

2006

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Repository Citation

Allen, Tony (2006) "High Stakes Research," *UNLV Innovation*: Vol. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/innovation/vol1/iss1/9>

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High Stakes Research



UNLV professor Bo Bernhard is counting on research to help in the prevention and treatment of problem gambling in Southern Nevada and beyond

Story by Tony Allen
Photography by Aaron Mayes

Bo Bernhard was a Harvard undergraduate in the early 1990s when he was assigned a sociology class project that seemed novel. While on semester break, he was asked to return to his native Las Vegas to conduct research on the effects of gambling on the Southern Nevada community.

Little did he know what impact the project would have on his life.

Fifteen years later, Bernhard is still studying the effects of gambling, but from a markedly different perspective: He is now considered one of the nation's foremost experts on gambling behavior.

"Growing up here, I never gave problem gambling a second thought," says Dr. Bernhard, who accepted a joint appointment as an assistant professor in the UNLV departments of sociology and hotel management in 2002. "Like many Las Vegans, I was proud to tell our city's story to my friends who visited here, and that story didn't include a downside."

Bernhard's early research revealed one possible explanation for his lack of awareness of the issue: The concept of problem gambling as a legitimate medical concern is little more than 30 years old. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that a Veterans Administration physician, Dr. Robert Custer, noticed that many patients he was treating for alcohol addiction also had gambling problems. This finding prompted him to create a specialized treatment program for problem gambling, which was introduced in Las Vegas in the mid-1980s and placed under the leadership of Dr. Robert Hunter. Nevada's first treatment facility for problem gamblers was born.

"As part of my research while at Harvard, I visited a treatment group run by Dr. Hunter, and was immediately thrown," he says. "I actually saw people there I knew personally. So I went back the next night, then the next and the next, learning more about the problem." He continued to write on the subject throughout his undergraduate education.

After graduating with honors from Harvard with degrees



in sociology and psychology in 1995, Bernhard took a break from academia to pursue a professional baseball career and even spent some time playing soccer professionally in Spain. His commitment to research trumped his love of sports, however, and he returned to Las Vegas where he went on to earn his master's degree and Ph.D. in sociology from UNLV.

His grounding in sociology, combined with his early exposure to the pioneers in the burgeoning field of gambling behavior research and his knowledge of the Las Vegas community, have strengthened Bernhard's enthusiasm for his research interest.

"My goal was to do the ultimate study on gambling in society, and Las Vegas has provided a dream laboratory for it," says Bernhard, a fifth-generation Las Vegan whose great-great-grandfather first came to Las Vegas seeking work in the gaming industry.

Though he's not sure he has yet conducted that "ultimate" study, Bernhard's exploration of the subject has been both wide ranging and productive. Since arriving at UNLV, he has been awarded two research honors, has received grants totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars, and has authored or coauthored more than 15 scholarly publications. In 2000, Bernhard was named co-director of the research committee for the National Council on Problem Gambling's Senior Citizen Problem Gambling Task Force. Most recently, he co-submitted a \$3.7 million National Institutes of Health grant with Harvard Medical School to study long-term gambling behaviors.

Bernhard is also a coveted speaker on the subject of gambling behavior. He has made more than 60 presentations to a wide variety of groups; more than half were refereed conference presentations. He notes that the proliferation of the gaming industry worldwide has provided him with incredible opportunities to share his research. He has lectured on six continents and advised national governments on the positive and negative impacts of gambling on society.

Bernhard was recently invited to Russia to speak with members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Cabinet about how that nation's alcoholism treatment programs can be extended to include problem gambling treatment.

"Growing up in the Cold War era, I never thought I'd find myself sitting in the middle of the Red Square," Bernhard says. "It's amazing how far we've come at UNLV to get to the point where we're helping another nation's government decide policy. It's a testament to the success of our research."

While the problem gambling issues of other countries are certainly of interest to Bernhard, he acknowledges that the sheer ubiquity of gaming back at home in the U.S. continues to provide him with a plethora of ideas for study.

"Gambling is the national pastime here. Year in and year out, it draws more revenue than theme parks, movies, spectator sports, and all of the other location-based recreations



combined, and it continues to soar," he says, noting that with the continuing popularity of Las Vegas and the lure of online gambling and televised poker, more people than ever are being exposed to the culture of gambling.

