

## Why College Students May Be at Higher Risk for Gambling Problems

### A Tool for Problem Gambling Prevention Professionals

Gambling is more common on college campuses than many realize. In fact, about **75% of college students** report gambling in the past year, and nearly **1 in 5** do so weekly or more. While many students gamble without serious consequences, various research studies reflect that **between 6% - 10%** develop a gambling problem that can lead to stress, debt, and academic struggles.

#### ► Why Are College Students More Vulnerable?

- **Brain development matters:** Young adults are still developing impulse control, making them more likely to take risks—including gambling.
- **Early exposure is a red flag:** Many adults with gambling problems started young.
- **Gender differences:** Male students are more likely to gamble frequently and report problems.
- **Gambling is linked to other risky behaviors:** Students with gambling issues are more likely to binge drink, use drugs, drive under the influence, and have lower GPAs.
- **Access is everywhere:** With the rise of online gambling, sports betting, and local casinos, students are surrounded by opportunities to gamble—on and off campus.
- **Popular activities:** Lotteries, sports betting, card games, and even skill-based games like pool or darts are common among students.
- **Athletes and fans are at higher risk:** Both groups tend to gamble more than their peers.
- **Campus events can normalize gambling:** Casino nights and poker tournaments are often used for entertainment or fundraising.

Yet, despite all this, **only 22% of colleges** have formal gambling policies in place.

# Risk & Protective Factors on Campus

## ► Risk Factors

These are personal and social influences that can increase a student's vulnerability to gambling-related harm:

- **Easy access to gambling**  
Online platforms, nearby casinos, and campus events make gambling readily available to students.
- **Lack of parental oversight**  
Increased independence in college often means fewer external checks on behavior and decision-making.
- **First-year stress**  
Academic pressure, social adjustment, and homesickness can lead students to seek escape or excitement through gambling.
- **Misperceptions about peer behavior**  
Students often overestimate how much their peers gamble, which can normalize risky behavior and increase participation.
- **Normalization of gambling on campus**  
Events like casino nights or sports pools can make gambling seem like a typical or harmless part of student life.
- **Current gambling behaviors**  
Students who already gamble regularly—especially to cope with stress—are at higher risk of developing problems.
- **Membership in fraternities or sororities**  
Greek life may include social or fundraising events that involve gambling, increasing exposure and risk.
- **Low perception of gambling harm**  
When gambling is seen as harmless entertainment, students may be more likely to take risks or ignore warning signs.
- **Peer pressure**  
Friends or roommates who gamble can influence others to join in, especially in social or competitive settings.
- **Times of transition (e.g., starting college)**  
Life changes can bring uncertainty and stress, making students more vulnerable to risky coping behaviors like gambling.
- **Poor academic performance**  
Struggling students may turn to gambling as a distraction or in hopes of a quick financial fix.
- **Substance misuse, especially binge drinking**  
Alcohol and drug use can impair judgment and increase impulsivity, making risky gambling decisions more likely.

## **Protective Factors**

These elements can help reduce the risk of gambling-related harm and support healthier choices:

- **Working 10+ hours per week**  
Employment can provide structure, responsibility, and less free time for risky behaviors.
- **Not gambling in high school**  
Students who didn't gamble before college are less likely to start or develop problems.
- **Strong religious or spiritual connections**  
These can offer a sense of purpose, community, and values that discourage gambling.
- **Peer disapproval of gambling**  
When students believe their friends don't support gambling, they're less likely to engage in it.
- **Involvement in service-based activities**  
Volunteering and community service promote positive engagement and reduce idle time.
- **Access to substance-free and gambling-free events**  
Offering fun, inclusive alternatives help shift campus culture away from risky behaviors.

## **Talking with Young Adults About Gambling**

As sports betting and online gambling grow, it's crucial to have open conversations with students and young adults. Here are some tips:

- **Talk about the risks** like you would with alcohol or drugs.
- **Teach smart money habits** and explain that most people lose more than they win.
- **Avoid betting at family events**—even small things like scratch-offs or March Madness pools can send the wrong message.
- **Encourage empathy**—students should feel empowered to help friends who may be struggling.
- **Keep the conversation open**—listen without judgment.
- **Model healthy behavior** if you choose to gamble.

