

The WAGER, Vol. 9(52) - In Celebration of the WAGER and Tom Cummings: Reflections on a Seminal Publication

December 29, 2004

After 10 years of continuous weekly publications, The *WAGER* will cease to exist as an independent entity and will become the flagship science review of the *BASIS* (www.basisonline.org). The following comments come from current contributors, former contributors, editors, and supporters. They are reflections on what the *WAGER* has meant to each individual and where we all hope the *WAGER* will go, under the auspices of the *BASIS*. For those who had the pleasure of meeting Tom Cummings, cocreator of the *WAGER*, there are fond memories of him as well. We are all pleased to have been a part of this important publication and are excited that it will continue in its new format.

Howard Shaffer, co-Founder of The WAGER, Editor in Chief, the BASIS

The *WAGER* had humble beginnings and a clear vision. A lot has happened to the field of gambling studies in the past 10 years. By the end of the twentieth century, almost 50% of gambling studies journal articles had been published during the 1990s. Now, about 33% of gambling studies journal articles have been published between 1999 and 2003. This level of interest was not always evident. During the 1980s, Tom Cummings and I were having our regular weekly meeting at the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling; we were continuing our ongoing discussion about the obstacles to awareness about gambling related problems. It seemed that few people were taking this matter seriously. We decided that science based information would provide a useful vehicle to raise public awareness – and the *WAGER* was born.

Taking a chapter from the Boston Pops, like Arthur Fiedler's interest in teaching people about the pleasures of classical music, I thought that we could make learning about science interesting and the science of gambling studies interesting, in particular. Using the *WAGER* as the vehicle, we could teach the public about scientific "thinking" and problem solving. All of this was intended to

raise awareness of gambling related problems and advance science literacy among the public.

Based on the assumption that people can learn to like something that they might not try on their own (e.g., reading science), we started to distribute the WAGER using a fax. In some ways, this strategy made the WAGER one of the first SPAM messages: coming into offices and homes without invitation. The first WAGER issues went primarily to public policy makers. We had no dedicated funding for the project and so in 1994 the WAGER was born as a labor of love.

I must admit that while the science literacy and gambling awareness goals were clearly fixed in our minds, the magnitude of what we were doing was not. During the early months of the WAGER, only one person identified to receive it, requested to be taken off the distribution list. Over the 10 years the WAGER has evolved, but the basic editorial style remained consistent. I believe that this strategy has served us well. Researchers can be sensitive about their work; yet, over the years, we only received one complaint from an author about our presentation of research.

We owe a great debt to the Andrews family for their early support of the WAGER. They helped it to grow and for that we are very thankful. Now, the WAGER is one of the most widely read gambling publications in the world. The WAGER is cited regularly in leading publications and by influential public policy bodies. Perhaps most importantly, it is read around the world and has served to stimulate important science based dialogue about important public health concerns.

Debi LaPlante, Senior Editor, the BASIS

I edited the WAGER for almost three years and feel honored to have had the privilege to do so. During that time I had the chance to write many weekly issues, participate in some spirited editorial exchanges with interested readers, and develop special series to gain in-depth perspectives on hot topics, such as the neuroscience of addiction. The WAGER, to me, represents an excellent learning opportunity. When I came to the Division on Addictions, I had limited experience with the study of addictions. Jumping on board with the WAGER changed that quickly and helped to hasten my entrance into this field. As I help transition the WAGER to become a part of the BASIS, it is my hope that the WAGER will continue to be an excellent source of information and education.

Professional and personal skepticism often greet addictions in general and excessive gambling, in particular: many people continue to view them through “moral” lenses. It is important to put forth the message that addiction is more than personal downfall and worthy of resources and attention. Though the WAGER’s extensive readership and success made me hesitant to suggest any changes, as I worked on creating the BASIS, I came to believe that it will provide a unique opportunity to express this sentiment and hopefully further advance the original mission of the WAGER: to strengthen worldwide understanding of addiction and minimize its harmful effects.

Christopher R. Freed(1), former principal writer, The WAGER

That the WAGER is now the flagship science review of the BASIS is fitting. The BASIS will provide the general public with direct access to scientific information on addiction. In this spirit of knowledge sharing, WAGERs on one or another aspect of gambling addiction have been written every week for ten years. I contributed to the WAGER in 2000 and 2001. Back then it was called the “Weekly Addiction Gambling Education Report.” Now, as part of the BASIS, the WAGER is called the “Worldwide Addiction Gambling Education Report.” This change not only points to the WAGER’s ongoing commitment to reach readers from across and beyond academic disciplines, but to its global appeal as a valuable resource at the forefront of gambling research dissemination.

