

# Using Benchmarking Techniques In Academia: Building A Gaming Education Program

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the use of benchmarking techniques in building a gaming education program. Four general categories of benchmarking techniques and their applicability to gaming education are presented. A template for building a gaming education program is explained, as well as the key success factors to consider when implementing benchmarking in academia. A summary of schools currently offering gaming courses, a list of gaming topics in various functional areas that can easily be integrated into existing courses, and a list of gaming-related resources are also provided. **KEY WORDS:** *gaming education, benchmarking, gaming resources*

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Periodically, academics discover that the application of a particular strategy, technique, or tool that has met with success in business will yield similar successes in an academic setting. For several years, many universities have applied the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) as a technique for improvement in academia (Ivancevich and Ivancevich, 1992). A tool that is often used in connection with the application of TQM techniques is benchmarking. Benchmarking principles call for identifying the best practices currently in use in a given industry as they relate to products, services, or internal processes, and then attempting to improve upon these practices and placing the improved process or product into action. Typically, industry leaders are targeted for their best practices, and by incorporating and improving upon the techniques used by leaders, competitors can make significant inroads in improving their own businesses. One area where benchmarking techniques are beginning to be used and should continue to prove quite helpful is in the area of gaming education.

After the rapid expansion of gaming in the early 1990s, the demand for well-trained gaming professionals increased. However, few universities offered courses in gaming, and those that did could not possibly meet the demand for quality gaming personnel. Because well-trained management prospects for the gaming field are in such scarce supply, many gaming operations have found themselves in tough competition for qualified employees. Often, in response to such competition, gaming properties have filled important management positions by hiring gaming executives away from other gaming operations, hiring executives from other industries and trying to quickly develop them into gaming experts, or by investing extensive funds in training lower level employees to become gaming managers (Cummings and Brewer, 1996). In response to this high demand, more and more universities are trying to add gaming courses or gaming programs to their curricula. But how can a university expand its curriculum to include gaming courses in an environment where qualified gaming faculty are scarce, and how does a university decide the scope and complexity of the courses offered when gaming is still not widely accepted as a mainstream field of study? This paper proposes that a possible solution to these problems is the employment of benchmarking techniques.

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## **Benchmarking in Academia**

So what are the implications of benchmarking for academia, and specifically for gaming education? Most schools and universities agree that they are striving for continuous improvement. Some universities may wish to improve their reputations through higher quality academic research. Others may wish to encourage better teaching or better service. Some may wish to begin a new curriculum or change the existing curriculum. Other schools may have recently been approved to change to a four-year status, or may want to begin a new Ph.D. or Masters program, or a new program in casino management. Benchmarking is one tool that each of these schools may use to help them achieve their goals.

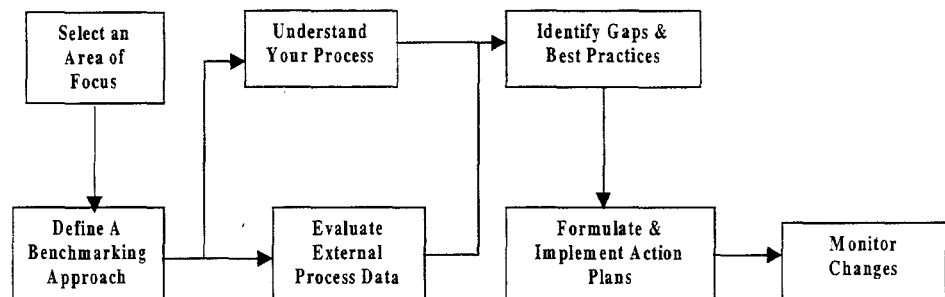
If a university wishes to encourage higher quality academic research, better teaching, or better service, how can benchmarking help? One way to utilize benchmarking in this area is to encourage faculty with a weakness in one of these areas to select another faculty member who has strong skills in that particular area as a model. By doing so, less skilled faculty members can learn important strategies and abilities to improve their own skills. For instance, if Dr. D. is struggling in the classroom and consistently receives poor student evaluations, why not encour-

age Dr. D. to benchmark Dr. J's teaching style, since Dr. J. has won numerous teaching awards? Similarly, Dr. J. may want to benchmark Dr. A related to Dr. A's research skills, since Dr. A. is a renowned researcher.