## **Sports Betting: A Growing Concern on Campus**

With the rapid expansion of legalized sports betting and mobile apps, college students are increasingly exposed to betting opportunities—especially around major sporting events. A 2023 NCAA survey found that sports gambling is widespread among college students, with 67% of college students living on campus admitting to placing sports bets. Additionally, 16% reported engaging in at least one risky gambling behavior, and 6% said they lost more than \$500 in a single day. This trend is concerning because:

- **Sports betting is often seen as skill-based**, making it more appealing and less risky in the eyes of students.
- **Student athletes and sports fans** are at higher risk for gambling problems due to their close connection to competitive sports.
- **Peer pools and fantasy leagues** can normalize betting behavior, even when money isn't involved.
- **The NCAA has identified sports betting as a major threat** to the integrity of college athletics and student well-being.

**Prevention professionals** can play a key role by raising awareness, promoting healthy alternatives, and supporting policies that limit exposure to sports betting on campus.

## **Prevention Strategies for Campuses**

### **Individual & Environmental Approaches**

These strategies focus on both personal decision-making and the broader campus environment to reduce gambling-related harm:

- **Education and life skills training**  
Equip students with tools to manage stress, make informed choices, and understand the risks of gambling.
- **Screening tools like SBIRT and GBIRT**  
Use evidence-based approaches to identify students at risk and connect them with support early.
- **Social norms campaigns**  
Correct misperceptions about how common gambling is among peers to reduce pressure and normalize healthy behaviors.
- **Clear campus policies on gambling**  
Establish and communicate rules that discourage gambling and promote student well-being.

- **Strong community partnerships**  
Collaborate with local organizations, treatment providers, and coalitions to extend prevention efforts beyond campus.
- **Hosting gambling-free events**  
Offer fun, inclusive alternatives that build community without promoting risky behaviors.

### **Campus Collaboration Ideas**

Working together across departments and with the community strengthens prevention efforts:

- **Joint campus-community policy efforts**  
Align campus rules with local ordinances and prevention goals for a unified approach.
- **Service opportunities for students**  
Encourage engagement in meaningful activities that build purpose and reduce idle time.
- **Educational giveaways and swag**  
Distribute materials that raise awareness and keep prevention messages visible.
- **Health fairs and awareness events**  
Use campus-wide events to educate students and promote available resources.
- **Faith-based engagement**  
Partner with spiritual organizations to reach students through values-based messaging.
- **Collaborative grant writing and funding efforts**  
Pool resources and expertise to secure funding for sustainable prevention initiatives.

### **Fundraising Alternatives to Gambling Events**

Instead of casino nights or poker tournaments, consider these fun and engaging options:

- Dodgeball, kickball, or softball tournaments
- Karaoke or talent shows
- Car washes or fashion shows
- Mystery dinner theater
- Bowl-a-thons or field day events
- Singing telegrams
- Date auctions (with appropriate safeguards)

**If a gambling-themed fundraiser is already planned:**

- Use play money and charge an entrance fee
- Check IDs if real money is involved
- Register the event as a charity fundraiser
- Post signs about the odds of winning
- Provide resources on responsible gambling and where to get help
- Always check your school's policies first

**☑ Conclusion: Creating a Safer Campus Culture**

As gambling opportunities continue to grow—especially through online platforms and sports betting—college campuses face new challenges in protecting student well-being. By understanding the risk and protective factors, implementing evidence-based prevention strategies, and fostering collaboration across departments and communities, we can reduce gambling-related harm and support healthier choices.

**Every conversation, policy, and program matters.** Prevention professionals play a vital role in shaping a campus environment where students can thrive—academically, socially, and emotionally—without the risks associated with gambling.

Let's work together to build awareness, promote alternatives, and create a culture of informed decision-making and support.

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