

Training Safe Drivers

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By CWU News Services

ELLENSBURG - National statistics indicate teenage drivers are responsible for about five times as many fatal crashes per licenseholder as drivers 35 to 64 years old.

While it's assumed a majority of the mishaps involve alcohol, experts say carelessness and poor decision making are likely the cause of most of these incidents.

Central Washington University is spearheading the effort to help Washington's student drivers learn critical car-control and decision-making skills needed to become safe drivers.

This summer, 24 teachers from the state are in Ellensburg seeking their traffic safety endorsements through both learning themselves and teaching local high school drivers education students.

Dr. Ron Hales, CWU safety studies professor, heads up the training program, which is being held at CWU and Ellensburg High School.

"As part of their training, the instructors will teach nine in-car lessons to high school students, " he says.

The centerpiece of the course is the "Skid Monster." Co-owned by the Ellensburg, Kittitas and Thorp school districts and CWU, the device allows instructors to simulate a skid as a way to teach drivers ed instructors and, in turn, students, how to avoid one, and what to do if they lose control.

Walla Walla High School traffic safety instructor David Kinnunen is serving as a graduate assistant with the CWU program. He's also a member of the Washington Traffic Safety Education board of directors. He says the skid monster can safely mimic a condition which causes many problems for inexperienced drivers-the loss of back-end traction.

"This vehicle provides students with an opportunity to understand that speed is a big factor in causing problems out on the road," Kinnunen says. "And, it helps them develop 'early detection' skills."

That's important because, according to research, drivers only have a window of up to a 25 percent margin of error in a skid before it's not correctable, he adds.

Five school districts in Washington are using one of the "skid monster" units.

According to statistics compiled by the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, Washington's teen drivers are involved in nearly one-fourth fewer collisions and one-third fewer fatality accidents than their peers nationwide.