most needed for college success frequently overlap with those employers seek from graduates. For example, time management supports academic persistence, while communication, teamwork, and leadership are essential in professional settings. Project management courses and experiential learning activities are particularly valuable because they require students to plan, coordinate, communicate, manage constraints, and deliver outcomes.

However, skill-building programs are often overlooked as formal mechanisms for increasing student success. Technical programs may focus heavily on disciplinary content while assuming students will acquire transferable skills informally. This case argues that such skills must be intentionally embedded into technical and polytechnic education.

2.3 Motorsports as an Interdisciplinary Learning Platform

Motorsports provides a distinctive solution to these challenges because it is inherently interdisciplinary. A racing team requires engineers, mechanics, designers, data analysts, logistics coordinators, marketers, financial managers, media specialists, legal experts, safety professionals, medical support personnel, hospitality staff, and community engagement professionals. Racing also creates a sense of excitement and accessibility that can draw in students who might not initially identify with traditional STEM messaging.

As Hylton, Raymond, and Otoupal-Hylton (2012) argue, collegiate motorsports engineering programs can create innovative educational opportunities by integrating engineering, business, vehicle dynamics, program development, and applied learning. Similarly, Hylton (2006) emphasizes technical risk management as a connective framework in capstone design education. Motorsports-based learning also allows students to engage with real-world constraints, including safety, finance, time, design tradeoffs, teamwork, and performance optimization (Figure 1).

This motorsports-based initiative aligns with Kolb's experiential learning theory, which positions learning as a cyclical process in which students transform concrete experiences into knowledge through reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).



Figure 1. Two Race Cars on Campus for a Motorsports Event

3. Literature Review

3.1 Motorsports and STEM Education

Motorsports has been used in higher education as a platform for engineering design, capstone learning, and applied technical education. The motorsports environment is attractive because it provides authentic problems with visible outcomes. Students can observe how design decisions affect performance, safety, cost, reliability, and competitiveness. These characteristics align well with experiential learning and project-based learning. Experiential learning emphasizes that students develop knowledge through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

Hylton et al. (2012) describe the development of a collegiate motorsports engineering program as an innovative practice that connects vehicle dynamics, business considerations, and program development. Hankins et al. (2014) examine how project structures in motorsports can enhance safety, innovation, and student learning. These studies suggest that motorsports can move beyond extracurricular activity and serve as a formal educational framework.

3.2 Experiential and Project-Based Learning

Experiential learning allows students to learn by doing, reflecting, and applying knowledge to authentic contexts. In technical fields, capstone projects are a common mechanism for connecting theory and practice. Fuh, Lu, Quan, and Lim (2010) discuss product design as part of an engineering capstone experience, demonstrating how applied design challenges can integrate student learning. Experiential learning theory suggests that students learn most effectively when they are able to connect experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and application (Kolb, 1984). In higher education, intentional learning spaces can further strengthen this process by creating environments where students actively engage with authentic problems and professional contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Groves et al. (2013) emphasize that higher-level study skills can be developed through potential learning frameworks that encourage active engagement. These learning environments require students to manage complexity, work with others, and apply knowledge in ways that mirror professional practice. Motorsports, with its combination of speed, safety, technology, and teamwork, provides a particularly rich context for such learning.

3.3 Interdisciplinary Programs and Institutional Value

Interdisciplinary initiatives can help institutions demonstrate value by connecting academic content to career pathways and community needs. Programs that bridge colleges and departments may increase student engagement, reduce duplication, and create stronger institutional identity. For regional universities, interdisciplinary programming can also elevate campus visibility and build community relationships.

Motorsports is well positioned for this purpose because it naturally includes STEM, STEAM, business, communication, and service-related fields. It also allows institutions to engage students who may be tactile, visual, experiential, or community-oriented learners. Rather than asking students to imagine abstract career pathways, motorsports allow them to see careers embodied in real professionals, vehicles, technologies, and stories.

