Center expands expertise in two high-profile areas

Distracted driving

A specialist in distracted driving issues has joined the CTS staff, supporting a broader effort to build knowledge in a rapidly growing area of national interest and concern. Joel Cooper earned his Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from the University of Utah, where he studied with Dr. David Strayer, one of the world’s foremost experts in the area.

While a student, he led projects investigating the impact of cell phone use on driving, the role of driver distraction in the breakdown of highway traffic flow, the impact of text messaging on driving performance, and other related projects. His experience also includes the study of visual attention, decision making, and multitasking capabilities.

Cooper joins the Human Factors Group at CTS led by Program Manager Sue Chrysler, and will serve as an expert on general human performance issues relating to attention, multi-tasking, expertise, distraction, and the role of practice in performance.

The subject of distracted driving has generated more interest and more headlines than any other traffic safety issue in recent years. Not since the intense focus on drunk driving began in the 1980s has a roadway safety issue drawn so much attention. Many safety experts consider that comparison an appropriate one, viewing activities like texting while driving as “the new DWI.”
Teen driver safety

One of the nation’s most successful teen driving safety initiatives is now part of the Center for Transportation Safety. Teens in the Driver Seat® officially joined the CTS on September 1.

TDS Program staff members bring with them extensive knowledge of teen driver risk awareness and driving behavior to help address an urgent public health issue for young people. Worldwide, car crashes kill more teenagers than any other cause.

TDS is distinct from other teen safety initiatives in two ways. Typical safety programs tend to focus on only one issue, such as seat belts or alcohol, often overlooking more common risk factors, but TDS focuses on all five of the factors unique to teen drivers – nighttime driving, distractions and speeding – in addition to alcohol and seat belt use. Also, TDS involves teens directly in both the development and delivery of safety messages. Since TDS began, the teen driver fatal crash rate in Texas has declined faster and more steadily than in any other state, dropping for five consecutive years. The program has earned national awards from several organizations, including the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Roadway Safety Foundation, and the Institute of Transportation Engineers.

“By supporting the laws in Texas at a grassroots level, TDS has helped to reduce the number of crashes involving young drivers for several years running,” TDS Director Russell Henk said. “Having the TDS staff join us will only strengthen our collective ability to better understand and combat this persistent roadway safety problem.”

TDS is active in more than 350 schools in Texas, with others active in Connecticut, Georgia, California and North Carolina. Discussions are also in the works to launch the program in Australia. The program is sponsored primarily by TxDOT and State Farm Insurance. In addition, AT&T recently became the newest corporate sponsor for TDS.
State lawmakers are taking a close look at roadway safety, and the Center for Transportation Safety is serving as a resource in that process.

CTS Director John Mounce and Senior Research Scientist Quinn Brackett testified before the House Subcommittee on Vulnerable Road User Safety at the panel’s public hearing in Irving on August 10. The two addressed the big picture of traffic safety in Texas, and then reviewed conditions for each of the five groups the subcommittee was examining: bicyclists, pedestrians, motorcyclists, teen drivers and work zone employees.

Mounce told the group that the roadways continue to be especially dangerous places for those groups, but pointed out positive developments in at least a few instances. For instance, motorcycle fatalities dropped 20 percent in 2009, after 10 straight years of increases. Teen driver crashes are on the decline as well. Mounce attributed the improvements to a combination of stronger laws and public outreach efforts developed by CTS staff.

In their discussions, subcommittee members focused on the full range of safety topics, and expressed their thanks to the Center for its contributions to the state and the subcommittee’s work. “Good decisions depend on good science-based studies and data analysis.” Mounce told the panel. “All of us at the Center for Transportation Safety stand ready to assist you in that regard with objective, expert technical evaluations to help you make good, justifiable decisions relating to traffic safety public policy.”

TMSC works to make riding safer

The Texas Motorcycle Safety Coalition (TMSC), composed of volunteer members dedicated to improving motorcycle safety, continued work on drafting the first ever Motorcycle Safety Strategic Plan (MSSP) at their July 15th meeting. The plan is a comprehensive approach to address motorcycle safety issues by identifying goals, strategies, action steps, and performance measures for key focus areas.

The overall goal is to improve highway safety by achieving a reduction in the number of motorcyclist fatalities, serious injuries, and crashes. The MSSP supplements and expands on the Texas Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) which includes motorcyclists under System Users emphasis area, indentifying objectives and strategies to reduce the number of motorcycle fatalities, injuries, and crashes.

The purpose of the MSSP is to help focus funding and resources on the areas with the greatest opportunity to reduce motorcycle fatalities, serious injuries, and crashes. The plan also provides guidance to the TxDOT Traffic Safety Section and key stakeholders concerned with providing a safe transportation system for motorcyclists and the motoring public.

