Gambling on our College Campuses isn't all Fun & Games

by Jeff Marotta

Anywhere you go in Oregon, odds are good you will find evidence of gambling's popularity. Driving to work, I pass an Oregon Lottery billboard. Visiting a radio station for an interview, I see that the talk-show host had been playing poker on the computer.

But what really surprised me was walking across a college campus and passing a series of posters, one advertising a student poker tournament, another reading "sex toy bingo" and a third advertising a "poker for candy" activity.

A graphic reminder of gambling's new image as an activity that is playful, sexy and in vogue.

And let's not forget about other more risky forms of gambling that may tempt college students -- thousands of electronic gambling machines and the hundreds of Internet poker sites, more of which are targeting college students.

No argument, college students' gambling is usually a fun social activity to enjoy with friends. It ceases being fun when it crosses the line into a harmful behavior, however, as it has for an estimated one in 20 college students.

That is why the state is expanding Oregon's nationally recognized problem-gambling program to public and private college campuses: not to be "the gambling police," but to raise awareness about gambling's risks and to ensure that students who fall into a gambling hole can get out with the help of self-awareness, knowledgeable friends, campus resources and an understanding that free treatment is readily available.

It's no different from raising awareness about the risks of tobacco or alcohol use, which in an earlier era were also treated as harmless.

Look at college Web sites, and you will see helpful information about avoiding risks from sex, alcohol and other drugs. You will rarely find anything about gambling's risks, even though a Harvard study reported that the rate of college students with gambling problems is about double that for all adults.

On one campus, a student told me his roommate was taking a term off so he could earn money to pay off his gambling debts. "It's in the residence halls, on the Internet, and there's a casino nearby where on Friday and Saturday nights you can find friends," another student told me.

Occasional social gambling isn't a problem because players set limits, hope to win but expect to lose, and can generally take it or leave it. By contrast, problem gamblers spend a lot of time playing, gamble with money they can't afford to lose, play to win back losses, and find their life's values have been hijacked by their gambling.

In the past decade, more than 13,000 Oregonians have received Lottery-financed treatment for a gambling problem after calling the toll-free Oregon gambling helpline: (877) 2-STOP-NOW. We see people come into treatment with debts as high as $500,000. In a recent year, the average debt was $23,127 and about a quarter of treatment enrollees reported committing crimes to obtain gambling money.

Gambling advertisements, legalized gambling and college kids playing Texas Hold 'Em in the residence halls aren't going away; nor do they need to. But we have an obligation to eliminate the dangerous perception that gambling is a completely safe activity; for some it leaves in its wake destruction that can wipe out friendships, families and lives.

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