Benchmarking can work in a similar manner with respect to establishing new programs or curricula. A school that wishes to establish a doctoral program, for instance, would collect information on all the top doctoral programs in that specialty in the country. A school wishing to establish a hospitality program could benchmark the top hospitality programs. Likewise, a school hoping to establish a gaming program would benchmark the top gaming programs.

Some of the steps commonly included in the benchmarking procedure are: identifying the process, product, or service to be evaluated; identifying the industry leaders against which to benchmark; establishing current performance levels; comparing these performance levels to the industry leaders; setting goals; developing plans necessary to achieve these goals; executing actions; reviewing progress; and adjusting benchmarks. While these are generic steps found in the benchmarking process, each entity can customize benchmarking to meet its own needs.

The process for benchmarking in higher education is quite similar to the process popularized in industry. First, the school must select an area on which to focus its attention. Next, the school should determine which schools appear to be the best performers in the area of focus, and select one or more benchmarks with which to make contact. Generally, other schools with expertise in one area will be relatively receptive to answering questions, sharing information, or helping to direct individuals to useful sources of information when approached diplomatically. Next, the schools should evaluate their own processes and needs while comparing them to those of the industry leaders (benchmarks). The culmination of this evaluation is the identification of best practices and gaps between the best practices and the school's own procedures. After this process is completed, the next step is to take action and implement changes. Lastly, the changes implemented should be monitored to determine their success. This process is summarized in Figure 1.



Adapted from "Applying Benchmarking to Higher Education: Part II. Steps in the Process." (1993). [www.innovet.com](http://www.innovet.com).

**Figure 1. Steps in the Benchmarking Process**

## Types of Benchmarking

While numerous variations of the benchmarking procedure are possible, there are four general categories of benchmarking: internal, functional, generic, and competitive (Camp, 1993). Internal benchmarking involves comparing similar practices within an entity, identifying which practice is superior in performance, and then requiring the business segments not following this practice to adopt it. Hence, multi-property organizations such as Mirage Resorts or Hilton Hotels can use benchmarking among the different properties to ensure that the most efficient and effective practices are continually adopted and used by each property. This ensures that each of its properties is continually improving its operations by implementing the most effective measures currently in use within the organization. Similarly, if a college or university finds that a particular department has adopted a method of scheduling classes that is far superior to methods used in other departments, the institution may want the departments using less effective measures to benchmark the department with the superior scheduling system.

Functional benchmarking entails benchmarking a specific function, such as a player tracking system or inventory procedures. With functional benchmarking, an entity can cross industry lines to identify the benchmark firm or stay within its own industry depending upon the function being benchmarked. For instance, a casino trying to evaluate its player tracking system will likely choose another gaming operation to benchmark that it believes has the best system in the gaming industry. Alternatively, a university attempting to update its payroll system may go outside of academia to benchmark a service or manufacturing firm's payroll system if that system is considered to be the best available.

Generic benchmarking refers to the adoption of benchmarking within an entity on a global basis across many functions and processes. Once identified, benchmarks for processes are located according to internal, functional or competitive lines. For instance, when Mirage Resorts, Inc. decided to build the Bellagio resort on the Las Vegas strip with the intention of making the new property a world class, five-star resort, many of the procedures, systems, and services were developed with the mind set of improving upon the best practices currently used in the industry. Mirage Resorts' goal in this process was to build a property that would still be the best resort in the world fifty years from now. In this case, a number of processes, services, and property features were identified for benchmarking, rather than focusing on just one item. Furthermore, the entity can look to its internal processes, competitor's processes, or other industries for benchmark identification. Similarly, a university wishing to improve upon its overall operations may choose to revamp and improve upon a large number of its systems in a global benchmarking effort rather than just evaluating one system at a time. For instance, the university may identify that its accounting, marketing, student registration, contracts and grants, fund-raising, and assessment efforts all need improvement and that within each of these areas, ten to fifteen smaller functions need to be revised. Hence, generic benchmarking results when an entity applies benchmarking techniques in a global effort across a variety of functions and processes within the entity.

