



# GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

## 5-year funding agreement for Institute

THE ALBERTA GAMING RESEARCH INSTITUTE is pleased to announce the signing of the new five-year funding agreement between Alberta's Minister of Gaming and the three participating Alberta universities (University of Alberta, U of Calgary, U of Lethbridge) that together make up the Institute. This agreement, effective April 1, 2006, provides the Institute funding in the amount of \$1.5-million annually to conduct gambling-related research.

The length of the funding agreement is described by the Institute Executive Director Ms. Vickii Williams as being particularly beneficial in advancing the research agenda of the Institute. She cites four specific factors that will be enhanced by the five-year agreement: 1) longer-range research planning, coordination and sequencing of projects will be possible; 2) researchers will have increased confidence that participating in gambling-related research will have more continuity; 3) research affiliations with agencies and investigators in other jurisdictions will be more effectively accommodated, and; 4) the already significant contribution by Alberta researchers to building the knowledge base in gambling research will be further facilitated.

According to Williams, the major difference between this agreement and the previous formative agreements is, "that there will be an increasing focus on strategic research." Despite the development and maturation of existing Institute-funded research programs, Williams says that particular areas of research 'need' still remain. She also points out that, "Stakeholder-identified priorities will be solicited and the best means determined to address them within the limitations imposed by finite resources—financial as well as availability of expertise."

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Williams explains that membership in a continuing research stakeholder consultative group is currently under consideration. She anticipates that, "it will include wide provincial representation, without becoming unwieldy in size." She is optimistic that it will assume an advisory role in assisting with the prioritization of the Institute's research agenda.

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.

#### OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society



It would seem logical to suggest that individuals who gamble would never knowingly set forth on a journey with their ultimate destination being pathological gambling.

## The transformative journey of the pathological gambler

by Rhys Stevens

PROBLEM GAMBLING PREVALENCE STUDIES from a myriad of jurisdictions consistently find that a proportion of the population can be considered “pathological” gamblers. Such individuals exhibit behaviors that negatively impact their own lives as well as the lives of their families, employers and others in their communities. It would seem logical to suggest that individuals who gamble would never knowingly set forth on a journey with their ultimate destination being pathological gambling. If this is indeed true, what does explain the transformation from recreational gamblers to pathological gambler? To further explore this issue, Dr. Gary Nixon of the University of Lethbridge’s School of Health Sciences used a research grant from the Institute to fund his investigation entitled “Understanding how gamblers really think: Psychological and cultural aspects that motivate gamblers.”

### Is there an explanation for pathological gambling behaviour?

Nixon traces his initial interest in gambling research to a trip he took to Las Vegas in 2000 to attend a conference. While in the city, he observed that many gamblers appeared to desire the status of a “high roller” or a “big hero”. After following up this casual observation by perusing numerous other narrative accounts of gambling, he concluded that many gamblers were attempting a shortcut to a “hero” status in which they would be admired and validated by others. He explains that, “It was as if [gamblers] were seeking a standing similar to professional sports stars like Wayne Gretzky or Michael Jordan, or a suave ‘James Bond’-type person.”

Existing theory concerning pathological gambling is characterized by Nixon as being based on paradigms from the patho-

logical, moral, disease, progressive, or biological perspectives. Though these theories are useful individually and in combination to explain the behaviour, Nixon contends that there are seemingly several theoretical pieces of the pathological gambling puzzle which have been under-explored. The pieces largely overlooked by researchers are what he terms the “lived experience” of the pathological gambler as well as that which is embedded within the psyche of individuals. In order to better understand how gambling can take on pathological dimensions, Nixon and his research collaborators recruited and interviewed a sample of pathological gamblers as part of their Institute-funded research investigation.

### Pathological gambling as described by pathological gamblers

A total of thirteen Southern Albertan participants who met the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling disorder were recruited and subjected to in-depth interviews that were audiotaped. A narrative technique for interviewing was used in order to give a natural sequential story structure to the commentaries. The focus of these one-to-two-hour long interviews was to explore the conditions and processes by which an individual becomes a disordered gambler. Essentially, participants took the role of a co-researcher and were guided to dwell among their emotional, cognitive, and psychospiritual experiences, bringing to light meaningful units of data related to the phenomena of becoming a pathological gambler.

After the interviews were completed and closely scrutinized, Nixon, Dr. Virginia McGowan and Mr. Jason Solowoniuk began drawing out themes that were common across interviews to highlight the shared

similarities of the gambling experience. These themes were categorically placed within thematic constructs based on the famous mythologist Joseph Campbell's work on the "hero's journey" as well as Carl Jung's work on archetypes. The resultant archetypal-mythic categorization was done in such a way as to approximate a timeline for the development and progression of the participants' lived experience of gambling.

### The "archetypal-mythic" gambling paradigm

Archetypal psychology suggests that people in Western culture generally live out particular archetypes in order to help them find deeper meaning or purpose in life. In the case of gambling, Nixon explains that, "It seems to bring out the need to be a hero [archetype] in some individuals as we live in a 'success' preoccupied culture." He goes on to explain that, "Gambling can also bring out the classical 'trickster' archetype in which the gambler feels through his or her 'smarts' the machine can be outsmarted and huge winnings won. Ironically, in our research, we see how in the end the trickster archetype outsmarts the gambler [hero] leading to many negative tendencies including virtual self-destruction."