4. Case Context

4.1 Institutional Setting

The case took place at the University of Michigan–Flint, a regional public university with a growing College of Innovation and Technology. The initiative was led by Dr. E. Shirl Donaldson, an assistant professor whose research interests include motorsports and education, project management, sustainability, minority representation in higher education, STEM education, rural STEM education, and industrial management. The College of Innovation and Technology served as a central academic home for the initiative, but the project expanded beyond one unit. It required support from university leadership, student services, academic administrators, faculty, staff, community partners, and industry professionals.

4.2 Origin of the Case

The project emerged from a motorsports-focused research agenda that initially examined how racing fans viewed motorsports and how participation in motorsports culture might influence educational and career interests. Over time, the research shifted toward a broader insight: motorsports are not merely entertainment; it is STEM in action and an interdisciplinary career ecosystem.

The research revealed that many students and community members associate racing primarily with drivers and pit crews. While these roles are important, they represent only a small portion of the industry. Motorsports also involves data analytics, aerodynamics, fabrication, vehicle dynamics, marketing, sponsorship, logistics, finance, media production, event management, safety, and healthcare. This realization created an opportunity to bring racing professionals to campus and use motorsports as a bridge across academic units.

The project also responded to an institutional concern: the campus was perceived as siloed physically, academically, and financially. A motorsports initiative offered a shared theme capable of attracting students from multiple majors and bringing together units that might not otherwise collaborate.

5. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative case study approach to describe the development and implementation of a campus-wide interdisciplinary motorsports event. The case study method is appropriate because the project involved a bounded initiative within a specific institutional context and because the primary focus is on process, collaboration, observations, and lessons learned.

Data sources included:

1. Researcher observations from the planning and implementation process;
2. Presentation materials and event documentation;
3. Event artifacts, including promotional materials, session descriptions, photos, and videos;
4. Informal feedback from campus stakeholders and community participants;
5. Reflections on post-event outcomes, including planned research collaborations, curriculum development, and community engagement activities.

The purpose of this case is not to provide statistically generalizable findings. Rather, it offers a transferable model that other institutions may adapt when building interdisciplinary, community-engaged, and career-focused programming.

6. Development of the Cross-Campus Engagement Model

6.1 From Research to Campus Activation

The case began with motorsports research, including a focus on Donk racing and motorsports culture. Donk racing, often associated with customized vehicles, large wheels, distinctive aesthetics, and community-based racing culture, provides a unique entry point into conversations about engineering, design, safety, culture, entrepreneurship, and representation. Technical questions related to rotational mass, center of gravity, suspension, engines, transmissions, and fabrication create strong connections to STEM fields. Cultural questions related to identity, community, media, and entrepreneurship create connections to social science, business, and humanities. As the research developed, the principal investigator-built relationships with motorsports professionals interested in engaging students and K–12 learners. These connections became the foundation for a campus event.

6.2 Administrative and Unit Support

The event required leadership support. Campus collaboration began with administrative endorsement and expanded through conversations with deans and departments. Support came from the College of Innovation and Technology and student-facing administrative units, with involvement from multiple colleges and departments. This top-level support was essential because the event required space, funding, promotion, scheduling, coordination, and cross-unit participation. The event also required negotiation. Planning meetings addressed goals, responsibilities, budget, logistics, room layout, guest travel, programming, promotion, and community outreach. The process itself became an example of project management in practice.

6.3 Event Concept: Motorsports Is More Than Entertainment

The campus event was titled **Motorsports Is More Than Entertainment: Discover Hidden Careers in Racing**. Its central message was that motorsports is a multi-billion-dollar global industry and that success in the industry depends on far more than the driver behind the wheel. As students, parents and educators, debate the impact of AI on traditional career paths, this event was designed to expose participants to often over looked career pathways connected to motorsports with transferrable skills, including: engineering and aerodynamics, data science and analytics, specialized mechanics and fabrication, vehicle dynamics, business and finance, sponsorship and marketing, logistics and operations, sports law and compliance, media and communications, event and project management, as well as, safety and healthcare.

Education and community outreach

The event was open to all students and community members, including K–12. Organizers wanted to engage students interested in racing and motorsports with the hope to spur an interest in engineering, technology, data science, project management, and related careers. Campus representatives connected with schools and community leaders to spread the information and encourage attendance.

