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Back to school, major in slots

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Even with nearly 40 million visitors a year, the casino floors of Las Vegas can be lonely places. Just ask Richard Gomez, a slot-machine attendant at a Euro-themed Strip resort since 1999.

Gomez, 70, watched casinos trade coin-operated slot machines for ticket-based devices. Now he sees them moving toward flat-screen machines linked by a back-room computer server, more similar to an office computer network than a classic ringing, clanging casino slot floor.

Each upgrade comes with more choices for gamblers, more cash for casinos and fewer jobs for attendants like Gomez.

"I could see what was going on," Gomez said of the gambling industry revolution. "You notice there are no new booths on the floor."

The realization led Gomez to another slot floor. This one is about 10 miles north of the Strip, just off a quiet, carpeted hallway on the second floor of the Morse Arberry Jr. Telecommunications Building at the College of Southern Nevada.

It's where students such as Gomez advance their slot machine knowledge through lessons on theory, electronics, computer technology and mathematics in an attempt to remain relevant to Nevada's No. 1 industry.

The college's School of Applied and Advanced Technologies just received a \$100,000 contribution from the Association of Gaming Equipment Manufacturers, a trade group for slot machine makers.

The money is the third installment of a \$300,000 commitment from the manufacturing group in support of the school's slot-technician degree program.

The gift represents the largest single contribution to a CSN academic program, said Jacque Matthews, executive director of the CSN Foundation.

All told, private grants represent a small but growing portion of CSN funding. In the most recent budget cycle, the college reported it received about \$119 million from the state and \$2.2 million in private gifts.

Matthews credited Michael Spangler, dean of CSN's School of Applied and Advanced Technologies, for working with Neil Freedman, a member of the CSN Foundation board and general counsel for slot maker IGT, with orchestrating the slot grant.

"It was a substantial gift, narrowly focused to make a huge difference," Matthews said. "They were looking to build a workforce, to build quality."

The money helped the school add a full-time lab technician and paid for supplies, like the \$5,000 slot machine simulator Gomez practiced with last week.

"We will look more like a lab instead of just a slot shop," said Jim Jennings, a former Marine who founded the slot tech program about eight years ago.

Jennings, who also has a \$10,000 scholarship named in his honor, said it became evident there was a need for a more studied approach to slot machines when casinos started replacing coin devices with ticket in-ticket out machines.

"It is a field that requires a broad set of skills," Spangler said. "That means it is going to be pretty challenging, but it is also very rewarding."

In 1997, there were about 197,000 slot machines in Nevada that won roughly \$4.8 billion from gamblers. By 2007, the number of slot machines increased just 2.5 percent to 202,000, but the amount they won from gamblers jumped 72.9 percent to about \$8.3 billion, according to Nevada Gaming Control Board statistics.

Many slot floor workers who dealt with coins have moved into other cash handling positions, left the industry or retired, said Steven Zanella, vice president of slot operations and entertainment for MGM Grand.

"They are going to have to understand the computer technician aspect more," Zanella said. "It is just a shift of a skill set."

MGM Mirage, parent company of MGM Grand, operates 10 casinos on the Strip with about 21,000 slots.

Zanella said the company taps the slot technician program and an information technology program at the college for talent. He said an entry-level worker can start as a laborer and work his or her way up to apprentice, journeyman and board technician.

CSN says board technicians, who mostly stay behind the scenes and are trained to understand machines at the component level, can earn \$60,000 a year.

Back on the CSN campus, Paul Bulver said the hardware in the slot lab reflects the changing industry. Jennings credits Bulver with building a plan for the slot program to capitalize on the three-year grant.

In addition to old-style slot machines, the lab now boasts machines with flat screens. A slot-technology textbook is in the works.

CSN's instructors are also preparing for server-based slots, the next wave in technology that will allow casinos to change games by pushing a few buttons on a back-room computer instead of swapping chips out of individual machines.

"Instead of replacing glass we will have more IT (information technology) type of skills," Bulver said.

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