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The Big Deal

By WM. FERGUSON

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THE popularity of poker on campus should surprise no one. Glory, risk, bravado - poker's hallmarks fit right in with the dormitory worldview. According to a recent study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, half of all college men gamble at cards at least once a month.

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Unfortunately, that makes things thorny for universities.

Bringing legitimacy to this gray area (or maybe just exploiting a loophole) is the Collegiate Poker Tour, a traveling game of Texas Hold 'Em in which students play for a chance to win as much as \$45,000 in scholarship money.

As conceived by two recent business majors, Jason Beck and Craig Rabin, the idea is to make money through commercial sponsors.

The Collegiate Poker Tour is not the only company pitching poker in the name of education. Absolute Poker, a Web site operated from Costa Rica, holds a Win Your Tuition online tournament. But Mr. Beck and Mr. Rabin seem to be making the first commercial incursion onto campuses. They found hosts by approaching universities' intramural departments, usually the domain of flag football and table tennis leagues.



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The first event was held at Mr. Rabin's alma mater, Illinois State University, where nearly 400 students played. Admission was free, and each participant was provided chips worth 300 "points" (emphatically not dollars).

Top players from the six participating universities will compete in a final match online in April. The prize money can be used for only tuition and to pay off student loans.

The only hitch so far, Mr. Beck says, was the felt on the tables. It was "shagging."

But Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Commission on Problem Gambling, sees hazards beyond little green flecks on the carpet. For one, he says, college-age men are more susceptible to gambling addictions than any other age group. And gambling - even for tuition - is still gambling. "It's very dangerous," Mr. Whyte says, "to have the message that gambling can solve life's problems."

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