

Introduction

Many officials from the traffic safety community believe that to achieve substantial reductions in motor vehicle crash related casualties, our own way of thinking presents both one of our most formidable barriers and one of our most promising opportunities. In October 2005, the AAA Foundation hosted a workshop, co-sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, to identify and prioritize long-range traffic safety research needs. A recurring theme throughout the workshop was that one of our greatest challenges wasn't a specific traffic safety issue, but rather our way of thinking about all of the issues, or our “safety culture.”

Following the workshop, the AAA Foundation made “Safety Culture” one of our four priority areas for sustained research and educational efforts. The overarching goal of this program is to ignite and sustain a serious dialogue about and demand for traffic safety at all levels of our society, elevating traffic safety on the national agenda to a place commensurate with its public health impact.

Recognizing that we would not be able to make a paradigm shift happen by ourselves, we began by soliciting input from the community regarding what “safety culture” is, how it can be defined or measured, and most importantly, how it can be improved. During February, March, and April 2006, we actively sought input from the traffic safety community and others, in the form of brief concept papers describing directions for the AAA Foundation and/or the community at large to take to promote change. Authors of several of these concept papers received in response to that solicitation were invited to develop their thoughts further, resulting in the papers in this compendium.

All of the papers in this compendium focus on the general theme of “culture” in the context of motor vehicle traffic safety. As you will see, there is considerable variation in the scope and focus of individual papers, as well as the perspective from which they were written.

For example, the paper by Larry Lonero describes what a paradigm shift in road safety might look like, and provides some examples of “potentially catalytic steps” to provoke discussion. Another paper by McNeely and Gifford draws from experience in three other culturally defined problems to provide insights that could be applicable to traffic safety. The paper by Wiegmann, von Thaden, and Gibbons reviews the concepts and definitions of “safety culture” that are used in other high-risk industries, and discusses the potential applicability of these concepts and definitions to traffic safety. Several of the papers discuss the role of culture in determining how people drive and suggest various avenues to promote safer driving cultures. Others focus on the policies and practices of various types stakeholder groups that can influence traffic safety, and provide suggestions regarding how they might be made more consistent with the respective authors' visions of cultures of safety. The wide array of issues—drawn from diverse perspectives—includes safety management, risk communication, the training of our safety workforce, and the importance of monitoring public perceptions of safety issues, just to name a few. Papers authored by top experts from Australia and the Netherlands add international perspective as well.

This document is being distributed electronically and in hardcopy to a broad cross-section of the traffic safety community. Through this compendium, the Foundation is providing contributing authors with a venue to communicate their perspectives on where we are with respect to the safety culture of our society, and more importantly, how to move forward. To that end, we hope the publication of this compendium, and the ideas that it contains, will lead to vigorous and sustained dialogue in the traffic safety community and beyond, and that it will ultimately lead to real change.

In addition, we at the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety hope to initiate research and development projects over the next several years on “traffic safety culture” to learn as much as we can about what it is and how it can be improved. Most importantly, we are hopeful that these activities will ultimately lead to real world change—an enhanced “culture” that leads to fewer crashes, injuries, and fatalities on our roads.