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CONTACT

Anne Wilson, Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
519-884-0710 ext. 3037 or awilson@wlu.ca

Kevin Crowley, Director, Communications & Public Affairs
Wilfrid Laurier University
519-884-0710 ext. 3070 or kcrowley@wlu.ca

Laurier Prof. Anne Wilson helps young women see their true beauty

WATERLOO – Laurier Associate Psychology Professor Anne Wilson is using science to help students feel good about their body image. She will share her research on how the unrealistic notions of beauty portrayed in the media impact young men and women during a talk at Sir John A. MacDonald Collegiate Institute in Waterloo Feb. 23.

“Even though many teenagers recognize that those ‘standards’ of beauty and thinness are unrealistic and unattainably high, they typically don’t recognize that *other* people think the same thing,” said Wilson. This disconnect reflects a psychological condition known as “pluralistic ignorance.”

The repercussions are that even though young men and women think critically about the media’s body image standards, they still feel they must strive to live up to them because everybody else will hold them to these impossible standards.

“That’s why talking about these issues in public is so important,” said Wilson. “Young women and men need to not only hear the experts criticize these norms for beauty and thinness, but also hear each other discuss and criticize the standards. This can go a long way to helping people realize that others don’t care as much about appearance as they might have assumed.”

Wilson and her research partner Erin Strahan, associate professor of Psychology at Laurier Brantford, have been investigating the media’s portrayal of beauty for several years. Their earlier work showed how idealized media images can harm body image, and can even cause people (especially women) to base their self-worth more on their appearance. More recently they have been investigating how these media messages not only affect body satisfaction, but also people’s relationships.

“People feel less secure about their various relationships if they don’t live up to the media standards,” said Wilson. “They feel their friends, family, peers or romantic partners won’t value them as much, and people often go to great lengths to avoid rejection.”

Wilson recently presented her research at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference in San Antonio. Her earlier research was published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, in an article titled “Victoria’s Dirty Secret: The impact of media images on adolescent girls and women.”

Wilson’s talk takes place at 11:30 a.m., Feb. 23, at Sir John A. MacDonald Collegiate Institute. She was invited by student Emily Doherty, who is helping to redefine the rigid standards of beauty in her community, and is an ambassador for Tyra Banks’ BIO (Beauty Inside and Out) campaign.