Competitive benchmarking involves looking solely at an entity's competitors in an attempt to improve upon its own operations. By identifying which competitors have excelled in certain areas and trying to improve upon these procedures, an

entity can substantially improve its own operations while still minimizing the risks of making a significant change in its operations. If a procedure has proven its worth in one entity, the risk of failure is somewhat reduced if another company chooses to adopt it. This phenomenon has proven itself in the gaming industry with respect to slot clubs. Several properties have benchmarked existing slot clubs at competing casinos, and successfully implemented similar procedures within their own casinos. This process has also proven quite useful in academia, particularly with respect to executive master's programs. By benchmarking successful executive master's programs at other schools, a school hoping to develop a solid executive program can mitigate some of its risks.

Even though four types of benchmarking can be identified, these four types are not necessarily distinct. For instance, it appears that Mirage Resorts is using a combination of all four types of benchmarking concurrently in its quest to develop the Bellagio as the world's best casino resort.

### **Using Benchmarking to Develop a Gaming Program: A Step By Step Approach**

If a university wishes to develop gaming courses or a gaming program, the first step of the benchmarking process is to identify the focus of the process. What is the intent of the process? Does the school want to integrate gaming into its existing courses, provide students the opportunity to take gaming specific courses, or develop an entire gaming management program? Once this question is answered, the school must then identify schools that offer gaming courses that would be appropriate benchmarks. This process would generally be considered functional benchmarking. The International Gaming Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) maintains one such source of information on gaming courses.

This source includes a current listing of gaming courses taught in the United States at four-year institutions of higher learning. Table 1 includes a summary of the four-year schools currently offering gaming courses or courses with a gaming component. If a school is thinking of adding gaming to its curriculum, this table should prove helpful in identifying the appropriate schools to select as benchmarks. The schools listed in the table range from schools that have integrated gaming into one or two existing courses, to schools such as UNLV, University of Nevada, Reno, and Fairleigh Dickinson University that have fairly extensive gaming programs. Depending upon a school's individual needs, one or more of the schools listed should qualify as an appropriate benchmark. It is important to note that all schools wishing to increase the extent of gaming content in their curricula will not select the same benchmark schools. Instead, the benchmarks should be selected on the basis of what resources are available and what constraints exist, so that the ideal benchmark is not beyond what is economically and realistically feasible.

**Table 1**  
**Schools Offering Gaming Courses**

<u>School (Number of Courses Offered)</u>	<u>Course #</u>	<u>Course Description</u>
Bethune-Cookman College (1)	HM 444	Classic Resort Operations
California State University, Carson (1)	REC 448	Hotel and Resort Management
Central Michigan University (7)	various	Offered through UNLV
Cornell University (1)	HADM 408	Introduction to Casino Operations
Fairleigh Dickinson University (8)	HRTM 3230	Overview of Casino Operations and Management
	HRTM 3231	Protection of Casino Games
	HRTM 4232	Mathematics of Casino Games
	HRTM 4233	Gaming Regulation and Control
	HRTM 4234	Accounting for the Casino Hotel
	HRTM 4235	Sociology of Gaming
	HRTM 4236	Advanced Casino Management
	HRTM 4237	Seminar in Casino Management
New Mexico State University	HTS 404	Gaming Operations and Organization
	HTS 434	Seminar Hotel/Resort Operations
New York Institute of Technology	HT 4803	Casino Management
Northern Arizona University	HA 401	Resort Management
	HA 477	Gaming & Casino Management
Pennsylvania State University	HR&IM 456	Casino Operations Management
Rochester Institute of Technology	0622-310	Resort Development and Management
University of Denver	HRTM 3550	Resort Management
University of Houston	HRMA 3357	Gaming and Casino Management
	HRMA 3356	Resort Management
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	HMD 131	Introduction to the Casino
	HMD 334	Casino Operations and Management
	HMD 339	Protection of Casino Table Games
	HMD 376	Special Topics in Hotel Admin. (Casino/Gaming)
	HMD 426	Casino Accounting and Control
	HMD 434	Casino Operations and Management II
	HMD 437	Gaming Regulations and Control
	HMD 439	Seminar in Casino Management
	HMD 442	Sociology of Gambling
	HMD 474	Seminar in Hotel Research (Gaming Topic)
	TCA 495	Casino Marketing
	HOA 718	Principles of Casino & Gaming Management
	HOA 742	Customer Development Strategies for the Casino and Gaming Industry
	HOA 763	Research Seminar in Casino and Gaming Management
University of Nevada, Reno	GM 325	Introduction to Gaming Management
	GM 415	Commercial Gaming Law
	GM 425	Accounting for the Gaming Industry
	GM 430	Gaming Management
	GM 440	Casino Marketing
	GM 460	Tourism Marketing