“This strategic plan will help us focus on the key safety concerns for riders,” says Gonzalo Ponce, a program manager in the Traffic Safety Section of the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). “It will act as a playbook for future endeavors and I think it will be a key element in our success.”

The plan will be made available on the www.LookLearnLive.org motorcycle safety website for coalition members to provide additional input and feedback as the plan is finalized.

The Coalition includes representatives from TxDOT, the Texas Department of Public Safety (TxDPS), the Texas Department of State Health Services (DHS), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), state and local law enforcement, rider training providers, individual riders, and motorcycle groups, including the Texas Confederation of Clubs & Independents (TCOC&I), Texas Motorcycle Rights Association (TMRA), and Texas Motorcycle Roadriders Association (TMRA2).

The TMSC will be instrumental in helping to implement strategies and action steps set forth in the MSSP and the SHSP. TTI is the designated lead agency for the MSSP and TxDOT provides funding support. For more information, visit www.looklearnlive.org or email Patricia Turner at p-turner@tamu.edu
Three students from The Bush School of Government and Public Service researched three critical transportation safety issues as part of their internship at the Texas Transportation Institute’s Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) this summer. They studied sobriety checkpoints, ignition interlock systems and traffic safety culture in preparation for the upcoming legislative session.

This was the first time the CTS internship program involved students from the Bush School at Texas A&M University, which was founded by former president George H. W. Bush. The mission of the Bush School is to educate principled leaders in public and international affairs, conduct research, and perform service.

"CTS is honored to conduct this internship, which has given us a great opportunity to work with these gifted students," says Research Scientist Melissa Walden, who leads the internship program at CTS. "The policy papers they developed have been extremely valuable to the center and to the traffic safety needs of the entire state."

"The Bush School is so pleased to have some of its students intern with TTI," says Dr. Arnold Vedlitz, Director of the Bush School's Institute for Science, Technology and Public Policy. "As the top transportation research unit in the world, TTI gives our students a once in a lifetime chance to learn about, and participate in, this area so important to our nation's future. And we are confident that our students bring their work with TTI a public management and public policy perspective that can help TTI in accomplishing its vital mission."

One of the interns, Jason Wagner of Houston, will continue working with CTS as a research associate while he finishes his studies with the Bush School. "This internship has provided me with an excellent opportunity to put into practice the theoretical skills I’ve learned at the Bush School and apply them to real-world problems," he said. "It’s been an extremely rewarding experience." Wagner is political science major and a Master’s in Public Administration candidate.

The other summer interns from the Bush School were Tricia Beifuss of Bryan and Brady Olsen of Haltom City.

Members of TTI’s Center for Transportation Safety helped educate parents about the enforcement of a new booster seat law, which began June 1. As part of her work with Safe Communities, Assistant Research Specialist Irene Rodriguez took part in a Safe Kids Austin Booster Seat Tour event in May.

The Booster Seat Tour is an effort to make sure parents know that the September 2009 Texas law requires children younger than eight years of age be secured in safety or booster seats. Those children who are taller than 4 feet-9 inches are exempt. Violators will be fined $25 for the first offense and up to $250 for subsequent violations.

“We worked with the Austin Independent School District with underserved schools by weighing and measuring kids and provided free booster seats and hands on demonstration on how to use them properly,” says Rodriguez, who is the coordinator of the Safe Communities effort in Texas. “It’s a great feeling to know that we are helping make sure kids are safe.”

The booster seats were donated by Safe Kids Austin, led by Dell Children's Medical Center.
CTS helps organize program to report impaired drivers

TTI’s Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) is playing a vital role in Texas’ first effort to urge the public to report drivers suspected of being alcohol-impaired. The campaign, called Report Impaired Drivers, was kicked off with a news conference June 22 in Deer Park, Texas, located near Houston.

“The Harris County leads the nation in alcohol-related driving fatalities — 46 percent compared to 32 percent nationally,” says Associate Research Specialist Lee Ann Bell. “That’s part of the reason why Deer Park was chosen.”

The three-year campaign is funded by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDoT) and includes a direct-mail piece to Deer Park residents, brochures, posters, a Public Service Announcement and a website. CTS will evaluate the program by comparing the public’s reporting of impaired driving pre- and post-campaign.

The news conference was attended by members of the Deer Park Police Department, the mayor of Deer Park, representatives of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, TxDoT and TTI. The conference detailed the procedures for reporting suspected impaired driving and why it is important for the public to get involved.