7. Event Implementation

7.1 Event Structure

The event included a combination of interactive, visual, and discussion-based components. These included racing simulations, a race car display, panel discussions, question-and-answer sessions, networking opportunities, photo opportunities, autograph sessions, and lunch. The design intentionally mixed entertainment with education, allowing participants to experience motorsports as both engaging and intellectually serious.

The layout of the venue was important. Rather than presenting a traditional lecture-only format, the event used multiple engagement points to encourage movement, interaction, and conversation. This structure helped reduce barriers between students, faculty, guests, and community members.

7.2 Industry Participants

The event included motorsports professionals whose careers illustrated the diversity of the industry. Panelists and speakers included individuals connected to NASCAR, IndyCar, Donk racing, entrepreneurship, team ownership, and motorsports media. Examples from the presentation included:

Lavar Scott, a NASCAR driver associated with Alpha Prime Racing and professional racing experience across ARCA and Xfinity competition;

Rodney Reid, connected to Force Indy and IndyCar, with experience as an entrepreneur, team owner, nonprofit founder, and Purdue University alumnus;

Julius Curry, founder of Curry Motorsports;

Sage Thomas, known as “The Donkmaster,” representing Donk racing culture, entrepreneurship, and In and Out Customs.

These professionals helped students see that motorsports careers are not linear or limited to one academic path. Each panelist represented a different combination of technical skill, formal training, informal learning, business knowledge, persistence, networking, and identity.

7.3 Learning Themes

The event highlighted several major learning themes.

7.3.1 The Technology Behind the Track

Students were introduced to technical areas that the average race attendee does not discuss such as, real-time telemetry, predictive modeling, race strategy optimization, suspension design, chassis simulation, tire performance analysis, custom fabrication and performance tuning. This was possible because of the different roles, experiences, and perspectives across the panel. Technology behind the track is firmly centered in STEM and business. These topics connected directly to engineering, computer science, data analytics, physics, and applied technology.

7.3.2 STEM, STEAM, and Sustainability

The event also framed motorsports as a site for future innovation. Topics included electric vehicle development, sustainable fuel research, emissions reduction, and workforce readiness. These themes allowed the event to move beyond traditional combustion-centered racing narratives and toward sustainability, green technology, and accessible career pathways.

7.3.3 The Business of Speed

Motorsports was presented as a business ecosystem. Career areas included sponsorship, marketing, brand activation, logistics, operations, team management, finance, regulatory compliance, contract negotiation, and intellectual property. This theme helped business, management, communication, and humanities students see themselves in the motorsports industry. Brand building was leveraged as a segue to connect to individual branding for students. Students could start building their own professional brands with education at this forward-thinking institution. Representatives from admissions and financial aid were onsite to share information and answer questions about the college admissions process and funding resources.

7.3.4 Transferable Skills

The event reinforced the importance of transferable skills. Motorsport’s professionals repeatedly model the need for communication, problem solving, leadership, teamwork, conflict management, adaptability, and persistence. These skills are also central to student success and project management education.

8. Observations and Findings

8.1 Motorsports Created a Shared Campus Focus

One of the most important observations was that motorsports provided a shared point of interest across campus. Students from different majors could connect to the event because the industry includes technical and nontechnical careers. Faculty and staff from different units could also see relevance to their own work. This shared focus reduced disciplinary boundaries. Engineering students could discuss aerodynamics and vehicle dynamics. Business students could discuss sponsorship and brand partnerships. Communication students could discuss media and storytelling. Health-related students could consider safety and sports medicine. Management students could examine logistics, project management, and operations.

8.2 The Event Exposed Hidden Careers

The event helped reveal careers that students may not have previously considered. The obvious career in motorsports is driver. However, the event showed that drivers are supported by a much larger ecosystem of professionals. The panel structure was particularly effective because students could hear directly from industry professionals who described their pathways, challenges, and opportunities. The panelists represented three different generations bringing varying perspectives. The eldest panelist was seventy-one years old and the youngest was twenty-two years old. This made them relatable to students, faculty, parents and grandparents in attendance. This finding is significant for workforce readiness. Students often make career decisions based on limited exposure. By expanding what students

can see, universities expand what students can imagine. This image was also useful for non-traditional students or unemployed residents who are considering retraining or pivoting in their careers.