Rachel Kidman, principal writer, The WAGER

When I began writing for the WAGER three years ago, I had just joined the Division on Addictions as a research assistant. Writing the WAGER required that I review an extensive body of literature each week, both to choose an article I thought would make a meaningful contribution and to build the background I needed to fully comprehend and convey the significance of that article to our readers. At the beginning, this process enabled me to situate myself in a new field; and as my tenure lengthened, it assured that I kept abreast of recent developments in the field. More importantly, the process taught me to question research findings and gave me the tools to do so. It also helped me to think more critically about the work we are doing here at the Division, the methodological choices we make, and the biases we as researchers bring to every endeavor. Finally, it made me consider the implications of our research. The WAGER’s most important role is providing the bridge between two worlds – research and

policy/practice - and thus giving them a common language and understanding with which to tackle this public health problem. I hope that you as readers have enjoyed and benefited from reading the WAGER, and that you continue to explore this field with us through the BASIS.

Dana Forman(2), former contributor, Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling

Often, those consumed with - or recovering from - addiction share certain common personality traits, Tom Cummings was the exception. Always thoughtful, articulate, empathic, and agreeable - no coworker at the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, which he founded in 1983, could ever recall Tom losing his temper. He was willing on a moment's notice to give away his time to help someone else solve a problem without expecting anything in return.

Tom was well-spoken with a sonorous voice from which ultimately emanated logic, clarity and dignity. His eloquent testimony at state house hearings helped pave the way for state-sponsored treatment for compulsive gamblers and their families. He had a knack for framing a problem and then standing it on its head. With regard to the ceaseless expansion of state-sponsored gambling, often seen as a painless way for legislators to raise revenues without having to raise taxes, Tom would say, "The state itself is now a compulsive gambler."

Kathy Scanlan, contributor, Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling

There is no way to talk about celebrating 10 years of the WAGER without also talking about Tom Cummings.

A regular occurrence at the Massachusetts Council's office in the 1990's was a weekly conversation with Howard Shaffer to strategize ways to accomplish the Council's mission. On a particular Thursday morning in the summer of 1995, Tom, Howard and I began to discuss how we could better provide solid, serious, scientifically sound information about problem gambling to complement the anecdotal information that was available. The decision to fax a one-page, readable summary of a relevant scientific study was the outcome. Tom, well into his seventies at that time and no user of faxes himself, saw the potential and heartily endorsed the use of the new (at the time) technology to get problem gambling information out to professionals. A guiding principle was to make scientific

information about problem gambling easily available and understandable to non-scientists. Tom believed that the WAGER would do for problem gambling science what the “Boston Pops” have done for classical music.

Tom would have judged the WAGER’s success by one standard: “Has it helped compulsive gamblers and their families?” I think he would agree that it has and that it will continue to do so in its new format. As the WAGER moves to a larger stage as a part of BASIS and takes its role in relationship to other addictive behaviors, I believe Tom would again be championing this growth and the potential in understanding problem gambling in the context of other addictive disorders.

Joni Vander Bilt(3), former principal writer, The WAGER

In anticipation of the launching of the BASIS, I spent some time recalling the moment back in 1996 when the idea of providing and disseminating information about gambling behaviors was first tossed around the offices of the “Division” and the “Mass Council.” As you can imagine, there were numerous, often amusing, attempts at naming the new venture before the acronym of the WAGER was born. At that time, I was the one given the responsibility to think about the logistics of getting together a list of fax numbers of people interested in receiving such information. I was also in charge of culling through current resources in the library and the media to think about topics that would be both interesting and educational for our readers. One of the most interesting aspects of this job for me was getting feedback from both Howard Shaffer and Tom Cummings every week on the current issue before tweaking the final version to send out. Howard always contributed important statistical, scientific, and psychological comments; Tom usually had some illuminating insight relating to what life was like from his perspective and the experience of being a recovering gambler and working with compulsive gamblers in recovery. The WAGER benefited from this multifaceted feedback, as did I.

I also have been extremely impressed as I have watched the WAGER keep up and sometimes surpass the technological cutting edge of distribution and cyberspace. I’m sure all my co-workers remember, as I do, the sound of my computer sending out 350 faxes every week (it took about 14 hours including re-dialing fax numbers that were busy!). I remember the steps of thinking about moving towards an e-mail list, then having interested readers visit the website. Another big change

that I observe is that in 1996-1997 when I was searching for “WAGER topics” every week, sometimes I felt I had come to the end of the road. Much of the existing research was so flawed that it didn’t warrant distribution. There just wasn’t an enormous pool of knowledge about problematic gambling behaviors. I believe the existence of the WAGER has not only encouraged more gambling research, but also helped raise the bar for standards of excellence. Researchers, educators, clinicians and policy makers have been made more aware of where the knowledge base stands, and also where the gaps in knowledge exist. We can only move forward from here.

Chrissy Thurmond, contributor, The WAGER

I can remember the day Howard called me from Tom Cummings’ office at the Mass Council, very excited that his weekly meeting with Tom had been particularly productive. They had made the decision that they were going to put into action what had been on Howard’s mind for years – creating a collaborative weekly educational report focused specifically on gambling. Over the phone, Howard charged me and my colleagues to come up with a name for the new publication. I can remember brainstorming for hours when one of my colleagues who happened to be from Ireland said “how about the WAGER” in her fantastic brogue. We loved the word and once she said it, we quickly were able to fill in “Weekly Addiction Gambling Education Report”. From the very inception, the WAGER has been a tremendous learning experience for all involved. As Joni Vander Bilt attests, not only was it an academic challenge, but at the time, a technological challenge too. Joni had to vet the WAGER with our colleagues at the Mass Council as well as our initial international collaborators from the Donwood Institute in Toronto⁴, Ontario on top of investigating and writing and getting the WAGER out on a weekly schedule. At first it was a daunting task but over time became part of the everyday work week at the Division.