A similar program in Montgomery County, Maryland, has experienced an increase in alcohol-related arrests and the police department attributes the increase as a direct result of the, “Operation Extra Eyes” program. That campaign and “Report Impaired Drivers” share the goal of making roads safer in the community through citizen reporting and a shared effort with the law enforcement.

“Remember…law enforcement officers aren’t the only ones who can get an impaired driver off the road,” says TxDoT Alcohol Program Manager Frank Saenz. “You or I can, too, and the Report Impaired Drivers program is designed to help do exactly that.”
Nighttime driving risk study captures national attention

A TTI study has added to the mounting evidence that cell phone use while driving, especially at night, can be fatal. Details of the study — that examined crash data over a 10-year period — were reported across the nation when it was released in May.

The Teens in the Driver Seat (TDS) study examined the effects of lighting conditions on crashes from 1999 to 2008 in all 50 states, along with the presence of alcohol as a factor in those crashes. The findings suggest something other than alcohol is increasing the nighttime fatal crash numbers for teen drivers. The most likely reason, researchers say, is the use of cell phones. The study was conducted by TDS Director Russell Henk, Research Scientist Val Pezoldt, and Senior Research Specialist Bernie Fette.

Speakers at the news conference included Henk, high school students involved with TDS, and State Rep. Larry Phillips, the Vice Chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

“Given the challenge we face, we have to change more than laws,” Rep. Phillips said at the news conference. “We have to change the way we think about driving. That’s what these young leaders are doing — using peer influence to create a driving safety culture among young people. And if they can change the way that young people drive, then it’s my hope that the rest of us can do the same.”

The study resulted in more than 300 media reports in 44 states, including stories by the Associated Press, United Press International, the Washington Post and Time Magazine.

Read the full report:
http://t-driver.com/nighttime-fatal-crash-trends/
‘Drink. Ride. Lose.’ addresses motorcycle/alcohol issue

The Texas Department of Transportation’s (TxDOT) Traffic Safety Section has launched a new motorcycle rider impairment campaign on the Look.Learn.Live.org website. The “Drink. Ride. Lose.” anti-impaired riding campaign aims to bring awareness about the significance of the impaired rider crash problem in Texas, as well as encourage safe motorcycle riding practices.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motorcyclists involved in fatal crashes are 2.5 times more likely to have consumed alcohol than passenger vehicle drivers. In 2008, 46 percent of riders killed in Texas had some level of alcohol in their system at the time of the crash. More than one out of three fatally-injured riders were legally intoxicated (BAC 0.08+). “These numbers are staggering and just not acceptable,” says Patricia Turner, research scientist with the Texas Transportation Institute, who manages the safety campaign. “We have to do more to communicate how serious this problem is and the effect of alcohol and drugs on riding ability.”

“With Drink. Ride. Lose., we’re focusing on the primary and most preventable cause of motorcyclist fatalities, alcohol use while riding,” says TxDOT Traffic Safety Motorcycle Program Manager, Gonzalo Ponce. “In order to make a significant impact, we realize that there first must be a change in rider behavior, and that is really our main goal.”

The Look.Learn.Live.org website features Drink. Ride. Lose. campaign logos and billboards voted on by riders. Other additions include more information about drinking and riding and links to testimonials from riders familiar with the effects of drinking and riding. A twitter feed (http://twitter.com/looklearnlive); campaign web banners; and promotional items like kick-stand coasters, bumper stickers, and water bottles are available for events to raise public awareness and help get the word out about the dangers of drinking and riding.

“Drink. Ride. Lose.” is funded by a grant from the Texas Department of Transportation.
CADES expands probation officer alcohol/drug training

The Center for Alcohol and Drug Education Studies of the CST, under the direction of Senior Research Scientist Dr. Maurice Dennis, has developed and provided a 6 hour alcohol/drug education program for Adult and Juvenile Probation officers. The Texas Drug and Alcohol Driving Awareness Program enables probation officers to gain knowledge about the effects of alcohol/drugs on driving so they may better deal with problems caused by illegal use of alcohol/drugs by their probationers.

The initial effort trained officers in 10 counties and plans are underway to expand the training to other areas in Texas. The training produced a significant increase in officer knowledge and all who attended recommended the course be provided to other probation personnel.

We’re all in this together.

2011 Traffic Safety Conference
March 21–23, 2011
Airport Hilton Hotel • Austin, Texas

Mark your calendar and make plans to attend!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

John Mounce
Center for Transportation Safety
Texas Transportation Institute
Texas A&M University System
3135 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-3135
ph. (979) 845-2736 · fax (979) 845-4872
j-mounce@tamu.edu