TABLE 1 Continued

<u>School (Number of Courses Offered)</u>	<u>Course #</u>	<u>Course Description</u>
University of Nevada, Reno	GM 470	Quantitative Methods and Applications in Casino Gaming
	GM 490	Internship
	GM 495	Special Topics in Gaming Management
University of New Haven	HR 260	Survey of Private Club, Resort & Gaming Operations Management
University of New Orleans	HRT 4160	Theories of Casino Gaming
	HRT 4165	Management of Gaming Enterprises
Widener University	HM 364	Casino Hotel Management
	HM 354	Club and Resort Management

**Source:** Adapted from the UNLV International Gaming Institute's master list of gaming programs and updated with current data.

Once appropriate benchmark universities are selected, these schools should be contacted for assistance. Usually, other schools are happy to provide some general assistance regarding information in the gaming area. If not, information may be obtained regarding curricular content from the schools' web pages, from web pages of individual gaming faculty (where sample copies of syllabi are often posted), from personal contact with the faculty teaching in the program, or from course catalogs and descriptions. Some universities, such as UNLV, and the University of New Orleans, even offer gaming education seminars to aid in the development of new programs and the refinement of existing programs.

A useful source for identifying areas where gaming topics can be integrated into existing courses is provided in Table 2. This table includes a sample of typical hospitality related courses and identifies key areas where specific gaming topics would naturally fit into the course discussions. Schools desiring to integrate gaming into an existing curriculum rather than establishing a separate gaming curriculum should find this information particularly useful.

Table 2 Gaming Topics and Issues for Course Integration

General Topic	Sub-Topic	Gaming Topic
Hotel Operations	Front Office	Casino Rates
		Casino Reservations
	Housekeeping Facility Management	Complimentary Rooms
		Market Mix in the Casino/Hotel
		High-roller Suites
		Energy Demands in the Casino
		Environmental Tobacco Smoke in the Casino
		Fire Safety in the Casino Environment
		Heat Load of Slot Machines
		Lighting Design in the Casino

**TABLE 2 Continued**

<b>General Topic</b>	<b>Sub-Topic</b>	<b>Gaming Topic</b>
	Security	Casino Robberies Con Artists Slot Cheats
Food Service Operations	Restaurants	Budgeting Losses Not Profits in Some Outlets Handling Complimentaries Pricing Casino Menus Special Requirements of Running a 24 Hour Operation
	Beverage Operations	Allocation of Complimentary Beverage Costs Complimentary Drink Policies Third Party Liability and Service of Alcohol in the Casino
Financial Accounting	Cash	Cage Operations Cashiering Casino Credit and Collections
	Accounts Receivable	Chip Inventory
	Inventory	Accounting for Depreciation of Gaming Equipment
	Property and Equipment	Chip Liability
	Liabilities	Progressive Slot Liabilities
	Payroll	Tip Compliance
	Equity	Corporate Gaming Act of 1969
	Revenue	Timing of Revenue Recognition
	Expense	Complimentary Items Preopening Costs
	Gains/Losses	Foreign Currency Gains/Losses
	Financial Reporting	Departmental Statements Uniform Systems of Accounts for Casinos
Managerial Accounting	Cash Flows	Financing and Investing Trends in the Gaming Industry
	Ratio Analysis	Industry Differences
	Pricing	Integrated Pricing in a Casino
	Forecasting/Budgeting	Forecasting/Budgeting for Casino Departments
	Cash Management	Bankrolls Hopper Levels
	Capital Budgeting	Buy vs. Build Decisions
	Internal Control	Cheating Scams Minimum Internal Control Standards Protection of Games Safeguarding Casino Assets Security Surveillance
	Taxes	Current IRS Gaming Issues (Deductibility of Marker Discounts, Employee Meals, Complimentary Expenses, Outstanding Chips, etc.) Gaming Taxes
Corporate Finance or Financial Management	Evaluating the Firm's Performance	Industry Differences
	Forecasting/Budgeting	Importance of forecasting/ budgeting in a Casino
	Valuation	Capitalization Rates Models for Valuing Casino Hotels
	Risk and Return	Investor Expectations
	Capital Budgeting	Buy vs. Build Decisions
	Cash Flow	Industry Differences and Regulatory Requirements
	Cost of Capital	Treatment by Lenders
	Capital Structure	Leverage vs. Cash
	Dividends	Reinvestment Policy of Casino Hotels
	Management of Working Capital	Industry Differences
Financial Analysis of the Service Industry	Financial Statements	Industry Differences