The WAGER has become a staple in the Division’s portfolio of work. It is timely and appropriate that the next-step is to create a home for additional publications similar to the WAGER in integrity, content and scientific accuracy that will help inform and educate the public on other addictive disorders. The BASIS is the perfect home for the WAGER and I suspect its siblings, the DRAM, AHSES, Addictions and the Humanities, and whatever else we conjure up will share the same longevity, loving care and prestige as the WAGER has for the past 10 years.

Chris Reilly, Executive Director, Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders

On a spring day in 2001, the Harvard shuttle was late as usual and so I picked up a copy of the New York Times from the news box. I started reading the technology section when an article on online gambling caught my eye. To my amazement, the sidebar listed Harvard Medical School's Division on Addictions and the WAGER as important resources for information about gambling and gambling-related problems. When new to the field, I depended on the WAGER as an easy to understand report on complex scientific issues and it continues to be an invaluable resource for my work in disseminating information about gambling disorders to the public. I was delighted to learn that the New York Times shared my assessment!

Gabriel Caro, Webmaster, the BASIS

I started working for the Division on Addictions in spring of 2000, and one of my first tasks was to evaluate the design and layout of the WAGER web site. Up to that point, the WAGER had been an incredibly successful publication and I felt a great deal of responsibility for maintaining and designing a web site that would be attractive, easy to read, and yet simple to use. This was at the height of the dot com revolution where every company and organization had a web site, and new technology was making web sites be more like status symbols rather than repositories of content. Then it occurred to me that form should always follow function. Content is what's ultimately relevant on any site. That's been our guiding principle for the design of the WAGER, and now the BASIS.

Two major redesigns later, the WAGER has kept a consistent look and feel, which has been translated to the BASIS site. Based on reader feedback, the WAGER continues to be an indispensable source of information. I feel proud to be part of such an important endeavor, and look forward to further success with the BASIS.

Mike Stanton, principal writer, The WAGER

The WAGER was a great chance for me to learn more about the technical side of website maintenance. When I first arrived at Harvard Medical School, Gabriel showed me how to post sites and edit them using web applications. He always gave me free reign to be creative with WAGER pictures and graphics. I had lots of fun customizing each presentation precisely to my liking, creating interesting

color patterns and unique designs. The biggest difficulty certainly came in trying to squeeze elaborate pictures into the tiny boxes you see when you first click into The WAGER.

I always learned plenty through the literature reviews we conducted each week for a new WAGER. A good deal of work and many reviews went into each published WAGER; but, that work ensured the text presented on the site was thorough and scientific. Thanks to Debi, Sarah, Richard, Howard and all those who helped review articles. I feel that I am a better writer because of their careful attention.

Sarah Nelson, Editor, The WAGER

I became Editor of the WAGER, during August 2004, after contributing as a writer for a little more than a year. When I first began writing for the WAGER, I was struck by how the WAGER made research available in a thoughtful, critical way to populations beyond the academic bubble. During my training years in graduate school, I found that important research that could benefit individuals, service-providers, policy-makers, etc., often either never makes it beyond the journals utilized by the academic community, or if publicized, reaches the public in a simplified, noncritical, and often-inaccurate way. The WAGER manages to share that research in a consumable form that retains the scientific integrity of the studies and educates its readers about both the content and methods of the research itself.

As Editor of the WAGER, I have had the good fortune to correspond with many members of the WAGER's diverse population of readers. We share as many of our readers' insightful thoughts and comments as we can through the WAGER's Op-Ed page. But even those we don't share often lead us to research and think about topics and issues raised by the readers' specific questions. Recently, one reader's question about the types of topics the WAGER covers piqued my curiosity. In the spirit of this WAGER retrospective, I grouped by topic and population the studies covered by the WAGER in the past two years. This quasi-scientific endeavor produced the following results.

As the Figures show, the WAGER has covered both the specific topic of gambling and the more general topic of addiction from many different angles. I believe the impending launch of the BASIS is the logical extension of this broad, yet thorough approach to sharing research on addiction with our readers, and I look forward to

contributing to the expansion of such a unique resource.

From all of us – our best wishes to all our readers this holiday season and for the New Year. See you at the BASIS!

Notes

1. Chris Freed is now enrolled in the Ph.D. Program in Sociology, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York.
2. Dana Forman is now President of Forman Consulting.
3. Joni Vander Bilt is now Senior Research Associate, Department of Geriatric Epidemiology, Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic (Pittsburgh, PA).
4. The Donwood Institute, Toronto Ontario is no longer in existence.