

THE POLITICS OF THON

Deliberation Nation 2016

February 29, 2016

THON is the largest student-run philanthropy in the world. Everyone at Penn State knows the impact that THON has on our student body, our THON families, and our university. Especially in January and February, mere weeks before the 46 hour dance marathon, businesses on College Avenue and everywhere throughout



State College show their support for THON by contributing a portion of their revenues to THON.

During the fall, students engage in canning week-ends, traveling all across the state to fundraise for the cure. Many of the Penn State athletics hold THON themed games, encouraging spectators to donate to THON.

THON helps hundreds of families and children forge through the difficult battle that is pediatric cancer, as well as unites the Penn State community in the fight for a cure. THON has raised over 127 million dollars since its' genesis in the early 1970's. The money goes toward Penn State Hershey Medical Center in search for a cure and also to the Four Diamonds families, ensuring that they never see a bill while their child is battling a terrible disease.

There are some extremely difficult questions that arise when discussing the inner workings of THON. Trying to pick apart an organization that literally deals with life and death situations isn't easy. Emotions tend to speak louder than logic, and few goals are accomplished when so many argue vehemently for one side or the other. Tensions run high and minds are often clouded by the terrible and dramatic event in a family's life that is losing a child to cancer. These discussions put the organization on the hot seat and shed light on the not-so-glamorous aspects of the largest student run philanthropy in the world.

Though a powerful and influential organization, THON cannot please everyone. Despite this, THON does help hundreds of people in a severe low point in their lives, and it gives them the strength to fight on and beat cancer. For many, THON will always be a significant part of their lives, whether they are battling the disease, in remission, or cured. We dare to ask the question: How should such a prominent organization be operated? What aspects need to be changed, if any?

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Tough Questions

1. If we don't accept our mistakes, how can we improve?

The idea that THON is working the way it should be is a major pitfall in the charity. We cannot be blinded by the good deeds of THON not to deal with the problems, no matter how unwilling we may be.

2. Why brush over the apparently minor details of THON?

Behind every good philanthropy is a strong foundation that takes tasks seriously. If we forget about the inner workings of THON, we risk falling apart.

3. If we make changes, many might stop participating and we'll lose money.

Change is vital to survive in our fast-paced world, but too much change may defeat the purpose of THON, therefore losing volunteers and money.

APPROACH #1: THON IS FINE

THON OPERATES IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED OUTCOME

The chief mission of THON is, “to provide emotional and financial support, spread awareness and ensure funding for critical research – all in pursuit of a cure” (thon.org). Setting high standards for fundraising efforts is how THON is successful in raising millions of dollars every year.

THON works well for the Penn State community, serves many useful purposes, and has a multitude of positive aspects. It’s not everyday that a school or even a company can say they ‘ve raised over 127 million dollars for cancer.

With such a large student-run organization, there are many aspects that need to be taken into consideration when preparing for

THON weekend. Many students must spend days making the BJC family friendly and cheerful. The stage is made every year by students who devote time and energy into making sure it is safe and secure for all the festivities that occur.

Canning and canvassing are the major sources of funds for THON. The canning weekends are a chance for students to bond with one another whilst raising money for the cure. Without these types of solicitation, the total would decrease drastically. Canning and canvassing are vital parts of raising money for the Four Diamonds Fund.

Ensuring that the flow of people

in and out of the BJC runs smoothly is the key to maintaining a peaceful environment. Cleaning the floor during the event is also one of the many tasks that must occur during THON in order to have a successful event. All of the committees are comprised of student volunteers who spend most of the weekend at THON, even though they aren’t dancers.

Students spending so much time with their THON committees are necessary for THON to even exist as an event. Without the students giving up their time, especially during THON weekend, THON would not reach the high status that it does today.



IT'S FTK

“For this one weekend, it’s not about the parties, homework, or competitions between groups, it’s for the kids.”

BENEFITS OF THON

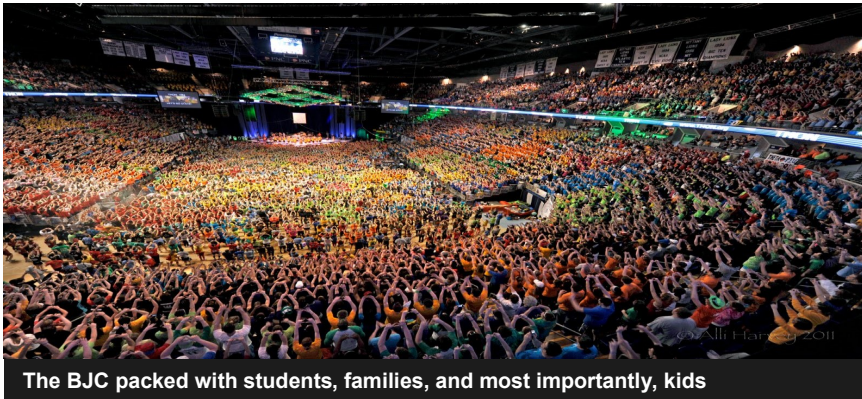
THON serves as an effective way for students to give back to the greater community as well as allowing them to take on leadership positions, which benefits student’s lives beyond college. Student involvement not only includes the 700 dancers during the 46 hour event, but also almost every student organization on the Penn State University Park campus. For some organizations, THON is the reason for their existence as a club, they spend all of their time and effort into raising funds for THON. Almost all clubs have a THON subject that allows students to be involved. In addition to those involved with THON through other student organizations, students can be involved through the program itself. Students have the ability to engage in THON development through various committees tailored to specific aspects that need to be addressed in preparation

and operation of THON weekend. In all, there are 15,000 students that volunteer their time to benefit THON.

