Sara Hoffman
NSF Workshop Vision Statement

I am an incoming PhD student in Clinical Psychology at Northwestern and mentee of Dr. Bonnie Spring. My research experience comprises large-scale clinical trials dealing with health behavior change surrounding weight loss, diet, physical activity, and sedentary time. I am interested in the influence of social factors on individual success in health behavior change, as well as the mechanisms that underlie this success. Specifically, I am interested in how to optimize social networks (e.g., buddies, social media) to assist in the maintenance of healthy behaviors. I see the value of utilizing technology as an integrative tool that helps an individual to improve physical activity and dietary behaviors and engages their social network to provide support. My career goal as an independent scientist is to develop ecologically valid health promotion interventions that augment traditional treatment by activating a positive sociocultural context and technological support for behavior change.

The college student population provides an optimal context through which to examine social influence on health behavior change. Research has demonstrated the loss of ideal cardiovascular health throughout the college years, as well as the acquisition of less-than-healthy behaviors (e.g., smoking). One reason for these losses and gains may be exposure to novel social networks. For example, in the obesity field, considerable attention has been devoted to examining how obesity may be socially contagious in naturally occurring networks, such that repeated exposure to friends who are obese increases the likelihood that an individual will personally become obese. So, college students may gain unhealthy habits through their exposure to a larger network of peers engaging in these behaviors.

On a more positive note, the positive effect of social support on health is well established. In the case of obesity, an extensive literature has shown that joint participation in treatment for friends who both want to lose weight has beneficial effects for both individuals, thus introducing the potential to "activate" social networks to promote positive health behavior change. However, the magnitude of the effect of social support on healthy diet and activity change is also largely unknown, partly because support provision remains an ancillary strategy in obesity treatment and partly because effective social support is often incorrectly assumed to be operative when groups or partnerships are present.

Given the time-sensitive window to preserve college student health, intervening upon a college-aged population while harnessing their technological savvy and built-in social networks is a necessary step. The impending American Heart Association study (NUYou), conducted by Dr. Spring's lab, provides the framework to address many of these insights, including the feasibility and acceptability of using social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to help initiate healthy habits before unhealthy ones have a chance to form. A potential discussion for this NSF workshop might be the feasibility of social media engagement strategies: what kinds of posts, hashtags, or content might be expected to promote the greatest habit formation within these intentional health-based networks, and whether these strategies might vary by age, gender, or location of university.

Another important insight concerns the lack of consensus about mechanisms underlying effective social support, particularly in the case of health, and the assumption that support is provided simply when a group is formed. College students are exposed to a variety of social networks, from dorm buddies to classmates to teammates in athletics, and the types of health-based support sought out or provided by each type of friend or group may vary. It would be a useful exercise to discuss specific mechanisms at play when college students seek out social support for healthy behaviors.

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Overall, the workshop might consider a specific discussion on social networks within the college-aged population, and how to harness these rapidly evolving networks to best promote ideal cardiovascular health.