The mythic aspect of Nixon's paradigm relates to the journey-like nature of gambling described by pathological gamblers during the research interviews. His analysis of interview transcripts suggested that there were three identifiable stages in the mythical journey from gambling to pathological gambling—a clear beginning, a transformational period, and a final sustaining phase. The gamblers uniformly described being "called" to their imaginary gambling "quests" through a yearning for something that felt they did not believe they already had, or else, a need to be somebody else. The second stage of the journey involved gamblers using their gambling activities as a way to escape current life stressors and becoming

psychically inflated as they pursued hero status. A third and final stage of the gambler's quest to become "extraordinary" resulted in a descent into extreme behaviours and distress to the individual and familial disruption.

### Conclusions & implications

It is Nixon's contention that, "To understand the processes involved in initiating and sustaining pathological gambling, one must include and yet, journey beyond the moral, disease, developmental, and biological paradigms." The archetypal-mythic paradigm developed by Nixon and his co-investigators is certainly one such way of providing a more holistic understanding of pathological gambling. Nixon notes that, "Rather than attacking the gambling addiction as something bad, it can be seen that gambling was just used as a shortcut for validation and to be a hero. The real question of how to make the authentic journey towards wholeness can then be taken up in earnest in counselling with the client, and the process of recovery can be honored. Thus, when disordered gambling is understood to be purposeful in nature (seeking for 'wholeness'), the gambler can hi-jack the creativity that lies at the heart of mythic forces within themselves and turn the tables on their addictive behaviors."

When asked about the term wholeness, Nixon says that, "it can be seen as living life fully on all levels of existence from the physical to the mental, social, and spiritual, or put in transpersonal terms, living at all developmental levels of existence. The pathological gambler can have the intention of going on a journey towards wholeness, to living life fully, but instead attempts to achieve wholeness in one episode of gambling. So, the quest for wholeness is real but the means are counterfeit."

As a complement to his investigations related to the path that some gamblers

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### Dr. David Hodgins receives research award

Dr. David Hodgins, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Calgary, has received the 2006 Research Award from the U.S. National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) for the best original body of research on problem and pathological gambling. Dr. Hodgins has been involved in research on problem gambling for nearly a decade and his publications cover a wide range of topics. The NCPG Research Award is given annually for "the best original research on problem and pathological gambling that contributes substantially to our understanding of this disorder." He serves as the Alberta Gaming Research Institute's 'Node Coordinator' for the University of Calgary.

### From the library...

Over the months of June and July, Institute Librarian Rhys Stevens surveyed each Canadian province and territory to determine the availability of various gaming formats and different gambling venue types in each jurisdiction. Complete results of this survey are contained in the document *Availability of Legal Gaming in Canada—As of July 2006* which is available from the Institute web site under 'Library Resources'.



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\* The Institute is funded by the Alberta  
government through the Alberta Lottery  
Fund.

ISSN 1499-2639 (Print)      ©AGRI 2006  
ISSN 1499-2647 (Online)

take toward pathological gambling, Nixon has also begun to explore the recovery journey away from it. This is a journey that Nixon says is focused on “authenticity, responsibility, embracing life’s opportunities, self-awareness, and giving back to the community.” It would seem that the archetypal-mythical perspective may provide a previously unheard voice for the pathological gambler who has not yet understood his or her own journey. In addition, counsellors tasked to help problem gamblers may now have additional insight as they guide their clients back toward a path of recovery with the goal of uncovering the deep self and finding its rewards therein. In describing these rewards, Nixon says that, “They are not monetary or self-indulgent, but are gifts that arise spontaneously during the recovery journey (i.e., a sense of trust in oneself and world), which then engender a pursuit toward living a meaningful life that does not require an addictive path to do so.”

*Dr. Nixon is an Associate Professor in the Addictions Counselling Program at the School of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge. He describes his counselling background as having “a humanistic-existential focus which has been shaped by the psychologies of eminent psychologists such as Maslow, Perls, Yalom, May, Jung, and Frankl.” He anticipates doing a follow-up study with a much larger sample size of pathological gamblers to further our understanding of under what circumstances does the notion of a hero’s journey explain the processes of addiction regarding the pathological gambler.*

**RELATED PUBLICATIONS:**

Nixon, G., Solowoniuk, J., & McGowan, V. (2006). The counterfeit hero’s journey of the pathological gambler: A phenomenological hermeneutics investigation. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 4(3), 217-232.

Nixon, G., & Solowoniuk, J. (2005). An insider’s look into the process of recovering from pathological gambling disorder: An existential phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 3(2), 26-34.

**New board member appointed: Dr. Daniel Mason**

The Institute would like to extend a warm welcome to new Board member Dr. Daniel (Dan) Mason. Dr. Mason is an associate professor with the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation and an adjunct professor with the School of Business at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada. Dr. Mason’s research takes a multi-disciplinary approach and focuses on the business of leisure and sport and the relationships between its stakeholders, including all levels of government, sports teams and leagues, the communities that host teams, agents and players’ associations. His research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Alberta Gaming Research Institute and he has over 30 refereed publications. In 2004 he was named a Research Fellow by the North American Society of Sport Management.



Dr. Mason teaches courses on sport and leisure and the public sector, and the business of hockey at the University of Alberta. His current research projects include: how cities leverage the presence of sports franchises and sporting events as part of their tourism and economic development initiatives; the effects of relying on gaming revenues on provincial sport organizations; and public awareness and willingness to support the use of gaming revenues to fund amateur arts, sports, recreation, and professional sports in Alberta.