

## Social networks' hidden resources

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Brooke Foucault Welles is pursuing a new line of research to help people “activate their networks,” which can contain valuable connections and resources that are underutilized. Photo by Brooks Canaday/Northeastern University

People's social networks can be quite extensive, often bigger than they realize. So Brooke Foucault Welles, an assistant professor of communication studies in the College of Arts, Media and Design, says it's not surprising that past research indicates people can't always recall everyone in their network and everything they know about them.

For her part, Foucault Welles is pursuing a new line of research she describes as helping people "activate their networks." She says people's social groups, particularly in the workplace and other professional settings, contain valuable connections and resources that are underutilized. For instance, a colleague could be a useful resource on a work project or someone in your professional network could be the ideal connection for a new job. Often, the people who are most relevant to an individual's needs are those at the edge of his or her network, she explained.

"I like to think of these networks as resources that are hidden in plain sight," said Foucault Welles, whose research focuses on how social networks shape and constrain human communication. "If you don't have a good sense of who is in your network then you can't leverage what people have to offer."

Measuring and identifying the consequences of an individual's ability to accurately activate his or her networks is a social psychological construct that Foucault Welles calls "network thinking." This approach, she says, can be particularly valuable for the U.S. military, which relies on efficient and effective networks.

This fall, Foucault Welles received a U.S. Army Research Laboratory young investigator grant, with which she will spend the next three years measuring and identifying "network thinking."

Learning how well someone knows his or her network and detecting errors in the person's recollections has traditionally been time-consuming and labor-intensive, she says. That's why Foucault Welles, with her new grant, will develop a self-reporting scale for measuring "network thinking."

Over the next year, she will survey Northeastern undergraduates with

questions about their social networks and then compare those responses to what she perceives and observes from data gathered from their Facebook accounts.

For this project Foucault Welles has teamed up with Christo Wilson, an assistant professor in the College of Computer and Information Science, who will develop a methodology for collecting this Facebook data. Wilson's research focuses on [online social networks](#), security and privacy, and algorithmic society.

Once about 200 Northeastern students have been surveyed, Foucault Welles will use the scale to determine how "network thinking" affects individual and team performance.

Foucault Welles said this research could have tremendous translational potential for military practices. She also views the scale as a tool to measure how quickly people adapt to new situations, such as college life. "Students who are quicker to recognize a college support network are more likely to have an easier transition," she said.

Collaborating with Wilson will also create an opportunity to set the social sciences standards for collecting data from social networks such as Facebook, Foucault Welles said. "Right now there are few ethical guidelines for collecting data from Facebook," she said. "We want to establish a track record of researchers doing this ethically to generate social scientific insights."

Provided by Northeastern University

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