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Published in Journal of American College Health

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In its May issue, the Journal of American College Health has published a paper authored by a team of Sacred Heart University professors and personnel, including a chart of body types that could change the way body-image studies are conducted.

The paper, titled “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: New Continua of Figure Drawings and Their Relation to Ideal Body Image,” reports the results of an on-campus study conducted by the Body Image Task Force student group, led by three SHU faculty and staff: Jocelyn Novella, assistant director of the university’s Counseling Center and a doctoral student at Oregon State University; Debbie Danowski, assistant professor of communication and media studies and author of the books Why Can’t My Child Stop Eating and The Overeater’s Journal; and Jennifer Gosselin, a former assistant professor of psychology.

The research, conducted in 2011, was designed to reveal students’ preconceptions about their body type, which required that the participants self-identify their physique on a chart. Novella says the research team quickly realized that the common illustrations of varying body types—ranging from thin to overweight—did not accurately represent the other body types found in the population, which could lead to faulty findings.

“Body types don’t all fall into a continuum,” Novella says. “The human race cannot be accurately represented by a one-dimensional progression of drawings depicting a range of light to heavy.” For instance, a person could be skinny, or thin and sinewy, or someone could be obese, or heavily muscular.

The team approached Jack de Graffenried, associate professor of the University’s department of Art & Design, who assigned the project to then-student Bryan Cocco, who had an interest in human anatomy and drawing figures. The charge was to help develop a visual scale that more accurately represented common body types.

The result was the “Presentation of Images on a Continuum Scale,” which was subsequently used to conduct the research. The scale has been published in the journal along with the findings and is being made available by the University for outside research teams to use free of compensation.

“Hopefully this can help in the endeavor of gathering more information needed to prevent body-image problems,” Novella says. “If we can get at body-image issues early in people’s lives, then we can prevent those more serious disorders from developing. It’s very gratifying to be able to give back to the field in some way.”

Novella says she is particularly fond of the University-wide teamwork that went into constructing the new scale. “Sometimes on college campuses, we talk about how we’re all in silos, working in our own little worlds,” she says. “But the best thing about this was the big
collaborative effort between so many different types of people here at the University. I’m really excited about how we all came together to create this.”

As for the study itself, the research showed that college women disclosed a disparity between what their body looks like and what they want it to look like, which is subsequently connected with lower self-esteem. “College men had a similar although lesser disparity that was tied into a drive for muscularity,” Novella says.