

**A CALL TO ACTION**  
**Addressing College Gambling:**  
**Recommendations**  
**for Science-Based**  
**Policies and Programs**

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A Report of the Task Force on  
College Gambling Policies

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

A Project of the  
Division on Addictions,  
The Cambridge Health Alliance,  
A Teaching Affiliate of  
Harvard Medical School,  
and the National Center  
for Responsible Gaming

# TASK FORCE ON COLLEGE GAMBLING POLICIES

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Many college students assume gambling is a risk-free activity; however, perception does not match reality.

Research has shown that for a segment of college students, gambling for fun can turn into a serious preoccupation that adversely affects their lives. At one school, a 21-year-old senior became so enthralled with online poker that it crowded out everything else in her life. The game seemed to be both the cause of all her problems and her only means of escaping them: “I kept on playing so I wouldn’t have to look at what poker had done to my bank account, my relationships, my life.”<sup>1</sup> Students who admit to having a problem sometimes find a lack of support on campus. A sports bettor in trouble with his bookie found that “despite what he saw as an endemic betting culture on campus,” there was little help for his gambling problem amid the wide range of drug, alcohol, and rape-crisis counseling programs at his school.<sup>2</sup> Researchers estimate that 3% to 11% of college students in the U.S. have a serious gambling problem that can result in psychological difficulties, unmanageable debt, and failing grades.<sup>3,6</sup>

***According to a national survey, nearly half of college students gambled during the past year, wagering on the lottery, casino games, cards, and sports.***

Recent trends have raised concerns that today’s college students might be more susceptible to risky behaviors, such as gambling, than previous generations. For example, gambling opportunities, once only available in a few states, have proliferated nationwide during the past 30 years with the expansion of lotteries, casinos, and Internet gambling. Therefore, today’s college students are exposed to not only drinking and drug use but also gambling both on campus and in the surrounding community. Furthermore, advances in psychoactive medications have made it possible for many more young people with psychiatric problems to attend college. Research has shown that most individuals with gambling problems have co-occurring psychiatric problems.<sup>7</sup>

Are colleges and universities equipped to deal with these issues? Do parents know what to expect if their children get into trouble with gambling or alcohol while at school?

Higher education has responded vigorously to alcohol-related problems. Nearly all U.S. colleges have policies on student alcohol use,<sup>8</sup> and increased awareness of high rates of “binge drinking” has led to the development of numerous prevention programs. The number of schools offering campus-based psychiatric services continues to increase with the number of consultation hours per week per 1,000 students doubling from 2.1 in 2004 to 4.0 in 2005.<sup>9</sup> Although alcohol-related problems still exist on college campuses, research indicates that these initiatives have led to reductions in underage drinking, alcohol-related assaults, emergency room visits, and alcohol-related car crashes.<sup>10</sup>

Campus efforts to address gambling and recovery from addiction, however, remain incomplete. According to a national survey, nearly half of college students gambled during the past year, wagering on the lottery, casino games, cards, and sports.<sup>11</sup> Yet, only 22% of colleges have a written policy on student gambling.<sup>8</sup> The lack of attention to gambling is disquieting in view of the increased availability of gambling opportunities and the greater susceptibility of young people to gambling problems than adults.<sup>3</sup> Gambling and gambling problems among this age group are highly correlated with other risky behaviors, including binge drinking. Another concern is that fewer than 30% of schools have policies designed to promote recovery from addictive disorders.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, policies only seek to punish violators of the rules, not help students with potentially damaging emotional and physical problems.

These gaps in policy and practice, which are missed opportunities to inform students about the risks of excessive gambling and to provide recovery-oriented measures, raise important questions for college and university administrators:

- Does your institution comply with local, state, and federal laws on gambling?
- Does your school allow gambling at special events such as casino nights or poker tournaments?
- Does your school newspaper or athletics program accept advertising from gambling operators?
- Is your student health service prepared to assess and treat gambling disorders?
- What is your policy on students who take a leave of absence for purposes of recovery from an addictive disorder?
- If a student violates rules related to gambling and alcohol, does your school refer the student to health services for an assessment?
- What is the liability of your school if a student is physically injured or racks up debt because of alcohol abuse or excessive gambling?

These policy gaps also raise serious questions for parents:

- Are you aware of the policies at your child's school focusing on gambling and alcohol?
- If your child developed a gambling or alcohol problem, would the college assist with recovery?
- If your child has to leave school because of problems with alcohol or gambling, what happens to his or her tuition payment?
- What are the steps to help your child back to wellness? Will these steps be sufficient for re-enrollment?