Bernhard and his colleagues are currently researching how gambling affects specific sub-groups of the population. He recently received a grant from the state of New Mexico, which has the largest percentage of Native Americans in the nation, to conduct the first-ever study of Native American gambling behavior.

"The explosion of tribal gaming nationwide has had a profound effect on the Native American population," Bernhard says. "We've surveyed and studied more than 600 people in an effort to understand the impact this booming business has had on local populations in tribal communities."

Bernhard is also working in partnership with Dr. Carolyn Yucha, dean of UNLV's School of Nursing, to study gambling behavior in women, principally the physiological effects women undergo while engaged in gambling.

"By utilizing the research lab at the Stan Fulton Building, as

"My goal was to do the ultimate study on gambling in society, and Las Vegas has provided a dream laboratory for it." – Bo Bernhard, UNLV sociology/hotel management professor



well as field research in local casinos, we'll be able to measure the physiological reaction of participants with and without money on the line," Bernhard says. "This will help us explain why gambling has the allure that it does."

Bernhard hopes to define not only the cultural factors associated with gambling, but also what he terms "skin-inward" factors.

"To truly understand any human behavior – particularly one as complex as gambling – you have to understand factors from the molecular to the global," he says. "As sociologists, we love to study 'the big picture' at the societal level. But developing research-based strategies to alleviate and treat these problems at the smallest levels has also provided us with some fascinating insights."

Bernhard believes that one critical treatment strategy will involve the use of technology, and he is beginning to address that subject in his research. He and his colleagues recently received a grant to examine the effectiveness of a "responsible gaming device," developed in Canada, that can be attached to gaming machines.

"It's essentially the first attempt to devise a seatbelt for gambling," he says. "Much as the automobile industry did a generation ago, the global gaming industry is increasingly looking for research-based strategies that provide safety measures to protect those who need it."

The device, which is voluntary, is activated by inserting a personal identification card into the gaming machine. The card tracks winnings and losses, almost as a bank statement does, and enables the user to block days on which he or she may be vulnerable to gambling overindulgence, such as pay-days or days off. (Once these days are selected, the user cannot go back and change the selections.) In addition, limits can be set on permissible monetary losses; when that limit is reached, the card will no longer permit the user to play.

The device is in the early stages of development; there are plans to incorporate new technology that would allow users to access gaming machines simply by supplying a thumbprint instead of a card.

"It's exciting to get a chance to be asked to conduct research on this technology," Bernhard says. "To be in an era in which we at UNLV can play such a central role in helping the gaming industry and governments around the world determine what works and what doesn't is remarkable."

UNLV is also playing an active role in the study of gaming and the resort industry in the country of Singapore, which recently decided to legalize resort-style casinos. The William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration has opened a campus there, and Bernhard and his colleagues have been working with the nation's governmental officials to build a model for the growth of legalized gambling in the country. As legalized gambling in Singapore develops, researchers will be able to measure the trajectory of gambling problems within the population.

"At this early stage, research in Singapore is vital," Bernhard says. "We have a fantastic opportunity to study gambling in a society from its introduction. It is our hope that we can help the government there develop research-based policies that will benefit all Singaporeans."

Bernhard is quick to admit that researchers have barely scratched the surface when it comes to studying gambling behavior, but he believes UNLV is well positioned to lead the way.

The fact that his research is positively affecting people not only locally, but globally, is one of the most rewarding aspects of his work, Bernhard says. He is also pleased that his research has drawn many fine students to UNLV. Since joining the faculty, Bernhard has worked with more than 40 graduate students and is currently advising six students in master's and doctoral tracts.

"UNLV's commitment to community engagement is evidenced clearly in the work that we do in gambling research," Bernhard says, noting as an example how the Problem Gambling Center, a local off-campus treatment facility started by Hunter, utilizes the research of UNLV faculty members to benefit the community.

"Our study of gambling asks questions about the impact of gaming on societies, as well as the effects of introducing gambling to various populations. At UNLV, we're building a solid research agenda that will allow people to answer those questions," he says, gratified that his research has drawn such praise and is responsible for helping so many people.

"They say of teaching that you never really know where your work's influence ends because you have the ability to touch so many lives," he says. "I believe that's true of research as well. Having that connection with the people we study is a phenomenal feeling."