

Trends in NCAA Student-Athlete Gambling Behaviors and Attitudes

Executive Summary
November 2017



FINDINGS

- **Overall rates of gambling among NCAA men have decreased.** Fifty-five percent of men in the 2016 study reported gambling for money within the past year, compared to 57% of respondents in the 2012 study and 66% in 2008. As in the general population (college-aged and otherwise), women engage in nearly all gambling activities at much lower rates than men. Over the 12-year period studied, participation in most gambling activities decreased among all student-athletes despite the expansion of land-based and online gambling opportunities during this time.
- **However, in contrast to activities such as poker or online casino games, sports wagering remains popular among student-athletes.** In 2016, 24% of men reported violating NCAA bylaws within the previous year by wagering on sports for money (9% reported wagering on sports once per month or more). These rates are just slightly lower than those seen in the 2008 and 2012 surveys. About 5% of current NCAA women reported wagering on sports in the past year.
- **Most of the gambling and sports wagering behaviors of student-athletes involve low stakes.** Among student-athletes who have ever gambled for money, the largest reported one-day loss is less than \$10 for nearly one-third of men and more than one-half of women. Only 35% of men and 13% of women gamblers have ever lost more than \$50 in a day. Of the student-athletes who have ever wagered on sports, only 21% of men and 5% of women reported losing more than \$50 in a day. Most fantasy sports and basketball pool participation among student-athletes involves similarly low amounts.
- **That said, gambling and sports wagering can lead to significant well-being issues for some student-athletes.** Just under 2% of men participating in the 2016 survey (along with a smaller percentage of women) met standard diagnostic criteria for problem gambling. Four percent of men who have gambled reported one-day gambling losses of \$500 or more. Student-athlete gambling debts are a well-being concern, but also a worry for potential vulnerability to outside gambling influences.

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- **Gambling and sports wagering behaviors are initiated long before college for many NCAA student-athletes.** Thirty-one percent of NCAA men and 14% of NCAA women gamblers had their first such experience prior to entering high school. Only 12% of men and 31% of women in the 2016 survey who had ever gambled indicated that they first gambled in college. Among those student-athletes who have ever bet on sports, 90% of men and 82% of women placed their first bet before entering college. Although playing cards for money was the most common gambling entry point for current NCAA men, we are increasingly seeing sports wagering being cited as their first gambling activity.
- **There are many different sports on which student-athletes report wagering, but the majority of sports betting is focused on a few sports.** The NFL remains the top sports wagering target for both men (65% of those who bet on sports in the past year) and women (44%), followed closely by college basketball (primarily tournament pools or bracket contests). The NBA and college football round out the top four targets for both men and women.
- **Technology continues to change how gambling and sports wagering occur.** Most student-athlete sports betting occurs among friends, family and teammates. However, the next most popular method for placing a sports bet is not at a casino / sports book or a via a traditional bookie, but electronically through an Internet site or an application on one's phone or tablet. One-third of the men and 15% of the women who reported wagering on sports in the 2016 survey placed bets electronically. In addition, a number of student-athletes continue to report engaging in some form of simulated gambling activity via social media sites, videogame consoles or mobile devices. These games are being increasingly marketed toward youth, and the line between gaming and gambling via social media sites has disappeared in many countries.

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- **There are contest fairness concerns around sports wagering technological enhancements.** We continue to have concerns that wagering enhancements such as live in-game betting (odds generated in real-time for participants to bet on various aspects of a game as it unfolds) could present increased opportunities to profit from “spot fixing” a contest (just a single mid-game event or portion of a contest needing to be fixed for a bet to pay off) as has been uncovered recently in a number of international sports leagues. Spot fixing is generally seen as easier to undertake and harder to detect than manipulating a final contest outcome. Thirteen percent of the NCAA men who wagered on sports in the past year engaged in live in-game betting. An additional technological concern is the proliferation of websites that offer betting lines on NCAA sports outside of men’s basketball and football, including non-Division I contests.
- **Fantasy sports continue to be popular among student-athletes. However, it appears that daily fantasy games have not led to increases in the overall number of student-athlete fantasy participants.** Approximately 10% of NCAA women and one-half of NCAA men have participated in free fantasy sports leagues. Twenty percent of men and 3% of women in the 2016 study reported having played (in violation of NCAA bylaws) in fantasy leagues with an entry fee and prize money during the past year. Both sets of rates are similar to what was seen in the 2008 and 2012 surveys. Although 11% of men and 2% of women surveyed in 2016 said they had recently played daily or weekly online fantasy sports contests for money, these participants overlapped substantially with those who reported playing season-long fantasy games. Note that the 2016 survey took place in proximity to a spike in advertising for such daily fantasy sites such as DraftKings and FanDuel.