THON is an honest and trustworthy organization that devotes all its time and energy into helping families and children. With over 90 percent of each dollar going directly to the Four Diamonds Fund. Unlike many influential charities today, THON is responsible with the money that they raise and they don’t waste it. Students created this event and they are the ones that are still running it to this day. There is no multi-million dollar CEO, but instead a student run board of directors and a president who is also a student. The charity gives way for families to gain the support they need during their struggles of medical treatment cost and morale support. Simply, the charity is legitimate in what it conveys.

APPROACH #1: THON IS FINE

THON OPERATES IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED OUTCOME



The BJC packed with students, families, and most importantly, kids

Beyond State College

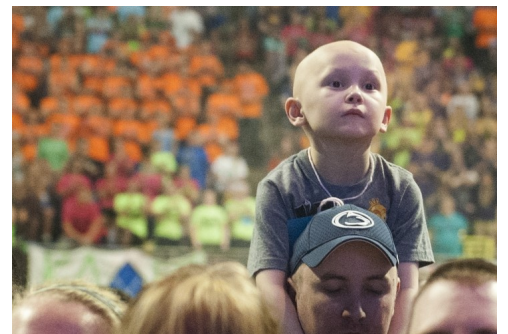
Penn State is known across the country for its vast success and dedication to THON. The recognition that Penn State receives from national media, for its commitment to cancer research and finding a cure, has only boosted the university's reputation. It has become tradition for THON to be featured on both local and national news stations. THON was one of the major components that allowed Penn State to maintain its credibility as a forerunner in higher education after the NCAA allegations that attacked the university and its moral code. These allegations that were broadcasted across national news for months could have drastically decreased the application rate for freshman and transfer students. However, with Penn State in the news, the administration took the opportunity to advertise their positive attributes, instead of letting the actions of a few employees devalue the whole university. THON's altruistic characteristics helped to redeem the university in the public's eyes following scandal.

THON expands far beyond Happy Valley as it touches the lives of many families. In addition to the THON children themselves, this organization includes alumni support as well as support from students at Penn State's branch campuses. Students from branch campuses also have the opportunity to be involved in THON, even if they can't make the trip to University Park for THON weekend.

Penn State is known for promoting its vast alumni network that spans across the globe, and THON is one reason for the enormous amount of alumni. Many of these individuals donate to THON and help to broaden the organization's horizons when it comes to fundraising. THON has led to many networking opportunities beyond State College for those involved, making the impact of THON greater as awareness spreads farther.

Impact on the kids

With every dollar raised, there are less medical costs for a Four Diamonds family to worry about. Just 150 dollars is one day of outpatient care for a Leukemia patient. Without THON, many of these children would not be able to pay for their treatment or their families would be majorly in debt. Most THON children and families will tell you they look forward to this weekend all year. Also, the THON children get to bond with the organizations and students who adopt their family. Throughout the year, there are memorable activities and trips. It is a way like no other that college students can reach out and help.



96% of funds go to the Four Diamonds Funds, ensuring that families never see a bill while their child battles cancer.

APPROACH #2

Does it matter? THON achieves its goal, why worry about everything else?

What's the big deal?

THON is notoriously known throughout collegiate life as being the largest student-run philanthropic effort, \$127 million has been raised for children. This raises the following questions: does the end result quell the controversy surround the politics and methods of THON? Is it even necessary to try and correct the wrongs of THON?

This speaks to the greater dilemma of whether greater good outdoes peripheral evils. A possible response to all the criticisms and defenses is: does it matter? Help is given, people benefit, and students contribute for the greater good – ends justify the means.

What follows is a rebuttal to those who say the means associated with THON politics are out of control and dilute the philanthropic effort in its entirety.



Some students feel obligated to participate, especially in more social events like canning.

- **Forced involvement:** Many viewing THON from the outside in (and to some extent, those who participate in THON) would argue that involvement is often times forced. It is said that THON has become cultic over the years and the environment pressures students into joining. A rebuttal, much like would be made for most subsequent arguments, is that that life skills are learned and a good cause is aided. Jumping through the various hoops and working in a team alongside the largest philanthropic effort is sure to garner you experience. Regardless of the bad, it is a win-win.
- **Unsafe Environment:** Another common criticism is the alcohol that is consumed before and after THON. Many say that this is hypocritical and reflects how students are really participating to meet fellow wine-bibbers to partake in wicked festivities. However, this could easily be said of any good deed. Students will be students. Perhaps the one area where I would concede to the unsafe environment is the incident in 2015 where a young girl lost her life in a car wreck but even that was not technically THON's fault.