TABLE 2 Continued

General Topic	Sub-Topic	Gaming Topic
	Ratio Analysis	Uniform System of Accounts Industry Differences Projected Goals
Technology	Input/Output Devices	Electronic Roulette Signs Keno Boards Other Electronic Games Slot Machines Table or Slot Machine Keypads
Technology	Systems	Cage and Credit Systems Casino Floor Layout and Design Systems Player Tracking Systems Slot Tracking Systems
	Peripherals	Auto Change Machines Bill Acceptors Coin Handlers Scales Security Cameras
	Interfaces	Golf/Resort Management Systems POS Systems Property Management Systems Restaurant Management Systems Time and Attendance Systems
	Communications	Camera Control Radio Frequency Communication for Slot Devices Security and Maintenance Personnel Special Issues with Riverboats
	Productivity	Increased Accuracy in Data and Speed or Reporting Holds, Win, Drop, Playing Information, Maintenance, Security, and Variance
Marketing	Price	Role of Complimentaries Take-out Rate of Casino Games
	Product	Changes in Consumer Tastes Changes in Technology Interaction Between Legal Framework and Consumer Demand
	Promotion	Legal Restrictions on Advertising Public Relations
	Place	Convenience vs. Specialty Good Diffusion Public Policy Technology
Tourism	Destination Life Cycle Tourism's Economic, Social, and Environmental Impacts	Casinos as a Revitalization Tool in Atlantic City Case Histories of Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Deadwood, etc.

Source: Jones, T., Fried, B., Ivancevich, S., Roehl, W., Brewer, K., & Eade, V. (1995). "Integrating gaming issues and topics into the curriculum: A new industry on the hospitality education horizon." Working Paper.<sup>1</sup>

However, benchmarking efforts will not be successful without gaining appropriate knowledge of the intricacies of gaming. To develop background knowledge on the gaming industry, faculty and administrators would seek out and read gaming-related materials. Table 3 includes a list of suggested readings in the gaming area. While this list is in no way intended to be all-inclusive, it should serve as a solid starting point for those interested in expanding their gaming knowledge.

**Table 3**  
**Gaming and Hospitality Books, Journals, and Magazines**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Title</b>
Gaming Journals	Gaming Research and Review Journal Journal of Gambling Studies
Gaming Trade Journals and Publications	Casino Executive Casino Journal Casino Journal's National Gaming Summary Harrah's Survey of Casino Entertainment Indian Gaming News International Gaming and Wagering Business Riverboat Gaming News Slotworld Magazine Sport's Forms Gaming Today State Gaming Regulations State Internal Control Standards and Guidelines The Grogan Report
Gaming Books	Audits of Casinos (AICPA) Casino Accounting and Financial Management by Greenlees Casino Management by Friedman Casino Operations Management by Kilby Casinos: The International Casino Guide Introduction to the Casino Entertainment Industry by Eade & Eade (Prentice Hall) The Gaming Industry: Introduction & Perspectives (Wiley)
Other Books	Financial Statement Analysis by Gibson Hospitality Financial Management by Schmidgall and Andrew
General Publications	Advertising Age Business Week Fortune
Other Academic Journals	Annals of Tourism Research Journal of Consumer Research Journal of Marketing Journal of Marketing Research Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing Journal of Travel Research Marketing News The Journal of Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals Tourism Management
Other Trade Journals	Amusement Business Meetings & Conventions Magazine Travel Trade News Travel Weekly
Library	Compact Disclosure Database Corporate Annual Reports Standard & Poor's Analyst's Handbook Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors and Executives Standard & Poor's Reports

**Source:** Jones, T., Fried, B., Ivancevich, S., Roehl, W., Brewer, K., & Eade, V. (1995). "Integrating gaming issues and topics into the curriculum: A new industry on the hospitality education horizon." Working Paper.