8.3 Community Engagement Increased

The event created an opportunity to bring local K–12 students and community members to campus. This was especially important for a commuter-oriented regional institution. When community members come to campus for an exciting and accessible event, the university becomes less transactional and more relational increasing the likelihood of being viewed as a community engaged campus.

Motorsports was effective in this regard because it was familiar, visual, and culturally engaging. Vehicles, simulations, professional guests, and hands-on activities created a welcoming environment for participants who might not attend a traditional academic lecture.

8.4 The University Profile Was Elevated

The event supported institutional identity building. For a regional university, distinctive programming can help the institution stand out. A motorsports-centered event connected to technology, innovation, and career readiness created a memorable experience that aligned with the mission of a College of Innovation and Technology. The event also generated content for video, social media, and campus storytelling. Digital media extended the impact of the event beyond the physical room and helped communicate the message that the university was engaging in innovative, applied, and community-connected education.

8.5 New Collaborations Emerged

The event produced several positive outcomes, including:

- Plans for research collaborations;
- Plans for new courses and concentrations;
- Increased community engagement;
- Elevated university visibility;
- Plans for summer camps;
- Stronger relationships among campus units;
- Expanded networks with motorsports professionals.

These outcomes suggest that a single event can serve as a catalyst for broader institutional activity when it is intentionally designed and strategically supported.

9. Discussion

9.1 Motorsports as a Model for Interdisciplinary Education

The MIMTE case demonstrates that motorsports can function as a model for interdisciplinary education because it requires the integration of technical, managerial, creative, and social knowledge. This integration mirrors the modern workplace. Most industries no longer operate within narrow disciplinary boundaries; they require teams that can translate across expertise.

Motorsports is especially useful because it makes interdisciplinarity visible. A race car is not only a mechanical object. It is also a data platform, a brand asset, a safety system, a logistics challenge, a media product, a financial investment, and a cultural symbol. Students can physically see the object and then explore the network of careers surrounding it.

9.2 Project Management as a Core Educational Tool

The event also reinforced the value of project management. Planning the event required scope definition, stakeholder identification, budget transparency, timeline development, communication, risk management, and coordination. These are the same skills students need in academic projects and professional settings. Polytechnic programs are well positioned to embed project management tools early and often. Doing so can help students move from isolated assignments to integrated project work. Standardized project management methods can also improve collaboration among students from different majors.

9.3 Reframing the Value of Higher Education

Higher education is often questioned for its economic value. Events such as this one help institutions demonstrate value by connecting classroom learning to real careers, real industries, and real people. They show students how academic content translates into opportunity, especially in arenas they may not have previously considered. This is particularly important for first-generation, low-income, commuter, and tactile learners. These students may benefit from seeing and touching the possibilities of education. A motorsports event can make abstract concepts concrete. It can show that physics, mathematics, analytics, business, communication, and management are not separate academic boxes but practical tools for solving exciting problems.

9.4 Campus Cohesion Through Shared Experiences

Campus cohesion is not created only through committee structures or administrative directives. It is also created through shared experiences. A well-designed event can bring together students, faculty, staff, administrators, community members, and external partners around a common purpose.

Motorsports worked in this case because it generated curiosity. It gave people a reason to attend, talk, ask questions, and imagine future possibilities. In that sense, the event functioned as both an educational intervention and a community-building mechanism.

10. Lessons Learned

Several lessons emerged from the planning and implementation of the event.

10.1 Start with a Clear Scope Statement

Cross-campus collaboration requires clarity. A scope statement should define the purpose of the event, intended audiences, expected outcomes, responsibilities, timeline, and constraints. Without a clear scope, interdisciplinary projects can become unfocused.

10.2 Identify Roles and Responsibilities Early

Each participating unit should understand its role. Responsibilities may include funding, marketing, logistics, student outreach, guest coordination, facilities, assessment, and follow-up. Clear ownership reduces confusion and prevents duplication.

