

Students get dose of reality in drunken-driving simulator

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HAYWARD — California Highway Patrol Officer Hank Campbell was giving a stern warning to the driver of a vehicle that had just careened off the track and into yellow caution tape on the Cal State East Bay campus early Tuesday afternoon.

"Did you hear what you said right before you lost control?" he asked Abdullah Maghazil. "You said, 'I got it, I got it!' That's what every drunk says right before going off a cliff!"

But Maghazil wasn't drunk. The senior was taking part in a demonstration at his school that uses an electric go-cart specially modified to simulate the delayed reaction time of an inebriated driver.

"I really thought I was in control, then I realized the steering wasn't working right and then it was too late," Maghazil said.

It's called the Simulated Impaired DrivIng Experience, or SIDNE. Since the Mariposa branch of the CHP acquired it in 2007, it's been visiting college campuses and high schools around the state, allowing students to get behind in driver's seat and feel the effects of a ¾-second lag in reaction time.

The result is an 8 mph cart that's impossible to



accurately maneuver. It doesn't steer, then oversteers. And don't even bother with the brakes: Even at low speed, the vehicle goes far in less than a second.

CHP Officer Tracy Ross said that's an accurate simulation.

"By the time (an impaired driver's) brain tells them to hit the brakes, it's already too late," she said.

Campbell added that they've done the science to verify the simulator's veracity.

"We've plotted the path before and extrapolated what would have happened had the cart been traveling as fast as a real automobile," Campbell said. "The angles match real cases that we've seen."

Campbell controls the car with a remote switch. He let the drivers navigate around the coned path at Cal State East Bay's outdoor amphitheater one time, then pointed a gizmo at the cart and it was one-too-many time — drunken mode kicked in.

Nearly instantly there was trouble: Maghazil veered through cones and was headed toward a plunge off the amphitheater stage when Campbell hit the kill switch. When sophomore Diane Ramos took the wheel, she made three loops in one direction before coming to a herky-jerky stop.

The driver isn't the only one who gets admonished.

"What were you thinking?" Campbell asked a passenger in the two-person cart. "I told you that your driver was going to be drunk in just a moment. Do you think a real drunk driver would warn you to get out?"

Campbell said the CHP hopes to secure more grant money — the cart and support materials cost about

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\$17,000 — to see the program expand to other branches, which in turn could take it to more schools.

"This is a nice foot in the door, and we've been talking to other departments," Campbell said. "There's definitely interest in it — it's a real eye-opener."

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Cal State East Bay students Hazina Williams, left, and Olivia Kwan, right, take out traffic cones as they drive the SIDNE drunk driving simulator on Tuesday April 14, 2009 in Hayward, California. (Aric Crabb/Staff)