

I first encountered Bill Eadington in 1997. It was the 10th “Eadington Conference,” but my first. It was also my first academic conference of any type. I had been encouraged to attend and present by some in the Minnesota gambling research world (though I did not understand at the time just how influential that world was) and did so with trepidation. After all, I was from “the industry” and I didn’t have the magic letters p, h, and d after my name.

So I took a deep breath and entered the whirlwind known as the International Conference on Gambling and Risk-taking. I learned about the relationship between compulsive gamblers and their bookies and about successful business models in Mississippi. I learned about the randomness of casino card shuffles and gambling in sports card collecting, not to mention money laundering, the role of gambling in the French Enlightenment, and the elasticity of demand for lotto gambling. I learned about gambling in South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany. I learned from psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, mathematicians, economists, public health experts, business executives, and government regulators. And I learned from a certain tall, balding (yes, even then) economist who presided over the entire affair with an ineffable air of expertise, authority, and above all, calm. Gambling was portrayed not as an activity fit only for moral scorn but as a valid subject for serious investigation by a multiplicity of disciplines.

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My own contribution to the conference was modest: a small paper on “Age as a Determinant of Gambling Behavior and Attitudes.” But I kept my overheads in order and right side up, the room wasn’t empty, and nobody threw things. It was a tremendous boost to my confidence in myself as a researcher. From my present day perspective, it makes me wonder how many others had their first positive presentation experience at an Eadington conference. I’m guessing the number is not small. Among the roles that the conference plays, we should not overlook its function as an incubator. It’s a place where one can present the new, not completely formed, idea or the modest result that over time develops into something much larger, receive constructive feedback, and not worry about being intimidated or picked apart.

Three years later I was back. This time I made an effort to write down some of the more memorable sentences uttered during the presentations. Here’s a partial list:

“*All pleasure is potentially addictive.*” – Peter Collins

“*In Australia, the highest use for a dollar is to buy a beer with it or make a bet with it.*” – Mark Dickerson

“*The more the public sees youth as involved with a vice, the more they fear it.*” – Jerome Skolnick

“*Only the U.S. would first prohibit something and then figure out how they would enforce it.*” – Joseph M. Kelly on Internet gambling

“*This is a global problem and we need international solutions. The biggest problem is the U.S. attitude.*” – Jan McMillen on Internet gambling

“Gambling is less and less a moral issue.” – William Eadington

Since that time, the conference has continued to grow and develop. Representatives from Asian nations began to appear. Internet and other forms of electronic gambling, first discussed in 2000, have grown to take a more prominent place on the agenda. But a large number of presentations from the 10th conference would not have been out of place 12 years later at the 14th. It's still diverse, still stimulating, still friendly, and I leave each one regretting that I have to wait three years for the next. And the highlight, always, is the synopsis of trends, studies, and activities summarized into the underlying big ideas by Dr. William Eadington.

Shortly after the 11th conference, I had the privilege of interviewing Bill for a trade journal. During the interview I asked him to talk about the first conference and his views on how the conference had changed. He answered:

“The first one was interesting in its own right. We did publish a book that captured the major papers that were presented - a book called “Gambling in Society” – that now is an interesting piece to look back on, if you can ever find a copy. The people who were doing research in the 1960s and 1970s were quite insightful in their ability to see what gambling encompassed and where it was going. So we had papers presented by people, such as Robert Herman, Edward Thorp, Peter Griffin, Igor Kusyszyn and a number of others, who were contributing to the literature at that time from their academic positions at various universities, but who were really ‘voices in the wilderness.’

“I think we found about the only economist, the only psychologist, the only sociologist, the only criminologist and the handful of mathematicians who were doing serious work. We managed to pull them all together for what was a very small, but quite interesting conference at the time. In total, for that first conference, we had about 30 papers and perhaps 75 people in attendance.

“At the 11th Conference that took place in Las Vegas in June 2000, there were approximately 250 papers and about 450 people in attendance from all over the world. The volume of research and the amount of interest in gambling has increased considerably, but much of the research has gone into more detailed areas than before. The sweepingly general kinds of analyses have pretty much been addressed, but we are now getting, I think, much better analysis of some of the narrower topics in particular areas.

