Sports Betting Grabbing the Attention of MA College Students

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As Kansas City’s kicker Harrison Butker took his stance in the last 8 seconds of the game, Kate Phan, a Smith College student, threw her phone aside and held her breath as she silently begged for this field goal. More than a team’s reputation, Kate had a lot more at stake…$300 worth.

“Not that I care much about football, but it’s just so thrilling to see the team I bet on win. It made watching the game so much more exciting.”

Kate is just one of the 50 million people that bet on Super Bowl 57, which had a record breaking number of bettors. Sports betting has been on the rise, with two thirds of college students reporting they have bet on sports, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG). This is even more severe than the 1 in 5 adults who bet in the past year, as reported by Pew Research Center.

Just in time for the Super Bowl, Massachusetts legalized and launched sports betting in the state’s 3 casinos, all of which happen to be accessible to college campuses. The upcoming launch of online sports betting is highly anticipated, as it launches just a few days before the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament, or March Madness, begins.

“It is not an accident that sports gambling in Massachusetts will take effect before March Madness—as it is a sport spectacle widely consumed and taken in by college aged students, largely male-identified,” says Jane Stangl, Dean of Smith College and a Sports Studies lecturer specializing in the sociocultural analysis of sports. Stangl can’t help but mention, “the danger for the college aged bettor, is just that—their age! Betting if under 21 comes with risk—betting regardless of age however, is a risk!”

Amongst the excitement of sports betting, the possible risks to college students are downplayed. The youth rates of being at risk for problem gambling is 2-3 times higher than adults, as stated by the NCPG. However despite the increased risk, there is little preventative action taken. Nearly all U.S. colleges and universities have policies on potential harms like student alcohol use; however, only 22% have a formal policy on gambling, unlike Smith College.

Although casinos and sportsbooks may attempt to enforce responsible gambling, reducing social harm is not necessarily a priority for them. In the end, the goal is to make money. In “mediated mega events” like March Madness, Stangl notes it is set up to encourage betting. The fan may make money, “but per usual, the overall producer—the NCAA, sports betting apps—is what wins.” When the sportsbook has more to benefit from addictive gambling, there is little incentive to warn or discourage students from engaging in sports betting.

As sports betting is introduced in Massachusetts, students will surely be curious and want to experience the fun for themselves. While that is not an issue, they should make sure to be aware of problematic gambling. They need to look out for themselves, because no one else seems to be.