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- **Student-athletes seem to be more attuned to outside sources looking for inside information.** Division I men's basketball and football players continue to be seen by gamblers as important potential sources for information that can provide a betting edge, whether that information comes indirectly (e.g., via a social media posting) or directly from the student-athlete. Perhaps as a result of campus educational efforts, the percentage of student-athletes reporting that they knowingly provided inside information remains lower than seen when these surveys began in 2004. In 2016, Division I football and basketball players reported being much less likely to post information via social media that could be useful to gamblers than was the case in 2012.
- **It is difficult, if not impossible, to get a true gauge of illegal match fixing / point shaving behavior among student-athletes from these surveys.** That said, we have generally seen decreases in student-athletes reporting the most concerning behaviors (betting on their own team, being asked to influence the outcome of a game, etc.) since 2004. One concerning number from 2016: Eleven percent of Division I football players and 5% of men's basketball players reported betting on a college game in their sport (but not involving their team).
- **Substantial divisional differences remain in gambling and sports wagering behaviors.** Although their rates have dropped a bit over the course of the study, men and women in Divisions II and III continue to gamble and wager on sports (in violation of NCAA bylaws) at much higher levels than observed among Division I student-athletes. Whereas 17% of men in Division I reported wagering on sports in 2016, that percentage was 23% in Division II and 32% in Division III (for women, the Division I, II and III sports wagering rates were 3%, 4% and 7% respectively). The most likely reasons for these disparities are differences in educating student-athletes about NCAA sports wagering rules and perceptions that the rules (and potential issues of contest fairness) are solely a Division I concern.

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- **Some inroads appear to have been made with Division I golf student-athletes. However, there are still significant reasons to be concerned about gambling and sports wagering among golf student-athletes generally.** Even outside the pervasive culture of on-course wagering in the sport, golf student-athletes (men in particular) across NCAA division are significantly more likely to engage in virtually every gambling activity assessed compared to other student-athletes. For example, 18% of men's golfers report betting on sports (outside of on-course wagering) at least once per month versus 9% among other men. They are also two to three times more likely than other men to frequent casinos, play cards for money and play casino games on the Internet. Ten percent of Division I men's golf participants reported betting on another team from their school, 16% said they know a bookie and 4% report knowing a student-athlete bookie at their school.

- **Knowledge/understanding of NCAA wagering bylaws has risen since 2012.** Among men and women within each NCAA division, more student-athletes reported in 2016 that they had received information on the NCAA sports wagering rules. Awareness of the rules is highest in Division I (76% among men and 82% for women) and lowest in Division III (68% for men, 64% for women). In addition to NCAA efforts to educate student-athletes (particularly those on the highest-profile teams) on sports wagering issues, many schools are providing their student-athletes with innovative programming and timely reminders about NCAA sports wagering bylaws.

- **Changing attitudes about gambling and sports wagering is a difficult task.** Fifty-four percent of NCAA men and 31% of women think sports wagering is a harmless pastime. These figures are substantially higher (76% and 61%) among those student-athletes who wager on sports. Half of men and one-quarter of women who bet on sports think they can consistently make a lot of money on the activity. They also feel that many others violate NCAA wagering bylaws and one-quarter believes coaches do not take these rules seriously. This last finding is important because student-athletes report that coach and teammate awareness/reaction is a significant factor in getting student-athletes not to wager.

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- **More than one-quarter of student-athletes are uncomfortable that people bet on college sports and more than half do not think gambling entities should advertise at college sporting events or during college sports telecasts.** A slightly higher proportion (one-third) of Division I football and men's basketball players report being uncomfortable with college sports wagering.
- **Continued enhancements and innovations in educational programming are necessary to protect student-athlete well-being and contest fairness.** As gambling opportunities and technologies continue to evolve and laws regulating the industry potentially change, it will be important that educational programming for student-athletes, coaches and athletics administrators be continuously evaluated. To be maximally effective, this programming needs to go beyond simply telling these groups not to gamble/wager, given the deepening normative nature of gambling and sports wagering in our society. These programs should help all involved in college athletics recognize risk factors associated with problem gambling, provide up-to-date information on the science and technology of gambling and sports wagering (e.g., betting lines are set using a great deal of data/research; gamblers can easily reach student-athletes through social media), and even promote strategies for discussing perceptions and normative expectations associated with gambling/wagering (e.g., being an athlete does not necessarily mean one has the insight required to make money wagering on sports, as many student-athletes believe). Many schools have developed their own educational initiatives and it is clear from the data that these local efforts are more effective than just receiving materials from outside entities like the NCAA staff. Above almost anything else, a typical student-athlete does not want to negatively impact his/her team. So, it is important that student-athletes from all three NCAA divisions fully understand not only the NCAA penalties for sports wagering, but also the potential negative outcomes for student-athlete and team well-being.

STUDY BACKGROUND

- Over the course of four study iterations (2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016), more than 84,000 student-athletes across all three NCAA divisions were surveyed about their attitudes toward and engagement in various gambling activities, including sports wagering. This includes 22,388 in the 2016 study.
- Surveys were administered with the assistance of campus faculty athletics representatives (FARs), who were asked to survey up to three teams on each of their campuses. It is estimated that more than 60% of NCAA member schools participated on each occasion.
- Study protocols were designed to ensure the anonymity of participating student-athletes and schools.
- Analyses were limited to 22 sports (11 for men and 11 for women) that were adequately sampled in each NCAA division within each administration.
- A high data-cleaning standard was applied consistently to data from each administration. Data were then weighted in comparison to national participation rates within the sampled sports to create national aggregates.
- Study investigators are Dr. Thomas Paskus of the NCAA Research staff and Dr. Jeffrey Derevensky of McGill University.