All in all, while THON has knicks in its armor, it does a greater which dilutes the lesser evils.

APPROACH #3: THON NEEDS HELP

There are many things that need to change



All of these problems listed are problems with the culture that THON creates, but there exist problems with how THON operates and its policies as a whole.

First and foremost, we think the age of THON “children” should be more carefully regulated. As it stands right now, THON “children” can be supported by the organization well into their twenties. We believe funding THON children from their childhood well into their adulthood is excessive, and takes money away that could be used for research.

There has also been concern raised by professors here at the university about THON taking time away from their classes. Penn State is first and foremost a school. Students skip classes all the time to get into line to enter THON and an overall mindset that, during THON-week, THON matters more than classes.



Perhaps the real issue at stake

There is no arguing that the cause THON supports is well worth all the effort that goes into it. During research for this project we hoped and prayed that Four Diamond Foundation wouldn’t check out. That some number one even just one of their financial reports wouldn’t check out. But it all did. THON does universal good for the research and hopeful eradication of cancer. We are not arguing that anything about that has to change. What does need to be changed is the culture that THON creates.

Some issues with THON:

1. All aspects of THON are becoming increasingly unsafe for the entire Penn State community. THON Committees for example, while still doing their jobs, have gained a reputation for throwing “ragers”. The overabundance of drinking in THON Committees is basically against everything THON stands for, and while there is absolutely no way it’s going to stop, it needs to be taken down a notch.
2. Clubs and organizations are more focused on competing to raise money. While this does end in the raising of more money, it takes the spotlight off of the kids that the charity benefits and moves it to the people doing the fundraising.
3. Instead of having THON be a selfless act that is purely “FTK” students are using it for selfish reasons, for example putting it on resumes or just being involved to boost their popularity.

APPROACH #3: THON NEEDS HELP

There are many things that need to change

There are so many students involved in THON that you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't help with the event or doesn't even attend it. Many students say that it's the best experience of their lives. While this may be true for many, some students use THON as a way to make them feel better about themselves. They say that it is the best experience of their life, but sometimes not for the right reason. THON makes us think about others for a day, and help those who are less fortunate than us. Unfortunately, this important message is lost beneath the balloons and tutus.

Many students choose to participate in THON to feel as if they have a purpose and to be part of a group. They want to feel like they belong to something, and a setting of 15,000 people is the perfect place to do it. People shout "FTK" at any appropriate time (or not), and of course they understand the meaning, but the extreme publicity that THON receives lessens the value of the acronym. It's become more of a social event than a stand against cancer. Of course, having fun is important and THON is designed to do just that, but it is not the main cause for students.

Everyone's favorite word: Culture

Talking about THON is not very easy. It's a topic that many hold near and dear to their heart, and often people become emotional when discussing the event. Doing something like this, talking about the problems that THON creates, is quite a bold move. Around campus, very few dare to say anything against THON, and when they do, they are shot down by lines such as, "It's for the kids!" and "So you don't care about little kids dying from cancer?" One must carefully tiptoe around such topics as forced involvement, safety, and drinking involved with THON.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO FIX IT?

We can't tear apart an organization without giving some suggestions about how to fix it.

1. First, we need to control the amount of drinking that is involved in THON orgs. Not only is it against the law, but it is also against what THON stands for. The amount of drinking associated with THON orgs only strengthens the theory that many students join just to socialize and party.
2. Regarding the change in focus, this is a little more difficult and abstract. It's mostly about educating the students and reminding them that THON isn't about them or their personal lives.
3. Having fundraising groups announced during THON may skew the focus from the cause to the glory of winning first place.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Now what?

No one can argue against the cause of THON. Helping children with any disease, especially something as devastating as cancer, is important and worth the attention that it receives.

An argument can be made in regards to some serious culture issues regarding how some students portray THON and how other students perceive the event. We could take the path that believes THON has no culture problems and the organization takes the necessary actions to achieve the goal of fundraising money for the kids. Though this keeps a positive mindset in a difficult battle, this does not help the issues at hand. Many people feel obligated to participate and feel ashamed if they do not.

We could also undergo the second approach that none of these political issues really matter when thinking about the main goal. No one is getting seriously injured and the overall outcome of THON is beneficial to others and our university. Though this looks at the bigger picture and focuses on the overall goal of THON, they remain naive when faced with the complaints of disgruntled students.

The third, and probably most controversial approach, is to attempt to reform THON. This targets some sensitive subjects that many do not dare to argue for fear of being ostracized by the many Penn Staters. Though a hard-hitting approach, this idea may be detrimental to THON itself.

Trying to make changes to an already highly community oriented university could end quite badly. If there were changes to some more social aspects many might not participate, therefore there would be a loss in fundraising money. Such a difficult topic requires thought and sensitivity when trying to improve aspects and make changes in an area that is rooted by tradition.

Overview

1. THON works the way it should in order to achieve it's desired outcome of raising money for the kids
2. Do all the nitty gritty aspects of THON really matter? THON carries our it's mission statement with great success.
3. THON has some blemishes that need immediate attention, whether we want to admit it or not.

What do you think? Be sure to voice your opinion and tell us your experience.

