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April 8, 2008

Record Grant Explores Safe Sex with Virtual Reality

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – An Illinois Wesleyan University faculty member will be using virtual reality to study when and if students make choices to practice safe sex.

Recent studies from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimate one in four teenagers in the United States carries a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Illinois Wesleyan University Assistant Professor of Psychology Natalie Smoak believes the statistics reflect an attitude of invincibility that can harm students. “Students don’t think they need to use condoms. They think they can tell by looking at someone if they have a sexually transmitted disease, which we know is rarely the case,” said Smoak. The CDC, which promotes condom use as a highly effective STD prevention method, also estimates 40,000 people become infected each year with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus which causes AIDS.

Smoak is co-recipient of a \$1.2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health, the largest grant in the history of the University, that will use virtual reality to study how people make health decisions that could lead to STDs, including the transmission of HIV.

Smoak and Kerry Marsh, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Connecticut, will enlist the help of virtual reality to place people in social situations and study their reactions, seeing whether they make safer sex-related decisions. “Studying people’s sexual choices is not like studying fitness, where you can walk down to the local gym and observe behavior,” said Smoak of choosing virtual reality for the five-year program of research. “You can’t really follow people around at parties to observe their choices.”

One of the goals of the study is to see if risky sexual decisions are based upon environmental cues or personality. “This study will help us know whether it is better to intervene on an environmental or a personal level to promote safer choices,” said Smoak.

To speak with Smoak, or for additional information, contact Rachel Hatch in the Office of University Communications at (309) 556-3960.

Founded in 1850, Illinois Wesleyan is a private, liberal arts institution located in Bloomington, Illinois, with an enrollment of 2,045 students from 39 states and 22 countries. With 184 faculty scholars, the student-faculty ratio is 11 to 1 and the average class size is 17. The University offers 47 major areas of study, plus programs in pre-med, pre-law, pre-dentistry, pre-engineering, pre-veterinary science, pre-seminary studies, and professional programs in business, the fine arts and nursing.