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Once appropriate information is obtained on curricular content and the parties involved in the benchmarking process have familiarized themselves with the gaming industry, the process of identifying gaps between the investigating school's current offerings and the offerings at the benchmark programs can begin. Next, a school can begin to pattern its own gaming curriculum after those institutions identified as benchmarks, while try-

ing to improve and/or mold the gaming curriculum to fit the institution's needs. In this way, the school can begin its gaming program with confidence as to its quality and optimism about its eventual success. Not only can benchmarking help in adding new programs, but benchmarking can lead to continuous improvement in all programs if this pattern of investigation, improvement, and implementation continues for many years.

**Key Points for Benchmarking Success**

There are several factors to consider when using benchmarking techniques in an academic setting that will help to increase the chances of a successful experience. First, always remember that the same constraints or factors that govern one institution may not be present in another, so it is important to examine every aspect of the benchmarked process or course prior to implementation. Second, it is important to recognize that the benchmarking process is destined for failure if successful implementation of changes cannot occur. The most critical area of the benchmarking process is to successfully implement the changes needed. To implement change, an advocate must be selected to lead the implementation effort. The implementation of change requires focused advocacy. Not only is it important to have a strong advocate, but it is equally important for both administration and faculty to show support for the process by committing time, resources, and support to the effort.

Third, time management is a critical issue. A realistic time line must be established with clear steps outlined at each juncture. If the time lines are adhered to, constituencies are more likely to be impressed with changes being implemented and are thereby more likely to support the changes.

Fourth, it is critically important for action plans or blueprints for the change to be developed. For implementation action plans to be adequate, they must meet five criteria (Jones, 1972).

- (1) Specificity: Are the actions precise and specific?

With respect to specificity, it is very important to formulate clear, precise objectives. Any ambiguity interjected into the process will hamper the benchmarking process.

- (2) Performance: What do you intend to accomplish?

The performance measures necessary to implement the change must be outlined. Care should be taken to formulate a detailed mission to be accomplished.

- (3) Involvement: Who is part of the action?

In terms of involvement, the faculty who will be teaching these new or adapted gaming courses should be actively involved in the process of benchmarking in order for the process to have the greatest likelihood of success. Further, appropriate administrators must also be actively involved where applicable.

- (4) Realism: Do you have the necessary resources to accomplish your objectives?

Realistic cost and time expectations must be used in the benchmarking process. Deadlines, estimates of faculty and administrative time, and estimates of costs must be carefully analyzed and evaluated to ensure they are reasonable.

- (5) Observability: Will you be able to measure the results?

Measurement criteria must be developed and implemented so that the results of the process can be effectively evaluated.

Finally, benchmarking should not be viewed as a one-time process that happens in isolation. Instead, post-implementation procedures must be utilized to perform an evaluation of the results, and any necessary changes must be addressed.

## Conclusions

As discussed earlier in the paper, the benchmarking process involves the following steps:

- (1) Identify an area of focus for improvement;
- (2) Select a benchmarking approach;
- (3) Evaluate external process data and develop a detailed understanding of your own processes;
- (4) Identify the best practices and gaps between your processes and those identified as the "best" practices;
- (5) Formulate and implement action plans; and
- (6) Monitor changes.

Benchmarking can serve as a useful tool in higher education when used to help build a gaming focus in an existing curriculum or in developing a separate gaming education program. When benchmarking is used, careful attention must be paid not only to properly identifying a benchmark, but also in implementing and monitoring desired changes to the curriculum. Benchmarking serves as yet another example of how techniques popularized in industry can prove useful in

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academia. With the tools discussed in this paper and the gaming resources set forth in the tables, schools desiring to build or enhance their gaming offerings should have a reasonable starting point to help them achieve their goals.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This working paper was published in *Hospitality and Tourism Educator* in 1996; however, the tables were inadvertently omitted from the journal publication. A citation of the published article is included in the reference section of this paper.

