A National Study on Sports Wagering Behavior Among NCAA Athletics Department Staff Members

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College athletics administrators have been concerned about the integrity of college sports due in part to the popularity of sports wagering on college games and the wagering by college students (Rockey & King, 2006). Over the past twenty-five years, this concern has expanded to the gambling and sport wagering behaviors of student-athletes (Ellenbogen, Jacobs, Derevensky, Gupta, & Paskus, 2008; Thrasher, Andrew, & Mahoney, 2007). Gambling and sports wagering by student-athletes poses multiple problems. Collegiate gambling and sports wagering scandals can result in negative publicity, poor recruiting classes, decreased revenue, decreased alumni support and alumni giving and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sanctions. Additionally, those student-athletes who violate the NCAA sport wagering rules risk losing or forfeiting their entire athletics eligibility (NCAA, 2011). The National Gambling Impact Study Commission (Hartle, 2001, p. 2) concluded that “sports wagering threatens the integrity of the sports, puts student-athletes in a vulnerable position, it can serve as gateway behavior for adolescent gamblers, and it can devastate individuals and careers.”

Numerous studies have been conducted by the NCAA and member institutions on the scope of sports wagering by student-athletes. Most recently, Cross and Vollano (1999), Rockey, Beason, and Gilbert (2002), LaBrie, Shaffer, LaPlante and Wechsler (2003) concluded that NCAA Division I, II and III student-athletes wagered on sporting events. In addition, the NCAA (2004 & 2008) conducted sports wagering studies supporting that student-athletes not only wagered on sports but also either conspired to fix and/or throw sporting events or were approached to do so. It is understandable that student-athletes might be at risk for being targeted by those who place wagers on sports due to their abilities to control performances, game outcomes, and/or provide insightful game related information. As such, researchers have devoted time to studying the gambling and sports wagering behaviors of the student-athlete population.

Not far from this notion, yet fairly unrepresented in the literature, is the review of NCAA athletics department staff members as it relates to gambling and their sports wagering behavior. For example, athletics department staff members often possess confidential information regarding the mental and physical well-being of student-athletes and in some cases might know when a student-athlete is suspended and/or returning to competition. Therefore, it is not an implausible suggestion that some athletics staff members might either willing participate in sport wagering activities or be a likely target for those who wager on sporting events and want to obtain inside information related to sports wagering. Holtgraves (2009) suggested that researchers should focus on understanding the differences in people and their gambling activities as this could foster developments in awareness, education, and rehabilitation programs. For sport researchers and practitioners alike, this includes extending studies outside of the student-athlete population and looking at other groups that might be distinct, yet have some of the same characteristics as the student-athletes.

With this, the purpose of this study is to ascertain the scope of NCAA Division I, II and III athletics department staff member’s behavior and level of involvement in gambling and sport wagering. Specifically, this study will focus on two areas. The following research questions guided this project: (a) does a relationship between gender and sport wagering behavior exist; (b) does a relationship between assigned sport (revenue vs. non-revenue) and sport wagering behavior exist; and (c) does a relationship between years of in-field experience and sport wagering behavior exist? First, participants will be asked to answer questions regarding their involvement and behavior surrounding sports wagering or other gambling activities. Secondly, these participants will be asked questions surrounding the providing of confidential information to individuals who might use the information to wager on sporting events in which those student-athletes compete.

A convenience sample was utilized and included all NCAA Division I, II and III certified athletic trainers, NCAA Division I equipment managers, athletics academic advisors and strength and conditioning coaches who had publicly
available e-mail addresses displayed on their respective athletics’ web site. A total of 4,777 e-mail addresses were obtained via these web sites. The staff members represented in the sampling frame were sent an electronic link to a 50-item survey in which permission to use and adapt the 2004 and 2008 NCAA National Studies on Collegiate Wagering Survey was granted. As a result, a total of 1,220 participants returned a survey, representing an overall response rate of 25.54%.

Descriptive statistics including percentages were calculated for gender, age, ethnicity, and NCAA sub-division. Chi-square tests were the primary data analytical methods utilized to answer the research questions. Chi-square tests were applied to determine the relationship between categorical independent variables and categorical dependent variables (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau, & Bush, 2008). The following research questions were answered using the chi-square tests: (a) relationship between gender and sport wagering behavior, (b) relationship between assigned sport (revenue vs. non-revenue) and sport wagering behavior, and (c) relationship between years of in-field experience and sport wagering behavior.

Results indicated that on average most athletics staff member groups actually wagered on sport at a lower rate when compared to the historically studied population of student-athletes. NCAA Division I strength and conditioning coaches (17.8%), athletic trainers (15.9%), equipment managers (10.6%) and athletics academic advisors (6.2%) reported placing wagers on sporting events in the past year. This compares to 22.4% of Division I male student-athletes and 4.1% of female student-athletes who reported wagering on sports in the past year (NCAA, 2008). Although a fair amount of literature exists regarding gambling and sports wagering within the student-athlete population, a dearth of research exists related to other groups with close associations to collegiate athletics. Thus, this study has theoretical implications as it will add to the literature regarding these specialized populations. Additionally, this project yields practical applications. As suggested by Holtgraves (2009) by garnering information of sport wagering activities from various populations, researchers can better understand the differences in people and their gambling activities. This could foster developments in awareness, education, and rehabilitation programs.