10.3 Be Transparent About the Budget

Budget transparency is essential when multiple units contribute resources. Early conversations should identify costs related to travel, honoraria, food, space, materials, marketing, equipment, and staffing.

10.4 Create a Realistic Timeline

Events involving external professionals require significant lead time. Calendars must account for university approval processes, travel arrangements, promotion, venue preparation, and contingency planning. Target an off-season time frame and set the date early.

10.5 Start Early and Meet Often

Frequent planning meetings help maintain momentum and trust. They also allow the team to adapt when circumstances change. Collaboration is a process, not a one-time agreement.

10.6 Design for Multiple Forms of Engagement

Students engage in different ways. Some prefer listening to panels; others prefer hands-on simulations, networking, visual displays, or informal conversations. A strong event includes multiple entry points.

10.7 Use Media Strategically

Videos, photos, social media, and short clips can extend the reach of an event. Digital storytelling helps preserve the impact and supports future recruitment, fundraising, and partnership development. See the reel from the event here: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/xieAFZb9px4>

11. Recommendations

Based on this case, the following recommendations are offered for institutions seeking to use motorsports or another applied industry theme for interdisciplinary collaboration.

1. Select a theme with broad disciplinary relevance. Motorsports works because it includes engineering, business, media, logistics, law, safety, healthcare, and culture.
2. Connect the theme to student career pathways. Students should leave with a clearer understanding of jobs, skills, and educational steps.
3. Invite professionals with diverse career stories. Panelists should represent different roles, backgrounds, and pathways into the industry.
4. Engage K–12 and community audiences. Community participation strengthens institutional relationships and supports future student pipelines.
5. Embed project management skills. Use the planning process and student activities to teach scope, scheduling, budgeting, communication, and teamwork.
6. Align the event with curriculum development. Use the event as a foundation for new courses, concentrations, certificates, summer camps, or research projects.
7. Assess outcomes. Future events should collect participant data, surveys, reflection responses, attendance numbers, and follow-up indicators.
8. Sustain partnerships. A single event can start a relationship, but long-term impact requires continued engagement with industry and community partners.

12. Limitations

This case study is descriptive and based primarily on event documentation, researcher observation, and informal feedback. It does not include a formal pre- and post-event survey, longitudinal student outcome data, or comparative analysis across institutions. Therefore, findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive.

Future research should include structured assessment of student learning, career awareness, sense of belonging, interdisciplinary attitudes, and community engagement outcomes. Longitudinal tracking could examine whether participation influences course selection, internship pursuit, major choice, or career interest.

13. Future Work

The event generated several opportunities for future development. These include research collaborations, new motorsports-related courses, possible concentrations, K–12 summer camps, and expanded partnerships with motorsports professionals. Future programming may explore several of the areas of study and career paths mentioned early in this manuscript including data analytics, electric racing technologies, motorsports entrepreneurship, race logistics and operations management, motorsports media and digital storytelling and project management in racing environments.

A long-term goal is to develop a sustainable model in which motorsports becomes a signature interdisciplinary platform for student recruitment, retention, engagement, and workforce readiness. A motorsports concentration is under development in the Smart Manufacturing department at this writing. The first course will be offered in the next academic year.

14. Conclusion

Motorsports is more than entertainment. It is an interdisciplinary ecosystem that can connect students to STEM, STEAM, business, management, media, sustainability, and community engagement. This case study demonstrates how a motorsports-focused initiative at a regional university created opportunities for campus cohesion, student career exploration, industry engagement, community engagement, university brand recognition, and future curriculum development.

The case also shows that polytechnic and technical programs should intentionally embed transferable skills and project management tools into experiential learning. Students need more than content knowledge; they need the ability to collaborate, communicate, solve problems, manage projects, and navigate complex professional environments.

For institutions seeking to break down academic silos, motorsports provide an unusually effective vehicle. It is visual, exciting, technical, cultural, entrepreneurial, and accessible. Most importantly, it gives students a reason to see connections among disciplines and to see themselves in careers they may never have imagined.

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