

Pilot Study of Gambling Attitudes and Behaviors Among Iowa College Students

Prepared for

*Iowa Department of Public Health
Division of Behavioral Health
Office of Problem Gambling Treatment and Prevention*



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**June 2013
Updated December 2013**

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The views and conclusions expressed in this report are the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Iowa Department of Public Health, Office of Problem Gambling Treatment and Prevention, or the University of Northern Iowa. This project was conducted under a contract between the University of Northern Iowa and the Iowa Department of Public Health.

This study was conducted by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at the University of Northern Iowa under contract with and funding from the Iowa Department of Public Health, Office of Problem Gambling Treatment and Prevention.

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Executive Summary

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Prepared by the University of Northern Iowa, Center for Social and Behavioral Research
June 2013

Background & Methods

Combining both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, this pilot study was designed as a preliminary investigation of gambling behaviors and attitudes among Iowa college students, particularly as they relate to the treatment of problem gambling. As the first phase of a larger proposed study of college gambling behavior among Iowa college students, this project evaluated an overall research design, the quantitative survey instrument and qualitative focus group questions, and assessed potential response rates. The report includes a review of the extant literature on gambling among college students, and summarizes the findings from a small pilot survey of one comprehensive university as well as providing key themes from two focus groups that were conducted at the comprehensive university. The original design included data collection at both a comprehensive university and a community college. However, because response rates varied dramatically between the two institutional populations, the decision was made to exclude the community college data from the report.

Literature Review

The review of the scientific literature indicates that gambling prevalence rates among college students vary by the specific type of gambling activity and gambling is more common among college males than females. Male gender is the most commonly reported risk factor for gambling participation among college students. College students are at a higher risk for financial problems from gambling losses than older adults due to other financial obligations from college expenses and tuition, as well as potential debt from the increased credit card availability to young adults.

Many gamblers do not seek formal treatment; research suggests that in most cases gamblers self-treat in an attempt to undergo natural recovery for problem gambling. Less research has been conducted on treatment-seeking and treatment methods among college students than among adults.

Key Findings – Quantitative Survey

Among all UNI respondents, almost seven in ten (68%) had gambled in the past year and 10% met at least one DSM-IV criterion for potential problem or pathological gambling.

Among students who reported gambling in the past year, 14% said they gambled more than monthly and the majority of students who reported gambling in the past year said the largest amount of money they had ever gambled with, lost, or won in a single day was \$50 or less.

Most students who reported gambling said they did so because it is a source of entertainment or fun.

Awareness of addiction and gambling treatment services and resources was quite limited and a large proportion of respondents were not sure about access to and perceptions of addiction and gambling treatment.

Males gambled at a much higher rate than females. Gender differences were apparent on a number of survey items related to gambling knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

Key Findings - Focus Groups

Consistent with the quantitative findings, the qualitative focus group responses indicated that males had greater knowledge than females about every gambling issue, as evidenced by more comprehensive answers to questions about gambling and gambling treatment among college students.

Participants in both focus groups quickly identified differences between males and females in gambling participation and the gambling activities.

Problem gambling was perceived by all participants as different from other addictions such as substance abuse, in part because gambling was not perceived to impact physical health and wellness.

Participants indicated that stigma may be the strongest barrier to treatment for problem gambling. Among the focus group participants, little was known about treatment or access to treatment for gambling problems.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this pilot study were consistent with those of previous research related to gambling and gambling treatment among college students but this information is limited and presents challenges with regard to best approaches to collecting information and concerns about variability across subpopulations. Findings emphasized the variety of gambling behaviors in which college students engage and identified significant gender differences. The findings also underscored the need for students' increased awareness of and access to treatment on and near campuses. Testing study design approaches and interview content using both quantitative and qualitative methods was valuable. The focus groups provided an important complement to the quantitative survey methods resulting in additional perspectives and depth not easily obtained through quantitative approaches alone. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies for future studies should include multiple student strata from a variety of college settings in the state to provide more generalizable results that can be used to inform decision-making related to gambling treatment for college students.