## The Task Force on College Gambling Policies

The Division on Addictions at the Cambridge Health Alliance, a Teaching Affiliate of Harvard Medical School, established The Task Force on College Gambling Policies ("task force") in 2008 to help colleges strengthen their health promotion efforts by providing a roadmap to policies that will (1) help reduce gambling problems among students, and (2) enable students who are struggling with addiction to fully participate in college life. The task force is composed of administrators and faculty from colleges and universities around the country. The National Center for Responsible Gaming (NCRG), a nonprofit organization that supports scientific research about gambling disorders, provided funding for the work of the task force as part of its mission to translate scientific research into practical applications. The Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders, an independent program of the NCRG, coordinated the distribution of the report.

## Guiding Principles

The task force was guided by the following principles in its deliberations:

- The academic mission of colleges and universities to promote learning requires a healthy student body to be optimally successful, and health promotion must include attention to both the mental and physical well-being of students.
- Policies on gambling and alcohol should support student persistence in school.
- Gambling policies should be integrated into policies and programs focused on alcohol and other drugs, reflecting new research findings that addiction is a syndrome with multiple expressions.<sup>12</sup>
- Institutions should be proactive in response to college gambling and drinking rather than waiting for problems to emerge.
- The best public policies prevent most infractions and punish only a few.<sup>13</sup>
- When possible, policies should be grounded in empirical research published in reputable peer-reviewed scientific journals.
- Policies should be enforceable to prevent students from losing respect for the rule of law.

## Summary of Recommendations

The task force focused its recommendations on three primary areas:

- On-campus prohibitions and restrictions
- Recovery recognition and facilitation
- Special events

After a review of the scientific literature and careful consideration of college student behavior and the realities of implementing new policies on campus, the task force developed 10 recommendations for policies and programs. The task force offers these recommendations not as a one-size-fits-all prescription but as a set of guidelines broad enough to accommodate the great diversity of the nation's colleges and universities.

**Please note that the following is an outline of the task force's recommendations. Detailed descriptions of each recommendation, including suggestions for implementation, are provided in the full report available for download on the NCRG's Web site, [www.ncrg.org](http://www.ncrg.org).**

**Recommendation 1:** Establish a campus-wide committee to develop and monitor a comprehensive policy on gambling.

**Recommendation 2:** Ensure that college policies are consistent with applicable local, state, and federal laws.

- A. Examine college policies to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal laws regarding gambling.
- B. Promote campus-wide awareness of local, state, and federal laws regarding gambling.
- C. Encourage campus law enforcement to collaborate with community law enforcement agencies to identify illegal gambling activities such as bookmaking operations involving students.

**Recommendation 3:** Strive for consistency and universal application with prohibitions and restrictions on gambling and alcohol use at special events.

- A. Be prepared for conflicts of interest when attempting to restrict or prohibit gambling and alcohol use at on-campus events.
- B. Consider the potential for sending mixed messages about alcohol and gambling.
- C. Encourage organizations to use non-gambling themes for special events.

**Recommendation 4:** Promote campus-community collaborations that focus on reducing problems with student drinking and gambling.

- A. Develop relationships with local gambling operators to encourage restrictions on advertising and ensure that laws on underage gambling are enforced.

**Recommendation 5:** Encourage adjustments in disciplinary actions applied to violators of gambling rules if the student seeks assistance from health or counseling services.

**Recommendation 6:** Make reasonable accommodations for students focused on recovery from a problem with gambling or alcohol.

- A. Allow students who need time off to focus on recovery from a gambling or alcohol disorder to take a medical leave of absence.
- B. Make reasonable accommodations allowing students involved in off-campus treatment to continue in classes.
- C. Allow students who withdraw and are no longer eligible for a refund to appeal the process citing gambling or alcohol problems as an extenuating circumstance beyond the control of the student involved.

**Recommendation 7:** Measure student attitudes, behaviors, and problems with gambling through campus surveys or by incorporating such measures into existing campus health-related surveys.

**Recommendation 8:** Promote campus-wide awareness of (1) pathological gambling as a mental health disorder that has a high rate of comorbidity with alcohol use and other addictive disorders, and (2) responsible gaming principles.

- A. Disseminate information about disordered gambling behavior on a campus-wide basis.
- B. Use a variety of media, including social media, Web sites, etc. to disseminate information beyond the traditional printed student handbook.
- C. Target particular groups for education about gambling disorders; for example, student athletes or student fans.

**Recommendation 9:** Employ evidence-based strategies to identify and help students with gambling and alcohol problems.

**Recommendation 10:** Strengthen the capacity of counseling services to identify and treat gambling disorders.

- A. Assess the ability of current counseling staff to meet the needs of students with gambling problems and provide additional training if necessary.
- B. Encourage referrals to off-campus treatment providers who are certified specialists in the area of addiction treatment.
- C. Specify the availability of services and promote them to students through a wide variety of media.

