

Two UL Lafayette psychology majors have gained a greater perspective of the potential consequences of using cell phones while driving.

Lauren Short, a junior, and Stevie Breaux, a senior, are helping Dr. T. Scott Smith with his continuing research on cell phones. An educational and cognitive psychologist, Smith is an assistant professor of psychology at the University. He has examined the wide-ranging implications of communication technology in vehicles and elsewhere.

Cell phone use behind the wheel is dangerous, safety experts

reported that cell phone use while driving leads to 1.6 million crashes annually. About 3,500 fatalities are “distraction-related.” Texting and driving causes a quarter of all car accidents in the United States, injuring about 330,000 people every year.

Cell phones represent cognitive, visual and physical distractions, according to Smith. Texting while driving adds a consequential complication.

Short is helping Smith road test his “trifecta theory” about the implications of cell phone use behind the wheel. They placed dashboard cameras in the cars of a total of 46 student volunteers. Each camera remained in a volunteer's vehicle for two days.

The volunteers self-reported their behind-the-wheel activities during those two days. They were asked whether they used their cell phone to listen to music, call others, text or check e-mail or the Internet. Their answers will be compared to the dashboard videos.

By early October, 10 participants' videos had been reviewed.

Short said those volunteers initially appeared self-conscious and regularly looked over at the cameras. As time passed, they forgot they were being observed. “They would sing. They would text. They would do all the behaviors they normally would do,” she said.

Preliminary results showed that of the 10 participants, 85 percent never touched their phones while driving. About 3 percent talked on the phone, and another 2 percent texted.

Twelve percent checked their phones at some point for texts or missed calls. But nearly 92 percent used their phone to search or play music, countering an oft-cited perception that it's texting behind the wheel that endangers drivers the most.

The “manipulation of music may represent a primary form of distraction, although Internet, texting and voice communication often

represent the main focus of studies and litigation,” Smith said.

While the results show relatively low incidences of cell phone use, vigilance is still needed, Smith cautions. “It only takes one distracted tasb0F1.29 TDsiov