“There, obviously, is a lot of interest in problem and pathological gambling as a research area. I would suspect about 35 percent of the papers that were presented at the 11th Conference dealt with variations on problem or pathological gambling. We were finally seeing some integration between studies that look at problem and pathological gambling, studies that look at public policy issues, and studies that look at the strategic positioning of companies that do business in the gaming industries. The common thread that has emerged in all these areas, interestingly, is problem and pathological gambling. It is an issue of interest to the scientific community because of its parallels to alcoholism and drug abuse, as well as the underlying questions of how society mitigates such issues. It is increasingly of interest to regulators and policy makers in terms of determining what is good public policy towards permitting legal and commercial gaming and at the same time not creating significant negative social impacts on society at large. Gaming companies, I think, are increasingly seeing their role in an enlightened self-interest context of better understanding problem and pathological gambling, and working out their own internal strategies to effectively deal with the issue before less acceptable strategies are imposed upon them from the outside, through regulations, statutory limitations, or prohibitions.”

In the same interview I asked him what the world of gambling would look like in ten years. As it has now been 11 years since the interview, we can see just how accurate Bill was. While he (along with me and many others) underestimated the degree of growth in U.S. casinos outside Nevada, I think after reading, you will join

me in marveling at the man's prescience. His knowledge has both a breadth and depth that continually astounds me, but that's not where Bill's genius (a term I do not use loosely) shows. Too often, knowledgeable people become repositories of trivia, facts without context. Bill is anything but trivial. He links his facts with unique insight and brings them together into big ideas that leave you thinking, "I never thought of that before."

"What I'm going to do is look back a little bit. In the United States, we had an explosion of casino-style gambling in the early 1990s that happened to coincide with an economic recession and a relatively slow recovery. Politically, casinos became very popular because they were labor-intensive and held out the promise of being good revenue sources for governments in search of new forms of taxation. But, more importantly, they were viewed as an important catalyst to stimulate local economies or create local tourism industries or to be a tool for economic redevelopment in declining areas. A number of states looked at casinos with that rationale, unrealistically in some cases.

"In retrospect, we learned in many jurisdictions that if you legalize casinos in a place that does not have many tourism amenities, those casinos primarily become entertainment venues for people who live within a 50-mile radius. There's not much of a tourism component associated with such casinos; that has been the experience with many of the riverboat jurisdictions in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Iowa.

"After 1993, the success rate of efforts to legalize casinos diminished considerably. Since then, only Detroit has added casinos to the list of American jurisdictions that now have casinos. The exception to this has been Indian gaming, which is being driven by a separate set of legal factors. Indian gaming has been one of the more important gaming industry developments in the U.S. in the last five years. California Indian gaming is going to be a very important development as it works its way through the various legal and political machinations that are still taking place.

"My suspicion is, over the next ten years, we are not going to see a pattern of legalization of casino-style gaming that we saw in the early 1990s. Instead, we are likely to see a continuing development in Indian gaming in the various states where it is permitted. We are also likely to see a lot more hybrid casino-style gambling, such as the introduction of slot machines at racetracks or in bars and taverns. The Internet issue is going to take on increasing importance, and the introduction of new technologies, especially in slot machines and gaming devices, is going to continue to have a very strong influence in terms of what happens in those jurisdictions where gaming is permitted. Technology will also push the envelope as to how new forms of gambling are going to sneak into various jurisdictions.

"I suspect that we are going to have a lot of difficulty in defining gambling as opposed to games, contests, and investments. It may become increasingly difficult to design laws to constrain and restrict gambling. The new technologies, many of which are linked to the Internet and many of which are linked to interactive game playing opportunities, are going to influence the kind of gambling that is available in ten years. These are going to pose some very interesting public policy challenges, as well as some intriguing gambling opportunities for customers and players."

"Long term, in my own opinion, the ability to prohibit gambling on the Internet is going to be fruitless and so, ultimately, I suspect we are going to see some kind of legal and regulated Internet gambling...My suspicion is we will also see the development of new forms of gambling on the Internet that are very different than what we are used to. They might be quite different from traditional lottery products or casino offerings or, for that matter, even traditional sports wagering or race wagering. This is because the Internet is a brand new toy. It has the potential to create a lot of other kinds of tournament activities or skill-chance games or other very entertainment-driven participation games that have gambling as only part of their offering. It is going to create legal questions as to whether these are forms of gambling or not. But even if we

had laws that would attempt to prohibit them, the ability to do so, I think, is going to be ultimately very constrained.”

Don Feeney
Research & Planning Director
Minnesota Lottery