## Implementation

Colleges that launch a policy initiative focusing on gambling will be in uncharted waters while attempting to create and implement effective policies and programs that will prevent excessive student gambling and promote recovery among those with a gambling or other pattern of addiction. Despite the challenges of being in the vanguard, addressing this issue proactively, rather than playing catch-up, will only strengthen a school's ability to maintain a healthy student body.

Whatever policies are adopted, we urge colleges to be as transparent as possible in publicizing policies and programs about gambling to students, administrators, faculty, parents, and, where appropriate, the surrounding community. The advent of social media provides many more creative possibilities for reaching these varied audiences beyond the traditional printed student handbook.

The task of implementing a comprehensive program to address gambling and recovery is challenging. As with any policy changes, the devil is in the details. To help with this difficult process we recommend resources such as George Mason University's *Task Force Planner Guide*<sup>14</sup> developed to help schools implement the recommendations of the *Promising Practices: Campus Alcohol Strategies Sourcebook* project.<sup>15</sup> This guide offers a detailed, practical blueprint for undertaking a systematic and thorough planning process.

We hope that this report will help launch discussions on U.S. college and university campuses about the best way to reduce gambling-related harms and encourage the rigorous evaluation of resulting policies and programs.

The full report is available for download at [www.ncrg.org](http://www.ncrg.org) and [www.gamblingdisorders.org](http://www.gamblingdisorders.org).

For additional information about the task force project or to learn more about how to implement these policy recommendations on campus, please contact Christine Reilly, executive director of the Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders, at [creilly@gamblingdisorders.org](mailto:creilly@gamblingdisorders.org).

## PROFILES OF ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

### **The Division on Addictions at The Cambridge Health Alliance, a Teaching Affiliate of Harvard Medical School**

The mission of the Division on Addictions at Cambridge Health Alliance, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Affiliate, is to strengthen worldwide understanding of addiction through innovative research, education, and the global exchange of information. The Division's ultimate goal is to alleviate the individual, social, medical, and economic burdens caused by addictive behaviors. The Division offers encouragement, education, and training to both the next generation of health care workers who treat addictive disorders and to scientists who study addiction. The Division provides knowledge to public policy makers and the public alike. Finally, the Division provides a message of compassion, tolerance, acceptance, and hope by advancing addiction science.

The Division on Addictions is a world leader in addiction-related research, education, and training. Through hundreds of scientific and scholarly publications, the Harvard Medical School faculty working at the division has influenced the scientific understanding of addictive behaviors in general and excessive gambling in particular. Many of these works are available at the Division's web site.

For more information, visit [www.divisiononaddictions.org](http://www.divisiononaddictions.org).

### **The National Center for Responsible Gaming**

The National Center for Responsible Gaming is the only national organization exclusively devoted to funding research that helps increase understanding of pathological and youth gambling and find effective methods of treatment for the disorder. The NCRG is the American Gaming Association's affiliated charity.

Founded in 1996 as a separate 501(c)3 charitable organization, the NCRG mission is to help individuals and families affected by gambling disorders by supporting the finest peer-reviewed, scientific research into pathological and youth gambling; encouraging the application of new research findings to improve prevention, diagnostic, intervention and treatment strategies; and advancing public education about responsible gaming.

More than \$22 million has been committed to the NCRG through contributions from the casino gaming industry, equipment manufacturers, vendors, related organizations, and individuals. Research funding is distributed through the Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders.

For more information, visit [www.ncrg.org](http://www.ncrg.org).

### **Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders**

The Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders is an independent program of the National Center for Responsible Gaming (NCRG) charged with managing and administering a competitive research grants program, and conducting public awareness and education about gambling disorders. The Institute, under the guidance of its scientific advisory board of independent experts, provides long-term funding for innovative, multidisciplinary research at the NCRG Centers of Excellence in Gambling Research, which currently are based at Yale University and the University of Minnesota. The Institute also supports research at the Division on Addictions at The Cambridge Health Alliance, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Affiliate, and manages a separate competitive grants program that allows investigators from leading research institutions around the world to apply for grants for specific research projects. All research grants, both long-term and project-based, are reviewed and selected by independent peer review panels of distinguished scientists in the field to ensure that only the highest quality research is funded.

The Institute also is actively engaged in public education and awareness activities, such as developing content for the NCRG's Conference on Gambling and Addiction, developing new science-based resources, and collaborating and coordinating with other institutional partners to develop practical applications for research findings.

For more information, visit [www.gamblingdisorders.org](http://www.gamblingdisorders.org).



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